



# The Naiad's Lover (Immortal Bonds #2)

**Author:** *Isabel Murray*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** A year ago, Erik Arnesson left his life as a merchant in the great city of Hallevalt and moved to a small cabin in the far north of the kingdom. There, instead of a quiet and solitary retirement, he found everything he thought he'd lost forever—peace, happiness, and enduring love.

In the year that he's spent with his naiad lover, Erik has coaxed the powerful immortal into trying out many new things. Above all, Erik has taught Sayan how to love.

As spring turns to summer, Sayan decides to do some teaching of his own. Only he isn't trying to introduce Erik to intimacy, small comforts, and tender embraces. He wants to teach him how to swim. In a freezing northern lake.

The problem is, a wild naiad born with the power over water isn't the best instructor for a human who is terrified of drowning.

Fortunately for Erik, a young friend is more than happy to step in and take over.

Unfortunately for Sayan, that young friend is handsome, he dares to have a crush on Erik, and Sayan has one more lesson to learn.

Love was easy. Now, he has to learn how to trust.

The Naiad's Lover is a low-angst fantasy romance novella about a patient human and a highly strung immortal who just wants to share his beloved lake. It's set a year after the events of *The Naiad's Gift*, book one in the Immortal Bonds series, and features the same couple.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am*

I came to wakefulness slowly, aware that I was being watched.

I knew who it was before I even opened my eyes; Sayan had slept in my bed every night for almost a year now and I was familiar with the weight of his attention.

He wasn't, however, usually quite this close.

I shifted back on the pillow a couple of inches in an attempt to bring his beautiful face into focus but he followed me, cupping the back of my head and leaning in to press his warm, full lips gently to mine.

"Mhm." I smiled into the sweet kiss.

"Good morning," he said.

"Mm-hmm."

Unlike my naiad lover, I took my time to come to full wakefulness. Also unlike my naiad lover, I rarely did it this early by choice.

Sayan rolled me over onto my back and slithered on top. "Good morning," he said again, and kissed me. As he withdrew, he nibbled on my bottom lip and whispered, "Get up."

Enjoying the warmth and heft of his solid body pressing me into the mattress, I sank back into the pillows with a soft noise of dissent. My eyes drifted closed.

Sayan lifted his hips to sneak a hand between us and give me a frisky squeeze. “Get up.”

I dragged a pillow over my face with a groan. “No.”

The pillow was snatched away and his dark green hair spilled soft and warm around me as he leaned down. “Yes, Erik. You must come with me to my lake.”

I heaved a sigh and looked up at him.

He braced over me, his face expectant and open.

“Later,” I mumbled sleepily. “It’s early still.”

“Dawn was a whole hour ago. I have been waiting.”

I threw an arm over my eyes. “Were you watching me for the whole hour?”

He grasped my wrist and pulled my arm away, ducking down to kiss each of my stubbornly closed eyelids, and then my nose. “Of course.”

“Can you manage another hour?”

He was silent, but the restless shift of his heavy body over mine was answer enough.

I sighed.

“I will wait,” Sayan said abruptly.

“No, it’s all right. If you want to go now?—”

“I will wait. Sleep. I will lie with you. I will be patient.”

He didn't move from his position on top of me. Gentle breaths ghosted over my face. I felt his gaze like a physical touch.

Keeping my eyes closed, I wrapped my arms around him and slid one hand down his long back to rest it on a smooth, firm buttock.

He dipped his spine, pushing his arse up into my hand, offering it should I want to do more than hold it.

When I didn't do anything, he huffed quietly.

After another long minute of lying there, he slid off to the side. His heat pressed the length of my body and he slung a long leg over mine.

I suspected that he was up on an elbow, watching me.

I blinked my eyes open and caught him in the process of tracing the shape of my lips, his fingers a scant hairsbreadth from making contact. He froze. I leaned up and nipped a fingertip, and he collapsed onto me, kissing me fiercely.

“Are you awake now?” he demanded.

“I am.”

To my astonishment, he leapt off the bed and thrust out a hand. I'd expected him to at least insist on lovemaking first.

He really wanted me to go down to the lake.

I tossed the bedclothes back and stretched out long, the bones at the base of my spine cracking. “Is there something special about today?” I asked, shuffling over to sit on the edge of the mattress.

“Yes.” He all but vibrated with eagerness. “Today is the day that I will teach you to swim.”

I looked up at him with dismay.

His answering smile was bright.

The truth of it was, I didn’t want to learn how to swim.

I was forty-four years old, and I’d managed to go my whole life without learning.

Until last year, when I’d moved to my cabin close to Sayan’s lake, I’d lived in the great city of Hallevalt. I had been born there, in the Merchants’ Quarter.

Hallevalt was a port city and, as the son of a merchant and then a merchant myself, I’d spent countless days on the wharves and in the waterfront warehouses and offices I owned.

There, the River Valt poured out the city’s filth along with its wealth into the crowded and polluted harbour.

I could safely say that the idea of voluntarily splashing about in its waters hadn’t ever crossed my mind.

As a child, I’d often traveled with my father on business trips, and had explored country ponds and streams as any curious city child would. Once, when we were in Lindis, I’d waded waist-deep in the warm blue sea alongside white shores.

But I'd never learned how to swim.

I hadn't needed to. Until today.

I'd known this was coming. Months ago, I'd drawn Sayan a hot bath. It was one of many human comforts that he hadn't experienced before, wild naiad that he was, and I'd meant it as a treat for him. I'd hoped it would remind him of his southern birthplace, which he missed to this day.

The bath had been a great success. Too great a success. He'd been entranced by it, and had insisted that he would 'return the favour' by teaching me to swim so I could join him in his lake.

I'd tried to put it off. I'd tried my very best. It had been easy enough to do when autumn cooled into winter and the land was buried beneath great drifts of snow.

I'd coaxed him into more hot baths. I'd even allowed him to coax me in with him.

It was a ridiculously tight fit with the pair of us in there; Sayan had been born in a time when men were closer to gods in stature than to the greatly weakened and diminished form—as he'd earnestly explained—that we now took.

Diminished I may be in comparison to my godlike naiad, but I was still taller than the average man, and squeezing into the tub once he'd crammed himself in there was no easy task.

I'd already ordered us a new, much larger, one.

I'd been fooling myself, though. A bath, no matter how large, would never satisfy him. Today, I had to accept it.

My luck had run out.

Sayan chivvied me through my morning ablutions and hovered close by as I dressed, telling me that neither a wash nor my clothes were necessary, as if I would just hurry , then I would be naked and fully submerged before I knew it.

He lost patience when I attempted to brew a third cup of coffee and, despite my laughing protests, he whisked me out of the house, into the forest, and off to his lake.

We walked hand in hand along the grassy track that wound through the trees. The morning breeze was crisp enough to raise goosebumps over my exposed skin, but it was significantly milder than it had been for some time.

Snowdrops had come and gone months ago, followed by dainty blue squill and thick banks of yellow daffodils.

Blackthorn blossom had turned the bare brown hedgerows into delightful billows of creamy white before fading to make way for fresh new leaves.

The hawthorn had taken up its mantle and now glowed under the lemony, late spring sun, even as the bluebells that had turned the ground beneath the ash and oak trees to a hazy purple carpet were turning, their seed pods swelling.

Summer was almost here.

I'd expected Sayan to all but run us to the lake, but as soon as we'd left the cabin behind us, his urgency eased. He still set a fast pace. Every few steps, I had to swallow my pride and jog a little to keep up.

He squeezed my hand and looked down at me, excitement lighting his green eyes.

I smiled and shook my head. “You really want to teach me to swim,” I said ruefully.

“Of course I do! You will love it!”

I swung our hands between us. “I will certainly try. But Sayan, I won’t feel about it quite the way you do.” I didn’t want him to be disappointed with my reaction, and I wasn’t about to insult either of us by faking an enthusiasm I didn’t feel.

He scoffed. “Of course you will not. You cannot. You’re just a human.”

I raised a brow.

Flashing me a smile, he lifted my hand to his lips and turned it to press a quick kiss to my palm.

“You cannot understand the world as I do,” he said.

“I do not expect it. What I want is to take you to my little island, and to my favourite bays and beaches, and to the fjords far from here. I want to show you all of my favourite places.” His gaze heated and his deep voice roughened.

“I want to make love to you in the water.”

“If that’s what you’re after, we managed to make love perfectly well in the bath. We can do that again, whenever you like.”

“We will,” he said confidently. “Many, many times. But I want to take you in my lake. I need it to know you, as it knows me. You’ve barely even dipped a toe in it.”

Because it was freezing .



It wouldn't be freezing today, I comforted myself. Winter was far behind us and summer was a couple of short weeks away. Perhaps out in the deeper water it would still be icy, but that didn't concern me, as I had no intention of going out into deeper water.

I had no intention of going any deeper than my chest.

My chin, at most.

Sayan's lake was as big as a sea. It stretched hundreds of miles in length, crossed the borders of seven kingdoms, and only Sayan knew how deep it went.

Settlements large and small clustered around its southern edges, while the farthest northern reaches of it were so inhospitable, they were as yet uncharted.

It had many different names, in many different languages.

Here, the townsfolk of Laskeld and the surrounding villages called it simply Greenlake.

I'd asked Sayan once what he called it.

He'd given me a perplexed look and said, "Mine."

As soon as we reached the sliding pebbles of the gently sloping shore, Sayan tugged on my hand—he'd clasped it tightly in his the whole way there—and turned me to face him.

His quick fingers unbuttoned first my coat and then my shirt in short order.

He made a deep, satisfied sound when my chest was exposed.

I caught his wrists, laughing, as he almost yanked me off my feet with his enthusiasm.

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He tossed the coat to the ground and hauled the unbuttoned shirt from my waistband.

He unfastened my breeches while I was still drawing breath to protest, and whisked my breeches and drawers down my thighs to my ankles, where the bunched fabric got stuck on my boots.

Crouching before me, he grabbed my left ankle and lifted it impatiently.

“Sayan.” I wobbled and braced a hand on his broad shoulder. “Sayan, wait.”

“I do not want to.” He tugged at my boot.

“Stop.”

At my firm command, he heaved a put-upon sigh and rocked forwards from balancing on the balls of his feet to plant his knees on the beach. He scowled up at me.

I touched his cheek. “Let’s at least make sure there is no one around to startle with my nudity.”

It was one thing for Sayan to be strutting about in all his glory. It was a treat to see him. According to the townsfolk, it was an honour.

Me, though?

I was less of a delight. Despite Sayan’s baffling admiration of my ordinary body and

plain face, I was just another average middle-aged man.

And in general, one kept one's clothes on in public.

"There is no one," he said, wrapping long fingers around my ankle again. That was all; he held me, and he watched my face.

I hid my smile as I glanced up and down the shore.

I hoped to at least see Henrick Berglund and his dog, Lilia, but there was no one in sight.

Of course there wasn't. When I'd moved to Laskeld, I'd chosen my cabin for its remoteness.

Very rarely did I see anyone, unless I walked in the direction of the town.

It seemed that nothing would save me from Sayan's enthusiasm today.

"Well?" He gave my ankle a demanding squeeze.

"You're right. There is no one about to see." I gasped and bent over, grabbing for his shoulders as he lifted my foot clear off the ground and yanked my boot off, tossing it carelessly to the pebbles. He had the other one off equally quickly. My breeches and drawers followed.

I should have been accustomed by now to how efficiently he could strip me down to my skin, considering that he never hesitated to take matters into his own hands if I was being too slow, but I wasn't used to it at all.

I didn't think that I'd ever grow used to his hunger for me, or to the way he looked at

me as if he'd never seen anything so wondrous in all his many thousands of years of life.

I didn't understand it. I supposed that I didn't have to.

All I had to do was love him back, and that was the easiest thing in the world.

Threading my fingers into his long, wild hair, I gently drew his head back as I leaned down to kiss him.

He stretched up to meet me, eagerly pressing our mouths together.

His large hands coasted up the front of my thighs and around to hold my arse.

He hummed into my mouth, then slowly stood without breaking the kiss until, instead of reaching up, he was the one leaning down.

He pulled away, his lips damp and red. Tangling our fingers together, he drew me towards the edge of the water.

My capricious cock had been showing some interest in the proceedings but as soon as we approached the waterline, it withdrew with trepidation, along with everything else south of my waist.

Sayan continued walking until our arms were at full stretch. When he noticed that I'd stopped and was no longer following him, he glanced back with a raised brow and tugged gently.

He had been so very brave for me.

He'd come into my home even though many centuries ago, he'd been betrayed and

enslaved by a lover, and had good reason to fear humans—to fear lovers—and their dwellings.

He'd stayed awake through the winter rather than hibernating, and had learned to love warm fires and candlelight, plush rugs and cushions, to sleep on a soft bed beneath silk coverlets, to lounge in a warm bath.

Day after day, he left his lake and came back to me, walking into my arms as if it was the only place he wanted to be. He'd claimed me and bound himself to me.

Given up his immortality for me.

So this, I told myself grimly as I waded into the glittering, sun-struck shallows and every inch of my skin flinched away from the knifing cold, was the very least I could do.

I had to try.

If I hated it, he would accept that.

But I had to try.

I pasted on a smile and waded deeper, until the frigid water was lapping at my knees and my breaths came short and tight. Sayan turned and picked up my other hand, walking backwards as he drew me in after him, his bright eyes on my face.

He stopped, and gazed at me expectantly.

“It is very pleasant,” I said.

He bit his lip and sent me a shy look from under his lashes. “Yes?”

Oh, my heart. “Yes,” I told him firmly. “I’m l-looking f-forward to s-swimming with you of-of-often. Holy gods it’s cold, though.”

“It is?” he said, surprised.

It was to me. Then again, I was a spoiled and pampered human who was used to luxuries like dry clothes and solid land.

“It is warmer after midsummer,” he said.

I saw the coward’s way out and was about to run for it by suggesting that we try again in another month or two, but the sweet expectation on his face...

I couldn’t.

Bracing myself, I said, “I’m sure it will feel less cold once I am submerged.”

“Of course,” he said with a mischievous smile.

Well. I’d as good as asked for it, hadn’t I?

I caught my breath as the water level rushed from my knees up to my chest and over my shoulders, stopping short of my chin. I yelped with surprise and flailed backwards, going under with a splash.

I broke the surface, gasping, and Sayan’s happy laugh rang out. He scooped me up against his hot body and grinned as I clutched him. “Less cold?”

Narrowing my eyes, I drove a hand between us and grasped his hard shaft. Mine was trying to follow my balls as they did their best to crawl into my body for the warmth. His, as always, stood proud.

His eyelids fell and he grunted, flexing his hips up into my grip.

I opened my fingers and let go before he could thrust more than once.

The water level sank, and returned to lapping around my knees.

Keeping an arm looped around my waist and his eyes on my face, Sayan drew me deeper into the lake.

Pebbles shifted beneath my bare, stumbling feet.

It actually was less cold now. In fact, the parts of me submerged were the warmest; the light breeze that blew strands of Sayan's hair around his lovely face sliced over my damp skin.

I hurried him backwards, eager to get the water up over my shoulders again for what protection it offered.

He was more than happy to oblige.

Only he kept going until my feet lost contact with the lakebed and I grabbed at him desperately.

He halted, attention going from my face to my neck, where my pulse beat frantically.

He'd probably sensed the vibration of it in the water.

"You are afraid?" he said, his voice lifting.

"Yes!" I clutched his shoulders.



“You have no need to be. My lake will not hurt you. It would not dare, even if it wanted to. Which it does not. You are safer here with me than you ever have or ever will be on land.” His big hands drifted down to settle on my arse.

He lifted me and held me tighter against him. “Do you not trust me?”

“Of course I trust you,” I snapped. Water lapped at the nape of my neck and I fought the urge to wrap my thighs around his hips and cling on like a child.

“I just don’t know how to swim, I do know that men drown easily, and it is hard to believe you when you say the lake won’t hurt me, because I have no idea what that actually means if I were to drop below—aaaah! ”

He’d released his grip on me in preparation, I can only imagine, to let me beneath the surface, but at my appalled shout, he snatched me close again, his eyes wide.

I locked an arm around his neck, hooked a leg around his hip, and clung on. He shook against me with laughter. I bit him on the shoulder. Hard.

Sayan groaned, and then nudged me back towards the shore. He was not, I was disappointed to realise, taking us back onto dry land. He stopped in shallower water and held me close until I had tentatively touched down and regained a sense of balance.

Then I shoved him.

His upper body swayed as gracefully as a young silver birch in the wind. He pursed his lips in an effort not to smile, but the sparkle in his eyes gave him away.

I wanted to turn my back on him, march up onto the shore, and keep going until I reached the cabin.

Unfortunately, more than I wanted that, I wanted Sayan to be happy.

I stood my ground and glared at him instead.

He held the back of my head and ducked down to give me a warm kiss, keeping our lips pressed together as he murmured, “Do not be afraid, my Erik.”

“I’ll try.” I took his face between my hands. “I will try, but this is not my element. It will take time for me to get used to it. Perhaps a lot of time.”

His face lit up. “A lot of time with you in my lake sounds perfect,” he said.

That...hadn’t been what I meant. There was no getting out of it, though. “Then let us begin. Teach me how to swim.”

“It is very easy,” he said with confidence. “You are a human. Your kind has plenty of body fat, like the little seals who live in the north of my lake by the glacier.” He pinched the skin above my hipbone. I slapped his hand away crossly. “You will float if you just surrender to the water.”

Surrendering to anything was not my strong point.

I wasn’t particularly enamoured with being likened to a seal, either.

“Once you are floating,” he continued, “you tense and release your muscles, and that propels you in the direction you want to go. You see? It is easy.”

As I stared at him, it slowly dawned on me that Sayan was quite possibly the worst person in the world to teach me how to swim.

He was a naiad. Swimming was his nature. He’d been born with the knowledge.

Like a seal.

Or maybe I was imagining a difficulty where there wasn't one, and it was truly that simple. Float, and move my muscles.

It didn't sound hard, after all.

"Float," I said.

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He nodded. “Yes.”

“Float how?”

“Lie on your back.”

He lifted the water level, watching my face carefully and reaching out to hold my hips when I gasped and clutched at him.

The water continued to lift, and we lifted with it. My feet left the bottom.

“All right,” I said, heart pounding. “How do I go from here to floating on my back?”

“You relax, and your legs will simply rise.”

I didn’t think I could relax if my life depended on it.

He squeezed my hips. “Relax.”

I gritted my teeth. “I am trying.”

My clenched fingers were white on his shoulders. My back was strung with tension. My legs began to jerk in spasmodic little kicks.

He cocked his head. “Try harder.”

I blew out a breath and closed my eyes. My core muscles were locked as tight as if I

was wearing a corset. I kept trying, but despite telling myself that I was safe in Sayan's arms, my body continued to disagree, insisting that I was in danger, that I was in deadly peril, that I was?—

Warm, soft lips touched mine. My eyes fluttered open.

Sayan's were closed, his saturated lashes spiky and dark against his skin.

One arm was curled around my tense back.

A gentle hand held the side of my face. He kissed me again, encouraging my lips to part, and pushed his tongue sweetly inside.

He dipped it in and out, stroking lazily.

My eyes fell shut as I fell into the kiss.

Now this , I could do.

I could kiss him all day long.

I softened into it, sighing when he changed the angle and licked deeper, even more demanding than usual. Perhaps because here he was in his element.

Here, he was king.

He moaned into my mouth and kissed me deeper still, overwhelming my senses until all I knew was his heat, the wet flicker of his tongue as it glided over mine, and the strength of him surrounding me. The chill of the water faded away. My limbs grew soft and heavy with lassitude.

He drew back in gentle increments, from the intense claiming to light brushes that had me chasing for more. I tangled my fingers in his long hair to hold him to me.

“Erik,” he whispered. “Open your eyes.”

I did.

Sayan was bending over me, his gaze dark and hot. All I could see was him. He blocked out the sun, the sky, and I felt weightless as I...

As I floated on my back.

My body jackknifed with panic and I plunged below the surface.

I thrashed and flailed under the water, kicking madly until my foot struck pebbles. Powering up to the surface, I crashed back into blessed air and discovered that I was standing in water that only reached my mid-chest.

Sayan was laughing.

I lunged at him and pushed, regretting my shove instantly when he gave way and sank below the gentle swell, taking me with him.

Before I could panic again, we broke through the surface and he beamed down at me.

When I’d first encountered Sayan, he had been remote, focused only on seduction and frustrated by my resistance to him. As we grew closer, I’d started to see flashes of his playfulness every now and then.

As a sultry naiad bent on sophisticated seduction, he was magnificent.

As a mischievous boy, he was irresistible.

Gods, how I loved him.

I hauled him down to kiss him, holding him in place with a hard fist wrapped in his hair as he made happy sounds against my mouth.

Releasing him, I blew out a breath. "Let's try this again, shall we?"

He nodded at once, his pale green eyes bright.

I would do this. I would learn.

I would do anything to keep that happiness inside him alight, until it had burned his past isolation to ash and had driven his loneliness beyond the point of memory.

"Will you trust me?" he asked.

"Always."

"Let me take you out deeper again, to where your feet cannot touch the bottom. You will not reach for it, then. I think it will be easier."

"Very well."

He gathered me close and I lost myself in the slide of our naked flesh in the water.

My legs tangled easily with his, sliding between his thighs now and then, his sliding between mine.

His arm was firm around my waist and he drew me after him as he moved us out into

the lake, further from the shore.

I was safe here in his arms, I told myself, fighting the urge to tense up. He was a naiad. As he'd said, when I was with him in the water where he ruled, I was safer than I could be anywhere else.

I almost believed it.

He stopped about a hundred yards out and we hung in the water, staring into each other's eyes.

His cheeks were flushed, his expression pleased and proud.

Of me or the lake, I didn't know. I suspected both.

I rested my forearms on his broad shoulders, let him keep us above the swell, and tried to enjoy the sensation of weightlessness.

Sayan pushed my wet hair back off my face, then did the same to himself. I admired the bunch of his gleaming biceps and he gave me a smouldering look but didn't follow it up with his usual kisses or fondling.

Instead, he set about teaching me as earnestly as any of my schoolmasters had a lifetime ago.



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We trudged in silence up the narrow track through the trees to the cabin.

I was right.

The problem was definitely that Sayan himself had never actually learned to swim.

His ease in the water was as much a part of him as the beat of his immortal heart. To me, it was utterly foreign. Not just in terms of knowledge, either—while our bodies might look similar from the outside, we weren't built the same.

Sayan was an ancient being, born to last the full span of Time itself.

I, on the other hand, was a man. Born to quietly wear out as the decades passed, my time in this world already set with my first breath.

I was fortunate enough to be more or less as fit and healthy as I had been in my thirties, but the flexibility of my youth was long gone.

Sayan's flexibility, on the other hand, was a sight to behold. In my bed, it was dazzling. In the water, it was something else.

In the water, he moved like smoke, like light, as if he was one with the currents.

As if he couldn't even imagine things like creaky knee joints, or stiff shoulders, or a neck with a crick in it from sleeping too hard in the wrong position.

Our muscles didn't work the same.

Our buoyancy wasn't the same.

Our willingness to be bobbing about in a frigid lake for hours on end wasn't the same.

"Perhaps I should ask someone else to teach me," I said as we made our way through the cheerful mix of ash, oak, birch and hazel that grew on the fringes of the old pine forest.

Sayan whirled to face me with a sound of absolute outrage.

"Let me explain," I said.

"No!"

"I could ask Henrik Berglund to give me lessons. Or his nephew, Mikko Jonasson."

I was confident that both men knew how to swim, having been born and raised in the small town of Laskeld that hugged the lake.

"I will drown them if they try."

"That's not very polite," I said mildly, hiding my amusement. "And you would not."

"I would! You know I would! You have heard the stories?—"

I glanced up at him. "Those stories weren't about you."

Before Sayan had claimed the lake as his own, it was held by a nix, who certainly would—and did—drown many people. Enough that the memories had echoed down through the generations to this very day.

My sweet naiad didn't have it in him to hurt a single creature alive.

Apart, I amended, from the many fish he delighted to catch and bring to me.

He scowled.

"You could be there while I took lessons," I said.

"No. I do not wish for them to see you naked."

"In that case, I will keep my drawers on."

It didn't appease him. He stopped us to skim a possessive hand from my collarbone to my groin, which he cupped. "They will still see you. You must keep all of your clothes on. Your coat and your breeches. And your boots."

"That will make it hard to swim, don't you think?"

He pondered this for a moment before he said with reluctance, "I do not want you to struggle." He thought for a second more. "You must blindfold them."

I laughed, pulling away and continuing up the path. "This feels like something of a double standard, my love." I glanced over my shoulder.

He raised a haughty, questioning brow.

"You are always naked," I said.

He tutted and strode after me. "They can look at me all they want. I do not care."

"But you care if they look at me?"

“They cannot have you. They cannot . They will see you and they will want you. They will...they will try to take you.”

I heartily doubted it.

Henrik was happily married to his wife of many years, Agnetha. Mikko was single, yes, but he was a serious and kind man in his early thirties, and surely not lacking for suitors.

While I didn't want to dismiss Sayan's concerns—or his double standards—out of hand, I also didn't think that either of them were in any danger of losing their hearts or their heads if they were to see me naked.

“If you are there,” I said, “no man would be able to take his eyes off you long enough to even notice me.”

He tipped his head consideringly. “You are right, of course.” He slid his hands sensually down his long torso to frame his erect shaft, and lowered his lashes. “I would make sure of it.”

“Not too sure, though. If they're completely distracted by you, they might forget that they're supposed to be teaching me to swim.”

He grunted.

“I will ask Mikko,” I said.

“No.”

“Very well, Henrik.”

“Not Henrik.”

“All right.” Sayan was smug until I added, “I will wait until Lars visits, and he can teach me.”

At Lars’ name, Sayan’s scowl returned.

There was no hiding my smile this time. When he saw it, Sayan scowled even harder.

“Not Lars ,” he said, the name on his lips scathing.

“Why not Lars?” I asked.

He growled low in his throat. “Because you are mine .”

I stopped and turned to face him. He kept walking until we were toe to toe, our bodies almost touching, and tilted his head down.

He was using his greater height in an attempt to dominate me.

He lifted his chin and looked down the length of his elegant nose, let his long hair swing forwards to demonstrate that he had to look down in the first place, and held his shoulders stiffly to emphasise how wide they were.

It was adorable.

I curled a hand around the back of his neck and pulled him close to bite his plump lips with a quick, loving nip.

His hips bumped forwards reflexively.

“Never doubt it,” I said.

He followed my mouth with his when I pulled away. I shot him a smile and turned back for the cabin.

He caught up with me in two long strides and took my hand, holding it tightly as we walked on. After a short silence, he said, “Very well.”

“Very well?”

He was already shaking his head. “No. Forget it. I changed my mind.”

His grip grew tighter, almost to the point of being painful. I didn’t say anything.

He heaved a big sigh and drooped a little.

“Very well,” he said again, tacking on another sigh.

I hummed inquiringly. We were almost home.

“You can...he can...”

We walked up the porch steps, still hand in hand. Sayan turned me and pushed me back against the door. His beautiful eyes bored into mine.

“Oh, Sayan,” I said, reaching up to cup his cheek. He was such an expressive creature. “There is no need for this. Lars is a friend.”

“You love him.” A large hand settled over my heart. He flexed his fingers, spreading them wide and digging them in lightly. “If I could, I would pluck him from your chest.”

I gave a shocked little laugh.

“I mean it.”

“I believe you do. Hopefully, one day you won’t. When you meet him?—”

He gave a disgusted snort.

I laughed again. “When you meet him?—”

“I do not wish to meet him.”

“That’s unfortunate, because meet him you will. As soon as he stops sending me letters five times a week and comes here himself.”

“He should stay in Hallevalt. Where he belongs.” Sayan sank his weight against me, pinning me to the door. He was mostly dry now, while my clothes still clung to my damp body. I was beginning to feel clammy. “Where he belongs, and you do not.”

I had visited Lars and Hallevalt not that long ago.

Sayan hadn’t taken the separation well.

I caught his hips and eased him back.

He frowned but he didn’t complain. Letting us in, I headed for the bathroom and a clean, dry towel. He stopped me with an arm around my waist before I got very far.

I pulled at his forearm. To my surprise, he didn’t unwind it. Instead he squeezed tighter, nosing at the back of my neck. He brushed my hair away, exposing my nape, and set his teeth to it. He scraped lightly, then licked. A slow, wet drag.

The muscles low in my abdomen tightened.

“Tell him to stay in his city,” Sayan murmured, his breath warm against my skin.

“All right,” I said. “If that’s what you want.”

He purred. “It is.”

“I will simply visit him there instead.”

Sayan stiffened behind me, then whipped me around and glared. “No.”

Over the winter months he’d been sleepy, soft and gentle with drowsiness.

Perhaps—and oh, how I hated to think of it—perhaps because he usually spent the season locked beneath the ice-bound lake, lying all alone at the very bottom in a death-like hibernation.

His body still expected it, even if his heart wanted to stay with me.

As the green tide of spring had rolled slowly in from the southern lowlands, however, he’d grown more demanding in his lovemaking. His possessiveness had increased.

I couldn’t deny that I was flattered by it.

In my former life, I’d been married to my childhood sweetheart and dearest of friends, Nils.

We’d had many happy years together before I lost him to a wasting sickness.

During our marriage I’d been satisfied with him alone, but Nils had needed more and,



with my blessing, he'd sought out other people and experiences.

I'd never known jealousy, either towards him or from him.

My bond with Sayan was as different from my bond with Nils as it could possibly be.

I sometimes thought that it was the very reason I'd been able to allow myself to love him.

One of the last things Nils had said before he left me forever was that I should find someone who could give me all of the things he'd never been able to.

Someone to dote on, a man who would soak up all my attention like he needed it to live.

Someone who drove me wild with passion, and wanted only me.

I'd certainly found that in my naiad.

Nils would approve.

Sayan's possessiveness, then, was both novel and flattering. His jealousy over Lars, while also novel, was concerning rather than flattering, and it had only sharpened over our time together.

Lars and I had a brotherly bond and nothing more. I'd tried to explain this, knowing that Sayan at least had experience of siblings even if he couldn't grasp the concept of a non-sexual friend. It hadn't seemed to clarify anything.

I could only hope that Lars would hurry up, stop writing me letters complaining that he missed me, that the city was a barren wasteland to him now I'd abandoned him for

my wild naiad and the north, that neither feast nor wine nor fucking would satisfy the hole I'd left in his life, and just visit .

## Page 5

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The only way Sayan would stop being jealous of him was if Sayan saw us together.

And, I thought with a smile, if he got to know Lars himself.

Sayan was still tense and angry. The sight of my smile didn't help. "I am yours," I said. "You must know that." Holding his burning gaze, I reached up to frame his face.

He drew back before I could make contact.

Ah. It was to be like that, was it?

I lowered my hands to his chest instead, sliding my palms over his firm pectoral muscles and grazing the small, tight nipples. He was sensitive there. He was a naiad—he was sensitive all over. But, I had noticed, he particularly liked it when I paid attention to him here.

Most likely because all anyone else had ever paid attention to was first his face, and then his cock.

He fought not to react. If you didn't know him, he would have seemed unaffected by the light touch.

I did know him.

I'd had months and months to learn his body, to learn what pleased him, and how to make him desperate for more.

I might have utterly failed at learning how to swim, but this I had mastered.

“I am yours,” I said, “and you are mine.” I gave one of his nipples a light, teasing pinch.

He gasped and crowded closer before pulling away again.

“Which means,” I continued, “that I have no interest in anyone else in the whole entire world. Only you.”

His eyes were intense on my face. His chest rose and fell quickly.

I held his hip and gave it a warning squeeze when he went to move. I backed up the unspoken command with a sternly raised brow. He stayed where he was, although he seemed conflicted about it.

I moved around to stand behind him, sliding my arms around his chest. “I have no interest in touching anyone else like this.” I stroked over the flat plane of his abdomen.

He curled his pelvis forwards, trying to get me to touch his shaft.

His breath came out in a short, frustrated pant when it didn’t work.

I stroked around to his back and glided my hands up either side of the strong channel of his spine, then pushed up to clasp his nape, pushing his head forwards. Long ropes of shining green hair slipped over his broad shoulders.

He moaned quietly.

“I have no interest in looking at anyone else like this. No interest in playing with

anyone else like this.”

I took a round, firm buttock in each hand and rubbed my thumbs teasingly up and down the deep divide between.

He wasn't used to attention here, either, having been exclusively the one who penetrated. My subtle explorations excited and unnerved him in equal measure.

He panted again, once, as he shifted away from my touch before pushing greedily back for more.

“You need never, ever, feel jealousy over me, Sayan,” I said. “I am wholly yours.” Drawing back, I gave his beautiful arse a sharp, playful slap, and moved away.

He was on me before I'd got more than two steps towards the bathroom, where I'd planned to shed my clothes, wash the lake water from my chilled skin, and warm up with a brisk towelling.

I grunted and laughed, then laughed again when his arms locked around me and he lifted me clean off my feet.

If having his beautiful behind played with was new for Sayan, then being toted around as easily as if I was the sort of slender boy I'd never been was new for me.

He rushed me over to the sofa by the hearth and pushed me down, crawling over me and covering me comprehensively.

He curled his arms around my head and shuffled his hips impatiently until I parted my legs and made room for him.

He stared at me, his lovely face stormy with emotion as he continued to fuss about.

He'd had a preference for enclosing me from the very start, but he'd grown more and more particular about it, adjusting and then adjusting again, until I was entirely contained.

It could have felt claustrophobic.

Fortunately, I revelled in his need for me.

A need that was quite visibly overflowing right now.

I stretched up and kissed him. "The only one," I murmured against the soft, plush mouth that tensed beneath mine. "You are the only one I love like this, my Sayan. The only one I will ever love like this. You have me, completely."

His chest expanded and contracted with a deep, shattering sigh.

I spread my fingers wide along his elegant jaw and held him for it as I kissed him again. "Do I have you?"

"Yes," he moaned, and fell into the kiss. "Yes. Only me. Always."

He slowly flexed, rubbing his silken skin and hard muscles against me. He made a cross sound when he registered that I was still dressed, and leaned onto an elbow, rucking up my shirt to expose my stomach and chest. He slipped a hand beneath my waistband and gently took hold of my shaft.

It was sweet, how affectionate he was to this part of me. Always tender and encouraging.

We didn't talk about it often and I had long ago released expectation as far as maintaining an erection went, but the thought of one day regaining the ability, of

showing him...

Holding my eyes, his all but black with desire, Sayan seized my wrist and clapped my hand onto his buttock hard enough that it quivered beneath my palm.

I pressed my fingertips deep into the dense, resilient muscle. He watched me anxiously.

“It’s all right,” I said.

He didn’t respond, other than to shift over me again.

I wondered whether I should coax him into asking for what he wanted. I wondered if he even knew.

“Can I touch you here?” I asked. Better than saying, Do you want me to touch you here?

He dipped his head in a short, quick nod. “You can...you can touch me anywhere.”

“Oh?” I eased my other arm free and wound it around him. He pressed closer, dipping his back and lifting his arse into my hands. Gods. I held him there, letting my want and my own possessiveness show clearly on my face. “Kiss me.”

He pressed his lips to mine and brushed them back and forth but didn’t push for more. He nibbled gently, kissed softly...

...and it was completely by rote. All of his focus was centred on his arse and what I was doing to it.

Or what I wasn’t doing to it.

I held it, nothing more. My touch was as reverent and chaste as if I was holding his face.

He hitched his hips into mine with a petulant little demand and nipped my bottom lip.

I pushed him back to look at him.

He glared at me, but his gaze quickly fell away.

I tutted, drawing his eyes back to me.

He huffed and raised a brow.

Very deliberately, I stroked the outside of his thigh, his hip, and up to the delicious, deep dimples at the small of his back. I refused to let him look away as I pushed my hand down and let two fingers glide between his buttocks.

His breath caught as he squirmed uneasily.

I moved back up to those dimples then pushed down again in a long, languorous stroke.

“Just this,” I told him.

“If you...” His breath stuttered and his eyes unfocused as I did it once more, this time brushing the tips of my fingers over his hole. He cleared his throat. “If you want.”

“Mhm.”

I decided to do it a little longer and then, if he was still uneasy, I’d back off and ask him to fuck me instead.



Watching him learn a new type of pleasure was arousing, but it also broke my heart. He was a skilled and passionate lover, yet at times there was a peculiar shyness in the way he responded to me taking control.

Sayan loved me and he loved being with me. He loved indulging in his physicality and using his body and his knowledge to bring us both pleasure.

I didn't think that he loved the act itself, for itself.

For thousands of years he'd been driven to seek out meaningless encounters with strangers. Always a stranger, never the same person twice. A stranger who never considered him and his pleasure, who took and took and took and, once sated, walked away.

I'd bet my life that he'd never even asked for a kind touch in return.

That he'd kept his need buried deep inside, tucked away in the same place where his loneliness lived, along with his helpless yearning for his childhood, his lost siblings, and the cold mother whose cruelty he didn't even understand.

I couldn't think about it for long without growing angry.

He hummed quietly against my neck. Every now and then he opened his mouth and licked at my skin.

"You taste perfect," he said, and humped against my stomach in a slow, thorough drag. "Like you and my lake."

I wasn't all that thrilled to have the lake water dry on me, but Sayan had expressed his enjoyment of it on more than one occasion.

I was stroking him firmly now, up and down, up and down. I let my fingertips tickle the skin behind his bollocks, and when I dragged them back up, I stopped over his hole and held there.

He parted his lips and set his teeth to the long tendon at the side of my neck.

I began a gentle, circling massage.

Sayan moaned and went limp, his heavy body pressing suddenly down onto me and pushing the air from my lungs in a short wheeze.

He arched up into my hand demandingly.

“Yes?” I said, surprised at how gravelly and low my voice was. My heart pounded and my face stung with aroused heat.

He hummed again.

It wasn't quite enough. I stilled.

“Yes, yes.” He sucked hard at my neck, and pinched the skin between his teeth. “Yes.”

I wouldn't go much farther today. He was about to come—I knew it by the frantic little pulses of his hips, by the way his voice shook.

I returned to the gentle, slow circling of my fingertips, regular and relentless. He fell into the rhythm, flexing his hips at the same speed, chasing my touch.

“Look at me, Sayan,” I said.

He tried. He raised his head and attempted to focus on me. His cheeks were flushed a deep rose, his lips were bitten red and damp, and his eyes were dazed.

None of this was a mystery to him. None of it was a surprise. Sayan had prepared many, many partners for his possession in exactly the way I was now preparing him.

And yet, from the way he was responding, from the look on his face, you'd think he'd never even imagined such a thing.

It reminded me of the first time I'd taken him into my mouth. Astonishingly, I'd been the first ever to do that, too.

I loved him so, so very much.

Digging my free hand into the solid lower curve of his buttock, I reached for his mouth and said against his parted, puffy lips, "Come for me," as I breached him slowly.

He did.

## Page 6

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The next morning, it was raining.

I sat on the comfortable bench on my porch, where I was protected from the ghastly weather by a wide overhang, and sipped my second coffee of the day.

Rain pounded on the roof with steady, percussive thuds.

The strong wind tossing it about in great gusts was so bitterly cold, I was amazed that it wasn't hailing, or even sleeting.

Water spilled over the edge of the roof as the downpipe gurgled, struggling to discharge the overflow from the gutters.

Sayan stood before me, frowning. He'd been awake early again, although instead of teasing me out from under the covers, he'd been content to lie curled around me until I got up.

He'd even waited—more or less patiently—as I made my first coffee and toasted thick slices of bread cut from a three-day-old loaf, but while I was in the middle of eating, he'd abruptly whisked himself outside, letting the door slam behind him as he always did.

When I followed him out, bundled up in a warm coat and holding a steaming earthenware mug between my hands, he must have known that we weren't going swimming.

He pretended otherwise.

“Hurry and drink your disgusting coffee,” he said as soon as I lifted the mug to my lips. He touched a finger to the bottom of the mug and helpfully tilted it. “Then we shall go to my lake.”

I almost choked on the coffee, pulling back before he could tip the lot straight down my throat.

He shifted from one foot to the other then stuck a hand out from under the shelter of the roof and held it there to catch the rain in his palm. His fingers opened and closed slowly.

“I don’t think I’m in the mood for a swimming lesson today,” I said. The sky was grey and thick with rainclouds. It might clear up later, but if I had to guess, we were in for it for a few hours yet. “It’s not a very appealing prospect.”

He stared at me, confused.

“It’s horrible weather,” I said.

Sayan tucked in his chin and widened his eyes. He couldn’t have looked more offended. “It is glorious weather.”

“For ducks.” And, I supposed, naiads.

He frowned. “Was that one of your human jokes?”

“Yes.”

“It was not funny.”

I set my coffee mug on the bench and leaned forwards, taking hold of the backs of his

thighs to pull him closer.

After a moment of resistance, he allowed me to draw him between my parted knees. His hands went to my face and he lifted it, gazing down at me with hunger and disappointment. We watched each other quietly.

“You really do not like this weather?” he said. It was more of a statement than a question.

“I don’t.” There was no point in pretending otherwise. “You really do?”

He closed his eyes briefly and inhaled, releasing the deep breath with a sigh. “I do.”

“I prefer it when the sun is shining and the air is warm.”

He gave me a sceptical look. “You are living in the wrong place for warm air,” he said, with all the authority of a naiad who’d spent his first ever winter awake and on land.

Winter hit the north of the kingdom hard, locking it for months in ice and deep falls of snow. Despite that, Sayan had continued to strut around naked, insisting that he wasn’t cold.

He continued to go out to his lake every day without fail to do whatever it was he did, but while he wasn’t outwardly bothered by the temperature, the season had affected him in other ways.

He’d turned into a soft and snuggly kitten.

He’d happily spend hour after hour by the fire, more often than not choosing to lie on the floor.

He'd join me on the sofa for lovemaking, but otherwise, he'd decided that such human nonsense wasn't for him.

I had no complaints. For one thing, it was a tight fit with both of us on it.

For another, I liked to see him there at my feet, whether he was poised and graceful or spreading his long, elegant limbs with abandon all over my expensive rug.

Winter had quieted him.

Spring and summer, it was safe to say, drove his appetites and desires up.

Along with his energy. Even now, he was swaying gently in my grip.

I squeezed the backs of his thighs, feeling the lean muscles tighten and relax under my palms. "Go," I told him. "Your lake is waiting. When you are finished with your lake, I will be waiting."

He bit his lip in hesitation. "Right here?" he checked, pointing at the wooden floor beneath his bare feet

"Here at the cabin, not here on the porch. I'll be inside."

Hiding from the rain, like any sensible man who had no other demands on his time. Reading a book, catching up on my correspondence, and drinking more coffee.

All by a crackling fire.

"You will not go into town?" he said.

"Not today. Tomorrow."

“Unless it is a clear day tomorrow. If it is clear, we will go to the lake, and I’ll teach you to swim again.”

Was it wrong that I hoped it would continue to rain?

Yes. Wrong, and pointless. I wasn’t going to get out of this swimming business.

“Whatever the weather, I still have to go into town. I can do that in the afternoon. We can go to the lake in the morning.”

It was worth it, to see his smile.

I would never understand the bond he had with his lake, but it charmed me. And he wanted, desperately, to share his joy with me.

I glanced at the rain, still sheeting down, and reconsidered. It wasn’t that cold. Should I...?

Sayan’s smile turned knowing. “Not today,” he said, leaning down and kissing me sweetly. “Tomorrow is soon enough. Although I think that you are quite mad to not appreciate all of this water.”

He released my face and slipped out of my hold, darting off the porch in a blur of movement. One instant he was before me, and the next he was standing out in the open.

He was drenched in seconds.

The rain gusted hard against him, whipping his long hair to one side, and he laughed with delight. His beautiful body shimmered, the shape of him blurred by the veil of thick rain hanging between us. He raised his arms out to the sides, arching his back



and feeling , with every part of his body.

I'd seen him do the same in the throes of making love.

Using both hands, he scraped his wet, dark hair off his face. He held still for another moment, staring at me through the curtain of rain, and then he was gone.

Our next lesson went about as well as the first.

"I don't know what that means !" I said in frustration. "You keep telling me to float but I don't know how!"

"You just...you float. You float !"

"Sayan—" I growled.

"You relax. Let the water take you. Float !"

He could not get his head around the fact I was entirely too preoccupied with the water taking me.

Specifically, with the water going up my nose, down my throat, and into my lungs.

I hadn't even realised that I was afraid of the lake until Sayan tried to get me to frolic in it with him.

When I was traveling around the countryside in search of a remote and peaceful location in which to spend my quiet retirement, I'd heard talk of Laskeld and its beautiful lake. I'd heard talk of its naiad, too, although I'd dismissed that as nonsense designed to make fools of tourists.

I'd gone some distance out of my way to come and explore the area, took one look at the lake, and it was love at first sight. I'd been instantly captivated.

But I'd never once considered dunking myself in it.

Perhaps because I truly was the ignorant city-dweller Sayan had called me a few moments ago when, once again, I failed to let the water take me, and ended up spluttering and thrashing instead.

The problem was, I didn't want to surrender.

I didn't want to lose control.

I wanted to be in control.

We stood waist-deep in the water, glaring at each other.

Sayan's face was a study of frustration and determination. He narrowed his eyes at me, jaw tight and chin lifted.

My lips twitched in amusement. I leaned into him, resting a hand on his chest. "My love," I said, "I really think you should let someone who once had to learn how to swim teach me."

His hand covered mine at once, holding it there. "I once learned, Erik!"

"All right," I said. "Then someone who learned in the last ten, twenty, or thirty years. Not in the last two or three millennia."

"Two or three? I am not an infant. No. I will teach you. It is not hard. I do not know why you cannot do it on your own. Here." He grabbed me, lifted me, and tried to set

me on my back again.

There was no more sensual coaxing, no kissing or teasing me into it. We already knew that I could do it if he was distracting me and my eyes were closed. It was when my mind registered what was happening that I locked up, panicked, and went under.

“Let’s do it again,” he said, attempting to lie me on the surface of the water as if he was setting a dinner plate on the table.

I kicked and thrashed, my head went under, and once again he hauled me out and up with an aggrieved sigh.

As soon as I’d stopped coughing and spluttering, I launched myself at him and got my legs around his waist and an arm around his neck.

His eyes brightened.

I kissed him hard, pushing for entry and driving deep inside when he yielded with a soft little moan, his hands on my arse holding me steady.

His short breaths struck my wet cheeks. I drew back in slow increments, kissed him one last time, and pulled away.

“I am going into town this afternoon,” I said, “and I will ask Henrik Berglund for advice.”

Sayan scowled.

I set a finger over his lips. He pouted.

“You want me to swim with you, don’t you?” I said.

He opened his mouth to reply, but I playfully pinched his lips shut. His eyes opened wide, as if he couldn't believe what I'd done.

“That was a rhetorical question,” I said. “I will ask Henrik how one goes about it. As a human. I'll ask him to teach me, or help me find someone else to teach me.”

Sayan's green eyes were shadowed and conflicted.

I released his lips. “And then you can show me your lake.”

The conflict bled away and was replaced with eagerness. “I can take you to my island. To my waterfall!”

“There is a waterfall near here?” It was the first I'd heard of it.

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“Yes. It is only a short swim away. Barely even a few hours, if we cut straight across the lake.”

Hours?

In open water?

The mere thought of it made my gut tighten.

“Or not,” he said, stroking my back. “That is fine. We can stay close to shore if you must have land in sight. It will take days that way, but I do not care. You will be with me.”

“I’ll do it,” I said. “Swim across the lake with you. For you. If you want that, I will do it.”

He lit up.

“But I have to learn first.”

He nodded quickly. “Yes.”

I couldn’t help but kiss him again, until we were both shaking with need. I’d have let him have me right there, holding me up with a combination of his strength and his control over the water, but to my surprise, he was the one to pull away.

He eased me down, took my hand, and hauled me out of the lake after him.

I thought we were going back to the cabin to make love, but no.

I rinsed myself clean at the pump, dried off and dressed in warm clothes, and he rushed me straight off to town, where I found myself ordering a late lunch at the tavern.

Henrik ate his lunch there every day and was on his way out as I was going in, but at my invitation, he was happy to join me at my table, ordering himself another drink to keep me company while I ate.

Henrik was a merchant, as I'd once been, and he was always keen to corner me whenever he could and talk shop.

Where I'd specialised in importing fine goods to sell in the kingdom's capital, he focused on bringing general goods to serve the population of Laskeld and its environs.

He was a knowledgeable man, and we'd spent many comfortable hours in conversation.

We'd become good friends, but even so, once I'd finished my quick meal of hearty beef stew served with freshly baked and still-warm bread, I had to conjure up Sayan's sweet hopefulness and somewhat baffling excitement over having me in the water with him before I could bring myself to ask Henrik for the favour.

"You want me to teach you to swim?" Henrik repeated.

I swallowed my mouthful of ale and set the tankard down on the scarred but sturdy tavern table. "Yes."

"You don't know how to swim?"

“No. That’s why I’m asking.”

Henrik pushed back from the table and gawked at me. “How can you not know how to swim?”

“It’s quite easy. All you have to do is grow up in a city where the river is poison and where, if you’re stupid enough to jump into the crowded harbour in the first place, the longshoremen will row right over your head.”

“Fair enough,” he said mildly. “No need to be offended.”

“Sorry, Henrik. That was rude of me. I find myself somewhat frustrated over the whole business.”

Henrik cocked his head and made an encouraging noise, even as he waved at the server and pointed first at me and then at himself.

“Sayan...” I slumped down in the wooden settle, then tipped forwards and set my elbows on the table and my chin in my hands. “Sayan is most eager for me to join him in his lake.”

“Ah.” Henrik gave me a broad wink. “To swim .”

“Yes. To swim.”

“I understand.” His tone of voice very much said that he didn’t.

“Quite honestly, if it was just for that, I wouldn’t have any problems at all. He actually does want me to swim, though. He mentioned taking me to a waterfall.”

“Waterfall?” Henrik paused to thank the server, who brought over two foaming

tankards. He pushed one my way. “There isn’t a waterfall around here.”

“Sayan said it was a few hours of swimming if we cut across the lake, or a few days if we follow the shore.”

Henrik’s eyes widened. “He might be talking about the waterfall up at the top of Norreld, but that’s hundreds of miles away, Erik. Doesn’t matter how good you are at swimming, you’ll never make it a few hundred miles. Doubt you could even make it one hundred. Does he know that?”

“Definitely not, no. Sayan is a naiad. He has a connection to the water that I, lowly human that I am, can’t even begin to fathom. Unfortunately, that works both ways. He has no comprehension of my human limitations, I don’t think he’ll ever manage to teach me, and he’s getting very frustrated.”

“He’s not the only one, I’ll warrant.”

“He is not.”

“Well, you came to the right man for help. I could teach you myself but I’m not getting in that lake until midsummer at the earliest, not even for a good friend such as yourself.

It takes that long for the water to warm up, and my old bones won’t like it.

My nephew Ral, on the other hand, is young, hearty, and restless.

A regular dunking in cold water can only do the boy good. ”

I eyed Henrik. “If you’re still hoping that I will fall in love and marry him?—”



Henrik threw back his head and boomed out a laugh. “He’s far too young for the likes of you.”

“That is not what you said when you tried to get me to marry him before.”

Henrik shrugged, unabashed. “Was I supposed to ignore the fact a rich and available widower had moved close to town, and me a family man with two wonderful nephews ready to settle down?”

“Yes. I wasn’t available.”

“Didn’t know you’d taken up with the Naiad of Laskeld himself, did I?”

“You saw me with him.”

“Right, but everyone knows he doesn’t come back for seconds. At least, he didn’t before you.”

I merely lifted my brows and took a sip from my tankard. “What about Mikko? Do you think he’d do it?”

“You don’t like my little Ral?”

“He’s a charming boy. Mikko is a sensible man.

As I have thus far proven to be impossible to teach, I might need Mikko’s pragmatism and, more importantly, his patience.

Also, Ral isn’t little.” He was the same height I was, six foot two inches.

Perhaps even a shade taller. Considering that he was in his early twenties, he wasn’t

really a boy, either.

“Mikko is a sensible man,” Henrik said. “You’re not wrong there. Far too sensible to get in the lake before midsummer.”

“Then I’ll ask Ral, if you think he’ll be amenable.”

“Oh, he’ll jump at the chance. Ral’s sweet on you, you know.”

“On...? On me?”

“Come, now. No need to look so surprised. Why shouldn’t he be sweet on you?”

“Why...? As you just pointed out, I am twice his age!”

“True, true. In case you hadn’t noticed, your naiad is more than twice your age, with a few thousand years on top.”

“I’m sure you’re mistaken. There’s no reason for a lad like Ral to turn his attention to a man like me.”

“I’m guessing he has a fancy for plain and stern,” Henrik said. “I wouldn’t worry yourself about it.”

Plain and stern?

Plain, yes, but...was I stern?

“I’m sure he’ll be able to keep it in his breeches,” Henrik went on. “If he doesn’t, a sharp word from you will do it.”

“If he doesn’t, what he’ll get isn’t a sharp word from me, it’ll be a nasty fright from Sayan. Possibly a near drowning.”

Henrik’s tankard paused halfway to his mouth. “I’ll ask Mikko for you,” he said.

“Thank you.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am*

On the following Saturday, I opened the door to a brisk knock, and looked into Ral Jonasson's cheerful face.

"Good morning, Mr Arnesson," he said, and beamed. "I'm here for your swimming lessons."

"Ah." I scratched the back of my neck. "Is Mikko?—"

"Busy?" Ral cut in. "Yes. Far too busy. Can't make it. I am here in his stead, sir. At your service."

I could hardly turn him away. It was an hour's walk from town, and he was doing me a great favour.

Besides, though he was a cheerful lad, I wasn't fooled. There was a stubbornness to his expression that suggested he wouldn't go easily.

"In that case, thank you, Ral. I appreciate it."

His smile widened as he stuffed his hands in his breeches pockets, shooting me a curious glance from under his lashes. They were a startlingly dark brown, as were his eyebrows, making a strong contrast to his fair skin and the ash-blond mop of hair which was currently tied back in a short queue.

I caught a blur of movement in the trees behind him, and sighed. "This is Ral Jonasson. He's here to teach me how to swim. Please don't frighten him."

“I beg your pardon?” Ral said.

Sayan was standing so close behind him that when he exhaled, the fine hair on the top of Ral’s head lifted. “I will not frighten him,” Sayan said, then stared with wide eyes when Ral yelped in shock and leapt away, crashing into my arms.

Sayan growled and plucked him away from me, lifting him off his feet and setting him back down a good two yards away. Then he positioned himself behind me, curling one arm low over my belly and the other high at the base of my throat.

Ral’s cheeks darkened when Sayan ducked his head and kissed my neck, opening his mouth over my skin and finishing up with a possessive nip.

I just knew that he was staring the poor boy down when he did it.

“All right,” I said briskly. “Ral, would you like to come in?”

His enormous brown eyes went from Sayan to me and back again. “Yes. Please. Yes, please.”

Sayan grunted and released me without being asked. He vanished into the cabin, and I watched with amusement as Ral’s attention fixed helplessly on the high, round arse bouncing its way into the shadows of the house behind me.

I stepped back and ushered Ral in, guiding him towards the kitchen only to bump into him when he stuttered to a dead halt as we reached the open doorway of the bedchamber.

Sayan had, predictably, draped himself over the bed.

It wasn’t even a seductive pose. Gods knew he had more than a few of those in his

repertoire, and he wasn't shy about using them.

He'd spread himself out until his long limbs covered as much of the bed as possible, giving us an unambiguous shot right between his legs. He stared as if unconcerned at the ceiling.

"Ral," I prompted.

"Yes!" He strode ahead of me into the kitchen. "Sorry, Mr Arnesson. I didn't mean to be nosy."

"No need to apologise." I gestured at the kitchen table. "Take a seat and I'll make us some tea. And please, call me Erik."

He picked a chair with its back to the door, and thus no line of sight to the shameless naiad all a-sprawl over the rumpled silk bedclothes. "I am sorry, though," he said. "It's just...I wasn't prepared to see your naiad here in your house, and he is...he's... you know."

"Beautiful," I said with a smile, setting the kettle on the stovetop.

"Yes. I'll do my very best not to make an idiot of myself about it, though. Again. I was less overwhelmed by it today. He startled me, is all."

The first time Ral had seen Sayan was back when Henrik had been attempting to entice me into courting one of his nephews, and had brought Mikko and Ral along for a surprise visit.

The three of them had caught us in a compromising position. Sayan had me on the ground as he often did before I'd coaxed him into my house and taught him about beds and sofas and soft rugs, and neither of the Jonasson boys had even given me a

second look.

Of course they hadn't.

Sayan had been designed by the gods to dazzle and seduce all who laid eyes on him, to draw them to him, wanting and ready to be showered with the pleasure that would, in exchange, sustain Sayan's immortal life.

It worked.

Ral, utterly mesmerised, had walked into the lake fully clothed to get to him. Mikko had been as bad.

The happily married Henrik, however, had admired Sayan's beauty but was otherwise unaffected. Knowing Henrik as I did now, I could only imagine that he'd teased his nephews quite horribly over how they'd lost their heads.

I made the tea and pulled out the chair across from Ral.

"I appreciate you giving up your free time to teach me," I said, passing him one of the sturdy earthenware mugs I favoured.

It was a far cry from the delicate tea service of finest porcelain that had graced the breakfast table in my mansion in Hallevalt, and much more to my personal taste.

"Happy to help. I am very much capable of fulfilling your needs, and am at your disposal for as long as it takes," he said. "Whenever I'm not working, consider me all yours."

I held his gaze.

He grinned at me, flashing a small dimple, before taking an innocent sip of his tea.

He didn't break eye contact.

"Hopefully this won't take too long," I said. "With any luck, I'll only inconvenience you for an hour or two today."

"Uh...it might take a bit longer than that," he said carefully.

"Really?"

"Or a lot. Henrik said you've never swum before?"

"That's right."

"And you're old, of course, which means it will take longer. Oh! No, no. Not too old. Certainly not. You're mature, not old. No one would call you old. You're a perfect example of a very fine, mature man." He grimaced. "Sorry. Anyway. Where was I?"

"I'm not sure."

He puffed out a short, laughing breath. "Me neither."

"Something about me being old?"

"Mature," he corrected at once. "What I was trying to say is that something like learning how to swim is much easier when you're young. Young people tend to be more fearless, mostly because they're less aware of consequences. Such as drowning. But don't worry. I won't let you drown."

"That's comforting to hear."



“We’ll have you swimming by the end of summer, no problem,” he said.

The end of summer?

It was late spring.

“You think it will take that long?” I couldn’t keep the dismay out of my voice.

“I’ll have you splashing about in a couple of lessons, but to get you to a point where you can swim any distance with confidence, unsupervised? Yes, end of summer.”

“I honestly had no idea it was such an undertaking. I’d never have asked if I’d known I’d be taking up so much of your time. Perhaps I should find a professional instructor?”

I wondered if there was such a thing as a professional swimming instructor.

If there was, I doubted that I’d find one here in this lakeside town, where the water seemed to be a part of life for everyone other than me.

Ral waved this off. “As I said, I’m happy to help. What else would I be doing in my time off work? I have a small garden but a man can only weed for so long, and almost everyone else my age is either courting or already married and setting up house.”

I remembered what Henrik had said—Ral was young, hearty, and restless.

Still, there must be fewer opportunities for entertainment in Laskeld than I’d imagined, if walking two hours on his days off to swim in a freezing lake with a ‘mature’ man was the best of the leisure activities available to him.

“Besides,” he said, “I’m sure that you’ll pick it up quick as anything.”

“I suppose we’ll have a fairer idea after today.”

He nodded and drained his tea, setting the mug back on the table with a gentle click.

“Who knows? You could be a natural.”

I was not a natural.

Ral, fortunately, turned out to be a natural teacher, as patient as he was cheerful.

Sayan walked with us down to the lake, circling us relentlessly and alternately bumping into Ral then resting a hand at the back of my neck before breaking away for more circling and a repeat of the whole performance, until we came out of the trees and the lake was in sight.

As soon as it was, he broke into a run and flung himself into the water without leaving even a ripple.

The sight was athletic and erotic in equal measure.

“How do you manage it?” Ral asked, adjusting himself discreetly. “Gods, how do you not get completely overwhelmed by him, all the time?”

“Well, as you said, Ral, I’m old?—”

He gave me a friendly nudge. “Mature.”

“—and with age comes experience.”

“You mean experience with naiads and the like? Have you seen any dryads?” He turned to walk backwards, fascinated gaze going from my face to the tangled forest behind me.

“No one around here has seen a dryad for at least two hundred years, the way I hear it. Before you, the last person to see even the naiad was Gil Olsson, and he’s ninety-five. Now that’s old.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I haven’t seen any dryads. Though Sayan tells me that they are here.”

Or they had been. When I first arrived, a few of them regularly roamed through the forest near my cabin. Once Sayan had claimed me and the area around me as his territory, however, he’d scared them all off. Again, so Sayan told me.

All apart from one curious little one, who lingered despite Sayan’s warnings.

He was an endless source of irritation to my beloved.

“In any case,” I said, “it was experience with relationships and attraction I was talking about, not experience with immortals.”

“Ah.” Ral stopped walking backwards and faced front again. “Can’t say I’ve had much of that first-hand, either.”

“No one you have your eye on?” I asked thoughtlessly as we reached the waterline.

He stopped and gave me a level look. “No one available.”

We stared at each other for a charged moment. I was oddly wrong-footed, and the first to look away.

Then Ral gasped, ducking his head and hunching his shoulders as a great splash of water slapped him in the side of the face.

Sayan stood in the shallows, glaring.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am*

Ral straightened, shoving his wet hair out of his eyes.

“All right,” he said. “I get it. He doesn’t like me near you and he doesn’t like me looking at you.

That’s going to be a problem, Erik, because to teach you to swim, I’m going to have to do all of that, and actually touch you, too. If the naiad?—”

“Sayan,” I said.

He nodded. “If Sayan takes offence every time I do, then?—”

“I know. Don’t worry. We discussed this earlier, and Sayan has given me his word that he won’t interfere once the lessons are underway. Haven’t you?” I lifted my voice pointedly.

Sayan grunted, then looked annoyed with himself and pulled his hair over his shoulder in a long rope, stroking it while he continued to glare at Ral.

“Very well, then,” Ral said. “Let’s get on with it.”

He stripped so fast, he was naked before I even realised what was going on.

It was impressive.

I reluctantly took off my coat, then my boots and stockings. I sighed, took off my shirt and my breeches, and stopped there.

Ral glanced expectantly down at my drawers.

“I think I’ll keep these on,” I said.

“Oh. Do you want me to put mine back on?” He scooped up his drawers and hopped into them. “I didn’t think. Sorry. We always swim naked around here. Right.” He clapped his hands together and swept out an arm towards the lake. “Shall we?”

He strode confidently into the water and immediately disappeared below the surface with a startled shout.

He resurfaced a good hundred yards out.

“I’m okay,” he called. “It’s fine! I?—”

He went under again.

This time he popped up closer to the shore, and Sayan rose up behind him. He waited until Ral was steady on his feet, then gave him a petulant little push.

Sayan stared at me over Ral’s shoulder. He abruptly turned away, his body arcing gracefully and silently beneath the waves.

“Whew!” Ral scraped his wet hair back from his face as he sloshed towards me. He stopped when the water was lapping around his knees. “That was fun.”

Fun? “Was it? It looked quite horrifying from where I’m standing.”

“He’s trying to scare me, and it is not working. It was amazing. I’ve never moved that fast in my life.”

“Amazing,” I echoed.

Ral considered me. “Well, he scared one of us. Erik, are you afraid of the water?”

“No.”

“Come on in, then. It’s lovely.”

I trudged into the shallows, flinching at the cold that didn’t seem to bother Ral at all.

“If you were afraid,” Ral was saying as he moved backwards, gesturing at me to follow, “you should know there’s no need to be. I won’t let you come to any harm. Sayan certainly won’t.”

“I do know all of this, intellectually.” I stopped when the water reached my mid-chest. “It’s simply that the deepest I’d ever been in water as an adult before Sayan tried to teach me how to swim was a few inches, and that was in my bath.”

“You’ll get used to it quickly enough,” he said. “We’re not in any rush, and we’re going to start with the easiest thing in the world. I’m going to teach you how to float.”

I groaned. “We’ve tried that already. I can’t do it! I can’t float!”

“Of course you can. All you have to do is relax, and let the water take you.”

I gritted my teeth. “I can do it when Sayan supports me, but the moment he lets go, I tense up and go under.”

I truly loathed the feeling of water rushing up my nose.

Ral contemplated me quietly. He was, I decided, much more thoughtful than his cheerful demeanour suggested. “It’s not the floating you’re actually having trouble with, is it? It’s worrying about what happens when you go under.”

“I suppose it is, yes.”

“Not a problem. We’ll fix that, and then you’ll be away. Now. Put your face in the water.”

“What?”

“Like this.” He sank down until the water came up to his chin, and then he leaned forwards and put his face in it. He straightened, and laughed at my expression. “Come on, Erik. It’s easy. Give it a try.”

Grumbling, I bent my knees, hesitating when it reached my chin.

“Close your eyes if you like. Dip your face in. In and out.”

I did as he said, then wiped the water from my eyes and shot him a raised brow. “What next?”

“Hah. We’re not done here yet. Do it again,” he said. “Do it lots. Get used to it. Do it like this.” He bent his knees again, only instead of leaning forwards, he dropped straight down, disappearing under the water, and came straight back up.

He stood there and made me go under the surface over and over again. He made me blow bubbles. I felt like a fool, but after what must have been twenty minutes of it, I could safely say that I no longer panicked at the sensation of water closing over my head, and I was even eager to proceed.



And proceed we did.

Once I was used to being under the water, and to holding my breath and staying under for as long as I could, he showed me how to float.

Unlike Sayan, who had wanted me to float on my back, to admire the vast emptiness of the sky above me as I was cradled by the water around me, Ral told me to tip forwards, he supported my chest and stomach as I spread my arms and let my legs rise, and it was...it was easy.

How could I worry about my head going below the surface if I started with it there in the first place?

We were both smiling with triumph when he reluctantly said that it was time to wrap it up for the day.

“Now that you’ve got your confidence,” he said as we towelled off briskly, “you can practice floating, on your front and on your back, and next time, we can move on to doggy paddle.”

“I’d like that, Ral, thank you,” I said, buttoning up my shirt. “You’re an excellent teacher.”

Ral grinned at me, pleased.

After his initial fussing, Sayan hadn’t shown himself once for the duration of the long lesson. Ral and I returned to the cabin, shared a hearty lunch of cold pies with bread, apples, and cheese, and Ral rushed off home with a promise to return tomorrow.

Afternoon turned to evening and still there was no sign of Sayan.

In the end, I went back to the lake in search of him. I found him sitting on the shore, staring glumly out across the quiet water.

He must have been sitting for some time, as his long, thick hair was completely dry, shifting in the gentle breeze. The setting sun gilded him, lighting the magpie iridescence in his deep green hair and casting a soft rose-gold wash over his warm olive skin.

He knew I was approaching but he didn't look at me. Not when I came to stand at his side, and not even when I sat down beside him.

Instead, he leaned his upper body towards me until our shoulders were touching, and tried to drop his head on my shoulder. He tutted. He was, of course, too tall to do it.

I wrapped an arm around his narrow waist and smoothed my hand over his midriff, stroking gently before letting it rest there.

"I am jealous," he said after a while. "I think."

"Are you?"

He nodded, and moved with that sudden and beautiful grace to kneel before me. His eyes were dark on mine.

"Oh, Sayan," I said softly, and cupped his cheek.

He swallowed visibly. "I do not like it."

"That's all right."

"It is?"

“Of course it is. You can’t help how you feel. You’re allowed to not like something.”

“You are not angry at me for it?”

I pulled him in and kissed his uncertain pout. “No.”

“Even though I wanted to take the boy out to the middle of my lake and leave him there?”

“You wanted to but you didn’t.” Thank the gods.

He snorted. “I wanted to very much, Erik.”

“Why? Because he touched me? That doesn’t mean anything to me. No one’s touch means anything to me. No one’s but yours.”

He’d been sitting back on his heels, but at this he lifted up onto his knees, stretching tall and shuffling closer.

I caught his hips in my hands.

Dusk was falling softly around us. It was a mild, late spring night. His lovely face was still shadowed with unhappiness.

I slipped a hand around to rest on his buttock and encouraged him closer still, even as I sank down to an elbow.

He made an inquiring sound at the back of his throat and followed, knee-walking up until he was straddling my chest. I took hold of his shaft and eased it away from his stomach, angling it towards my mouth.

His eyes were fixed on mine, bright with anticipation.

I licked the tip and his breath stuttered as his hips flexed forwards.

No one had ever put their mouth on Sayan before me.

It still made me angry to think of it. Angry and sad.

In his thousands of years of existence, he had brought pleasure to many.

He'd received little for himself in return.

Pleasure for him had been transactional, a matter of survival.

His lovers had found ecstasy in his arms, and he'd taken nothing but basic sustenance from it.

No one, in all that time, had thought to spoil him, only to be spoiled. They hadn't sought to arouse and seduce him, only to be aroused and seduced.

It had turned him into a strange mix of utter seductive knowledge and strange, bittersweet innocence.

He could take me apart in minutes. He could bring me to the height of pleasure with a few practiced touches, some filthy whispers, the light brush of lips, and hands.

But whenever I played with his cock or his arse, he gasped and squirmed and panted, behaving as if he'd never dreamed of such a thing—even though he'd done it himself to others.

Now, when I pressed my mouth to his inner thigh, when I licked up the length of his

shaft to capture the head and suck it hard, his eyes were round and wondering.

I released his buttock and fell to both elbows. He followed me down, one large hand cupping the back of my head protectively, the other holding his erection at the base as he guided it between my lips in a smooth, unbroken move

His hair fell forwards as he settled me on the ground and he kept his hand behind my head, cushioning me from the hard pebbles that dug uncomfortably into my back.

He was a beautiful sight.

He towered over me, his long torso tight with muscle and flexing with each of his shallow thrusts as he dragged slowly in and out of my mouth.

In general, he preferred it if I pinned his hips and made him take it at my pace, but as I'd suspected, right now he wanted to reassure himself that he owned my affections.

That he owned me, as I did him.

He didn't thrust deep. For all that he was an overwhelming, vigorous lover who had on many occasions given me a stitch in my side and left me heaving for breath as if I'd been running for my life, he was ridiculously tentative when it came to this.

Even though I'd have taken him all the way in, as deep as I could, he seemed to prefer playing quietly just inside my mouth. It was the act of entering me that he liked the most. He liked to watch my mouth yield to his cock, see my tongue slip over the head.

The sound of the birds in the trees behind us settling in for the night and of the lake before us lapping gently on the shore all faded as my world narrowed to Sayan and nothing more.

He gleamed even in the rising dark, moving over me slowly and relentlessly, gasping with every thrust until his body was all I could see, his breath was all I could hear.

“Erik,” he said, his voice little more than a low vibration. His hips bucked but then, instead of finishing in my mouth as I’d expected, he pulled out, tore open my coat and shirt, and spent on me instead—my neck, my chest, and a little on my face.

I laughed as he did it.

His muscles were cast in sharp relief, clenching in a delicious play of darkness and light as he climaxed with a guttural moan and marked me more thoroughly than he ever had.

His moan tailed off into a deep, satisfied sigh and he eased down to lie on top of me.

“Sayan,” I said with a hint of complaint, catching his sides and attempting to brace him off me.

He grumbled and lay himself fully over me, driving his weight down and rubbing our bodies unsubtly together.

I let him do it, pushing his hair back off his hot face and holding the spill of it at the nape of his neck. He gazed down at me.

“Do you feel better?” I asked him wryly. Now that he’d covered me in as much of his spend as possible.

He considered it, then ducked down and kissed me. It was an incongruously chaste peck. “Yes.”

“Good.”

“Although I think I should do it again, and then I’d feel even better.”

“You do?”

“Mhm.” He kissed me again, licking delicately at my lips. They were swollen and hot after my exertions. It always fascinated him when they were that way. He nibbled gently. “And then I will do it to you, and feel better yet.”

I squeezed his solid ribs and gave him a brisk push. “Let’s go home first,” I said. “These pebbles are beginning to grow—oh.”

He rolled off me and had me up before I’d even finished talking. He gave me a hot look, his eyes raking the length of my body and back up before grabbing my hand and dragging me after him all the way back to the cabin.

If I’d thought he’d made a mess of me on the shore, it was nothing compared to the state of me by the time he was fully reassured hours later, sprawled happily in our bed with a heaving chest and damp skin while I was facedown and gasping beside him.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am*

“Y ou’re going to what?” I said to Ral a few weeks later, my voice ringing loud with indignation.

He’d managed to coax me into swimming out further than I’d gone before and I was concentrating on treading water, keeping my head above the surface with some ungainly kicks and flails.

“Push you under,” Ral said.

I stared at him, then turned and aimed my ungainly kicking and flailing in a shoreward direction. “No.”

Laughing, Ral darted around to block my escape.

He wasn’t as graceful as Sayan—he couldn’t possibly be—but he was a strong, athletic young man and he made swimming look easy. Natural. He didn’t even have to think about it.

It seemed impossible that I would one day be as confident as he was, but he’d assured me that if I continued to put the time in, then I would be.

I attempted to push him out of my way, and was instead swiftly propelled a few feet in the opposite direction. He enjoyed dominating me in the water a little too much. “Why would you even want to do that?” I demanded.

“Well, Erik, I’m not really here to teach you how to swim, am I?



I'm here to teach you how to spend time in the water with Sayan without being convinced that you're about to die at any moment.

You don't need to know how to do all the different strokes.

Now that you've mastered floating and paddling, you need to get comfortable not panicking when things get rough and you're getting splashed and tossed about. "

I frowned at him. "Sayan can control the water. If it was choppy enough that I'd be at risk of being tossed about, he'd simply calm it."

Ral smiled, dimple popping, and lifted his brows.

"Oh," I said.

Sayan would be the one tossing me about, not the lake.

"All right." I stopped treading water and let myself rise to a floating position on my back for a rest. Now that I could do it, I was baffled that I had found it remotely challenging in the first place. "But why do you want to push me under? I don't think Sayan would do that."

"Maybe not on purpose, and certainly not if you ask him not to. It's about getting you used to the shock of going under when you don't expect it.

We already know you're fine when you do it deliberately.

Having it suddenly happen rather than first preparing for it and then doing it yourself is different. Can I give it a go?"

"I suppose it makes sense," I said, staring at the sky above me. "But—" I cut off with

a yelp when he darted forwards, threw himself on top of me, and shoved me below the surface.

Instead of being overcome with panic, I simply thrashed back to the surface with a splutter and glared at him. “That was?—”

He did it again. He leapt at me, put his hands on my shoulders, and drove me down.

I bobbed back up like a cork to see him grinning. “Excellent!” he said, reaching out to shove me again.

I was ready for him, but before he made contact, his eyes flew wide and he shrieked as Sayan exploded from the water behind him, snagged him around the chest, and crashed back below the surface.

I trod water and looked around me.

Nothing.

Sayan?” I shouted. “Ral?” I propelled myself in a circle, scanning the lake. “Sayan!” Thrashing gracelessly back towards shore, I kept going until I felt the lakebed beneath my feet.

A tiny dark speck popped up on the horizon. I saw a flash of movement and heard a distant call.

“I’m all right!”

It was Ral.

The speck disappeared. For a moment, I thought Sayan had snatched him away again.

I realised he hadn't when I caught the faint sound of splashing water as Ral began to swim back to shore.

And when someone slipped a warm arm around my waist and tugged me against a large, solid body.

I gripped his forearm. "Sayan," I said chidingly.

"What?" He nosed the side of my neck then scraped sharp teeth up and down the tendon.

"That wasn't nice."

"It wasn't supposed to be," he said, sounding irritated. "He liked it. He was laughing."

I pulled his arm away and flapped and kicked myself around to face him. His eyes glinted at my graceless movements.

Learning a new skill at my age was very hard on the ego.

The splashing of Ral's strong, regular strokes grew louder as he came steadily closer.

Sayan vanished again, slipping beneath the waves without a sound. I assumed he'd darted off, until he gripped my hips. I let out an ungodly groan when the heat of his mouth closed around my cock. It was there and gone before I had time to process it.

Ral swam up beside me. "He is so fast," he said happily. "Erik, you're going to love it when he does that to you."

I wasn't sure I'd enjoy being snatched out into open water quite the way Ral

apparently did, but it was possible. I hadn't thought I'd enjoy swimming at all, and yet here I was, quite contentedly splashing around.

Ral gave me an approving once over. "You're doing so well."

That bruised ego of mine, well beaten down after playing the part of wallowing incompetent in front of an immortal naiad and a robust, athletic youth, perked up. "I am?"

He nodded enthusiastically and sculled back a few feet. "Why don't you see if you can paddle yourself over here?"

"Or we could call it done for the day and go back to the cabin for lunch?"

"Come on. You're not even treading water right now. That's cheating."

"Fine," I said, lifting my feet off the bottom and splashing over to him. "But we'll have to stop soon, and?—"

Ral lunged forwards and shoved me under again.

This time when I broke the surface, I lunged back at him and tackled him down.

We both went under in a tangle of limbs. I got an elbow in my ribs, and my knee glanced off something large and hard. I was almost certain that it was his thigh.

As soon as I touched the bottom, I bent my knees and powered upwards.

I broke the surface at the same time as Ral did. We were both laughing.

Until Sayan snatched Ral again.

I sighed, and waited.

The little dark speck popped up even further away, but I got the same cheerful wave and shout.

I sculled backwards until I was standing comfortably, the water lapping at my collarbones. We'd been at it for a good hour and a half, and apparently being fit enough to walk all day long didn't translate when it came to swimming.

I was tired and my muscles ached.

Expecting Sayan to reappear behind me, I gasped when, out of nowhere, that teasing heat once again surrounded the head of my cock.

At least...

Dear gods in all ten heavens, let it be Sayan and not a fish, or an eel, or?—

I gasped again and groaned when I felt pressure at my hole even as that heat slid down to cover the full length of my shaft. My stomach clenched as Sayan dragged back up with a long, slow suck from the base to the tip.

He released me with a quick, playful kiss and stood, drawing it out in that way he did when he wanted to be admired. Displaying himself for me.

He wasn't only making sure that I got a good view.

He was making sure that I got a good feel .

He dragged his body over mine as he stood; his chest slid first over my belly, then my chest, then he slipped a thigh between mine and arched over me, a hand secure at my

back to help me keep my balance.

Oh, he was dazzling like this.

The sun glowed behind him and light caught in the drops of golden water that rushed over his skin. He was little more than a dark shape in my sun-struck vision, but I didn't need to see his face to know he was gazing at me with hunger and intensity.

I felt it in the tension of his body, in the hardness that he pulsed slowly, almost absently against my stomach, in the space he refused to let open up between us.

And simply because that was the way he always looked at me.

The sound of splashing grew closer as Ral made his way over to us.

Sayan pushed my hair back and lowered his head to kiss me, settling his warm lips on mine and resting them there. The possessive hand low at my back slipped down to hold my arse.

“That was even faster!” Ral said with enthusiasm.

Sayan tilted his head and parted my lips with his, his tongue pressing in and gliding over mine. I gripped his shoulders tighter.

“I'll bet no one else in Laskeld has ever gone that fa—oh. Uh.”

Sayan licked into my mouth with deep, claiming strokes. The hand on my arse slid inward. He stroked my hole with gentle insistence.

The sound of heavy breathing broke me out of the erotic spell. I blinked my eyes open and my gaze clashed with Ral's.

The poor boy was staring at us, his cheeks bright with a hard blush.

“Sorry, Ral,” I said. That was all I could get out before Sayan caught my chin and brought my mouth back to his.

I kissed him quickly and pulled back.

Sayan’s hold on me tightened.

“Sayan,” I said, “not here.”

“Yes. Here. I want you now.”

Ral choked.

Sayan held my chin again and murmured into my mouth, the vibration of his words and the feel of his damp lips against mine making me shudder. “I want you now. I need to be inside you. Let me in, my Erik. I want to feel your body take me?—”

Gods. I got a hand between us and clamped it firmly over his mouth. I couldn’t do anything about the way he was very obviously working his hips against mine.

He sighed.

“It’s...I’ll...it’s...” Ral’s words were tumbling over themselves. “Go. I’ll go, because you’re...uh.”

“Sayan,” I said sharply.

His hold on me fell away. He sank down, gliding backwards in the water. He didn’t say anything, just kept his large green eyes fixed on my face.

Ral was already splashing out of the lake.

“I will come back to you,” I said to Sayan.

“I will wait.” His words were patient. His face was not. His brows were low and his gaze went from me to Ral. His eyes narrowed to glittering slits.

I followed Ral onto the shore, where he was doing his best to scramble into his clothes while still wet. He hadn’t even stopped to dry himself off using one of the towels I’d brought down.

“I’m sorry, Ral,” I said.



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He squeaked and almost fell over as he turned away to shield the erection which was painfully obvious in his wet, clinging drawers. He hauled his breeches up over his arse and fumbled at the fastening with an impatient huff. “Nothing to apologise for!”

“Actually, I think there is. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable and have you see anything you didn’t sign up for.”

He straightened and began to button his shirt. “Oh, I signed up for whatever, Erik.” He shot me a cheeky grin. “Don’t you worry about me.” He yanked on first one boot, then the other. “Same time again next week?”

“If you’re still happy to do it?” I didn’t need his assistance the way I had when we began, but if I was honest, I preferred to have him with me, his presence acting as a buffer between me and Sayan’s enthusiasm.

“More than happy,” he said, bouncing up to his feet. He grabbed his coat and pulled it over his broad shoulders, leaving it unbuttoned.

“I’ll see you the same time next week, then, unless we meet in town before that.”

He beamed and hurried off.

I bent down and swept up one of the towels to dry my face. Something tickled the arches of my bare feet and whispered over my toes. I didn’t have to look down to know what it was. I was already smiling when I turned to face the lake.

Sayan had slipped beneath the water again, but he’d sent a shallow sheet of it up the

gentle slope of the beach to tease me.

I stared out at the small waves, using the towel now to dry my chest.

The lake whispered up to meet me again, lapping around my ankles. A faint tugging sensation pulled at me. I waited for it.

The water level rose to curl around my knees. The tug was more noticeable now, as if someone had wrapped strong hands around my calves and was drawing me towards the lake.

I squeezed out my shoulder-length hair.

Sayan rose dramatically to his full height ten yards away and locked eyes with me. His face was tight with impatience and he held out a demanding hand.

I tossed the towel behind me and waded for him.

The water took me at once. I didn't fight it. I let it sweep my legs out from under me, let it cast me up against Sayan's hot body.

Ral had been right. It had never been swimming itself that I needed to learn. It was how to let myself be pushed around in the water by an insatiable and amorous naiad.

Sayan had always been a challenging lover. From the very first, he had pushed. He adjusted his behaviour as soon as I pushed back—he would never trespass where he wasn't wanted—but his hunger for me seemed without end.

He scooped me up as soon as I reached him, winding an arm around my waist and whisking us hundreds of yards out from the shore.

He unwound his arm and sculled backwards, leaving me to tread water and watching me carefully.

I did it without fuss or panic. Had he done such a thing a few sessions ago, I'd have been splashing about and clinging to him, insisting that he take me back to solid ground at once.

Now, I didn't feel the need to. Yes, I had learned how to float, and could thrash myself in one ungainly direction or the other, but that wasn't the source of my confidence.

Sayan was. My faith in him had overridden my most basic survival instincts in the same way his trust in me had led him into my home, and my bed.

Sayan continued to watch me, his eyes bright as the sun hit them, shrinking the pupils and turning the beautiful green of his irises translucent.

His cheeks glowed pink and his long dark lashes were spiked with water. He slowly dipped lower, hiding his smile below the waves.

I splashed closer.

He sculled away, keeping out of my reach.

I flipped a cupped handful of water at him and he lunged at me, dragged me briefly beneath the surface with him, and boosted me back up. I laughed even as my heart pounded.

Scraping my wet hair away from my face, I looked all around but saw no sign of him.

Something brushed against the backs of my thighs then slid up to my arse for a quick

squeeze of both cheeks before falling away.

Taking a deep breath, I dropped beneath the surface and opened my eyes.

Sayan was suspended in the water beneath me. His lean body was all shadow and light. His long green hair drifted around him in an ever-moving nimbus. His wondering gaze was fixed on my face.

I didn't want to look away, but the need for air soon made my chest tighten. I quickly popped back up and took a few deep breaths. I spread my arms and legs and let the water take me—as Sayan and Ral had instructed many, many times—relaxing into a facedown float.

I opened my eyes again.

Sayan turned in the water to mirror my pose, and he rose up towards me until our bodies touched. He was warm against my lake-chilled skin. His hair tangled around me like waterweed and his hands went to my face to hold me as he pressed his lips to mine.

Oh. It was beautiful, it was magical, it was?—

I thoughtlessly took in a breath through my nose, and then it was nothing but hacking and coughing as I flailed around, trying to get the stinging shock of cold water out of my passages.

I was still thrashing and coughing when I suddenly felt the familiar (blessed) firmness of the pebbled shore at my back. Sayan was leaning over me, his long hair falling to my chest and to the ground either side of us as he watched me with a mix of anxiety and amusement.

Feeling like a complete fool, I went on the offensive. I grabbed him, rolled him beneath me, and kissed him.

He went gracefully, even though we both knew I couldn't move him if he didn't want to be moved. Even if I took him by surprise.

I kissed him until my nose began to aggressively run, at which point I gave up, rolled off, and flopped beside him to stare up at the sky.

"Are you all right?" Sayan said, turning onto his side and setting a hand on my chest, stroking soothingly. From the tone of his voice, the amusement now outweighed the anxiety.

"I'm fine. I just forgot about the need to breathe when kissing."

"Mm."

His fingers lightly grazed my mouth and I lay there as he stroked gently, teasingly.

I sneezed.

Sayan stilled, then laughed.

"Ugh." I pushed myself up to sitting and scrubbed my eyes. I couldn't possibly have snorted that much water up my nose, but it felt as if I was leaking. "I think it's time to go home."

He was already handing me a towel and helping me up.

I went straight to the pump as soon as we reached the cabin.

I'd had some workmen come in autumn last year and build a small courtyard of flagstones set on gravel, as it seemed likely that the pump would get a fair bit of use. Not necessarily from me—I'd found Sayan out here more than once, working the handle and watching the water gush out.

He'd been transfixed.

He could lift the water straight out of the ground if he wanted, and yet for some unfathomable reason, the clanking handle seemed to fascinate him.

Since the area was a little suntrap and also a favourite place of his to sit, I had plans to add some potted cypress and olive trees to make him an ornamental grove, if I could find any hardy enough to survive this climate.

But that was for later.

I had other plans on my mind right now, and I stripped quickly out of my clothes.

"I do not know why you bothered putting them on," Sayan said.

"Yes, you do. I don't want to be caught running around the countryside naked."

Sayan crowded behind me. "Humans are so foolish," he said, sliding his hands around my waist and pressing himself against me. He squeezed until I gasped and slapped at his arms with a short laugh.

"Are you including me in that general insult?" I asked.

"Yes." He curled over me and pulsed his hips into my arse at a languorous pace.

"Must you wash?"

“I must.”

“ Foolish .” He groaned and humped against me, nudging my head to the side and opening his mouth over my neck to hungrily suck.

“I’ll be quicker if you let me get on with it,” I said, attempting to unwind the strong arm that had slipped lower to brace my hips for his gentle fucking motion.

“Hmm,” was all he said.

“Sayan.” I put an edge of firmness into my voice.

He tensed, then let me go and vanished.

I didn’t hear the door open or shut, but that didn’t mean anything. He was silent when he wanted to be. It was even odds that he’d whisked off into the trees or slipped inside. I’d find out soon enough.

I took the small piece of soap from the pot I now kept out here for any post-lesson washes, and lathered it quickly. I wasn’t inclined to linger; the pump drew water from deep underground and it was wickedly cold. I soaped myself swiftly, rinsed off, and made my way into the cabin.

I carried my armful of clothes to the bedchamber and set them in the hamper that I would empty and take into town to be laundered later this week. I was happy to cook and clean for myself, but laundry was beyond me.

Endless buckets of water to heat, endless scrubbing, and soaking, and rinsing. After all that, I had to wring it out before I hung it, where it would steam up the kitchen? No, thank you.

I'd tried only twice before I decided that it was best to leave it to the professionals.

The front door opened and shut quietly. I turned to see Sayan standing in the bedchamber doorway. His hungry gaze raked my body from head to toe.

Feeling unusually playful I returned his gaze with a bold one of my own, and cocked a hip.

He tilted his head.

"Go and sit on the bed," I said.

He hesitated, then stalked past me and sat on the edge of the mattress.

"Get comfortable," I said, because he'd perched there expectantly, resting his hands on his knees.

He flung himself backwards and writhed about until he was comfortably settled against the headboard.

There were more efficient ways to do it, but he loved feeling the fabric sliding over his skin, and tended to make a meal of things.

I walked to the bottom of the bed and set a knee on the mattress.

He immediately sat up and reached for me.

I stopped him with a shake of my head.



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Scowling, he watched intently as I climbed on and crawled towards him on hands and knees. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

I shifted over him until I was positioned over his lap. Lowering myself down, I settled my weight on the tops of his thighs. His shaft jutted up between us. His hands went to my face and his eyes were fixed on my smiling mouth. He flicked his gaze up as if asking for permission.

“Kiss me,” I said.

He did, before I’d even finished ordering it.

I held the sides of his neck and kept him from deepening the kiss. He strained for me but quickly settled into it, following my pace.

He feathered his hands up and down my back but stopped grabbing.

The kiss turned sweet. His soft exhalations struck my cheek.

I lifted away and kissed the tip of his nose and between his elegant eyebrows on my way to rest my chin on top of his head.

His height meant that, even sitting on his lap, I could only manage it if he bent down.

The arms wrapped around me tightened then eased as we sat together, breathing.

His face was tucked into my neck and I held him, a surge of tenderness welling up

from deep inside me.

He rearranged his arms and tugged me closer as he opened his mouth on my neck.

He didn't push. He sucked gently, brushed his lips back and forth, had a little nibble.

In the end, I was the one who moved things on.

I'd always been more interested in driving a partner towards their own pleasure than receiving pleasure for myself, but with Sayan it had become an obsession.

I leaned back, lifted his face, and kissed him hard.

He grunted, a little surprised by the sudden shift in my mood, but more than receptive to it. I pushed my tongue into his mouth even as I pushed a hand down between us and took him in a punishing grip. His body jerked, hips bucking up and almost dislodging me.

I wanted, fiercely, to take him then, as I used to take. To have a shaft that would harden and stay hard, to slide into him and own him from the inside out, to brand him and let him know that he was mine, for that moment and forever.

My stomach twisted with an acid pang of regret that I couldn't.

I'd managed to get an erection more than once during the winter I'd spent with Sayan, but it hadn't lasted and I'd never allowed myself to engage with it beyond observing it and moving on.

But now I wanted to maintain it long enough to use it, dammit.

"Erik," Sayan murmured against my lips. "Erik, what's wrong?"

“Nothing.” I angled his face to the side and slid my mouth to his neck. I strung a line of sucking kisses down to his collarbone and back up to the hinge of his jaw. He dropped his head against the pillows and moaned for me.

No one made noises like my Sayan. No one.

I drove my hand into his long, tangled hair, making him hiss. His eyelids lowered and he panted, watching me. I tightened my fingers and pulled, drawing his head back and exposing his throat. He flexed beneath me and his eyes closed, cheeks flushing sweetly.

I darted in to bite at his plump mouth, making his eyes pop open in surprise. “I want to take you,” I growled.

“I am yours.”

I groaned and tightened my grip on his hair again, loving his responsive gasp. “I can’t. Not the way I want.”

His large hands went to my waist and he lifted me with that effortless strength that still—and always would—gave me chills.

He set me in a high kneeling position and slithered down from the pillows to lie flat.

He raised his arms above his head, eyes on mine, and stretched himself out in a long ripple. His muscles flowed like water.

“If you cannot take me exactly how you want, take me in another way.” His knowing gaze went to my cock. It was hard, but not quite halfway. He slid a hand up my thigh and in to hold my balls for a second before drifting behind to stroke at my hole. He raised a brow.

I shook my head sharply. Yes, I'd intended to ride him when I first climbed onto the bed, but it wasn't what I wanted.

Besides, it might start with me taking him but it always ended with him taking me. He still hadn't yet managed to not flip me over in the middle of things and finish on top of me.

A smile flickered over my face and I caught his wrist, drawing his hand out from between my legs.

He pouted, turned his wrist in mine, and pulled my hand to his cock instead.

I squeezed it and shook my head again.

Sayan thought for a moment, then grinned. Catching the backs of my thighs with a loud smack, he hauled me up to straddle his chest, and leaned forwards to lick the tip of my cock.

He made a happy sound.

"No," I said.

His happy sound turned to a disgruntled sound.

I shifted off him. "Lie on your stomach for me."

Sayan immediately flung himself onto his front, shaking the bed. He humped against the sheets, luxuriating in the slide of silk over his skin.

Once I'd discovered quite how sensitive he was to the feel of fine fabrics, I'd spent a fortune sourcing the very best silk to be found and having it made into sheets.

It still wasn't as fine as his lovely, immortal skin. Nothing was.

I trailed my fingers lightly down his spine, following the channel between the lean planes of muscle. He flexed up into it, sighed, and pushed his hips down, rubbing himself lazily against the bed.

I covered him again, slinging a leg over to seat myself at the top of his thighs. He bounced his arse up at me, making me laugh.

He shook his head, muffling his own laughter in his crossed arms.

I mapped out the graceful architecture of his strong back.

He was nature's finest work of art, he truly was.

I began with a light, tickling touch but soon moved to firm strokes, up and down, curling around his waist, tucking my fingertips between him and the sheets, tilting his pelvis and controlling the gentle rocking he hadn't yet stopped.

He wasn't laughing now.

He moved slowly but steadily, hungry for sensation, yes, but doing it for my enjoyment as much as his.

I leaned over him, bracing one hand on the mattress and sliding the other beneath him. He stilled, quivering, as I dragged my palm over his lower belly and coasted it the length of his hard shaft before enclosing it in a firm grip. I leaned down and bit his ear. "Move for me."

Sayan did, beginning with a small, almost delicate rock into my fist and quickly moving to a solid driving thrust. He moaned and leaned up onto his elbows, tossing his hair back.

It scattered over his flexing back in long, snaking green tendrils.

I didn't pull it, even though that was, I suspected, what he wanted.

Sayan leaked copiously against my hand, significantly more than a human would. It was a part of his naiad nature, designed to help ease his way into lovers without hurting them, despite his size, despite his tendency to overwhelm.

I was about to use it to overwhelm him.

I let him work for a few thrusts more, and drew my hand away. He whined, spreading his legs wider and pushing his hips down onto the mattress.

The whine caught in his throat and he froze, quivering, when I slipped a finger between his buttocks and rested over his hole. I leaned down, pressing my front against his heaving back, and said in his ear, "Take it for me."

Sayan gasped with excitement, nodding.

I pressed inside.

I knew that he liked this. It was new for him but he'd told me he did, when I'd asked. His body told me so now. He shifted restlessly beneath me.

I took my time rearranging myself. I lay on top of him, canting to one side to give myself room to play with his beautiful arse.

Next time, I thought, I'd have him kneel up for me. At the head of the bed, facing the wall. Perhaps I'd find us a mirror. I'd have his cock in one hand and take him with the other.

That was for next time.

Now, I began to flex my wrist slowly, getting him used to the sensation.

He panted into the covers, his hips returning to that steady, rolling movement.

“Touch yourself,” I told him, and he eagerly complied, shoving an arm down and reaching beneath to grab himself.

I guided his movements, pushing him into it, letting him draw slowly back, pushing him forwards again.

I had two fingers inside him, and he groaned.

He was tight. I got lost in the feel of him, his body beneath me, around me. He said my name, over and over.

I tucked another finger in and he began to shake.

“Hold still, now,” I said, and he did his very best, as he always did.

He shook beneath me in hard clenches. His hips twitched constantly, his shoulders tightened and released.

He was up on his elbows again and he dropped his head low, letting it hang.

He was trembling so much that his arse was quivering. And what a sight that was.

Without warning I pulled my fingers free and lay down over him. I took a round, firm cheek in each hand and slid my shaft between them. I didn’t try to enter him. I wasn’t hard enough to do it, and I didn’t need to. This was enough.

“Yes,” Sayan was whispering, “Erik, please. Please . Please, Erik.”

I held his cheeks together and began to thrust. I groaned at the familiar sensations, at the pull in my thighs, in my hips. The tension low in my abdomen.

While I wasn't on Sayan's level as a lover, I had been good at this, once.

Apparently, I was good at it still.

Sayan was rolling beneath me, doing his best to meet my thrusts. He was endearingly clumsy at it; it was, after all, familiar to me but new to him. He adjusted his pace, his rhythm, trying his best to work his arse back against me as I worked against him.

I smacked a hand down on his right buttock—not a slap but a sharp grab, and I dug my fingers in.

Sayan cried out, high and surprised, and came suddenly.

He was beautiful as he did it, writhing in long, spasming pulses. I squeezed him tighter around my cock, which only made him moan louder and jerk harder. I thrust against him again and again and again, the thrill of watching him come undone beneath me rising and rising.

The pleasure crested and spilled through my body, billowing through me and leaving me energised and thrumming. But I didn't climax as I once used to. I'd thought, for a moment, that I might...but no.

I gazed down at where Sayan lay spent and sated between my legs. His head was turned to one side. His eyes were closed and his lips curled in a dreamy smile. His large, strong body shimmered with relaxation.

Even though he was lying in the wet spot.

I slowed my thrusts to something gentler, enjoying the sensation of pushing between



his tight buttocks, entranced by the erotic sight of it. Sayan lifted a heavy arm and reached back to clasp my thigh.

“Yes,” he said, and held on, pulling me forwards gently.

I took it to mean keep going, and I did, for a while.

He moved with me subtly, the same way I’d seen him do when he talked to me of his lake, as if even when he wasn’t in it, he still felt its currents flowing through him.

My heart rate slowed and so, eventually, did my movements, until I stopped with a sigh and draped myself over him.

He breathed deeply. I rose on his inhales and fell on his exhales. We lay there together in silence. I felt his heart beat back against mine.

“I love you, Erik,” he said quietly.

“I love you.” I parted the warm, damp hair at the base of his neck and kissed him there at the very top of his spine.

He lifted up, rolling me until we were lying on our sides. He tangled our legs together, and pulled me in to press against him.

His beautiful face was shy, his eyes lowered. He licked his lips. “I liked that,” he said, and darted a quick glance up at me before looking away.

“As did I.” I touched his chin, bringing his gaze back up to mine. My chest swelled with tenderness as it always did when he let me look at him. Really look at him, not just admire him.

He shuffled closer, until we were wound together as close as we could be.

It was another thing he loved to indulge in, this closeness.

I was almost certain that he enjoyed the intimacy and the afterglow more than the actual act of making love. He loved to wind himself around me, hold me close, as if I'd drift away from him if he didn't.

It was strange, but I felt his love then like a physical thing. It was a warmth inside and all around me, a mingling of the invisible parts of me with the invisible parts of him.

It was pure chance that we had found each other.

Chance, that I had come here to Laskeld at the same time as he had woken from the sleep that could well have lasted the rest of existence itself, and had seen me on the shore. Followed me onto land. Seduced me, and allowed himself to be seduced in turn.

Or perhaps it had nothing at all to do with chance. Perhaps it was fate, the work of the gods themselves.

While I was a lowly and insignificant human, Sayan was, after all, an immortal who shared their blood.

Perhaps one of them had looked upon him, decided that he'd been alone long enough, and had drawn me here just for him.

I smiled.

To be on the safe side, I sent out a silent thanks to them all.