



Seamark

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Category: LGBT+

Description: A distant island in the blustery north holds a secret – a clan of shapeshifting sea dragons called the Agnarra, all but wiped out by humans a generation ago. For Morgan, a lone artistic soul among his practical people, life on the island is incredibly boring. That is, until a human ship explodes on the horizon, causing fear among the clan.

In the aftermath, Morgan finds a human in the water – Auban – badly injured and with no memory of his past. As Morgan nurses him back to health, he can't help but fall in love. But their love is forbidden – Morgan's people, especially his fierce older brother, would kill Auban if they knew he existed. It's up to Morgan to keep him a secret until they can find a way for him to escape the island.

But secrets never last, and neither does the Agnarra's new peace. War is coming, and Morgan must use all of his wits and Auban's help to save his clan from annihilation.

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Honestly, the explosion on the horizon was a relief, given the way the council meeting had been going.

Well, all right, that wasn't true. Morgan was a lot of things, most of them disreputable if you listened to his brother, which no one who had any sense should, but ... Anyhow, he wasn't foolish enough to wish the worst upon their people as an anodyne for boredom. Not when there were plenty of less dramatic diversions around.

Garen had scowled at him when Morgan announced that he'd be skipping the meeting as usual. "How can Brevaer possibly let you get away with that?" he demanded sourly. "I have to attend every council meeting even though my mother never allows me to speak at them."

"That's the whole trick," Morgan informed his best friend as he tossed his bright-green braid over his shoulder. "I make my brother think that I am going to speak at the council meeting, and he can't wait to get rid of me. It's quite strategic of me, don't you think?"

It was enough of a jibe to coax a reluctant smile out of Garen. "I don't know about strategy, but after the last time you talked there, I suppose I can't blame him."

"All I said was that I would be happy to take any interested parties with me to dive for pearls!" Morgan crossed his arms with a huff. "How was I supposed to know half the council would interpret that as me being inappropriate? I don't know what our women call their personal parts—"

"You should know that; you're twenty years old—"

“And it’s of no interest to me anyhow, because I have no interest in their personal parts,” he pressed on. “I like actual pearls, thank you very much. And I’m very good at finding them! Aren’t we supposed to share our unique gifts with the clan?”

Pearl diving was the only gift of Morgan’s that his clan was interested in for the most part. The majority of them were indifferent to the art and sculptures he made, and his talent at making paints and pigments was useful but not the sort of thing that would get him out of doing his daily chores. Pearls, though ... those were special, and being able to dive deep enough to reach the oysters that made them was a challenge.

“The point is, my brother is happy enough to let me do as I please when the council comes together, and you are jealous of my good fortune.” Morgan patted Garen on the cheek. “My heart weeps for you! Have fun now!” He whirled around and flounced off toward the big beach, the one the village was closest to.

“I’m going to make you run around the island tomorrow morning with me, see if I don’t!” Garen called after him.

Ugh. Running. Not Morgan’s idea of fun, but if it made Garen and his brother happy, he would do some training with them just to get them off his back.

Training. Training for what, he asked himself petulantly as he practically skipped to the beach. There had been no fights with the humans since he and Garen were five years old. This island, the new island—although new was relative since Morgan had lived here for the past fifteen years of his life—was safe. Humans didn’t sail this far north. Why would they? There was nothing for them here, not even the whales they once hunted—the great beasts didn’t like the confusing currents.

No one would ever find their clan here. They could be bored and useless and isolated forever.

That's not fair. Morgan slowed as he reached the beach, skirting around the groups of playing children and their minders and heading for a slightly more isolated section of sand, protected from view by a windswept hummock of seagrass and rocky soil. It wasn't fair to miss what he barely remembered. It wasn't fair to wish he were back in a place that had claimed the lives of so many of his kind—or, in the case of Garen's father, his sanity. But the home island had been ...

Morgan sat down on the sand, digging his long fingers into the cool grains and closing his eyes as he tried to remember. The home island had been bigger than this one, at least twice as large. It had been warmer, with more rain and never snow. The soil had been dark and rich, and food had grown there without the need to seed the earth with fish waste. There had been a waterfall with a pool beneath it—he remembered playing there with Garen when they were so small, when his parents had still been alive, and Brevaer had just been his big brother, not his guardian and the boss of his entire life. He remembered his mother's laughter and how she and Garen's mother, Rozyne, had giggled into each other's ears as they whispered about their husbands and children and lives.

It had been good there. So good. Too good to last.

Morgan slowly opened his eyes. Waving seagrass met his view, and beyond that pale sand, and past that, the choppy, dark-blue waves of the ocean. The sky was clouded today, giving everything a flat, shadowed look, and the distant horizon was an uninspiring blur.

Flat. Uninspiring. Just like everything about this new island of theirs.

I am unkind. Morgan knew he was. He knew the elders had done what they thought was right by moving them here; he knew his brother did what he thought was right by forcing him to train when he would rather be painting; he knew Garen's mother did what she thought was right by screaming at everyone, emphasizing her son's failings

and ignoring his triumphs. He knew it was all to make them tougher, stronger, more ready to protect themselves if and when they were ever found again.

There was another island somewhere, he knew—colder, smaller, even less inviting than this one. That island was their destiny if they were scared badly enough.

Morgan was more frightened of that fate than of dying. I am unkind, but I know myself. I will stifle in such a place. He was stifling here though he would never confess it to his brother. Brevaer thought he just needed to find more work to lose himself in, to exert himself more for the good of their clan, their people. Brevaer thought better of Morgan's potential than Morgan did of his own.

I am not brave like he is. I cannot live like he does.

Melancholy threatened to sweep away Morgan's fragile peace with himself. In an effort to preserve it, he pushed to his feet and went down to the water's edge. The sand there was wet and malleable, and the tide was going out—he would have time to create something before the waves washed his work away.

This is life in this place, he mused as he scooped sand into a pile, then began to shape it. He made the sculpture long and sinuous, breaking up the circular shape of it here and there with the curls of fins and claws. He finally finished with the head, clambering over the sand to grab a broken piece of shell a few paces away, then using it to carve tiny details that would be too fine for any but the most curious to see. The curve of scales here ... the ridge of an eyebrow there ... the snake of a tongue reaching out to taste the world, to drink in everything it had to offer. The shell itself made a decent-enough eye.

Morgan sat back and looked at his creation, then chuckled. If he could color it in, it would be a perfect self-portrait. As it was, he might be able to thread some of the longer stalks of grass into the sand to make something like a mane, and—

BOOM!

Morgan startled so badly he fell flat onto his backside as he turned to stare at the horizon. A cloud of flame swelled and burst like a seedpod, jettisoning smoke into the air. The bright-orange flames died fast enough, but the smoke remained. He heard the children close by crying in fear and the worried tones of the few other adults on the beach at this time of day.

What is it?

Is it them?

Have they found us?

How?

The others fled the scene, rushing back to the safety of the village even as Morgan ran to the main beach, his art project abandoned in the sheer, intense rush of curiosity that came over him.

Was it a human ship? Could they breathe fire and smoke like that and survive? Was it something else? He stepped out into the water, waves breaking against his bare feet, and gave in to the urge to go and find out.

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“No!” Hard hands and snarled words jerked Morgan back before he was more than a foot deep. Morgan stumbled into his brother, turning and giving him a wounded look as he rubbed the spot where Brevaer had grabbed onto him. His brother raised one eyebrow, clearly unimpressed with his pantomime.

“I wasn’t going to get close to it, Brev!” Morgan protested. “I just want to see what it is!”

“It’s trouble, that’s what it is,” Brevaer snapped, crossing his strongly muscled arms. Honestly, Morgan wasn’t kidding when he let on that it hurt to be tossed around by his brother—Brevaer was the strongest person in the clan. “Nothing that isn’t a volcano should be erupting in flames like that. You think I’m going to let an untrained, untested child like yourself out into the water to investigate it? Think again.”

“I’m twenty; I’m not a child,” Morgan muttered. The most experienced warriors in the clan streamed past them and leapt into the water, their two-legged forms swiftly giving way to the long, slender shapes of their sea-dragon selves. Morgan yearned to follow them—at a safe distance, of course. He wasn’t a fool, no matter what his brother said. Maybe he could ...

“Garen!” Brevaer called out to the young man who’d just reached the beach, and Morgan’s hopes sank like a stone. Garen had a wild crush on Morgan’s older brother and would sooner cut his arm off than disappoint him. It was terribly inconvenient to have a friend who was so biased toward boring responsibility.

Garen jogged over, doing a decent job of keeping his expression neutral despite the

way his dusky cheeks were pinking up from sheer reaction to being close to Brevaer. Shameless. How Brevaer hadn't noticed and done something about it yet was beyond Morgan. "Yes, Brevaer?" Garen asked.

"Can I trust you to keep Morgan on land while the rest of us investigate the explosion?"

The corners of Garen's mouth turned down. Ah, that wasn't the question he'd been hoping to be asked. Probably he'd wanted something like, "I need someone I can depend on by my side as I swim into what might be a fatal battle. May I count on you to protect me, tooth and claw?" And then Garen would say, "Of course, Brevaer. You honor me," as he tried not to faint from sheer joy, and then Morgan would have to wash his eyes out with saltwater as his brother swept his best friend into a passionate kiss, and—

"Garen stays here!" a sharp voice called out. Garen's shoulders crumpled a bit more as his mother arrived, her expression thunderous as she looked at Brevaer. "Don't you dare ask him to go out into that mess. You aren't clan chieftain, and I won't—"

"I wasn't asking him anywhere," Brevaer replied coldly. Morgan's heart ached for his friend as Garen cast his gaze down onto the sand, all hopes utterly dashed. "I want him to keep Morgan back as well."

"Of course, he will. What good could Morgan do out there?"

Well, great. Now Morgan felt like shit as well. Their families were just the best.

Brevaer rolled his eyes and turned away, following the others into the water. He transformed into his dragon self, all shining black scales with glittering green edges and a long green mane, and quickly overtook the rest of the clan as they swam out into the open waters.

Morgan sighed, then glanced at his friend, who was enduring a pointed lecture from his mother about the importance of “—keeping yourself safe at all costs! You are next in line to lead this clan after your father, and I won’t have you risking yourself on pointless expeditions into danger!”

“How could I ever lead a clan if I’m unwilling to do the work of a warrior?” Garen demanded.

“Look where being a warrior got your father!” Rozyne said, her voice breaking. “You stay here, do you understand me?” She left before getting confirmation from either of them, furiously wiping at the tears streaming down her face as she went. Probably off to check on her husband—not that he ever moved much these days. Sariel had irrevocably changed the day their clan was attacked, lost in his own mind after losing so many of their people, including Garen’s older siblings and Morgan’s own parents.

Morgan reached out and grabbed his friend’s hand, determined to cheer him up even though both of them were smarting right now. “Good thing you’re here to keep me out of trouble!”

Garen didn’t try to grip back. “Don’t, Morgan,” he said quietly. “Just don’t.”

“Don’t what? Rely on you to keep me out of trouble? That’s our entire relationship, though. What will I do if you take away the central pillar of our friendship?”

“Probably find someone better than me to replace it with.”

Morgan’s heart went from aching for his friend to bleeding. “No,” he said, leaning his head against Garen’s shoulder. They were almost the same height, but Garen was just tall enough that Morgan could still make this work without putting a crick in his neck. “There’s no one better than you.”

Garen scoffed. “Are you joking? Everyone is better than me! I’m a trained warrior who’s prevented from doing the duties of a warrior by my own mother. I’m the chief’s only living son, but the chief is a madman who should have been replaced years ago and only hasn’t been out of pity. I’m a fool who’s in love with someone who will never see me as more than a minder for his younger brother, and at least you are never looked down upon for choosing not to train. Everyone knows you’re an artist at heart. It would be cruel to try and make you into a fighter.”

“Tell that to Brevaer; he’s constantly bothering me to train,” Morgan said lightly.

“Only because he wants you to be safe.”

Morgan cuddled a little closer. “That’s what your mother wants for you too. To keep you safe.”

“But that’s not what I want,” Garen whispered.

“Soon you’ll come of age.” They were both already considered adults, but coming of age took several more years of maturation and personal decision-making. Their people, the Agnarra, had traditionally had many trades and professions for coming-of-age youths to choose from. Too many of them had been lost during the war, and necessity had made many who would rather have been artisans or lorekeepers or innovators into warriors and farmers. Morgan himself had no master he could approach to teach him about the art his fingers constantly itched to make. He could only look at the work that had been done before and imitate it until he managed to teach himself. Their people had lost so much ... and might lose even more.

“We’ll both come of age,” he continued. He and Garen had been born only two moons apart, after all. “And then your mother won’t be able to stop you from truly dedicating yourself to being a warrior. You’ll get your chance to be just as impressively stupid as all the rest of them.”

Garen finally twined his fingers in between Morgan's. A tiny smile that most people wouldn't even have noticed appeared at the very corners of his mouth, and Morgan relaxed a bit with the knowledge he'd made his friend happy or at least amused him. "Thanks."

"Just don't leave me behind completely when my brother finally notices you," Morgan went on, slyly hip checking Garen and laughing when he saw the blush reappear. "After all, I was your friend first, and ..." He stopped, distracted by something rolling in on the waves. Was someone returning already? No, this didn't move like a living thing.

He took a step toward the water, almost falling when Garen tugged him back. "What?" Morgan demanded.

"I told your brother I wouldn't let you leave the beach," Garen replied determinedly.

"I'm not going to swim anywhere, I just—look." Morgan pointed toward the water. "What's that?"

Garen narrowed his eyes. "I'll find out." He let go of Morgan's hand and launched himself into the waves, quickly swimming out to the object in his two-legged form.

Traitor! Oh, Morgan was going to give Garen a piece of his mind and then some when he got back here. So he could disobey his mother even when he knew she would beat him blue if she saw him out there, but Morgan couldn't go ten feet out into the surf because Garen didn't want to upset Brevaer, who wasn't even here right now, and ... and ...

Garen hauled the object up onto the beach, and Morgan's blood went cold. It was a chunk of wood but not just wood. This wood had been cut and shaped and was nailed together to create what almost looked like a jagged-edged shield. It wasn't a shield,

though. It stank of pitch and fire and was blackened on one side.

No, this was no shield. This was part of a ship.

The humans had found them.

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Morgan was probably the only person in the clan who didn't attend that evening's council. At least not much of it.

Everyone had an opinion on the ship and its contents. The pieces of many bodies—none of them whole—had been found in the water, humans wearing black clothes covered with some sort of metal skin, many rings that locked together almost like scales. Some wore swords at their shredded waists, and the fact that their ship had blown apart so thoroughly implied that they'd had some sort of weapon on board that could have been disastrous for the Agnarra if it hadn't turned on its bearers first.

“We have to flee!” some had insisted, including Garen's self-important uncle Dinigan and his odious son Denikel. “Move to the hidden island farther north! If the humans have found us—”

“They didn't find anything,” Brevaer had said firmly. “They didn't get close enough to find us, and then they went and blew themselves up. No one knows that we're here.”

“But that they came this far in the first place is of concern,” Rozyne put in. “We're already far enough north that humans should have no interest in this area. What has brought them here now, then? To assume they don't know about us is the height of arro—”

That's when Sariel, Rozyne's husband and the clan's mad chieftain, had come barreling out of his hut, a wild look in his eyes. Morgan had been astounded at how such an energetic person, who spent so much time lying down, could be lost in his own mind.

“Humans?” he’d shrieked, wrenching a spear from the nearest warrior, who’d stared in shock. “Where? Where?”

“Father,” Garen had said, tears springing to his eyes. “Please, put that away. Let me—” He’d reached out, but his efforts were rebuffed with a wild cry. Brevaer had been pulled in to disarm Sarel, all while Rozyne hissed reprimands at her son for not keeping his father in the hut—as though he could have anticipated such an act.

That was when Morgan left, slipping through the crowd and back toward the beach. Not the same beach, though—no, it was covered with ship debris now, all of it brought back in an effort to discover what it was that had destroyed the humans’ ship so thoroughly. None of the bodies were there although some of their armor had been retrieved. After all, that was the most interesting thing about the bastards.

But it isn’t, Morgan had wanted to say when he first heard that. What about their clothes? What about their dishes and cups, their trinkets and idols? What more could we learn about them that might help us understand them if only we tried? He wasn’t stupid enough to actually voice that thought where Brevaer could hear it, though.

He avoided the sandy beach and pressed on for another twenty minutes until he reached the small, rocky beach that was far less popular among his clan. Unlike the other, it wasn’t protected by the shape of the island, a cove of safety during storms. This beach was rough, the wind constantly crashing waves against it. The only bit of creature comfort to be found there was an overhang, almost like a shelf, that had been dug out of the shore by the waves long ago. There was just enough space beneath it for a pair of children to plot and play, or for a single adult to watch the waves come in while marginally protected by the wind.

Morgan climbed down and sat beneath the overhang, stretching his feet out into the dark water. His scales came into view, glimmering in the faint moonlight as they adapted to their new element. If he pressed his feet together right now, they would

form a perfect sea dragon's tail.

I'm the most useless sea dragon in existence. Morgan had always known he had different priorities than his brother, but today's events had driven that fact home for him in a most uncomfortable way. Fear, anger, frustration—he understood why his clan was feeling that way, he did! Humans had brought them terrible pain and trouble in the past. Of course, every avenue ought to be considered, but ...

If they left this place, what would their lives become? It was already hard to grow enough during the warmer months to take them through the winter without rationing, and their next choice in refuge was even farther north. Was it smaller too? Flatter? Less colorful, less hospitable? In their efforts to escape humanity, were they going to turn themselves into beings who didn't even have lives worth living?

Morgan didn't know the right answer. No one did; that was why the council and everyone else was debating right now, but ... He reached down and dipped his hand into the water, watching his green scales glimmer. He could just barely remember swimming in waters that were warm and welcoming. These ones were cold but bearable. If he couldn't even swim, he would lose his mind, he knew it.

Morgan sighed and looked out at the sea, the water reflecting the pale light of the moon. Perhaps a midnight swim was in order. Brevaer wouldn't like it, but then, his brother didn't have to know every ... little ... hmm.

What on earth was that?

Morgan wasn't entirely sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. There shouldn't be anything floating in the water so far around the side of the island—the tides were against it right now, not to mention the winds. But that looked like ... it looked like it might just be ...

Morgan dove into the water a moment later, and his curiosity was momentarily overcome by the bliss of stretching out into his full length. He dodged the rocky outcroppings with ease and swam hard for the drifting lump that marred the surface of the sea.

Perhaps it was another piece of the boat—that was an exciting thought! It would give Morgan a chance to examine one for himself, to take time with it instead of having it wrenched from his hands and thrown into a great pile on the beach like the rest of them. Or perhaps ... or ... oh.

Oh, no.

There was fresh blood in the water. Strange blood, not from any creature he'd ever scented before. It had to be human. One of the humans must have survived the explosion.

Morgan wasn't the only one to realize it either. Not far distant was a pod of orcas, the matriarch leading them steadily toward this new prey. Orcas and sea dragons usually ignored each other, but Morgan was small for his people, and if these orcas were hungry enough, they might challenge him for whatever—whoever—this was.

I could let them have it. The human must be close to death. But ... Morgan had never seen a human up close before! This could be the only chance he ever got to inspect one for himself, and he wasn't about to lose it. He let the waves carry the body past him as he twisted his body into a threat display, baring his teeth and holding his short, stubby claws out in front of him.

The mama orca slowed down, bemused by his appearance. She made to go around him, and Morgan darted sideways, blocking her path. After two more tries, both thwarted, she pulled back and chattered a bit to her pod.

Morgan didn't speak orca fluently, but he got the gist of things. She and her family had been snacking on pieces of humans all day. A fresh kill appealed to her, but they weren't hungry and didn't need trouble with the Agnarra. That's right, you don't. Morgan opened his jaws a little wider and wiggled the pointed tip of his tail for emphasis.

The matriarch did the orca equivalent of shrugging and turned around, leading her petulant pod away. Once they were distant enough not to be a threat, Morgan relaxed, a bit astounded he'd managed to pull that off. He hadn't even been able to threaten off little reef sharks when learning his displays as a child, and now he had dispersed an entire orca pod!

In a good mood, he swam after the bleeding human, who was somehow clinging to a buoyant piece of the ship even while unconscious, and dragged them to the beach. Morgan was careful in how he maneuvered the person onto the rocks—out of the water, the scent of blood was even more profound. They would surely be dead soon. He would have to get his fill of looking at them fast.

Once the person was securely on the beach, Morgan pulled himself out of the water, changing into his bipedal form without thought. He knelt beside the wretched human, whose body appeared to be covered with burns, and rolled them over onto their back to get a better look at them.

The clouds cleared from in front of the moon, strengthening her light. Miraculously, the human's face was unburned. It was slack with unconsciousness but otherwise in perfect form.

Perfection. That was the word Morgan was looking for. He had never seen a more beautiful face—the long nose, smooth jaw, lovely high forehead, and sharp, sloping cheekbones. It was hard to tell in this light, but he thought the person's hair might be red. What a glorious color. Morgan was transfixed, first with astonishment, then with

fear.

Brevaer could never be allowed to find out about this.

Never.

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Morgan couldn't stop looking at him. The beauty of the man's face was something he'd never expected—how could humans look so much like the Agnarra? Weren't they brutish, as ugly on the outside as they were on the inside?

But this one was truly beautiful, with broad, elegant features and eyelashes so long Morgan couldn't help but wonder about the eyes concealed beneath them. The man was nude, not wearing pieces of armor like the others had been—perhaps they'd burned away in the blast—and his form was long, lean, symmetrical ...

Except for the burns.

Morgan felt sorrow in his heart even as he looked at the man. Surely he would die soon. Morgan didn't remember much about people, but he did know they weren't as tough on an individual level as an Agnarra. That was why they had to play terrible tricks and do unforgivable things in order to win. Burns this severe ... they would test even one of Morgan's kind. A human could have no hope of recovering.

I should leave him here. I've seen him; now it's time to let him die in peace. But the light of the moon had never looked quite so lovely as it did when it was highlighting this poor man's face. Morgan's fingers itched with the urge to draw or sculpt him. Would anyone believe he'd imagined this face on his own when they saw it later?

Unable to resist, Morgan reached out and, very gently, ran his fingertips down the man's forehead, over the bridge of his nose, then bump-bump over the curves of his lips. He tried to commit those curves to memory, feeling them out: the shape of his jaw, his smooth and lovely chin, his slender eyebrows, and the arch of his cheekbones. Morgan mapped the man's face, more and more entranced with it, until

finally he'd had his fill. He pulled his hands back, reluctant but ready to bid the poor soul farewell, and then—

The man's eyes opened.

His eyes were like starlight.

Morgan couldn't move, completely entranced by the person looking up at him. "Hello," he offered after a moment, not sure what else he could say. Would the human rage at him? Spit on him? Prove once and for all that people like this weren't a breed to be trusted?

No ... he smiled. It was a faint, thin thing, but a smile nonetheless. He smiled, and Morgan felt like his heart flipped upside down in his chest. If he was beautiful when he was still, he was positively radiant when he smiled. Distantly, Morgan realized that the possibility of him coming out of this meeting unscathed had just gone way down because now ... now he couldn't leave. Not without doing everything he could to make this man comfortable.

"Do you hurt?" he asked. "You fell into the water after your people's ship blew up. Is ... are the burns painful?"

The human looked at him blankly. Morgan was confused at first, then put it together in a rush—of course, the human didn't speak his language. This man had no idea what Morgan was saying.

"It's all right," he said, making his voice as reassuring as possible. "I'm going to make you feel better, all right?" He would start with a bed of cooling, slippery seaweed to lay the human on, then bind the rest of his wounds as best he could in the same.

Gathering the seaweed was easy enough, even in the dark—there was a special variety that promoted healing better than the others, and its strands were long and wide, simple to detect by feel. Morgan bundled it between his claws, then carried it up onto land, where—

Oof! It was a lot heavier when he took on his humanoid form! And ... where to put it? He couldn't leave the man out in the open like this—the birds would peck him to shreds. The overhang, though ... that might do for a while. Morgan hauled the seaweed over there, then followed with the man, who was looking far less awake now than he had been a few minutes ago. His breath sounded raspy in his throat, a bit wheezy—perhaps he was thirsty.

Fresh water, fresh water ... they were too far from the village's spring for Morgan to fetch some from there, but perhaps the last rainfall had left some reservoirs here on the rocks. He shifted and hunted the smell of fresh water down, finding two small pools. Changing back into two legs, Morgan cupped his hands in the water and, very slowly, brought it back to the man.

He was barely awake now, but he managed to drink, first tiny sips, then enormous slurps once he realized what was being offered. "Yes, isn't that nice?" Morgan said, feeling accomplished. "Let me get you some more." He made the trip again, then again, and on the fourth time ...

On the fourth time, the man was asleep. Or unconscious, but Morgan was going with asleep for now. It was gentler, somehow. He stared at him, resting peacefully on the seaweed, calm in the night air despite how it must make his human skin feel chilled ...

Skin. The burns, right! Morgan grabbed the extra lengths of seaweed he'd pulled ashore and bound up the remaining burns, hoping that it helped. Saltwater wasn't usually very nice in a wound, but the seaweed itself was a tried-and-true remedy.

Hopefully, it would help more than it hurt. Now, what next?

“—gan!”

Morgan was so absorbed in his own thoughts, he barely realized that someone was calling for him until their voice was too close for comfort.

“Morgan!”

At least it was Garen and not Brevaer. Morgan climbed out from beneath the overhang as carefully as he could and dove into the water, transforming and swimming to the front of the beach a moment later. He poked his head out of the water and wriggled his ears at his best friend, who reoriented on Morgan the moment he saw him.

Yes. Leave the rocky section alone, pay attention to me here.

“What are you doing out here?” Garen demanded harshly, wading into the water and grabbing Morgan by one of his ears. Morgan whined pathetically. “It’s too late to go off by yourself, especially after everything that’s happened today. Do you want your brother to drag you back to the village by your tail?”

How was holding him by his ear any better!? Morgan whuffed irritably, then flipped his tail to splash Garen with a wave of water. His friend spluttered and dropped him, and Morgan swam far enough away to be sure that when he changed back, he wouldn’t immediately be tackled.

“I just wanted to see if I could find some pieces of the boat on my own!” he said. “Without Brevaer looking over my shoulder and shouting at me the whole time.”

“Your brother is just worried about you, Morgan. He only wants you to be safe,

he—”

Morgan had had it with being lectured. “I don’t want to only be safe!” he snapped, splashing water at Garen with a humanoid arm. “I don’t want to be tucked away in our home and left to experience nothing but what my brother deems appropriate for all of my days. I don’t want to sacrifice my life for some imaginary ideal of security! And if you do, fine, then go back and listen to your mother, but it will only make my brother less likely to love you than he already is!”

Garen looked at Morgan like he’d just stabbed him through the heart. It took a moment for Morgan to realize the extent of what he’d just revealed—that he not only knew Garen was in love with Brevaer but also that Brevaer knew it and didn’t requite it.

He’d gone too far. “I’m sorry,” Morgan said, reaching out to take Garen’s hand. His friend was already turning away, stumbling blindly toward the rocky beach. Morgan splashed after him, wrapping his arms tight around him before Garen could get away. They sank to their knees in the water, and when Garen began to shake, Morgan knew it was from crying even though he couldn’t see his face.

“I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not that he doesn’t like you,” Morgan babbled, desperate to fix things. “He does, he just ... I don’t think anyone has caught his attention like that yet. That doesn’t mean no one ever will.”

“Just not me,” Garen said in a small voice.

“Ha, he would be lucky to end up with someone as wonderful as you.” Garen was one of the best people Morgan knew, kind to everyone, always ready to listen, and with a fierce desire to serve their village. So he was a bit blustery and occasionally grumpy—who wasn’t? “And I shouldn’t have talked about your mother either,” Morgan added. “I’m sorry.”

Garen didn't reply, just turned and wrapped his arms around Morgan's waist, leaning his hot, wet face against his shoulder. Morgan rocked him and held him close and almost, almost forgot about the man he had hidden not a hundred feet away.

He would come back to him tomorrow and bring food and a blanket if he could find one to spare. The man would surely appreciate it ...

If he was still alive by then.

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Morgan had never wished so badly for an hour of idleness before in his entire life. And he'd done a lot of idle wishing.

The result of yesterday's conference slash shouting match was that the entire village would make ready to leave on a moment's notice, and that everyone of age would increase their training in weaponry and practice fighting in their sea dragon forms.

"I remember the tricks they used last time," Brevaer said darkly to Morgan that morning as they ate the plain, tepid meal he'd managed to scrape together. He should have taken time yesterday to haul in more of the communal root crop and pound it into something edible, but, well ... yesterday had gotten away from him.

"They spread nets across the water to tangle us," Brevaer went on, either not realizing, or equally likely, not caring that Morgan's thoughts were several miles away. "They had some sort of stinking black oil that set the sea on fire too. It burnt out quickly, but the oil stuck in the gills. You had to transform to scrape it off, and then you were more vulnerable to attacks by their harpoons."

"But we still don't know they're coming for us," Morgan pointed out. His brother scowled at him. "We don't! Not for sure! You said yourself that the evidence you've found so far is inconclusive, didn't you?"

"It's true that much of their ship's stores sank or were destroyed before we reached the wreckage," Brevaer said. "But think. Their ship exploded. Why would a ship with good intentions carry something on it capable of that level of destruction?"

That ... was a very good question and not one that Morgan wanted to consider. He

changed the subject instead and later that morning found himself sweating alongside every other person of fighting age in the clan as they wielded staffs on the beach. The only ones who weren't there were the women with young children, the few who were needed in the fields, and those seeing to the packing.

"Double tempo!" Brevaer called out, and the drummer picked up the pace. Morgan groaned aloud, almost getting whapped by someone else's staff as he broke formation. "You don't get to stop yet!" his brother snapped at him when he saw Morgan standing there, rubbing one aching arm. "Not until you do this ten more times, perfectly!"

What good will staves do us against people who can make things explode? But Morgan didn't say that out loud, because he valued his life.

"Time the strikes to your exhales," Garen whispered from where he was working a little ways off. "It makes it easier to move in time with the beat."

"But that's boring and predictable," Morgan whined, nevertheless following along with Garen's direction. "How is this supposed to help us fight anyone?"

"It's not."

Morgan almost jumped out of his skin as his brother's hand landed on his shoulder. "These early skills are meant to help you learn to move and become accustomed to the weight of a weapon in your hands," he said sternly. The others moved around them like a bunch of panting, breathless shadows. "Once you're capable of that, you can learn more."

Morgan scowled. "If this is the beginner class, then why is Garen here?"

"Morgan!" he heard his friend mutter.

“He’s here because he’s responsible for making sure you do your training.”

Oh, for the— “That’s not fair! You can’t punish him just because I’m bad at this!”

“Garen, unlike you, has enough of a care for the well-being of the entire village that he doesn’t want a little fish like you to bring the rest of the school down!” Brevaer snapped.

In the distance, Morgan heard his cousin Drenikel snicker. Son of a bit—no, I won’t dishonor Auntie like that.

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt!”

“Then take responsibility for yourself for once and let these lessons sink into your thick head!” His brother turned away before Morgan could do something he knew he’d regret, like whap his brother upside his thick head with the end of his staff. Sea and wave, Brevaer thought Morgan was capable of nothing but idiocy, didn’t he? Sometimes Morgan wondered whether his brother cared for him at all, or whether Morgan was nothing but an enormous thorn in his foot.

“It isn’t fair,” Garen agreed quietly later on, once the class was over. “He’s very hard on you, but ...” He shrugged. “The ones who love us the most are also the hardest on us.”

“Of course, you think that,” Morgan muttered, cramming a yam patty into his mouth and chewing desultorily. Ugh, no seaweed sauce. Bland.

Garen looked away. “I know it doesn’t mean as much coming from me, but ... your brother had to learn to be not just brother but father and mother to you after what happened before. It had to be difficult.”

“I know.” And that was the only reason Morgan wasn’t fighting against this stupid edict any harder. “I just wish it wasn’t so hard for him to show any feeling other than anger.”

“Well, there’s also impatience, disdain, worry ...”

Morgan made to chuck a yam patty at Garen’s head, then thought better of it and set it aside beneath the edge of his kilt. If the man were still alive, he would probably be hungry.

It had been so hard not to get lost in thoughts of his illicit human all morning—if Morgan hadn’t been on the verge of driving his brother to insanity, he wouldn’t have been able to manage it at all. As it was ... “What are you doing next?” he asked casually.

“I’m in the water-tactics-and-fighting class.”

Morgan grinned at the banked pride in his friend’s voice. “You’re training to fight in both forms! That’s great!”

Garen grinned back. “Mother tried to argue against it, but Brevaer won her over in the end. I’m looking forward to it. What about you?”

“Um ...” Oh shit. What was a good excuse for him to head back out to the rocky beach? “I think I’m going to go for a run,” he said slowly. “It’s basic conditioning, I know, but it gives me a chance to clear my head. Besides, I might find something for a new art project along the way.”

Garen accepted the explanation like Morgan had been sure he would. “Just don’t run too far,” he said as he got up and reclaimed his staff.

“How far is too far?”

“Around the whole island.”

“That wouldn’t even take half the day!” It was true, their home was a speck of a place. For the first time, Morgan wished it were bigger, not for the sake of more variety, but because the thought of someone stumbling upon his human when Morgan wasn’t there was horrifying.

“Well ... maybe not for someone else, but for you ...”

Morgan threw sand at Garen, who laughed. “Go be muscular and leave me alone!” As soon as Garen was out of sight, Morgan got to his feet. He brushed off his tunic and wrapped his kilt firmly around his upper body, then loped out of the village at an easy jog. No one called out to him; no one even seemed to notice him. Perfect. As soon as he was out of sight of the village, he picked up the pace.

Two hundred feet later, he stopped, bent over at the waist, and nearly threw up his meal. Too fast! Maybe this really would do him some good if he was so damn out of breath after such a short distance. Once he was sure he could move without wanting to vomit, Morgan set out at a very mild jog toward the beach.

The closer he got, the more chaotic his emotions became. Would the human be there? Be dead? Be missing? What if he was cold, or too hot, or sick? Morgan didn’t know the slightest thing about keeping another living being alive, much less one that wasn’t Agnarra. If he was dead ... Morgan’s heart panged for no good reason. He’d just met this strange, quixotic creature yesterday—it was far too soon to be thinking fond thoughts about him. Far too soon! And yet ...

He arrived at the beach out of breath but no longer caring and stumbled over the rocky ground to the overhang where he’d left his human. Please let him be all right,

please let him be all right, please, please ... When he saw the man still there, the relief was nearly overwhelming. But was he breathing? Was he alive?

Before Morgan could lose his mind from uncertainty, the human opened his eyes. His starlight eyes were blue in the sunshine, and his charred hair was golden red where it wasn't blackened by fire. He was even more beautiful now than before.

Then he opened his mouth and said, "Hello."

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Morgan almost fell into the water. The beautiful human even reached out to help steady him but ended up wincing and falling back against his seaweed bed. “Forgive me,” he said in a weak voice. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No! I mean, I wasn’t ... or I was, but it’s not ... um, never mind me,” Morgan finally settled on. “Listen to you! You can speak! And a civilized language at that!” He beamed at the human. “I didn’t know your kind could speak like an Agnarra.”

“I ... Agnarra?”

“Ye-ees?” Morgan trailed off as he watched the man’s face for any sign of recognition. There was nothing there. Better try another tack. “Um, I’m Morgan. What’s your name?”

“My name? It’s ...” The man’s eyes drifted away from Morgan as he looked inward, searching himself for his own identity. “I don’t ... I don’t know.”

Morgan frowned. “You don’t remember your own name?”

“No.” He held up a partially burned hand, which wavered with weakness as he stared at it. “I ... what happened to me?”

“You were a sailor on a human ship, I think,” Morgan said, careful not to give too much information. He wanted to trust this person, but Brevaer hadn’t been lecturing him nonstop on the evils of mankind for the past fifteen years for nothing. “There was a fire. You were the only survivor. You floated to this island, and I found you.”

“You saved me?”

Morgan smiled modestly. “I did.”

“And ...” The human licked his chapped lips. “Are you the only one living here? I’ve been ... drifting, I think, in and out of sleep. I kept expecting someone to come, but all I hear are the sounds of waves and the cries of gulls.”

Oh. Right. “Um. Ah. So ...”

The human looked at Morgan with far too much discernment. “Are you the only one who knows I’m here?”

There was no point in lying about that. “Yes. And it should stay that way!” Morgan emphasized. “If you do hear anyone else coming around this beach, don’t call out to them! They won’t treat you ... well,” he finished a bit unsteadily.

“Why not?”

“Because ...” Morgan cast about for an answer that wouldn’t offend either the human or Morgan’s own sensibilities. “Because you’re not Agnarra. You’re human, and that means that technically, you’re trespassing on our lands.”

“But you pulled me from the sea, didn’t you? That makes your act one of mercy.”

“That is technically true,” Morgan allowed. “But I’m a very low-ranking member of my clan. No matter what I say about you, or about why I saved you, I’m not going to be listened to. And my people ... let’s just say that we have no reason to think well of humans in general.”

“Oh.” The man stared at Morgan for a long moment without blinking, a tiny line

between his eyebrows. “Then why did you save me?”

“Why did I—What, would you rather I had left you out in the ocean to be eaten by a pod of orcas?” Morgan demanded. Sea and wave, wasn’t anyone going to be on his side?

“Of course not.” That mollified him somewhat. “But I also don’t want to be the cause of any trouble for you.”

“Well, it’s too late for that!” Morgan said cheerfully. “My middle name is trouble—just ask my brother.” Or better yet, don’t. “And I don’t mean to let you cause any trouble for me, I assure you. I just want to get you feeling better. Once you’re well, I’ll figure out a way for you to go back to your own people.”

“That is extremely kind of you,” the man said. He seemed on the verge of saying more, but then a cough wracked his frame. A look of deep pain crossed his face, and a second later, blood bubbled up from between his lips.

“Oh no, no, what’s wrong?” Morgan reached out but didn’t dare touch for fear of making the pain worse. “Do you need water? I’ll get you water! Hang on!” He turned and ran for the nearest rain catch, scooped up water in his hands, and brought it back as fast as he could without spilling. “Here, here,” he said, scooting carefully along the rock wall until he was by the man’s head. “Drink this.” He tilted his hands but stopped just short of the human’s face, not sure how best to deliver the water given how the man was coughing.

A second later, the man reached out and grabbed Morgan’s wrist with his own shaking hand. He lowered his hands to his lips and drank greedily, and Morgan ...

His mind blanked. He couldn’t do anything but stare as this strange person lapped water from his hands. It was uncomfortable for a reason he couldn’t quite put a word

to and alluring for a reason he didn't dare think about too deeply.

"You're very injured," Morgan babbled as the man finished drinking. "I'm sure your burns are painful; you should let me get fresh seaweed for them."

"That would be nice," the human admitted with a little gasp as he let his head fall back. "And if perhaps you could find me something to eat ..."

"Oh, I've got that!" Morgan reached into his kilt and pulled out the yam patty he'd sequestered during lunch with Garen. "Here. It's kind of bland, but that's probably best for you right now." As the man took it with a shaking hand, Morgan wondered whether he ought to offer to feed it to him.

Then again, he might totally lose what little dignity he had if he hand-fed this curious, clever creature he'd pulled ashore. "You eat, and I'll find new seaweed for your wounds."

Morgan darted to the shore, kicked off his clothes quickly, and waded out into the surf. If he was quick, he could get all the seaweed he needed in one dive. He flowed into his dragon shape and began to hunt around for the right variety. It needed to be thin and supple but thick enough that it wouldn't dry to the man's skin before Morgan could change it. He could only imagine how painful it would be to have to pull stuck seaweed off burned skin.

He surfaced with his arms full of the slippery bounty, which he then had to set down again so he could put his clothes back on. Propriety, ugh. By the time he made it back, the human was done eating. He was also staring at Morgan with a look of shock on his face.

"You ... you changed into a ..."

“Oh. Oh!” Morgan hadn’t thought twice about changing, but then again, why would this man know anything about sea dragons when he didn’t even remember his own name? “That’s my other form. Did you ... like it?” If the man said it scared or disgusted him, Morgan didn’t know what he would do.

“You looked glorious.”

Glorious? Glorious!Morgan had never been called “glorious” before, and he rather liked it. “Why, thank you,” he said with a little preening toss of his green hair. “I’m actually far less impressive than many of my clan.”

“I don’t believe that for a moment.”

Morgan began to blush and hurriedly moved on to help change out the seaweed. “Your wounds are looking ... pretty good, actually,” he said, surprised at how the edges were already receding. Who knew humans were such quick healers?

It had to be the seaweed. It had healing properties that worked wonders.

“They feel awful, so I’ll take your word for it.” The man smiled at him to let him know he wasn’t being too serious.

“What should I call you?” Morgan blurted out. “I can’t keep thinking of you as ‘the man’ in my head; it’s too distracting. What do you want your name to be?”

“I have no preference,” he said. “Really, I don’t. Pick something you like, and I’ll respond to it.”

Morgan looked consideringly at his companion. If there was one thing that stood out about him right now, injured and sick as he was, it was the brightness of his eyes. Not a fever brightness, but the blue of the sea, sparkling under the sunlight. “Auban,” he

said at last. Bright.

The man smiled. “Then Auban I shall be.”

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For probably the first time in his life, Morgan was making his brother happy. It was a welcome but very weird feeling.

“You’ve been very dedicated to your training lately,” Brevaer said a week after Morgan named his hidden, human friend. “Mielin tells me you’ve been requesting more food too.” He plucked a yam patty up off the plate and waggled it before taking a bite.

“Ah ...” Morgan felt his face heat. He should have guessed that the old woman would give him up. Mielin, who along with her daughters cooked meals for many of the single Agnarra in exchange for help maintaining her household and bringing her the best catches from the sea, was also the biggest gossip in the whole village. “Yes, I’ve been hungrier lately.”

“That’s all the running you’re doing.” Brevaer nodded approvingly. “Even your basic battle forms are improving.”

Morgan gave his brother a real smile at that. “Thank you.”

“It won’t be long before you can move up into the more advanced exercises.”

“Let’s not be too hasty!” Morgan held his hands out. “I’m still working on my endurance! I can’t even make it around the island yet without wanting to throw up!”

“Oh? That’s still better than how you used to get winded after a hundred feet. Why don’t you show me.” Brevaer got up from the floor and brushed his kilt free of crumbs.

“Um ...” The truth was, while Morgan was actually running better—for a distance at least as far as the beach where Auban was hiding out—he hadn’t gone beyond that yet. The glint in his brother’s eyes made it clear that he wasn’t going to let Morgan get out of this, though. “Sure, let’s do that. But, ah, let’s bring Garen too!”

Brevaer cocked his head. “All right, but why?”

Because then you’ll have someone to focus on other than me. “Oh, you know, I need someone who will run with me instead of darting ahead,” he joked.

Brevaer frowned. “I can pace you, Morgan.”

“Yes, but you won’t want to.”

“I ...” Morgan was startled to see his brother at a loss for words. “I’m not doing this because I want to see you fail at something,” Brevaer said after a moment. He looked uncomfortable—which made sense, given how desperately his older brother usually tried to avoid talking about his feelings. Or to Morgan in general if he wasn’t shouting orders at him. “I’m proud of the effort you’ve been putting in. I know that fighting doesn’t come as ... as naturally to you as it does to some others. I want to acknowledge that, and, well ... spend some time with you, I suppose.”

“You do?” Morgan was dumbfounded. He couldn’t remember the last time Brevaer had spent time with him like that outside of sharing a meal.

“Yes.” Brevaer shook his head. “I know I’ve been a poor brother to you in many ways. I ask a great deal of you, and it’s hard for me to see sometimes that you’re trying when you don’t ... do things as quickly as I expect.”

Because you expect me to be as perfect as you are, Morgan thought bitterly. Brevaer seemed to catch on.

“And that’s wrong of me,” he continued. “Before humans drove us from our island and we had to come here, someone like you—Morgan, you would have been celebrated by our people. By our parents.”

Morgan felt tears well up in his eyes. “Really?” he asked—squeaked, more like, his voice suspiciously tight.

“Even I can tell that you’re a gifted artist.” He gestured to the walls of their home, which were covered in charcoal drawings and wood carvings. “I know you don’t remember it, but our island was a place of incredible beauty.” Brevaer’s eyes went distant, focusing on something only he could see. “Every home was a work of art, and our public places were tended to by our gardeners and artisans to create the most magnificent blends of nature and necessity. Walls made from living trees, benches shaped from rock or coral, everything so bright and green and colorful ... it was like living in a dream.”

Morgan had never heard his brother wax poetic like this about the past before. He tended to focus on the terrible things that had happened, which were, admittedly, very terrible. It was important to remember those things, but Morgan also couldn’t help but wonder at the fond expression on Brevaer’s face as he remembered the good things as well. What sort of man would you be if the world hadn’t hurt you so much?

“Artisans were valued there. I always knew I would be a warrior, like our parents, but our mother’s sister ... she was a great sculptor.”

“What was her name?” Morgan asked, rapt with this new information.

Brevaer smiled. “She was called Morgana.”

Morgana. He was named for her, named for an aunt he couldn’t remember meeting but with whom he shared so much.

Brevaer chuckled the bottom of his chin. “Better close that before you catch flies.”

“Brev!” Morgan swatted his hand away. “Can you, um, can you tell me more about her?”

“I don’t remember much,” he admitted. “I was too busy playing with other children and practicing my forms to sit still and watch her work, but I remember that when we were born, she carved portraits of us in the bark of the family tree outside our home. As the tree grew, so would our portraits, supposedly mirroring us into adulthood.”

“Wow.” Morgan was terribly impressed. “Did it actually work?”

“Well, I don’t know who did our mother’s portrait, but I personally thought it looked nothing like her,” Brevaer said with a shrug. “But mine was looking very like me by the time I was twelve. And yours ... you were just a little child then, but it might have grown to look very like you as well.” Some of the light went out of his eyes. “We’ll never know, of course. The humans burned the tree at the same time they burned our home. Hundreds of years, dozens of faces from our family’s past—gone.”

This time, Morgan wasn’t able to fight back the tears. “I wish I could remember it,” he said, clenching his hands uselessly in his lap. “I wish I could remember any of it. All I get are visions of fire and darkness. I can’t even remember our parents’ faces.” He pounded a fist against the floor, hating the helplessness that swamped him.

“Hey, no.” Brevaer knelt down in front of him and took his hand, cradling it between his two much larger ones. For a moment, Morgan felt like a kid again, safe in the presence of someone who he knew would take care of him. “It’s not your fault that you can’t remember. Everything that happened was so difficult, and you were so young ... I would be more surprised if you could remember anything of our parents, especially since I never talked to you about them. I just couldn’t when you were young.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry for that.”

“It’s not your fault either,” Morgan said. “You had to be responsible for a child ten years younger than you when you were still a child yourself.”

“And I did my best,” Brevaer agreed. “But I’ve always known my best was never enough for you.” He sighed. “I was so relieved at first when you and Garen became close friends because I thought it meant Rozyne would step in and be a parent to you as well. I could see so clearly that you needed more, but ... she wasn’t the one to give it to you.”

“No,” Morgan agreed. “I think Garen has had a harder time of things than I have, and he’s technically still got both of his parents. They’re just ...”

“Not ideal,” Brevaer said diplomatically.

Morgan snorted. “If you call a mother who never stops criticizing him and a father who never looks at him ‘not ideal,’ then sure.”

“But he has you. You’re worth more than you think, Morgan, trust me.”

Morgan wasn’t entirely sure he could believe his brother’s words. Brevaer almost never looked back, but this wasn’t the first time he’d apologized to Morgan for being a less-than-ideal guardian to him. His remorse didn’t seem to last long—probably next week, he’d be looking down on Morgan’s paintings again or mocking him for losing his grip on his staff. But for now ... for now, it was nice to have his brother really feel like a brother instead of someone who was just here to judge him.

“You can pace me,” he said at last, “but we should still invite Garen along, I think.”

“Give him some space from his parents, huh?”

“Yes.” Also, give him a chance to impress you one-on-one instead of admiring you

from afar. Morgan might not get why his best friend had fallen for his brother, but he wanted to help Garen along as much as he could, and honestly, being adored by someone he wasn't related to could only help Brevaer's mood.

"All right. I'll go get him." Brevaer got back on his feet and headed out the door of their hut. Morgan watched him go with a pang, a little sad their conversation had come to an end. It had been ... quite nice, actually. Nicer than he could remember his brother being for a long time now.

And maybe things would stay nice for a while, as long as Morgan kept him from going down to the rocky beach and finding Auban.

That wouldn't be nice at all.

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Fear, fatigue ... these things were all in the mind, right? That was what Brevaer said, at least, when he was whapping students around the legs and shoulders with the knob end of a piece of seaweed, chiding them to do better. If it was all in the mind, then Morgan just had to make sure his mind didn't pay attention to those things. Then he'd be able to do this run just fine ... right? And not huff and puff and wheeze and grind to a halt in less than a mile, which was how it had gone last time, thereby not letting on to his brother that he was a liar who hadn't been training nearly as much as he said and was, in fact, secretly visiting an injured human on the pebble beach. No, that would be bad.

So he wouldn't do it, because otherwise Auban might get caught, and Morgan definitely didn't want that. So he was going to be fine!

That was an easier thing to tell himself than it was to act upon, it turned out.

First was the fact that Brevaer, for all his talk about pacing Morgan, seemed to think that "pace" meant "pick up the pace" because after just a minute they were going at a speed that Morgan would have called a sprint any other day.

Second, Garen was absolutely no help, because it was clear from the second they asked him to join them that he thought Morgan was doing this as a favor to him, so that he could get some personal time with Brevaer. That meant that instead of playing to Morgan's preferences and slowing things down, he stretched his stride to keep up with Brevaer. Which, rude, what kind of friend abandoned you for a chance at romance? A poor one, that's what.

Third, as desperately as Morgan didn't want anyone to find Auban, he was getting

perilously close to his limit by the time they ran past the pebble beach. His lungs burned, he had a stitch in his side that made him want to vomit, and his feet felt like they were about to fall off. He wasn't going to be able to make it. He wasn't going to—

Be able to keep his balance! Morgan's lead foot hit an unfamiliar rock—unfamiliar because he never ran this far, damn it—and sent him sprawling onto the ground. He swore as he hit knee, then hip, then shoulder, pain on top of pain. At least he managed to avoid smacking his head, he thought as he tried not to gag for air.

“Morgan!” That was Garen, running back toward him. Brev was hot on his heels. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” he muttered, rolling over onto his back and sitting up. “I'm fine, I just fell and ...” And actually, this could work out okay for him. “And my hip really hurts,” he groaned, rubbing it theatrically. Not too theatrically—he didn't want Brev to think he'd broken it or something. The fact that both his knees were bleeding, and his shins were coming up in blue and purple, lent some valuable believability to his story, though.

“Darn it, I can't believe I tripped like that.” Morgan sighed. “That hasn't happened on a run before. Ow, my whole side hurts.”

“Let me check it,” Brev said. Morgan sat there and endured the indignity of having his brother squish him like a piece of fried yam, making sure none of his bones were broken. Finally, Brev pulled back.

“It's not serious.”

“Well, it feels bad enough,” Morgan pouted. He saw his brother's lips go terse and knew he was skirting the line of his tolerance, so he continued, “I think a little time

just sitting here would be good. If you two want to keep running, maybe down to the point and back, I can rejoin you then. That way the run won't be for nothing."

"Running is never for nothing," Brev said about the most nothing thing to do in existence. "But ..." He glanced at Garen. "If you're up for it ..."

"I am!" Garen said quickly. Morgan stifled a smile. Could his best friend be any more obvious? How had Brevaer possibly not figured it out yet? "That sounds good to me. It won't take us long."

"Not at your pace, it won't."

Was that a jab at him? Morgan was sure that was a jab at him. He wanted to tell his brother that he had noticed that, but his good sense overrode his internal outrage. "I'll be waiting," he said. "Go on, shoo."

Brev rolled his eyes but turned and ran off. Garen paused long enough to mouth, "Thank you," at Morgan before hurrying to catch up. Morgan sat where he was, like a pathetic little thing, until they were out of sight. Then he leapt to his feet, winced because his knees really did hurt, ow, then limped over to the beach. Once he got close to the overhang, he called out, "Auban?"

Nothing.

"Auban?" Morgan tried more loudly. There was still no reply. Oh, no ... had something happened to him? Morgan crawled over the rocks in a flurry, forgetting his pain, until he finally got within sight of the ledge, and—

Oh, he was asleep.

"Thank the gods," Morgan breathed. "I was afraid you were gone."

He'd tried to be quiet when he said it, but Auban blinked his eyes and slowly lifted his head from the pillow of seaweed it was resting on. "Morgan?" he croaked.

"It's me," Morgan said, rushing the rest of the way over. He grabbed the little clay pot, heavily chipped along one side, that he'd brought to keep water in and handed it to Auban. "Drink," he said worriedly as he stared at the other man. Did his wounds look redder today? Was he dealing with an infection? How would his human body react to an Agnarra cure? "Are you all right? Do you feel unwell?"

"Mmm." Auban tolerated Morgan pressing a hand to the unburned part of his forehead. "I'm all right, just tired. I was awake for a lot of the night."

"What? Why? Are you not comfortable enough?" As soon as he said it, Morgan realized how silly that sounded. How could the man be comfortable enough with nothing but seaweed to cushion him and keep him warm? "I'm so sorry, I should bring you more—here, take my kilt, it will keep you warm at night." He tried to unwind the dark-green cloth, but Auban stayed his hand.

"I'm fine, really. I'm not uncomfortable," he assured Morgan. "I'm actually doing much better than I thought I would be. Watch." He braced his arms on the ground, then ever so slowly, pushed himself up into a sitting position. Morgan was both amazed and worried to see it. Would his scabs crack and break? Would he start bleeding all over again? But no, his skin remained supple, and his arms, though skinny from lack of use, were strong enough for this much, at least.

"It's a good start, isn't it?" Auban asked, his bright eyes shining with pleasure.

"Such a good start," Morgan breathed. Auban looked positively beautiful when he was happy with himself.

"It made me think that ... we ought to begin making plans to get me off your island."

Morgan frowned. “Why?”

Auban smiled gently. “Morgan, what would your people do if they found me?”

“Oh.” Right.

“I’ll probably need a boat to get out of here,” Auban continued, totally blind to the chaos that was ensuing in the center of Morgan’s chest. “Unfortunately, if I once knew how to make one, I don’t anymore.”

“I don’t know how to make one either,” Morgan said numbly. “We’ve never needed boats.” But how had they gotten all their things here from their last island, then? “There might be something else I can find plans for, though. Not a boat like the one you came on, but something that would keep you out of the water, at least.”

“Anything you can do would be a great help to me.” Auban braced himself on one hand and held the other out to Morgan. “You’re already a great help to me, far better than I deserve.”

“That’s not true.” Morgan knew it in his heart. Auban was good, he was good through and through. “Oh!” He reached into his shirt and pulled out a very worse-for-wear yam patty. “Here.” He put the patty into Auban’s outstretched hand. “I’m sorry it’s not more; I promise I’ll bring something better tomorrow, but I’ve got to get back to the trail before my brother suspects something, and ...”

“It’s all right.” Auban took the food and set it aside. His cheeks were getting rather pink.

“Are you sure you’re not running a fever?”

“Very sure.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Morgan said. His hand tingled with the realization that he’d just lost the chance to touch Auban. Stupid, stupid ... “I promise.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.” He retreated before he made an even bigger fool of himself, crawling out from beneath the overhang, up onto the bigger rocks above it, then— “Ah!” Garen was right there, with a look of mingled concern and suspicion on his face.

“What are you doing all the way over here?” he asked.

“I was, um, washing myself off a bit.” Luckily his legs were indeed wet after kneeling down.

“Why not use the lower part of the beach? It’s way easier to reach.”

“I ... wanted a place to sit and let my legs dangle,” Morgan said. “It felt easier on my hip.”

“Ah.” The suspicion was still there. “Were you speaking to someone?”

Morgan scoffed, louder than he should have. “Who else would come all the way out here? I was admonishing myself, that’s all.” He looked at the ground, in part to disguise his anxiousness. “My first chance in forever to impress my brother, and I had to go and ruin it. Thank the gods you came along, or he would have been so mad at me for wasting his time.”

Garen grinned. “I’m glad you invited me. He’s ... Brevaer is really great, actually.”

“I’m glad one of us thinks so.”

“Morgan! Garen!” Brev called out from the path, his hands cupped around his big, loud mouth. “Stop talking and start moving!”

“Ugh,” Morgan groaned.

“Can you run?” Garen asked.

“I’ll try.”

Anything to get us out of here faster.

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Things settled back to normal quickly after that, which was to say that Brevaer found new things to pick at, and Morgan found new ways to disappoint him. Slowly but surely, week by week, the village was losing the edge of fear that had gripped it since the distant ship exploded. Weapons practice was shortened by an hour in the mornings, and more villagers were going back out to fish and work the seaweed farms.

Brevaer didn't like it, and neither did Garen's mother, Rozyne, for that matter, but there was little they could do in the face of the growing apathy. People needed to be fed, fields needed to be tended, and Sariel came down with something that necessitated Rozyne tending to him constantly, to keep his fever under control.

The few times he got away from her, he ran out of the hut with wild eyes, his skin flushed and sweaty, swinging a pole around in an effort to destroy the "fucking humans" who were attacking in his mind. Rozyne never shouted at him, though; she never cried or wished he would just disappear, at least not in Garen's hearing. She just did her best to bring Sariel back inside before too many people saw his madness.

Theirs was a love that Morgan didn't really understand. They were very famously mates, not just married but so close that they were able to feel each other's thoughts and emotions. At least, Garen said, they'd had that connection before Sariel lost his mind. What had Rozyne done at that point? Shut that part of her mind and heart off so that she could keep her own sanity and care for her son? What did anyone do when they had to survive losing their mate? It was one of those questions that Morgan would love to ask but that nobody wanted to talk about.

Naturally, those who were inclined to be shit stirrers were having a great time. "You

give up your efforts for our safety so quickly!” Dinigan, Rozyne’s brother, said imperiously to Brevaer with the village council in hearing distance after the close of the morning session. Morgan had been dragged along to it and had found it as dull as ever. “I’m surprised you such lack conviction.”

“You just spoke against my measures to the council,” Brevaer pointed out with gritted teeth.

“Well, but I’m not a famed warrior like you, now, am I? Of course, it’s a waste of my time to train like that, but you ...” Dinigan smiled his oily, insincere smile. “Why, you’re all muscle! Training to fight should take all of your time.”

Morgan, rarely moved to stand up for his brother, had to speak then. “I guarantee that my brother can make even a person like you into a better fighter,” he said. “When he sets his mind to something, he succeeds. Always.”

“Oh?” Dinigan smirked. “And yet he hasn’t managed this transformation with his own brother. It doesn’t speak well of his abilities.”

“Morgan is better at fighting than you or your son,” Brevaer put in, and darn it, Morgan wished he hadn’t spoken up. Nobody got people’s backs up like Brev. He was just ... naturally abrasive. Only Garen didn’t seem to get the message.

“Ha!” Drenikel, Dinigan’s son, laughed from where he was sitting, toying with the end of one of the tassels that edged his tunic. He was the gaudiest dresser in the whole village. “Morgan can’t go two paces without tripping over the end of his own spear!”

“You can’t even hold your spear upright for more than a minute,” Garen said, and wonderful, now he was getting involved. “So shut up about what other people can do, Dren.”

“You shut up.”

“Make me,” Garen taunted, and now his cousin was standing and backing away with a petulant expression on his face. Everyone knew that Garen was the best of their generation at fighting, and Dren wasn’t stupid enough to pick a fight with him when he didn’t have any of his cronies around.

“You need to get your brother to mind his mouth,” Dinigan snapped at Brevaer.

“You need to get your son to mind his.”

“All of you need to shut the hell up!” Rozyne’s shrill voice was like a blast of water in the face as she charged out of her hut. Even the remaining members of the council packed up and moved on a second later. The fierce woman stalked into the open, fixing her gimlet eye on her brother. “You’re the eldest here. What are you doing, wasting time fighting with children?”

“I—sister, I—”

“My husband is sleeping. My husband, your chief, is finally sleeping after hours of wakefulness, and I will be damned if one of you bastards is the person who—”

There was a moan from inside the hut, then a scream. It didn’t sound like a scream that could come from an Agnarra—it was guttural and desperate, like a whale caught in shallows might make. Rozyne paled and ran back inside, and the rest of them made themselves scarce, Morgan grabbing Garen by the arm and pulling him away before his sense of responsibility drove him to try and help his mother, who wouldn’t appreciate it.

They made it through an extra-long training session, courtesy of a very annoyed Brevaer, before finally being released. Garen kept casting glances toward the center

of the village, like he expected his mother to call for him any second, and Morgan decided his best friend needed him more than Auban did right now. He would visit his dear—his other friend later.

“Come on.” Morgan took Garen’s hand. “Let’s go to the beach.”

They went to the close beach, where more of their people were calmly hauling in long lines of seaweed. Children learned sea marks in the sand—the signs for calm, for danger, for welcome, for illness—as well as their number signs. The horizon was clear, without even the haze of clouds to obscure it today. The pair walked until the sand turned to rock and finally sat down beside each other, their feet extending out into the water.

Garen was silent and avoiding his gaze, so Morgan played around, changing the lower half of his body only into his sea dragon form, enjoying the strangeness of it. He wasn’t fool enough to try and move that way—he’d been warned what could happen if he got caught between forms, how these bodies weren’t designed to work well with each other. For the most part, you had to be all or nothing, or blood wouldn’t flow well, and muscles would lose their strength. But right now ... right now there was nothing to do but play, and that was what he did.

“I’m sorry about what they said.”

Morgan didn’t let his delight at Garen breaking the silence show. If he made too big a deal of it, his friend might clam up again. “As if I care what they say. Calling me bad at fighting? That’s the oldest insult in the sea, and it’s not Brev’s fault either.”

“They’re looking for any reason to make mischief.” Garen buried his left foot in the sand. “My uncle is getting tired of being the head of his house but not the head of the family. As long as my father lives, my mother has seniority over him in the council. I think ... I think he might call a vote for chief soon.”

Morgan scoffed. “Then I hope he likes the thought of my brother being chief.”

“That’s just it. I’m worried that Brev won’t be made chief.”

That was news to Morgan. He turned to stare at Garen. “Why not?”

“Uncle Dinigan and Dren are talking to all the other families about what an overreaction it was to make everyone train more after that boat blew up,” Garen said, his misery clear in every line of his body. “They’re making much of the fact that it’s set our yam harvest back by at least a week, and the weather might make half the crop wither before we can pull it out of the ground if we’re not careful, and we don’t have enough fish salted and dried, and that it’s all because we’ve been wasting so much time at Brev’s behest, and—”

“They all agreed to it!” Morgan protested. “Everyone on the council agreed to increase training! We had no way of knowing there wasn’t going to be another boat or an actual attack.” Not even Auban could tell me about that.

“It doesn’t matter that they agreed then. They think the danger has passed, and Uncle Dinigan is saying that your brother is using this as an excuse to cling to power.”

“He doesn’t know shit about Brev,” Morgan snapped, then immediately felt bad. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to take my temper out on you. I just ... you know that my brother and I don’t always get along, but he always, always wants what’s best for the village. He doesn’t care about power, he just wants people to be safe, and everyone knows he’s our top fighter. He’s taking care of us the best way he knows how. That’s what he’s always done for me, and I appreciate it even when I get tired of it.”

“Do you indeed?”

Morgan and Garen both startled, and Morgan’s long, shimmery green tail became

legs a second later. “Brev!” He pressed a hand to his chest. “Don’t scare me like that!”

“I apologize.” Brevaer looked at Garen. “Your mother is asking for you.”

“All right,” Garen said quietly. “Thank you.” He stood up, brushing sand from his tunic. Brevaer took a moment to set a hand on Garen’s shoulder, holding him gently. Morgan resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he practically felt the wave of adoration roll off Garen.

“I appreciate your support, earlier.”

“I ... I meant every word of it,” Garen said. Brevaer nodded and let go, and Garen staggered off down the beach.

Morgan was surprised when his brother took Garen’s place. “You’re not going fishing today?” Morgan inquired.

“Not yet. I wanted to talk to you for a moment.”

Morgan sighed. “If this is about what happened after the meeting, I’m sorry, but they really shouldn’t get to treat you like that without some pushback.”

“I agree.”

Morgan was so startled at his brother agreeing with him about anything that he couldn’t speak for a moment.

“But that doesn’t mean what you did was smart.”

And here comes the criticism.

“I can handle being spoken ill of,” Brevaer said, his dark eyes earnest as he stared at Morgan. “It wouldn’t be the first time, and I truly don’t care if I ever become chief. All I want is to keep us safe. You most of all.”

“Brev ...”

“And now I’m afraid that those idiots will get it into their heads that you’d be a good target for their wrath, or petty revenge, or whatever stupid thoughts might be going through their head. They can’t attack me directly, but Garen’s cousin could make trouble for you without the council making much of it.”

“I can run faster than them,” Morgan said glibly.

“Can you? Really?” Brevaer laughed as Morgan knocked their shoulders together. “No, I’m just teasing. I know you’re working hard.”

Morgan felt his heart soften toward his brother in a way it rarely did anymore. He knew he loved Brevaer, but he rarely liked him all that much these days, but now ... Now, he realized just how much he did like his brother when they could be like this. “I’ll be careful,” Morgan promised. “And keep working hard for you.”

“Thank you.” Brevaer gathered himself like he was about to get up, but Morgan laid a hand on his arm. “What?”

“I—” Truthfully, he didn’t have a reason to hold him back other than the fact that he didn’t want him to go. “I—uh—how do you make a boat?” he asked at last.

Brevaer’s eyebrows went up. “What?”

“A, a boat. How do you make one? We, um, we must have had them, right? When we came here? To bring our belongings with us instead of just swimming for hundreds of

miles ... didn't we?"

"Hmm." Brevaer thought for a second. "Well, not boats, exactly. We had rafts and not very good ones either—they kept falling apart in the water. We had to repair them over and over again." Well, that didn't sound very promising. "But ... Father did once teach me how to make a boat out of a single tree."

Morgan brightened. "Really? That's possible?"

"We only did it together once ... I'm not sure if I remember how. And we can't use one of the village trees to experiment on."

"What about the one in our house?" It was actually half a tree trunk, Brevaer's share of a particularly impressive harvest several years ago. They'd been using it as a bench, but Morgan could see the possibilities.

"I'm not sure if it's big enough."

"You won't know unless we try," Morgan said winningly.

Brevaer laughed. "You really want to do this?"

"Yes!"

"Then we'll do it. Let me talk to a few of the other villagers first, though."

"Whatever you need." Morgan put his feet back in the water, keeping them feet this time. He splashed them back and forth, making little, inviting ripples. He smiled to himself when Brevaer stretched his legs out to join him in the surf a moment later.

"Thanks, little brother," Brevaer said.

“You’re welcome, big brother.”

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It turned out that making a boat out of a single log was a lot harder than Morgan had thought it would be. He'd been thinking that a few choice strikes with one of their stone axes, a little shaping and some ballast, and the thing would just ... float like boats were supposed to. Wood floated, after all.

But noooo, it was nothing like that simple. It ended up being an entire project, one that involved fire, of all things. Fire! Fire to make a boat! How was that logical? But it had to do with hollowing and charring and a bunch of other things Morgan didn't quite understand. Honestly, the whole thing felt like—not a waste of time, because it couldn't be denied that Auban was going to need a boat, but time that Morgan didn't have to spend. He wanted to be with Auban, or failing that with Garen, but Garen was being held close by his mother right now, and Brevaer, in turn, was forcing education on Morgan with the help of every elder man in the entire village, it seemed.

That, at least, was something good to come of this boat-building exercise. As soon as Brevaer started asking around for advice on how to make a boat out of a log, every person with the slightest hint of an interest came out of the woodwork—ha—to give their opinion. Many of them were people on the village council, people who Dinigan said he was turning against Brevaer.

They turned right toward him again as soon as Brevaer gave them a challenge that didn't require them to work on their fighting skills or spend time away from their fields. It turned out heckling—ahem, Morgan meant giving advice—could be delivered from porches.

“Hotter coals, lads, hotter coals! You're going to get a bad char at this rate!”

“Oof, not that hot though! Do you want to burn right through the side of that log?”

“Should go deeper at the front end, deeper—you need a place to stick your legs, don’t you? Can’t be using this little thing in your sea serpent form, after all.”

“The shape of it, think about the shape of it—you want it to cut through the water, not wallow around like a beached whale!”

Needless to say, the work on the boat was going slowly and with much fanfare, but it gave people a reason to be interested as opposed to being angry at them, so Morgan was for it.

He was less for it when he realized he was going to have to sneak out of his house to get food to Auban either in the dead of night or ridiculously early in the morning at this rate. He hadn’t seen his friend for three days, and although he’d left him with a healthy store of yam patties, berrybread fruits, and fresh water, it wasn’t the same as seeing him and knowing that he was all right.

Maybe Morgan could bring him some more berrybread; it was delightfully sweet, and he knew Auban loved it, and the harvest was almost over ...

“Are you sick?”

“Hmm?” Morgan was jolted out of his thoughts by his brother’s blunt question. “What? No!”

“Morgan.” Brevaer stared at him from the other side of the fire, his eyes still but his hands clenching and unclenching. “Don’t lie to me. You ought to be a turtle’s weight heavier than you are now with all the food you’re eating, and instead, you’re losing weight.”

“I’m not!”

“You are!” Brevaer slapped his own waist. “Look at how many times you’re winding your kilt!”

“I—” Morgan looked down and was a little surprised to find that, in fact, he’d added another half twist to his kilt fabric without even realizing it. The layer of baby fat that had been with him his whole life, comfortably padding his stomach and arms, was almost gone.

He hadn’t set aside that much food for Auban ... had he?

“Huh.”

“Yes, huh. So I ask you again—are you sick?”

“No.” Morgan tried smiling winningly at his brother. “Maybe I’m going through a growth spurt?”

“You’re never going to get any taller than you are now.”

“I might!” Morgan stood up and gauged the distance from the top of his head to the top of the door. Nope ... he wasn’t even close to needing to duck. “All right, maybe not.”

“I’m worried about you.”

Morgan blinked, then laughed. “Don’t be.”

“I am. You’re different lately. Distracted. You haven’t made any art for days.”

“I’ve been working with you on the boat,” Morgan defended himself. “And I have been making art; you just haven’t noticed because it’s small.”

“What is it?”

“It’s ...” It’s a present for Auban. Something for him to take with him when he leaves. “I’ll show you.” Morgan pulled out the tiny frame he’d bent into position and showed his brother the painstakingly precise cuts he’d made in the edges of it to loop tiny lengths of thread through. “It’s all from scrap, I promise,” he told him. “I’m not using any of our good cloth to do this.”

Brevaer touched the frame gently. “What is the picture going to be?” Right now Morgan was just getting the first layer down—the background, as it were. It rippled with tiny waves, but there were several carefully flat spaces in the fabric that would soon be filled with ...

“Us,” Morgan replied. “In our sea forms.”

“It’s ...”

A waste of time, ridiculous, dull ...

“Beautiful.”

Oh. “Thank you.”

“But it’s not a reason for you to be losing weight.”

“Ugh!”

In the end, Morgan didn’t need to sneak out of the house. Early the next morning, a

call went out in the village that the sturgeon migration was beginning, and Brevaer—and many of the other good swimmers—immediately ran to transform and bring in a heavy catch. Which was perfect because Morgan was very happy to run the other way.

It was actually getting a little easier to make the run now. Despite himself, Morgan was getting fitter and still eating plenty, thank you very much, Brev! He made the run even in the semidarkness of the early dawn, and when he reached the rocky beach, he expected to find Auban asleep.

Instead, he found him standing in the water, entirely nude.

Morgan proceeded to swallow his tongue.

The choking sounds made Auban turn, and luckily for Morgan, his hips were below the water because Morgan wasn't prepared to be confronted with that much glorious nudity right then. He'd seen Auban naked before, of course—changed his seaweed bandages, cleaned his wounds with seawater—but it hadn't been like this.

In the darkness, it was hard to see the scars left by the fire. All Morgan could see was his friend's pleasure in being able to stand, to move, and how the smile on his face made him look even more beautiful.

"Morgan!" Auban called out softly. "You're earlier than you usually are."

"I ... " Morgan coughed to clear his throat. "I didn't want to make you wait any longer."

"I appreciate that," Auban replied. "I missed you."

Morgan's heart briefly stopped. "I ... I missed you as well." More than I knew even

though so many other things were going on.

“Come tell me what you’ve been doing.”

“Come ... what, into the water?” Morgan eyed him dubiously as he walked over. “Should you be in there? Are you strong enough for this?”

“It’s easier to stand with the sea’s help,” Auban assured him. “And now I’ve got you to catch me if I start to drift away.”

I would love to catch you. “All right.” Morgan took off his kilt and set down the package of food he’d brought, then stepped into the water, resolutely not letting himself think any sexual thoughts—at least until he was covered up again. “My brother and I have been hard at work on a boat for you,” he said. “It’s going ... I’m not entirely sure how it’s going, honestly, but I think we’ll be lucky to make you something that floats in the end.”

“I appreciate your efforts even if it doesn’t,” Auban said.

“You won’t appreciate it if you end up capsized in the middle of the ocean,” Morgan said glumly, splashing a little water with his hands.

“I wish I didn’t have to use it.”

Morgan looked up abruptly, his heart pounding. “You do?”

“I do.” Auban looked from him out to the east, where the sun was just appearing over the edge of the sea. He wasn’t shivering, which surprised Morgan—even for an Agnarra like himself, in his land form the water was cold right now. Winter, and the storms that came with it, was slowly turning back toward their island. “It’s peaceful here,” Auban continued, something conflicted in his voice. “I can’t seem to

remember my old life, no matter how hard I try, but I get the sense that there wasn't much peace in it."

"Well, you did come here on a warship," Morgan said, then wished he hadn't.

"I know," Auban replied quietly. "I just wish I knew why. Did we come here to hunt you? To kill you?" He shook his head. "Why would we do such a thing? What is the point? It's senseless—look at this island. It's just large enough for you and your clan. What could anyone else hope to get here?"

"I don't know," Morgan said. "I've never understood humans."

"I don't either," Auban said, then laughed caustically. "And I am one! You'd think I'd understand my own motives better, but I don't. I just don't." He shivered, and Morgan knew it was time to get him warm again.

"I brought you a berrybread hotcake. It won't be hot anymore, but it will be delicious. We can talk some more, and I can look at your wounds."

"They're nearly healed," Auban protested, but he didn't resist as Morgan took his hand and gently pulled him up out of the water. "I just need to build up my strength. Soon, too. I know I can't stay here during the winter months."

No, he wouldn't be able to. The beach was too exposed; he would freeze if he stayed, but there was no way Morgan could bring him into the village. They had perhaps a month, maybe a week or two more than that, and then ...

Auban needed to be off the island, or he'd be discovered for sure.

"We'll figure it out," Morgan promised him. "Everything will be all right."

That was when he saw a dark shadow peel away from a low point on the beach and begin to dart away.

Oh no.

Oh shit.

Nothing was going to be all right. Not unless he stopped whoever that was from making it back to the village!

Morgan ran.

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No one was more surprised than Morgan himself when he closed the distance and tackled the other person before they even made it off the beach. He readied himself to fight, or threaten, or do whatever he needed to do—well, almost whatever—to get them to never speak of this, but then he realized exactly who he'd tackled.

“Garen!” Morgan sat back and let his friend up, delighted—

And promptly fell on his ass as Garen punched him in the face.

Ow. OW! That hurt! And, shit, Garen was starting to get up and turn again; Morgan couldn't let him get away. He grabbed his legs and forced him down again, this time sitting on his back. Garen was the better fighter, but Morgan was scrappy as hell and had a wicked grip on Garen's hair.

“Stop!” he snapped. “What the deep are you doing?”

“Me?” Garen sounded incredibly offended. “You're the one having strange liaisons in the sea with people I don't even know! What the deep are you doing out here, huh?”

“I'm—it's not—there's no liaising, I'm not liaising with anyone!”

“Then who were you talking to out there?”

“No one,” Morgan said a bit frantically. “There's no one here but you and me.”

“Morgan!” There was real, deep hurt in Garen's voice now. Second-guessing himself but knowing he had to trust in their friendship, Morgan let go of Garen's hair. The

other man rolled over beneath him, not even trying to buck Morgan off but seemingly desperate to make eye contact. “I spend every minute with my father, pretending to see the same things he does to keep him from falling into a screaming fit,” Garen hissed in anger and despair. “Reality doesn’t have a place in my own home, so don’t you start telling me I’m not seeing things that I clearly am, or I might have a screaming fit myself!”

“Oh.” Oh, my poor friend. “Come here.” Morgan pulled Garen into an embrace before his friend could do more than squawk about it. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re up to something,” Garen muttered, but the ire was slowly draining out of his voice and body.

“I ...” Honesty, Morgan. He needs honesty. “Yes, fine, I am. And I’ll tell you all about it, but! I need you to promise me that you’ll listen to the whole story before you run off and start gabbing to people about it! This is really important, Garen. It’s a matter of life and death.” Morgan stared at his friend, willing him to take him seriously for once.

“You want to bring me in on a matter of life and death?” Garen glanced over Morgan’s shoulder. “Are you ... sure?”

“You’re the only one I could imagine telling, honestly.”

Garen lowered his voice to a whisper. “Is it another one of us? Another survivor?”

Oh, this was going to be so awful. “It is a survivor. Let me—”

“I’m human.”

Both of them turned in a flash to look at Auban, who had somehow dragged himself

all the way up to this part of the beach, far from the supportive water. Right now, slumped against the gravel, naked and shivering, with the light of dawn slowly illuminating the damage his body had taken, he looked far less intimidating than anyone calling themselves a human should.

Which, Morgan realized, was the whole point. “Humans” were scary, but this battered, skinny wreck of a person wasn’t.

“Morgan found me in the water after the ship exploded,” Auban went on, and now it was Garen’s turn to shiver. He turned a betrayed look on Morgan, and all Morgan could do was shrug.

“I don’t remember what happened there, or what we were doing here,” Auban said. “I don’t remember anything except waking up and Morgan’s face being the first thing I saw. Without his care, I would be dead.”

“You should be dead!” Garen snapped. “You ought to be dead for the havoc you wrought on our home! Humans have no place on our island, our sanctuary! You should have died with the rest of your awful kind!”

“I know.” Auban lowered his head. “I completely understand, I assure you. But the fact is, I’m alive. Unless you want to kill me yourself, the best thing to do is get me off this island as fast as possible, and that’s what Morgan is trying to do.”

“The boat,” Garen muttered, then sighed in despair. “The fucking boat you’re building with Brevaer. It’s for him?”

“How else am I supposed to save him?” Morgan demanded.

“You’re not supposed to save him at all! You’re supposed to be on our side, not his!”

“I am on our side!” Morgan roared. That got Garen, really got him—his eyes widened, mouth dropping open. Morgan had never yelled at his friend like that before in his life. He hated that he had to do it now, but he also needed to make Garen understand.

“I’m on our side, always,” Morgan said more quietly. “But Auban isn’t our enemy. He’s a good person.”

“You don’t know that,” Garen argued.

“I do! He’s kind and sweet and he treats me with dignity!”

Garen pointed a finger at Morgan as though he were about to catch a huge fish. “But you didn’t know any of that when you first pulled him out of the water.”

“No, I didn’t,” Morgan said, not at all repentant. “He was hurt, I helped him, and I’m not sorry about it. I was prepared to kill him if I needed to,” he added, which was a lie, but no one needed to know that. “But I didn’t. I want to help him. I want to give him a chance to get back to his own home.”

“You’re mad,” Garen said, but there was an undercurrent of resignation in his voice that let Morgan know he was making progress. “You’re completely mad. Your brain has been baked by the sun. Do you know what would happen to you if anyone finds out you’re harboring a human?”

“It would be bad.”

“Your brother would beat you half to death, the elders would beat you the rest of the way, and Brevaer would never be voted in as chief.”

“I know!” Morgan had gone over the ramifications in his head time and time again;

he knew the consequences that would fall on him and his family if word of this got out. “Why do you think I ran so fast to catch you? I thought you were Drenikel!”

“And what would you have done if I was Drenikel, bashed me over the head with a rock and fed me to your human friend?”

Morgan had no good answer for that. Fortunately, Auban chose that moment to faint, providing an excellent distraction for both of them. Morgan clambered off Garen and ran over to Auban, who seemed unusually pale even for him. “He’s exhausted,” he muttered, then looped one of Auban’s arms over his shoulders. “Help me get him back to his bed.”

Garen looked at him like he’d just asked him to wipe the human’s dirty ass.

“Garen, come on! We have to do this fast; do you want someone to find us in the middle of the beach carrying Auban between us?”

“Sometimes I wish I’d never met you,” Garen huffed, but he got up and gingerly got his shoulders under Auban’s other arm. Together, they moved Auban back down to the overhang and settled him onto his seaweed bed. He woke up just as Morgan was adjusting his feet.

“Fuck,” he said groggily.

Morgan didn’t mean to, but he began to laugh. He’d never heard Auban speak like that before, crudely, like one of the men in the village. He’d been gentle, refined ... and now it was like he’d swallowed a mouthful of seawater, he was so salty.

“Sorry,” Auban apologized, but he was half smiling. “I think I overdid it. Damn legs ...” He glared down at the appendages in question, which had by far taken the most damage. Several of his toes were fused, and the front of his right leg was still vividly

red, the skin taking a long time to regenerate there. “Let’s hope my arms get stronger faster. I assume I’ll have to use an oar with this boat?”

Right, back to the subject at hand. “Yes,” Morgan said. He knew humans had ways of capturing the wind to help propel them, but Morgan had no clue how to do that. “I’ll have to wrangle the materials for it somehow, but—”

“I can do that,” Garen put in. He looked sour, but his voice was firm enough. “I’ve got something we can use,” he said, this time looking straight at Morgan. “It’s one of my father’s old training spears,” he said. “No one will notice it’s missing.”

“Thank you,” Morgan said, touched beyond telling.

“Thank you,” Auban echoed. “I can see you’re a good friend to Morgan.”

“The best,” Garen said snippily. “Which is the only reason you’re alive right now. If you care about Morgan at all, as soon as you can leave ... go.”

“I will,” Auban said solemnly, his eyes darting to Morgan’s before he turned to look out at the sea. “I know I have no place here. I promise, as soon as I’m capable, I’ll go.”

“Good.” Garen sounded satisfied by that.

Morgan was far from it, but he knew he couldn’t argue. He was destined to lose Auban. The thought of keeping him should never even have crossed his mind, and yet the idea filled him with a kind of poignant longing anyhow.

Still, they’d pushed their luck far enough. The sooner Auban was off the island, the safer he would be.

Morgan would have to learn to be satisfied with that.

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In truth, it was the perfect time for Morgan and Auban to be discovered—at least by a friend. The entire village was wrapped up in catching, preserving, and cooking sturgeon, which Morgan had to admit were delicious, from the crisp crunch of their scaly backs to the glistening, dark wonder of their eggs. And everyone who wasn't working on the sturgeon was working in the fields, including Morgan and Garen, but only in the mornings. In the afternoons, they had plenty of free time, and Morgan decided it would be a good idea to move the boat to the pebble beach.

“I can say I was sick of it being in the way if Brevaer asks,” he said one afternoon a week after Garen's discovery. His friend was still prickly about the entire thing, but a few more meetings with Auban had convinced him that the human was at least in earnest about wanting to leave as much as Morgan wished he wouldn't. “And that you and I are finishing it up on our own.”

“You don't think that will upset him?” Galen asked, wrapping his hands with leaves to help keep the edges of the boat from biting into his skin. “After all the work you two did on it together, to take it over by yourself and cut him out?”

“Brevaer never gets upset about that sort of thing,” Morgan said blithely. “He's too busy being better than everyone at everything else.”

“I think you don't see things very clearly where you and your brother are concerned,” Garen replied. “He loves you very much. He's just not very good at showing it.”

Morgan opened his mouth to argue, then reconsidered. After all, when it came to complicated relationships with people who weren't very good at showing their affection, Garen was the authority.

When backed into a corner, tease your way out of it. “Are you sure you’re not talking about his relationship with you?” Morgan asked, wrapping his own hands up. One layer ought to be enough ... He stared down at the heavy boat and frowned. Hmm, maybe two layers would be better. “Aren’t you the one he’s spending all that extra time training with in the mornings before he goes out to sea?”

“It’s because my mother asked it of him,” Garen said, but there was no mistaking the flush in his cheeks. “It’s just that she’s concerned about my ability to protect myself.”

“She ought to be concerned about idiots like Drenikel, not worried about people like you who actually practice every single day.” Dren and his crew were becoming more insufferable by the day; it was only due to the fact that everybody was needed to help prepare food for winter that they weren’t dogging Morgan’s every step. As it was, they spent most days drowning in fish guts instead, which was quite pleasant. “All right, let’s try to move it.”

“All right.” They reached down, got their grips, and hoisted the boat up.

Morgan almost immediately let go of it, sending Garen crashing down to his knees with a cut-off cry. “Damn, that’s heavy!”

“Ow,” Garen snapped, rubbing his lower back. “Warn me before you drop it, Morgan!”

“I didn’t know I was going to drop it!”

“I still could have used a warning!”

This wasn’t an argument worth having, especially not with the truth staring Morgan so starkly in the face. “We won’t be able to carry it to the beach.”

“No kidding,” Garen muttered as he got back to his feet. “Not if you’re going to drop it every two feet.”

“You wouldn’t have been able to hold it up much longer either! Now shut up and let me think.” Think, think ... we’ll have to float it there. It was the only way. But that meant possibly exposing their movement to the sight of the village, which didn’t bode well for keeping things under wraps. But if they waited until evening, when the central beach was empty, Brevaer would be back, and he would undoubtedly have questions that Morgan didn’t want to answer about where the boat was going.

“We’ll have to chance it in the water,” he said at last. “Maybe we could push it from below?”

“Towing it would be better,” Garen said. “I think I can get a rope around the front, actually ... but you’ll need to sit inside it and stabilize it with the paddle.” The paddle was still mostly stick shaped.

“Sure,” Morgan said with all the conviction of someone who had no idea what he was doing but didn’t want to let on. “I can do that.” First, though, they had to get the damn thing down to the shore.

In the end, they rolled it. The log was heavy and hardy enough that it bumped over rocks and roots with aplomb, and by the time they got it to the water, Morgan was cautiously optimistic that even the worst storm wouldn’t be able to tear it apart. Getting inside of it and balancing it, however ...

Sploosh.

“You’re supposed to stabilize it while I get in!” Morgan said as he lifted his head out of the water after the fifth dunking.

“I’m trying!” Garen replied after shifting back into his human form. “It’s not the easiest thing, you know—this shape seems to want to roll. You’re going to have to take more off the bottom, find some way to make it sleeker and less—”

“Ah, look. Idiots at work.” There was a snicker. “Or is that play?”

Morgan groaned inwardly, then turned to face Drenikel and his pair of remoras—the suck-up snots of the village. “Dren,” he said pleasantly. “I see you’ve escaped the fish frenzy early today. You don’t even smell any worse than usual!” Actually, the scent of guts was very strong on the breeze, and the trio seemed to know it if the dark looks they shared were any indicator.

“At least we’re working for the common good,” he snapped. “Whereas the two of you are ... what, trying to get that ridiculous boat of yours to work? Stupid. It’s all wrong. You and your brother were mad to think you’d ever be able to make something like that yourselves.”

“It works just fine,” Morgan snapped despite all evidence to the contrary. “We’re just fine-tuning it now.”

“Fine-tuning it to what, see how quickly you can get it to flip over?” Drenikel laughed. “Too bad it’s not your brother doing the testing—I could stand to see him fall out of a boat a few dozen times.”

“Yeah, too bad he’s off hunting with the rest of the men,” Morgan said.

“At least I’m not farming with the women,” Drenikel shot back.

“I’d rather farm with the women than get stuck on gut duty. Too slow to keep up with the hunters, too stupid to know weed from food in the fields ... no wonder they had to set you to eviscerating a bunch of fish. I suppose not even you could screw up that

job.” Morgan’s smile turned sharp. “Or ... is that a cut I see on your hand? Did you stab yourself while you were trying to take out a sturgeon’s liver?”

“I—you—” Drenikel was speechless with rage, and Morgan was ready to escape. He pulled himself out of the water, plopped down into the boat, and put the end of the paddle with the bit of shaping down to help maintain his balance. Miraculously, it worked this time.

“Lovely,” he said as Garen started to pull him away. “It works! Even better than three fish-fingered sturgeon fuckers, I bet!”

And that was when Drenikel led his crew into the water, changed shape, and began a fight that led to three broken fingers, several slashes, a swollen eye ridge for one of Dren’s lackeys, and a rip in Morgan’s own beautiful tail. Hours later, as he sat enduring a scolding from Brevaer that would put any parent to shame, Morgan reflected that maybe it would have been better if he hadn’t gotten the last word in after all.

“And on top of it all, you lost the boat!”

On the other hand ... after the fight was over—and Garen was truly magnificent in the water, sending Dren and his fools packing after hardly a minute—they’d been able to tow the boat to the pebble beach with no one the wiser except Auban, who had done his own scolding but also listened with a smile on his face to Morgan’s tale of adventure.

To Brevaer, the boat was as good as gone. That meant he’d never have reason to look for it.

Now, if they could just get it seaworthy for Auban, this would all be worth it.

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Morgan was in a rather good mood when he finally unveiled the boat to Auban at the pebbly beach, with Garen standing by looking sullen but likely just feeling uncomfortable thanks to the massive bruises where one of Dren's lads had gotten lucky. "Ta-da!" he exclaimed. "And it even floats! Not extremely well yet; we'll need to keep fiddling with that, but it's moving in the right direction. I think with some more work, we'll be able to keep it upright in the water nearly all the time."

"Nearly all the time, eh?" Auban looked from the boat to Morgan with a queer expression on his face, like he was trying not to laugh and nearly managing it. "That's certainly better than it could be."

"Exactly! And I brought you some tools to use to work on it." He unloaded the adze and the sanding stone he'd snagged from the house. "I'll need them back," he added, "so try not to break them, or my brother will kill me."

"I certainly don't want that." Auban glanced between the two of them and lost his nearly there smile. "What happened to you both?"

"We got into a fight," Garen said stiffly.

"Which we won," Morgan added. "You should see the other guys."

"Which I won, really."

"I helped! I bit Dren so hard on the tail that his face turned purple, don't you remember that?" Morgan stuck out his tongue in a "blegh" gesture. "And he tasted fucking awful. Too much time cutting fish bellies, not enough time washing off."

“A fight?” Auban pressed to his feet. Morgan was proud to see how steadily he was moving. He was getting so much better! Able to walk and everything, and Morgan was rather pleased with the fact that he’d scavenged enough old clothing from the rag pile to actually give his human friend some to wear because it made him look rather dashing. Plus, now that he was up and moving, seeing him naked all the time felt like less of a medical necessity and more of a ... of a ...

Titillating thrill? You jerk. He isn’t here for your heart’s consumption! You should know better than to let yourself have these sorts of thoughts about him!

“Did you fight them with those?”

“Mmm?” Morgan snapped out of his argument with himself to see where Auban was pointing—at the staff in Garen’s hand. Both staffs, actually; he was holding Morgan’s too. They were meant to be “training” right now, which was Morgan speak for “spending time with Auban” and Garen speak for “we really ought to actually train with these things,” which was why he’d brought the staffs along in the first place. That and to make it look better to Brevaer. Garen was more and more concerned with making things look good to Brevaer lately; a bold choice, given that the village was slowly but surely splitting into two schools of support for the next chief: one for Brevaer, the other for Dinigan, Drenikel’s father.

Of course, this all ignored the fact that the current chief was still alive and being supported by Garen’s mother, who was more than capable of beating anyone in the village into pulp with her bare hands. In short, it was a very confusing time.

“We did,” Garen answered once it became clear that Morgan had lost the thread of his thoughts. “Some of your metal human weapons were found in the water”—he spat the word like it was made from acid—“but we don’t have the resources to make entire blades out of such things. It would be wasteful, and our staffs are thick enough to block a blade anyhow.”

“I don’t recall fighting with a sword myself,” Auban said absently. “But I think I remember a bit about how they’re used. Show me some of your moves.”

Morgan and Garen shared a look. “Umm ...”

“Surely you’re not afraid to show me a little stick work,” Auban said, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “I can’t even lift that paddle you brought me yet, so what harm could it do?”

“Humans do nothing but harm,” Garen shot back quickly, and Morgan decided he’d had enough of that.

“I’ll show you.” Morgan took his staff from his friend and got into a vague facsimile of the “ready” stance they began their patterns with. “We do training patterns to help us learn the basic attacks and defenses of the staff,” he said. He swept it up, then down, over then over again ... Morgan futzed his way through the first pattern, knowing he was getting at least a third of it wrong.

“What’s the third motion meant to be blocking?” Auban asked once Morgan was done.

“Um ...” Morgan knew the answer to this, he did, he totally diiiid ...

“It braces you against a downward strike falling like so,” Garen said, finally stepping in—probably because Morgan had embarrassed him with his poor showing. Mwahahaha, his evil plan was working!

That’s right, convince yourself it’s deliberate.

I will, thank you.

Garen went through the first pattern himself, much more smoothly and strongly than Morgan had managed. At the end of it, he turned with an expectant glare at Auban.

“Your attacks and defenses are very good,” Auban said after a moment. “But they’re designed to work against someone wielding another staff or a spear. The people on the boat ... you said they were carrying swords.”

“So?”

“So what do you know about blocking a sword attack?”

Morgan frowned. “I mean ... it’s just like a spear, isn’t it? Except shorter.”

“And with sharpened sides, a different manner of grip, the ability to slash as well as stab ...”

“Well, if you’re so smart, why don’t you show us how to fight against a sword?” Garen snapped.

“I would be happy to,” Auban replied evenly, “but I know you don’t trust me. The last thing I want is to make you believe you’re being led astray as though I’m some sort of enemy agent.”

“We don’t think that,” Morgan assured him, then looked at his friend expressively. Garen managed to withstand his pathetic look for a few moments but finally gave in.

“I don’t really think that,” Garen said. “Or at least I don’t think you’d be stupid enough to do anything to hurt Morgan when he’s your only chance of getting off our island.”

“I would absolutely never do anything to hurt Morgan,” Auban said just as somberly.

Morgan felt a strange little thrill go through him as he realized that two people he cared so much about placed such weight on his presence in their lives. He felt, for a second there, actually important. Not like Brevaer was important, or like Sariel was important, or even like how Dren just thought he was important. To these two people, and a few more, he actually was important. That was ... special.

“But I would be remiss if I didn’t take the chance to show you a few things you can do with a staff versus a sword since they seem familiar to me,” Auban went on. “I don’t remember fighting with a sword myself, but ...” He put a hand on his forehead and winced. “But I remember ... training grounds? Men with many different types of weapons fighting against one another. Sword, spear, halberd, ax ...”

Morgan ran to him and cupped Auban’s face in his hands. His skin felt hot—it was always hot, hotter than any Agnarra ran, but right now it seemed even more extreme than usual. “Stop that,” he chided gently. “You’re going to give yourself a headache.”

“I need to remember,” Auban said, keeping his eyes closed even as he covered Morgan’s hands with his own. “I need to help you somehow instead of doing nothing but take from you. If I can make you better prepared to fight a human who would come here and try to ruin you, again, then that’s what I need to do.”

“But not at the expense of your own health,” Morgan insisted. Auban slowly opened his bright eyes, squinting slightly against the brilliance of the sun on the sea. Morgan leaned forward until his own long green hair created a barrier against the light, and the pain in Auban’s face eased.

“Right,” Garen said from a few feet away. He sounded unaccountably awkward. “So we’ll just ... make sure to bring some shorter sticks next time we come out, and you can ... show us some sword stuff.”

“Perfect,” Morgan said.

“Great. Just ... Morgan. We ought to be getting home now.” A hand on his shoulder pulled him out of his close-up with Auban, and after that Garen hustled them out of there like Brevaer was on their tail shouting at them to “pick up the pace!”

Morgan knew Garen idolized his brother, but this was getting out of hand!

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“How,” Morgan gasped at his best friend in a rare moment of stillness, “is this even worse than training with Brevaer?”

“I don’t know,” Garen said, not quite as out of breath but bent over with his hands on his knees. “I wouldn’t have thought it was possible before now.”

“He’s a ruthless taskmaster.”

“Cruel.”

“Downright mean.”

“Vicious, even.”

“All right, that’s enough of that,” Auban said from where he was smoothing out the side of the boat with the stone Morgan had brought him ... what, was it two weeks ago already? Two weeks had gone by since Auban had promised to train them to fight against an opponent armed with a sword, and he had certainly kept his word. Every day they could, they came to him. What Morgan had been anticipating would be nothing more than some simple exercises and lots of time to talk and admire his human friend’s improving health, however, had turned into the kind of training that made him wish he hadn’t woken up that morning.

“There is nothing vicious about wanting the two of you to be the safest you possibly can be,” Auban said, scraping another thin shaving of wood from the boat. He was spending all his spare time evening its weight out and making it seaworthy, and the results were quite promising. Between their bouts, he either forced himself to work

on his own muscles, paddling doggedly back and forth until he was slumped over from exhaustion, or worked even harder on the boat.

He had good reason to hurry up. The enormous shoals of migrating fish were gone as of last week, which meant the clan's hunters were spending more of their time in the village now. With the threat of another ship mostly forgotten by the clan, this meant more time spent working on their homes, preparing them for the winter storm season that was heading their way, or bringing in the end-of-season harvests that were occurring more and more frequently with their various crops. There were just a few things left to gather before the fields would be abandoned for the rest of the year, and then Brevaer would be around all the time.

Auban had to be gone by then.

Morgan was still able to excuse his absences for the most part, convincing his brother that he was training or collecting seaweed to dry and save for winter. He did, in fact, collect a lot of seaweed, but that was secondary to coming and training with Auban. Just spending the extra time with him now felt precious, even more so because Auban was, for the first period since Morgan had met him, able to interact without being in the role of patient. He could stand up straight, he could walk on his own—he was even hunting his own food with the slender spear Garen had loaned him! It was impressive, and it painted Auban in a whole different light than before.

He had gone from a thing to be admired and cared for to a person who Morgan longed to spend time with, even when it came at the expense of his personal comfort.

Like now.

“Aren't we safe enough?” Morgan whined, drawing it out so that he could tempt Auban into making that face which said—yes, that one there! It was a beautiful mixture of amused and annoyed, with a hint of something deeper to it—did Morgan

dare hope it was genuine affection? He knew Auban liked him, knew he was grateful to him, but ... that wasn't what he wanted. Not precisely. It didn't hurt, yet it wasn't enough.

He was unnervingly aware of the fact that nothing he ever got with Auban might end up being enough.

“We can defend against slashes, pokes—”

“Stabs.”

“Stabs, high strikes, low strikes, even that sneaky one with the spin. What more do we need to know?”

“You need to know how to defend against them without thinking about them,” Auban said, setting the stone down. He stood up and held his hand out to Garen. “If you would let me borrow that, please.”

“Of course.” Garen passed over the stick he was pretending was a sword with no small amount of glee. He had grown fond of Auban over the past few weeks, which was much better than before. Much! But Morgan wondered if maybe his friend was growing a bit too fond.

Wouldn't want Brevaer to have competition, after all. Especially now that Garen was taking almost every evening meal with them, and he and Brevaer talked about hunting and planting and the needs of the village for hours, and the way they looked at each other when they thought the other one wasn't looking, never bothering to notice there was a third person in the room, thank you very much.

Not that Morgan was bitter or anything.

“Good.” Auban motioned for Morgan to pick up his staff. “Now, you’ve had a decent amount of practice attacking each other. Let’s see what happens when you attack me.”

Morgan froze. The very thought of it made him suddenly sick to his stomach. “Um ...”

“Go on,” Auban encouraged him. “I promise I can handle it. I’m not asking you to use full force or anything resembling it, but it will be easier for me to show you some of the trickier ways to defend yourself if I can work with a direct attack.”

“I don’t ...” Morgan was stunned to find his hands were shaking. “I ...” He stared at Auban, at this person with his red-fuzzed hair finally growing in, the sharp beauty of his feature and the brightness of his eyes, and he knew without a doubt that he couldn’t do this thing. Not even in jest, not even gently, not even when Auban asked him to. “I can’t.”

He couldn’t. He wanted to shower Auban in gifts, make tiny sculptures in the sand for him to look at, carefully stack crooked rocks for him until they were as tall as his beloved in a delicate show of the perfection of balance ...

Courting behaviors. He wanted to court—he wanted to—oh shit, he wanted to court Auban. He was already courting Auban, with the food and the care and the visits and the lessons, and he had thought it had just been friendly, but it wasn’t, it wasn’t, it was worse than that because Morgan had never even imagined courting someone before, and now all of a sudden, he was realizing that he was in love with Auban, and it was hopeless. Absolutely hopeless, and ...

“Morgan?”

He dropped his staff, whirled around, and stalked off to the edge of the water.

“Morgan?”

“What’s wrong?”

He hastily stripped off his clothes, waded into the cool, clean water, and dove into it. He changed quickly and used his powerful tail and his stubby little limbs to push him deeper into the water, ever deeper, deep enough to drown out his stupid, stupid heart.

How could he let himself do this? How could he think it was a good idea? He had always known Auban wasn’t for him, and that was fine, it was—he was resigned to that, truly. When Auban was sick, he had been more an ideal than a person. But now, now that he was well again, now that he was funny and active and more interesting than ever, Morgan knew he had let himself go too far, get too deep.

He was in love, and he would never be able to tell Auban that. It wouldn’t be fair, not when there was nothing the other could do about it. Not that Morgan expected his love in return, but oh, if things had been different ... if he was allowed to court Auban, to convince him of his love and care ... oh, the beauty he would bestow on him. The adoration. The finest shells, the softest clothes, the most beautiful pearls ...

A touch to his tail had him swirling around in a hurry, but it was only Garen, inky in the water but in a clear posture of concern. He solicited a reply, but Morgan just shook his head. How could he confess to his friend what he had barely begun to understand himself? Garen nudged him again, then began swimming back toward the shore.

The swim had been too brief to settle Morgan’s mind, but as he got close to shore, he found he was feeling rather ashamed of himself. He had been given a simple request from Auban, and he’d run off without a word of explanation. Auban must think he was childish, must think he was a brat, someone spoiled and silly and—

Warm hands touched his face the moment he emerged from the wave near the shore. Auban stood there, thigh deep in the water, and even though he'd seen next to nothing of Morgan's Agnarra form, he wasn't afraid. He cupped Morgan's chin and looked deep into his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I won't ask you to do that again." It had the air of a promise, and a vow, and Morgan ...

He fell in love just a little bit more. How could he not, when he was being looked at like he was beautiful, like he was important? When the person he loved was treating him with understanding and not contempt?

"It will be all right," Auban said, and Morgan—probably foolishly—let himself believe it.

It will be all right.

For a little bit longer, at least.

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When the winds changed, so did Garen. Morgan watched his friend bracing himself in the weeks leading up to the oncoming of winter because it was going to lead to another perennial occurrence—one that never got less painful.

When the winds shifted, Garen's father, Sariel, began to relive the tragedy of his youth, the battle that had changed everything for him—for all their people. He went from long periods of docility, during which he let his wife and son care for him with little acknowledgment or emotion, to a period of regression that left him active from dawn until dusk and sometimes later.

And always, always, he either fought or wept.

Rozyne used to take care of him during this period on her own, but as Garen grew, she'd relied on him more and more to step in and keep Sariel from hurting himself or others. She never asked her brother or nephew. For all they touted the importance of blood and family, Morgan knew the truth—Rozyne didn't let them close to her husband in these desperate times because she didn't trust him with them.

The first day Sariel woke up screaming, the sound traveled all the way to Morgan and Brevaer's hut. Both of them bolted upright, Brev reaching for his spear before they realized what was going on.

"Damn it," Brev said with a sigh. "The change has come on so gradually this year, I thought we would have a few more days of peace."

"He never even goes outside," Morgan groaned. "How can he tell the winds are changing?"

“He feels it in his heart,” Brevaer replied.

“That’s not a thing.”

“Of course, it is.” Morgan’s brother cuffed him on the back of the head. “The Agnarra have always had a sense-feel for the most important events in our lives, whether they’re good times or bad times. Being consciously aware of it isn’t necessary; you can just feel it.” He looked bemusedly at Morgan. “It’s worse for Sariel than it is for a lot of us, obviously—he spends an entire season in a state of panic and fear, but I always feel the exact day that our home was invaded. I’m surprised you don’t.”

Morgan shrugged. “I was too young for it, I guess.”

“Garen feels it.”

That was news to Morgan. “How do you know?”

“Because he told me about it, of course.”

Wait ... “When did you two get so companionable?” The words could have sounded accusatory, but Morgan made sure to saturate them with approval and a fair dose of innuendo.

“Shut up,” Brevaer grouched, throwing his blanket off and reaching for his kilt. “I’m going to go help finish in the north field today.” The change in the winds also heralded the fast-approaching end to the growing season, and many hands were requested to make light work.

“I’ll probably harvest more seaweed. Medicinal this time, not the stuff for dyeing.” Morgan had found himself becoming something of an expert when it came to how to

use the many varieties of seaweed found near the island, after testing everything he could get his fins on to see if and how it would be helpful to Auban.

“That’s good.” Brevaer paused where he was stoking the fire and bestowed Morgan with an appreciative look. “I used to think that nothing could interest you more than art, but this year you’ve found all sorts of useful occupations for yourself. I’m impressed, little brother.”

“Thanks.” Morgan said it a bit dryly; he knew he was generally thought of as useless, so of course Brevaer liked it when he showed a passion for something that was more useful to the clan.

“Not—not like—” Brevaer made an exasperated grunting sound. “I’m not saying that to make you feel bad. Your art makes the village more beautiful. The children love finding it on the beach; they’ve been wondering why you stopped, in fact.”

Morgan was about to protest that that couldn’t be true, but then he stopped himself. He had stopped drawing in the sand on the beach, and making sculptures out of driftwood, and every other thing he’d once occupied his days with. “I ... I’ll have to go back and make something new,” he said even though he already knew he wouldn’t do it before Auban was safely away.

“Do that,” Brevaer said, and the rest of their time together passed in companionable silence.

Morgan knew better than to go to try and get Garen’s attention after the morning. Rozyne wasn’t going to let her son out of her sight for the next week, and he wouldn’t leave his father anyway. He might not love the man—something he had shamefully admitted to Morgan the first time they got drunk on yara together—but he was a dutiful son and would never abandon his father in his time of need. That meant Morgan was going to be visiting Auban by himself, which was ... honestly, it was

fine with him.

It was more than fine.

It was kind of ... amazing? But also terrible? It was hard to describe. Morgan treasured the time he had with Auban, and as his friend became healthier and more mobile, they were able to do different things together—mostly swimming and diving. Auban was a bit clumsy in the water compared to an Agnarra, but he turned out to be a very decent swimmer once he got used to it. Whether he'd known how to do it before or he was just learning now for the first time, Morgan was impressed.

Morgan loaded himself up with as much food as he could safely carry, then began his now-daily run to the pebble beach. The wind nipped at him as he went, colder, harsher than before. He frowned. He'd brought Auban a blanket months ago, and spare clothes, but those wouldn't suffice for long. And he'd need another container for fresh water, and something to cover his food, and a net or a pole to fish with—not things Morgan's people used often, but before children were developed enough to fish in their dragon forms, they did so from the shore.

There's still so much to do. So much to do, and the end date was coming faster and faster.

Auban was nowhere to be seen when Morgan reached the beach. That in and of itself wasn't surprising—Auban was wary about not being seen, which was good since one of them needed to be cautious. Morgan knew it was already a lost cause when it came to him. He walked down to the edge of the water and looked left, then right. There was no one clearly visible although he could see the very tip of the canoe where they'd dragged it under the edge of the cliff. He stared out into the water for a moment, but he didn't see anyone's head bobbing out there.

A little disturbed now, Morgan stowed the food, then decided to check the only place

he could think of where Auban might be that they'd ventured together before. It would be faster to swim, so he stripped down and waded out into the shallows, then dove and changed all at once. He headed for the point of the island, the easternmost tip that was barely wide enough for two men to stand on side by side. From it, if you squinted and the water was calm enough, you could see the shadow of the next closest island in the distance, the one that Morgan was hoping to get Auban to himself before setting him off on his own.

Not that he was thinking about that.

He emerged from the water with a relieved whuff as he saw Auban standing exactly where he'd hoped he would be. He wasn't looking out at the sea, though. He was standing with his eyes closed, arms extended, the wind ruffling his ragged clothes and leaving him looking like a beach bird on the verge of flight. Morgan didn't interrupt the experience, just lifted his head out far enough to lay it on the rocks beside Auban's feet.

The man blew out a sigh a second later. "So close," he muttered. "I feel so close to something today. I'm almost—there's almost—I'm on the verge of some memory, I can tell. I just don't know what it is." He pounded one of his hands into the palm of the other. "It's driving me crazy!"

Morgan crooned comfortingly, and Auban knelt down beside him a moment later. It wasn't easy for him; he still grimaced bending his right knee, but he could do it without help.

He's ready, and we need to get ahead of the storms that will come with winter.

Then Auban stroked a hand over Morgan's head, and every uncomfortable thought fled his brain as a rush of pleasure rolled down his spine. "There are things I feel I need to remember," Auban said. "Things that make me feel ... I don't know, like

something is about to happen that I should know about. A sense of foreboding, a ... a feeling of danger. It's been growing stronger." He half smiled. "Perhaps it's my mind telling me it's time to leave this place. But my heart ... my heart is saying the opposite.

"I think about not seeing you"—he scratched beneath Morgan's jaw, tender on his smallest scales—"and I feel frantic. I feel like I'm abandoning you even though I know I can't stay. I'm endangering you every second I'm here, but." He sighed again, then leaned forward until their foreheads touched, his fire-warm and human, Morgan's cool and damp. "I cannot tell you what I feel, because I refuse to be cruel to you. But I know, beyond all doubt, that you are the best person I've ever known in my life. If I never regain my memory, or if it all comes back to me someday, that is something that shall never change."

Oh. Oh, was it possible he ... felt the same? Could he possibly love Morgan back? Could he want him the way Morgan yearned toward Auban, every inch of his body suffused with longing—sometimes embarrassingly?

Oh.

Oh no.

Morgan crooned again, this time a sound of sadness, and Auban held him through his song. It was probably the last chance at a courting behavior he would get with this person he'd fallen in love with, the man his heart had chosen as his mate.

He would enjoy it even though it hurt.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:17 am

It was easier to remain a dragon after the truth was out. If Morgan became a human right now, he might just throw himself into Auban's arms—arms that were strong enough to hold him up now, to support him and cradle him close—and cry like a child, and Morgan couldn't afford that kind of weakness right now. He needed to get ahold of himself quietly, in private.

He slowly pulled back from Auban once his song was over, and Auban let him go, let him slither back into the water with a look of infinite regret combined with understanding on his face. "Will I see you tomorrow?" he asked, and Morgan nodded before turning and swimming off into deeper waters. He seemed to be doing this a lot recently. There had to be a better way of getting control of his emotions, and yet ...

The Agnarra were people of the water. They lived surrounded by it and in it for most of their lives. It set the rhythm of their year, dictated when they fished with the currents and when they planted with the rains, determined when they drew together as a tribe and when they allowed themselves to drift apart. The water was everything to them, and so it made sense that the water was also the best place to seek solace and comfort.

Morgan thought he could remember his brother disappearing for hours into the water after they first came to this new island. It had upset him at the time, made him wonder whether Brevaer was abandoning him, like he had felt their parents had done. But Brev had always come back, and even when he was brusque about Morgan's tears, he had wiped them all the same, held him close and told him that he wasn't going anywhere. Morgan had never seen his older brother cry, but perhaps that was simply because Brev had given all his tears to the sea.

Morgan dove down, down, until the water wrapped around him and held him close like a lover might, until it was so dark even his eyes could no longer distinguish details. He curled up and drifted for a bit, listening to the sounds of other creatures moving in the depths. Their motions were like sounds in his skin, flickers that danced across his nerves and told him where they were, how they moved, what they might be.

A pod of whales ... hmm, a shark perhaps, not big enough to worry about, though. A school of cod—running late, you are. And a ... hmm. There was one feeling he couldn't quite identify, the lightest touch of something that seemed to be enormous and many armed. A giant squid, perhaps? Morgan had heard about them before, but he'd never seen one—they tended to stay deeper than his people were comfortable with.

He let his interest drift away, along with all the other sensations and cares he held with him, until he was left with nothing but himself in the darkness of his mind. Himself and Auban, because try as he might to center himself and find solace in the solitude, it seemed like Auban was right there with him, like he could feel him if only he reached out a fin to touch.

He really is my mate. Morgan wouldn't be so attuned to him otherwise. A mate, he had a mate, a beautiful, impossible mate, and he loved him so much that he didn't know how his heart could bear it. He didn't know how he was going to bear it once Auban was gone. Auban had to go ... but if he cared for Morgan the same way, would he be happy once he was back with his own kind? Did humans mate the same way, or was it a more temporary thing for them? If so, then Auban would recover from their separation swiftly.

But what if he didn't? The fact that Morgan felt him so plainly now, felt him in that part of himself that was reserved for family, was telling. It made him think that it was reciprocal after all, that Auban didn't just love him, he was bonded to him. The

thought was glorious and intimidating and the most frightening thing that Morgan had ever experienced.

He is mine, and I must lose him.

Or ... or he could go with him, but then Morgan would have to live in the human world, and he didn't think he would survive that. They would know he wasn't one of them, know it from his green hair and the way he moved and how he needed to stay close to the water at all times. He would be hunted and killed, and Auban would surely suffer the same fate. No, Morgan couldn't live with humans. He could only die with them.

We can find somewhere to be together, alone. Another island, a place just for us. That option, too, was riddled with flaws. Living required a community—you couldn't go it alone. Two people, even two people who were hard workers, would confront extreme privation with just the two of them attempting to live wild on these hard, northern islands. And Morgan would be the first to admit that he wasn't the hardest worker, and Auban was still injured and might never recover his full strength, and ...

No. It couldn't work, it couldn't, and he needed to resign his stupid heart to it. Irritated and incredibly sad, Morgan tried to shove the presence of his beloved out of his mind.

It didn't work. Rather, the shove he gave deepened his connection to Auban momentarily, taking Morgan's sense of him and amping it up to new heights. And as it sharpened, he could feel Auban's stoic facade fading into something fearful.

Fearful? Why was he fearful?

There was motion, a few words, an entreaty of some kind and then—

Ow! Auban was hurt! He was being hurt right now, injured by someone that Morgan couldn't fight for him.

Not yet at least. Morgan uncoiled and flared his fins, propelling himself hard through the water, harder than he ever had before in his life. He had never been a fast swimmer, but his months of training on land had translated to a fitter, stronger body now. It took less than five minutes for him to return to land, five terrible minutes in which he felt his mate injured, wounded, felt his pain like it was his own, and Morgan had to go faster because if he didn't get there soon, Auban might just be killed, and that was unacceptable.

He burst out of the edge of the water and transformed in midair, then stumbled when his feet hit the rocky surface of the beach that had become his second home. The skin on his soles split, but the pain was nothing to the fury coursing through his blood, fury that rendered all but Auban blurry and indistinct.

There was his love, there, held on his knees by some enormous brute. Morgan surged forward with a scream, beat back two sets of arms that tried to hold him, and finally got close enough to Auban to enfold him in his embrace. Auban couldn't hold him back, not with his arms bound as they were, but he tilted his head against Morgan's.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he whispered. "I should have been more careful."

"I shouldn't have left you," Morgan whispered.

"You see?" a high, nasal voice insisted from somewhere off to the left. "I told you he betrayed us with this human! I told you he was false, and now you know it's true!"

That was Drenikel, Garen's loathsome cousin ... but then who was holding Auban captive? Morgan lifted his face and looked up at the shadow looming over them and saw—

Oh shit. Brevaer.

“All this time.”

Morgan had never heard his brother’s voice like this. Low, deep to the point of guttural, and absolutely without mercy. There was nothing of kindness in this voice, nothing of love and family. There was nothing but cold anger and even colder duty.

“All these months,” Brevaer went on, piercing Morgan to the core with the sharpness of his gaze, “that I thought you were changing for the better, developing a sense of responsibility at long last. All the training, the work, the effort ... and it was all spent hiding this disgrace?” He jerked Auban’s head back, making him wince with pain. Morgan whimpered and reached for him, but his brother pressed his foot into Morgan’s chest and half shoved, half kicked him back. “You’ve been harboring an enemy under our very noses?”

“I told you!” It was Drenikel again, gloating over the scene. “I told you all! Morgan would not know a true day’s labor if it came to him bedecked in flowers and singing a song! He’s turned on the whole village, spurned us to harbor a human! He’s a traitor to us all!”

There were murmurs from the crowd—how much of a crowd, Morgan couldn’t tell, because he couldn’t take his eyes off Auban. His mate’s neck was held back at a cruel angle, and forcing him onto his knees like this had to be exacerbating his injuries terribly. “Let him go,” Morgan begged his brother. “At least let him sit upright, please! You’re hurting him!”

“Why shouldn’t he be hurt?” Brevaer bellowed. “Why shouldn’t he feel pain, after all the pain he and his kind have caused us? He came here to kill us, Morgan! He came

in a ship of war, full of men armed with blades and worse. He came with fire-dust and harpoons, ready to do us all in. What sort of mercy should I grant him for that except a quick death?"

"No!" Morgan screamed the word, drawn up from the depths of his soul. "Don't kill him!"

"Why not?"

"Because I love him!"

There were shouts of horror, of dismay—and of terrible glee from Drenikel and his friends, but Morgan was still focused solely on Auban, who gave him the ghost of a smile as he mouthed the words right back.

I love you too.

Gods, his heart was breaking. This couldn't happen, it couldn't. If he watched his own brother kill his mate, Morgan would lose his mind.

"He is even more of a traitor now!" Drenikel roared above the din, shaking a spear over his head. "He's given his heart to one who would have wiped out our entire village! He should be killed as well!"

That seemed to knock Brevaer out of his wrath, and a look of dismay crossed his face. "Absolutely not," he snapped.

"Spoken like a soft-hearted fool," Drenikel said with a sneer. "It's clear where the line of your loyalty to us really lies, Brevaer. You had the audacity to present yourself as a leader to our people, and yet you lack the discipline to punish your own dishonorable brother. If you won't do it, then I will!" He leapt forward with his spear,

thrusting it toward Morgan's chest.

Morgan didn't do anything to block it even though he easily could have—his time training with Garen and Auban hadn't been completely wasted. He let it happen, though, not looking away from Auban, who stared at him with horror as the point began its inevitable descent into his heart.

I would rather die with you than live after watching you die.

The attack was stopped, though—not by Brevaer and not by Morgan, but by Garen. He had his own spear outstretched, knocking Drenikel's to the side as he lunged forward to place himself between Morgan and the rest of them.

“Don't you fucking dare,” he snarled, clearly out of breath but no less fierce for it. Morgan pressed his face to the back of Garen's thigh, his breath hitching with the realization that he had only narrowly avoided death. He risked a glance at his brother—Brevaer looked poleaxed, like he was barely able to follow what was happening. For the first time, Morgan felt nothing but contempt for the sibling he had revered from birth.

You know nothing. Nothing at all.

“He's a traitor!” Drenikel insisted, but there were murmurs of discontent now.

“It don't mean you can just kill him,” one elder spoke up.

“Who gave you the right?” another asked.

“He's young! Surely that must afford him some understanding,” one of the women said.

“His guilt is undeniable!” Drenikel shouted. “And he hasn’t even tried to deny it! He preserved the life of this human in secret, it—it’s a betrayal of everything we stand for!”

“The human doesn’t remember anything!” That was Garen again, speaking up when Morgan couldn’t—and neither he nor Auban could, Auban because no one cared what a human had to say, and Morgan because his throat was too tight with fear and grief. “He washed ashore without a single memory, gravely injured. Should Morgan just have let him die, then?”

“Wait.” Drenikel sounded interested now. “You knew about this?”

“Not at first,” Garen said stiffly. “But yes, I found out eventually.”

“And you didn’t report it to any of us?”

“No.”

“Another traitor!” He sounded terribly, horribly excited.

Brevaer spoke next, and there was no excitement in his voice. Only betrayal. “You knew,” he rumbled. “And you said nothing to me as well.”

“I could not,” Garen told him. “I swore to Morgan I would keep my silence.”

“Then you truly have no loyalty toward me, do you?” Brevaer let go of Auban, who slumped to the ground in a daze. “You’ve been playing me this whole time in an effort to help my brother hide his dirty little secret, haven’t you? Everything we talked about, the moments we shared ... they mean nothing to you.”

“You’re wrong. They mean so much to me,” Garen said in earnest. “But I could never

betray my oldest friend. And Auban has done nothing but help us better ourselves as soon as he was able to.”

“Better yourself how?” Brevaer growled.

“In fighting, in defense ...”

“You think you are a fighter now, thanks to this filth’s efforts?” Brevaer grabbed Drenikel’s spear from his hands with ease, making the younger man yelp with surprise. “Then fight me. Show me how much this human has taught you.”

Garen was shaking—from fear or sadness, Morgan didn’t know. Nevertheless, he took a step forward. Morgan cried out as his friend moved away, and Garen turned back and laid a gentle hand on his head. “It’s all right,” he said, staring into Morgan’s eyes. There was no lie there.

Morgan knew, in that moment, that he had grossly underestimated his friend. Garen was the best person he knew—not Brevaer, certainly not himself. Garen had bravery without end, and Morgan did not deserve it ... but ... “It’s all right,” Garen repeated, then let go of Morgan and moved forward, placing his spear in a ready position.

Brevaer attacked, and Garen answered.

The breath caught in Morgan’s throat as he watched two of the three people he held dearest in the world attack each other like they were trying to kill each other—which, judging from the scowl on his brother’s face, he at least was. He couldn’t do anything, couldn’t move at all as Brevaer, massive yet swift, as inexorable as the tide, struck at Garen with no respite, no pulling of his own strength. And Garen ...

Garen answered it. Every strike, he had a reply for—every combination, he parried and matched. He avoided trips, redirected sweeping blows that a few months ago

would have taken him off his feet, and when he could not move out of the way, met force with force in a display of strength that had the other villagers murmuring at his increased strength and skill. He was incredible ... but he was totally defensive, not striking back, not even trying to get the upper hand against Brevaer.

He loves you, Morgan wanted to scream. He loves you, you fool! Why can't you see it? Isn't love more important than punishing him for helping me? But the words stuck in his throat, stuck like everything else, paralyzing him. The only thing that managed to jolt him out of his fugue was the arrival of Auban, still bound, crawling over to his side.

"Morgan," he breathed, levering himself painfully to his knees and pressing their foreheads together once more. "We have to stop this. Tell your brother to stop, and I'll leave. I'll leave right now."

No! "Please." Morgan didn't even know what he was pleading for anymore. For things to go back to how they had been yesterday, perhaps, when he had his brother's love and Garen's friendship and Auban's admiration without any of them conflicting with each other. "Please ..."

"Morgan!"

There was a collective gasp from the crowd. Morgan turned just in time to see Garen fall at last, taken down by a blow that should never have landed—would never have landed if he'd been attacking with intent—and the follow-up strike was going to sever half his neck if it landed.

Morgan couldn't let that happen. He threw himself forward, covering Garen's body with his and squeezing his eyes shut as he waited for the spear to stab him instead.

The fatal blow never came. A heartbeat turned into a breath turned into a few

seconds, then five, then ten. When Morgan finally opened his eyes, he peeked up to see his brother staring down at him, his spear halted less than a foot from Morgan's face.

No matter what happened next, Morgan knew he would never forget the way Brevaer looked right now, like his heart had been ripped right out of his chest.

It was a feeling Morgan knew well.

“Please, let me leave.”

The first voice to break the terrible silence was Auban's. Morgan wanted to shout at him, to tell him to be silent and safe, but there was no such thing as safe now. Not anymore. If this was the only chance he could get to speak, then he would take it. Of course he would. Auban was brave too, brave like Garen. Morgan turned his head to stare at his mate, wishing he could go to him but unable to tear himself away from his best friend, shuddering beneath him. Auban saw him watching and looked at him calmly as if to say, It's all right.

It wasn't, but there was nothing Morgan could do about that now.

“I never intended to stay, I swear it,” Auban went on. “Truly, I remember nothing from before waking up on this beach.” He gestured to the scars that covered his body. “I'm as surprised as any of you that I survived. It's only because of Morgan's kind heart that I didn't die like everyone else.”

“You should have!” Drenikel shouted, but he was immediately shushed by someone else.

“I know I don't belong here, and I know I can't stay. All I ask is that you let me leave now, with my oath that if I live to be rescued, I will never tell a soul about the Agnarra or your island.”

“Why should we believe you?” This was one of the elders, pushing forward. He was also heavily scarred, and the look he gave Auban was serious but not furious. “Why should we trust you with our very lives, when your people have proven yourselves

incapable of honor?”

“I know you have suffered at the hands of humans,” Auban said somberly. “I know that—”

“You know nothing!” another elder snapped. “I lost all three of my children and two of my grandchildren to your last attack! What do you know of the pain I carry in my heart? What do you know of the weight I hold in my soul?”

“I admit that I don’t know the intimacy of your pain,” Auban replied. “But I know how fiercely you love each other. You’re a strong, and strongly connected, people. I know that you love your children, and that the last thing you want is for any of them to suffer. Please.” He spread his hands. “Don’t take my existence here out on Morgan or Garen. They were only being kind, and I know it’s a kindness I neither earned nor deserve. But if you love them, I beg of you. Don’t hurt them.”

Drenikel sniffed. “You presume a great deal to think that killing you would hurt them.”

“Morgan says he loves the brute,” one of the women said sourly.

“Then killing him would be an object lesson for Morgan, one he would get over in due time!”

“No!” Morgan finally found his voice again. He pressed a kiss to the back of Garen’s head, then pressed to his feet. Ignoring his brother’s gaze, Morgan walked over to Auban on unsteady legs, finally taking his hand. “I love him,” he said, turning defiantly to stare at his people. He still couldn’t meet Brevaer’s eyes, but he made sure to meet Drenikel’s. “Perhaps it shouldn’t have happened, but it did. My heart is given, and I wouldn’t undo it for anything. If you kill Auban, you’re going to have to kill me too.” And I will fight you with everything I have in me.

“No one is killing anyone.” That was Brevaer, finally. His voice was still low and dark but steady now. “This is why you worked on the boat, isn’t it? You wanted him to have a means of getting away from the island.”

“Yes,” Morgan said quietly.

“It isn’t really lost, is it?”

“No. It’s tied up over there.” He pointed to the ledge where Auban had been living for months now.

“You always intended for him to leave.”

Morgan recognized what his brother was doing for him. He hated it, but he recognized it, and he knew he needed to take advantage of it for Auban’s sake. Even if the rift between him and Brevaer never mended, at least he could count on his brother’s protection in this. “Yes.”

“That’s no excuse!” Drenikel insisted. “That the human was brought here in the first place is—”

“He washed ashore,” Garen croaked, finally finding his own voice. “He came here on his own, and Morgan tended to him after that.” He stood up and shook the tension from his limbs. “We tend to visitors. That’s one of our oldest laws of hospitality.”

“It doesn’t apply to humans!” someone else called out. “They’re murderers!”

“He might be a man, but he’s harmless,” Garen replied scornfully. “Or do you think that he could defend himself against even the smallest of us right now? Look at him! He’s about to fall over in this wind.”

Morgan knew Garen was playing up Auban's weakness as a tactic, but it was still disconcerting to see people nodding in agreement. Auban had gone incredibly pale, his scars standing out lividly on his skin, and he was trembling. Morgan wrapped one of Auban's arms over his shoulders before the other man could protest. "Let me," he whispered. "Please." Any complaint his mate might have made subsided.

The elder who had stepped up to speak directly to Auban—one of those who had given Morgan no end of "advice" when it came to making the boat—finally nodded, then looked at Brevaer. "It would do no good to take this to the chief," he said plainly. "He is unreasonable on the topic of humans. The best thing we can do now is make sure this man leaves as swiftly as possible."

Morgan's heart lightened even as Drenikel roared in indignation. "Now you don't want to involve the chief? How dare you! I'll make sure he hears of this!" He and his cronies took off at a run back toward the village.

"Well, that's that," the old man said with a sigh. "You need to get him gone before they get back, or we'll all be in a mess."

"I can try to stall him," Garen said. He turned to Morgan and Auban, his face filled with remorse. "I'm sorry it ended like this. I ... you were good company."

"You were a good friend," Auban said softly. "Be well, Garen." Garen nodded, then began to lope southward along the path that Morgan had walked at least once a day ever since Auban came to them.

"Here." The elder undid the satchel around his shoulder and tossed it over to land at Morgan's feet. "It's got fresh water and a few meals in it and a decent set of hooks. Enough to keep a man alive if he knows how to fish."

Auban inclined his head. "Thank you."

“Here.” Another satchel came flying at them. “Yam cakes and an extra cloak.”

Then another. “Fish jerky.”

And another. “My second-best line and a fire starter.” That was a generous gift indeed. A few more donations made a not-inconsiderable pile, and then people began to disperse.

That was it. It was time for Auban to leave. Right now. Right ... right now.

Oh no. Morgan’s heart wasn’t ready, but there was nothing for it. If the chief found Auban, he would certainly kill him—the madness that lived in him didn’t allow for any other outcome. And if Morgan tried to stop him, he would be killed as well.

“Brother.”

How had Brevaer gotten so close? Morgan must have been lost in his own mind. “We’re leaving,” he said flatly, not wanting to talk about it.

“Both of you?” The pain in Brevaer’s voice made Morgan pause.

“I’m only going to take him as far as the Spit.” The Spit was the nearest island to them, with nothing to make it into a home, but at least it would serve as a decent midpoint for Auban, a place where he could catch some more food and ready his supplies before putting to sea.

“Ah.” The silence between them filled with unsaid words that nonetheless echoed in Morgan’s ears. Auban was the one to finally break it.

“I’ll make sure he comes back soon,” he said, and Morgan shut his eyelids against the flood of tears that suddenly pressed against them.

“Very well. I ...” Brevaer sounded conflicted. “I wish this hadn’t happened,” he said at last. “I wish you were someone who Morgan could bring home proudly. I’ve never seen him as ... as engaged, as lively, as he’s been these past few months. It’s clear that you ... you’ve been good for him.”

“So have you,” Auban said kindly. “He’s spoken to me about you a great deal. He’s fortunate to have such a loving brother.”

Brevaer laughed caustically. “I nearly killed him a few minutes ago.”

“You never would have.”

“You need to apologize to Garen.” Morgan found his voice in time to glare fiercely at his brother.

Brevaer looked shaken. “I know.”

“You need to make it good. He loves you, Brev.”

“I ...” His brother swallowed hard. “I thought he might, but ... surely I’ve ruined that now.”

“Not as long as you tell him you’re sorry, and you mean it. You have to be good to him. You have to.” One of us needs to be happy. And Morgan was sure that it wasn’t going to be him at this point.

“I will,” Brevaer promised him. “I’ll apologize. Sincerely.”

“And tell him how you feel.”

“I ...” Brevaer finally nodded. “Fine. I will, but you have to make sure I do it right.

You have to come back soon, Morgan, and you need to make sure I do it the right way.”

Morgan nodded, his throat stopped up once more. He might have taken the time to clear it if he hadn't heard a sudden, distant roar of rage.

“That's Sariel,” Brevaer muttered. “You two need to leave, now.” Brevaer bent down and gathered all the satchels into his arms. “Where's the boat?”

Auban, with Morgan's help, led the way to where the boat was moored. Brevaer didn't waste any time, filling it with the goods and then reaching out and grabbing Auban by the arm. He didn't even flinch as he handed the human down into the boat. “Morgan, you need to—” But Morgan was already jumping into the water, letting the change come upon him. He floated to the surface, green hair a riotous seamark against the water, and took hold of the slender rope attached to the front of the simple craft.

It was getting late, and the water was choppy, but there was nothing for it. He pulled, leading Auban out into open water. The boat glided with surprising smoothness, and Auban did his best to help steady them with the slender paddle.

“Be safe!” Brevaer called out after them as they sped away from the island.

Morgan thought Auban answered, but he couldn't quite hear how as he ducked his head under the water to pull. He didn't want to hear any more goodbyes, not when he still had his own to live through.

I don't know how to let you go! How do I let you go?

How do I live without you?

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:17 am

The Spit wasn't far from the main island, but Morgan found the distance passing incredibly slowly. Was it because the waves were choppy, interfering with his pulling? Or was it because he had all the energy of a slug when it came to bidding his beloved goodbye?

Just thinking about it made him want to duck his head under the water and keep it there until he couldn't bear the lack of air anymore, but he didn't have time for that. They needed to be out of sight when the chief got to the beach because things would go poorly if Sariel came after them. For all that he was practically bedridden now, he had been their clan's greatest fighter in his youth, and Morgan was sure he hadn't lost all his ability. He would never bet on himself in a fight between them, and neither would anyone else. If Garen had to go to battle yet again with another member of their families ...

No. Just no. It would be so dangerous for Auban too. So Morgan got into a rhythm and tugged, breathed, tugged, breathed, tugged ... and his belly finally hit sand. He crawled up onto the beach, tugging the boat with his snout. After a moment, Auban got out and helped him draw the canoe up onto the Spit, a quarter-mile stretch of barren rock and sand with only a few low shrubs and boulders as windbreaks.

This place is miserable. Auban couldn't stay here long, he would be blown away. But the seas were already so rough ... how would he possibly make it farther south, to calmer seas and welcoming isles, without sinking?

Morgan transformed and began talking immediately, unable to hold his babble in. "What if I visited you every day here during the winter?" he asked. "To bring you fresh supplies and make sure you're all right, and that you've got driftwood to burn

and fish to eat?”

“Morgan ...”

“It wouldn’t be nice, I know it wouldn’t, but I could make this place better for you. Just until spring, when the seas calm again, and you can go south while the cod come north.”

Auban came over to him and took his hands. “My darling. I can’t stay.”

Morgan whimpered. He hated the way he sounded, hated the way his face had to look based on how it made Auban’s fall even further, and tucked his head against Auban’s collarbone to hide. “What if the boat capsizes?” he asked breathlessly.

“Then I’ll right it.”

“What if you can’t? What if you’re too cold?”

Auban pressed a kiss to Morgan’s head. “I don’t get very cold. Not yet at least.”

That was true—he’d been able to survive with a seaweed blanket for weeks before Morgan managed to steal his first piece of cloth. But still ... “Water coldness is different. It seeps into your bones, and the wind will drive it there to stay. If you fall in, you might never get out again.”

“I will take that chance.”

“I don’t want you to have to!”

“I know.” Auban raised Morgan’s head and pressed a gentle kiss to his brow. “I know you don’t; I know you want to take care of me. You’ve done such a good job, my

love. But if I want to take care of you in return, I have to leave. Your people will never accept me or you if I stay.”

“Maybe that doesn’t matter. What if I ...” Morgan swallowed hard. “What if I went with you? I could conceal myself in the water, swim along until I knew you were going to be found, or that you had arrived at a place that would welcome you.”

“No.” Auban shook his head immediately. “That would be too dangerous for you. I don’t know why we humans acted the way we did against the Agnarra, but if your differences inspired enough of us to try and kill your entire clan, I can’t imagine them finding out about just one of you would be any better.”

“But—”

“Darling, please. For my heart’s sake, don’t ask me.” Auban squeezed his eyes shut. “Because the truth is, I want to say yes, so badly it hurts. I want to keep you as close to me as possible for as long as I can, and even then I entertain the notion of living by the sea in a place where you could visit me, or even stay, and ...”

“Yes!” Morgan’s heart rose at the thought. “Yes, surely there must be places such as that. Somewhere we could truly be together, where—”

“Morgan.” Auban’s hands stroked down his damp, dark-green hair. “It would never work. You’re seamed, beloved, and all who set eyes on you would know your true form immediately. They would come to kill you or find another use for you, and I would never be able to forgive myself for making you give up your home and your family to come with me only to find bondage or death. So please, please, don’t ask. I can’t think about it, because I want it too badly. It’s just too tempting and too dangerous.”

“It’s not fair.” Morgan had never felt that the world was less fair in all his life, even

when he lost his parents. Then he'd been a child, unable to understand the violence that had found them. Brevaer had taken on the brunt of the emotional load, taken the anger and helplessness and responsibility of looking after his sibling while Morgan had simply floundered into a new world like the rest of the young ones, confused but more resilient than their elders. But now ... now he felt with the heart of a grown man, knew what it was to have a mate, a person who meant more to him than his own life. Unfortunately, that meant acknowledging that his mate was entitled to feel the same about him.

"I just found you," he went on. "And I didn't mean to fall in love with you, but I know now I could never have stopped it."

"I feel the same for you," Auban said, still stroking his hair as his eyes drank in the sight of Morgan's face. "I wondered for a bit if I was being unfaithful to someone in my old life by falling for you so completely. I remember so little about my life before, but I know I would remember loving another person like this. The mind might lose its way, but the heart does not forget."

Morgan smiled mirthlessly. "Then we acknowledge that we're in love, and that we have no hope. Wonderful. Now all that's left to do is ..." Leave, he should say, and then he should do it, but he couldn't. Not yet. "Auban." He slid in closer, held his beloved tighter. "You can't leave here until tomorrow morning."

"Hmm, not with the waves like this," Auban agreed, turning his face for a moment to stare at the sea. Morgan nosed the smooth skin along his cheekbone, then gently licked his earlobe. Auban's breath caught abruptly in his chest, and Morgan actually found himself smiling.

"Then I think we should make the most of the time we can have together tonight."

"Morgan ..." Auban stared at him, pale-blue eyes hungry in a way Morgan hadn't

seen before. “I ... promised your brother I would send you back,” he said, but it was a weak protest at best.

“I will go back,” Morgan promised. “After I’ve felt your body on mine, in mine. We have this one night to be together, Auban.” He gathered his courage and tilted his hips, pressing his growing erection against Auban’s groin. The answering hardness he felt there was very encouraging. “Let’s not waste it.”

“Beloved ...” Auban’s mouth was on his a moment later, and Morgan almost fell right off his feet. This was nothing like the slow, sensual kiss they’d shared earlier. This was tense, hungry, devouring, and Morgan answered in kind. His lips were clumsy but eager, his tongue unsure until Auban guided him into a rhythm of push and pull, and then—

Then they were falling to their knees together, always together every step of the way, and Morgan gave his heart leave to soar.

If this was the only chance he was going to have to know Auban as a mate, then he was going to make the most of it.

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The ground was hard beneath Morgan's knees, but he didn't even feel the discomfort as he writhed up against Auban, pressing and twisting, desperate for more even as he reveled in what he was getting. He finally lay back, pulling Auban down on top of him, and oh, that was even better. Now there was real pressure, now he could feel the shape of Auban's cock pressed against his, and it was so fucking good he could hardly stand it.

"Ah ... ah!" It hurt to get hard so quickly, but Morgan didn't care. He wasn't afraid of pain, wasn't afraid of anything right now except the prospect of this stopping. He couldn't stop, didn't dare. There was something building inside of him, a force that made him want to arch and claw and cry out ... and why not? Who would hear him except his mate?

He had never done this so freely before. Jerking off, when sharing a home with Brevaer, was almost impossible. Doing it alone had been all right but a languorous, slow affair, usually in the water, where his other form could writhe and squirm, and he could rub against all the places that were hard to reach as a human. But now he had Auban to writhe against, and his lips tasted like the wind and sand and a hint of blood, so mortal and real and delicious that Morgan just couldn't hold back.

"Auban!" He thrust up against Auban one more time, his core clenching desperately, and then he came. He couldn't have stopped himself if he'd wanted to. White light overwhelmed his vision, and pulses of pleasure rolled over his body, one after the other until he could hardly stand it, but he also couldn't bear to move away.

Auban held him through the wracking shivers of his release, stroking his hair and kissing his face. Once Morgan could breathe without trembling again, he realized

something.

“You didn’t come.”

“Not yet,” Auban said, thrusting lightly against Morgan’s hip. “I think I only have it in me to do so once, so I want to make the most of it.”

“Ah.” Of course. He was still recovering from his injuries, he’d been assaulted by Morgan’s brother, he’d undergone almost as much emotional upheaval as Morgan himself ... it was a lot. Maybe Morgan was the strange one here, actually. “Then ... let’s get camp set up, and we can—”

“Not quite yet,” Auban said, a hungry look on his face. “Can you wait a few moments longer?”

“Wait for what?” His question was answered as Auban slid down his body, settling between his legs with a grin before leaning in and— “Oh!” He was licking him clean, his incredibly hot, wet mouth lavaging Morgan’s overstimulated cock from the tip to the base, then over his balls for good measure. Morgan stared down at him, sore and aching and loving it and not quite sure how all those emotions were able to coexist in his brain at the same time. “You ... ah ... Auban ...”

“Mmm.”

“You don’t have to...”

Auban pulled off. “I want to,” he said. “I want to know you as well as I possibly can. I want to have you every way imaginable. There’s just ...” He stopped, then leaned in and rested his head on Morgan’s thigh. “There’s not enough time.”

Morgan sniffled. “No, there isn’t.”

They held each other for a long moment, then set up the closest thing to a shelter they could put together. The canoe made a decent, if low, bulwark against the wind, and with the sack they'd used to collect everything stretched over the top of it and tied with some spare rope, it was not ... anywhere near comfortable in the space beneath it, but at least the wind wasn't going to rub them raw. Morgan was chilled to the bone by the time they were done, and Auban kept trying to push clothes at him, but Morgan pushed them right back.

"You need those."

"I'm warm enough," Auban insisted. "I'm not the one shivering."

"You ought to be." It was so strange—Auban was skinny! So skinny! He ought to be colder than he was! Were all humans so resilient in response to low temperatures? They couldn't be—why would they wear such thick clothing if that were the case? "Save the dried food," he continued, "I'll go hunt you something, and we can—"

"Morgan. Come here."

Morgan shivered but not because he was cold this time. They'd spent almost an hour setting up, and every time he brushed against Auban, he was reminded that his lover was still hard, ready for more. So was Morgan, but he was also afraid.

"It's all right," Auban said as he drew Morgan into his arms, nuzzling his mouth against Morgan's temple. "It's all right, darling. We don't have to do anything you don't want to—"

"Be inside of me."

Auban pulled back to look at him. "Are you sure? That's not an easy thing."

“I want it.” Morgan was positive about that much. “Please, there’s oil in your things, I know we’re supposed to save it for cooking, but men use that, don’t they, to help ease the way, and I want you so much I can’t—I don’t want to wait any more.” He couldn’t wait anymore; he might die if they waited anymore.

Auban kissed him again, and the hunger that had banked between them roared back to life like a fire. “Get on your back,” he said hoarsely. Morgan obeyed, and then—

It was so much all at once. Auban was on him again, kissing his cock, licking him there, then going lower and licking him there, and oh, fuck, that felt amazing, and Morgan didn’t care if he looked ridiculous with his knees back against his chest and a fist in his mouth as he tried not to scream himself hoarse; he would take the embarrassment of that any day if it meant Auban never stopped pressing his tongue inside his body. It couldn’t be any better, and then Auban put a finger in, and it could reach a lot farther than his tongue, and that—

Morgan came again, only this time, Auban was there to swallow him down and drink his rain, catching everything in that so-hot mouth and moaning as he pressed a second finger inside of Morgan. It was so good it hurt, oh gods, it hurt, but Morgan loved it. He felt owned, possessed, encompassed by Auban. He wanted him to do it again, harder, more, more, and Auban knew. He knew, and he gave Morgan everything he wanted, never letting his cock go all the way soft. By the time he rolled Morgan onto his side and slotted in behind him, lifting his top leg, Morgan was seeing stars.

“Yes, yes, oh fuck, I love you, I love it, please ...” His voice evaporated as Auban’s cock pressed inside his softened hole, still so small by comparison, but he could do this, he could, it would fit ... and it did. Aided by the oil and two orgasms, Auban was able to fuck inside of him all the way in two pushes. Morgan lay there, staring out at the darkening sky, and wondered how he had lived without this feeling.

He wondered how he was ever going to survive without it.

“No, stay here with me,” Auban breathed against his ear, pressing kisses to his neck as he began to work his cock in and out of Morgan’s clutching heat. “Stay with me, darling, be with me. I need you right now, I need you so much.”

“I need you too,” Morgan confessed, tears spilling over in his eyes even as he gave in to the pleasure of the moment. What else could he do? This was it, this was their time. “I need you, I need you ... please, please, please ...”

“I know.” Auban began to go deeper—not faster, but harder, pressing in over and over again, holding Morgan’s hip in place as he made a place for himself inside of Morgan. “I know, oh ... you feel so good. You’re so good to me, I can’t—you’re amazing, Morgan, I love you. I love you.”

Every repetition seared the truth deeper onto Morgan’s heart. He wanted to say it back; he knew he ought to, and he felt it so much, but he couldn’t wrap his lips around the words. All he could do right now was hold onto his lover, and his composure, by the barest threads. He closed his eyes and clenched down, and Auban moaned and thrust harder, and when he finally came, Morgan did too, but it felt like ...

It felt like a loss. Like an ending.

I shouldn’t have sped it up, I should have slowed down, I should have made it last forever.

“Darling ...”

He was crying now, audibly, and wasn’t that just the worst thing he could possibly do when they both ought to be so happy? He was ruining this for Auban, absolutely ruining it.

“Morgan.” Warm lips covered his cheek, his ear, his neck and shoulder once more. “It’s all right. I know. I love you so much, so much. I always will.”

“I can’t bear it,” Morgan gasped, and Auban began to pull out. “No! Don’t leave!”

“All right.” Auban pressed even more tightly against his back, and Morgan sniffled and wrapped Auban’s top arm around his chest. His breathing was ragged, twisted as he tried his best to control it, but there was no fighting the tears. “I’m here,” Auban said, and Morgan tried not to think about how soon that wouldn’t be true.

Soon he would be alone again. Alone ...

He thought he might rather die.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:17 am

In the end, it was the orange light in the otherwise-dark sky that pulled Morgan from his despair. Light in the sky ... but it wasn't the sun, not yet—it was too early for dawn, and the blanket of clouds overhead meant the glow of the moon and stars were diffuse at best. No, this light was much closer than that, a strange, unnatural thing. Morgan stared without comprehension for a long moment until he finally heard a sound from his earliest nightmares.

BOOM. The orange was punctuated by a trail of inky soot, and even though Morgan couldn't see what was happening, he knew this sound.

The weapons of man. They had come back for the Agnarra; they had come for his people. He jolted away from the comfort of Auban's arms, staggering onto his feet as he stared into the distance at his island. He could see the trees, the beach ... and the spreading fire. And hundreds of feet out into the water, he saw the enormous black ship, squatting there like a gigantic eel content to snap at a passing shoal of fish. As he watched, another boom echoed, and this time he saw one of the village's homes burst into splinters.

“No!” Morgan had to go, he had to help—there was no doubt that Brevaer was already organizing a counterattack.

“Oh, god,” Auban said from behind him. “They're back.”

Morgan whirled on him, the dismay he felt transmuting to rage inside his chest. “Why?” he screamed. “Why did they return? Why do they always return? Why do they hate us so much? Why do you hate us so much?”

“I don’t hate you,” Auban insisted, catching Morgan’s flailing fists and pinning them to his chest. “Morgan, I love you. I love you, please, listen to me! I would never hurt you; I swear it.”

Morgan knew all of that. Of course he did; Auban was his mate. But he was also human, and that made him an easy target for Morgan’s wrath. He feared and hated them in equal measure, but he could never hate the man standing in front of him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered before leaning in and kissing Auban’s cheek. “I love you too, but I have to go.”

“Go ...”

“To my people.” He wiped his eyes and turned toward the tempestuous sea. “I have to help them.”

“How will you—”

“You yourself taught me how to fight,” Morgan pointed out. “You can’t expect me to stay here when I could be helping save the lives of my clan.”

Auban stared at him with horror in his eyes. “Darling ...”

“I have to go.”

“Take me with you!”

It was Morgan’s turn to be horrified. “What? No! What could you do against a ship full of murderous scumbags? They would kill you immediately!”

“I don’t care.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Then I’ll take the boat and follow you on my own,” Auban replied.

“You can’t!” That would be suicide; he would fall into the water and drown; he would be seen by the humans and destroyed by one of their fireballs; he would have a swift and silent vengeance taken against him by someone from Morgan’s own tribe. Auban couldn’t, he mustn’t do such a thing. “You’ll die!”

“I’m coming with you either way,” Auban said, bringing all the stubbornness that had kept him alive so far to bear on Morgan. It was unfair, it was absolutely cruel for him to do this now. Morgan almost wanted to be able to hate him again, but ...

“I won’t be able to stay with you,” he warned.

“It’s fine. I’ll help in the village,” Auban said. “Come on, we have to go.”

He was right. They quickly turned the boat and hauled it into the water. Morgan took just enough time to weigh down the gifts they’d been given—it wouldn’t do to let Auban’s things blow away in the wind—then pulled the boat, and his lover, into the water after him.

Morgan felt colder than he ought to, distracted, almost panicked. The only reason he was able to make decent time through the water at all was because Auban was paddling in long, smooth strokes, stronger now than ever before. How odd for his lover’s strength to be rising as everything else seemed to be weakening and falling apart.

They were getting close to the isle now, and Morgan felt the bodies of his clansmen enter the water and shift into dragon form, then dive deep and begin to swim toward the invading ship. He dropped the tow rope and looked back at Auban.

“I saw them,” Auban said, his lips pressed into a thin, tight line. “Go. I’m close enough to get there on my own now. But be careful.” He leaned forward and reached a hand out to stroke down Morgan’s bright-green mane. “I don’t know what I’ll do if you’re hurt,” he said.

Hopefully, they wouldn’t have to find out. Morgan nodded once, then dove down into the water and swam as fast as he could to join his people. For what felt like the first time since the fight at the beach, he had clarity again.

Fight against the invaders. Save his people and his mate. Worry about everything else later.

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For all his faults as a fighter, Morgan was a fast swimmer. He caught up to his clanmates in less than a minute, darting through the dark water with ease. They were all of them getting close to the ship, which loomed in the sea like an enormous whale, unmoving and bloated. Its oars wavered in the surf, sending out little susurrations that were familiar—the thing Morgan had felt in the water yesterday, that he'd thought was a giant squid! It had been this ship, far away but coming closer all the time. If only he'd pursued the sensation, if only he'd discovered them earlier ...

Then Auban would probably be dead. It was a fate that didn't bear thinking about, so he moved on.

Morgan tried to remember his lessons. How did one fight humans who were already on a ship? How did they get up there? Something about climbing, creating a chain to get onto the ship itself—oh, he could be the bottom of a chain, that was no problem, but—

Swish! Something heavy and sleek entered the water, coming so close to Morgan's face that he felt the bubbles of its wake against his scales. He twisted to watch it go, but then more of the missiles began to strike—swish, swish, thunk! One of them, a harpoon Morgan could now see, went into the body of the Agnarra nearest him ... one of Drenikel's cronies, in fact. Morgan shrank in on himself as he watched this person he had no reason to like writhe in utter agony, blood spilling out into the water around them as he tied himself in a knot before his eyes glazed, and he began to sink.

Personal dislike seemed to count for very little all of a sudden. This was one of his people, and he had done nothing to these humans! Why were they—

A sharp nip on his tail turned him suddenly, and Morgan darted down and away just in time to avoid another barrage of harpoons from above. He followed the nipper—Garen, of course it was Garen—back out into the waters between the boat and the island. The strongest warriors were massing under the ship, readying themselves to make the climbing chain. Morgan recognized Brevaer in there. He ought to go and help his brother. He turned to swim back, but Garen nipped him again.

What? Morgan thought angrily, but then he saw Garen swim up so fast and hard that his body erupted from the water. He came down with a great splash moments later, and even over the cacophony of their fire weapons and harpoon launchers, Morgan could hear the humans begin to shout over sighting one of them.

Ah. He wants us to be a distraction.

That was honestly probably the best thing for Morgan to do. He could be a distraction; he would get all their eyes on him, dance through the waves and evade all their terrible missiles, and then his brother would board their ship and make them pay for their actions.

Morgan gathered himself and followed suit, propelling himself out of the water and through the air in a perfect arc. He was more visible in the darkness than Garen, whose midnight coloration was largely lost against the water, and he smiled grimly to himself as more of those long, thin harpoons began to fly at him specifically.

I can do this. He would keep his people safe no matter what.

He and Garen danced in the shallows, darting this way and that and raising their heads and bodies just enough to tempt the humans into watching them. Whenever the missiles slowed, one or both of them would make a big, showy leap to grab their attention again. He was grazed once across the tail, and Garen was hit twice, more

seriously, but while they were still able to move, they would. Morgan sensed the chain of Agnarra growing up the side of the boat—they would be able to board soon. As long as they weren't discovered ...

New shouts sounded, and suddenly the attack stopped. A few seconds after that, the scent of the water changed, turning oily and foul. Morgan knew this smell. He knew what it meant.

They have to dive!

He could tell some of them were climbing fast, snarling and gnashing and finally making it over the edge of the ship, ready to wreak havoc—

And then the humans set the oil they'd thrown overboard on fire.

The Agnarra scattered from the pool of flames, screaming their fresh pain into the depths of the water. Morgan gave up on dancing and searched desperately for his brother among the wounded, but none of them was Brevaer. Of course, he'd gone on board—did that mean he was burning there right now?

Morgan lifted his head from the waves in an effort to look for his brother. He could see that there was a tumult going on aboard the ship, but he couldn't make out any of the specifics. Where was Brevaer? Was he all right, did he need help, should Morgan—

Thunk!

It took a moment for Morgan to realize he'd just been shot. The second he did, he cried out and curled around the spot where the harpoon pierced his long abdomen. He had never hurt so badly in his entire life. His blood joined the blood of his people in the water, and in that moment, Morgan knew he was probably going to die from this.

They were all probably going to die.

Garen was beside him, tugging at him, trying to pull him back to land, but Morgan couldn't help. He was losing all his energy so fast; the world was beginning to blur. All he could muster the focus for was reaching into the spot inside himself, deep within his heart, where his love for his mate resided. His human mate, his wounded mate, his beautiful mate.

I'm sorry, he thought to him and felt a stab of agony from Auban. I love you, I'm sorry. I don't want to die.

I'll miss you.

The agony grew more intense, morphing into a frenzied fury that physically pained Morgan. He was about to beg Auban to have pity on him when—

FOOM!

There was an eruption ... but not on the ship. It came from the island. It didn't feel like the thud of a fire weapon either; this was the crackle of pure heat exploding into being. More than that, though, the shape of Auban had suddenly changed in Morgan's mind. He felt him more clearly than ever, like he was right there beside him ... only he wasn't, he was ... flying?

How was that possible?

Morgan weakly swam toward the surface, and with Garen's anxious help, he made it there, just in time to see a bright-red dragon, flames erupting from its mouth, pass by overhead. It roared a warning, and the Agnarra on board the ship threw themselves off just before the dragon soared down and razed the deck with its fire.

A second passed, full of fearful screams. Then another second, and another, and then—

The boat exploded.

The shockwave rolled through Garen and Morgan, stunning both of them. They began to sink, and Morgan felt his mate's vengeful satisfaction turn to fear as he realized what had happened.

The last thing Morgan saw was the dark shadow of another Agnarra swimming toward him.

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The first thing Morgan sensed as he slowly drifted back toward consciousness was warmth. Penetrating, bone-deep warmth. He could hardly even remember what cold was when surrounded by so much warmth. It could have felt drying, suffocating, but instead, it felt like being tucked underneath a soft, breathing blanket.

Was he tucked under a blanket? And where did the “breathing” thing come from?

Ah, the movement. The warmth pulsed around him in a slow, easy rhythm, and beneath it was a comforting sound that made Morgan want to tuck his face even closer to the blanket, which he did. Mmm, bliss.

“He waking up?” a familiar voice asked.

“Not yet.” This voice rumbled, deep and reverberating, making the blanket tremble a bit from the force of it even though it was clear that the speaker was trying to be quiet. “Stirring a bit, but it will be a little longer before he’s conscious again. Don’t be afraid, though. He’ll wake soon.”

“I’m not afraid.”

The deep voice laughed, low enough to send a thrum through Morgan’s body. “Not of many things, no. Of this? I think you are.” A bit more gently, it added, “We all were.”

The familiar voice sighed. “I thought he was going to die.”

“So did I.”

“He would be dead without you.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself.”

The familiar voice scoffed harshly. “I pulled him out of the water. You set fire to the ship.” His voice became awed. “I still can’t believe it. All this time, we thought you were a human, and you turned out to be ...”

“This.”

“Yes.” There was a pause. “I thought your people were nothing but a myth. We have legends of the Brindarra, but it’s been generations since anyone actually claimed to have met any of you.”

The deep voice hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t remember my own history very fully ... I have a sense that that’s probably for the best.” They shared a moment of grim, respectful silence before he went on. “I remember a few things, though. I lived human—my coloring was such that I could do so without giving myself away.”

“They have red hair too?”

Red hair? Why was that striking a chord inside of Morgan?

“Some of them do. More have brown or yellow or black hair, but red pops up, especially in the north. I was the only one of my kind in their village, I think. I ... I don’t know how I found out that they were coming this way.” The voice grunted with frustration. “Perhaps that’s why I was in the village in the first place, keeping track of their movements. Perhaps not. Either way, I decided I had to go with them. I don’t remember how I got onto the ship, but I knew once I was on that I could never allow any of those people to return home.

“I didn’t even have to use this form on their ship,” he continued wryly. “They had so much powder on board, all I had to do was set it alight. They discovered me in the act, though, and I ended up burning more of it than I intended. I didn’t have time to transform and fly away—it was all I could do to leap into the water as the ship exploded. And then ...

“And then Morgan found you.”

“Yes. Wounded and in human form.”

“And with no memory of your dragon self.”

Dragon? What kind of dragon? Another sea dragon? What had Garen said ...

Ha, Garen! That was the familiar voice! Morgan was pleased that he was able to recall it even if he couldn’t share his pleasure. That just left the identity of the person holding him so warmly, so sweetly.

“I wish I had remembered sooner,” the rumbling voice said ruefully. “It would have saved you all so much grief if you’d known I wasn’t actually human.”

“You did the best you could.”

“I nearly ruined his life.”

“No. No, Auban, you saved us. You saved all of us! No matter how it came about in the end, no matter what we had to go through to get here, there’s no gainsaying the fact that you are the reason our people are still alive now.” Garen kept talking, but Morgan wasn’t listening any longer, his mind spiraling off into memory with the mention of—

Auban. Auban, Auban, he—my person, my mate, my love, he was going to leave! The ship came, and he paddled ashore, where—how—

“He’s breathing harder.”

“I think he’s getting close to waking up.” Something gently nudged his face. “Morgan ...” He felt cradled in that croon, felt it vibrate through his lungs and into his heart and down to his soul. “Darling. I’m here.” There was another faint nudge, and then— “Should I change back?”

“He’ll recognize you,” Garen said confidently. “He would recognize you in any form. I’ll give you some privacy, but if you need me, just call.”

“Brevaer is sitting right outside even though he ought to be lying down,” Auban said. “Try to get him to rest. We’ll be all right.”

Garen laughed. “You think he’ll listen to me on this?”

“I think he would do almost anything for you.”

There was a faintly embarrassed silence, and then Garen mumbled, “Thanks,” and walked away. There were murmurs in the distance, but Morgan could only focus on the body holding him. The huge, warm, leathery blanket of a body holding him, which rocked him with every breath and soothed him with every heartbeat.

Auban. Auban was here, and he was ... he was ...

Morgan fought to open his eyes, finally managing the tiniest of slits. It was dark, wherever they were, but there was enough light for him to make out the outline of the head above him. It had a shock of red hair and was mottled here and there with burn scars. It also had a long pair of curving horns, a muzzle full of sharp teeth, and blue

eyes so bright they glowed in the dark.

“Auban,” Morgan whispered wonderingly. He tried to lift his hand toward his lover’s face, but the pain in his abdomen stopped him.

“Easy, my darling. My sweet.” Auban touched him very gently on the forehead with the tip of his snout. “I’m here. You’re going to be all right now.”

“I know.” How could he not be? He was alive, if in more and more pain the more he woke up, and his mate was here with him. His beautiful, dangerous, dragonish mate.

Whatever spirit had blessed Morgan with this fate, he could only hope he proved worthy of it.

“Auban.” This time, Morgan did manage to reach his lover’s face. “Tell me everything.”

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To be honest, the easiest thing about it all was learning that Auban was a dragon. That made a lot more sense than Morgan being fated to bond with a human. Plus, the way he was always warmer than he ought to be, given that he was sleeping out in the open next to the sea, and how he'd healed despite the massive number of burns on his body—apparently humans got things called infections, which was when their bodies seemed to fight against themselves after taking wounds.

Not to mention his incredible beauty despite his wounds, his grace, his glorious spirit, and the way their souls seemed to speak together ... no, Auban being a dragon was absolutely perfect.

It was everything else that was insane.

“He what?”

“Sariel apparently came back to himself at the first sound of the cannons,” Auban explained. “His wife was so astonished, she didn't even try to stop him when he ran out of the house and began coordinating an evacuation. It's thanks to him that none of the children were lost, for certain; but I'm afraid that over half the homes of your villagers have taken damage.

“Once he got people moving to the far side of the island, he leapt into the water just in time to save Garen.”

Morgan frowned. “What was wrong with Garen?”

“He got tangled in the lead lines on the ship as it began to sink,” Auban replied,

looking as shamefaced as a bright-red dragon could. “I, um, I didn’t expect to do quite as much damage as I did when I breathed my fire across their vessel. It exploded rather viciously and spread debris far and wide. Garen was struggling, but his father managed to find him and free him before he was dragged too deep.”

“That’s incredible.” Garen must be so happy. Or ... “And is Sariel still ... present in his mind now?”

“He is,” Auban said. “And he’s not pleased that I’m here, that’s for sure.”

Morgan tried to sit up, then hissed with pain. “How dare he?” he said through gritted teeth. “You saved all of our lives!”

“Be that as it may, I can’t blame him,” Auban said, and he certainly did sound very forgiving. “The poor soul was lost in his mind for over a decade, and when he comes back to himself, he’s confronted with the same nightmare he’d just left, only with an outsider who isn’t even a member of his clan flying around spreading fire everywhere. It’s a lot to take in.”

So it was. Speaking of taking things in ... the last thing Morgan remembered was coming back to him now. “I saw the outline of a dragon in the water coming to rescue me,” he said, then gave his best attempt at a leer for Auban. It was a very weak one, but the warm look his lover gave him made Morgan feel accomplished. “Was it you?”

“Ah ... no.” Auban shook his head. “I’m no good in the water when I’m in my dragon form, and my human one ... well, my strength wouldn’t have been enough to save you, and I didn’t even know where you were when I was rampaging. I’m sorry for that,” he added, a remorseful shine coming into his eyes. “I should have taken better care.”

“How could you possibly have taken better care?” Morgan demanded. “You did everything you could, you—you fought through a mental fog that prevented you from remembering your own past to regain your dragon form for me! I don’t blame you for anything, darling.” He risked snuggling a little deeper into Auban’s coils and was pleased when he ended up feeling only a little tinge in his abdomen. “So who saved me then?”

“Who else? Brevaer, of course.”

“Brev—Brevaer!” Suddenly Morgan’s sense of relaxation evaporated like mist, and he tried to sit up—and failed, thanks to Auban very carefully holding him down, but it was a near thing and still enough effort to leave his wound stabbing with pain. “Where is Brevaer? Is he all right? Is he wounded? He would be here if he weren’t wounded; where is he? Is he going to heal soon?”

“He’s just exhausted,” Auban soothed him. “There are some small burns, yes, and a few scratches from harpoons, but he was very fortunate. And strong. Your brother is an amazing fighter. Even your chief had to admit that.”

Morgan felt cold inside. “Is he feuding with Brevaer?” For Sariel to come back to himself, only to side with Dinigan and his ilk ... it would be too cruel.

Then again, Dinigan and Drenikel and their companions might not be much of a force any longer.

“He’s not feuding with him, but Sariel did tell him not to expect to be chief any time soon. Much to the pleasure of his wife,” Auban said wryly, and they shared a look of understanding. Rozyne must be thrilled to have her husband—and her status—back after so long. Thrilled, probably stunned, possibly furious that it had taken so long, but Morgan hoped that her happiness overrode her anger. He hoped that for once, she would let her rage go instead of turning it on those who she chose to blame, such as

her poor son.

“What did Brev say?” Morgan asked apprehensively. His brother was wonderful in many ways, but he didn’t have much of a sense of diplomacy ...

“He said he’d much rather marry the next chief than be one.”

Morgan stared at Auban. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am.”

“He hadn’t even declared his intent to court Garen to Garen yet!”

“I know.”

“And he just blurted it out to his father, who probably hasn’t even wrapped his head around the fact that his son is of marriageable age yet?”

“The shouting match could be heard all the way over here,” Auban said. “Eventually, Garen had to step in and put an end to it. He told his father that he didn’t need to be so protective of him, that he was of age and could do with his life what he wanted. Then he told Brevaer that he’d better not make assumptions about what Garen really did want, and that he’d have to accept that he’s in for a long courtship if he really means it.”

Oh ... it was everything Morgan had always hoped for when it came to his brother and his best friend. Intense, dramatic, full of passion and wit and ending with Brevaer dashing his boldness against the rocks of Garen’s stubbornness ... “I wish I had been awake for that,” he said mournfully.

“You were busy healing a terrible wound, my love,” Auban said, and the light in his

eyes dimmed a bit. “I thought for a while ... The bolt went straight through you. It put holes in all sorts of important organs, including your stomach. Your healers injected a special resin into the wounds that closed the holes so they could heal naturally, but they had to go carefully one layer at a time, and ... there were several moments that we thought you wouldn’t make it.” He huffed. “It doesn’t help that I’ve been stuck in this form ever since the battle.”

“Stuck in it?” Morgan raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“I’m not entirely sure. Perhaps because I was unable to reach it for so long, and now my body is compensating?” Auban’s patchy mane rippled, a dragonish equivalent of a human’s shrug. “I don’t honestly remember all the details of my life as a Brindarra. I think ... I think if the things I had to think about were good, I would remember them. I think perhaps my mind is shielding me from a painful past.”

“Oh.” That made an unfortunate amount of sense. “So you don’t know if you have a clan of your own to go back to?”

“Why would I go back?”

“Well ... you said that Sariel hasn’t been nice to you, and now you can fly, and you’re a powerful dragon, and ...”

Auban leaned down and gently flicked Morgan’s face with his tongue. “We’re mates,” he said. “We belong together. This place is your home, and now that we know I’m a dragon and not human, I think we have a good case for asking for permission to remain together here. If they don’t let us, then if we must go—which I don’t want to do—at least I’ll be powerful enough to protect you.”

“Or I’ll protect you,” Morgan said archly, but inside he was dancing at being the recipient of such a heartfelt declaration.

“And I know you would do it very well,” Auban agreed. “But I hope that you don’t have to, darling.”

A vision of the future spread out before him: one where his tribe was secure and content, where Brev and Garen were married and leading them prosperously, where Auban and Morgan were able to live in this little home of his all by themselves and make it a place where they could be safe and happy together. It was a beautiful vision, and this time the ache in Morgan’s body wasn’t just a twinge from his wound. He longed for this future.

Anything will be better than the hopelessness you faced.

True, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to work as hard as he could for what he really wanted either.

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“What a mess you’ve made.”

Morgan kept his head demurely down, but inside he was trying not to seethe. That was a rich statement coming from someone who’d been so lost in his own mind for over a decade that he’d been unable to lead. He was glad Sariel was well again but less than happy to be the chosen sacrifice for the clan’s unity.

“A mess the likes of which this clan hasn’t seen in many years,” Sariel went on. Rozyne stood to his left, Garen to his right, both of them in their formal attire. Rozyne looked very happy with the situation while Garen looked like he’d rather be anywhere else. Brevaer stood behind Morgan, a staunch and silent ally. At least Morgan had him to lean on; Auban hadn’t been allowed into the chief’s hut. “To bring someone you thought was human onto our sacred land—”

Sacred ever since we moved here, at least—

“To give them aid and kindness in the face of all their terrible acts against us—”

Yep, because too much kindness is definitely the problem here—

“To hide them from your fellows and go so far as to claim them as your mate ... it’s so far-fetched that I have a hard time believing it, and yet believe it I must. There are too many witnesses who corroborate your actions.”

Witnesses who are only alive because Auban saved them. Morgan took a deep breath and looked up at his chief. Sariel was recovering from his time as a madman, but his hair was as white as the underside of a shell, and his limbs were thin and wiry in a

way that seemed to defy taking on weight. Yet his eyes, which had been dazed and crazed for so long, were clear.

“If I might be allowed to speak in my defense?” he asked.

“I’m not through laying out your crimes yet,” Sariel replied. “You fought your brother, our clan’s best warrior and trainer, for the right to your illicit relationship. You only left to take your lover away once you had no choice in the matter.” He shook his head. “You gave your heart to a human. How can such a thing be borne?”

“I didn’t, though,” Morgan insisted. “Auban was never a human despite how he looked on the outside. He was only among them in an effort to protect our people from harm, which he’s done not once, but twice now! I fell in love with a member of the Brindarra, not a human. My heart recognized his suitability as my mate even if my mind didn’t.”

“Your mind didn’t seem to have much of a problem with it,” Rozyne said dryly.

“I was afflicted with terrible guilt,” Morgan replied, which was ... kind of true. Mostly. A bit. “But I could no more abandon my mate than you could abandon your family. And,” he added when Sariel’s expression went from neutral to a glower, “in the end, Auban is the one who turned the tide against the humans. Without him, our people might be completely wiped out. Surely you can’t doubt his suitability as not only my mate, but one of the greatest defenders of our clan?”

Brevaer coughed lightly, a signal that Morgan was going a bit too far. He didn’t really care, though. “He fought for us when he could have stayed apart,” he went on. “He protected us despite the threat to his life. Auban is not an enemy, he never was, and I love him with everything I have. I won’t be parted from him.”

“No,” Sariel said after a moment. “I can see that you won’t. But the two of you must

depart nonetheless.”

Garen gasped, and Morgan felt his brother stiffen at his back. His own heart skipped a beat. Surely not ... not after everything they’d been through, not after all that Auban had done for them. Please, no ...

“Your deceit requires punishment,” Sariel went on. “But it’s not dire enough for exile. Therefore, I decree that you and your mate are sentenced to one year living apart from the village.”

One year apart ... what did that mean? “Like ... on the Spit?” Morgan asked tentatively.

“That awful, windy little slip of land?” Sariel made a face. “Not unless you truly wish to make that your choice. No, I was thinking something a bit closer to home. I understand there’s a beach that you’ve made into quite the hideaway.”

Morgan felt his heart begin to rise. “Yes ...”

“I think that should suffice. You’ll need to make a shelter there—a temporary one, since you won’t be living there forever. You won’t be required to contribute to farming efforts since you’ll lack access to the fields out there, but you’ll have to hunt for the good of the whole village.”

“I—yes, we can do that.”

“And you won’t be allowed to come into the village at all.”

Oh, that would be hard. Not seeing Garen and Brevaer as they bumbled their way through courtship ...

“But citizens in good standing will be allowed to visit you.” Sariel smiled. “To ensure that you’re behaving with humility and penitence, of course.”

“You’re so soft,” Rozyne muttered, but there was no bite to the words.

“Ah.” Morgan blinked. “I’m ...” Not sure I understand this as a punishment. It kind of feels like you’re setting me up for a year-long honeymoon with my mate.

Sariel’s smile fell away. “There are so few of us,” he said softly. “Fewer still who find a mate who suits their heart as you have. I would never send you away forever, Morgan. You’re the son of my closest friend, and our families will soon be joined.” He glanced at Garen, who was blushing furiously and trying to pretend he wasn’t. “There are still factions within our people who require appeasing, but what they want isn’t as important as keeping our clan whole and healthy. I remember the beautiful things you made as a child.”

Morgan nodded, not quite able to keep up with the non-sequitur. “Yes.”

“Now more than ever, our people need beauty in their lives. That’s the other task I lay upon you while you and your mate spend your time apart—create things that will bring us joy, that will bring light to our spirits. Give us something to look at that isn’t a broken home or a filthy beach. Use your love to shape works of the heart.”

To hear his useless skill for art so explicitly praised almost brought tears to Morgan’s eyes. “I shall,” he said roughly. “I promise. Auban and I will use this time to work hard for the betterment of our people.”

“That’s what I ask.” Sariel inclined his head, then said, “You’ll need to build fast if you’re to get a hut up before winter. I suggest you start today. Use rocks if you can—that little promontory is covered in them, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“Then use our strongest warriors to help you.” He gestured to his son and Brevaer.

“You have a week before your time apart begins. Use it wisely.”

“I will.”

“Go, then.”

Morgan turned, a bit unsteady on his feet, and walked outside the hut, Brevaer at his back. Auban was waiting for him there, with children hanging from his arms and another on his shoulders. He’d proven a great entertainment among the children of the village, but he gently set them aside the moment Morgan appeared and came over to him. He looked so good, Morgan reflected as Auban took him into his arms. Strong and recovered ... still scarred, but those were simply the lines that meant he’d survived.

“What did the chief say?” he asked, sounding concerned. “You look so dazed.”

“More like amazed at his own good fortune,” Brevaer said gruffly. “I’ll get started pulling everything I can spare out of our home.” He walked away, and Auban tilted Morgan’s face up to look into his eyes.

“What does he mean by that?” Auban asked.

Morgan laughed. “He means that we’re going to have a little adventure,” he said, wrapping his arms around Auban’s waist and squeezing. “In a place I’ve come to be quite fond of. I’ll tell you all about it on the way to Brev’s house.” A house which would never truly be Morgan’s home again, but that was all right.

He was about to create a new one, after all.

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Springtime, Morgan reflected, was the perfect time for beach sex.

Not sex in the water. It was still rather cold for their two-legged forms, the currents brisk enough that the water could carry them out to sea if they weren't careful. Plus, Auban wasn't a strong swimmer yet. Summer would be a fine time for him to learn that but not during the sneaking waves of a treacherous spring sea. The beach, on the other hand ...

The sunshine beamed down on the black rocks by the water enough to make them warm to the touch, and the sound of the waves crashing on the shore felt like the perfect accompaniment to an act of joy. Lay down a few blankets to soften the bed beneath them, and Morgan was hard-pressed to say which he preferred more—being beneath his husband, legs tilted over his shoulders as Auban moved inside of him, or being on top of him, riding him slowly while looking down at him with perfect satisfaction.

Both were good. Excellent, in fact. The only thing Morgan didn't really care for when making love was facing away from Auban. It reminded him too much of their first, desperate time, when he'd been unsure if they'd ever see each other again. Just thinking about it could bring tears to his eyes, so he did his best not to.

It was easy when he had such a wonderful distraction laid out before him.

“You're so beautiful,” Morgan said with a moan as he lifted himself up, up, up to the tip of Auban's cock before slowly gliding back down. It took a while to get used to the feeling—as often as they did this, changing shapes seemed to reset their bodies, and Morgan had to accustom himself to it all over again. He loved it every single

time. “You fit me so well.”

“We fit each other,” Auban said, staring up at him like he was looking at something truly incredible. All he wore was a band around his wrist, woven from several slender, supple branches and decorated with every lustrous pearl that Morgan had been able to bring up from the deeps since their exile. “So perfect, Morgan, just like that ... fuck, you’re tight around me.”

“I know,” he purred, bouncing a little. He paused, leaning back and resting against Auban’s legs as he touched his cock. He wasn’t as big as Auban, but he thought the green curls at the base of his length were especially pretty. He stroked himself, long and slow, head tilting back as he absorbed the spring sunlight into his body, then shivering when Auban’s hand, wet from the water so close to them, cupped his balls and rolled them. Morgan clenched, and now it was Auban’s turn to moan.

“Can you come if I don’t move?” Morgan asked. “If I just sit here and hold you tighter”—he clenched again—“and then relax once more. Over and over ...”

“Can you?” Auban asked with a breathless smile. “Or will you break with wanting more?”

“I don’t break,” Morgan insisted.

“Mmm.” Auban leaned up and slung an arm around his waist. “You might when you realize we’re not going to be alone for long.”

“Huh?” Morgan was distracted by the feel of his husband’s hips flexing beneath his legs. “What?”

“I hear someone running toward the beach. Running quite quickly, in fact.”

Auban’s senses were sharper than Morgan’s, at least when they were out of the water.

In it, he was as helpless as a newborn eel, but Morgan bowed to his expertise beyond it. “How soon?” he whined before capturing Auban’s lips in a kiss.

“A minute,” Auban said into the embrace. “Perhaps two.”

“Come in me.”

Auban laughed, a little desperately. “Right now?”

“Right now. No games.” Morgan began to move again, sliding up and down Auban’s cock with a vengeance. He adjusted his hips a little, and oh, fuck, yes, there it was. “I want to feel you spend in me. Fill me up now, and we can save the games for later.”

“You come first,” Auban growled and wrapped his hand over the top of Morgan’s where it was gripping his cock. He squeezed with calculated ruthlessness as he thrust up into Morgan, hitting him just right.

“Ah, ah, ah, fuck me, ah!” Morgan came helplessly, unable to stop the flood from his body and not really caring to either. Skies and waves, it just went on and on, and when Auban stiffened and began to come it just got better and then—

“Morgan! Morgan, I need to talk to you, it’s a matter of—ugh!”

It was Garen, thankfully. He was the last person in the clan who would make something of seeing Auban and him naked together in front of their own home.

“Why?” he moaned, and—fine, so maybe he’d make a little something of it, the dramatic man. “I’ll—all right, um, I’ll be inside? You two—” He couldn’t finish, just darted into the little house as the two of them slowly came down from the high.

“Well,” Morgan said at last. “That was wonderful. Now I need to go make sure Garen isn’t scratching his eyes right out of his face.”

“Delightful.” Auban kissed the curve of his neck, then winced as they carefully separated. “I think I’ll go on patrol. I need to stretch my wings anyhow.” Patrolling for the safety of the clan was work Auban took seriously. He hadn’t spotted any human vessels yet, but everyone knew it was only a matter of time. If he saw them far enough out, there were steps the clan could take to protect themselves. It was better than being attacked in their own village again.

Besides, his darling husband loved to fly. “Go,” Morgan said. He leaned over onto the blankets and watched Auban get up, enjoying his view of him—he always enjoyed looking at him—before Auban took two huge strides forward and launched himself into the air. He transformed midleap, his body growing longer and thicker, red wings spreading from his back like a rare bird. The band of pearls stayed, though, as his wrist became the tip of one of his glorious wings.

Morgan sighed with satisfaction as he watched Auban circle higher into the sky, then dip his body down into the waves to cleanse it. Morgan might shift later, but for now ... he liked the little ache he felt.

He was fully dressed and grinning by the time he joined Garen in the house he and Auban—and half the village—had built just before the winter storms got bad. Garen was still flushed but was doing his best to contain it. “I apologize,” he said as Morgan joined him on the floor. “I should have come more cautiously, but I was too deep in my own head to be careful.”

“It’s all right,” Morgan replied, pouring fresh water for the two of them to drink and setting out some smoked fish. “You’re always a welcome guest, you know that. But what has you so concerned?”

“Well ...” Garen was practically braiding his fingers together. “Brevaer proposed.”

“I knew it!” Morgan smacked the ground in his excitement, then winced. Smoothed stones for the floor or not, it was still stone. “He was acting so distracted when I saw

him yesterday! When does he want to get married? Probably tomorrow, the man has no patience when it comes to getting what he wants.”

“He would like it to be soon,” Garen allowed, “but my father wants to wait for the summer, and Mother won’t hear of it until next winter. Next winter! I can’t possibly wait that long, but I can’t gainsay my own mother either.”

Ah. He was looking for help finding a middle way before the people he loved choked on their own pride. Fortunately, Morgan was an expert at middle paths.

He’d forged his own, after all.

He took the hand of his best friend, who would soon be his brother by marriage, and smiled. “Let’s work it out.” It was easy to feel happy because Morgan had no doubt that they would work it out. Everything was working as it should, and though there would be challenges ahead, as long as he had the people he loved, he knew he could face them.

With Auban, and with Garen and Brevaer, he could face anything.

~*~*~*~