



Rock of Stages (Moonlight Siren #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He will, he will Rock You!

A grumpy gargoyle, a curious mermaid, and a magical mate bond.

I'm a gargoyle drummer in a supernatural cruise ship band with zero tolerance for nonsense. All I want to do is play music.

Until a mermaid crashes into my life—saving me from sinking like a...rock.

Worse, fate whispers she's my fated mate.

Naiya is sunshine and curiosity. She's everything I can't have. She lives in the ocean and I can barely swim.

But fate's a funny little sea witch. Because every time Naiya smiles, my stone-hard heart pangs.

And when she's threatened by the same selkie who almost destroyed my band?

My beast wakes. Sea or sky, I'll fight for her. She's mine.

Welcome aboard the Moonlight Siren for a short and spicy paranormal rom-com with found family vibes, rock band banter, and fated mates who rock each other's world.

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CALEB

I tapped my feet, anticipation rising as I waited for my cue to join in. Our vampire guitarist Damien kicked off the opening to Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love." When my time came, I pounded the drums and adrenaline rocked through me. What a rush.

When I first started playing music, it changed me.

I had to pursue it—even if it meant leaving my gargoyle clan.

But I'd found a strange new family on this ship—specifically with our band Luna Blue Shadows.

We played rock covers on the Moonlight Siren, a cruise ship for supernaturals.

Although I wasn't a fan of the ocean and would rather fly the night sky than put a toe into the cool wetness below, I jumped at the chance to take this gig.

Rex, a wolf shifter, joined in with bass as we practiced for tonight's set.

Van crooned the vocals, accompanied by his usual sauntering around on stage.

My wings were retracted so they wouldn't get in the as I played in my gargoyle form, something I couldn't readily do in the human world without drawing stares or fear.

But among supernaturals on this ship, no one blinked.

And it gave us a memorable feature, much like Van's suave feline appeal and Damien's vampire speed, which gave him an edge on guitar.

Now that easygoing Rex had replaced our ego-driven former bassist, we'd finally found the perfect rhythm for this band.

When the song ended, I gave Van the usual good-natured crap. "The worst part of sitting back here is suffering through you shaking your ass. Save it for the show and stop tormenting me."

The jaguar shifter tossed his shaggy blond hair over his shoulder. "You mean this gluteus of fine maximus?" He slapped his right butt cheek, covered by leather pants. "Hard as stone. Wouldn't you agree, you oversized rock lobster?"

I pounded on the drums to drown him out.

My grumbling was only half-serious. The crowd went feral in response to his sauntering and crooning.

Van was the ideal front man with a Robert Plant voice and David Lee Roth swagger, which didn't go unnoticed by our female audience.

Since he'd found his fated mate with a vampire, he'd given up his pursuit of supernatural vixens.

Almost unbelievable considering how he'd relished that pastime.

If I hadn't witnessed Van's transformation, I might not have believed it. But he was a changed man—like the rest of the band. They'd all found their mates, greatly changing our dynamic, and I still wasn't used to it. But as long as we continued to play music, I wouldn't grumble—too loudly.

That didn't mean I understood. We had a great thing going with our band.

Why would they put it second just because they fell for a woman they'd only just met?

Ridiculous, all of them. And the endless chiming about finding the one...

Insufferable. Whenever they told me I'd understand one day, I tuned them out, as I was doing with Van now.

We worked through our set for tonight, a classic rock setlist from the sixties. Just as we finished, someone opened the door to the Nocturnal Lounge.

"Not bad with the wolf."

That familiar voice tightened my muscles.

"But we were better," he added, his voice slick.

Dread clawed up my spine. I forced myself to look over. Oh, hell no.

Our former bassist Angus lurked there in all his slimy flesh, strolling back into the lounge as if he were captain of the ship. His smug grin was plastered on his face, selkie ooze cranked up to eleven.

I clenched my drumsticks and stood. "What are you doing here? Back to cause another scene?"

The air between us vibrated with tension. "Nah," Angus said, spreading his hands like a peace offering. "I'm here to make amends. Reclaim my spot on bass."

“I’ve got it covered,” Rex growled.

Angus narrowed his dark squinty eyes at Rex. “When we created Luna Blue Shadows, wolf, you weren’t in it.”

“And neither are you after your stunt,” Damien said, putting down his guitar.

Angus and I had never seen eye-to-eye, but it had all come to blows when he’d lunged at me during our show. We’d fought and he’d quit the band, dove off the ship, and swam away in selkie form. We hadn’t seen him since.

I hoped it stayed that way. “You have some nerve coming back here, Angus,” I growled.

He faced me and flashed a sour smile. “Still glaring from the shadows, Caleb. Tell me, do they pay you extra to work as a concrete bouncer?”

I stepped out from behind my drum set. “You need to go. Now .”

“I helped create this band,” Angus said, eyes gleaming as he stepped closer. “A boulder with a grunting problem isn’t going to keep me out of it.” He glanced around. “Now where’s my bass?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Rex. “Step aside, pup.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Rex said, standing his ground and staring down at Angus, whom he loomed over by several inches.

The size difference didn’t appear to intimidate Angus, just as it hadn’t when he’d attacked me. Damn fool.

“You’re fired.” Angus pushed Rex’s chest with both hands. “Leave.”

Instinct kicked in. I launched myself at Angus and knocked him to the ground.

“Damn it,” Damien muttered. “Not near the instruments.”

True. This was the worst place to get into a fight. “Outside.” I pointed at Angus.

I glared at him as he threw eye daggers at me. Once we were outdoors, I raised my index finger. “You’re not in the band. You don’t get to fire anyone.”

“The hell I don’t.” Angus’s nostrils flared as he sneered. “You’re the one I have a problem with.” He punched me in the chest, then snapped his hand back, shaking it. “Shit—what are you made of? Granite?”

“Rex isn’t going anywhere,” I snapped.

“He’s a better fit than you ever were,” Damien added.

We didn’t have any of that tension during practice and shows the way we had with Angus’s ego and surly attitude.

“We’ve decided as a band,” I declared.

Angus’s face contorted with fury as he turned his wrath on me. He lunged for me with a roar. I turned to evade him, but hit a patch of something slippery on the deck—just as he reached me with his full force.

Off-balance, my weight shifted and we were airborne. But I wasn’t flying. The rails were rushing past and my wings were retracted.

Shit. I was falling overboard.

I hurried to unfurl my wings, but the ocean soared up too quickly.

Smack! I hit it with a cold slap, and it swallowed me whole.

The last thing I saw was that damn selkie swimming away in seal form, leaving me to sink like a stone.

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NAIYA

I shouldn't be this close to the ship.

My pod would be furious to know what I was doing, but I'd always been fascinated by the world above the ocean. The more I explored it, the greater my intrigue. Sure, the world below was home—but there was so much more to see.

When I'd first heard the music drifting from the massive cruise ship, I'd swum after it. The low, pulsing rhythms pierced the calm of the ocean. Drums, steady and primal, like a heartbeat—thump-thump-boom, thump-thump-boom. Often shaken up with a high-pitched crash.

The music called to me, more than it should. Like the tales of sirens luring sailors, but I was the one enchanted.

I'd followed the ship for several weeks now, whenever it sailed near our pod. Its music would waft out into the night, and the melody rippled through me.

I turned to float on my back, listening as I stared up at the twinkling stars. Moonlight caressed my scales.

The music stopped. Shouts echoed from above, sharp against the quiet hush of the sea. I righted myself in the water, heart picking up.

A massive shadow dropped from one of the decks.

Crash!

Whatever it was vanished beneath the surface. I dove under and swam toward the sinking shadow.

One form broke apart from the mass, a sleek and silver selkie. He glanced at me, then swam away.

The other descended, like a tossed anchor.

Panic flickered through me. Why wasn't he swimming?

I propelled my tail faster, heart pounding. By the ocean's tides, he was enormous—broad shoulders, limbs heavy and still. His skin shimmered gray in the water. Statue-like. A gargoyle? I'd never seen one in the flesh—or was it stone?

With the way he sank like a statue, it sure looked like it. His eyes were closed and he wasn't moving.

Oh no. He would drown!

I looped my arms around his wide chest and heaved. By Poseidon's trident, he was heavy. Like hauling a boulder through a cresting wave.

I kicked harder. Slowly, painfully, we rose through the dark water. When we broke the surface, I gasped, my arms shaking. The weight of him dragged at me. Up close, I gazed at the thick lines of his features, the bluish-gray skin, the heavy brows.

"Caleb! Caleb!" shouts from the ship rang out.

I tuned them out to focus. He smelled of earth and sea—deep and male and strangely

enticing.

But he wasn't moving.

I whispered a spell to help him breathe and pressed my lips to his. A shimmer of magic rippled through me—something deeper than that of the spell. A warm, electrifying sensation in my body, tethering me to him.

No. That wasn't possible. He was of land, I was of sea.

His mouth opened with a gasp. His eyes fluttered open and locked on me.

“Who are you? Where am I?” He glanced around and released a guttural shriek. He flailed his giant arms and they cracked through the surface, breaking my hold on him and sending arcs of water cascading. “I'm drowning!” His stone-gray eyes widened with terror. “Oh no, I'm already dead...”

“No, you fell into the ocean, but you're safe now.”

“Oh, shit!” He thrashed through the surface and sank like a boulder.

I dove, chasing him beneath the waves. His body blurred in the darkness until a blue-gray shimmer pulsed around him again. Some kind of magic? It wrapped around my senses like a tether, pulling me closer. Familiar.

He started to shift. I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the surface. He didn't fight me.

When he broke the waves, the gray stone was gone—replaced by a broad-shouldered, very human-looking man. Water streamed down his jawline. His hair, now dark brown, floated to his chin. His eyes, still a storm-gray, locked on mine.

“You’ll be okay,” I assured him. “Just relax and let me help you.”

He searched my eyes with wonder. “Are you a—mermaid?”

“Yes.” I reached out to touch his skin, see if it was indeed softer now, but forced my hand down. “And you’re a gargoyle?” I whispered.

“Right.” His gaze swept over me again.

“Wow.” His voice was low and rough with awe. “You saved me.”

The shouts from the ship grew louder. A floating tube splashed nearby.

“I owe you my life,” he said, voice a smooth ripple now. “Come with me to the ship?”

I bit my lip. My father would be furious. He’d warned me about my wandering too far. About seeking my path when he already had one planned for me—to marry a high-ranking mate from another pod. A merman I felt nothing for.

And yet...

When I looked into this strange gargoyle’s gray eyes, a strange shimmer fluttered inside. Almost like a warm current flowing through me.

“I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” He dropped his head back and exhaled. “We’ve had mermaids join us before. All kinds of supernaturals. You can shift, right?”

“Right, it’s not that,” I said.

He searched my eyes. When I didn't finish my sentence, he prodded, "But what?"

After taking two steady breaths, I pointed in a vague direction around us. "I heard it's dangerous up here."

"It can be," he said with a grim smile. "But don't worry, I'll keep you safe."

The bond toward him pulled tight. I hesitated. He was a stranger. Massive. Intimidating if not for this enigmatic pull...

"Please," he insisted. "Come with me."

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CALEB

What the hell was going on?

First, I was falling into the ocean with that slimy selkie.

Next, I woke in the arms of a beautiful woman. No, not a woman—a mermaid. Who was the most radiant creature I'd ever seen.

Her hair floated around her, darkened by water and gleaming beneath the moon.

Her eyes were a fascinating shade of green—wide and curious—with droplets of water dripping down her dark lashes or rolling down her smooth cheeks.

Her lips were plump and pink, with a heart-shaped pout.

And her tail. It stretched behind her, long and sleek, with shimmering silver and teal scales. Absolutely mesmerizing.

I didn't know what happened when I hit the water—whether it was from the shock or impact, but I'd lost consciousness. If she hadn't helped me...

I gulped. Since I was still in the sea, I wasn't home free yet. This damn liquid enclosed me like a pliant prison while the ship loomed in the distance. I should be onboard getting ready for tonight's show. Not treading water, trying to keep from drowning in an awful death. Damn ocean.

Damn selkie.

I should have known he'd come back one day to stir trouble. That was what he'd been since we'd started the band—trouble.

The shouts from the ship sounded far away as my bandmates called after me. They'd thrown a floatation device and told me to grab it. That help was coming.

I'd shifted to my human form as it was easier to swim, but a bonus might be that I didn't look as intimidating to this gorgeous mermaid.

Who I'd just asked to come onboard with me.

Where the hell was I going with this? Surely I hadn't thought it through. But she fascinated me.

"Please," I insisted. "Come with me."

She stared at me, searching my eyes, and then bit her lower lip as if contemplating my request. My pulse kicked harder. Why did it matter to me that she said yes?

Her eyes brightened and then those worried lips broke out into a smile. "Okay."

When she smiled at me like that, it felt like when sunlight warmed my cool stone. Luminous.

I exhaled with great relief and turned to the flotation device.

It had already moved several dozen feet away.

Even if someone had alerted the crew that I'd fallen overboard, it would take time to

stop a multi-ton ship.

I couldn't wait to get out of the damn water.

Dangerous creatures lived under there. Like sharks.

I snapped my head around, searching for any sign of approaching fins or the telltale sign of the theme from Jaws.

Foolish. I lived on a ship so I should be used to water by now. But a cruise gig didn't mean I had to ever step a toe into the sea. The sea lapped hungrily at my skin, reminding me how close I'd come to sinking for good.

She looked over at the ship. "Can you swim that far?"

It would take several exhausting minutes to swim to the float and then deal with the laborious process of climbing up.

"I have a better idea," I said. How it would work since I'd never done so from the ocean while carrying someone would be a challenge—if not disastrous.

She tipped her head and studied me as if waiting for my reply.

"We fly," I declared with more confidence than I had.

Her eyes widened. "Fly?" She blinked. "As in...the sky?" She pointed to the clouds.

"Yes." I exhaled a slow breath, attempting to relax my tense limbs. "Come closer. I need to hold you."

She swam over, stopped a few inches in front of me, and gulped. I wrapped my arms

around her.

But then—an unfamiliar scent. Feminine, like midnight orchids. Alluring. Entwined with the distinct salty scent of the ocean.

The beast inside me rose with a low rumble, stirring as if awoken from a century-long slumber. A possessive instinct roared.

He whispered mate.

The word rumbled through me like distant thunder.

No. Impossible.

She was a mermaid from the sea. A different species. A different habitat.

And yet...every instinct screamed mine .

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NAIYA

What was I doing? Agreeing to join a strange gargoyle shifter on an even stranger ship was ludicrous. My pod would scold me from one shore to the next.

But something about him called to me. His intense slate-gray eyes. His deep, gravelly voice. That mysterious tethering sensation. When he opened his massive arms, I swam over without hesitation. He wrapped them around me, and I softened against his solid chest. A tremor of heat rushed through me.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice rough but steady.

I gulped. “Ready.” I nodded, trying to convince myself.

“I need my wings.” His breath tickled my ear. “Don’t be afraid of how I shift.”

His body reformed as if magic rippled through him. He grew broader, heavier, and his skin turned back to gray. Behind him, massive wings unfurled with a whoosh, slicing through the water.

His arms tightened around me. “Hold on,” he directed.

I grasped him tightly. Before I could second-guess my rash decision, he pushed upward with a powerful thrust of his wings. The water broke around us, spraying in silver arcs.

Then—we soared.

The air rushed past and I gasped, dangling in his arms as my tail hung below. The world tilted around us as we rose. I clung to him, heart racing. Was it from fear? Exhilaration? Being in this massive gargoyle's arms, our bodies touching in such an intimate embrace? Likely all of them.

The air rustled my hair and the sea below sparkled beneath the moonlight. As we flew closer to the ship, its lights grew larger.

I needed legs before we reached it. If I landed on my tail, I'd flop around like a drunken walrus. I initiated the shift from tail to legs, from scales to skin, as my fins slipped away. The transition was disorienting enough, as well as the adjustment to breathing out of the ocean.

Thank the tides for my magic so I wouldn't flounder around nude while embraced in the gargoyle's embrace.

A sea witch who'd fallen in love with a merman in our pod generations ago had blessed us with a spell that allowed us to weave clothing.

As I completed the transition, the silvery threads of a dress flowed over my body.

I slipped in his grasp and yelped.

"I've got you," he declared in a panicked voice and gripped me more tightly.

I held on to him and pressed my head on his shoulder. Both our hearts raced, almost touching.

"Sorry, I should've waited to shift," I managed through raspy breaths.

Two more pounding heartbeats followed. "Ah. Warn me next time?" he said in a

gentler tone.

Next time? Would there be another? No, I wasn't going to worry about that now. I'd set out on this adventure with a gargoyle and was far too curious not to see where it would lead.

We headed toward the ship and he angled down. "Get ready to land."

I braced myself but as soon as my feet hit the deck, I teetered.

"Whoa!" I flailed my arms as I tried to keep my balance.

He swooped me back to him, steadying me against his stone wall of a chest.

I blinked up at him and gave a sheepish grin. "Not used to land legs. They're, um...wobbly."

He huffed a soft laugh. "You'll get the hang of it."

He seemed even more massive standing upright, looming a head or two above me. I stared up at him—the chiseled jawline, stone-gray eyes and skin—and my heart resumed its frantic beat. But not from the unsteady landing.

From him.

From this.

And this enigmatic thrum of energy between us.

I didn't want to step away from him, but I had to. Although my legs still wavered like sea kelp, I stepped back. He straightened and his wings folded behind him in a

graceful sweep, then disappeared.

“Caleb! Caleb!” voices shouted. “You okay?”

I glanced toward them. Three men rushed over to us.

“Yeah. Thanks to this mermaid.” He motioned to me, his eyes glistening with gratitude. “Wait, what’s your name?”

“Naiya.”

“Naiya,” he repeated, his lips spreading into an enigmatic smile. The way he said it in his baritone sparked a little thrill inside me. “I’m Caleb.”

“What happened?” the man with long, dark hair asked.

“Angus.” Caleb snarled. “Damn selkie always causes trouble, then slinks off.” He exhaled and turned to me. “You saved my life. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, feeling steadier on my legs.

“These are my bandmates. We play on the ship as Luna Blue Shadows.” Caleb pointed out the man.

“Our guitarist, Van.” He gestured at the blond guy beside him.

“Our lead singer Damien.” And then to the burly man with a dark beard.

“And our bassist Rex.” Pointing at each of them in turn, he added, “Jaguar shifter, vampire, and wolf shifter.”

“Been a while since we had a mermaid onboard,” Van said. “Last time, it was a pod for a wild bachelorette party.”

“No, those were sirens,” Damien corrected.

I stared at each of them as I followed the conversation, and then we exchanged greetings. His bandmates thanked me for my help.

“Better than having us try to haul your heavy granite ass out of the ocean,” Van teased Caleb.

Caleb grunted. “Do something useful and grab us towels, will ya?”

Van chuckled. He headed down the stairwell and returned with two fluffy towels. When he handed one to me, Caleb reached forward and grabbed them both.

“Got it, thanks.” He opened it up and wrapped the towel around my shoulders.

My nerves fluttered as Caleb ensured I was warm.

“Thank you,” I murmured and glanced around. What was I doing here on this floating ship? I should be below the water, not cruising along above it. “Now that I know you’re okay, I should probably head back in.” I motioned with my head toward the waves cascading by.

“Wait... I have to find a way to thank you,” Caleb insisted. “At least let me...” He let out a low whoosh. “Do you want to come to my cabin to dry off? Are you hungry?”

Van smirked. “Boys, that’s our cue to leave.”

“Right,” Rex rumbled. “Nice to meet you, Naiya.”

“Thanks for saving our drummer,” Damien added, and the three of them walked away.

Drummer. The music had drawn me to the ship. And I didn’t want to leave just yet.

I wrapped the towel around me more tightly and took a cautious step forward, trying to adjust to the strange weight of two legs.

The deck felt so solid. And the fragrant air—full of scents of food and sound.

Music drifted faintly from a deck below, and laughter bubbled up.

People were enjoying themselves and I wanted to be a part of it.

My pod would call this foolish. Dangerous.

Yet when I glanced at Caleb, the tight line of his strong jaw, the flicker of protectiveness burning in his eyes—I didn’t want to leave.

Not yet.

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CALEB

“Wow. This place is— magical.” Naiya marveled at our surroundings as we walked down the stairs to my cabin, still wet and wrapped in striped towels.

“A floating city,” I remarked, although that was a stretch. But it did have the essentials to keep us going until we reached our next stop to restock on food, fuel, and all the other requirements to keep the ship functioning.

When she stumbled on a step, I caught her arm and instinctively brought her close to my body.

“Are you okay?” I asked, ensuring she was steady.

“Yes.” She flashed a small smile. “Still getting used to these land legs.”

I chuckled. “I know the feeling. After days of sailing, I’m unsteady once I step on land. Still using my sea legs.” I tapped the side of mine.

“Truly?” Her eyes widened even more. “You have sea legs?”

“No.” I shook my head with another laugh. “It’s just an expression we use to describe the feeling as we adjust.”

“Oh.” She nodded with understanding.

I held her arm as we reached the next landing. “Come on.” I motioned with my head.

“We’ll take the elevator the rest of the way.” I continued to hold her close to me while I directed us over to a bank of them.

We stepped inside the glass elevator and the doors closed.

Her scent filled me with sudden longing, and I had to brace myself against a wall.

Her unique fragrance had the signature salty scent of the sea and one that was alluringly female.

Mate. A quiet rumble resonated deep within my chest. The yearning for her stirring something deep.

Strange. Foreign and yet somehow familiar.

It made no sense. I’d never believed in all that fated mate stuff.

I’d rolled my eyes every time Van or Rex told me they “just knew.” But here I was, rattled by a woman with sea-glass eyes and silvery-blond hair that cascaded down to a shimmering blue at the end, like the subtle silver-teal gradient of her fins.

No, not just a woman—a mermaid with fins and a tail who lived in the ocean.

Completely and utterly bewildering.

Once we descended, she gasped and leaned against me, clinging to my arm.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’ve never been in one like this. It’s a little scary and”—her gaze fixed on a chandelier as we descended—“magnificent.”

“It’s fine, I’ve got you.” I held her close and we passed into the vast atrium filled with marble and lights, looking at as if seeing it through her eyes for the first time. It was indeed magnificent, though something I’d taken for granted after living on the ship for months.

This fancy elevator didn’t take us to my deck, so we had to step out and I chose to walk the final flights.

I held her arm once more to keep her steady—or at least that’s what I told myself.

She seemed to be much sturdier now, and I doubted that she needed my help, but I liked being able to touch her soft skin and ensure she was safe.

And she didn’t seem to mind me doing so.

As we walked down the narrow corridor through the cabins, she turned her head in every direction. “These are all cabins?” she asked. “And different supernaturals sleep in them?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Wow, this ship is like an oyster’s dream,” she whispered.

I tried to hold back my chuckle.

I pushed open the door to my cabin and stepped aside to let her in. “It’s not much,” I warned, scratching the back of my neck.

She stepped inside and glanced around with awe, like she was entering a cathedral.

She scanned every inch of my tiny room—the bed, the desk, the built-in storage, and

tiny TV—with the same wonder I imagined I'd have if I visited her home.

I pictured a world of caverns and coral palaces under the sea.

“This is all yours?” she asked, pausing on the bed before she turned away with a slight blush.

“Yeah. Pretty standard cruise ship setup. Tight quarters, but I have more space than many others, considering my size.” My gaze focused on the bed as well, and I tore it away.

She ran her fingers along the smooth wall panel, then poked the edge of the desk. “All this is like what I've seen on land, but—it floats on the sea.” Her voice sounded breathy.

“Right.” I gulped, inhaling another whiff of her scent. But now it was here, in my space, near my bed...

Why was my throat suddenly tight?

“Shower's through there,” I said, my voice gravelly. I pushed open the door to the tiny bathroom. “If you want, you can rinse off while I find dry clothes for you.”

She walked over toward it, but in the confined space, we were merely inches apart. I moved out of the way to let her in, and she cocked her head. “How does it work?”

“Turn the silver handle,” I directed. “The water will come down from that nozzle above. Like rainfall.”

She turned to me with a fascinated expression. “Like rain?”

“Yes. You can adjust the water to a comfortable temperature and then step under it.”

“Okay.” She closed the door softly.

I stared at it. The sound of trickling water followed, and she laughed with delight. A bolt of awareness bloomed deep within my chest. Naiya was in my cabin. In my shower. Naked. I let out a slow exhale, trying to calm my pulse.

Forcing myself not to gape at the door, I tore my gaze away, where it landed right on my bed.

What the hell am I doing?

“I’ll be right back,” I called out in a strained voice. My clothes were way too big, and I needed to find some that would fit her body—her gorgeous, naked, soaking wet body.

Focus.

The second I closed the cabin door, I leaned back against it, fighting the urge to head right back inside.

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NAIYA

“ A floating city.” I repeated his words as turned from the stores on either side of us to smile at Caleb. He held my hand, saying it was to help keep me steady until I got used to land legs. I couldn’t deny how much I liked the feel of my hand in his large, warm grasp.

In human form, he was devilishly handsome, still massive and muscular, with a chiseled jawline and intense eyes that were now more of a bluish-gray.

He’d showered after I was finished in there, and I’d sat on his bed, reading—keenly aware of just a thin wall separating us.

Now he was dressed in a pair of black jeans, gray button-down shirt, and black boots.

His dark hair was dry and draped over the top of his massive shoulders.

“We can get almost anything we need until we reach the next port,” Caleb said as he continued the tour of the ship.

It had so many decks, and each seemed different from the next.

We’d landed on one he called the Gargoyle’s Perch earlier, where he said he often flew from at night.

His cabin was far below, where he had private space all to himself—with that gigantic bed.

Being alone in there with him had made it difficult not to let my mind wander—and fantasize .

Besides that tethering connection I sensed between us, I grew aware of a simmering heat.

It hadn't dissipated, not even in the shower, which had been a luxurious experience with endless hot water cascading down my naked body. I could have stayed in there for hours.

But there was so much more of the ship to explore.

And since my time onboard was limited, I wanted to experience all that I could before I had to return to my pod.

I'd gone exploring on land many times before.

I was a grown mermaid, for the love of coral.

But I could only stay for so long before my controlling father would send out podmates to search for me.

"It's so fancy," I gushed, marveling at the details that caught my eye. Twinkling chandeliers, grand pianos, and polished wood or marble everywhere around us. The cruise line's logo reminded me of my world beneath the sea. It featured a silhouette of a siren with a beautiful long tail.

The ship was so massive it barely rocked, but my feet felt steadier than when I'd first tried the stairs.

Still, I moved with careful steps. Wide-eyed.

Absorbing all the lights and sounds and scents—so many smells.

From the variety of supernaturals, to the various aromas of food from specialty restaurants. What a fascinating ship this was.

“I found clothes for you in there.” He pointed to one of the stores with racks of clothing, many of them with the ship’s logo. “If that doesn’t fit or you don’t like it, you can pick out something else.”

I traced my fingers over the blue and green floral sundress that flowed over my legs. “No, it’s perfect.”

“If you’re hungry, we can go back upstairs. There’s a buffet that’s open now. Otherwise, we can get something to eat after my show tonight.”

“Show?” I repeated, my ears perking up.

“Yes. Our band is playing tonight.” He cocked his head. “Do you want to come watch us play? We start in about an hour.”

I grinned from ear to ear. “I’d love to.”

The luminous smile he returned sent sparks dancing inside me. Slippery seashells, if a simple expression could have such a potent effect, what would it feel like if he touched more of me with those large hands?

Yikes. Why was I thinking that way? Of not just a land-walker but one who flew in the sky. His world was land and sky. Mine was in the sea.

“Come, I’ll show you the Nocturnal Lounge, where we’re playing tonight.” His smile turned boyish as he quickened his steps.

“Whoa, still getting used to these.” I chuckled as I teetered. “And you have big strides I can’t keep up with.”

“Sorry.” His expression turned sheepish. “I’ll slow down.” We crossed a busy deck where he pointed out the doors to the Nocturnal Lounge. “This is where we’re playing tonight. I better meet up with the band to get ready for our set. Are you okay with exploring on your own for a bit?”

I smiled at him. “Yes.” With a wave, I added, “Go on, I’ll be fine.”

He released my hand slowly as he headed toward the door but then stopped and searched my face. “Promise you’ll return? You won’t go diving off into the ocean on me?”

I smiled at him. “I promise.”

His chest heaved with a deep exhale. “See you soon, Naiya.”

I inhaled, relishing the sound of my name from his lips, which seemed to give a gentle tug on that magical tether between us.

An hour later, I stepped into the lounge with dark-wood paneling and a bar in the back of the room.

The instruments were set up on the stage and small tables and chairs lined the space below.

The ship’s passengers strolled past—wolf shifters laughing, a vampire couple gliding by hand in hand, and a pair of witches bickering over a spell.

As supernaturals ordered bright, colorful drinks and took their seats, the room buzzed

with energy.

I took a seat at a table near the front. The lights dimmed onstage as figures walked out, then brightened to a purplish hue as Van stepped up to the microphone.

“We’re Luna Blue Shadows.” He unleashed a cocky smile and pumped his fist. “Who’s ready to rock this ship with us tonight?”

Lots of shouts and cheers followed as the crowd caught his energy.

“Let’s start this up with Queen.”

Rex, the bearded wolf shifter, picked up his bass, and Damien, the dark-haired vampire, strode over to his guitar.

Caleb walked on stage back in gargoyle form—gray skin, wide shoulders, wings tucked behind him. My gaze hooked on him.

He sat behind his drum set, retracting his impressive wings. Rolling his shoulders back, he raised his sticks before hammering the drums at a steady pace.

Slippery conch shells, could Caleb play. From the first beat, I was transfixed by the sound as it tumbled through me—like a wave crashing through coral. His primal rhythm captivated me just like it had when I’d been swimming beneath the water, following the music from the ship.

Van grabbed the mic and sang, “We Will Rock You,” and the crowd sang along enthusiastically, but I couldn’t tear my eyes off Caleb.

The muscles in his arms rippled as he moved them.

His slate-gray eyes were sharp and focused while he appeared to both lose himself in the music while leading with the pulse of the band.

They continued through more songs. Van said, “Here’s one of my favorite Led Zeppelin songs, D’yer Mak’er.”

I recognize it from my time on land, but now the lyrics echoed in my brain, a haunting melody repeating that I didn’t have to go.

Didn’t I? My home was the sea. I didn’t belong here above the surface.

He looked up, sweat shining on his brow, and his eyes caught mine. Something fluttered in my stomach, bright and warm, like the morning tide catching the first rays of sunlight.

Every beat of the drum echoed in me. I’d always loved music.

The times I’d gone on shore, I sought it out and listened to it wherever I could.

This, though—this was utterly different.

Caleb wasn’t just playing—it was as if he was seducing me with this rhythm, reinforcing that beat that whispered I didn’t have to go.

My hand fluttered to my chest, covering my pounding heart. What was going on between us? Was I imagining it? I’d never felt anything like this.

And I didn’t know what to do about it.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

CALEB

I loved music. I loved playing drums. And I loved performing with the band.

But I'd never felt exhilaration like what rushed through me with Naiya in the audience.

Once we locked gazes, everything else faded.

I played for her, banging out the beat to Van Halen like it was some sort of primal mating ritual.

She sat alone at a table, wearing the dress that I'd picked out for her—one that brought out the fascinating sea-green hue of her eyes.

She watched me with a rapt expression, pink lips parted, and I performed at my best, wanting to impress her.

Our practice had been cut short earlier thanks to Angus's unwelcome, slimy entrance, and when I'd met up with the band again before our set, they'd wasted no time ribbing me.

“Was it tidal-love at first sight?”

“Did you reel her in for the catch?”

But when Van wagged his eyebrows and said, “Getting a little tail tonight?” I'd

snapped at him.

“Don’t talk about Naiya like that,” I grumbled.

“Easy, it was just a joke,” he said, hands raised in surrender. “Don’t get so stone-faced about it.”

Something was different about Naiya, they could clearly see. But they didn’t come right out and ask what they might have suspected.

Mate.

That was a sacred bond, beyond all kidding around.

Through the remainder of our classic rock set, I practically floated in the clouds. We ended it with a fiery rendition of Def Leppard’s “Rock of Ages,” and the audience cheered with enthusiasm.

I quickly made my way over to her.

“Wow, you were absolutely brilliant!” she cooed.

My heart seemed to swell three times larger, like I was a stone grinch. “Thanks. I’m glad you were here.” I wanted to take her in my arms and hold her, but was covered in sweat from that performance. “I need to rinse off real quick,” I said. “Then we’ll get a bite upstairs?”

“Sounds perfect.”

Twenty minutes later, we’d picked our selections from the buffet upstairs and sat at an outdoor table beneath the stars. I’d stacked my tray with two burgers and sides to

fuel me after burning through energy. She'd chosen pizza, salad, and chocolate cake for dessert.

"Where did you learn to play like that?" she asked.

"New England, where I grew up. My parents died when I was young, and my grandfather raised me. He was strict and stoic, and I did what many teenagers did—rebelled through music."

"I love it," she crooned, leaning forward. "You're back in human form now. Do you shift so often?"

I swallowed my burger bite and took a sip of soda before replying. "My gargoyle form takes up a lot of space on this ship. So I save it for the sky and our shows. The drum space is mine. And having a big gray gargoyle bang on the drums is part of our appeal."

"I'll say," she agreed with a giggle.

That musical sound spread an unfamiliar lightness through my chest. She took a bite of pizza and chewed with a thoughtful expression.

I reached over and squeezed her hand across the table, partially as an excuse to touch her. "Thank you again for helping me in the ocean. I've never been comfortable in it and prefer the sky."

She gazed at me with a curious glimmer in her eyes once more. "How did you end up falling in like that anyway? I saw a selkie swimming away."

I groaned. "Long story. Band stuff." Then I quickly told her about Angus. "Enough about him," I finished, not wanting to waste any more words than necessary on that

slick egomaniac. “I want to hear about you. Where you live. What it’s like. With whom?”

Her gaze shifted downward, taking the corners of her mouth with her. “With my pod.”

“Merpeople?” I questioned.

“Yes.” She turned her gaze toward the sea. “Our pod lives near coral, brimming with sea life. And it’s swimming distance from an island, which I’ve explored a half-dozen times—despite numerous warnings about land-walkers.”

“Meaning...” I pointed to myself. “Someone like me.”

“Right.” She nodded. “Anyone who lives above the ocean.”

“Ah,” I said, the differences between us growing vaster. “Is someone going to be upset you’re gone?”

She bit her lower lip. “Sure. My father.” She grimaced. “He’s the king of our pod and always scolding me for exploring too far and for too long.”

I followed her gaze outward. “You must be far from home?”

She nodded. “Many, many miles away by now.”

As she told me more about her world under the sea, her eyes brimmed with wistfulness. A pang of guilt hit me square in the chest. “Oh. I shouldn’t have asked you to come onboard, should I?”

“No.” She reached across the table and brushed my arm. “I wanted to. I heard music

and followed the sound, curious. To see where it was coming from. Who was playing. I wanted to hear more of it— your music.”

A strange delight rippled through me again at her praise. “Do you need to go back soon?” I hated the words as soon as they left my mouth.

She didn’t answer right away but then nodded slowly. “I should...”

A bolt of panic shot through me at the thought of her leaving, but the hesitancy in her voice gave me a sliver of hope. I reached for her hand. “Stay a little longer,” I pleaded.

She brought her gaze back to me, capturing me in her magnificent eyes. “Okay.”

After we ate, I took her hand as we explored the nightlife on the ship. When we passed the entrance to the casino with all its lights and pinging noises, she stopped and gaped.

“What the sweet coral is that?” Her voice had a wondrous edge.

“Casino,” I grumbled. “Place where people gamble their money and lose. The house always wins.”

“The house?” She turned to me with a questioning glance.

“It just means that it might be fun to play, but you’ll probably kiss your money goodbye. Don’t go overboard thinking you’ll walk away richer. That’s about as likely as me sprouting gills and fins.”

She nodded while seemingly entranced by the colorful machines, blinking buttons, and the clattering coins.

“Oh no, we have a live one,” I joked.

Naiya turned to me with delight. “Can we go in?”

I couldn’t deny her anything when she looked at me like that. “Come on. Let’s see if you have some beginner’s luck.”

She didn’t—not even a lick of luck. We’d churned through coins on the slot machines, but damn, it was worth every cent.

I’d never had more fun in the casino, watching her delight as she pulled the lever, wide-eyed with anticipation.

She beamed with delight even if she only had two objects match and lost.

I’d never met anyone like her. She was curiosity, excitement, and sunshine—the opposite of my grumbling, stone-hearted self. And I was completely hooked.

After we’d burned through our remaining coins, we walked back outside for some fresh air. The deck was quiet this late at night, and the crowds had thinned. A warm breeze rolled in, tinged with the salty sea scent, and Naiya tilted her face toward it like she was greeting an old friend.

She leaned over the railing, her silvery-blond hair with the blue tips dancing in the wind. The moon cast a subtle glow over her, making her look even more ethereal. Like she belonged to the stars as much as the sea. I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

“The ocean is so mysterious from this angle,” she whispered. “Different but...beautiful.”

“Beautiful,” I repeated in a hushed voice.

She turned to me and smiled. “You’re not at all what I thought gargoyles would be like.”

“How so?” I stepped closer, as the space between us charged with heat.

“I thought they were all big and intense and...intimidating.”

I chuckled softly and pressed my finger to my lips. “Shh, don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to uphold.” I reached for her hand as if on instinct. It felt small and warm and perfect in mine. Without thinking, I brought it to my mouth and brushed my lips against her knuckles.

She watched me, eyelids dropping slightly as her chest rose and fell with quickened breaths. I lowered her hand but kept hold of it.

“I wonder if this is a dream,” I admitted quietly. “That you’ll dive back into the ocean, and I just imagined you.”

She squeezed my hand. “I’m real.”

“Oh gods, I hope so.”

Her eyes, green as the morning sea, locked on mine. My heart pounded yet neither of us spoke. The rush of the waves roared over the low murmur of the ship’s engine.

Her lips parted, eyelids lowered, drawing me in.

I bent down toward her, widening my stance to lean closer. She moved to her tiptoes, meeting me in the space between.

And then—our lips grazed. The feather-light touch was gentle at first, almost

mystical, and sparks ignited.

She tilted her head, inviting me closer, and I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck to deepen the kiss.

She let out a soft sigh and slid her little hand over my chest. Over my heart. As if claiming it.

Mine.

My beast didn't whisper it but declared it with thunderous certainty. She was mine. I knew it in the deep, eternal way that gargoyles felt in their stone. In their wings. As natural as flying.

I couldn't let her go.

When we finally broke apart, I rested my forehead against hers, trying to stay grounded.

"There's something between us," I said, my voice low. "Tell me you feel it too," I urged her.

One thunderous heartbeat followed. Then two.

"Yes," she admitted, her voice breathy. "A connection."

Thank the gods I wasn't imagining it.

"So don't leave yet," I urged, cupping her cheeks as I stared into her eyes.

"Stay. Come back to my cabin tonight. I know there's only one bed.

I'll find a place to sleep. On the floor.

In the shower. I don't care where." I blew out a rough breath, trying to calm my rambling.

This wasn't like me, but I couldn't just let her go back to the sea where I'd never see her again.

Lose her forever. I took another deep breath and pleaded, "Just... stay."

Naiya stared up at me, a silent statue caught between the sea and sky as she seemed to contemplate. As I waited for her answer, my heart drummed with thunderous anticipation.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

NAIYA

Stay with Caleb, in his cabin... Sleep in his bed.

Was this mad? We'd only just met that night.

It was now the quietest part of the night, just before morning, when the sea held its breath. The hours had zipped by as I'd spent them with Caleb, but I wasn't ready to return to the ocean.

And I wasn't ready to leave Caleb. That kiss was...

unreal. The echo of it lingered with a warm tingle on my lips.

I'd never been kissed like that before, with a heat that bloomed through me like sun warming the ocean's surface.

The way he'd held me in his muscular arms felt as secure as a stone cave protecting me.

He looked at me from those gray-blue eyes like I was a treasure found in the deep.

He was still looking at me like that now, his intense gaze imploring me to stay.

"Yes," I whispered, a slight breathy tremble in my voice.

Caleb's face broke into pure joy, and my insides fluttered like sea kelp. He took my

hand in his large one. “Come on.”

We headed down the stairwell to the lower deck.

Although my legs were steadier now that I’d adjusted to them, my mind floated like we were walking through sea foam.

Every aspect of the ship fascinated me earlier—from the dazzling chandeliers to the elevator—but now the tether tugged at me and my senses were solely attuned to him.

The way he moved—his massive body with a lithe grace.

The veins in his powerful arms. The chiseled contours of his cheeks and jaw.

His scent wrapped around me—like moonlight on mountains, something earthy and ancient that stirred my awareness.

We didn’t speak as we walked down the hallway lined with doors, but the silence wasn’t awkward. It pulsed with anticipation, like a hush before a wave crested.

When we stepped inside, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Shoot, I didn’t get you any”—he scanned me from my head down—”pajamas.”

I motioned to the dress. “This is fine. Very comfortable. Thank you for getting it for me.”

“You’re welcome.” His storm-gray eyes locked on mine for a few burning seconds. He cleared his throat. “All right, the bed is yours. I’ll—uh—find a spot on the floor.”

I blinked. He wouldn’t truly try to squeeze into that tiny space beside the bed, would he? There was more room in the bed than on the rug. “You’re not serious?”

He gathered a blanket from a shelf near the small TV and one of the two pillows on the bed. As he made a makeshift bed on the floor, he said, “Yes. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.” He removed his jeans, stripping down to a pair of black boxer shirts.

My eyes traced the muscular definition in his massive thighs as he lowered his large body into the tiny space.

“Caleb,” I said, half-laughing. I climbed onto the bed and patted the space beside me. “You look like you’re stuck inside a clam shell. Get up here before you hurt yourself.”

His eyes met mine in question. “You sure?”

“Yes.” I smiled softly.

He hesitated, then unfolded himself from the floor with a grunt. “My body thanks you.”

I scanned him from head to toe, cheeks warming slightly, then I turned away and rolled onto my side with my back to him. The mattress sank as he climbed in, leaving a tiny space between us.

“Good night, Naiya.” He rolled to his side.

“Good night, Caleb.”

I’d never been in a bed like this on a ship, let alone share it with someone else.

The ship rocked in a lulling motion, and the low hum of the engine sounded muted below.

Caleb and I lay back-to-back, and that tiny sliver between us crackled with heat.

How I longed to nudge backward, feel the warmth of his body.

I closed my eyes and listened to his breathing, slow and deep, and let it carry me to sleep like floating on the waves.

When I stirred on the fringes of waking up, I grew aware of a heavy arm slung across my waist. Warm and protective. At some point during the night, Caleb had turned over and held me. His body radiated heat like a sun-warmed rock. I leaned into it. Relishing his warmth.

And then felt something hard and long against my rear.

Oh...

A low rumble rolled from deep within Caleb's chest, and he pressed himself tighter against me, his erection unmistakable.

I didn't move away. Didn't want to. Not when every cell in my body burned with heat and sudden awareness.

His breath slowed again and deepened. He'd fallen back asleep.

And me? Painfully awake, with a yearning growing within me. Sweet coral, I'd never felt desire like this before. So... intense .

What would it be like to be with Caleb? Have him touch me with his large, rugged hands. Feel him inside me. I tried to ignore the urge to wiggle against him, rub against his erection, wake him up...

Maybe coming back to the cabin with Caleb was a mistake. Because now I had all these heady sensations I couldn't ignore, dominating my mind and intoxicating me, and I didn't know what to do about them.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

CALEB

S hit.

When I woke, holding Naiya close to me, with my painfully hard cock pressed against the curve of her luscious ass, I cursed myself. This was not what she wanted.

Fortunately, she appeared to be asleep, her gentle breath soft like a melody and her chest rising and falling in slow movements.

Her enticing fragrance wrapped around me, and I breathed it in more deeply.

It flooded my senses, stirring me like an aphrodisiac, yet also calming me, like the scent of the sea.

Carefully, I tore myself from her warm embrace, despite my beast murmuring within about claiming my mate.

I tiptoed into the bathroom and turned on the water.

What I needed was a cold shower. But despite the frigid temperature, I was still raging hard.

Sleep had been full of dreams about Naiya, sweet and sinful, and I couldn't help but replay the most sordid memories—of tasting her, of sliding deep inside her, of having her cry out my name...

My hand found its way to my erection, stroking as I fantasized about my mate. Despite the sense of it being wrong to touch myself with her sleeping merely feet away, I justified that I needed to take the edge off to be able to function around her. Otherwise, I feared I'd pounce like a feral beast.

I stroked faster as I got closer to release. Thinking of her, there in my bed. Climbing on top of her... I dropped my head back and exploded with a low grunt.

Hell, I hoped it wasn't loud enough to wake her. Breathing hard, I leaned forward and pressed my forehead against the shower wall. Damn, I needed to pull myself together before I scared my mermaid away.

Minutes later, I truly cooled myself off with the iciest water I could stand.

I grabbed a towel and dried off. My clean clothes were in the closet.

I didn't think about bringing them in here.

I wrapped the towel around my waist and slowly opened the door, planning to grab some without waking her.

But when I stepped inside the main cabin, Naiya was sitting up in my bed with the lamp beside her side on.

Her silvery-blond hair was tousled, and her eyes still heavy with sleep. Adorable.

"Good morning," she said with a bright smile and glanced at the clock. "Or should I say afternoon?"

I chuckled. "Yes, it's hard to know the time of day without a porthole. And I tend to sleep late since I work with a vampire who isn't ready for practice until sundown."

“Ah.” She brought her gaze back to me and slowly perused my body, covered only in a towel, in a way that made me pump my chest out further. I wanted to look good for her. Wanted her to want me, to feel a fraction of the desire I had for her.

“Is that what you do most days?” she asked, tilting her head with a curious expression.

“Yes.” I smiled. “But priorities first. Are you hungry?”

We returned to the buffet on the pool deck and filled our trays with sandwiches and fruit, then found a free table outdoors. The ship had docked at its private island, and I had free time before meeting with the band that evening.

“We could go explore after we eat,” I suggested, then realized she’d probably rather swim, the way other sea-faring supernaturals often did.

“Or I could show you the extension on one of the lower decks. Many sea shifters dive into the ocean when we’re docked.

If you’re missing the sea...” I left the thought unfinished.

She grinned. “I’d rather explore with you.” Then she arched her brows with a gleam in her eyes. “Especially if you go in the ocean with me later.”

I groaned playfully. “If I must...”

While we ate, she asked me about myself.

I told her more about my life before I joined the ship, glossing over the days with my strict grandfather after losing my parents.

“The band and the staff on this ship, they’re my new family now—strange as hell, but I wouldn’t change a thing.

” I turned the discussion to her and asked about her life and family and how she usually spent her days.

“Exploring, if possible,” she replied with a smile. “I love to swim to new areas, explore shipwrecks, find treasures.”

She plucked a grape from her plate, eyes sparkling as bright as the sunlight on the ocean’s surface.

“But my father... He thinks I should stay close, follow his path in leading the pod.” Her expression dimmed slightly.

“My mother died when I was young, and I barely remember her. I’m the youngest. My brothers and sisters have found mates, and lately, he’s been pressuring me to marry a merman from a high-ranking family.

A political alliance he described as ‘the best interest for me and our pod.’”

The words hit like a sucker punch. I set my sandwich down, appetite instantly gone. “Marry a merman?”

Her mouth pressed into a grim line, she affirmed the horrid news with a slight nod.

A tightness coiled in my chest, low and dark, making it difficult to breathe. My beast growled beneath the surface, stone-hard and ready to hunt down a merman who thought he had any claim on my mate. Mine. The word rumbled through me with a fierce echo.

I tried to keep my reaction subdued so as not to scare her. She'd only met me last night. Anyone would be frightened by a big, intimidating gargoyle grunting that she was his. So I forced myself to keep my voice low and steady when I asked, "What do you want?"

She pushed her hair back and glanced at me with uncertainty in her eyes. "I'm not sure. I just know...it's not him."

Good. I exhaled and the tightness in my chest eased a fraction. I couldn't let this nameless, faceless merman steal my Naiya. And as long as I was still breathing, I wouldn't let that happen.

The problem was—now what? She belonged to the sea. And soon enough, once the novelty of her exploration wore off, she'd want to return to her home beneath the tides—a place I couldn't exist.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

NAIYA

“The best of both worlds.” I sighed deeply as I flopped onto a lounge chair in the powdery sand and faced the sea.

The tide rolled in with white-tipped waves kissing the shore.

Ah, the sun felt good, its warmth caressing my body.

Palm trees swayed around us with the breeze whispering through the leaves.

The salty ocean scent tickled my nostrils, calling me to return. Yes, soon.

“Indeed.” Caleb stretched out on a chair beside me, his long, muscular legs hanging over the edge.

The gray camouflage swim trunks weren’t fooling anyone—he was not blending in.

Not when he wore those and nothing else.

Rather, he was very, very noticeable. How could he not be with all that hard muscle, like chiseled stone?

And he was so close to me, mouthwatering and tempting...

Van strutted over with a drink in his hand, wearing tiny, leopard-print swim bottoms and matching, over-sized sunglasses. “Would you look at that? Our favorite grumpy

gargoyle lounging on the beach.” He flashed a teasing smirk.

Caleb grunted. “Looks like the cat dragged himself in.” He nudged his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose and narrowed his eyes at Van. “What in the name of all-that-I-have-to-banish-from-my-mind are you wearing? A banana hammock?”

Van turned in one direction and then the other. “What a find. Matches my sunglasses.”

“You look like you’re posing for a studs-with-cats calendar,” Caleb grumbled.

Van chuckled as he sat down in his lounge chair and put his drink beside him. He motioned down the front of his chest. “I’d be a good Mr. January. Stud and big cat, all rolled into one, baby.”

Their teasing wasn’t malicious, but playful, like they were family. I admired their closeness. I’d always felt different from my pod—an outcast. Could I actually find where I belong outside of it? Above land...

With Calum...

Wait, why was I thinking this way? We’d only just met. He was land and rock, I was sea and fins. Our worlds didn’t mesh.

Van pointed at the sky and glanced at Caleb. “Careful, the sun might turn you to stone.”

“It feels good on my stone.” Caleb rolled his muscular shoulders.

I gaped at him. I’d seen him as a gray-winged gargoyle with leathery skin and in this gorgeous human form. “Can you turn to stone?”

“Same as you can shift to legs. Not much need for gargoyles to watch from stone on a ship so I don’t do so often.” He grinned at me. “Want to see?”

I nodded slowly as I continued to stare at him. Already fascinated by his body, I wondered what else he could do with it. “Of course.”

He climbed off the lounge chair, standing tall, but then his body contorted and shifted, turning slate gray as he crouched down.

In the next blink, he loomed beside me stone-hard—a gargoyle statue complete with fierce horns, wings pointing to the sky, a massive tail, and exaggerated features frozen in a grimace.

Van slow-clapped. “Very Cirque du Statuesque.”

“Excellent party trick,” the wolf shifter Rex said as he strode over with a witch with pink hair. “Naiya, this is my mate?—”

“Piper,” she finished enthusiastically. “It’s so wonderful to meet you.

” She beamed with a friendly smile, turned to the stone version of Caleb, blinked a few times, and then threw her head back with a hearty chuckle.

“Wow, he really knows how to flirt.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Kylie, you’ve gotta see this.”

A woman with dark hair under a sun hat and dark sunglasses walked over as Caleb shifted back from stone.

Caleb de-stoned with a huff, back to smoldering broodiness in his human form. “I’m not flirting,” he grumbled.

Kylie reached us, exchanged an amused glance with Piper, and said, “Talk about a rock-hard flex.” They both chuckled as if sharing a private joke.

After we were all introduced, I’d learned about their roles on the ship and their mates. Van’s mate Celeste and Kylie’s mate Damien were both absent as they were vampires who avoided the sun.

A woman with a large beach hat over silvery curls walked by. “Enjoy the beautiful day.”

“You too, Maribelle.” Van straightened and nodded, his voice oddly formal for him.

After she passed by, Caleb leaned over and explained, “That’s Maribelle, a witch who works at the spa. Van gets wary around her since she’d hexed him one night as a prank.”

“What did she do?” I asked.

“Made me look like a fool in front of my mate!” Van leaned over and explained. “Bleating like a sheep, spouting naughty limericks that night. I couldn’t even introduce myself to Celeste as I was afraid I might bray like a donkey.”

“Well, you can be an ass,” Caleb teased. “Maribelle probably did you a favor by forcing you to keep your mouth shut.” He winced as he glanced at Van. “Come on, Naiya, let’s go in the water. Drowning is better than looking at Van wearing that leopard-print abomination.”

“You? Water?” Van declared with wide-eyed amazement. “Naiya, you’re good for our grump Caleb. Getting this stone slab to swim, not sink? Amazing!”

I turned away from Van while I peeled off my sundress, a peach one that Caleb had

bought for me.

I stuffed it into the beach tote with the Moonlight Siren logo.

Behind the sunglasses, I could see his gaze travel over me.

I only wore a pink bikini, which he'd also bought for me.

The way he looked at me made my skin burn with awareness, far more potent than the sun beaming down on us.

Van waved a hand. "Have fun splashing around. We'll stand guard from here in case you start to sink, Cal."

"What a hero," Caleb muttered. He took my hand and we walked through the sand. I relished the soft bristle against my feet. The sea appeared and inviting, shimmering turquoise and so clear I could see tiny yellow fish swimming below.

When we reached the shore, I stepped right in, but he hesitated as water covered his toes.

"Come on, it's warm," I encouraged him.

He paused. "I'm not much of a beach guy. And definitely not the biggest fan of open water."

I cocked my head. "Then why are you going in?"

He stared at me for several seconds before his lips parted. "To be with you." His voice came out lower, sounding more vulnerable.

That admission made my heart flutter. I leaned up and kissed his cheek.

Once we waded out far enough that the waves hugged our waists, he relaxed a little. I ducked under the surface and swam around him, playfully grabbing his leg. He swooped a giant arm around me and pulled me close.

“Gotcha.”

I looped my arms around his neck as water dripped down my face and hair and teased, “Mmm, what are you planning to do with me?”

He pushed his sunglasses up on his head and glanced down at me, his blue-gray eyes darkening with heat.

“This.” He bent down slowly as he lifted me higher by the waist. He kissed me, softly at first, but then deepened it.

My body lit up as heat curled in my belly and shot through every nerve. And my brain sizzled.

When he pulled back, I blinked, dazed and breathless. My lips still tingled from the intensity of it.

“Whoo!” Shouts and hollers from the shore drew my attention to see Van pumping his fist and Piper raising a glass.

Caleb groaned. “I swear I’m going to drown those knuckleheads.”

“Go ahead back to them,” I said. “I’ll explore on my own. Check out the reef.” Get hold of myself and this powerful reaction to you.

“Okay.” He lingered for a couple of seconds before kissing my temple and heading back to shore. His muscular legs cut through the water like cliffs breaking through waves.

I dove beneath the surface, slicing through the welcoming embrace of the salty sea. My magic flowed through me and my legs reformed to a tail and my scales and fins returned. The reef ahead shimmered with bright pink coral and colorful fish. This was my element. My home. And yet...

A part of me yearned to be back on shore with Caleb.

What was going on and what was I going to do about it? While I swam, I wrestled through my conflicting emotions.

The current shifted. Something moved in my periphery. A figure swimming toward me.

A selkie.

Slick dark hair framed his angular face. He swam in an unnervingly smooth way.

“Well, well...didn’t expect to find a pearl in this tide pool,” he said with an oily smile.

I narrowed my eyes, instantly disliking his slick tone. Could this be the same selkie who’d fought Caleb?

“I’m Angus,” he said, confirming my suspicion. He bent forward in a slight bow that made his form shimmer in the water. “In case my reputation has preceded me.” He paused and stared at me. “And I know who you are.”

My heart thudded. “How?”

“Come now, you can’t seriously be interested in that piece of rock.” He ignored my question as he swam beside me.

“What do you want?”

He tsked. “I get it. You’re curious. Playing house on land.” He swam in a slow circle around me. “But sooner or later, you’ll miss the sea. And when that stone-faced statue starts cracking, you’ll want to return to it—and those who reside in it.”

“Goodbye,” I said sharply and swam.

Angus blocked me. “That giant rock will take everything from you, like he has me.” He sneered. “We’ll talk again, Naiya .” His lips curled into a smirk. “Soon.”

Not if I could help it.

I surged past him and swooshed my tail, splashing water his way. As I swam for the surface, I remained on edge, thinking this selkie would reach out and grab me at any second. He knew my name. Knew far too much about Caleb and me.

All I wanted was to rush back to Caleb and take refuge in his powerful arms.

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CALEB

“That slithering...slimy...sea slug!” My muscles hardened as if I was turning back to stone. I turned back toward the ocean, determined to find that slippery selkie and rip him fin from fin.

“It’s over, Caleb,” Naiya assured me and gently placed her hand on my forearm. “He swam away.” She nudged me forward. “Come. I’m looking forward to watch you perform tonight.”

Her gentle voice brought me back to the present, and my thoughts took a wicked turn as I pictured how I’d like to perform for my sultry mermaid.

Holding her in the ocean earlier, feeling her soft skin, seeing her barely clad in a bikini, kissing her...

I’d asked her to come to our show tonight and promised we’d go to a restaurant after.

That was after plenty of sweet-talking the decision-makers, letting them know how she’d saved me and begging to let her stay the night.

I couldn’t keep her onboard as a stowaway.

They’d agreed and even let me book a reservation at one of the specialty restaurants.

Back in my cabin, Naiya took a shower while I struggled with my fury about Angus. What he’d done to me and the band was bad enough, but how dare he approach my

mate? Slither his slick tail near her?

Sound from the bathroom distracted me—Naiya singing. At first, it was barely audible, but then the volume rose. She sang a haunting lament about a shipwreck. But her voice...simply breathtaking.

I'd never heard anything like it. Enchanting. Ethereal. I wandered over to the bathroom door to listen closer and all my anger about Angus dissipated, like seaweed carried on the waves.

When she stepped out minutes later, hair wet and wearing a pink sundress I'd bought her, I just said, "Wow."

She blinked. "Wow, what?"

"Your voice."

"Oh." Her cheeks flushed. "Was I too loud?"

"No, no." I shook my head rapidly. "It's beautiful. I could listen to you sing all day."

A demure smile flickered on her face. "You're the one with the musical talent. Playing in a band."

My gaze roamed over her as I marveled at this beauty. I fell for her more each moment we spent together. "Maybe you should be too."

Playing drums each night was the highlight of my days, a high I never thought I could surpass—until I'd met Naiya.

Now having her in the audience, watching me with lips parted and a fascinated

expression eclipsed that.

We finished up our 90s set with our version of the Beastie Boys' "Sabotage," and my body still buzzed from the adrenaline.

I stepped away from the drums, my eyes locked on hers.

Van nudged me with his elbow. "Go get your mermaid before she swims off with some kelp-haired merman."

I growled, my stone tingling with possessiveness as I pictured Angus, but I wouldn't let anything or anyone divert me as I approached her.

She rushed up to me, eyes wide. "You were wonderful!" She threw her arms around me while I was still in my gargoyle form, and my beast rumbled with content deep within. Mine.

After I shifted and showered and found the nicest pair of black pants I had, we headed up to the sushi restaurant. We sat at an intimate table for two near a window, with a perfect view of the ocean twinkling and waltzing beneath the stars. Her silvery-blond hair flowed around her bare shoulders.

"Every time I look at you, I swear you're even more beautiful," I told her.

"Oh, Caleb," she uttered softly, turning slightly pink under my praise.

Dinner was incredible—not just the food but how she marveled at every detail. She read the menu options with delight and laughed as she fumbled with chopsticks.

"Here, you hold them like this." My fingers brushed over hers as I adjusted her positioning and heat rippled through my skin.

Naiya caught my gaze and her cheeks flushed, as if she also felt it. “Like this?” She tried to pick up a sushi roll, but it fell out of her grip and landed on her plate. She laughed. “Maybe I’ll need more practice with those fun sticks. I’ve used these before.” She reached for the fork instead.

I loved watching her, talking to her, just being near her.

We spoke about everything while we ate, including one of my favorite subjects—music.

Spending time with her cracked a fissure in the stone-hard shield covering my heart.

We lingered through wine and dessert, and I tumbled even deeper into this cavern of falling for a mermaid.

We took the elevator down to my cabin. Heat built between us as we stood almost touching in the confined space. If we were alone...

But we weren’t. The space was packed with other supes. Instead, I stole a glance at her, and when she caught my eye with a naughty gleam in hers, I sensed we were on the same page.

Sensual tension swirled between us, like rising steam.

Even just the touch of her hand in mine singed me with electricity.

The urge to touch more of her skin, feel her body pressed against mine rose.

I tried to suppress an erection, but it was no use.

Good thing no one was approaching from the opposite direction—they’d face a

gargoyle sporting a massive hard-on.

By the time we reached my cabin, every nerve inside hummed with anticipation. I unlocked the door, my heart thundering as I let her in.

She turned and stared at me, her green eyes dark with desire. Her chest rose and fell, lips parted as we stared at each other. And then...we crashed together like a collision of tectonic plates. All the tension that had been building between us imploded.

“Naiya,” I whispered as I kissed, delving into her sweet mouth and tasting her.

She pulled away just enough to utter, “I want you, Caleb,” in a breathy voice and tugged at my shirt.

I pulled it off and her gaze hooded as it roamed over me. My beast urged me forward, to claim her.

I scooped her up and carried her to my bed. While I removed her dress, I kissed down her body, exploring every satin inch of her skin. Her breasts. Her pink nipples. I took each pert one into my mouth. Marking her with my lips, my touch. Marking her as mine.

How? She lived in another world, one I couldn't access.

“Caleb.” She released a soft moan and ran her fingers through my hair.

I could stay here forever worshiping her, but there was so much more to touch...and taste. When I moved down her torso and kissed around her belly button, she squirmed.

“That tickles,” she murmured.

“How about this?” I slid down her body, pushing the top of her delicate pink lace panties down, and kissed her skin. The scent of her arousal drove my beast feral, and my rock-hard cock ached in desperation to sink inside her.

She gasped, arching her lower body up. “That feels”—she paused, sounding breathless—”really good.”

“Good.” I puffed my chest out. “Because that’s how I want you to feel.

” I slid her panties off and inhaled her heady fragrance.

My body throbbed, dizzy with need. I drank in the sight of her, exposed and slick, waiting for me.

So tempting. I dipped my head and tasted her sweet honey—an instant addiction.

She shuddered with a relieved sigh, settling back onto my bed.

What a divine sensory feast. She was a gift from the gods of the sea. Seeing what she liked and how she responded ramped up my desire as well as hers. And more so—I could feel it on a deeper level. Like our souls whispering to each other. I could sense her emotions. It was surreal. Incredible.

As I increased the pace, her sighs and moans grew louder. Her limbs tightened. She was getting close. And I was right there on the edge with her, rock hard with anticipation.

Then she crashed, crying out before she went still. What a rush. I wanted to pleasure her like that again and again.

As she came down from her high, I removed the rest of my clothing. I sheathed

myself with a condom, my hands trembling. I wanted her so badly. Her eyes were at half-mast but full of fire as she watched me, then she reached out her arms.

“I need you,” she pleaded.

Fuck yes. I slid my large body over her much smaller one, careful not to crush her. While I teased her with the head of my cock, I kissed her lips, her neck. With our size difference, I had to ensure she was ready for me.

I edged the tip in, slowly, then paused. She was so tight—and felt so fucking good.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” she rasped out, grasping tighter.

Centimeter by aching centimeter, I rocked in, letting her adjust to my girth. Deeper I drove, then I was finally fully inside her.

And I knew.

She was the one. The only fucking one. “Mate,” I murmured, like a one-word primitive beast.

I couldn’t let her go. She was my mate and I was falling in love with her.

“Naiya?” My voice sounded deep, guttural.

Her hooded eyes fluttered open. “Yesss?” she whispered.

I stared into her eyes and staked my claim. “You’re mine.”

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NAIYA

Mine. Caleb declared it with such determination, such possession, that it sent trembles through my body.

He stared down at me from shadow-gray eyes that darkened with feral possession—both terrifying and thrilling.

This huge gargoyle of a man, all hard contours and carved muscle, loomed over me like a cliff facing the ocean's wild tides. Filling me like I'd never experienced.

He'd even said mate in a deep, rumbling baritone.

And oh, how a part of me wanted to be his. That part that grew bigger each hour I spent with him. Luring me from my family and the familiarity of the sea. All I wanted was him. More of this—more of how he made me feel so...wanted. Desired.

Cherished.

Caleb's muscles rippled with restraint, and he gripped my hips like an anchor. He drove into me with a slow, deep rhythm, and I ached for more.

"You feel so good, Naiya," he rumbled.

The way my name sounded in that gravelly voice made my body sing.

"Please," I begged, clutching on to his boulder-sized shoulders. I wrapped my legs

around him, pulling him deeper, desperate to hold him close.

“Tell me,” he demanded and rocked deep inside me. “Tell me you’re mine.” He thrust in, slow and steady, then harder, unraveling me with each rhythmic beat.

“Yesss,” I cried out, arching toward him.

With a guttural growl, he drove in harder, stretching me with every thick inch until I thought I’d split in exquisite pleasure.

His control seemed to snap as he rocked into me, hitting that perfect spot again and again.

Shock waves rushed through my body, building up to a roaring climax, and I shattered, pulsing around his thick shaft with wave after wave of blissful release.

Incredible. It felt like I soared to the sky, then floated back to the sea, to his arms—back where I belonged.

I woke with my cheek on Caleb’s warm chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. His arm was wrapped tightly around me, as if he didn’t want to let me go.

Or maybe that was what I wished.

I lay there, savoring the warmth of his skin and how protected I felt in his massive embrace.

When he stirred sometime later, we cuddled closer and fell back asleep with him spooning me. His erection pressed against me stirred my desire once more, and I wiggled against him. Although I was still sore from last night, I wouldn’t give up the chance to be with him once more.

We spent the next couple of hours in bed, taking turns pleasuring each other, before the need for food drove us out of the cabin.

After we ate a breakfast outdoors, we refilled our coffee cups and sat on lounge chairs facing the sea as the afternoon sun blazed down on us. He was quiet and his body language seemed jittery—unlike the smooth motions I associated with him. Something was on his mind.

I wrestled through the thoughts in my head until I finally summoned the courage to speak them. “Caleb?”

“Yes?”

“Last night, you said some things.” I paused, witnessing my nervousness mirrored in his expression. Still, I had to know. “Was it just in the heat of the moment?”

He tensed beside me and rubbed the back of his neck. He worked his jaw, then exhaled. He turned to me and fixed a gaze on me that was so intense it left me breathless.

“I meant it,” he admitted, his voice low. “I need to tell you something—something I’ve known since we first met. You’re my mate, Naiya.”

I stared at him, blinking hard. Did he really say that?

“I want to be with you,” he added. “However. Wherever.”

My heart swelled with happiness but then dropped with the reality of our situation. “How? You live here. I live under the sea. It’s impossible.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” he said quickly, his expression determined. “Strap on a

scuba tank. Build a houseboat. Anything. Just say...say you feel it too.”

My chest tightened as emotions surged through me—joy, longing, fear. Yet underneath it all, a certainty pulsed. I knew what I wanted.

My eyes glistened and I blinked before I admitted, “I do.”

He let out a giant exhale.

“Caleb, I want to make it work. I want to be with you.”

He whooped and jumped out of his chair, then pulled me into his arms and spun me around in a tight grip.

“Sorry.” He put me down.

“That’s okay.” I laughed and then stared out at the horizon, pulling my lips into a tight line. “But if we’re going to figure this out, I need to go back to my pod and tell them I’m leaving.”

His wide grin vanished, and his expression turned concerned. “You sure that’s safe? What about your father?” His face contorted into a painful grimace. “His plan?”

Dealing with my father and the situation with the arranged marriage would be a challenge, but I was determined to let no one else decide my future but me. I brushed my fingers along his chiseled jawline. “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

He studied me for several seconds. “Naiya, what would you think about singing a song during our practice today?”

I blinked at him. “Why?”

“You have a beautiful voice. And I’m coming up with ideas.” When he told me what he had in mind and asked me what I thought, I squirmed in delight.

“Do you think it’s possible?” I leaned closer.

He shrugged. “We won’t know until we try.” He gently nudged my chin up and smiled. “If anyone can wow them, it’s you.”

Later that evening, I walked into the Nocturnal Lounge with Caleb at my side.

Nerves fluttered in my belly like a startled school of fish.

The lights were low, the stage lit by a soft blue glow that reminded me of moonlight filtering through ocean currents.

His bandmates glanced up from their instruments with curiosity.

Caleb squeezed my hand. “You’ve got this.”

“Thanks for letting me interrupt your practice,” I stammered and smoothed my hands over the sides of my dress.

“No worries,” Damien said. “Do you have a song in mind?”

My stomach flipped, twisting with nerves. “Since you play rock, one of the songs I loved when I’ve been on land is ‘Bring Me to Life’ by Evanescence.”

Rex rumbled, “Good choice.”

Van motioned to the mic. “Have a go.”

I stepped up to it, my heart thumping like the driving beat of Caleb's drums.

I sang the first notes, which came out low and jittery, and the band joined in with their instruments. As we continued, my confidence grew. Soon, the nerves flitted away and I was soaring, like I had been in Caleb's arms when he'd flown us to the ship.

The music flowed deep inside me. I glanced over my shoulder at Caleb on the drums and smiled.

He was right. Singing this way felt incredible. Like it was something I was born to do.

Even though I was far from the sea, I didn't feel like an outsider here. Music had always drawn me—it had lured me here to this very ship with so many species of supernaturals. I'd always felt different from others in my pod, but here, I sensed I was finally where I belonged.

No longer an outcast. I was home.

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CALEB

The next day, I brought Naiya to meet Carina, a siren who was the head of entertainment.

When I'd told her about a mermaid with a voice like silky moonlight, she'd been curious to meet Naiya.

We stepped into the rehearsal space while the performers were in the middle of a number from Moulin Rouge.

Naiya's gaze darted everywhere—stage lights, sequins, soaring voices—and awe bloomed across her face, like she'd walked into a dream.

When Carina asked to hear her sing, Naiya's eyes widened with fear, like she'd rather dive overboard instead. Then she took a deep breath, stepped onstage, and began. Her voice was low and shaky from her nerves at first, but soon, she let her incredible voice soar. Pure magic.

After she sang the final note, she fidgeted with the seam of her dress before daring to gaze at Carina.

"Well done." Carina gave a thoughtful nod. "I'll see what I can do," she said, then motioned around the theater. "Feel free to hang around during rehearsals."

"I'd love to." Naiya nodded with enthusiasm.

“Enjoy.” I kissed her cheek. “See you tonight.”

After my show, we met up to eat at the buffet upstairs and Naiya gushed about the performance.

“It was simply magical. The performers—so vibrant. The music, the dancing, the lights—the costumes ...” She paused to take a breath, eyes bright.

“Everything is so sparkly and bright and I loved every second! I volunteered to help however I could. Carina said I could come back tomorrow.” Naiya’s eyes sparked with wonder.

“Do you think, Caleb...” Her voice trailed off.

“What?”

“Do you think it’s possible for a mermaid like me—to be—part of this world?”

I chuckled. “Now that sounds like a song I’ve heard an animated mermaid sing.”

She tipped her head at me and her brows narrowed with confusion.

I’d save my pop culture references for another time. Funny how she knew a rock song but not “The Little Mermaid” movie.

“Yes, of course, Naiya,” I confirmed. “Carina is a siren, and there are other mermaids. Probably some who are currently sailing or currently work on this ship. Thousands onboard so I don’t know who everyone is. But yes, of course you’d fit in perfectly on here.” With me.

Her lips spread into a smile as she gazed up at me. “Thanks for bringing me there.”

“You’re welcome.” I caressed her soft cheek.

Introducing her to Carina had been step one, an attempt to move more boulder aside in the obstacles between our worlds. But we still had many mountains to go.

Naiya spent her time with the production team over the next few days. She helped with props and costumes. When we met up each night, she shared stories about that night’s performance, her eyes bright with excitement.

One night, my band and their mates all met up near the dragon pool outside on a top deck. Van’s mate, Celeste, joined us and I introduced her to Naiya.

While Naiya chatted with the vampire, Piper nudged me and whispered, “You better not screw this up. We see how happy you are around her.”

“And less of a curmudgeon around us,” Rex chimed in.

I grunted. “I’m trying to make it work, but it’s not easy—considering she lives under the sea.”

“If Kylie and Van managed with creatures of the night, you’ll find a way,” Piper declared. “Besides, we’ll help you however we can if— she’s the one, ” she added with emphasis.

Piper and Kylie had teased both Van and me about finding our mates, saying they’d place a bet on it. Both of us had denied it would ever happened, but Van was now blissfully with Celeste. And me—could I have a stone’s throw of a chance with my beautiful mermaid?

I swallowed and admitted, “She is.”

Piper leaned back with a nod and then sipped her drink. She exchanged a glance with Kylie, as if confirming what they'd suspected.

"No betting on anything," I grumbled.

Naiya and I talked about everything as we got to know each other better. We discussed ideas for our future—if we could live here on the ship, or find an island that gave us access to both sea and sky.

When I told her about the mating bite, she leaned forward, perking up even brighter than her already curious nature.

"I'm familiar with a bond between mates," she said. "For me, it felt a tether to you when I found you in the ocean."

My chest filled with warmth. She felt our bond since the beginning, reaffirming my belief that we were destined to be together. I'd do whatever it took to be with her.

"Tell me how it works with gargoyles." She tilted her head.

"The urge usually comes when we're in bed," I explained and her eyes grew as wide as twin moons. "The pressure to mark you will grow strong. But I'd never do it unless you're okay with it, Naiya. It's a permanent bond. It will connect us, even when we're apart."

"Even if I'm in the ocean?"

I shrugged. "That I don't know." I smiled. "Since I don't know of any gargoyle/mermaid matings."

A gleam of uncertainty flashed in her eyes. "What if that means it won't work for

us?”

“It will,” I assured her. “I know it—because you’re the one.”

We were happy. I was the happiest I’d ever been, and time didn’t just fly by, it rocketed past at warp speed. All too soon, the ship neared her pod—and with it came the parting I’d dreaded.

She was swimming back to them in the morning.

My fears surged forth as we stretched out on my bed in my tiny cabin.

Her silvery-blond hair splayed across my pillow like sea foam.

There were so many threats in the sea, from predators, such as sharks, to slimebags, like Angus, and I voiced my worries about them all.

The underwater world left me incapacitated—it was one place where I couldn’t protect her.

And that disturbed me more than anything else.

“The ocean is far more full of wonder than danger,” she assured me.

“What about Angus?” I asked, the name bitter on my tongue.

She touched my cheek. “Miles away. We’ve sailed far since then and he’s probably still near the island.”

I worked my jaw. “And...the merman your father wants you to marry?”

Her face tightened—I'd clearly struck a nerve. "That will never happen." Her eyes burned with determination and then she fixed them on me. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

She glanced at me with those ocean-deep eyes, and I reached for her, yearning to feel her one more time and carve her deeper into memory.

Our lips met, slow and deep. I slid my hands over her soft skin, down her smooth legs, incredulous that it would soon shift back to a long tail when she returned to the sea.

I kissed down her throat, her breasts, and lower still.

She arched toward me as I played with her with my fingers and tongue.

She ran her fingers through my hair and then cried out as she shattered on my tongue.

How I loved feeling her unravel for me. My beast stirred beneath my skin, desperate for more.

I buried myself inside her, rocking in and out with greater demand as something primal uncoiled deep within.

"Naiya," I rasped, mouth trailing down her neck, to the spot where instinct pulled me like a magnet. "It's here... I need to...need...to..." I struggled to speak, my voice strained and gravelly. "Mark you."

Her lips parted, her breath catching. "The mating bite?"

I nodded, no longer able to speak as I fought the overwhelming urge to bite.

One pounding heartbeat followed another as I waited, desperately waited for her response. If she said no, I might never recover.

“Yes,” she said, barely audible, and turned her head. “I’m ready.”

My beast surged forward, urging, and my fangs extended. I kissed the curve of her neck and moved toward her shoulder, where her flesh pulsed like a beacon, drawing me to it. I bent down and pierced her skin. She gasped and tightened around me.

The second her blood touched my tongue, magic flared inside me.

Her essence—light and sea—dancing with mine.

A connection spun, wild and fierce and—eternal.

My heart thundered, senses flooded, and I drifted to a place beyond.

I pulled back and carefully sealed the wound.

She released a wondrous sigh and then clutched my shoulders.

“The tether,” she whispered. “Deeper.” She wrapped her legs around me and encouraged me to move. “I feel you.”

I growled as my beast rose, invigorated, after I’d claimed Naiya. The pressure intensified and I drove into her, relentless, until I exploded inside my mate with a guttural cry.

“Mine.” She was truly mine now. And I was hers. As eternal as the rocks and sky and sea.

Forever entwined.

The next day, Naiya and I stood on a lower deck, preparing for her departure.

While we were docked, a barrier was open with a diving board extended so seafaring supernaturals could go for a swim right off the ship.

A soft breeze tugged at Naiya's dress, and the sunlight gilded her hair with a warm glow.

My chest ached, as if weighed with boulders.

I tried to project calm and strength, but a maelstrom of dread brewed in my head.

Naiya turned to me, her jade-green eyes appearing almost ethereal.

She brushed her fingers over my cheek. "I'll meet up with you when the ship sails near my pod next week."

I gulped as I pulled her into my arms. Her leaving felt wrong, gnawing at me. My beast growled inside, unwilling to let her go. I yearned to be able to protect her, and my wings unfurled. I snapped them back. They were useless beneath the sea.

Was this the mate bond, or was something wrong? An unsettling sensation gnawed at me that I couldn't shake off.

"Come back to me, Naiya." My voice was rough.

She trembled, but smiled through it. "I promise."

I didn't let go until I had to.

Naiya kissed my lips and stepped back. “Don’t miss me too much,” she said with a cheeky smile.

Before I could answer, she dove into the ocean, sliced through the waves, and disappearing beneath them.

I watched, frozen, until she resurfaced.

She turned and blew a kiss at me and my heart panged with longing.

She dove under, her silver and teal tail emerging as it gleamed beneath the sunlight.

I didn’t blink until it, too, disappeared.

And my waiting began.

I’d wait. However long it took. Or I’d go search every inch of the sea to find her.

She was mine.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

NAIYA

The sea hugged me like an old friend—warm, comforting, and teeming with life.

Velvet currents brushed over my skin, carrying the scent of salt and seaweed.

I swam deeper, golden light rippling down in threads like beams of sunlight reflected from above.

A pod of whales sang a haunting, echoing melody in the distance.

With each kick of my tail, a subtle ache grew, which exacerbated the more I increased the distance between Caleb and me. But the sooner I spoke to my pod, the quicker I could return to him.

If my father didn't try to stop me. I winced as I braced myself for the inevitable clash.

Whooshing my tail to propel me, I descended into the glowing reef, where vibrant coral bloomed like underwater towers in every hue—scarlet, orange, violet. Soft anemones waved lazily in the shifting tides.

I swam through swaying kelp curtains and darting bioluminescent fish that flashed like falling stars. The underwater world sparkled with familiarity—but it was time to leave.

My heart pounded. Not from the swim—but from the conversation waiting ahead.

Several merpeople in my pod greeted me back and asked where I'd been. I smiled and replied briefly, noting I'd fill them in later. "Have you seen my father?"

They indicated where he was and I swam in that direction, my pulse edging skyward.

I found him near a red fan sea coral. His back was toward me, yet he still loomed—imposing, long, and broader than most merpeople, with powerful shoulders and a deep-blue tail.

His long dark hair floated around him like seaweed, streaked with white that seemed to have grown more prominent in my absence.

"Naiya." His voice was low, rippling with restrained anger. He turned toward me as if he sensed me approach.

I braced myself for what was sure to come next.

"You've been gone nearly an entire tide cycle without a word. What were you thinking?" he demanded.

I straightened, struggling to keep my voice calm. "It has not been that long." Then I took a deep breath and admitted, "But I'm sorry if I worried you. It wasn't intentional."

He frowned, fins flicking with irritation. "You missed an important dinner with Tarel's pod, where we discussed the arrangement."

I closed my eyes to keep my anger in check, lest he think I was protesting like a toddler having a tantrum. That would do little to convince him I was able to take care of myself, out from his oppressive control.

Caleb flashed in my mind—strong and steady as stone—stirring my courage. Opening my eyes, I declared, “I’m not going to marry Tarel.”

My father stared at me, then narrowed his eyes. Silence between us deepened like a trench.

“How dare you?” he lashed out with a meaty forefinger pointed in my direction. “After all I’ve done to secure this. Your future .”

“No.” I shook my head. “A future you planned for me—one I don’t want.”

He motioned to the surface above. “Where have you been, off gallivanting with the land-walkers again?”

“Yes,” I agreed, struggling to keep my voice steady.

“I’ve been happy with them. And safe. You have no need to worry or fear about that.

” My pulse raced as I anticipated his reaction and I pushed myself to keep going before he cut in.

“In fact, I came back to say goodbye. I’ll be leaving for good in a week to go—” I paused and reassured myself that I could do this.

“—to live above. I’ll be onboard a ship. ”

His eyes widened. “You—no—you can’t... This is your home.”

I took a deep breath and admitted. “I never truly fit in here. But...I found somewhere where I belong. Where I can live in both worlds, land and sea.” I let out a shaky sigh. “It’s time for me to leave the pod and find my happiness.”

He stared at me, pain and disappointment etched across his face. His gaze dropped to the mating mark near my shoulder—and he winced, as though it lanced him. Without another word, he turned and swam away, turning his massive tail on me.

A hollow ache bloomed in my chest. His silence hurt worse than any scolding.

But I wouldn't chase after him. It was time I stood up for myself and what I wanted, so I held firm—anchored by the choice I'd made.

I wasn't turning away from my past. I was building a path to my future.

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

CALEB

“Enough pacing,” Van muttered as he dropped tonight’s set list on the table. “You’re going to wear a trench through the deck and sink the ship!”

“Oh.” I grunted and plopped into a seat in the Nocturnal Lounge.

We’d met up for practice, but I couldn’t concentrate on what they were saying about the set tonight.

The phantom scent of sea and orchids haunted me.

I sensed her from afar and longed to be with her again.

“I’ve been putting every good word I can to help get Naiya hired.

Nudging Carina just about every damn day.

And now it’s just waiting, waiting, waiting.”

Gargoyles had patience acquired generations of sitting still in stone, but this wait for Naiya to return was killing me.

“Well, what can we do to hurry this process along?” Damien asked with an exasperated huff, running his hand through his dark hair. “Otherwise you might as well headline your own tragic play—The Brooding Gargoyle: A Shakespearean Misery.”

Van's eyes gleamed and he shot Damien a conspiratorial grin. "Act One: The Stone Man Waits."

"Act Two," Damien continued. "He Sulks in Shadows."

"Act Three," Rex chimed in. "He Growls under the Moon."

"Even you, new guy?" I scowled at the three of them. "And the tragic ending: The gargoyle brandishes a sword and murders his entire band."

Van chuckled. "That's better than dealing with your sullen ass stomping around here on those concrete feet."

"We're afraid you're going to start throwing drums and tossing amps." Damien shook his head. "They're expensive and not built for gargoyle-level angst."

They were right, and I hated it. I sagged into the chair. "This sucks."

Silence fell like the aftermath of a cymbal crash.

They knew. I could see the certainty in their eyes.

"She's your mate, isn't she?" Rex asked quietly, putting a voice to that epic life change.

I nodded, then slumped over the table, pressing my fingers to my temples.

"Yeah. And I can't escape this pressure in here.

" I tapped my chest. "Flight used to clear my head, but now that doesn't even help.

I take to the skies every damn night, hoping the air on my wings will soothe the ache, but...

no. They feel heavy.” I leaned back and groaned. “Fuuuuck.”

Van’s sly grin left his face, and he looked earnest for once.

“It sucks, trust me, I know. But it’s a good thing, Caleb.

The mate bond is incredible . To be so connected with someone...

” His expression turned all wistful and moony.

If I wasn’t so torn up about Naiya, I would’ve given him crap about it.

“Hell,” I grumbled, “it’s new, faint, but I still feel it and—it’s agony.

I know she’s out there, beneath the waves.

Somewhere I can’t reach.” I stood and began pacing again, unable to stop myself.

“How am I supposed to protect my mate when I can’t even breathe in the same space she’s in?

” I shook my head and swallowed the bitter taste on my tongue.

“The universe had a real good time in this case,” Damien muttered.

“Tell me about it.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I can’t stop wondering if she’s okay.” In a smaller voice, I added, “If she’ll really come back.”

Rex stepped forward. “She will. She’s your mate. She’ll feel the pull too.”

“Yeah, have faith, man.” Van strode over and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“Look, you’re an insufferable, grunting piece of barking stone ninety percent of the time, but Naiya makes you more bearable.

Like a cuddly pet rock—or less stony, at least.” He grinned, as if amused by his nonsense.

“So for our sanity, we want her back, too, and are here for you.”

I huffed out a quiet chuckle. “Thanks. I think.”

“What can we do to distract you?” Damien asked.

I glanced at my bandmates, all who’d gone through the same yearning for their mates, and who’d survived. They were now happy with their mates onboard. I had to have faith that it could work out for me as well.

Something in my chest eased. Even stone cracked under pressure without support. Looked like mine came in the form of three shaggy supernatural fools who had my back.

I sat at my drum kit and grabbed my drumsticks. “Let’s play.”

“Finally.” Van grinned, sauntered over to the mic stand, and wiggled his ass in my direction—a move he knew would rile me up.

“Shake it somewhere else, shifter.” I punctuated it with a drum roll and began to play.

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

NAIYA

I didn't see my father for two days, during which time I talked to others in my pod and told them my plans to leave. Several of the single mermaids had me repeat the stories of the world above, the ship, and especially the different species of supernatural men onboard.

"Wait, wait—start over. Tell me about the vampires again," Marina insisted with deep interest.

"Well, I met two. Damien is a guitarist in Caleb's band. And Celeste is a two-hundred-year-old vampire who's super rich and sophisticated and likes art and fancy things. She's Van's mate."

"The jaguar shifter, right?" Julie pouted. "Too bad they're all taken. Are all shifters that wild?"

"They're all different," I explained. "Van is a jaguar, Rex is a wolf, and their personalities are as opposite as I can imagine. But one trait they all seem to have is that they're very protective of their mates."

"Like you, with a gargoyle." Julie leaned close. "Who would have thought you'd fall in love with a shifter with wings?"

A smile bloomed across my face. "He's incredible. Not just strong and protective, but considerate. He's so caring and looks out for me."

“That’s it,” Marina declared. “I’m swimming to the surface and finding myself a hot rockman too.”

“You’d get distracted by an octopus and beg him to wrap all eight arms around you,” Julie teased.

We laughed and teased each other some more. They would always be my pod, but I had another home waiting for me above the waves.

When my father swam over, the laughter abruptly stopped, replaced by a quiet underlining tension. Our podmates exchanged glances.

“Naiya, can we talk alone?” he asked, his voice low.

What did this mean? “Of course.”

We swam from the others and I contemplated what he’d say. Would he banish me forever? We stopped beside a curtain of kelp.

He turned to me and let out a slow exhale.

“You’ve always been different than any of your siblings—of anyone I’d known.

Curious. Adventurous and unafraid.” His voice was heavy with resignation.

“I thought if I bound you here, I could keep you safe. After your mother died, that’s all I focused on—keeping my children safe and secure.

And by arranging the marriage, it would give you something to keep you occupied—a new adventure.”

Emotion tightened in my throat. “I can’t marry him, Father. I don’t love him. I love—someone else.”

He blinked at me, eyes shiny. “A land-walker?”

I nodded. “Yes. A gargoyle shifter.”

“Oh, for the love of conch shells.” He rubbed his face. “A gargoyle ?” He removed his hands and his expression tightened with incredulity, like I was engaged to a sea urchin. “A rock with wings?”

“His name is Caleb,” I declared, straightening my tail.

“He is my— mate .” That was the first time I’d said it, but the word burned in my heart with a certainty.

My fingers traveled to the bite mark near my shoulder and brushed over the raised skin.

The feel of the scar from the mating bite filled me with confidence.

Silence settled between us for half a minute until he broke it.

“You’ve chosen him?”

“Yes,” I declared.

He exhaled with a low whoosh. “I made many mistakes along the way, both trying to lead this pod and raise a family on my own. But I won’t make another one here and try to force you to do as I wish.

” He shook his head. “You always looked toward the surface, Naiya. Somehow, I knew you’d one day go there.

And maybe that’s why I tried to bind you so tightly, to keep you here.

” After a shaky inhale, he continued. “One thing I did right was find your mother. Falling in love with her and creating a family was the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

And if that’s where your heart is”—he motioned above—”that’s where your happiness lies.

” He moved his hand to his heart and bowed forward. “You have my blessing.”

Emotions burst in my chest and I rushed over to him. “Oh!” I wrapped my arms around him.

He pulled me into a strong embrace. The pressure of his arms felt grounding, steady. “You’ll always have a place here in the pod, Naiya.”

“I’ll visit often,” I promised, my voice shaky as I held back tears.

We pulled apart and I glanced at him through the sheen coating my eyes. He looked older than he had moments ago—not from age, but from the weight of letting go.

Or maybe I was just reading into it.

I spent the next several days with my pod, swimming with them while a pull to return to the surface grew stronger inside. And I began to feel him—Caleb. His emotions—sad, longing—a whispering echo of my own.

I'm coming soon , I tried to assure him, through the miles that separated us.

Then it was time to go. Hugs all around.

With one last squeeze of my father's hand, I turned and kicked off into the open sea.

My tail cut through the water, strong and sure.

Every current around me buzzed with energy.

The reefs shimmered like the edge of a dream, and the path to the surface called to me.

My heart was full and my chest buoyant. I was chasing my dreams.

I swam toward the closest island where the ship docked, which was where I'd promised to meet Caleb.

And then the outline of it emerged like an oasis in the desert.

I followed it and broke through the ocean's surface.

There it stood—the ship with all its lights, its music, its rich sound of liveliness and activity and laughter.

I felt buoyant as I treaded water, almost as if I had wings like Caleb and could fly.

I gazed over every inch of this marvel and sighed, content.

I was home.

My heart sped with anticipation as I swam to the ship.

I smiled to myself and drifted nearer, picturing Caleb wrapping his massive arms around me. Bringing me to his broad chest. Holding me. But then...the water stilled. As if charged by something dark. A chill danced across my fins.

“Welcome back to the Moonlight Siren,” a man’s voice dripped low.

My fins tightened and every scale flickered with wariness. I turned slowly and my heart thudded.

“Angus...”

“Yes.” The selkie sneered. “You’re with that miserable piece of granite?

How unfortunate for you.” His mouth spread into a menacing grin.

“But for me? Just what I need. The perfect chess piece to end this game. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot.” He cocked his fingers back like a loaded gun and aimed at me.

“Wh-what are you talking about?” My voice trembled.

He swam in a slow, creepy circle around me. “Revenge.” His voice dripped low, laced with a dark threat.

I tried to dart away, but he was faster, slick as a sea snake. He grabbed my arm so hard I cried out.

“Check.” He sneered. “Mate .”

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

CALEB

I headed up to the Gargoyle's Perch, the top-level deck where winged creatures like me often soared from at night.

Unfurling my wings, I propelled up toward the stars.

The wind whipped past me as I flew higher, and the ship appeared to shrink to the size of a toy boat in a bathtub.

Since Naiya had left, I'd spent more time up here, seeking refuge in the sky, comfort from the constant yearning.

Mate.

The word echoed in my head, like the steady beat of a war drum.

Naiya had said she'd return tonight, and I could feel her presence inside me, a pleasant warmth in my chest. The pull between us was faint but pulsing deeper as she approached.

It was the mate bond, growing stronger as each magical thread formed.

I glanced down to the ocean, yearning to glimpse the outline of Naiya's long, smooth body swimming beneath the surface, her graceful silvery-teal tail propelling her.

Something changed.

A tightness in my ribs. Fear. Sharp and raw.

It was Naiya. She was afraid.

I tensed mid-flight, my wings beating hard to keep me aloft as dread coiled in my gut. Where was she? I scanned the sea below as I resumed flying, searching for any sign of her in the ocean.

Was that—movement?

Yes. Two figures beneath the water, struggling?

Was I imagining this?

I flew lower and focused. Sweet skies—it was Naiya.

And the bastard holding her? Angus in human form.

A guttural snarl ripped from my throat and rage exploded inside me. Before I could think and strategize, I snapped my wings tight and dove. My fear of the ocean returned just as it rushed up to greet me.

Too late now. I hit the water with a thunderous splash, my world turning cold and weightless as I plunged. I retracted my wings and shifted to human form underwater, making it easier to swim.

I followed the mate bond and found them struggling. Angus dragged her and she thrashed her powerful tail, trying to escape his hold.

I unleashed a roar that ripped the current and surged toward them like a torpedo. Naiya spotted me and her eyes widened with shock. She jerked against Angus's grip,

and he turned to me just before I hurled my fist in his face.

The motion shot him back, forcing him to release his hold on Naiya. His blood clouded the water—or maybe it was just my eyes burning with rage.

He smirked, but it faltered as he spat out a tooth from his bloody mouth. I lunged forward and grabbed him by the throat, forcing him upward. He pounded against my chest, struggling to escape, but adrenaline surged and I barely felt his feeble attempts.

Once we broke the surface, I took a massive breath and then tightened both hands around his neck. “This ends now,” I growled. “I’ll kill you for touching my mate.”

His eyes bulged, and he was struggling, clawing, fighting. Satisfaction flooded me as I watched him struggle to survive.

A hand touched my back. Naiya floated beside me. “Enough,” she said gently.

I struggled between glancing at her, back here with me, and finishing the job of ending Angus.

She touched my cheek. “Caleb, please.” She trailed her soft fingers over my shoulder and down my arm, calming the beast inside me. “It’s over.”

I blinked through the crimson haze blinding me and then let go of his slimy neck.

Angus coughed. “You insane piece of rock!” he sputtered. “You almost killed me.”

“If you come back, I will,” I seethed.

With a look of disgust, he shifted to selkie form and dove into the deep. I stared after him, waiting several seconds for that sneaky shadow to resurface, but the surface

remained calm.

“How did you find me, Caleb?” Naiya whispered, her voice tinged with awe.

I cupped her face, our foreheads nearly touching, and our breath mingled in the salty sea air. “I felt you,” I said. “The bond. I’ve been feeling it grow since you left.”

She gazed at me, a wondrous gleam in her eyes. “I’ve been feeling it too.”

I tipped my forehead to touch hers as we treaded water in each other’s orbit. “You’re my mate, Naiya. I will always come for you.” In a softer voice, I added, “I love you.”

Her lips trembled and then formed a luminous smile. “I love you too.”

I pressed my lips to hers and kissed her. The energy between us sizzled, searing into my soul that this was right, this was perfect. It didn’t matter that we were sea and sky—we were mates.

We pulled away a fraction, holding each other there in the ocean.

She tilted her head and flashed a sly smile. “We’ve met like this before, gargoyle.”

I chuckled. “True, mermaid.” I grunted. “Same selkie causing trouble.” I pushed a strand of wet hair off her cheek. “Then you saved me.”

Her eyes gleamed. “This time, you saved me.”

A lump of emotion formed in my throat, and I swallowed it down.

She ran her hands over my back. “How about you show me those beautiful wings of yours again and fly us back onboard?”

I gazed down at her. “Excellent suggestion.”

Seconds later, I unfurled my wings and she squealed as I flew upward. She clung to me and then laughed, her tail hanging down toward the ocean.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Her breath hitched. “Yes.” Magic shimmered against my skin as she transformed, her tail reforming as legs. She glanced around us and exhaled. “It’s exhilarating up here. Incredible to see the sea from the sky.”

“Indeed.” I couldn’t think of anything better than holding my mate as we soared beneath the moon. “Can we fly for a few minutes before returning to the ship?”

She held me more tightly. “Yes, show me your world.” She kissed my cheek. “Let’s fly, my gargoyle mate.”

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:09 pm

NAIYA

The stars and moonlight sparkled over the ocean as I stepped outside near the pool deck. The ship rocked gently beneath my feet—no longer strange as I'd gotten used to this rhythm—and legs.

Caleb leaned against a railing with his signature don't-mess-with-me stance, his blue-gray eyes scanning the horizon. He turned, as if he sensed me approach. When his eyes found mine, his face softened into the smile that he seemed to reserve just for me.

"There's my beautiful mate." He kissed me and pulled me into his giant arms. Tingles danced up my skin and my toes curled—that was one of the advantages of feet. He pulled back and gazed down at me. "How was your night?"

"Brilliant." I beamed. The Moonlight Siren had hired me for the rest of the sailing season, and I spent most of my time working behind-the-scenes on productions. Carina mentioned she'd try to get me a small role performing on a new show next season, but for now, I'd learn everything I could.

"Proud of you," he said, brushing his fingers over the back of my neck.

The last three weeks had flown by in the blur. On dock days, I often swam with Carina and the other sea shifters. Now, I belonged to two worlds and relished exploring them both—especially whenever I could do so with Caleb.

We made our way to a table beside the dragon pool where the rest of his band had

gathered with their mates. I loved when we met up like this after our shifts—a family of supernaturals, forging our own way on as we sailed the sea. As laughter rippled around the table, a massive shifter walked by.

Van leaned forward and muttered, “I thought our rock lobster was big, but that shifter’s biceps could probably crush Caleb’s drum set.”

“No one better lay a finger on my instrument,” Caleb grumbled.

“I hope you don’t say that to your mate!” Van added with a laugh and everyone joined in.

My cheeks warmed in slight embarrassment, yet at the same time, it felt to be good to be included in their teasing. It was their way of saying you’re one of us.

“I wonder why Maribelle giving him the stink eye from across the pool,” Piper said with a low whistle.

The shifter continued walking on, oblivious to Maribelle’s eye daggers.

The witch headed over to us. “Ugh, that’s the new physical trainer.

” Maribelle tossed her hair over one shoulder and planted one hand on her hip.

“What a meathead. I can’t believe they hired someone like him.

So...so brawny. And too close to my spa.” She threw her hands up in exasperation.

“If I hear him say ‘Beast mode, baby,’ I’ll hex him into a sea cucumber! ”

After she stormed off, Piper rubbed her hands together with excitement. “I can’t wait to watch this play out.”

Van chuckled. “Bring out the popcorn.”

What was so entertaining about that? I was about to ask when Caleb wrapped his arm behind me, and I instinctively leaned into my gargoyle protective embrace.

I glanced up at the stars, then down to where it met the black velvet of the ocean.

This ship, the sea, the sky...all with Caleb. I was where I wanted to be.

I was home.

Thanks for diving into Naiya and Caleb’s story! Catch the fiery sparks when Maribelle clashes with the burly shifter in Bear to be Wild !