



Siren Problems

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I'm only here for research.

Aura resonance. Ley line mapping. Maybe a little “don't die by magical seagull” on the side.

But then I meet him. Broody, shirtless, barefoot—and living upstairs in the beach shack I just rented. Calder Thorne, local sea grump with a voice like thunder and the emotional availability of a cursed tidepool.

He says I can't stay.

I say: good luck moving me.

Now the ley lines are spiking, my scanner's on fire, and the ocean may or may not be singing in minor key every time I look at him.

Which I do. A lot. Especially when hes wet. (Which is always.)

Turns out, he's hiding a voice that can command storms and a secret that could drown us both.

Too bad I'm already in way too deep.

I'm supposed to finish my thesis.

Not fall for the man who might be cursed by love itself.

Read on for cursed ocean princes, emotionally constipated brooding, magical science shenanigans, and a heroine who's definitely going to kiss the sea monster. HEA Guaranteed!

Total Pages (Source): 30

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

I hit a pothole the size of my dignity on my way into Lowtide Bluffs.

My front passenger-side tire lets out a pathetic wheeze as I lurch to a stop in front of what the rental listing called a “coastal vintage cottage.” Which, as it turns out, means the paint is peeling off like a bad sunburn and the porch is held together with salt, sand, and probably curses.

“Well,” I mutter, popping open the driver’s side door, “at least it has... shingles.”

The air smells like brine and regret, and I’m already sweating through my tank top.

The ley lines here are humming, faint but steady.

I can feel them tingling in my molars, the way I always do when I’m near a major surge site.

Good. That’s why I’m here. Not for the view.

Definitely not for the “coastal charm.” And absolutely not for the squawking seagull that just took a crap on my windshield.

“Seriously?” I glare up at the bird. “I’ve been here for three minutes .”

It screeches like it’s laughing.

By the time I haul the last box out of my overstuffed car, my hair's tied in a messy knot on top of my head, my boots are coated in beach dust, and I'm two pit stains away from total meltdown.

There's a rusted key taped to the front door.

No note. No welcome basket. Just a whisper of "don't touch anything you don't understand" from the ether.

That's fine. I like it better this way. Less awkward small talk.

Fewer questions about why a marine biology grad student is lugging around rune-etched scanners and a slightly possessed diving suit.

The inside of the house smells like cedar, ocean, and a little like someone once tried to cook fish and forgot halfway through. It creaks when I step inside, like it's surprised to have company.

I'm halfway through setting up my aura resonance scanner in the front room when I hear the door above me slam. Loud. Like thunder kind of loud.

There's a second floor?

I freeze, squint at the ceiling. Definitely footsteps. Slow, heavy ones. Someone's up there.

I grab the nearest object that could serve as a weapon—a tripod leg—and march toward the stairs. They're tucked behind a peeling door in the hallway, and they look like they haven't been used in years.

I'm halfway up when a figure appears at the top, shadowed, broad-shouldered, and

dripping with the kind of don't-mess-with-me energy usually reserved for bouncers and exorcists.

He's barefoot. Wearing worn jeans. Shirtless.

And he is not happy to see me.

"Can I help you?" he asks, voice gravel and foghorn.

My brain tries to reboot.

"I could ask you the same thing, Hagrid."

His eyes narrow. Sea-glass gray. Stormy.

"I live here," he growls.

I blink. "Cool. Didn't mention that in the lease."

His frown deepens. "Lease?"

"Yeah. I'm renting the downstairs for the summer. Doing research. Aura fluctuations, ley mapping, magical anomalies—you know, boring stuff."

He steps forward into the light. Holy hell.

He's gorgeous in that "I haunt coastal towns and emotionally unavailable women" kind of way.

Tan, scarred, jaw sharp enough to file a fishhook.

His dark hair's wet like he just came out of the ocean, and there's a faint shimmer to his skin that screams not-quite-human.

"You can't be here."

I drop the tripod leg and cross my arms. "Then maybe take that up with the rental site? Because I've got a receipt, a key, and a three-month research grant that says otherwise."

He scowls. "This is private property."

"It was private property. Now it's a duplex. And I'm your new roommate. Try not to cry about it."

He opens his mouth, probably to say something dramatic and grumpy, but then a second voice echoes down the stairs.

"Calder, who are you yelling at now? Did a gull steal your socks again?"

A woman appears behind him. Elven, maybe. Long platinum braid, floral romper, giant hoop earrings. She leans against the banister with a juice bottle that's glowing slightly.

She sees me and grins. "Oh hey! You must be the witchy science girl."

"Not a witch," I mutter. "Just very curious and moderately underfunded."

"I'm Kaiya—Kai. I run The Sip & Spell in town. This grumpy fishstick is Calder Thorne. Don't let the face fool you—he's just emotionally constipated."

Calder's jaw clenches. "Kai."

She waves a hand. “Relax. She’s cute. Let her stay.”

“Already staying,” I say sweetly, patting the banister. “Feel free to keep your shirt off, though. Adds ambiance.”

Calder mutters something that sounds like I should’ve stayed in the ocean and disappears down the hall.

Kai descends the stairs with the grace of someone who’s tripped over them before. “Ignore him. He’s not used to people. Or smiling. Or women who talk back.”

“Lucky for me I’m great at being insufferable.”

She laughs. “You’re gonna fit in fine, Luna.”

She leaves with a wink and a promise to bring “welcome shots” from her potion bar. I don’t ask what’s in them.

The house settles into silence again, though I swear I can still feel Calder brooding from upstairs like a thundercloud with abs.

I plug in my scanner, and it hums to life, flickering in pulses that match the nearby ley waves.

Stronger than I expected. Something deep is moving here, beneath the tides and time.

I lean against the window frame, gaze out at the rocky shore.

This town is weird.

The ley lines are volatile.

My upstairs neighbor might be cursed, unhinged, or both.

And I've never felt more alive.

—

By dusk, the air thickens with humidity and something else—something electric. I finish calibrating the aura resonance scanner, its crystal tips flickering between blue and violet as it aligns with the local ley field.

Then the signal spikes .

Like, off-the-charts spikes. The scanner lights up like a Christmas tree having a panic attack and starts smoking around the edges.

“Shit, shit, no —” I yank the power core out, fingers singeing slightly. My palm is buzzing, like I stuck it in a ley socket.

I fumble for my backup handheld, a janky prototype I rigged from a salt crystal, a compass, and a stolen gnome amplifier. It's chirping so loud I can hear it over the ocean breeze. Whatever's happening out there is big. Bigger than my thesis ever predicted.

I grab a flashlight, curse the fact that my boots are still wet from earlier, and sprint out the front door. The cliffs behind the house are sharp, jagged, and singing —not literally, but close. The ley lines here aren't humming anymore. They're chanting .

“Okay, okay,” I pant, following the readings as the device vibrates harder with each step. “What are you, huh? Sea sprite with a caffeine addiction? Dormant fae hotspot? Surprise underwater portal?”

Then I see it.

Just offshore, past the tide pools, a faint greenish glow pulses beneath the water like a heartbeat. The rocks beneath my feet shiver. I kneel, holding my scanner toward the light.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I jump. And immediately regret it.

Because standing above me, drenched in moonlight and menace, is the storm-eyed lumberjack of a man I thought I left behind in the house. Shirtless again. Wet again. Scowling like I just insulted his mom and kicked his dog at the same time.

“I could ask you the same thing, Moby Dick,” I snap, breathless.

“This isn’t a game,” he growls, stepping closer. “You’re too close.”

“To what ? The glow stick party under the sea?”

“Back off, now.”

The scanner lets out a warning bweep .

“Too late,” I whisper.

There’s a surge , fast and hot. The ocean lurches like it’s exhaling magic straight from its lungs. Calder grabs my arm just before I stumble, pulling me hard against him as the scanner overloads and dies in a puff of sizzling ozone.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” he hisses.

“I was researching ,” I retort, struggling out of his grip. “It’s called science. You should try it sometime.”

“This place is dangerous.”

“Then maybe put up a sign next time, Aquaman.”

He looks like he wants to throttle me. Or throw me over his shoulder. Possibly both. I stare back, chest heaving, my adrenaline buzzing in harmony with the damn ley waves.

Neither of us moves.

Without another word, he turns and walks away, disappearing into the shadows like some cursed sea phantom with boundary issues.

I mutter, “I knew he was going to be a problem.”

The tide pulses behind me, silent and strange.

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CALDER

The ley line breathes wrong tonight.

It's a ripple under my skin, a magnetic pull that drags through my bones like the ocean's remembering something I swore I buried.

I pause mid-step in the tide, boots looped over one shoulder, saltwater soaking the frayed hem of my jeans.

The wind's changing—picking up from the south, sharp and sweet with summer rot and ozone. Storm air. Magic air.

I know what this is. Not a natural surge. Not this close to the cove.

It's her.

The woman with the fast mouth and cursed timing.

I climb the rocks with long, practiced strides, avoiding the stretch where the ley fissures are closest to the surface.

That ground's too unstable lately—cracked from the seaquake three winters back and humming like a haunted harp ever since.

The barrier spell's weak tonight. I can feel it unraveling thread by thread under the weight of whatever she's doing.

And then I see her.

She's crouched near the edge of the cliff, silhouetted against the glow of a ley pulse churning in the tide below.

Hair loose and wind-snarled, skin flushed in the moonlight, arms extended like she's trying to make a deal with the sea.

Her gear is scattered across the rocks—crystals, coils of wire, one of those tech-to-magic interface boxes that spit sparks if you look at them wrong.

The ley field shrieks against it.

I grit my teeth and step forward.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

She jumps and nearly loses her balance. For a blink, my heart kicks into my throat. Reflex makes me lunge forward, hand out. But she catches herself, turns, and glares up at me like I'm the intruder here.

“I could ask you the same thing, Moby Dick.”

Stars, she doesn't even blink. Doesn't flinch. Just shoves a piece of hair out of her face with the back of her hand and keeps right on talking like we're mid-argument in some sitcom.

“This isn't a game,” I growl, closing the distance between us. “You're too close.”

“To what? The glow stick party under the sea?”

I point at her device, which is now blinking angry red like a bomb about to blow.
“Back off. Now.”

The box lets out a sharp bweep , like it agrees with me. She freezes, eyes widening.

“Too late,” she whispers.

The ley surge hits like a sucker punch. It doesn't explode so much as collapse inward , a vacuum of energy that rips through the air. The ocean shudders. The rocks underfoot vibrate like a war drum. Her legs buckle.

I catch her without thinking—one hand around her arm, the other braced against her spine. Her body is hot against mine, thrumming with adrenaline and defiance. She smells like citrus and old spellbooks and sea air.

“You trying to get yourself killed?” I snap.

“I was researching.” She struggles in my grip, eyes blazing. “It's called science. You should try it sometime.”

“This place is dangerous.”

“Then maybe put up a sign next time, Aquaman.”

There's a spark of something under her sarcasm. Fear, maybe. Or worse—curiosity. That kind of curiosity gets people buried.

I push her back a step and let go.

Her scanner fizzles out in a puff of smoke, crystal core cracked. Good. Maybe now she'll take a damn hint.

I turn without another word and head back toward the path, shoulders tight, jaw locked.

The ley line quiets behind me, but the air hasn't settled. Not really.

Back at the house, the porch lights are off, but Kai's still lounging out front on a woven hammock she definitely enchanted to repel mosquitoes. She's sipping a cocktail that glows faintly purple and has a piece of candied ginger floating in it. She doesn't even look up when I climb the steps.

"Look who washed back up," she says. "Did the hot scientist fry your cove?"

"She nearly destabilized the ley web. Again."

Kai shrugs, eyes closed. "Yeah, but she's cute. Makes up for it."

I grunt, pushing past her to the front door.

"She called me Aquaman," I mutter.

Kai snorts into her drink. "Gods, marry her."

I don't dignify that with a response.

The house is quiet inside, save for the low hum of magical tech pulsing from the downstairs office. Her scanner's dead, but I hear her shuffling around down there, probably running diagnostics. Or muttering insults about me into her audio log.

Upstairs, I change into dry clothes and toss my damp jeans in the corner. My muscles ache from the cold, but the water always leaves a buzz in my skin—too much energy, not enough outlets. I crack open the window, let the breeze in. The salt air rolls

through, familiar and sharp as old memory.

I sit on the edge of my bed and stare at the nightstand.

It's there. Waiting.

I reach for the drawer and slide it open.

Inside lies the relic—silver, small, etched with runes I can't forget no matter how many years pass. I pick it up, turning it over in my hand. It's warm. It always is.

I can still feel the shape of the curse humming in its edges, like a song you can't get out of your head. This was once a binding talisman. Now it's just a reminder. Of who I was. Of who I can't be again.

I stare at it too long, then shove it back in the drawer.

Downstairs, Luna laughs at something. Not a big laugh—just a soft, tired one, like she surprised herself. The sound slides under my skin.

She's going to unravel this place if I let her.

But gods help me... I'm not sure I want her to stop.

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LUNA

The ley lines here aren't just strong—they're erratic . They twist and coil around this damn beach like they're trying to tie themselves in a knot. Or maybe like something underneath is trying to hold them down.

And every time I scan near the cove— his cove—the readings get weirder.

“So what's the verdict, Professor?” Mira asks, peering at me from behind a clipboard that's color-coded, tabbed, and almost definitely enchanted with a mild anti-wrinkle charm.

I don't correct her on the “professor” part anymore. It's not worth it. She's got this starry-eyed respect that I'd feel bad squashing, even if I'm technically still a grad student with caffeine problems and a vendetta against academic bureaucracy.

“The verdict is: your ley density graphs look like spaghetti and this beach is trying to kill me.”

Mira beams. “So normal fieldwork, then?”

I glance up from the cracked screen of my scanner. “Normal fieldwork doesn't usually involve magic pulses that sing in minor chords or unreasonably shirtless landlords who brood like it's a full-time job.”

She blushes, scribbles something on the clipboard. Probably unreasonably shirtless landlord . I'm going to regret that later.

We're sitting on the back porch of the beach house, the scanner gear laid out between us like the world's most confusing tarot spread.

My laptop hums beside me, its battery drain warning blinking in rhythmic annoyance.

A breeze picks up from the water, carrying the usual combo of seaweed, salt, and someone barbecuing fish way too early in the morning.

Mira flips to a new page. "You said the ley flux was peaking right along the western tide slope?"

I nod, chewing on the end of a pencil that I'm pretty sure I haven't sharpened since undergrad. "Right where the cove shelf dips off. The resonance hits 9.7 spikes per cycle just before the scanner craps out. It's localized. Focused. Like the lines are circling something."

"Buried relic?" she offers.

I shrug. "Or a sealed anchor. Maybe even a submerged altar. Whatever it is, it's old, and it's still active. Which is... a little terrifying."

Mira's eyes go wide. "Do you think it's calling something?"

I stare out at the cliffs, my stomach doing this slow roll I pretend is hunger.

"Maybe," I mutter. "Or maybe it's trying to keep something in."

Just then, the porch creaks behind us and I nearly knock over the aura scanner. Mira yelps.

Kai appears in the doorway with two iced drinks that are either potions or smoothies

or some terrible in-between. Her hair's up in a knot, curls spilling out like she's been dodging explosions.

“Okay,” she says. “I brought you both something to cool down. And by something, I mean this one has electrolytes and this one might be possessed.”

I take the pink one. Mira takes the glowing green one with exactly zero hesitation.

Kai slumps into a deck chair. “So. Magic's doing weird stuff. Shirtless Fish Man still acting like he invented trauma. Anything else exciting?”

“He hates me,” I say.

“He doesn't hate you,” Mira mumbles around her straw.

Kai raises an eyebrow. “Oh, he hates that he doesn't hate you. Which is, like, ten times worse for a guy like that.”

“I'm not here to emotionally rehab a cursed fisherman,” I deadpan. “I'm here to finish my thesis before the department decides to cut my funding and send me back to the data mines.”

Kai grins. “Sure. That's why you've spent the last two nights scanning the ley shelf outside his cove like a creeper with a crush.”

I throw a napkin at her.

She dodges it. Barely.

“I'm serious,” I say. “There's something there. And every time I try to scan it, Calder shows up like he's got ley-surge radar built into his abs.”

Mira flips a page. “What if he does?”

I blink. “What?”

She pushes her glasses up her nose. “I’ve been doing comparative readings. His aura signature fluctuates along the same rhythm as the ley waves. Especially during peak hours. It’s faint, but it’s there.”

I sit back, stunned for a second. “Are you saying he’s setting off the surges?”

“I’m saying... he’s connected to them. Maybe not causing them, but definitely reacting.”

Kai whistles low. “Sexy and spooky. My type.”

“No,” I say quickly, too quickly. “We are not doing this.”

“Doing what?” she says, all innocence. “Encouraging healthy exploration of potential romantic entanglements with sexy, emotionally complex supernatural men?”

Mira hides a giggle behind her clipboard.

I groan and take another sip of whatever-the-hell’s in my cup.

But the thing is... Kai’s not wrong. Something about Calder sticks. He’s prickly, growly, and moodier than a teenage shadow sprite, but underneath that? There’s heat. Depth. That weird sadness you only find in things that used to be powerful.

And when he grabbed me the other night—when the surge hit and I almost went over the cliff—I felt it. Not just his hands. Not just the electricity of touch. But something bigger.

Like the ocean held its breath.

I glance down at my scanner. It's still cracked. Still useless.

But tomorrow, I've got a dive scheduled. Low tide. Full spectrum sensors. I'll get closer this time.

I have to.

Even if Calder tries to stop me again.

That night, I go back out.

Scanner rigged with a jury-rigged stabilizer I cobbled from Mira's leftover crystals and some gnome-wired copper bands. It hums like a drunk hummingbird, but it's steady—at least until I hit the bluff line that borders Calder's cove.

The readings spike again. Higher than before. The ley current bends here, warping like heat above asphalt. Something is pulling the energy.

I plant the tripod, anchor the scanner, and mutter under my breath, "Come on, just give me one clear signal. Just one."

"You really don't know how to leave things alone, do you?"

I jolt, nearly knock the sensor into the sand.

He's there. Calder. Shirt on this time, but just barely—half-buttoned like he got halfway through getting dressed and changed his mind.

"I'm working," I say. "Don't you have some brooding to do? Maybe sculpt driftwood

into emotionally symbolic art?”

His jaw tics. “You’re pushing the ley field too hard.”

“And you’re not the ley police.”

He steps closer. “You don’t know what you’re messing with.”

“That’s what research is , fishboy. Messing with things until they give up their secrets.”

His eyes narrow. “This place isn’t a lab. The sea doesn’t care about your thesis.”

I laugh. Not because it’s funny, but because if I don’t, I’m going to scream. “You think I don’t know that? I’ve been laughed out of every department back home for saying magic affects ocean currents. This is my last shot. So unless you’ve got something helpful to add—back off.”

His gaze flicks to the glowing scanner, then to my hands, still shaking from the surge I absorbed earlier.

“I’m trying to protect you,” he says, voice lower now. Rougher. “You don’t understand what’s buried here.”

I freeze. That’s... not a denial.

Before I can ask, a third voice cuts through the tension.

“Wow. If I’d known this was a thing , I’d have brought snacks.”

Kai stands a few feet away in a flowy top and leather sandals that cost more than my

entire aura kit. She's holding two drinks—one bright blue, one milky pink—and a half-eaten skewer of grilled mushroom from the night market.

“Please, don't stop glaring at each other. The sexual tension is feeding the ley lines.”

Calder curses under his breath.

I sigh. “Kai.”

She hands me the blue drink. “It's got electrolytes and a whisper of flirtation enhancement. You're welcome.”

“To be clear,” I say, “I am not flirting.”

“Nope,” she says, totally ignoring me. “Just aggressively arguing with a hot man at midnight on a magically active cliff. Totally academic.”

Calder rakes a hand through his hair. “I'm leaving.”

Kai calls after him, “Tell your aura it's looking extra cursed tonight!”

I sip the drink. It tastes like regret and blueberries.

When he's gone, Kai nudges me with her shoulder.

“You okay?” she asks, quieter now.

I nod. “He knows something. I can feel it.”

“Yup,” she agrees. “And he's terrified you'll figure it out.”

I don't answer.

I just stare at the cove and feel the ley current pulse under my feet like a heartbeat no one's supposed to hear.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

I dream of drowning.

Again.

Salt fills my lungs like molten stone. My body doesn't sink—it fractures . The pressure of the deep pressing down, endless, ancient. Somewhere below, something sings. Not with words. With want . And I—gods, I answer.

My voice breaks the water like thunder.

Then I wake, sharp and choking, half-tangled in the sweat-damp sheets.

It's still dark. But not silent.

There's a pulse in the air—too soft for normal ears, too bright for anyone who isn't me. I sit up, already knowing I've made a mistake. My throat's dry, raw like I've been screaming.

I sang . Out loud. In my sleep.

And worse—someone heard it.

I feel her before I see her. Down near the shore, standing with her back to the moon, all shadows and wind-whipped hair. She's motionless, like the rocks around her, except for the scanner in her hand that's blinking like mad.

Luna.

Shit.

I don't think. I'm down the stairs, bare feet slamming against the wood, storming out the side door before reason catches up.

She doesn't turn when I approach, but I know she heard me—every step, every breath.

Her aura's sparking all over the damn place, full of confusion, awe, and too much knowing.

“You shouldn't be out here,” I say, low and hard.

She flinches slightly but doesn't move. “You were singing.”

I stop, just out of reach. “You imagined it.”

She turns then, slow and sharp, eyes glowing under the moon like she pulled the truth from its hiding place and isn't giving it back.

“My scanner says otherwise.”

I glance at the thing in her hand, buzzing softly, little crystals lighting up like fireworks. Dammit.

“What did you hear?” I ask.

Luna folds her arms, chin tilting like she's daring me to lie.

“It wasn’t a song,” she says. “It was... a call . Like the ocean answering itself. I’ve been recording ley pulses for weeks and I’ve never heard anything like that. And it came from you. ”

Her voice isn’t accusatory. It’s curious. Too curious.

I shake my head, fists clenching. “You didn’t hear anything.”

“You’re scared,” she says softly.

I stiffen.

“No,” I snap. “I’m cautious . There’s a difference.”

She steps closer. Barefoot, hair wild, face open and unafraid. How the hell is she not afraid?

“You’re cursed, aren’t you?”

It hits me like a slap. The word. The truth in it.

I want to lie. Gods, I want to bark at her, chase her off like all the others. But the silence between us is heavy now, full of moonlight and half-buried ghosts.

So I say nothing.

Luna exhales slowly, watching me. Her face shifts—not pity, not judgment. Just... understanding. It’s worse. It cracks something in me.

“I’ve been down there,” she says. “Near the altar. The ley lines bend like they’re afraid of it. But you—you walk near it every day. You live next to it.”

I swallow hard. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me. ”

She doesn’t blink. Doesn’t move.

I grit my teeth, turn away. “Go back inside, Luna.”

She steps forward. Her hand brushes my arm, light as a wave.

“I’m not trying to expose you. I just want to understand what’s hurting this place.”

“It’s not the place that’s cursed,” I say, voice low. “It’s me.”

She freezes. Just for a breath.

“Who did it?”

I laugh. Short, bitter. “A mistake.”

“You?”

“Someone I trusted. Once.”

The ocean crashes against the rocks like it’s punctuating the conversation. I feel its pull in my ribs. Old magic. Old pain.

Luna says nothing. She just stands beside me, eyes cast out to the water, quiet now.

“I can’t sing,” I say, finally. “Not like I used to. If I do... the magic comes back.”

“And that’s bad?”

“It’s binding. Siren song isn’t just sound—it’s power. It commands, consumes. I was trained to use it as a prince. But when I used it to save someone... I broke the rules. And she took my voice in return.”

Luna doesn’t gasp. Doesn’t recoil. She just nods slowly, like it makes too much sense.

“You sang in your sleep.”

I close my eyes. “That means the curse is unraveling.”

“Isn’t that good?”

“No.” My voice breaks a little. “It’s worse. If it comes loose without control—without the ritual—it’ll take everything with it.”

The tide pulls hard, and I step back, away from the surf, from her.

“Then let’s find a way to control it,” she says.

I stare at her. This girl with scanners and sarcasm and salt on her skin like it belongs there. She doesn’t understand what she’s offering.

Or maybe she does.

Either way, I don’t trust the way my heart stutters.

“Go to bed,” I mutter.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re such a drama queen.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. You think I’m gonna just ignore a walking sea hazard singing ballads into the ley stream?”

She turns to leave. Pauses.

“You’ve got a good voice,” she says over her shoulder.

Then she’s gone.

And I’m left standing in the cove, afraid I’ve already said too much.

She lingers near the path, hand curled around her scanner like it might still spill answers.

I should walk away. I need to. But I don’t.

Instead, I stand there like an idiot, skin still humming with the remnants of song, throat raw with the echo of what slipped out. Her eyes never leave mine—steady, probing, not prying like the council used to, or ravenous like the press back when I was still royalty. This is different.

She’s watching like I’m a question she wants to ask.

And worse... like she’s already started to care about the answer.

“You heard wrong,” I say, quieter now. Flat. Final. “It was the tide. You’re not used to the way the rocks echo.”

Luna raises a brow. “That’s your excuse?”

“It’s the truth.”

“No, it’s not.” Her voice softens. “But it’s the only one you’re willing to tell me.”

That gets under my skin. Not because she’s wrong, but because it’s too damn accurate . She turns away finally, but not before giving me one last look—slow, searching, unreadable.

Wonder.

Not suspicion.

Not fear.

Just... wonder.

And I haven’t seen someone look at me like that in a very, very long time.

It unsettles me more than her scanner ever could.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

“This is a bad idea.”

Kai ignores me completely, digging through the backseat of her jeep like a raccoon in a glam rock thrift store. She’s wearing a sequin bikini top, cutoff shorts, and has already enchanted her hair to smell like mango every time it flips.

“It’s not a bad idea,” she says. “It’s a vibes-based decision. Those are different.”

“Pretty sure they lead to the same kind of hangover.”

She straightens, grinning, two potion bottles in hand—one a glimmering lavender, the other glowing chartreuse. “Don’t worry, I pre-tested the flirtation elixirs on the kelpie twins. You’ll be fine. Unless you have unresolved feelings. Then it gets... spicy.”

“Kai.”

She waves a hand. “Don’t make that face. It’s just a little enchantment. The magic wears off in a couple of hours. You could use a couple hours of lower inhibitions.”

“Lowered inhibitions got me into grad school with a sea magic thesis and a crush on a cursed fisherman. I don’t need more.”

Kai tosses the bottles in a bag and drags me toward the beach bonfire already glowing at the far curve of the cove.

The party's already in full swing—witches weaving illusions into the fire, a group of tiefling guys passing around a charmed guitar that only plays sad breakup songs, and someone—probably one of Kai's bar staff—passing out rainbow jello shots that blink Morse code.

“Where's Mira?” I ask, mostly so I don't have to think about him being here.

“Over by the tide tables,” Kai says, gesturing with her chin. “Talking to that nymph intern from the ley registry. I think she's trying to seduce him with graphs.”

“And Calder?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Kai doesn't answer.

Because I already see him.

He's leaning against a piece of driftwood, shirt damp, hair pulled back, looking like he lost a fight with a thunderstorm and won anyway. He's not mingling. Of course he's not. He's brooding in public like it's an art form.

My stomach twists.

Kai hands me the lavender bottle. “Sip. Breathe. Don't look like you're about to scream.”

“I'm fine,” I lie.

She clinks her bottle against mine. “Here's to science and bad decisions.”

We drink.

I don't know what's in mine, but it tastes like lavender, honey, and a very specific kind of regret. My tongue tingles. My skin feels... buoyant. Not floaty, exactly, but like I could say something honest and not immediately want to die.

Which is dangerous.

Because Calder sees me.

His eyes lock on mine from across the firelight. I feel it in my ribs .

"Go talk to him," Kai whispers.

"I'm not here to flirt," I hiss.

"No. You're here to overshare under magical influence. Big difference."

I mutter something rude and head toward the drinks table instead, heart racing. Mira intercepts me halfway with a fresh spreadsheet and an alarming smile.

"Luna! I cross-referenced the aura spikes from the cliffside recordings with last night's scanner bursts—look."

She flips open her data tablet, and yep. Spikes. Deep, harmonic ley pulses. All matching Calder's presence .

"Mira," I say, carefully, "have I told you lately that I love your graphs?"

She beams. "Three times, but not with this much emotional sincerity!"

"Great," I say. "That's the potion talking."

And because my luck is pure garbage— he’s there.

Calder steps into my periphery, all tall shadow and tide tension.

“Luna.”

I turn. My mouth’s already open with something flirty or sharp or stupid. But the potion grabs it first.

“You sing in your sleep,” I say.

He freezes.

Oh hell .

“I mean,” I backtrack, “that wasn’t what I meant to lead with—what I meant was you’ve got a...very loud aura.”

His brow arches. “Loud.”

Mira tries to fade into the sand, but not before whispering, “Oh my gods.”

“And complex,” I add quickly. “Your aura’s complex. Like a depressed thunderstorm.”

Kai is behind me somewhere laughing way too hard .

Calder’s expression doesn’t change, but something behind his eyes flickers. “Are you drunk?”

“No,” I say, entirely too fast. “Just emotionally compromised.”

He steps closer. Close enough that I can smell salt and something darker—storm magic maybe, old and bitter. “What do you want from me, Luna?”

And that’s the thing. I don’t know .

I want to understand why the ley lines curl around him like vines. I want to know what’s buried under the waves near his cove. I want to stop thinking about how it felt when he caught me last night.

But what I say is: “I want to do my damn research without you looking at me like I’m a threat.”

He leans in. “You are a threat.”

The air between us hums. The potion buzzes in my veins. I want to punch him. Or kiss him. Possibly both.

“Fine,” I say. “Then I’ll be the most professional threat you’ve ever met.”

I storm off.

Mira follows me a minute later, breathless and vibrating with gossip.

“Okay,” she says. “On a scale of one to magically bonded, how cursed do you think your love life is?”

“I’m not in love,” I groan. “I’m in fieldwork . This is just proximity hormones and bad potion planning.”

But even as I say it, I know it’s a lie.

Because something about Calder Thorne is pulling me in.

And not even magic can explain it.

Later, after Mira finally gives up trying to cross-analyze flirtation frequency with ley field volatility, and Kai is off somewhere slow dancing with a water spirit wearing glow-in-the-dark board shorts, I sit on a driftwood log with my shoes in the sand and the bottle still in my hand.

The potion's mostly worn off, but the buzz behind my ribs hasn't.

I catch myself watching Calder again.

He's moved to the edge of the firelight, arms crossed, expression unreadable. He's not talking to anyone. Just... observing. Still. Heavy. Like gravity has favorites and he's one of them.

I hate how easily I can see the shadows in his face now. The way his mouth sets like it's holding back an apology he won't give. The way his eyes search the surf like it owes him something.

I take another sip and mutter, "I should be annoyed."

Because I am. He's rude, uncooperative, emotionally repressed like it's a competitive sport.

But underneath all that salt and silence, there's something else.

Curiosity nips at the edges of my irritation. Why does the ley line bend near him? Why does the sea seem to watch him when he moves? Why did his voice in the dark make my skin shiver in recognition ?

The more I poke at it, the more I can't stop poking.

Still, I'm not ready to admit that aloud. Not to Mira, not to Kai, and definitely not to myself.

So I toss the rest of the potion into the sand, dust off my skirt, and say firmly to no one in particular, "This is just a magical anomaly. A hot, frustrating, walking magical anomaly."

The ocean doesn't argue.

But it doesn't disagree either.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

The ocean screams before it splits.

I feel it in the marrow of my spine, a vibration too deep for human instruments but loud enough to rattle my ribs. The ley line convulses, sharp and hot—like a nerve snapping. The moment the surge hits, I drop the fishing line I've been pretending to care about and bolt barefoot across the shore.

It's not a storm surge. It's something older . A seaquake.

And Luna's in the water.

I dive without hesitation.

The tide fights me, angry and unfamiliar. The currents twist like they're trying to hide something, like they're pushing me away from her. But I know this stretch. I know the rock shelves, the crevices that splinter off toward the altar's edge. I kick hard, eyes open against the salt.

There. Flash of red wetsuit. Hair floating like seaweed. She's caught in the vortex of a ley rift, tangled in the magical aftershock like a doll caught in a drain.

She's not moving.

No.

I reach her, arm looping under hers, and pull with everything I've got. The current clings, electric and heavy, and for one breathless second I feel it: the altar stirring beneath us. Watching.

Then we break free.

I surface with her limp against me, gasping as the water flattens into silence. The seaquake's passed, but its echo buzzes in the air, unnatural and sharp-edged.

She coughs hard, sputters, starts to breathe.

I carry her to shore anyway.

She's conscious by the time I drop her onto the sand, which is good. Because it means I get to yell.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Luna blinks up at me, soaked and coughing, hair matted to her face. "I— ow —didn't think it was that deep."

"No," I snap. "You didn't think at all."

"I was just getting a reading. The scanner went nuts?—"

"You're lucky the only thing that went nuts wasn't your lungs. That ley rift could've crushed you. Or worse."

She tries to sit up. "Thanks for the rescue, but I don't need a lecture?—"

"You're not listening."

“No, you’re just talking at me like I’m some kind of reckless intern!”

I step back, shaking, hands clenched.

She doesn’t understand.

She almost touched the edge of it. The altar’s influence. If it had opened more fully... she wouldn’t be here. Not whole. Not herself .

Luna stands, wobbling a little, brushing sand off her arms. “I get it. You’re mad I came near your secret sea spot. You want me to stay out of your cursed little cove?—”

“It’s not about you. ”

She stops.

“Then what is it?” she asks, voice soft now. “Why does this whole place twist whenever I get close?”

I can’t tell her.

I can’t tell her that the altar recognizes her. That her presence isn’t random—it’s reactive. The same way it once reacted to me, all those years ago. The same way it punished me when I broke the rules.

“It’s old magic,” I say instead. “It’s not meant to be disturbed.”

She tilts her head. “And yet, here you are. Living on top of it. Why?”

I open my mouth. Close it. The words stick.

Because I deserve it.

Because it's the only place I feel the weight of what I lost.

Because I'm afraid to go too far, and lose the last piece of who I was.

I grit my teeth. "Because someone has to make sure no one else wakes it up."

She studies me. Her gaze isn't hostile now. It's sharp, yes. But not angry. Not scared.

Just... curious.

Again.

And that terrifies me more than the altar ever could.

"I'm fine, by the way," she mutters. "Thanks for saving my dumb, magical-assaulted life."

I sigh. "You shouldn't have been out there alone."

"Yeah, well," she says, picking up her half-broken scanner, "neither should ancient sea altars with anger management issues."

I don't laugh.

But something in my chest loosens. Slightly.

We walk back to the cottage in silence.

And for once, the tide doesn't fight us.

The knock on my door comes less than an hour after I get Luna settled back inside. She insisted she didn't need help. I insisted I didn't care. Mira gave us both a weird look and wandered off muttering something about ley harmonics and trauma bonding.

Now I've got two council envoys on my porch and a headache blooming behind my eyes.

"Calder Thorne," says the older one—Rin, a kelp-blooded seer with eyes like polished obsidian. She's flanked by Juno, the elven tide-lawyer who once tried to sue a selkie for identity theft.

"Something break underwater?" I ask flatly.

"The altar surged," Rin says. "Three ripples across the coast and a minor rift detected inland. Your ward failed. Again."

I clench my jaw. "I handled it."

Juno steps forward. "You handled it after a human nearly got pulled into the veil. The town's protections are fragile, and this Leypoint isn't just yours anymore."

They exchange a look. And I know what's coming before Rin even opens her mouth.

"You'll be partnering with the human," she says. "Her readings are clearer than any council data. Until this wave stabilizes, you're both required to investigate ley flux events together."

"No," I say immediately.

"It's not a request," Juno says.

I scowl. “She’s reckless. She doesn’t understand what she’s poking at.”

“Then teach her,” Rin says simply.

I want to argue. Gods, I want to slam the door and let the sea swallow everything.

But if I refuse... they’ll pull me from the cove. And if they get curious enough, they’ll unseal the altar themselves.

That can’t happen.

So I nod. Barely. Just enough.

The council disperses.

And I sit on my porch, hands curled into fists, already dreading the next time I have to meet her eyes.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

Of all the places I imagined being stuck with Calder Thorne, the damp, crab-smelling tide shack at the ass-end of Lowtide Bluffs is not at the top of my fantasy list.

“Remind me again,” I say, wringing out the hem of my soaked sweatshirt, “why you didn’t mention the roof leaks?”

Calder grunts.

Which is about par for the course since we got stranded here twenty minutes ago, thanks to a freak storm surge that slammed into the cove like Poseidon sneezed. My gear’s fine. My nerves, not so much. There’s only one bench, and he’s on it, brooding like it’s his hobby.

“You okay there, broody McTidepool?”

He doesn’t even flinch. Just keeps staring at the wall like it personally offended him.

“I’m talking to you,” I say, flopping onto an overturned crate. “This is the part where you engage in basic human interaction.”

He exhales through his nose, finally turning his head. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Oh good, a full sentence,” I say. “I was worried I’d have to start using interpretive dance.”

His eyes narrow. “You’re not funny.”

“Not to you,” I shoot back, “but my audience is very specific. Mostly Mira.”

At that, his lips twitch. Barely. But it’s something.

I pull my damp hair into a bun and eye the storm battering the shack windows. The wind howls, waves crashing hard enough to shake the floorboards. The ley lines are buzzing again. Not dangerous—but alert. Like they know something’s off.

“I could’ve gone back to the lab,” I say. “But nooo. The magical council wants to play team-building with the human and the cursed sea prince.”

He stiffens at that. Bingo.

“You’re not cursed,” I add quickly. “Well, you are. But not in the villain sense. More like a tragic Disney subplot.”

“Stop talking.”

I grin. “Make me.”

Calder stands up so suddenly I almost fall off my crate. He crosses the room in two steps and looms over me—arms crossed, shirt still half unbuttoned from our ocean misadventure earlier. There’s a scratch on his collarbone that’s already fading. Of course it is.

“I don’t want you near the altar again,” he says, low.

I stand up too. We’re toe to toe now, the storm still raging behind us, but it’s this moment that feels electric.

“Too bad,” I say, calm and clear. “I’m not here for your comfort. I’m here for answers.”

“Some things aren’t meant to be unearthed.”

“And some people shouldn’t live in houses made of secrets and salt.”

We stare at each other.

His jaw flexes. “You’re reckless.”

I smirk. “You’re emotionally constipated.”

He looks like he wants to say something else—something real—but he doesn’t. Instead, he turns, runs a hand through his wet hair, and mutters, “You don’t get it.”

“Then help me get it,” I say, voice softening. “You don’t have to carry whatever this is by yourself.”

He freezes.

“I do,” he says, after a long beat. “Because if I don’t, people get hurt.”

The air shifts. My breath catches.

And for once, I don’t make a joke.

Instead, I sit back down and let the silence settle between us like something holy. Outside, the rain starts to slow. The tide begins to retreat. But inside, the tension’s just starting to pull tight.

Calder sits again too, this time a little closer.

Not touching.

Not yet.

But closer.

And I realize I'm not trying to crack his shell anymore.

I want to be let in.

The storm eases, the tide pulling back like it's holding its breath. The shack groans as the wind quiets, and I exhale with it, muscles finally unclenching. Outside, waves slosh against the rocks in a tired rhythm. Not angry anymore. Just restless.

Inside, the quiet between us stretches. Not awkward. Just... full.

I glance at Calder.

He's leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. His brows are knit like he's deep in thought or trying not to say something dangerous. Water beads on his jawline, catching the flicker of the emergency lantern like drops of moonlight.

"You always like being this dramatic?" I ask gently.

He huffs out a breath that might be a laugh. "You think I'm dramatic?"

"You make storm clouds look subtle."

He doesn't rise to the bait. Just glances sideways at me with something almost—

almost —like amusement.

“I’m not trying to be a mystery,” he says after a moment. “I just... don’t know how to stop being one.”

That lands deeper than I expect.

I shift, resting my arms on my knees. “I get it. I’ve been chasing magic since I was fourteen, and I still don’t know if I’m trying to understand it or prove to everyone else that I’m not crazy.”

He turns his head toward me, curiosity flickering in those sea-glass eyes. “You think people think you’re crazy?”

“People don’t say it,” I reply, “but you start talking about ancient sea energy and aura resonances in polite academic circles and you’ll be amazed how fast someone offers you a therapy crystal and a transfer request form.”

He actually smiles. It’s small, quick, and it vanishes like mist—but I see it.

And damn it, I like it.

I lean back against the crate wall, watching shadows dance across the floor. “You know, for someone who hates talking, you’re weirdly good at it when you stop being an emotionally fortified shipwreck.”

“Maybe I just don’t like most people.”

“Lucky me, then.”

The silence that follows is different. Charged.

Not the storm.

Not danger.

Something... closer .

His eyes linger on mine longer than they should. My pulse skips. Just a little.

My fingers curl around the hem of my sleeve, grounding myself.

“Calder,” I start, not sure what I’m about to say.

But that’s when the door creaks open.

“ Professor?! ”

Mira’s voice cuts through the air like a spell gone sideways, and both of us jump a solid six inches. She bursts in, raincoat flapping, holding a stack of printouts and one of those ridiculous glowing tablets she’s enchanted to ping when ley anomalies occur.

“Oh gods, I knew you’d still be here! There was a surge uptick like twenty minutes ago and I tracked the leystream signature right to this shack?—”

She stops cold, eyes darting from me to Calder, eyebrows going from curious to suspicious in a single heartbeat.

I scramble back a little, clearing my throat. “Hey, Mira. You, uh... found us.”

Calder mutters something under his breath and shifts further away.

Mira looks at the single bench. The lantern. The proximity.

And then her eyes go wide. “Oh no.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” I say quickly.

“It looks like sexual tension with a side of ley dysfunction,” she whispers, horrified.

I bury my face in my hands.

“I brought new data,” she adds, recovering, shoving the tablet at me. “But we can talk later. Or never. Sorry. I’m gonna—bye!”

She vanishes back into the rain with all the grace of a spooked deer.

The door swings shut behind her.

Silence falls again, but it’s not the same. The thread between us has snapped, replaced by awkwardness, embarrassment, and a fresh wave of “what the hell am I doing?”

I rub my temples. “I forgot I’m a scientist.”

Calder stands slowly. “You forgot you’re being watched.”

That stings more than I expect.

But he’s not cruel about it. Just... distant again. Wall rebuilt. Shell back on.

I hate how much I miss that glimpse of something soft.

“I should go,” I mutter.

He doesn't argue.

Just watches as I gather my gear, tablet still buzzing faintly with Mira's new data.

Before I leave, I glance back at him. His silhouette in the fading lantern light is sharp and lonely.

And I realize I didn't crack his shell tonight.

He let me see inside.

Just for a moment.

And then the tide took it back.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

The ley current pulls strange today.

Tense. Fractured. Like it's waiting for a scream.

I stalk the shoreline out of habit more than purpose. The sea's quiet, but the quiet feels wrong—tight with anticipation. It's not just the weather, though the clouds have been flirting with a storm all morning. It's her.

Luna.

She's down at the old tidepool ruins again.

The ones I warned her not to touch.

And she's touching something.

I spot her crouched near the edge of a sunken rock altar, elbow-deep in seawater, gloved hand wrapped around something gleaming and half-buried. Her brow's furrowed, that focused scowl she wears when she's figuring out a puzzle. The tide creeps in around her boots, but she doesn't move.

I see the relic before she does.

Silver. Sea-stamped. Edged in siren script.

No.

No, no, no .

“Drop it.”

My voice cuts through the wind like a blade.

Luna startles, whipping around, but she doesn't let go. “What—Calder?”

I close the distance in a few hard strides. The closer I get, the more the relic pulses. It's faint—most wouldn't notice. But I do . It's singing to me. Or maybe remembering me.

She holds it up, blinking. “It was just wedged in a tide crevice. The scanner flagged it. Some kind of talisman?”

I reach out and snatch it from her hand.

She gasps. “Hey—what the hell?”

“You shouldn't have touched this.”

“It's metal, Calder, not a cursed diary!”

I turn the thing over in my palm. The edge is cracked, but the sigil in the center—my family crest—is still intact. Trident and spiral. Siren royalty, etched in binding iron.

I haven't seen it since the day they sealed my voice.

And suddenly, the tide isn't the only thing rising.

“Calder?”

Her voice breaks through the roar in my ears. I glance up, and I know she sees it—the change in me. The tightening. The way the ocean behind me rears like it’s waiting on my orders.

“You need to leave.”

She straightens, eyes narrowing. “You’re not my boss.”

I growl. “I’m not asking.”

Her mouth opens. Shuts. She studies me, and I hate that she looks concerned . That she steps forward instead of backing off.

“This relic... it’s yours, isn’t it?”

I don’t answer.

“Why is it reacting to you?”

Still, I don’t speak.

“Calder.”

“Because it remembers,” I snap, louder than I mean to. “Because it’s mine . Because I used to wear it when I sang storm calls and blood treaties and love songs that could drown armies.”

She flinches, but not from fear. From understanding .

And that makes it worse.

“You were a prince,” she breathes.

I laugh. Bitter. Ugly. “Was. Now I’m a warning tale mothers whisper to their sea-witched children.”

Luna crouches again, her voice lower. Softer. “I’m not trying to break you open.”

“Then stop poking around in my wreckage.”

She stands slowly, soaked up to her knees, but unflinching. “You can’t keep locking every truth underwater. Eventually it drifts back to shore.”

I throw the relic into the waves.

The sea accepts it with a hiss.

Luna watches it vanish.

“Why are you so scared of what I’ll find?” she asks, not accusing—just... wondering.

“I’m not scared of you,” I say.

It’s a lie.

Because I am .

She sees through too much. She listens too closely.

And I can’t afford to care about someone who makes me want to be known.

Without another word, I turn and walk away.

The waves lap behind me, gentle now.

But I feel them waiting.

The cliffs rise like jagged teeth behind the cove, wind-scoured and ancient, older than any map dares to mark. I climb them without thinking, boots slipping on moss-slick stone, hands scraped by sharp shale. The wind up here cuts deep and cold, like it wants to peel the skin off your thoughts.

I welcome it.

It's easier than feeling anything else.

Below, the tide churns around the rocks where I left her— where I lost it. The relic, the control, the last sliver of calm I've been clinging to.

I press the heels of my palms into my eyes and curse under my breath.

Why did I let her get that close?

Why didn't I take it when I had the chance—to warn her off, to shove her out of this storm before she gets swallowed whole?

I lean against a boulder, wind howling past, and force myself to look down.

She's still there.

Luna.

Kneeling where I left her, watching the surf like it might give her answers if she just stares hard enough. Her hair's plastered to her cheeks, strands tangled in her lashes. Her hands are limp at her sides. She looks smaller now, quieter. But not broken.

She doesn't run.

She doesn't flinch.

She doesn't treat me like I'm the monster the council warns against, or the ghost everyone's politely agreed to ignore.

She looked at me and asked me to be honest.

And gods help me... I wanted to be.

I dig my fingers into the rock, the sharp sting a poor substitute for the chaos in my chest.

She's the first person in decades who hasn't looked at me with fear.

Not when I warned her off or when I yelled.

Not even when I let the sea answer me.

There's something dangerous in that.

Because if she keeps looking at me like that—like I'm worth understanding—I don't know if I'll be able to keep lying. To her. To myself.

And I can't afford to open that door.

Not when I've spent a century sealing it shut.

Below, Luna stands. She doesn't look up. But she walks the shore with purpose again, boots splashing in the tide, already scanning the rock pools for more evidence. For more truths.

She's relentless.

She's brilliant.

And she's going to get herself killed if I don't step in.

But I don't move.

I can't.

Because right now I'm not Calder Thorne, brooding fisherman of the Bluffs.

Right now I'm what I was before— prince , voice-binder, heir to a forgotten throne made of salt and silence. A man who once believed he could save a world with song.

And I remember what happened the last time someone believed in me.

I failed her.

The sea took her.

And I paid the price.

I close my eyes, the wind cold against my face, and swear softly in the old tongue.

Luna Wilder is a problem I didn't plan for.

And if I let her in, this whole place might unravel with me.

But gods...

She's still there.

Still watching the tide.

Still not afraid.

And that scares me more than anything else ever could.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

There's a particular kind of silence underwater.

Not the peaceful kind you romanticize in poems or spa commercials. No, this one's tight. Coiled. Like the ocean's holding its breath while you trespass somewhere sacred.

I kick harder, fins slicing through the frigid green-blue as the trench yawns open below me.

"Ten more meters," I mutter through the comm charm clipped to my ear. Not that anyone's listening.

Because I didn't tell anyone.

Because if I told him, he'd lose his mind.

Again.

My scanner pings off a series of sharp ley echoes, flashing in frantic pulses. It doesn't like this zone—neither do I, if we're being honest—but I'm done playing safe. Done letting Calder guard secrets like treasure in a drowned kingdom.

The altar's close. I feel it.

Pressure deepens around me. Not just physical—magical. The kind that squeezes

your bones and whispers in your blood.

I flick on the light built into my diving mask. A shimmer pulses ahead, right at the edge of visibility. A pattern, half- covered in sediment, carved into the rock shelf. Not random. Deliberate.

“I knew it,” I whisper, even though my lungs are starting to burn.

But before I can blink, the shimmer moves.

And then the water grabs me.

One second I’m reaching toward the symbol, the next I’m twisted in a vortex of icy current and pulsing magic.

The scanner flies from my grip, vanishing into darkness.

My mask jolts sideways. The ley lines scream , and suddenly I’m not swimming anymore—I’m drowning in something that doesn’t want me here.

I flail, chest tightening, limbs sluggish. Everything tilts sideways.

Then something crashes into me—arms, heat, motion.

A second later, we’re ascending.

Fast.

The world bursts open with air and sound as we breach the surface, and I gasp like I’ve been reborn. Cold wind lashes my face. Salt burns my throat.

And Calder's voice is in my ear, rough and shaking.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

He's gripping me like I'll vanish. Dragging us toward the boat with fast, jerky strokes. I cling to him, coughing, because I can't not —because I don't have the strength to argue yet.

He hauls us up and over the edge of the boat, dumps me onto the deck, and then paces three steps before spinning back, face dark with rage.

“You dived alone ? Into the altar's ley rift?! Are you trying to die?”

I peel the mask from my face, blinking against the sudden brightness. “I had it under control.”

“You were seconds from being pulled under!”

“I had to see it, Calder! I had to know?—”

“No, you didn't!” he snarls. “You had to prove a point. You had to poke until something snapped.”

“Well maybe I'm tired of everyone telling me what not to touch without telling me why! ”

That lands like a slap.

He stops.

Freezes.

And for a second, I see it.

Not the anger.

Not the fury.

But the exhaustion.

He sinks onto the bench across from me, hands braced on his knees, jaw clenched so tight it looks like it hurts.

I sit up slowly, limbs shaking. “You knew I’d go anyway.”

His voice is hoarse. “Yeah.”

“You followed me.”

“I always do.”

That’s what breaks me.

“Calder—” I start, but I don’t even know what I want to say. Thank you? I’m sorry? You scare the hell out of me and somehow I still keep diving closer?

His eyes finally meet mine.

And what I see there...

It isn’t rage.

It’s grief.

Old. Bone-deep. Carved into him like the sigils I saw underwater.

“You weren’t supposed to find it,” he says.

“I already had,” I whisper.

Neither of us moves.

I reach for his hand without thinking.

He lets me.

His skin is calloused and damp. His grip doesn’t tighten—but he doesn’t pull away, either.

“You don’t have to keep guarding it alone,” I murmur.

His lips twitch. “I do.”

“No. You’ve just been doing it so long you forgot there’s a difference.”

He stares at the sea.

And for once... doesn’t argue.

The ocean still rolls around us, gentle now—lulling, almost. The kind of calm that only shows up after everything’s already gone to hell.

Calder’s sitting on the bench again, elbows on his thighs, face turned toward the horizon like it’ll tell him something he doesn’t already know. He hasn’t spoken since we surfaced. Hasn’t moved, except to occasionally flex his hand like something

aches.

I notice the blood a few seconds before he does.

“Hold still,” I say, pulling the med kit from the bench storage and kneeling beside him.

“It’s fine.”

“You’re bleeding, you emotionally constipated barnacle. Let me help.”

He doesn’t argue.

I take his hand carefully, and it’s warmer than I expect. Big. Calloused. There’s a gash along his knuckle, shallow but angry, probably from where he slammed into coral dragging me out.

I clean it in silence, wrapping it in gauze I enchanted to be salt-resistant. He watches me like he doesn’t understand why I’m doing it. Like touch is foreign. Or forbidden.

I glance up once, catch the edge of something in his expression.

Gratitude?

Fear?

I don’t push.

Instead, I let myself wonder.

What would it be like if he weren’t so haunted?

If he smiled more than once a lunar cycle? If he kissed like he meant it instead of looking like the act itself might unravel the world?

I trace the edge of the bandage with my thumb.

There's something under all his armor. Something kind. Fierce. Tender.

It scares me a little.

Because I want to reach for it.

I want him .

Not the prince. Not the storm. Not the curse.

Just... Calder.

But I say nothing.

Because we're not there yet.

Because I'm not sure we'll ever be.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

I shouldn't have come here.

The Sip & Spell is loud. Lit. Magical residue clings to the air like perfume and electricity. The ley hum pulses beneath the floorboards, drunk on spell-shots and potion-infused happy hour specials. People are laughing. Dancing. Touching.

I don't belong in places like this.

Especially not tonight.

But Rin cornered me after the council briefing— “Show your face, remind the town you're not just a shadow on the cliffs,” she said—and I didn't have the energy to argue.

So here I am. Grumpy, damp, and perched at the end of the bar like a warning sign nobody reads.

“Someone looks like they regret every decision that led them here,” Kai drawls, dropping a neon-blue drink in front of me.

“I didn't order anything.”

She smirks. “It's water. You're welcome. Although, if you want to feel things, I've got a cinnamon potion that unblocks repressed emotions. Like Draino, but for the soul.”

“Hard pass.”

“Coward,” she sing-songs, already moving on.

I sip the water. It tastes vaguely of starlight and judgment.

The door opens again.

I know it’s her before I look.

Luna.

Hair loose, cheeks flushed, wearing a black leather jacket over one of those scientific-rebel T-shirts. She’s scanning the room, looking for me.

Of course she is.

She spots me. Her eyes narrow. Then, to my surprise, she walks straight to the bar, grabs the drink someone abandoned next to me, and throws it back.

“Probably cursed,” I mutter.

“Definitely cursed,” she says, licking her lips. “Tastes like trauma and lime.”

I shouldn’t be here. With her. Not now.

Not after the dive. The boat. Her hands on mine.

But she leans in anyway.

“You avoiding me again, Sea Grump?”

“Trying,” I grit.

“Failing.”

She’s too close. Her elbow brushes mine. Her aura sparks at the edge of mine, fizzing, friction-filled. It smells like rain and stubbornness.

Kai reappears with a tray of glowing shot glasses, one already cracked and smoking.

“Oh. Oh no. ”

“What?” Luna says, already reaching for another.

Kai yanks it away. “That wasn’t lime trauma potion. That was the shelved one. The... oops batch.”

Luna blinks. “Oops?”

“It amplifies whatever you’re already feeling. And, um, makes it impossible to lie. Or shut up.”

“Wait, what?”

Kai leans over the bar. “You’re about to be real honest, real fast, and possibly ruin someone’s entire emotional coping strategy.”

Luna turns to me, eyes wide.

And then she laughs .

“Oh no,” she says. “That’s... that’s not good.”

I can feel the shift before she even speaks again. Her aura flares. Her voice dips.

“You’re hot, Calder.”

I freeze.

She keeps going. “Like, really hot. In that broody, emotionally repressed, haunted-by-sea-ghosts kind of way. I should be annoyed by it. But I’m not.”

She grabs the edge of my shirt. “I think I like it.”

I grab her wrist before she pulls me closer. My grip is gentle. My pulse is not .

“Luna,” I warn.

“Yeah?” she breathes.

“Stop.”

“Make me.”

And that’s the moment I break.

I don’t know who moves first.

Maybe her.

Maybe me.

But suddenly, we’re crashing together in the narrow space between bar stools and bad judgment. Her mouth finds mine, hot and sweet and desperate. Her hands are in my

hair. Mine are gripping her waist like I've forgotten how to let go.

The noise of the bar fades.

All I hear is her.

All I want is her.

But just as suddenly, I pull back.

Hard.

She stumbles, blinking.

“What—?”

“I can't.”

The words hurt.

Her expression shifts, from dazed to something like hurt.

“I didn't mean to—” she starts.

“No,” I say, softer now. “I wanted to. Too much.”

She swallows. Her voice goes quiet. “Then why?—?”

“Because if I fall for you,” I whisper, “the curse doesn't just return. It finishes what it started.”

She stares at me.

And I leave before I say anything else that could kill us both.

The night air hits me like a wave of ice.

Sharp. Punishing.

It should help. It doesn't.

I don't get far—just around the corner of Kai's bar, into the alley that runs along the bluffside. My palms hit the wall. I lean there, chest heaving, hands braced like they're the only things keeping me upright.

She kissed me.

I kissed her.

And gods, I wanted it. I still want it.

Her taste lingers—wild, electric, like ozone and adrenaline. Her scent's on me, subtle and sharp: citrus and skin and something I'd let burn me alive if I wasn't so damned afraid.

I press my forehead to the stone.

“Stupid,” I mutter. “Stupid, stupid?—”

Because I've been careful.

For years.

No voice. No touch. No room for want.

And then she shows up with her storm-colored eyes and her defiant little smirk and her cursed questions , and suddenly the silence I've clung to doesn't feel like protection anymore.

It feels like a prison.

I exhale hard. Try to ground myself.

But the guilt slides in anyway.

Heavy.

Smothering.

Because what if this is how it starts?

The curse didn't just strip my voice—it marked me. Tied every fiber of my magic to the part of me that feels . That desires . That loves .

If I give in... if I want her too much...

She could drown in me.

Literally.

I feel the tremble in my fingertips before I register it's not cold anymore—it's magic. Thrumming just under my skin, aching to reach for her again. To call her name and watch her come .

That's the danger.

That's what the curse wants .

To destroy.

My breathing's ragged now. I slide down the wall and sit on the wet stone, arms braced on my knees, head bowed.

I should've pushed her away the moment she stepped into this town.

Should've let the sea take the relic.

Should've never let her touch me.

But gods...

I remember her hands on my jaw. Her breath at my throat. That whisper of Calder like she knew me before the silence.

No one says my name like that anymore.

Not like a question.

Not like a prayer.

And it makes me hate myself a little more.

Because I wanted to answer.

I wanted to sing.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

You'd think a beach town built on magic would have better lifeguards.

But no. All it takes is one drunk tourist with a death wish and a fascination with tidepool selfies, and suddenly we've got a full-on riptide rescue happening thirty feet from my half-damp beach towel.

"Where the hell is everyone?" I yell, scanning the beach.

Mira's sprinting down from the dunes, half-shouting into a charm shell. The lifeguard station's empty—of course it is, because Leo the mermaid-shifter is probably off flirting with a kelpie again.

But then Calder's there.

One blink he isn't—next, he's diving into the surf like the ocean made him for this. No hesitation. No prep. Just raw motion, body slicing through water like it's air.

And he's fast.

Way too fast for someone who claims to be a retired fisherman with bad knees and no magic.

Within seconds, he's got the kid. Pulls him out like it's nothing. Tosses him to the sand and vanishes again, like the tide swallowed him back up.

By the time I reach the spot where the crowd's gathering, Calder's already walking away, dripping and silent, face like thunder.

And my bullshit meter is in freefall.

I wait until the storm breaks.

Because of course one rolls in—the sea always throws a tantrum after Calder uses whatever it is he's not telling me about.

The sky cracks open around 9 p.m., lightning crawling across the clouds like drunk spiders. Wind howls through the shutters of the beach house, and the ley lines under my floorboards buzz like angry bees.

He's outside.

I know it.

So I grab my boots and my frustration and stomp toward the bluff like I've got something to prove.

Because maybe I do.

I find him standing near the cliff's edge, arms crossed, shirt plastered to him from the rain. He doesn't look at me.

“You're lucky I didn't drag you to a town council meeting,” I say, voice raised over the wind. “Because I've got about sixteen eyewitnesses who just watched you outswim a riptide like Aquaman on adrenaline.”

Still nothing.

“Calder.”

He turns. His eyes are darker in this light. Storm-bright. Shadow-wrapped.

“You want to tell me what the hell that was?” I ask. “Because I’m running out of scientific explanations for how many impossible things you keep casually doing.”

He exhales slowly. “I didn’t mean to draw attention.”

“Oh great. That’s your issue? That people might notice you saving lives with your secret sea powers?”

He glares. “I wasn’t trying to save you this time.”

That hits harder than it should.

I look away. “That’s not the point.”

He runs a hand through his hair, shakes his head. “You already know. I’m cursed.”

“Yeah, and so are half the plants in my backyard. That doesn’t mean anything without context. ”

He tenses.

“Just talk to me, Calder. Stop feeding me fragments. Stop pushing me away when you’re the one who keeps showing up.”

Lightning flashes behind him, casting shadows that make him look less human.

He finally says, “My voice used to be magic.”

I blink.

“What?”

He swallows. “It’s... binding magic. Siren-born. I didn’t just sing. I called. Commands. Lures. Shields. Love.”

I stare.

“You’re telling me your voice could do things?”

He nods once.

“And it’s... cursed now?”

His jaw clenches. “If I use it wrong—if I feel too much—it triggers.”

“What happens?”

“I don’t know,” he snaps. “Because I’ve never let it go that far.”

I take a shaky breath, heart thudding.

“And the kiss?” I ask. “The other night. That was... what? A warm-up act to your magical unraveling?”

He flinches.

“Luna—”

“No,” I cut in. “You don’t get to throw sparks and then walk away. You kissed me

like I was air and fire all at once, and then you vanished like I'm dangerous."

"You are ," he says, hoarse. "Because I want you. And that's the most dangerous thing I can do."

Rain lashes my face, but I don't move. I can't.

"You think wanting me is going to break you?"

"I think it might break you, " he says, barely above a whisper.

My breath catches.

And that's when I see it— really see it.

Not the power.

Not the curse.

But the fear in him.

The self-hate.

The impossible loneliness of someone who's been swallowing his own name for too long.

I step forward, slower now. Softer.

"I'm not asking you to unleash whatever magic horror story lives in your throat," I say gently. "But I am asking you to stop pretending like caring about someone is the same thing as cursing them."

He doesn't answer.

But he doesn't leave.

And for now... that's enough.

The wind eases, but he doesn't.

He's still standing there like he's bracing for a wave that hasn't hit yet, shoulders rigid, hands clenched. His breathing's shallow, barely audible over the hush of the storm. He gave me a sliver of truth—and I can see it already cost him more than I understood.

Most people lie to protect their pride.

Calder lies to protect his pain .

And gods, that's worse.

I should be furious. He's been dancing around this for weeks, throwing out half-truths like breadcrumbs and retreating every time I got too close.

But instead, I'm standing here, watching the man who saved my life twice—three times, maybe more—look like the idea of me caring is what's going to undo him.

And I realize I don't want to unravel him.

I want to know him.

Even the jagged parts.

Especially the jagged parts.

I step closer again, close enough that the rain between us has nowhere to fall.

“You’re still standing here,” I say quietly.

“So are you.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Calder.”

“That’s the problem,” he whispers.

But his voice cracks on it.

And that crack?

It splits something in me too.

I take a shaky breath and press a hand to his chest—right over the place where I know his magic sleeps. His heart pounds beneath it, wild and uncertain.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” I admit. “And yeah, I’m still pissed you keep half-answering everything like it’s a riddle. But... I think I’m falling for you anyway.”

His breath hitches.

And still, he doesn’t move.

So I smile, just a little. “Terrible idea, I know. You’re broody. Possibly cursed. Bad at compliments. Definitely allergic to feelings.”

He finally exhales a laugh.

“Don’t fall too hard,” he says. “I break things.”

“Try me,” I whisper.

And I swear—for just a second—he lets me see him.

All of him.

And I fall a little harder than I should.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

This is a mistake.

I know it before we're even in the water. Before Luna wriggles into her dive suit with a grin and says something flippant about sharks and romantic trauma. Before she flashes me that stubborn, damnably brilliant look that says I'm not afraid of your ghosts.

She should be.

The shipwreck sleeps beneath the cove's far edge, wrapped in seaweed and old spells, sealed in silence that was once sacred. It was a royal vessel—mine, technically—before the sea turned on us. Before I turned on it.

And I'm bringing her here to scare her off.

To show her what loving me really costs.

But the second she dives in after me, smooth as a siren herself, my chest tightens.

Because deep down, I'm not sure I want her scared.

I want her to see me.

But that's the worst part, isn't it?

She already does.

The wreck looms up from the sand like a beast's ribcage—splintered timbers and twisted metal etched in coral and regret. Magic clings to it like algae, low and hungry.

Luna hovers beside me, eyes wide behind her mask. Her hands move—graceful, efficient. She doesn't speak. Doesn't need to. The comm charms between us hum quietly, synced to the leyline she anchored to the boat.

"I thought this would shut you up," I mutter, voice muffled through the spell-linked comm.

She flips me off. Cheerfully.

Gods help me.

I lead her down the sloped hull, hand brushing the worn wood as if it might still breathe. There's a hatch near the stern—half-collapsed but passable. Inside, everything's warped by time and pressure. Silk banners hang like jellyfish. Broken chests glitter with salt-kissed coin.

And at the center...

A sealed crate, still glowing faintly. Still locked. Still marked with the royal binding rune—three spirals, curved into the trident's crown.

Her aura touches it, and the seal responds.

The light flares gold.

No.

“Don’t—” I bark, but she’s already moving.

Her hand grazes the edge.

The crate hums like it remembers her.

She jerks her hand back, startled. “What was that?”

I float toward her, faster than I should, heart hammering.

“That seal shouldn’t recognize you,” I growl. “It’s attuned to blood. Royal lineage. Siren-born command.”

She stares at it, then at me. “So you mean it’s locked to people like you ?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did it light up when I touched it?”

That’s the question, isn’t it?

The one I don’t want answered.

I swallow hard. “Because something’s wrong.”

She frowns. “Or something’s right. Maybe I’m supposed to help you.”

“No,” I snap, harsher than I mean. “You’re not.”

“Why? Because I can ?”

“Because if you do, you get pulled into this.” I gesture to the wreck around us, to the relic pulsing between us like a heartbeat. “You think this is some cool side quest? This wreck holds the last remnants of a war you haven’t even read about.”

She doesn’t flinch.

Just floats there, eyes searching mine like she’s reading footnotes on my soul.

“I’m not afraid of your past, Calder.”

“You should be.”

“No. I should be afraid of losing you to it.”

That undoes me.

Because for all the magic and curses and wrecked empires...

That’s the first time I’ve ever heard someone say they didn’t want me lost.

We surface in silence.

Rain falls soft on the water.

She doesn’t speak. Just climbs onto the boat and peels off her mask, face drawn and wet.

I join her a moment later, unsure of what to say.

What to do.

She towels off slowly, then looks up. “So... shipwreck second date?”

I stare.

She shrugs. “What? It’s romantic. Death, danger, emotionally unavailable men. Real classic vibes.”

Despite myself, I laugh. Just once.

And she grins like she won something.

Because maybe she did.

Because this time, I don’t feel completely alone in the deep.

The crate pulses again.

Once. Twice.

Then surges .

A violent spike of magic ripples through the water—sharp and wrong, like a heart skipping a beat. The pressure shifts instantly, crushing in on us like a whirlpool wrapped in static. Luna jerks backward as the seal flashes from gold to a deep, angry red.

“ Move! ” I shout, grabbing her wrist.

We launch upward in tandem, the water vibrating around us like it wants to keep us. I yank her behind the wreck’s hull, shielding her body with mine just as the relic bursts with a wave of raw energy.

Stone cracks. Currents whip. The wreck moans like something alive and betrayed.

I hold her tight, one arm around her waist, the other braced against the hull.

Her chest heaves against mine. Her fingers clutch my side.

And for a second—for one dangerous, fleeting second—I forget everything.

I forget the curse.

The wreck.

The centuries I've spent coiled in silence and shadows.

Because she's here. Warm and furious and so real it burns.

And gods, I want her.

Not like a prince.

Not like a siren.

Not like a broken thing desperate for absolution.

But like a man .

A man who could kiss her without consequence.

A man who could hold her without the ocean trying to take her in exchange.

She looks up at me, lips parted, pupils blown wide from the shock and the magic and

maybe from me .

“Calder...” she breathes, barely audible through the charm.

I want to kiss her.

I almost do.

But I let go instead.

Push her up toward the surface before I can make it worse.

By the time we breach, the tension’s still there.

Coiled. Unspoken.

On the boat, she rips off her mask and rounds on me, breathless.

“What the hell was that? ”

“Backlash,” I growl. “The seal isn’t meant to open. Especially not to you. ”

“Then why does it want to?”

I don’t answer.

I can’t.

Because I’m still reeling from the fact that—for a moment—I wanted to stay in that wreck. Pressed against her. Drowned in her.

Not because of a curse.

But because I could've loved her .

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

Mira has been possessed before.

Once during a ley surge in Underroot and once at a magical convention when she got too close to an ancestral memory well. The first time she spoke fluent Old Tide for thirty seconds, then vomited glitter and passed out. The second time, she tried to marry a salt crystal.

So when she starts humming in a pitch only ley-sensitive glass can shatter, I freeze mid-step in the lab and mutter, “Oh hell no—not again.”

She’s sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by the relic fragments we brought back from the wreck. Her fingers hover just above one of the sigils I traced this morning—still faintly glowing, even outside the water.

“Mira?” I ask.

Nothing.

I inch closer, slow and careful, like she’s a cat about to bolt—or a bomb about to singe my eyebrows off .

“Mira, I swear, if this is another trance-loop and you try to propose to the coffee pot again?—”

Her eyes snap open.

But they're not Mira's eyes.

They're glowing. Sea-glass green with a ring of moonlight white.

And when she speaks, it's not in her voice.

“A voice unbound under moonlight shall echo. A heart in silence must choose. The deep remembers.”

I drop my tablet.

“What?”

Her head tilts. “The sea takes what it loves. The sea gives what it mourns.”

“Mira—come on. Snap out of it. Don't start reciting cryptic breakup poetry.”

But she keeps going. The voice vibrates the air around us, charged and hollow. Like she's being used as a conduit .

“Only the unbound shall open the sealed. Only love shall temper the song.”

Then, just like that, her eyes flutter. Her body slumps. And she falls backward into a pile of ley paper and enchanted rubber bands.

I rush forward, catching her head before it hits the floor. “Mira! Are you with me?”

She groans and squints up at me. “Ugh... why does my throat taste like kelp and sarcasm?”

“You were possessed.”

“Again?” She frowns. “That’s rude. I didn’t even have a snack first.”

“You channeled a spirit. It said things. Weird things.”

She pushes herself up slowly, blinking like her eyelids haven’t recalibrated yet.
“What kind of things?”

I repeat it.

A voice unbound.

A heart in silence must choose.

Only love shall temper the song.

Mira’s eyes widen with every word.

“That’s prophecy syntax.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

“No, I mean it’s formal. That wasn’t a rando ghost trying to flirt. That was a higher echo. Bound to a ley junction. Maybe tied to the wreck.”

I pace.

Because here’s the thing—I want to laugh it off. I want to roll my eyes and chalk it up to magical indigestion.

But I can’t.

Because when she said “a voice unbound under moonlight,” my brain screamed Calder before I could stop it.

His voice.

His curse.

His fear of unraveling.

And mine... mine is trying very hard to pretend I didn't feel something shift the second I touched that seal in the wreck.

Mira is watching me now.

“Luna,” she says slowly, “you don't think this is about you and Mr. Stormcloud, do you?”

“I know it is.”

Because I saw that moment underwater—when magic snapped and recognized me.

I felt him behind me—protective, wild, and wanting something he swore he'd never take.

I exhale hard.

“I think we're in deep, Mira.”

“You think ?”

I rub my eyes. “Okay. I know .”

She stands, brushing off sea dust. “So what’s the plan, Professor?”

I look down at the relics still glowing, and feel the ocean pull behind my ribs.

“We find out what he’s not telling me,” I whisper. “And then I figure out if loving him is going to save him... or break us both.”

Kai shows up ten minutes later with a potion that glows like mood lighting and smells like cinnamon lies.

“Someone said the lab got spooky,” she announces, toeing the door open with a box of fried seaweed dumplings. “And by someone, I mean Mira called me in a whisper and said, ‘Possessed. Help. Bring snacks.’”

Mira’s sitting on the floor again, covered in sigil dust and drinking lemon water like it owes her rent.

“I blacked out,” she mutters. “Again.”

“She quoted a prophecy,” I say, pacing the length of the lab like it’s going to solve the puzzle faster.

Kai perks up. “Ooooh, prophecy! Sexy and stressful.”

I repeat the words again. A voice unbound under moonlight. A heart in silence. Only love shall temper the song.

Kai freezes mid-dumpling chew. “Oh, girl. That’s fate-coded.”

“Don’t start.”

“I’m serious. ” She waves the dumpling like a wand. “That’s vintage destiny language. Half my aunt’s vision scrolls start that way. Moonlight. Echo. Love tempering power? That’s fate with a capital F. ”

“Or it’s metaphor,” I argue. “Or it’s just ley residue trying to sound poetic.”

Kai crosses her arms. “You think everything’s academic until it licks you in the face. Then it’s ‘Oh no, maybe this siren prince is emotionally attached to me through a thousand-year-old enchantment!’”

“Because that’s a totally reasonable reaction to a cursed water boy throwing sea relic tantrums when I breathe near them.”

Mira raises a hand weakly. “I think I’m dying.”

“You’re fine,” Kai and I say at the same time.

I finally collapse into my chair, rubbing my temples.

Because here’s the truth I haven’t said aloud yet.

Every time Calder looks at me I feel something pull. Not like fate. Not like magic.

Like recognition.

And when Mira quoted that line—“a voice unbound”—I remembered the way his voice almost came back the night we kissed. Like my presence cracked the curse.

Not through power.

Not through magic.

But through emotion.

Through... vulnerability.

Through love.

And gods help me, I'm starting to think that's the key.

"I think..." I say slowly, eyes still closed, "his curse is tied to emotional suppression. Like, it feeds off repression. Silence. Fear. The more he wants, the more dangerous the magic gets."

Kai whistles low. "That's diabolical. "

"It's brilliant," Mira adds. "A curse that weaponizes intimacy. Keeps him isolated. Guarded. Broken."

I look up. "Which means... maybe it's not about breaking the curse with force."

Kai's grin is wicked. "It's about breaking him open. Gently. Romantically. Possibly with steamy bathtub scenes."

I throw a pillow at her.

Mira blinks. "Luna. Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

I nod.

"If I want to free him... I have to love him out loud."

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

The wind howls outside the beach shack, but inside, it's too quiet.

Too charged .

Luna paces the warped wooden floor, hair wild from the storm, cheeks flushed from the cold—or maybe from the fight we just had.

“Say something,” she demands.

I don't.

Because if I open my mouth right now, I can't tell if I'll speak...

Or sing.

She turns on me, eyes blazing. “You can't just look at me like that and then run. You don't get to kiss me like that and act like nothing happened. If I'm fate—then face it. If I'm danger—then tell me. But don't pretend like this isn't real. ”

My control snaps.

“I can't pretend,” I growl, crossing the space between us in two long strides.

I don't kiss her gently.

I kiss her like I've been dying for centuries and she's the only breath I'll ever get again.

She gasps into my mouth, and I drink it in, pushing her back until her spine hits the wall, my hands gripping her hips, thumbs brushing under the edge of her shirt. Her skin is hot. Human. So alive it hurts.

She moans against me, clawing at the hem of my shirt, yanking it upward.

“You feel like a storm,” she pants.

“I am one,” I whisper, and when she bites my lip, I shudder.

Her hands are on my chest, exploring the scars I thought I'd buried under salt and silence. My claws stretch, barely restrained. My skin darkens where her fingers graze—crimson marks where lust and power blur.

I slide my hands beneath her thighs and lift her. She wraps her legs around me, instinctive, like her body was meant for mine. I carry her to the rickety cot without looking, never breaking the kiss.

The mattress groans under us, but neither of us cares.

She straddles me now, her knees braced on either side of my hips. Her shirt's gone, breasts free and beautiful. My pants are halfway down, her mouth trailing fire along my throat.

“You don't scare me,” she whispers, lips against my ear.

“You should.”

Her hand wraps around my cock, and I hiss through my teeth.

She strokes me once, slow and bold, and says, “Prove it.”

I flip her beneath me with a growl, pinning her wrists above her head. Her pupils blow wide. Her breath stutters.

“Say it again.”

“Prove it. Ruin me, Calder.”

My cock throbs against her thigh. I groan as I drag my fingers down her stomach, watching her writhe beneath me, helpless and so goddamn beautiful it’s a curse all its own.

I dip my fingers between her thighs, across her lips, and finally into her pussy . Hot and ready and trembling.

“You want me to?” I ask.

“Yes,” she breathes. “Please.”

I don’t tease her long.

I line my cock up and push in, slow and steady, watching every flutter of her lashes, every gasp she can’t control.

Her pussy clenches around me, wet and tight and perfect.

She arches, mouth falling open. “Oh... gods —Calder?—”

I brace on one elbow and thrust deeper, rolling my hips until I'm fully seated in her, every inch buried, her body trembling under mine.

"You're not afraid?" I rasp.

"No. Never. Just don't stop— please don't stop. "

I fuck her slow, deep. Letting it burn and build.

Her hands claw at my back. My name tumbles from her lips like a prayer, a curse, a confession.

And it's not just sex; it's centuries of longing cracking open.

It's me— Calder Thorne , prince of silence, cursed and lost— loving someone in the only language I have left.

Her legs pull me closer, tighter. I feel myself unraveling.

The curse pulses, hungry, old magic rising in my throat, tingling beneath my tongue.

"Luna—" I choke. "I— I'm going to ? — "

She cups my face, breath ragged. "Let it go."

I shudder, every thrust now edged with something deeper. I grab her face and let go.

I feel her pussy clench hard as I spill inside her, her face twisted in pleasure.

"Calder!" she cries, holding on tight. I coach her through it, feeling my own muscles relax as the shocks of orgasm fade.

Her breath is still unsteady when I pull the blanket over us. The fabric clings to our skin, damp with sweat and storm air, but she doesn't move away.

She stays curled against me like we belong here. Like we didn't just break a centuries-old curse boundary with our bodies. Like this isn't a bad idea riding a lightning bolt toward a disaster I should have stopped.

But gods, it felt good.

No—right .

I can still feel her pulse against my ribs, the soft sound of her breathing syncing with mine. Her hand rests against my chest, fingers splayed like she's trying to map out a new country. A place she doesn't know yet, but wants to.

“Are you okay?” she asks again, quieter this time.

I nod before I think. The lie's automatic.

But something in the way she shifts—pressing closer, not letting go—tells me she doesn't believe it. Not completely.

Her fingers stroke down the curve of my shoulder, then lower, thumb brushing the faintest mark where my skin shifted during the heat of it. My body always wants to change in moments like that—reveal the monster under the man. But this time, she didn't flinch. She didn't freeze.

She touched it.

And kissed me harder.

I don't know what to do with that.

She exhales slowly, her breath feathering against my collarbone. "You're thinking a lot."

"Yeah," I rasp.

She doesn't push. Doesn't tease.

Just lets the quiet stretch between us like something safe.

I stare at the ceiling, watching storm light dance through the cracks in the shack's roof. The rain's softened now—gentle, almost forgiving.

But inside me, a storm is still building.

Because what we just did wasn't just sext or magic.

It was real.

Unshielded. Raw. The kind of connection I've spent lifetimes avoiding. Wanting.

Dreading.

And it scares me more than anything.

Because for a moment—one perfect, aching moment—I wasn't a cursed prince or a siren relic. I wasn't the council's burden or the sea's prisoner.

I was just Calder.

A man in love with a woman who sees him, touches him, and doesn't recoil from the sharp edges.

I close my eyes.

It felt like taking my first breath. But joy like that? It doesn't last. Not for me. Not when the sea remembers everything and the curse coils beneath my ribs, patient and possessive.

I don't know what will trigger it next.

My voice? Maybe want or love?

And Luna—she's not just a part of this now. She's at the center of it. The relic reacted to her. The altar recognized her. And when I was inside her, when she called my name with nothing but truth in her voice, the power rose.

It didn't lash out, but it stirred, and I can't let that happen again.

Because if it breaks free, it won't be my life it takes.

It'll be hers.

I feel her shift against me, laying her head on my chest.

"I felt it too, you know," she whispers. "That... thing between us."

I stay still.

"If I'm wrong, tell me. But it didn't feel like a mistake."

My throat burns.

She lifts her head slightly, meets my eyes. “It felt like a beginning.”

And there it is: the knife, twisting slow.

Because I want to say yes.

I want to kiss her again, pull her beneath me, and make it mean something more than curses and fate and ancient warnings wrapped in prophecy.

But the fear’s louder than the want and it says: This ends with you alone again.

She brushes my jaw with her fingers, soft and patient. “You’re allowed to want this.”

“No,” I say, hoarse. “Not if it risks you.”

“I’m already in this,” she says gently. “You pulled me out of the deep. Let me stand beside you now.”

Her words undo me.

Because she means them.

Every syllable.

And I don’t know if that makes her braver than me, or just more foolish.

But either way, I pull her closer.

Let her rest her head back on my shoulder.

And for one more breath... I pretend the sea's forgotten us.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

The first thing I register when I wake up is the cold.

Not the temperature—though yeah, the shack’s drafty as hell—but the kind of cold that seeps into your chest when you reach for someone and find nothing.

I sit up slowly, blanket tangled around my hips, hair a mess, thighs still sore in the best kind of way.

And Calder’s gone.

The other side of the mattress is cool.

Untouched.

Like he vanished hours ago.

No note. No noise. Just air.

Goddammit.

I rub my face, heart sinking faster than a ley anchor.

I don’t panic. I don’t cry.

I’ve done this before—opened up, cracked a door, thought maybe, maybe someone

would stay.

Spoiler: They never do.

I pull on my shirt and jeans with robotic efficiency, my fingers moving faster than my thoughts. Because if I start thinking about how he held me last night... or the way his voice almost trembled when I touched his face...

I won't be able to breathe.

So instead, I throw my hair into a bun, jam my feet into my boots, and walk out into the morning like I'm not bleeding from the inside out.

Back at the lab, Mira takes one look at me and tosses a croissant in my general direction.

"You look like heartbreak and bad decisions."

"Good morning to you too," I mutter, catching the pastry one-handed.

She raises an eyebrow. "Did he bail?"

"Of course he bailed."

Kai snorts from the corner. "He left after sex? Wow. That's almost vintage toxic masculinity. Is he gonna turn into seafoam next?"

"No," I say tightly, taking a huge bite of flaky carbs to avoid screaming. "He's gonna turn into a ghost with great cheekbones and a martyr complex."

Mira winces. "You okay?"

“Peachy,” I say. “I’m burying it under science. Like a professional.”

And that’s exactly what I do.

For the next six hours.

I dig into the binding seal we found in the wreck. I cross-reference ley resonance maps with enchantment signatures from ancient siren scripts. I translate the spiral glyph again, even though I’ve memorized it.

Every time I start to feel something—his touch, his voice, the way he whispered my name like it meant something—I push harder.

I lose track of time. Of food. Of everything.

At some point, Mira quietly places a bottle of water on my desk and backs away like I’m a sleep-deprived velociraptor.

She’s not wrong.

But I need this.

Because if I can figure this out—if I can solve the curse, if I can rip it up by the roots and prove that magic doesn’t have to win—maybe he’ll stop running.

Maybe I’ll stop drowning every time he disappears.

Kai eventually slinks in around sundown, sipping something neon and vaguely illegal-looking.

“You’re spiraling,” she says.

“I’m analyzing.”

“You’re obsessing. ”

I don’t answer.

Because she’s right.

Because Calder cracked something open in me, and now I don’t know how to close it.

And the worst part?

I don’t want to.

I want him back.

I want last night again.

Not just the sex. Not even just the magic.

I want the version of him who held me like I was holy.

The version who let me see the man behind the monster.

But instead, I have this void where he should be.

And all I can do is work around it.

Try not to fall in.

“Okay,” Kai says, hopping up onto my desk like it’s not covered in half-deciphered

glyphs and magical debris, “I’m gonna say something, and you’re not allowed to throw anything at me.”

I squint at her. “If it starts with ‘I told you so,’ I reserve the right to throw something small .”

She holds up her hands. “Fine. No ‘I told you so.’ Just a gentle, loving reminder that you climbed onto a tidal emotional rollercoaster without checking the seatbelt. ”

“I had a seatbelt,” I mutter. “It was just made of sex and false hope.”

Kai winces. “Oof. That’s... bleak. And relatable.”

I sigh and push back from the table, scrubbing my hands down my face. “I thought maybe... I don’t know. That he’d stay. That last night meant something.”

“It probably did, ” Kai says gently. “But he’s not built for soft landings, babe. He’s all storm and guilt and thousand-year-old self-loathing.”

“He said he wanted me,” I whisper. “And I believed him.”

“Doesn’t mean he didn’t mean it. Just means he might not know what to do with it.”

She hops down, shoving a half-empty smoothie into my hand. “Drink that. You’ve had three coffee potions and no protein.”

I take it automatically, but I don’t sip.

Mira peeks in from the doorway, arms full of scrolls and concern.

“I rearranged the leyline overlays from the wreck zone,” she says softly, “but... I can

run them later. If you need time.”

I blink.

She never offers to delay analysis.

Not even for minor electrocutions.

“I’m fine,” I say too fast.

Both of them give me the look.

“You’re not sleeping,” Mira says.

“You’re not eating,” Kai adds.

“You’re compulsively tracking relic resonance patterns even when they’ve stabilized.”

“You also cried at that one siren ballad commercial yesterday.”

“That song is very manipulative,” I grumble, but my voice cracks halfway through.

And suddenly, I feel it.

The crack inside me that Calder left behind when he walked out of that shack.

It’s not clean. Not sharp.

It’s soft. Slow. Exhausting.

Because it didn't come from betrayal.

It came from absence.

From that quiet space he occupied so fully last night—and left just as fully by morning.

And the worst part?

I get it.

He's scared. Cursed. Traumatized.

But I'm scared too.

And I'm still here.

Kai rubs my shoulder. "You love him."

I swallow hard. "I think I do."

Mira's voice is quieter. "And you're scared he'll never let himself be loved."

That hits harder than anything else.

Because maybe that's the truth I've been avoiding in all this research and glyph-work and magical busywork.

Maybe Calder doesn't need saving.

Maybe he doesn't want to be saved.

Maybe I'm just another woman trying to pour sunlight into someone who's already decided he belongs in the dark.

And gods, I don't know if I have the strength to keep reaching for him...

If he keeps backing away.

I'm halfway to the exit when I hear her name.

Luna.

My spine locks up like I've just touched live leywire.

"She's considering it," someone says, just behind the curtain that separates the bar's main room from the back alcove. The voice is sharp. Familiar.

Council envoy. Juno.

"I heard she's applying for the Westwind Fellowship. Full funding. Artifact authority. Field access beyond the Bluffs."

I step closer, staying just in the shadows.

"She'll leave," Juno adds. "Once the grant comes through. Can't blame her. No real future here. Especially with him hanging around."

My stomach drops.

"She's the best we've had in two decades," someone else says. "We can't stop her. We shouldn't."

Laughter.

Agreement.

And then the sound fades as they move deeper into the alcove, taking their drinks and their casual dismantling of my entire fucking world with them.

I stand, anchored to the floor like something ancient and immovable.

She's leaving.

Not maybe.

Likely.

And gods, it shouldn't hurt like this.

But it does.

Because this time, it's not the sea stealing something from me.

It's me.

My silence.

My absence.

My fear .

I wanted to protect her. To keep her safe from the storm I carry inside me. But all I did was convince her I'd never choose her back.

And now?

Now I'm the reason she's packing up the pieces and preparing to walk away.

The idea slices through me deeper than any curse flare ever could.

Because Luna didn't just crawl into my bed.

She opened a place I didn't think could be touched anymore.

She made me want again.

And I let that want drown under guilt.

I turn toward the door.

The tide's coming in fast now.

And if I don't move soon...

I might lose the only person who's ever looked at the monster and reached for the man instead.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

The bar doesn't have a name.

It's carved into the side of the cliff, half-submerged at high tide and illegal in three magical jurisdictions. Most don't know it's here unless they're invited or unlucky. Tonight, I'm both.

The kelpies call it The Sinkhole.

It's exactly what I need.

The glowroot cocktails burn like sea acid and regret. The music vibrates through the floor in low, rhythmic pulses, like some ancient thing breathing just below the surface. The smell is salt and moss and sweet rot.

Perfect.

I've downed four drinks before the bartender—Osha, all gills and no patience—cuts me off. She replaces my glass with a chunk of driftwood carved with binding runes.

“You need water.”

I grunt. “I need to forget.”

“Then you came to the wrong place, curse boy.”

I glance around the room.

Kelpies lounge in tangled piles on furniture that shifts between driftwood and bone. A selkie in a leather duster is slow-dancing with a siren who has blood in her hair and no concern about it. Everything pulses with too much color. Too much noise.

I hate it.

But I can't leave.

Because if I leave, I'll go back to her.

And if I go back to her... I doubt I'll have the strength to let go again.

I close my eyes, and Luna's face floods the dark.

The sound she made when she came undone in my arms.

The way her voice cracked when she said she wasn't afraid.

The way she looked at me, like I was worth the storm.

I slam the driftwood down and mutter, "Fuck."

"That's not gonna help," says a voice beside me.

I turn—slowly, because the room tilts—and find Lyle. Tall. Soaked. Somehow simultaneously glowing and disheveled. His seaweed hair is braided into something tragic and his eyes are far too sober for how drunk he smells.

"What do you want?"

“To drink,” he says, flopping into the seat beside me and waving for a glass. “And to ask why you look like a thundercloud fucked a heartbreak poem.”

“I didn’t ask for company.”

“And yet, here I am. Like a barnacle on your emotional hull.”

I groan.

Lyle takes his drink, sips, and winces. “Ugh. Who made this? My regrets taste better.”

He leans on the bar, eyes too sharp for a drunk. “So. Let me guess. You slept with her.”

I don’t answer.

“You did ,” he crows, too loud.

“Keep your voice down.”

He ignores me. “And then you bailed. Classic cursed man-child maneuver. A+ commitment issues. Truly vintage.”

“Lyle.”

“No, no, I’m invested now,” he slurs, wagging a finger. “You let someone in , and it felt good , and now your trauma says, ‘Flee!’ like you’re some ancient sea deer dodging affection.”

I stare at him.

He stares back.

“I hate you.”

He smiles. “Everyone does. Except Mira. And she mostly tolerates me because I make good tea.”

I lean back, arms crossed. “You don’t get it.”

“I do get it. Because I am you. Just wetter. And with better cheekbones.”

I snort.

He nudges me. “Look, I’m not saying you’re not cursed. You are. You’re basically a romantic horror trope with a six-pack. But Luna’s not afraid of your darkness. She’s afraid you won’t let her walk beside you through it.”

I go still.

“She’s not asking you to be safe, Calder. She’s asking you to stay.”

My throat tightens.

Lyle finishes his drink in one dramatic gulp and stands. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna go scream into the surf and maybe romance a tragic seaweed god. You should go apologize to the woman who didn’t run when you showed her what you are.”

He pats my shoulder. “Let her love you, asshole.”

Then he’s gone—wobbling toward the back of the bar, shirt half-unbuttoned and

mumbling something about fate and snails.

I sit there for a long time.

Long enough for the tide to rise.

Long enough to realize I can't drown out what she gave me.

And I don't want to.

Not anymore.

I'm halfway to the exit when I hear her name.

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My spine locks up like I've just touched live leywire.

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Likely.

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But it does.

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It’s me.

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My absence.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

I should've known better than to respond to a text from Kai without inspecting the emojis.

“Emergency at The Gutter Mermaid. Bring gloves. Wear something washable.”

You'd think I'd learn. But no. I walk straight into the trap, clutching an industrial-strength aura filter and half-expecting to find a kelpie riot or another potion spill incident involving amorous barnacles.

What do I find instead?

Kai is sitting on the bar, surrounded by snacks, glitter pens, and what looks like a therapy workbook labeled “Feelings Don't Have to Suck: A Guide for Magical Hot Messes.”

This is worse.

“Inventory day?” I ask warily.

“Emotional inventory,” she says cheerfully, patting the bar next to her. “And surprise! You're the featured item.”

“Oh gods, no.”

“Oh gods, yes.” She tosses a sticker at me that says Cursed by Feelings. “Come on.

Sit. Be emotionally vulnerable. Or at least pretend until you accidentally start healing.”

I sigh and sit, because resistance is futile and Kai once threatened to have Mira hex my pants to squeal every time I lied.

She slides a cocktail toward me. It’s pink. It’s sparkling. It smells like honesty and poor decisions.

“I call it the ‘Heartbreaker Spritz.’ It makes you feel brave and vaguely guilty about your choices. Drink.”

I do. Because I’m tired and my defenses are low and honestly? If anyone’s going to hold up a mirror to my bullshit, it might as well be someone wearing seafoam eyeliner and sarcasm as a second language.

Kai twirls a pen. “Let’s begin with a diagnostic. On a scale of one to ‘I’m fine’ said while actively crying in a supply closet, how emotionally stable are you today?”

“I haven’t cried in this supply closet yet,” I mutter.

“Progress!” she chirps. “Now. Talk to me about the sea prince.”

I groan. “Do we have to?”

She gives me a look.

The kind that says yes, you idiot, that’s why I dragged you here and fed you a truth potion cocktail.

So I exhale. “He’s gone. Again.”

“After sex?”

“Yup.”

She hisses. “Oof. That’s the emotional equivalent of ghosting someone after they save your life and also see your weird birthmark.”

“He doesn’t do feelings. Or mornings. Or communication.”

“But you still want him,” she says softly.

I stare into my drink.

“Yeah.”

Kai swings her legs, voice gentler now. “So what hurts more—him leaving, or the fact that you almost expected it?”

That one gets me.

Because yeah, I did expect it. Some part of me always does.

That quiet voice that whispers, don’t get used to good things, they have an expiration date.

It’s not new. Just... sharper now.

“I thought maybe this time,” I say slowly, “he’d stay.”

“Because you let him in.”

“Because I wanted to.”

Kai nods like she’s seen this a hundred times, because she has.

Because behind her glitter and glam, she’s the unofficial therapist of half the magical beings in Lowtide.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Luna,” she says. “You let yourself hope. That’s not weakness. That’s human. ”

“I’m not used to it.”

“You’re used to research and snark and keeping your heart in a lab drawer.”

“Yeah. Where it’s safe and labeled and doesn’t get crushed by a shirtless sea prince with a hero complex.”

She laughs, but then it fades.

“You’re scared,” she says simply. “Of being too much. Or not enough.”

I swallow.

Because yeah.

That’s it.

“That’s the thing,” I whisper. “He makes me feel like too much and not enough all at once.”

Kai squeezes my hand.

“You don’t have to fix him,” she says. “You’re not a curse mechanic. You’re not a magical bandaid. You’re a person who deserves to be chosen. Freely. ”

Tears sting my eyes, and I blink them away.

“You think he’ll come back?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Maybe. If he pulls his head out of his emotionally repressed ass long enough to realize he’s not cursed because he loves you—he’s cursed because he’s convinced he doesn’t deserve it.”

I stare at her.

“That’s... unfairly insightful.”

“I’ve read three romance grimoires this week.”

We both laugh, but there’s a crack in mine.

A vulnerability I can’t patch over this time.

“I love him,” I say softly.

“I know.”

“But I don’t know if love is enough.”

Kai doesn’t sugarcoat it.

“Sometimes it isn’t. But sometimes... it’s the thing that breaks the curse.”

Kai slides off the bar, suddenly serious in a way that silences even the leyline hum around us. She plants herself in front of me, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

“No more deflecting,” she says. “We’re done with safe answers.”

I blink. “What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s time you decide what you actually want. Not what’s smart. Not what’s survivable. What your heart wants.”

“I can’t just throw everything away for?—”

“For what?” she cuts in. “For safety? For a maybe-someday that never shows up because you’re too scared to risk the fall?”

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Because she’s right.

I’ve been hiding behind logic, behind research, behind the thin veil of ‘I’ll fix him with knowledge’ because that feels safer than saying what I really want.

I want him.

Calder.

In all his cursed, storm-wrapped messiness.

Kai softens again, stepping close. “You want love, Luna. I’ve seen it. And you’re trying to pretend you don’t because you think choosing it makes you vulnerable.”

“It does.”

“Good,” she says fiercely. “That means it’s real.”

I look away, blinking hard.

“I’m scared,” I whisper.

She lifts my chin. “So is he. But you’ve come too far to back down now.”

I nod slowly.

Not sure.

But braver than I was ten minutes ago.

Kai kisses my forehead. “Choose, Luna. Safety, or love. You don’t get both.”

That night, I dream of water.

Cool. Endless. Familiar.

I’m floating, suspended in silver light, the sound of singing echoing all around me—but it’s not coming from outside.

It’s me.

My mouth is open. My voice moves through the current like a living thing, soft and searching. And through it, I feel him.

Calder.

He's reaching for me.

Not with fear.

Not with desperation.

But hope.

And I reach back.

Just before I wake, our fingers brush.

And I swear I hear him whisper my name.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

The cave hasn't changed.

Still smells like kelp rot and stormwater. Still buzzes at the edges like old spells barely holding their shape. Still echoes like something down here remembers when the ocean was young .

I strip to the waist and step into the pool.

It's colder than I remember.

The water bites, sliding over old scars and fresh regrets, but I don't flinch. If I've come this far, I'm not backing out because the water's angry.

"Come for absolution?" rasps the eel, coiling from the depths like smoke made flesh.

"No," I say.

"Then why do you stink of loss?"

"I need answers."

She laughs. Dry. Cruel. Hungry.

"And you think I give them for free?"

“I came to offer a truth.”

That stills her.

The Oracle Eel moves closer, her face a blur of fins and impossible eyes. “A truth freely given,” she echoes. “Not bartered. Not twisted. Are you sure?”

No.

But I nod anyway.

“Speak, cursed prince.”

I exhale slowly.

And then I say it.

“I loved someone once.”

The water shifts, but she says nothing.

“I was young. Reckless. Full of power and promise and pride. She was the Sea-Warden’s daughter—sharp as coral, with a voice that could command whales. I swore myself to her. Swore I’d return after the war.”

I close my eyes. It hurts. Even now.

“But I didn’t.”

The cave groans, the pool rippling with weight.

“I didn’t go back. I couldn’t. Because by the time the war ended... I’d broken the court’s sacred law.”

The eel watches, unmoving.

“I betrayed the Siren crown,” I whisper. “To save a human fleet.”

“You chose them .”

“I chose mercy. ”

“And she cursed you.”

“Yes.”

Silence falls like a tidal wave.

“Why?”

I laugh bitterly. “Because I couldn’t stomach more blood. Because I watched children drown, and I had the power to stop it. And I used it.”

The eel circles me now, slow and deliberate.

“Your voice was the blade.”

“And the balm,” I murmur. “And the bond. It was everything. Until it wasn’t.”

“You loved her.”

“I still do,” I whisper.

“Not the one who cursed you.”

“No.”

“The one who might leave you.”

My stomach turns.

Because that’s the worst of it, isn’t it?

I feel it slipping already—Luna’s presence, her touch, the spark in her when she looks at me like I’m more than the silence.

I don’t know how to hold on.

I don’t know if I should.

The eel pauses inches from my face. “You gave your truth. Now take mine.”

I brace.

“You do not lose her by loving her,” she hisses. “You lose her by fearing that love.”

The cave brightens—just once, a pulse of moonlight from nowhere.

Then all goes still again.

I stand there a long time.

Alone.

Wet.

And somehow... lighter.

Because I said it.

And maybe that means I'm ready to say it again.

To her.

I turn to go, the sting of truth still raw on my tongue. The cave feels heavier now—denser, like the weight of what I admitted is still circling in the shadows.

But just as I set my foot on the first ledge of stone, her voice slithers through the dark again.

“Not so fast, stormborn.”

I freeze.

Her tone has shifted. Not the hungry rasp she used when I first entered—this one coils around my ribs. It knows me now.

“You think confession frees you,” she says, rising once more from the pool like smoke wearing flesh. “But you forget. Magic that binds the heart does not break with simple honesty.”

I narrow my eyes. “You said one truth earns another.”

“I did.” Her grin flashes, serpentine. “But I did not say it was the final truth.”

The pool shimmers. Warmer. Louder.

And her face—if you can call it that—stretches wider, more ancient.

“You have given pain,” she says. “But your silence— your voice —you still keep that chained.”

I shift, suddenly feeling the weight of the silence I’ve carried not as a shield, but as a debt .

“You said the curse is tied to grief,” I murmur. “That it feeds off guilt.”

“I said it feeds on you, ” she snaps. “It lives in your lungs like a drowned oath. You did not lose your voice. You buried it.”

The words hit like cold.

I flinch.

Because somewhere deep, I know she’s right.

The magic that took my voice didn’t just rip it from me.

It demanded I give it up.

And when she cursed me... I let it happen.

Because I thought I deserved it.

She drifts closer, until I can feel the temperature drop where her magic presses into mine.

“Only a freely given voice can break what love once bound.”

My pulse stalls.

She sees it. Smiles wider.

“You gave your voice in love once,” she whispers. “To someone who broke you.”

“I trusted her,” I rasp. “And she cursed me.”

“And now you trust no one,” the eel hisses. “Not with your power. Not with your heart. Not even with a whisper.”

I clench my fists.

“You think if you stay quiet, you stay in control,” she continues. “But that silence—that fear—is the cage, not the key.”

My chest tightens.

“You speak nothing,” she says. “Because you think if you say something wrong again, the world will burn.”

I can’t breathe.

“You loved. You were wronged. And instead of healing, you turned your own voice into a punishment.”

I take a step back.

The cave spins.

“You kept your silence so no one could twist your words,” she says. “So no one could use your love as a weapon again.”

She rises higher. Her coils reach the ceiling now, undulating like smoke stitched with lightning.

“But you forget,” she whispers. “A gift locked away is not safe. It is rotting.”

The words strike something primal in me.

Because the truth is, I haven't just feared the curse.

I've clung to it.

Used it as a wall between me and anyone who might touch what I buried.

Because my voice?

It wasn't just power.

It was truth.

And giving it to someone... meant giving them everything.

My heart.

My history.

My name.

The eel lowers her face to mine again. “You want to break the curse?”

I nod.

“Then give it again.”

My voice catches. “To who?”

She tilts her head. “To the one who sings in your silence.”

My heart stutters.

Luna.

“Speak,” she says. “Not as weapon. Not as command. As offering. As invitation.”

The pool glows faintly. I feel warmth radiate from it.

“Only a voice given freely can undo what was bound in chains of fear.”

I stagger back, breath shallow, limbs shaking.

Because suddenly I understand.

This curse—it’s not a leash.

It’s a wound.

And if I want to heal...

I have to open my mouth again.

To choose my voice.

Not in rage.

Not in defense.

But in love.

Real , terrifying, heart-laid-bare love.

The kind Luna would accept without flinching.

The kind she already gave me.

My knees hit the rock as the truth crashes into me like a wave too heavy to resist.

I whisper her name.

It doesn't echo.

But it resonates.

Deep in my chest. Deep in the cave.

Deep in the curse.

And the Oracle smiles.

“Good,” she says. “Now go earn her ears.”

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

Which is already a red flag. Nothing good ever shows up in my inbox before coffee and a minor existential spiral.

Subject line:

“Congratulations, Dr. Wilder: Westwind Fellowship Award”

At first, I think it’s a mistake.

Then I see the sender. The seal. The watermark. The signature.

Not a scam.

Not a dream.

Real.

I stare at the screen.

Mouth slightly open. Mug frozen halfway to my lips.

And then I do something incredibly mature and professional.

I say, “Holy shit ,” and nearly spill coffee all over the ley line energy stabilizer.

Mira bolts into the room like a spell just detonated. “Did the field specter come back?”

“No,” I croak, spinning the laptop toward her. “Look.”

She blinks. Gasps.

“You got it.” She clutches the back of my chair. “Luna. You got it.”

“The Westwind,” I whisper. “They picked me. ”

“Top-tier research freedom. Full magical archive access. Travel budget with artifact pursuit rights. You could build your own damn department.”

“I could publish every sea-magic theory we’ve proven here tenfold.”

“You could rewrite the ley code protocols.”

I nod, eyes still locked on the glowing screen. “I could... everything.”

And then I see the attachment.

Fellowship Terms and Clauses.

My heart jumps. But I click it open. Because I’m a scientist. I follow details. I double-check my blessings.

The clauses scroll like a glittering red carpet—until I reach the one that makes my stomach turn.

“The recipient agrees to full cooperation with the Department of Magical Integrity in

cataloging all anomalous magical artifacts, energies, and entities encountered during grant-related research. Evidence must be turned over in its entirety for classification and containment purposes. No exceptions.”

I stare.

And stare.

Because “entities” doesn’t mean ghosts or ley surges.

It means Calder.

It means his curse.

His voice.

Him.

Mira’s still celebrating behind me, tossing sparkly sticky notes in the air. She finally notices my silence and creeps back to my side.

“You look like you just read your own obituary.”

I point to the clause.

She leans in.

“...Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“They want everything ?”

“All the relics. All the data. All the... beings. If it’s anomalous, it’s evidence.”

“Including?”

I nod slowly.

She sits down beside me, hard. “That’s not just academic. That’s predatory.”

“They always frame it in pretty words. Oversight. Containment. Preservation.”

“But it’s still exploitation.”

I clench my fists. “They want me to prove magic. But to them, proving it means boxing it. Studying it. Draining it.”

“And Calder?—”

“Would be a target the moment I name him.”

Mira is quiet.

I can hear the hum of the ley grid under our floor. The quiet whir of the aura stabilizer. My own heartbeat, thick in my ears.

This is everything I’ve worked for.

Years.

Blood. Sweat. Magical near-death experiences.

This fellowship is validation. Power. Autonomy.

I deserve it.

But I didn't fall in love with power.

I fell in love with him.

I slam the laptop shut like it might bite me.

Mira reaches for my hand, her voice quieter now. "You don't have to decide today."

"I already did," I whisper. "A year ago, when I applied. I built my career on proving the impossible."

"But you didn't know him then."

"No," I say. "I didn't."

We sit in silence for a while.

Then Mira asks the question I've been dreading.

"What are you going to do?"

I don't answer.

Because I don't know.

I want both.

I want Calder. And I want this grant. I want to change the field from within. I want to rewrite the rules so people like him don't have to hide anymore.

But I can't do that from a position I bought by betraying him.

Mira stands. "I'll run some simulations. On what we can publish without triggering the clause."

"Thanks."

I walk out into the dunes, the wind snapping at my coat, the sea churning like it knows something's wrong.

And I scream.

Loud. Harsh.

Full of salt and heartbreak and rage.

Because I don't want to choose.

But if I don't...

I'll lose both.

By sunset, the lab is buzzing.

Mira has already printed the grant banner from the university press release and tacked it to the wall above my desk. She's bouncing between data logs and spreadsheet tabs like a hyperactive sea sprite.

“I’m telling you,” she says, waving a coral-pink highlighter, “this changes everything. We can map the South Ridge leyline fault with equipment we’ve never touched. We can reverse engineer rift decay. Hell, we could build our own magical oceanography lab.”

She twirls, throws confetti into the air, and yells, “Luna Wilder, you sea witch genius!”

Kai, by contrast, is slumped on my couch with a drink and a very tight smile.

“You okay?” she asks, softly, when Mira darts into the supply closet in search of more glitter.

I nod too quickly. “Yeah. Just processing.”

“Luna.”

“I am. ”

She watches me for a moment. “So... do you want to celebrate?”

“I... I don’t know.”

Because inside, I’m quiet.

Not triumphant. Not proud.

Just this dull ache of almost.

Because Calder still hasn’t come back.

He's not in the shack. Not on the cliffs. Not near the tide marker where he usually broods dramatically at dusk.

And I'm starting to feel it in my bones.

The withdrawal. The slow sinking.

The feeling of being left again.

"Maybe I'm just tired," I mumble.

Kai gets up, crosses the room, and sits beside me.

"You haven't seen him?"

I shake my head. "Not since the dream."

Her brow furrows. "You told him about the grant?"

"I haven't even seen his shadow, Kai."

She doesn't push.

Just leans into me, shoulder to shoulder.

"You still want to go?" she asks after a long beat.

"I don't know."

Because it was supposed to be simple. Glory or heartbreak. Power or love.

But it's not.

Because if I stay—and he doesn't want me, I'll have given up everything for nothing.

And if I go, I'll always wonder if he would've come back.

CALDER

I find her on the cliffs, like I knew I would.

She's silhouetted against the dusk, wind tangling her hair, her coat clutched tight around her like she's trying to hold herself together.

I don't say her name, not yet.

Because I don't know what I'm about to say after.

She turns when she hears my footsteps—sharp and slow, like she's bracing for a wave.

“You're late,” she says, voice flat.

I nod once. “I'm here.”

“That's not the same thing.”

No. It's not. I walk closer anyway.

“You got the grant.”

She lifts a shoulder. “Guess you heard.”

“I did.”

Her jaw tightens. “And?”

I reach for words. Don’t find the right ones.

“I came to say goodbye,” I finally manage.

That breaks her.

Not visibly, not right away. But I see it in her eyes—how they go glassy, then hard.

“Of course you did,” she says.

“I’m not good at staying.”

“No kidding.”

“Luna—”

“Don’t.” Her voice cracks. “Don’t do this if you’re just going to disappear again.”

I move before I think. I cross the space between us in two steps and pull her against me.

She resists for half a breath—then melts into my chest like she’s exhausted from fighting gravity.

“I didn’t come here to leave you,” I whisper. “I came because if this is the last time, I want to remember everything.”

Her breath catches.

“Don’t say that,” she whispers.

I cup her face, force her to look at me.

“I love you.”

Her eyes go wide.

“I love you, Luna Wilder. And I’m sorry it took this long.”

She swallows hard. “Then don’t let it be goodbye.”

I kiss her, desperately, without any softness.

She responds instantly, grabbing my coat, pulling me close, like she’s trying to anchor herself.

We stumble back toward the shack, barely making it through the door before she’s pushing me against it.

“Take it off,” she growls, tugging at my coat.

I shrug it off and press her against the wall, kissing her until she gasps.

My hands slide under her shirt, up her spine, memorizing every inch of warm, willing skin.

“Gods, I missed you,” she breathes, fumbling at my belt.

“I couldn’t stay away,” I admit. “Not from you.”

She pulls me down into a kiss so fierce it's more like a promise, then pushes me back toward the bed.

Clothes fall away—hers, mine—until there's nothing between us but breath.

She sinks onto the mattress, legs parted, flushed and waiting.

“Come here,” she says, voice thick.

I kneel between her thighs, run my fingers through the slick heat of her pussy, and she moans—head thrown back, eyes glazed.

“You're soaked,” I murmur, rubbing her slowly. “For me.”

“Always for you.”

I groan, fingers curling inside her. She arches, hips grinding down.

“Don't tease me,” she begs.

“Never,” I reply. Not tonight, at least.

I guide my cock to her entrance, holding her gaze.

“Look at me.”

She does.

And I slowly push in, deep and aching. She gasps, nails digging into my back.

I fill her completely, stretching her walls, and for a moment we just breathe, locked

together.

“Fuck, you feel like home,” I rasp.

Her legs wrap around me, urging me in deeper.

I start to move in long, deliberate strokes. Each one saying what I can't.

She moans into my mouth as I kiss her, her hands sliding to my ass, urging me on.

I give her everything: all the pressure, all the rhythm, all the need.

“You're mine,” I growl against her throat.

“Yes,” she gasps. “Yours.”

Her pussy clenches around me, pulling me tighter, and I lose control—thrusting harder, rougher, but she meets every one like a challenge.

“More,” she pleads.

I flip her over, haul her hips up, and take her from behind, gripping her hair, watching her back arch.

“Fuck, Luna,” I growl. “You're so good. So perfect for me.”

“Yes Calder,” she cries, trembling. “Harder, please, don't stop!”

I do as she asks and fuck her harder until she's sobbing with pleasure, collapsing onto her elbows as her orgasm hits, sharp and stunning.

I follow with a roar, spilling inside her.

We collapse in a heap of sweat and salt and love we're not ready to lose.

And for a moment, we don't.

Her breath's still stuttering when I curl around her from behind. Her skin is warm against me, pulsing with aftershocks.

I breathe her in, memorizing the scent of her—salt and fire and something that's just hers.

She's quiet.

Too quiet.

And the words crawl up my throat like they've been waiting there all night.

"You should take the grant."

She stiffens.

I pull her closer anyway. "Go. Take it. Get everything you've earned. Forget this town. Forget me."

"No," she whispers.

"You have to."

She turns slowly, her eyes already wet. "Why?"

“Because I’m cursed. Because I’ll always be cursed. Because you can’t build a future on someone who’s afraid to stand in the sun.”

“I’m not leaving because I’m scared,” she says. “I’d be leaving because you are.”

I wince.

But she doesn’t look away.

“You think love is the risk,” she says, voice trembling. “But it’s the only part of this whole damn thing that isn’t.”

I shake my head. “Luna?—”

She kisses me.

Slow.

Soft.

Lingering.

Like it’s a promise she has no intention of keeping.

And when she pulls back, she whispers, “I’m not forgetting you, Calder. So you better decide fast if you’re going to let me remember you with or without you.”

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

I sign the grant acceptance letter with a hand that feels like it belongs to someone else.

It's temporary, I tell myself.

Just long enough to collect the last batch of data. Just long enough to take what I need and dismantle the machine from the inside. It's strategy. Not surrender.

I send the email, close my laptop, and wait for the rush of pride I thought I'd feel.

It doesn't come.

Instead, there's just this low thrum in my chest. Like a leyline gone off-key.

Like something breaking quietly where no one can see.

Mira is thrilled.

“Smartest tactical pivot you've ever made,” she says, clapping her hands. “Access, funding, mobility—and when you pull the plug? You'll have every artifact and data point they could ever try to bury.”

Kai's more subdued.

She leans against the counter at The Gutter Mermaid, stirring her drink with a straw

like it personally offended her.

“You’re walking a line, Wilder.”

“I know.”

“You sure you won’t get sucked in?”

“That’s the plan.”

She studies me for a moment, then says, “It’s not just the council you’re lying to, you know.”

I lift my chin. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You haven’t talked to him since that night.”

I look away.

“It’s not avoidance,” I say. “It’s... boundaries.”

She snorts. “Call it what you want. But you’re both walking around this town like ghosts who died holding hands.”

Calder’s silence settles over Lowtide like fog.

He’s still around—I see him on the cliffs sometimes, or disappearing into the surf at dusk—but he never comes close. Never speaks.

We’re orbiting each other.

Too raw to touch.

Too scared to let go.

It bleeds into everything I do.

Every field report, every relic scan, every half-finished chart has a hollow ache stitched into its corners.

I try to focus. I do.

But every time I look at the data, all I see is him.

The way his voice broke.

The way his body held mine like a lifeline.

The way he begged me to leave him behind.

One night, I find a tideprint in the sand behind the lab.

Large.

Deliberate.

I kneel beside it, fingers hovering over the indent like it might still be warm.

I don't call his name.

I don't run after him.

But I sit there until the tide washes it away.

Because some part of me needs to believe he's still watching.

Still wondering.

Like I am.

A week passes.

Then two.

I finish the final scans of the rift zone and prep a full spectral overlay of the altar structure. My hands move automatically. My mind doesn't.

Because I've already made my choice.

I'll give them the data.

Then I'll give them hell.

And when I'm done...

I'll come back here.

To him.

If he lets me.

If he hasn't turned to mist and memory by then.

But I won't chase a man who won't fight for himself.

Not even if I love him.

Especially if I love him.

I'm elbow-deep in relic dust and artifact residue when Lyle waltzes into the lab uninvited.

He's wearing a "Crabs Are Just Salty Spiders" t-shirt, carrying a smoothie, and wielding the emotional subtlety of a drunk selkie at open mic night.

"Hey," he says casually, sliding up to the table with the energy of a seagull about to steal fries. "So... just wondering, are you and Calder, like... broken up or whatever?"

I nearly drop a rune shard.

I stare at him. "What?"

He holds up his smoothie like it's a diplomatic offering. "No judgment! Totally chill. Just, y'know, the whole town is kind of on edge, and Calder's been moodier than usual—which is saying something for a guy whose resting face screams 'do not approach or you will die of emotional frostbite.'"

"Lyle—"

"He growled at a tide shifter for wearing a hoodie similar to yours. Also someone said he punched a mirror in the fisherman's cove? So. Context."

I clench my jaw. "We weren't a thing. We were just... adjacent."

Lyle's brows lift. "Adjacent?"

"Adjacent to something. Curse therapy with benefits."

"So... situationship with trauma?"

"Pretty much."

He slurps his smoothie.

"Still sounds like a breakup."

I groan, dropping my head to the table with a muffled thump.

Mira strolls in at that exact moment, arms full of scrolls, eyebrows already raised.

"He's bothering you, isn't he?"

"He's doing that thing again," I mumble, face still buried, "where he casually dismantles my emotional repression with questions wrapped in kelpie sass."

Lyle beams. "It's a gift."

"Out," Mira says, pointing toward the door.

"Fine. But I'm leaving the smoothie. It's passionfruit and chaos. Just like this lab."

He backs out dramatically. Mira closes the door behind him and drops the scrolls beside me.

"I pulled everything from the wreck overlay logs. You said you wanted to look again."

I sit up, dragging my fingers through my hair.

“Yeah. I do.”

She spreads the materials across the table, careful and precise. Spiral glyphs. Fragmented binding sigils. Ley residue imprints from the altar stone.

“He won’t ask for help,” I mutter, picking up the spectral map. “So I’m going to fix this without him.”

Mira doesn’t argue.

Just starts sorting glyph translations like she already expected this.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say slowly, “the curse doesn’t just silence him. It turns his power inward. His voice—his gift—it’s not gone. It’s bound.”

Mira frowns. “Like a sealed frequency?”

“More like a looping command structure. The kind designed to contain a source of immense power and emotional volatility.”

She nods. “And his voice was both.”

I trace my finger over the spiral’s center, where the leylines fracture outward like ribs cracking around a heart.

“This isn’t just punishment. It’s a mirror.”

Mira’s brows lift. “A mirror of what?”

“Of guilt,” I whisper. “He believed he deserved it. And magic obeys belief like blood obeys gravity.”

She exhales. “That’s cruelly elegant.”

“Which means we don’t break it by overpowering it. We break it by changing what he believes. ”

I pause, staring down at the ink.

“It feeds on silence because silence is what he thinks protects the people he loves.”

“And it anchors itself in betrayal,” she says. “Because that’s what created it.”

I look up.

“Then forgiveness is the counter-charm.”

Her eyes widen. “You think if he forgives himself?—”

“It might unbind the loop. His voice, his magic, his freedom. ”

“But how do you make someone believe they’re worthy of forgiveness?” she asks.

I don’t answer.

Because I don’t know.

But I intend to find out.

I’ve seen the cracks in him. The fault lines between rage and sorrow. He’s held onto

that guilt like a lifeline—like if he lets it go, he'll float away.

But I won't let him drift.

Not without knowing he could come back.

I start organizing the overlays, hands moving faster now. “We'll map every sequence. Track the feedback loop. Build a counter-rhythm he can align with. If he sings into the structure willingly...”

“You think it might resonate,” she finishes. “Unlock what's buried.”

I nod. “It's not magic we need.”

“It's a key.”

She places her hand over mine.

“Then let's build one.”

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

The cave is older than memory.

Black stone carved by salt and time, sloping down into the belly of the sea. Bioluminescent moss veins the walls like an underwater galaxy, and the air thrums with low, eldritch vibrations—music too deep for ears, but not for bone.

She lives here. Of course she does.

Nerida.

My mother's sister. My aunt. The last true tide-singer of the Eastern Deep.

And the only one who knows how to unravel this curse without unraveling me along with it.

I step onto the threshold.

Her voice reaches me before she does. "You've grown tired of silence, then?"

I flinch.

Because it isn't just a greeting. It's a scalpel.

She emerges from the dark like she's poured from it—all silver scales and skin that shifts like dusk over water. Her hair floats behind her like strands of black kelp, and

her eyes... gods, her eyes are mirrors. Not literal. Worse.

Emotional.

“I need answers,” I say, and my voice comes out hoarse. Worn. “About Lysira.”

“Ah.” She tilts her head. “So it is her again.”

I nod once, throat tight.

She gestures for me to sit by the singing pool. I do, sinking onto the cool stone. The surface of the water pulses with rhythm—slow, heartbeat-deep, matching mine. I hate that I find comfort in it.

“She was once your consort,” Nerida says without looking at me. “And she is the one who bound you.”

“Why?” I croak. “I know I broke an oath, but?—”

“You didn’t just break it, Calder.” Her tone sharpens. “You shattered it. You left the Siren Court at the height of its power. You loved her and then turned your voice—your sacred voice—against them. You used it to save the humans she called prey.”

I clench my fists. “I made a choice.”

“And she made hers,” Nerida replies. “The curse she crafted was no simple silencing. It was a soul-braid. She didn’t just take your voice—she stitched it into your heart. Bound it to your guilt, your self-hatred, your silence.”

I stare into the glowing water.

“And now?”

“Now, it will only unbind if you give something freely.”

“What?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“Vulnerability.” She finally looks at me. “A truth spoken without armor. You must voice the thing you most fear. Only then will the braid loosen. Only then will the curse crack.”

I swallow. My mouth is dry.

“She said I was her storm,” I murmur. “And I left her to drown.”

Nerida’s eyes soften. “You never drowned her, Calder. You drowned yourself. And now you’re crawling back to the surface.”

I think of Luna.

Her fire. Her fury. Her faith.

“She’s not Lysira,” I say.

“No,” Nerida agrees. “But she might be your undoing in a better way.”

A pause.

“Are you willing,” she asks, “to let her hear who you really are?”

I close my eyes.

And for once, the silence inside me doesn't feel like safety.

It feels like a prison.

I don't go straight back to the surface.

Instead, I let the ocean hold me—suspended in cold, heavy quiet beneath Nerida's grotto. The pressure wraps around me like weighted cloth. Not crushing. Just... insistent. Like even the sea itself knows it's time I stop hiding from what I am.

There's a ridge here I used to come to after battles. When I was younger. Angrier. Drenched in salt and shame and the kind of grief that doesn't make noise—it just hums beneath your bones. I used to think the silence down here matched me.

Now I see it mirrors the prison I built with my own hands.

Not one spellbound by Lysira's curse—but one I reinforced every damn time I swallowed my truth and pretended it didn't hurt.

Gods.

I don't even know when it started, this obsession with keeping everything buried.

Maybe it was after I saw the first human drown and did nothing.

Maybe it was the day I used my voice to drag a ship away from the rocks, and realized what it felt like to save someone instead of seduce or destroy.

Maybe it was the day I met Luna—loud, brilliant Luna—who didn't shrink back when I growled, who pushed harder when I snapped, who cracked me open without ever asking for permission.

She doesn't know it, but she's already undone me in more ways than the curse ever did.

She looked at me like I wasn't monstrous.

Not pitiful, not broken. Just... frustrating. Complicated. Worth figuring out.

And for someone like me, that's more terrifying than any curse.

Because I've clung to the belief that silence is control. That if I just kept my distance—physically, emotionally—I'd never be dangerous again.

I'd never hurt anyone.

But Luna makes me want.

To be known. To be forgiven. To be held without consequence.

I drift lower, toward the old trench where Sirens once gathered to mourn. Coral bones twist from the rock like pale fingers. It smells like time down here—dark and deep and endless.

This is where I used to scream underwater.

When the curse first took hold, I would dive so deep my ears rang, and scream with everything I had. Soundless. Ineffectual. Just pressure in my throat and fire behind my eyes.

Back then, I thought silence was punishment.

Now I know it was a wall.

And behind that wall was the part of me that still believed I had something left to say.

I hover in the middle of the trench and close my eyes. Salt stings my eyelids. My hands curl loosely at my sides. Not fists—just readiness. Not resistance—acceptance.

I think about the truth Nerida said I'd have to give freely.

Not facts. Not exposition. But a truth with teeth.

One I've never said out loud—not even to myself.

It comes slow, soft, but real: I want to be loved.

Gods, there it is.

It makes my chest hurt.

I want to be loved—not feared, not revered, not tolerated.

And I want to love back.

I want to say her name without thinking it's a mistake. I want to touch her without fearing I'll corrupt her. I want to believe I deserve even a scrap of what she offered so freely.

But I don't just want her.

I want to speak again.

Not just in magic. Not in siren-song.

I want to say things that matter.

To wake up beside her and mutter curses at the sun. To fight and make up and share food and stories and space. To grow old—even if I never age.

To exist with her in ways that feel ordinary and alive.

I let the thought settle.

It's the first time I've admitted it—not just the curse, but the life I've refused to live.

Because it's safer to ache in silence than to risk the sound of your own longing.

But I'm done with safety.

I'm done with shadows and control and pretending that keeping quiet makes me noble.

It makes me lonely.

And I am so damn tired of being alone.

The current nudges me forward, gentle now. As if the sea, too, is tired of my pretending.

So I turn, slowly, and begin the long ascent toward light.

And as I rise, I whisper—soundless still, but truer than any chant or spell: I want to be free.

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

I've rewritten this damn chant four times, and each version makes me want to lob my notebook straight into the sea.

"This is the magical equivalent of drunk texting your ex," I say, stabbing my pencil into a scratchpad covered in chicken-scratch notes and coffee stains.

"It's not drunk texting if you mean it," Kai offers from the counter, where she's perched like a caffeinated sea sprite.

She's wearing her 'brainstorming' hoodie—oversized, threadbare, and absolutely smothered in embroidered charms and pinned-on sigils that have long since lost their original purpose.

Mira snorts without looking up from her array of bones and crystal shards. "It's not a breakup if neither of you ever admitted you were together."

"Guys," I groan. "Not helping."

Lyle pipes up from the floor, where he's half-curled around a pile of enchanted driftwood. "Actually, I think this is going great. For once, nobody's bleeding."

"Give it time," I mutter.

But beneath the sarcasm, I'm grateful. We're all exhausted—emotionally, magically, academically—but they showed up anyway. No questions asked. Just friends who

would literally help me reverse-engineer a siren curse using duct tape and questionable runes.

Kai swings her legs, mug balanced on her knee. “You said the curse was fueled by grief and betrayal, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, brushing my hair out of my face. “The spell matrix was saturated with old magic. Stuff tied to Calder’s voice, his heart.”

“So we reverse it,” she says. “We flood it with something else. Something newer. More human.”

“Love?” Lyle suggests, half-mocking.

I freeze. Mira stills. Even Kai pauses.

“Yeah,” I say after a long beat. “Love. But not the pretty kind. Not hearts-and-flowers or first-date flutters. I’m talking about the messy kind. The holy-shit-I’d-bleed-for-you kind. The kind that doesn’t flinch when you’re ugly and broken and pissed off.”

Mira’s voice is soft when she says, “You’re in love with him.”

I roll my eyes, but my heart’s beating way too fast. “Congratulations. We’ve all caught up to the plot.”

“Then stop writing this like a term paper,” Kai says, hopping down. “We’re not gonna crack this by being clever. We need to be honest.”

“I am being honest,” I protest, waving my notebook. “This is the most honest I’ve ever?—”

“No.” She takes the notebook gently from my hands and sets it aside. “This is cautious. It’s intellectual. It’s safe. You wanna break a love-curse? You better bleed for it.”

Mira clears her throat. “Metaphorically. Please. No more blood on my quartz.”

“Seriously,” Lyle says, holding up a rune stone. “These things are porous.”

I sit down hard in the rickety chair. The legs groan like they’re judging me.

Kai leans forward. “Luna. What would you say to him if he were right here?”

“I’d punch him first,” I mutter. “Then I’d... I don’t know. Tell him to stop hiding. Tell him I see him, and it doesn’t scare me.”

“Write that,” Kai says.

So I do.

The words come slow, but true.

I write about the first time I saw him in the moonlight, cursing the sea like it owed him something.

I write about the sound of his voice when he’s not trying to be mean—but trying not to care.

I write about how it feels to look at someone and know they’ve been drowning for centuries, and still want to throw them a rope.

I write about love. Real, terrifying, get-under-your-skin-and-haunt-your-bones love.

And when I read it aloud—just once, soft and shaky—Kai wipes at her eyes with her sleeve and mutters, “Okay, yeah, we’re cursed too now.”

Mira doesn’t say anything. Just adds a new symbol to the circle, something glowing and gentle.

Lyle whispers, “That was, like, violently romantic.”

I laugh.

I believe this might work.

Not because it’s perfect. But because we made it together.

Because my truth is finally louder than my fear.

And Calder? He’s going to feel it.

Even if he’s too afraid to admit what he feels back.

The next morning, the sea fog clings low to the sand like it knows something’s about to break.

Mira’s got her hair twisted up in about six different pencils, aura scanners strapped to her arms like some techno-shaman war general. She hands me a rune disk pulsing with gentle blue light. “This one’s synched with the heart relic. If the chant takes hold, it’ll act as a stabilizer.”

“Good,” I say, fingers closing around it like it’s a lifeline. “How’re we on ley convergence?”

“Peak’s at moonrise,” she says. “That gives us twelve hours. I’m mapping the energy flare around the altar. Kai’s placing signal stones along the tidepath.”

“And Lyle?” I ask.

Mira grins. “Building a dramatic fire pit and pretending he’s not nervous.”

“Classic.”

We hike down to the cove, packs full of relics and spell components clanking like we’re heading into magical battle—which, honestly, we are. The sea churns near the rocks, uneasy. The current’s restless. I can feel it under my skin, like it’s waiting for a decision.

Calder hasn’t shown up.

I don’t expect him to.

He’s made it clear he doesn’t want saving.

But I’m doing it anyway.

Not because I think I can fix him. Not because I think love solves curses.

But because I see him.

And no one else ever tried to.

Kai’s already knee-deep in saltwater, planting runes along the perimeter like she owns the tide. Mira’s setting up a pulse generator made from enchanted kelp fiber and stolen council code. She glances at me over her shoulder. “If this backfires, I

want my eulogy to include my Wi-Fi password.”

“Noted,” I say, managing a grin.

She gets serious. “You sure about this?”

“No,” I admit. “But I’m done letting him carry this alone.”

I plant my boots in the sand, heart hammering.

Calder doesn’t have to show.

He doesn’t have to say yes.

But when this spell hits the water, it’ll call to him.

And if there’s any part of him left that still wants to be free—he’ll come.

Even if it kills us both.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

I feel it in my chest before I even hit the shore.

Not pain. Not pressure.

Something missing.

The current stutters near the cove like it's been clipped, interrupted. As if some part of the magic holding me down has... shifted.

I stumble through the foam, boots sinking in the slush of half-tide muck. A gull screeches overhead—too close, too loud. My balance falters. Something's wrong with the ley flow. Not broken, but changed.

I've felt this before, once—long ago—when the curse first wrapped around my throat. When it silenced my voice and sang a thousand lies into my blood.

But now? It's humming.

Soft. Wild. Human.

I round the bend of the bluff just as Nerida's translucent form rises from the seafoam. Her hair whips like a banner in the wind.

She doesn't waste time.

“Your human has rewritten the ritual,” she says. Her voice is low, almost reverent.
“With emotion. With truth.”

“What does that mean?”

“She turned down the grant.”

I blink, as if that’ll clear the absurdity from the air.

“No.” My voice is a growl. “She wouldn’t do that. She—she fought for that funding. She needs it.”

“She sent back the stipend. Burned the fine print. Sent her thesis in with every mention of you stripped out. You’ve been wiped from the academic record, Calder.”

“That’s suicide.” My heart thunders. “That’s her career. That’s everything.”

Nerida cocks her head. “She chose you. ”

And that does something brutal to me.

I turn from her, nearly tripping over my own boots in the sand. “She shouldn’t have.”

“But she did.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, pulse pounding in my throat. It’s too much. I wanted her gone. Safe. Out of reach. Not because I didn’t care—but because I do. Because letting her near the broken pieces means she might try to hold them, and if she drops them... they’ll cut her to the bone.

I’ve destroyed people I loved before.

And I swore I'd never let that happen again.

“Where is she?” I rasp.

“Where you left her,” Nerida says. “At the altar. Rebuilding what you wouldn't face.”

I don't thank her. I just run.

By the time I find her, the wind has picked up. The tide roars like it's fighting to be heard.

Luna stands near the circle drawn in salt and charcoal, her hair whipping around her like flame. The wind catches the pages she's scattered—scrawled notes, spell fragments, runes etched in thick ink. A pulse stone glows faintly at her side, tuned to her heartbeat.

She doesn't look up.

“You're late,” she says flatly.

“I didn't ask for this.”

She snorts. “And I didn't ask to fall for a broody sea demon with abandonment issues. Life's full of little surprises.”

My chest clenches. “You gave it all up.”

“Yup.”

“The grant?—”

“Gone.”

“Your thesis?—”

“Torched.”

My hands fist at my sides. “Why the hell would you do that?”

She finally looks at me then, her eyes full of fury and grief and some deeper kind of truth.

“Because you matter more than a fucking footnote in a magical journal.”

The wind howls. The sea seethes. But she’s louder.

“I know you’re scared. I know you think loving someone means you’ll ruin them. But newsflash, Calder— I’m not afraid of you. I’m afraid of losing you to your own damn self-loathing.”

“Luna—”

“You think hiding is noble? It’s not. It’s cowardice dressed in self-sacrifice. And I see right through it.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then don’t.”

I flinch like she slapped me.

Because it’s that simple.

Because she's not demanding answers or promises—just presence.

I step forward, slowly. “How do I just be... this?”

“Try,” she says. “Start with here. Start with now. ”

The pulse stone flares.

She holds it between us like a tether.

“I wrote something,” she says softly. “A chant. But not for the council. Not for the books. For you.”

She presses it into my hand. “It's made of truth. Of memory. Of choice.”

I stare at the stone, then back at her. My throat tightens.

“You're asking me to let go of everything.”

She nods. “So I can hold something. ”

A beat of silence.

Then another.

And finally, I say the words I've been terrified of:

“I'm scared.”

She takes my face in her hands.

“So am I.”

Then she kisses me—soft and fierce and terrifyingly gentle.

And I let her.

Because for the first time in centuries... I want to stay.

“I’m not some broken myth you can glue back together with poetry,” I snap, voice low and rough.

“You think that’s what I’m doing?” she fires back, stepping into my space like she’s daring me to push her away. “You think this is pity?”

“You threw away your career—your future —for what? For me?”

“For us, you stubborn, emotionally-stunted bastard!”

The air crackles.

I step back, hand clenching. “There is no ‘us.’ There’s you, and your obsession with fixing things, and me—one bad breath away from breaking everything.”

Her hands tremble at her sides, but she doesn’t flinch.

“You think I haven’t seen what you carry? You think I don’t know what fear looks like? I’m not doing this because I think I can save you, Calder.”

Her voice drops to a whisper.

“I’m trying to stand with you. ”

The silence afterward is thunderous.

I stare at her, throat aching, wind cold against my skin.

“Luna...”

She shakes her head, blinking fast. “You don’t have to say anything. But I’ll be at that altar when the tide turns. Whether you come or not... that’s up to you.”

She turns before I can speak.

The wind swallows her footsteps as she walks away.

And I just stand there, shaking, heart cracked wide.

“I’ll try,” I say too late, to no one.

But I mean it.

If I can find my voice—if I can still choose, I’ll meet her.

At the altar.

Where fate waits to be rewritten.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

The sea's growl is louder tonight.

There's something feral in the way the wind bites at my cheeks, salty and sharp, like it's trying to warn me away from what I'm about to do. Too bad for it—I've always had a problem with authority. Especially when that authority is a pissed-off ocean and a moon that's too bright for its own good.

The supermoon casts silver shadows over the sand, turning the beach into something from a fever dream. Waves pound the shoreline like war drums, and somewhere in the middle of it, I'm standing in thigh-deep water with a relic in one hand and my heart in the other.

"You're insane, Luna!" Kai had shouted before I left the shack. "There's no proof this'll even work!"

I turned back, only once. "Proof's overrated. Besides, since when did we need permission to do the impossible?"

Now, I'm alone. Well—me, the crashing tide, and the ghosts of every bad decision I've made in the last three months.

I've got my boots buried in the wet sand, soaked to the knees, the chill creeping up like a dare.

Mira's relics are strapped to my belt, my custom chant carved into the slip of sea

parchment tied to my wrist. The air tastes like static and old magic.

I draw a breath that rattles in my ribs and lift my arms. The chant rolls out of me like it's always been there, waiting just under the surface.

"By moon's command and sea's deep heart?—

Unbind the voice, let fate restart?—"

The ocean hisses. The relics spark.

I keep going, louder now, the words vibrating in my bones.

"Where love was crushed and vows undone?—

Let storm and song restore the one?—"

The wind howls, but I don't stop.

"Let him be free!"

And then—I hear it.

Not a crash of thunder. Not the roar of waves. But a note.

Low. Haunting. Carved out of centuries of silence.

I turn.

He's there.

Calder stands at the edge of the surf like a shadow peeled out of myth—dripping wet, shoulders squared, eyes locked on mine. His shirt is half torn, hair wild from the wind, and his mouth—God, his mouth—is open in a note so pure it cuts the air like glass.

He's singing.

Calder Thorne is singing.

The sound of it tears through me, achingly beautiful and so alive I forget the cold, the ritual, everything.

He walks toward me, each step a vow. His voice threads through the chant I started, weaving new magic into the old bones of the spell. And I can feel it—can feel it—rising all around us like a second tide.

Magic pulses in the sand. The relics flare.

He reaches me, still singing, and grabs my hand. His skin is warm, burning hot even through the cold surf.

“I couldn't let you do this alone,” he murmurs, breaking the song only to speak.

“Good,” I say, my voice cracking. “Cause I wasn't gonna let you get away with leaving me behind.”

A surge of water crashes around us, but we stand firm. Calder closes his eyes and sings again, louder now. The chant bends to his voice, twisting upward into something wild and holy and free .

The sky splits.

The supermoon gleams like a promise overhead.

Light. Not white, not gold, but the kind of light you feel , like warm breath or laughter through tears. It explodes out of the relics, pours from the sea, wraps around Calder like a ribbon and snaps.

And I hear it.

A break. A shatter .

The curse is gone.

He stumbles, breath heaving, eyes wide. “Luna?—”

I kiss him before he can say anything else. Hard, fast, terrified it’s all a dream.

He kisses me back like it’s not.

The ground trembles under our feet, the sea suddenly enraged—as if the very magic we’ve stirred has teeth and a temper. Water explodes around us, a surge of energy lashing out from the altar where the relics gleam like furious stars.

“Shit,” I gasp, grabbing Calder’s hand tighter. “This isn’t the calm-after-the-storm part, is it?”

“No,” he growls, voice barely audible over the screaming wind, “this is the part where it fights back.”

A column of seawater rises beside us, crashing in on itself with a roar.

Lightning forks through the sky like the ocean gods are pissed we woke them from a

two-century nap.

The chant stutters on my tongue, but Calder's voice doesn't falter.

His song rises again—raw, commanding, steeped in something ancient and heartbreakingly human.

Like he's daring the storm to take him and finish what the curse started.

And for a second, I think it might.

But then I feel it—something inside me surging, a deeper note thrumming against my ribs like the pulse of the tide itself. I grab hold of it. I let it carry me.

I throw my head back and sing—not words, not even notes, just feeling. My voice weaves around Calder's, tangling with it, lifting it. It's not perfect. It's real .

The sea responds.

A vortex of water launches into the air between us, spinning mad with light and sound. Mira's relics levitate from the altar, caught in the storm, orbiting us like possessed moons. I don't even flinch when they hover just inches from my head. I trust this. I trust him .

The chant and the song converge. The vibrations around us shift—less violent, more intent, like the magic's trying to decide if we're worthy.

“Don't stop!” I shout, voice hoarse, reaching for Calder's other hand. “Don't you dare stop!”

He grits his teeth, his grip crushing mine, and sings louder. The note rips out of him

like it's tearing something free from his bones. I echo him, our voices now one tide pulling the whole damn world into its undertow.

CRACK.

The sound is deafening, the kind of sound that doesn't just echo—it etches itself into the world. And then the light.

Every color and none. Seafoam and silver. It bursts out from the altar, from the relics, from us, swallowing everything in a burst of clarity that tastes like salt and grief and relief.

When the light fades, everything is still.

The wind's gone.

The sea is gentle, lapping at our knees like it's trying to apologize for the tantrum. Mira's relics clatter gently onto the wet sand, now just trinkets again.

Calder breathes like he's never had air before. His eyes find mine, wide and wet.

"It's gone," he says, like he can't believe it. "Luna... I'm free."

I can't speak. I just crash into him, arms wrapped tight, laughing and crying into his chest while he buries his face in my hair.

"I told you," I choke out, "you don't have to save yourself alone."

"No," he murmurs, holding me like the sea might try to take me back. "Not anymore."

CALDER

I don't remember falling.

One moment I'm singing like it's the only thing tethering me to this plane—like if I stop, the ocean itself will suck me under. The next, I'm weightless. Empty. Not drowning, not fighting. Just... floating in the dark.

Then her voice cuts through.

“Calder. Calder, come on. Don't you dare fade out on me now.”

It's Luna. Fierce. Shaky. Pissed, probably. My first instinct is to smirk, even while half-unconscious. But I can't lift my head. It's like my limbs forgot they exist.

“Wake the hell up,” she whispers. “You're not allowed to save the damn ocean and then keel over like some cursed prince. Not on my watch.”

I let out something between a grunt and a groan. Air rushes into my lungs—easy, like I've never known before. My chest rises without pain, without pressure, without magic pulsing like a parasite under my ribs. I can breathe like I'm alive.

My eyes blink open. Her face is the first thing I see—silver hair plastered to her cheeks, sand stuck to her jaw, eyes red from crying or maybe the salt spray. She's cradling my face like she's scared I'll vanish if she blinks.

“Luna,” I rasp.

Her eyes go wide. “Oh thank god . I swear, if you’d gone full sea-ghost on me, I would’ve kicked your spectral ass.”

I chuckle, and it hurts, but not in the way I expect. More like a cracked rib from laughing too hard. “Sorry. Cursed guy habits die hard.”

She scowls, but there’s no real fire in it. Her fingers trace the line of my jaw like she’s making sure I’m solid. Real. Here. “You scared me, seaweed.”

“You scared me first,” I say. “Standing in that tide, offering your voice. I thought...”

“I’d get sucked under?” she finishes. “Please. I had a plan. Sort of. I mean, Mira helped, and Kai brought snacks, and Lyle sang backup by accident, and—okay, maybe it wasn’t a great plan.”

“It worked,” I say simply, and when I say it, something settles inside me. Final. Clean. Like old wounds finally deciding to stop bleeding.

She pulls back just enough to study me. “So? How do you feel?”

I take a long breath. The air doesn’t taste like blood or brine or curse-bound silence. It tastes like her skin—salt and citrus and wild wind. I look out at the water. It’s still. No more glowing ripples. No more warning hums beneath the surface. Just the ocean. My ocean. Ours.

“I feel...” I pause. “Free. And empty. But in a good way. Like there’s space in me again. Space for you.”

She stares. “Damn. That’s almost poetic, fisherman.”

“Don’t let it go to my head.”

“I won’t,” she snorts. “I’ve seen you without your coffee.”

We sit there, in the lull of the tide, hands still tangled.

Mira’s glowing relics have dimmed, scattered around the sand like seashells after a storm.

The sky is bleeding pink and gold on the horizon.

Kai is doing a little victory dance near the dunes, and Lyle’s holding up a thermos like it’s a holy relic.

Mira’s grinning through tears, scribbling notes like a mad scientist.

“You know,” Luna murmurs, “this was never about fixing you.”

I glance at her. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“No,” she says. “It was about standing with you. Giving you a damn choice. You’ve been carrying this thing alone for so long... you forgot how to be held.”

Her words slam into me harder than any wave.

“I don’t want to be held,” I mutter. “I want to hold you back.”

She leans in, her forehead pressed to mine. “Then do it. Be here. Be with me.”

I pull her into my lap, just to prove I can. She lets out a surprised squeak, but her arms wind around my shoulders like she was always meant to be there and I breathe her in. Not because I need to. But because I want to.

“I thought letting you love me would destroy everything,” I whisper. “Turns out, it saved me.”

She kisses my temple. “Told you I was good for something.”

I close my eyes, just for a moment. Let the world exist as it is. No curses. No lies. No running. Just her heartbeat against mine, the sea lapping at our knees, and the distant sound of Mira yelling at Lyle to stop juggling sacred relics.

I don't want to be anywhere else.

The tide's breath slows, gentler now, curling around our legs like a dog that's finally tired of barking. Above us, the sky stretches from bruised blue to burnished gold, the storm breaking open into morning.

Luna shifts in my lap, her head resting on my shoulder, and says softly, “You know what you have to do, right?”

I do.

It's been whispering in my chest since the curse broke, vibrating low and steady in my bones. The ocean hasn't just calmed—it's waiting. Not for violence. Not for power.

For a song.

I stand slowly, dragging in one last breath of her scent, the grounding warmth of her. When I turn toward the cove, the others are watching—Kai with her arms crossed and a smug grin, Mira clutching her tablet like it might record the air itself, and Lyle, wide-eyed and reverent.

I don't ask them to follow. I just walk to the cliff's edge, where the wind still tugs at my hair like it remembers who I was.

I plant my feet.

And I sing.

Not the old songs of rage or siren commands. Not the grief-heavy ballads I used to croon when the curse owned my tongue. This is new. This is mine . A song shaped by Luna's laughter, by Kai's chaos, by Mira's relentless curiosity and Lyle's ridiculous optimism.

It's a melody of peace .

Low and slow at first, it spirals out of me—gravelly, imperfect, human . It glides across the surf and dips into the ley lines like a soft pulse. The stones shimmer faintly. The wind settles further. Somewhere below, sea creatures hum back.

Behind me, I hear footsteps.

Luna.

She doesn't speak, just slips her fingers into mine as I keep singing. Her eyes are wet, but she's smiling, and that smile becomes my harmony.

The whole town feels it. Lowtide Bluffs listens . Windows open. Doors creak. People step outside, heads tilted like they hear something they forgot they needed. A lullaby for the whole damn coast.

By the time the final note fades, the ley lines glow steady and warm—no longer fractured, no longer bleeding.

Healed.

And this time, I don't collapse. I turn to Luna, and I breathe .

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

The ocean's still grumbling when we stumble into the beach house, rain slapping the windows like it's demanding an encore. Calder kicks the door shut with his heel, seawater dripping from his lashes as he pins me against the wall. His thumb brushes my lower lip, dragging a shiver up my spine.

“Still cold?” he rasps.

I yank his soaked shirt open, buttons pinging against the floorboards. “Freezing. You planning to just look at me, sailor?”

His laugh is dark honey as he peels my wetsuit down, inch by torturous inch, mouth trailing behind his hands. Everywhere skin meets skin, steam rises. His teeth graze my collarbone when he murmurs, “Patience, scholar. Centuries-old predators like to savor their prey.”

“Savage,” I gasp as he lifts me, my thighs clamping around his hips.

The couch creaks when he drops us onto it. His fingers hook into the waistband of my underwear, pausing. Always pausing, like he's memorizing borders before crossing.

I arch against him. “Calder?—”

“Don't rush me.” His palm cups my pussy through the fabric, heat radiating even through the cotton. “This isn't breaking waves.”

I bite his earlobe. “Then quit teasing the tide.”

When he finally slides two fingers inside, my head thunks back against the cushions. He watches—hungry, focused—as his thumb circles my clit with sailor’s precision. “Christ, you’re slick.”

“You’re overdressed.” I claw at his belt, fumbling until his cock springs free. Thick. Saltwater-damp. Mine.

He hisses when I stroke his cock, his hips jerking. “Fuck, Luna—/truce/.”

“No truces.” I rise to straddle him, letting the tip tease my entrance. “Only surrenders.”

He groans my name as I sink my pussy onto him, slow enough to feel every ridge. Our foreheads press together, breaths syncing. Rain hammers the roof. Calder’s hands grip my waist, stilling me.

“Wait,” he grits out.

“Why?”

His thumb brushes my lower lip again. “Want to see your eyes when I make you come.”

I rock harder. “Better hurry.”

He flips us, pinning me beneath him without breaking contact. Each thrust is methodical, his gaze welded to mine. One hand tangles in my hair. The other finds my clit again.

“That’s it,” he growls when I start shaking. “Let me watch .”

The climax rips through me like a riptide, ferocious and unavoidable. I'm trembling and boneless, but he's far from done with me.

Calder’s breath hitches when I tighten around him, his pupils swallowing the storm-gray of his irises. He drags out slowly, then slams back in, the force knocking a gasp from my throat. Rain batters the windows like a wild audience.

“Look at you,” he murmurs, calloused thumb swiping across my bottom lip. “Taking me so deep. Like you were made for it.”

I rake my nails down his back, savoring the growl it rips from him. “Maybe you were sculpted for me . Ocean’s apology gift.”

His hips stutter. A rare crack in that infuriating control. “Careful, scholar. Myths bite.”

“Prove it.”

He shifts abruptly, sitting back on his heels with me still impaled on his cock. The new angle steals my breath—every thrust grazing that molten spot inside. His hand slips between us, fingers finding my clit with merciless precision. “This what you wanted? To ride me like your personal tempest?”

I clutch his shoulders, the muscles there taut as ship ropes. “Wanted you unhinged. Wanted this .” I roll my hips, taking him deeper, and his groan vibrates against my throat where he kisses me.

His voice drops to a wrecked rasp. “Could drown in you. Worse ways to die.”

The admission cracks something open in my chest. I fist his hair, tugging his forehead against mine. Our breaths fuse, salt and heat.

He surges up, capturing my mouth as his thrusts turn erratic. Shattered control. I drink the sound he makes when I come—a low, guttural thing, like waves breaking on rocks. He follows me over the edge, his release flooding warm as he murmurs my name like a prayer against my sweating skin.

We collapse sideways, tangled in damp limbs. Calder traces the shell of my ear, his touch softer now. “Still cold, little storm?”

I bite his wrist, grinning at his flinch. “Getting there. Might need another demonstration.”

His laugh is rough velvet. “Greedy.”

“Learned from the best.”

Outside, the sea roars its approval.

The storm’s fury quiets to a murmur beyond the windows, our breaths syncing to the rhythm of receding rain.

Calder’s arm stays locked around my waist, our skin still fused with sweat and seawater.

His chest rises and falls beneath my cheek in slow, deliberate waves—like he’s charting each second before I ruin it.

“I’m not leaving Lowtide.”

His fingers tense against my hipbone. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t stay?” I press my palm flat over that frozen scar, willing warmth into him. “You don’t get to martyr yourself into another three centuries of brooding. I’m here .”

He shifts, his exhale shuddering as he rolls to face me. Moonlight carves the hollows of his throat, the tension in his jaw.

I knot my legs with his, sealing the last sliver of space. “I’m not your drowned sailors, Calder. I’m not some passing storm you outwait. I’m staying. You’ll just have to endure me.”

His lids lower, shadows pooling beneath them. “You’ll grow old. Brittle. I’ll watch you?—”

“And I’ll make you savor every damn wrinkle.” My thumb finds the pulse at his wrist, furious and stuttering. “You didn’t save those humans just to live like a ghost. Let me be selfish for both of us.”

A beat. Saltwater drips from his hair onto my shoulder, each drop a ticking threat. When his mouth crashes into mine, it’s not hunger—it’s surrender. His hands frame my face like I’m something salvaged from a shipwreck, precious and salt-crusted.

“Say it again.”

“I’m staying.”

He ghosts his lips along my temple, my cheek, the corner of my mouth. Each touch a vow. “Even when the bluffs erode?”

“I’ll learn to breathe underwater.”

His laugh is raw, unfiltered—a sound I’ve never heard. “Stubborn creature.”

“Learned from the best.” I lay my forehead against his, our noses brushing. “We’ll map every ley line. Crack your curse. Burn the sea itself if we have to.”

His fingers slide into my hair, tightening. “And if we fail?”

“Then we drown together.”

He stills. The old house creaks, tide pooling around our ankles through cracked floorboards. When he speaks, the words fray at the edges. “I’ve forgotten how to want things that last.”

I curl my hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down until his breath hitches.

“Then let’s be terrible at it. Let’s be reckless. Let’s?—”

His kiss swallows the rest, salt and desperation and something greener, older—the first bud cracking through winter ice. Outside, the ocean exhales.

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

CALDER

They said it couldn't be done.

Hell, I said it couldn't be done. The tidepool cove— my tidepool cove—once barred to everyone but ghosts, sea-worn secrets, and my own bitterness... is now teeming with laughter.

I stand at the edge of the rocks, arms crossed, boots wet with spray, and watch Lyle attempt to give a “magically immersive” tour in flip-flops and a tank top with a seahorse that reads Siren or Nah?

“See here?” Lyle waves dramatically toward a glowing crack in the stone where ley energy pulses like a heartbeat. “This fracture once split open during a storm curse so fierce, even the kelpies peaced out!”

The kids crowding around him ooh and ahhh like he's a bard from the old court instead of a former bartender with a penchant for glitter and high drama.

Beside me, Mira's tapping furiously on a tablet she's rigged to a piece of kelp tech. “Ley flux is stabilizing. Again. That's the third reading today.”

I grunt. “That a good thing?”

She looks up, pushes her glasses higher on her nose, and gives me a sly grin. “It's a Luna thing. Your girl rerouted the whole damn web using her voice and love or whatever. The sea's basically got a crush on her.”

My chest does this stupid soft thump at the mention of Luna. Not because I'm surprised. But because Mira's not wrong. The water knows her now—like I do. Like it owes her.

“You're sure about this?” I ask, voice low. “Opening the cove? Letting the ley markers stay visible?”

Mira shrugs. “I'm sure that guarding your trauma in a tide shack for two centuries wasn't exactly an educational experience for the next generation.”

I scowl, but it's half-hearted. She's not wrong. Again.

It wasn't easy, pulling the wards back. Unbinding the silences I'd stitched into the sea itself. But I kept Luna's hand in mine the whole time. I sang. And it stayed still.

No magic backlash. No curse.

Just peace .

Now, instead of solitude and fear, there's curiosity. Research interns. Kids with sand in their pockets asking about sea sprites. Mira cataloging echo frequencies from relics I once hid beneath stone.

And for once, I'm not watching from the shadows.

I'm here .

Mira elbows me. “You're brooding.”

“This is my face.”

“Well, change it. You’re a public figure now.”

I groan. “Gods help us all.”

Across the beach, Luna waves from where she’s perched on the hood of her Jeep, boots kicked off, hair wild in the sea breeze. She’s talking to a reporter from some paranormal anthropology journal who keeps blinking like he can’t quite believe she actually tamed Lowtide’s myth.

She catches my eye and winks.

Damn woman could unravel me with a blink.

Mira catches it and sighs dramatically. “I take it back. You’re not brooding. You’re pining.”

“I do not pine.”

“You’re a tree, Calder. A tall, grumpy, emotionally repressed tree who just realized spring exists.”

I grunt again, but this time it’s a laugh under my breath. “That mean you’re sticking around?”

Mira closes her tablet, her gaze turning serious. “Yeah. If you’re serious about this place becoming a sanctuary, you’re gonna need someone who knows what ley sickness looks like before it blooms. Someone who doesn’t mind your mood swings.”

I nod. “Then you’re hired.”

She smirks. “About damn time.”

Just then, Lyle trips over his own enthusiasm and nearly faceplants into the tidepool. I lurch forward on instinct, but he catches himself—barely—and the kids erupt into giggles.

“Also,” I mutter, “tell him the glitter wards are off-limits.”

Mira snorts. “You’re going to have to accept that magical beach tours are the new local economy.”

“Gods save me,” I say again, but I can’t stop the grin tugging at my mouth.

Because somehow, this place that once held nothing but salt-scabbed memories and silence... now holds life.

And I let it.

When the crowd thins out, I walk the cove alone for a few minutes. It’s quieter now, just the rhythm of the waves and the distant voice of Luna arguing with Kai about whether ley mapping qualifies as flirting.

I crouch by the altar rock—the one we once feared. I press my palm to its surface. It’s warm.

No echoes. No pain.

Just freedom .

“You did good,” Luna’s voice says behind me.

I turn. She’s barefoot, her jeans soaked from wading through the surf, a shell in her hand like it’s some kind of offering.

“I did what I should’ve done centuries ago,” I say.

She shrugs. “You did it now. That’s what matters.”

We sit in the sand, backs against the altar stone, shoulders brushing. The tide creeps in, cool and gentle.

“I want this,” I say quietly. “Not just for the town. For us.”

Her hand finds mine. “Then keep it. No more hiding.”

I squeeze her fingers. “No more hiding.”

The sea hums like it approves.

Later that week, I wait inside the new field lab—a renovated boathouse with open walls, filtered light, and more enchanted weatherproofing than I’d ever admit I helped with. Luna’s due any minute, and my hands keep twitching like I’m about to be caught doing something illegal.

Mira helped stain the wood. Lyle engraved the nameplate with more flair than necessary. But the desk? I built it. Every plank sanded, every joint fitted by hand. Oak and stone and a shimmer of sea glass set into the corners, humming softly with ley protection.

The nameplate reads: Dr. Luna Wilder – Chaos Cartographer, Sea-Saver, Certified Nuisance.

The last part was Mira’s idea. Obviously.

Luna walks in mid-rant about someone refusing to let her sample a ley crystal without

three forms of ID. “I swear, if they make me fill out one more?—”

She stops cold.

Her gaze falls on the desk. On the nameplate. On me.

“You...?”

I shrug, trying not to fidget. “You needed a place to work.”

She walks to it like it might vanish if she breathes too hard. Her fingers trace the carvings, the smooth polish, the little drawer handles shaped like coral.

“Calder...”

My throat tightens. “I just wanted you to know. You’re not temporary here. This town, this research, me. You’re a part of it.”

She turns slowly, eyes glassy but bright. “You made me a goddamn desk?”

I nod, awkward as hell.

She launches into my arms with a laugh that sounds like sunlight.

“You absolute softie. I love it. I love you. ”

And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I smile without guilt.

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

LUNA

I don't know what I expected from Kai's re-opening party, but it sure as hell wasn't this much glitter.

Sip the whole place hums like it's breathing along with the tide.

There's magic in the air—and not just the literal kind. Everyone in Lowtide Bluffs has shown up. Fisherfolk who never leave the docks. Seers and sirens and the odd nymph with sea-glass in her hair. Even the town mayor is here, looking confused but pleased while sipping a bubbling purple drink.

I move through the crowd, barefoot and buzzed, weaving past a trio of kelpies debating tidal sovereignty and a were-seagull in a tux shirt unbuttoned halfway. There's joy in the air, heavy and heady like summer salt and freedom.

Mira's posted up at a corner booth, elbow-deep in leyline readings and poking at a glowing relic like she's trying to make it sing opera. She waves without looking up. "Luna, the tide resonance spike is behaving weird. You need to see?—"

I cut her off with a grin. "Mira. Babe. I'm wearing a skirt that sparkles when I twirl and drinking something Kai called 'Sea Bitch.' Science can wait."

"Fine." She sips a bright green drink. "But it's peaking under the moonlight. Literally peaking."

"That's what she said!" Lyle cackles as he slides past with a tray full of cocktails,

each topped with a spiral of glowing lemon peel.

“Lyle, what’s in the Whirlpool Heartache?” I call out.

“Regret and pomegranate,” he says cheerfully. “Want two?”

I wave him off and keep moving, because I see him. Leaning against the back wall, arms crossed like a sea god carved from shadow and salt, is Calder. The crowd parts around him like even now the tide knows better than to get too close.

But he doesn’t look untouchable anymore.

He looks... mine.

I saunter over, feet sticky with spilled spells and joy. “You gonna lurk all night like a sea-salted vampire, or are you gonna dance with me?”

He raises one of those perfect eyebrows. “I don’t dance.”

“You don’t yet.” I tug his hand. “Come on, sea monster. One dance. For me.”

He exhales like I’ve asked him to fight a kraken, but lets me pull him onto the makeshift dance floor—really just a cleared space between the tables, where laughter spills louder than the music.

There’s no real band—just that weirdly tuned fiddle and enchanted drinkware chiming in sync—but the rhythm is enough. We sway in time with the chaos. Calder’s hand slides to my waist, warm and grounding, and I don’t even mind when he steps on my foot the first time.

Or the second.

“I warned you,” he mutters.

“You’re lucky you’re hot.”

We move slowly, awkwardly, letting the spelllight dapple across our skin. He holds me like I’m something precious. I look up, and his eyes—those deep, storm-gray eyes—soften in a way that turns my insides into seafoam.

“I still don’t understand how we got here,” he says, voice hushed. “How we survived it.”

I squeeze his hand. “You stopped running. I stopped pretending I didn’t care. Magic did the rest.”

He huffs a breath that could almost be a laugh. “You always simplify the impossible.”

“It’s a gift.”

Across the room, Mira raises her glass in our direction, and Lyle whistles like a pirate at a siren sighting. I flip him off with a grin and lean into Calder’s chest, soaking in the warmth of him, the way his breath stirs the top of my hair, the steady beat of his heart against my cheek.

“You’re dancing,” I murmur.

“I’m dancing.”

“For me.”

He chuckles. “Only for you.”

The spellfire flares as the fiddle launches into something vaguely romantic, and Calder—bless his sea-scarred soul—tries to twirl me. It’s a disaster. We nearly trip over each other’s feet and crash into a table full of potion shots, but I’m laughing so hard I don’t care.

“I love you, you grumpy ocean cryptid,” I say as I catch my breath.

He pulls me closer, forehead to mine. “And I love you, storm-brained lunatic.”

The world falls away for a moment. Just me and him, wrapped in light, in magic, in something deeper than ley lines or curses. Something real.

We dance through the end of the song and into the start of another, barefoot and stumbling and entirely too happy.

And when he kisses me in the middle of it all, it’s not a grand gesture or a dramatic finale.

It’s a beginning.

Mira knocks back her third “Sea Bitch” with the kind of confidence usually reserved for dragons and research scientists. Her elbow flies wide as she laughs at something Kai says—and knocks an entire glowing goblet onto the nearest guest.

Unfortunately, the guest is a water sprite.

“Oh no,” I mutter, watching the sprite blink, sizzle faintly, and start muttering in ancient stream dialect.

“Oh hell,” Mira gasps, grabbing napkins that immediately disintegrate in her hands. “I am so sorry! That was—experimental alcohol! Possibly sentient!”

The sprite begins to swell like a wet balloon about to scold. But before a full-blown elemental tantrum can explode, Lyle steps in with the grace of a trickster fox and a shot glass of rainbow mist.

“Peace offering,” he says with a wink.

The sprite gurgles once, tastes it—and bursts into delighted giggles. Crisis averted.

Except now Lyle’s twirling dramatically with a dryad who appeared out of nowhere, her bark-slick dress shimmering with moss. “We’re getting married,” he announces mid-spin, holding up an enchanted ring of coral like it’s a trophy. “She loves my cocktails and my commitment issues.”

The dryad smiles, unbothered. “I like his chaos. It’s very nutritious.”

“Lowtide marriages aren’t legally binding after midnight,” Kai calls. “But if you consummate it in the tide shack, we all owe Mira five gold.”

Mira chokes on her drink. “Why am I always the one with bets I don’t remember making?!”

In the midst of it all, Calder climbs a barstool like it might fight him for dominance, holding up a simple glass of amber sea-aged whiskey. The bar quiets. He doesn’t yell—he doesn’t have to.

“To Luna,” he says, voice steady. “The storm who taught the sea how to stay. The chaos I didn’t know I needed. The voice that broke my silence.”

My throat knots, heat rising behind my eyes.

He looks at me like I’m the center of the world. “You didn’t just save me. You made

me want to be saved.”

The entire bar erupts into howls, clinks, toasts, and two pixies start throwing confetti that definitely wasn't there before.

I smile through it all, heart pounding with joy so bright it's almost hard to hold.

Because this—this beautiful, ridiculous, magical mess—is mine.

And I wouldn't trade it for anything.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:08 pm

I've been many things in my life—monster, myth, mistake—but I've never been this. Nervous. Not like this. Not the kind that coils low in the belly and thrums through your chest like a second heartbeat.

I lead Luna down to the tidepool where the ley lines hum quiet lullabies beneath the surface. It's the same place where she first stomped into my life—bright-eyed, sarcastic, and dragging all her weird human gadgets like she owned the coastline.

Now she walks beside me, barefoot in the moonlight, and I don't feel like the loner anymore. I feel like the luckiest bastard to ever crawl out of a cursed cove.

“You're being weird,” she says, bumping my shoulder with hers.

“Define weird.”

“Weirder than usual. You're brooding with purpose.”

I stop walking and let the moonlight spill between us. The water glows faintly, not with danger now, but promise. “This is where you ruined my peace and quiet.”

She grins. “You're welcome.”

I turn to face her fully, and for once, I don't hide behind the growl or the sarcasm. “This is also where I realized I was afraid of you. Afraid of what you'd see in me. Afraid you'd leave once you did.”

Her smile fades, softens. “And now?”

“Now I hope you never leave. Even if I have to rebuild this damn tidepool with my bare hands every year just to keep you here.”

She blinks, caught off guard. I never say this kind of thing. Hell, I’ve barely said anything about what I feel without grunting or deflecting.

But tonight’s different.

I take her hands in mine. They’re warm, familiar, calloused in a way that tells stories—of fieldwork, of magic, of resilience. “I’ve been carrying a voice I couldn’t use and a heart I couldn’t trust. You made both matter again.”

Before she can respond, I do the only thing I know that’s realer than any words I could string together.

I sing.

Just one note. One syllable.

Her name.

The water stirs. The ley lines shimmer. Something ancient and gentle hums beneath our feet, answering like it’s been waiting for this song all along.

Her breath catches, and she touches her chest like the sound hit somewhere deep.

“I’ve never heard my name like that,” she says, voice a whisper. “Like a prayer.”

“I meant it like one.”

A tear slips down her cheek, but she’s smiling too. “Damn it, Calder.”

“I know.”

She throws her arms around me, and I hold her like the sea holds the moon—tightly, reverently, like I’d drown without her.

“I love you,” she says against my chest, fierce and certain.

My throat tightens. “I’ve loved you since you stormed into my cove and called my fish-netting system medieval.”

“It was medieval.”

“And now I’d defend it to the death because it brought you here.”

She laughs through a snuffle. “Romantic and grumpy. My type.”

We settle on the tide-worn rocks, our feet dangling into glowing water. The wind tugs at her curls, and I tuck a piece behind her ear, fingertips lingering.

“So... what now?” she asks.

“Now?” I lean back, letting the salt air fill my lungs. “Now we build something that’s ours. You and me. Research, chaos, the weirdest beachside love story ever told.”

“And no more curses?”

“Only the good kind.”

She grins. “Like the one where I’m stuck with you forever?”

“Exactly like that.”

She leans in, lips brushing mine, a kiss slow and sure as the tide. When we part, she sighs and rests her head on my shoulder.

We stay there a long while—just two souls beneath a moon that's seen centuries of heartbreak and still chooses to rise.

Tonight, the water sings not of loss, but of love.

And I let myself believe, for once, that I deserve it.

She tilts her chin up, eyes locked on mine. The smirk's gone, replaced with something raw and open. Her lips part like she's about to say something cutting or clever, but instead she just breathes, "Come here."

I do.

The moment her mouth meets mine, it's different. Not hurried like the first time. Not desperate like the second. This kiss is still, rooted. The kind you plant in the soil of your soul and wait to grow into forever.

Her hands come up, fingers threading into my hair, and I swear the whole damn ocean exhales.

Around us, the tidepool brightens—tiny sparks dotting the surface like stars falling into the sea.

It's not magic, not really. Or maybe it is, but the kind that doesn't come from spells or ley lines.

The kind that comes from love—simple, inconvenient, undeniable love.

"I think I could live in this moment," she whispers against my lips, voice trembling

like she's surprised by how much she means it.

I brush my forehead against hers, eyes closed. "Then let's make a thousand more like it."

Behind us, Lowtide Bluffs is quiet, windows glowing warm in the distance. The night wraps around the town like a well-worn storybook—full of weird chapters, strange characters, and a plot twist no one saw coming.

Luna looks out toward the sea, her body still curled against mine, and says, "Do you think the sea remembers?"

"Remembers what?"

"All of it. The singing. The sorrow. The storm."

I glance at the water, still pulsing with faint light. "I think it remembers what matters."

"And do we?"

I turn to her, brushing my knuckles along her cheek. "We write the next verse."

She snorts, tears bright in her eyes. "You just quoted yourself like a washed-up sea bard."

"I've been called worse."

"I've called you worse."

"And you'll keep doing it," I murmur, grinning. "But now you're stuck with me."

She nods, and something settles in her shoulders—like she’s finally decided to stop running from the thing that terrifies her most: happiness.

We stay like that, tangled together as the tide creeps in, lapping around our ankles. She starts humming, and I join her, letting the melody drift into the sky. Our voices twine and twist, not siren-strong or perfect, but true.

In the distance, gulls cry softly, and a fish breaches, silvery scales catching moonlight.

Luna breaks the silence. “Calder?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve never had a home before.”

I look down at her. “You do now.”

She kisses me again, fierce and final, like a signature on the last page of a book we’ve rewritten together.

And when the wind shifts, carrying salt and sea and something like joy, we don’t let go.

We just hold on tighter.

Because the tide’s no longer pulling us apart.

It’s pulling us forward.

Together.