



The Ocean's Heart (The Lunaterra Chronicles #3)

Author: *Debbie Cassidy*

Category: Fantasy

Description: When the Sea King falls for the fake princess meant for his son.

Royal by name only, Thalia Faircaster has lived her life by the sword, in service to an isle that is rapidly descending into ruin—the lands growing bitter and infertile, even as the population grows.

When an alliance with the Northern Sea Realm promises her people a new home, Thalia willingly accepts the charge of escorting her adopted sister across the oceans to witness her wed to the Sea King's only son.

King Vaarin's people are cursed with infertility, and a royal marriage with a blessed Faircaster royal will dispel the blight on his people.

But the sea is a mercurial mistress, bringing a storm that tears Thalia's sister and crew from her, leaving Thalia for dead.

Until King Vaarin finds her, mistaking her for the crown princess.

He believes Thalia to be his son's betrothed, the key to restoring the fertility of his people, and his to protect until they reach safe waters.

The alliance is vital to Thalia's people, and so she takes her sister's place. Willing to woo the prince and seal the agreement.

So why is it the ancient king that makes her pulse race?

Total Pages (Source): 27

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter One

There was a dead man between my thighs, and I was too weak to move him. At least his blood would keep me warm for a while, his body providing a blanket against the icy sea spray that stabbed like needles every time the wind howled and the ship rocked. A respite until my mortal wound ended me, for there was no cause to live now. Not when they'd taken everything from me.

Churning gray clouds moved across the late afternoon sky like distant voyeurs, and I ached to rise from my bruised and battered body and join them. But Death was taking his sweet time in coming to collect.

The clatter of wood on wood, followed by the rise of urgent voices in a language I didn't recognize, chilled what little warmth was left in my blood.

More invaders?

There was nothing left to reap. Nothing except me.

Damn you, Death.

Salt burned my eyes, useless tears slipping down my stiff cheeks because all was lost.

The thud of boots approached, and the body was rolled off me. I sucked in an icy breath, eyes at half-mast as I stared up at the monolith crouching over me.

Dark tendrils of hair lashed at his high cheekbones, and storm-gray eyes raked over

my bloody form, snagging on the emblem pinned to my chest and flaring with recognition.

Who knew that death could be so beautiful? I would have closed my eyes to surrender to it if my lids hadn't been frozen in place.

He reached for his weapons belt, and my chest rattled on a breath, hungry for the final gasps of air before they were taken from me. But instead of the cold kiss of a blade, I felt the soft caress of cotton as he wiped at my face, cleaning it of blood and ice.

"Ah, there you are," he said, his tone gruff with pity. "I am sorry we did not arrive in time to save your virtue and your entourage." He hauled me into his arms like I was nothing but a ragdoll and cradled me to his wide chest. My head flopped against his neck, against skin that smelled like a raging sea of thunderstorms.

His voice boomed across the deck, sending orders to his party even as he moved across it with swift, sure strides unimpeded by the sway of the ship and the lash of the elements.

A whimper of pain slid from my frozen mouth, and he pressed his warm lips to my temple, speaking close to rival the storm.

"Worry not now," he whispered to me. "You're safe, Little Princess."

I was safe, yes. He was right about that.

But he was wrong about the rest.

I wasn't the princess that he was looking for.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Two

48 hours earlier

Bryony dry-heaved over the side of the ship as the deck rocked. I held back her hair and made circles on her back in a manner which I hoped provided some comfort.

“Urgh.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I think I’m dying.”

I bit back a smile, used to her exaggerations. “You’ll be fine once the storm passes.”

“And when, pray Thalor, will that be, considering it isn’t fully upon us yet?”

“Soon.”

A dark mass of angry clouds rapidly drifted across an equally gray sea, blown by a gusty wind right into our path. There was no avoiding it. And even now, the sea fretted beneath us, lapping hungrily at the sides of the ship as if desperate for harbor. The deck was slick with saltwater spray, rocking back and forth as if inebriated. And far to the east, mist gathered. I had to hope it wouldn’t be rolling our way.

Done with her retching, Bryony fell against me with a dramatic sigh. “I fear I shall not last until soon, and if I do survive, then I’ll arrive at Merida Isle emaciated and broken, and Prince Dylan will be sure to reject me, and the alliance will die before we can breathe life into it.”

I cupped her shoulders and studied her heart-shaped face, a little pale for certain, a

little green, but ethereal and lovely all the same. “You couldn’t look unappealing if you tried. He’ll be lucky to have you, vomit stained or not.”

She looked down at the front of her gown with a groan. “I’m disgusting.”

“Yes, yes, you are, but you’re also the princess of Faircaster, and therefore no one would dare say anything other than nice things about you.”

She offered me a half smile, jade eyes lighting up. “You do have a valid point.” She lifted her chin high. “I shall remain in these clothes until the storm passes. I refuse to ruin another gown.”

“Or you could just wear britches and furs? Much more appropriate for travel.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Thalia, but I’d rather not dress like a guard. If I’m to maintain an illusion of station and power on this voyage, then I must dress appropriately.”

She sounded like her mother, Queen Marla, the pompous witch, and she must have realized it too because she winced and shook her head. “I’m sorry. Mother’s been drumming instruction into me for weeks now, ever since Chamberlain Colson negotiated the deal with King Vaarin. Etiquette, etiquette, and more etiquette.”

“I doubt the sea fae have the same standards of etiquette as us humans.”

The chamberlain of Pridehaven had been assigned by Prince Adom himself to act as an envoy in arranging the deal with the Northern Sea King. A deal that would benefit us for generations to come. In the meantime, the generous monarch of Solmane had shipped enough food to last us until the contracts with King Vaarin could be signed.

Bryony sucked in a breath, her already pale cheeks going sheet white. “I’m going to

be marrying a sea fae.”

Oh dear, I couldn't let her spiral now. “I've heard wonderful things about Prince Dylan. He's kind and talented. An artist and poet. You'll like that.” Not that any of that mattered. Bryony would be marrying him regardless, for the good of Faircaster Isle and its people. Our people.

“What if he's ugly?” Bryony's eyes flew wide. “What if he has fins?” She pressed her hand to her heaving bosom. “Of course he'll have fins. He's sea fae. They're a different breed to us entirely. Did you know their hearts are on the opposite side to us? And they have two sets of lungs? Oh, Thalia, I don't know if I can do this.”

“You can. And you will. You're not so shallow as to let his appearance stand in the way of making a connection. Look to his heart.”

She swallowed hard. “And what if his heart is ugly too?”

I sighed. “Then you will nurture it with the warmth and generosity of your own until it blooms.”

She blinked back tears and nodded. “Yes. I will do that. I will find a way to love him.” She managed a small smile, and the knots in my belly eased. “I didn't know you were so romantic, Thalia.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Me? Never.” I drew my sword and held the blade up to the waning light so that it bounced off the steel edge in lethal glints. “My heart belongs to battle and the waves.”

I'd hope to make her laugh, but instead her smile wilted. “Will you truly leave on your discovery voyage?”

I hooked an arm through hers and led her away from the starboard side and toward a bench bolted to the deck. We still had a little time before the storm was overhead, and a little more fresh air would do Bryony a world of good.

“Thalia?” Bryony prompted me for an answer.

“You know I must go. And you know why.”

Although Faircaster Isle was my home, it wasn’t my origin. King Bronan had found me, an abandoned baby, at sea twenty-one years ago. I’d been wrapped in a blue blanket and hidden in a basket on a small rowboat. How the boat had survived the raging of the ocean was a mystery, King Bronan always said when recounting this tale. But I knew as soon as I held her in my arms that she belonged to me.

When he recounted that tale, every time he said those words, a rush of warmth would course through me. A sense of belonging, but it always faded beneath Queen Marla’s withering glances and sharp words. The king might have adopted me, but his queen never accepted me, and I’d learned not to call him Father in her presence.

Bryony and I were raised as sisters, but I was never a princess, and truth be told, I preferred it that way. I’d chosen the guard and the sword over petticoats and corsets.

My discovery voyage had been planned for almost five years. It offered me the freedom to take to the sea and discover where I’d come from. But the fracture of our alliance with the Rootborn of Thyrealis Isle and our failing crops kept me home.

I was King Bronan’s voice across the seas. And as his ambassador, he’d needed me to secure a new alliance. I’d finally succeeded with Prince Adom and Colson’s help.

“You will come and see me, won’t you?” Bryony dropped her head to my shoulder. A gust of icy wind slapped at my skin, whipping tendrils of my dark hair out of my

braid and into my eyes. I brushed them away before attending to Bryony to do the same for her. “Thalia, promise me you’ll come back to Merida,” she insisted.

I’d been her protector, her shadow for as long as I recalled. But the past three years had taken me far from her to distant isles as I’d sought aid for our people. She’d survived without me then. She could do it now.

“I’ll come visit, I promise.”

Her face fell, but she didn’t press for more. My sweet sister might be a little spoiled, but she’d never been selfish.

A fat raindrop hit my cheek, then another, and a moment later, the deck sang beneath the downpour.

The crew yelled out instructions to lower the sails, to hold the helm, and although part of me ached to join them, I turned away, taking Bryony with me below deck and to safety. I had only one duty on this voyage.

To protect Bryony with my life, for without her, there would be no alliance, and without the alliance, my people would surely starve.

* * *

Once Bryony was safely ensconced in her chambers, her lady’s maid busy preparing her a bath, I hurried to my own quarters to change out of my wet clothes. This time tomorrow we’d be in view of Merida Isle—a lush paradise and our new home, once the alliance was sealed, of course.

It had been more than a century since humans had inhabited that land, back when the Northern Sea Realm had brokered a deal with humans. The sea fae would excavate

human technology from the depths of the sea; in exchange, the humans would provide them with brides.

It seemed that the sea fae suffered with infertility, something my people had never had an issue with, and something which was now killing us.

The council of elders called our fertility a gift, but the younger generation knew it as nothing but a curse. More bodies meant more mouths to feed. But if our fertility was now a curse, it was one that could be gifted to a race that needed it.

Royal marriage to the sea king's only progeny would allow the Northern Sea Kingdom to benefit from the ancient blessing that had been bestowed upon our people over a hundred years ago. Bryony carried the gift of fertility in her veins, as did all Faircaster royals. Fertility that had blessed our people in turn. The Northern Sea fae were also connected to their royal bloodline, and so by marrying King Vaarin's son, Bryony would be ushering in a new era, not just for the Northern Sea fae, but for us all.

Once the ceremony was done and the marriage consummated, the contract would be forever sealed, and then...then I would leave for my discovery voyage.

I pulled on dry pants and a fresh tunic and twisted my hair into a knot. My stomach grumbled, telling me it was time for the evening repast.

I made my way down the corridor to Bryony's quarters, swaying side to side with the ship because the storm was overhead now, the howl of the wind audible even below deck.

I rapped on her door, but it was Lissa, her maid, that answered, her expression etched in concern.

“Is she still feeling sick?”

“Oh yes, miss,” Lissa said. “Terribly so.”

I slipped into the room and crossed to the bed hung with gauzy nets to create an illusion of opulence. Queen Marla was all about appearances, but anyone with an eye for ships could tell that the Marilise was on her last legs. Even then, the queen had been incensed when Father gifted her to me.

“Consider it the dowry that I know you’ll never use,” he’d said.

He knew my heart lay with the sea. Still, I’d be lucky to get a full discovery voyage out of the Marilise .

I drew back the netting to find Bryony lying on her front, her face turned away from me.

“How are you feeling, Bry?”

“I want to die...” she groaned.

“I’m assuming you don’t want supper, then?” She gagged, and I pressed my lips together. “All right.” I softly stroked her silken hair. “Would you like me to stay with you tonight?”

She turned her head toward me, her eyes dull and dark. “Will you tell me a story?”

Although a year older than me, Bryony had always fallen into the little sister role. I kissed her sweaty brow, then mock-grimaced, which made her smile. “Whatever you want, Your Majesty. I’ll be back after supper.”

She grabbed my hand as I made to stand. “No. Not Your Majesty. Never to you, Thalia. You’re my heart.”

Damn her, she was the only person in the world who could make my steely heart melt. I squeezed her hand.

“Very well, sister . I’ll be back in an hour.”

“I love you,” she called out as I reached the door.

I threw a smile over my shoulder. “Love you more.”

* * *

The mess hall was filled with rambunctious laughter as guardians filled their bellies with food and ale. But the merrymaking died when I entered the room. I swept a stern gaze over the gathered, noting the barrel of ale, probably already half-drunk by now. Yes, it was the night before we made land, and yes, I had agreed to two barrels being brought on board for the ship, but I expected decorum from my guard.

“Chief.” Tomas pulled out a chair next to him.

Ruddily handsome with a mop of dark curls, Tomas was a heartbreaker, but he hadn’t succeeded in breaking mine.

I took the seat; it would be rude not to. Someone plonked a plate of grub in front of me.

Fish. Again.

We’d run out of meat last week. But this was our last supper before we set foot on

land, so it hardly mattered.

“How is our princess?” Berand asked from across the table.

“The sea is not kind to her.”

“Let us hope the sea fae are.”

Low murmurs of agreement drifted around the room. Bryony was well loved by all, and although we needed this match, we worried for her happiness.

“Alliance or not, if they harm a single hair on her head...” Berand left the threat unfinished so that we could each complete it as we wished in our minds.

One of the oldest in the guard, Berand held sway over the men, and I’d made sure to make a friend of him when promoted to chief over him. I’d since learned he’d had no yearning for the role anyway. He’d become my mentor over the past year. But he was due to retire. This was his last voyage, and I’d miss the old man.

Someone filled my cup with ale. Sweet and refreshing. I allowed the knots in my belly to slacken. Knots that had formed a day ago, a foreboding that should be satisfied by the arrival of the storm but remained like a stubborn itch at the back of my mind.

I shook it off and tucked into my meal as the conversation started up around me once more, less boisterous now, but lively, nonetheless. As much as we loved being at sea, we loved coming home to land more because it was only there that we could crave the waves once again.

Someone pulled out a pack of playing cards, and a game began at the end of the table.

“Have you considered my offer?” Tomas said softly from beside me.

Ah, his offer. “I have.”

“And?”

“The answer is still no.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t give you what you want. You’d be wasting your time.”

“Isn’t that for me to decide?”

I chewed my mouthful and swallowed. “No.”

“Dammit, Thalia?—”

“Chief. You will address me as Chief.” I fixed a glare his way, and his jaw ticked.

I hated that he was in love with me. Hated myself for the moment of weakness a year ago when I’d succumbed to desire. I’d been promoted to chief since then. I’d kept my distance, kept the boundary, but Tomas was insistent.

“Nobody cares if we’re together,” he whispered.

I glanced across the table to find Berand’s eyes on us. Oh, he knew. The old man knew everything.

The mess hall door slammed open, and Pippen, one of the deck crew, burst in. “Black sail! Coming in fast.”

Ice rushed through my veins, panic making a fist around my throat, but I held my calm. “How long before they’re on us?”

“Less than an hour, maybe forty minutes, if that.”

“We have no valuables on board,” Tomas said. “No jewels or coin.”

“We have a princess,” Berand snapped. “One that can be traded or ransomed. Do you not think the news of the alliance has spread?”

We’d done our utmost to keep it quiet, but... “They can board us, but they won’t find her here. Berand, Finnius, you’ll take the rowboat and sail ahead. Use the mist to the east to hide you.”

“They’ll go searching when they don’t find her on board,” Berand warned.

I rose slowly. “No, they won’t, because she will be on board. At least they’ll think she is.”

“You’re going to pretend to be her?” Tomas said. “Thalia, that’s insane. We should go, all of us. There are two row boats, and if we?—”

“Enough!” How he ever made it on to the guard was beyond me. “If the ship is empty, then they will search the seas for certain. Bryony is our people’s hope. She must be protected at all costs.”

“Then let me go with her,” Tomas implored.

How had I ever deigned to sleep with this weasel? “You? A man who was ready to run just now? No. You’ll stay here and prove your worth as a guard.” I strode to the exit. “Grab your weapons and prepare for battle.”

The sea looters wouldn't know what hit them.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Three

VAARIN

Waves crash against the cliffside below me like an angry lover demanding my attention. I step forward and tip back my head to bathe in the mist that rises to kiss my skin.

The transition from sea to land is never easy. The burn of air in my lungs, its alien touch on my skin, and its invasive fingers raking through my hair. I hate it, and yet it is a necessary evil.

This island was a necessary evil, the humans who once inhabited it a desperate concession that my father was forced to make, and for some time, the Northern Sea Kingdom thrived, but the agreement my father forged with the land dwellers ended, and our numbers eventually waned once again.

This new alliance with King Bronan of Faircaster Isle is a permanent solution. The gift that the royal female will bring will filter into my bloodline and to my people through the power that binds my kingdom to me. Although, when the deal was first brought to me, I did wonder what kind of king would name his isle after himself. I wondered at his arrogance, and in other circumstances, given the luxury, I might have turned down his offer.

But the circumstances were dire.

His offer our only hope.

And so, arrogant or not, our bloodlines would soon be united by marriage.

“We were lucky,” Lyam says beside me. “If the Faircasters had gone to the eastern kingdom, or even the west...”

“I know. But I doubt that the news has escaped the other sea kings’ ears.”

“Our ocean guard have reported no breaches on our territory, and the blue coral route is a no conflict zone.”

“The oaths that make it so do not apply to all, Lyam, and you know that well.”

“Then we must hope that news of this alliance has not reached the wrong ears,” Lyam replies.

I don’t need to look at him to know that he wears a frown. It is a favored expression of his of late. His cobalt blue hair is beginning to gray, and there are lines of exhaustion around his eyes that were not there a summer ago. My adviser is beginning to show his age. I’m not sure why I’m surprised by this. He isn’t a royal, and his lifespan will be that of any other sea fae, and yet the thought of losing him evokes a sense of unsettlement inside me.

He has been my confidant and closest friend for the last one hundred years. Losing him will be unpleasant.

The wind howls, a message from the sea, begging me to return.

Soon, I promise it.

Once the deal is sealed.

My attention moves to the dark skies in the distance where a storm races across the horizon, into the path of my most precious cargo.

I suspect it is no ordinary storm, that it is a conjuring, and my suspicions are confirmed as it shifts trajectory too suddenly to be elemental in nature.

“I see it, sire,” Lyam says. “But it cannot be a conjuring allied with one of the other sea kingdoms. They would not break the no conflict pact.”

“Then that leaves only sea looters or...”

“Yes, sire. I believe it could be the Obsidian Pearl.”

Delusional, and dangerous because of their twisted beliefs, the Obsidian Pearl is a sect of sea fae who believed in myths and legends. Tides, they may even have spawned the stories that they so fervently cling to now.

If they are in pursuit of my cargo, then it is in grave danger.

I drop my gaze to the ship below us, sleek, fast, and manned by a crew of my own in preparation for such a possibility. I had hoped not to have to use it.

I sense a presence behind me and recognize the vibration of my squire’s pulse.

“Where is Prince Dylan?” Lyam asks him.

“He...um...He has not arrived yet...um...sire.”

“I didn’t ask of his arrival,” Lyam snaps. “I asked for his whereabouts.”

“We...um...do not know.”

A sigh burns my lungs, which sparks my temper. “Find him and bring him to the castle.”

Dylon, the fruit of my loins and the bane of my existence. Praise Thalor, some days I wish that Evya and I had been plagued with the infertility that so many others are cursed with. My son is a man whore who would live between the thighs of females rather than learn how to run a kingdom. This match will force him to turn away from frivolity and toward serious matters of state.

I can’t help but blame myself for his cavalier attitude. I allowed him to be spoiled. Allowed my queen to dote on the boy, giving him all the love that I could not find in my heart to reciprocate. But my queen is gone now, and my son is all but lost to me.

“The prince will come around, sire,” Lyam says, reading my thoughts as accurately as always.

“I hope so. Enough women have suffered at the hands of my son.”

“Maybe if he finds his heart’s desire before he takes the throne?—”

“Please, Lyam, tell me you do not believe the old tales. They are stories, nothing more.”

“The abyss is no story, sire.”

I have no argument for that except, “We have no idea what lies beyond.”

“And yet the Obsidian Pearl guards it.”

“Insanity takes many forms.”

“But—”

“Prepare the quarters in the east wing for the princess and her entourage. I will be back with our prize soon enough. Make sure my son is present to receive his betrothed.”

I stride to the edge of the cliff and leap into the arms of the ocean.

I cannot allow the Obsidian Pearl to take my prize, and if I must go and fetch it myself, so be it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Four

THALIA

“I ’m not leaving you,” Bryony cried.

I ignored her, forcing my tunic over her head.

“Thalia, please.” She pulled away from me. “Stop! I am not leaving you!”

I slapped her hard enough to rock her head back.

She grabbed her cheek, staring at me with bright eyes. “You hit me.” Her words were a trembling whisper.

“And the sea looters will do so much more if they get their hands on you.” Fat tears slipped down her cheeks, and I almost softened. Almost. “They will violate you. They will have their fun, and they will keep you alive long enough to collect a ransom. But you will not survive it unscathed, do you understand?”

“Mistress, listen to her,” Lissa pleaded with Bryony. “We must go.”

Emotions played across my sister’s face, anger and fear, but I knew her well enough to understand that neither was aimed at me. “Thalia, if you stay, then it could be you that they violate.”

I allowed my lips to curve in a wicked smile. “Oh, they can try. But they’ll have to

answer to my sword first.”

My words seemed to calm her. She swallowed hard and lifted her chin. “Lissa, pull the blue gown from the trunk. It has the lightest material; it will tear easily when Thalia wishes to dispense of the skirts and fight.” She took a step toward me, her eyes burning with inner fire. “You will fight, Thalia. You will survive this, and you will find your way to Merida. Swear it.”

I spoke past the lump in my throat. “I swear it. I’ll kill them all, and I will join you.”

Her mouth attempted to tremble, but she held it stiff. “Good. Then let’s do this.”

We dressed quickly—Bryony in my clothes and I in hers.

“Your hair.” Bryony reached for the knot I’d wrangled my riotous waves into. “It will not do. A princess would not wear it thus.”

Lissa moved toward me with pins and a determined look that struck fear in my heart because there was nothing that I hated more than having my hair done. But I held still while she worked on me, quickly and efficiently, setting my locks half up and leaving the rest to fall about my shoulders.

“This way it won’t be a hindrance in battle,” Lissa explained, “but will still fool them into believing you are the princess.”

She quickly worked on my face next, applying lotion and other things that I had no use for.

When it was done, I didn’t recognize myself. Gone was the gruff warrior to be replaced by a lady of refinement. I lifted a hand to my cheek, rouged now, and then my lips stained with berry juice.

“Your hands...” Lissa examined them, calloused from wielding a weapon, nails cut short and a little dirty.

I pulled them free. “There is no time for a manicure. We must leave.”

There was a knock on the door, then Berand’s voice boomed, “It’s time, Majesty.”

Bryony did break then, tears flowing freely as she hugged me hard enough to stanch my breath. “I love you; please don’t die.”

I kissed her temple, breathing her in. “I won’t. I swear it.”

She peered up at me and attempted a smile. “Don’t you wish we were at Prince Adom’s wedding now?”

The shifter prince of Solmane was due to marry a fairy princess. It was the event of the year, and all had been invited. If not for our dire predicament, there was no doubt that Father would have ordered us to attend. I’d heard there was even a tournament in play, one that promised riches to the victors.

Yes, if our situation was different, it would have been good to attend.

Another knock sounded on the door.

I opened it and ushered Bryony toward a waiting Berand.

“Wait!” She rushed to her bedside table and grabbed something which she hurriedly passed to me. “Put it on. Then there will be no doubt.”

I turned over the broach. Not just any broach but the royal emblem for Faircaster.

Father had commissioned two of these, one for each of his daughters, but the queen had taken mine, claiming that only a blood heir should wear it.

I pinned it to my chest, another lump forming in my throat because how ironic that I get to wear it now, when faced with death.

“Thalia...” Bryony’s voice trembled.

“Go.” I steered her out of the room before I could do something stupid like cry.

She looked back once, her eyes swimming in tears, and then she was gone.

I took a moment to breathe, to steady my racing heart and steel my spine, then grabbed Bryony’s fancy furs and my sword.

It was time to kill some lawless men.

* * *

Rain lashed at my face and wind tore at my hair as I stood on deck while the intruders boarded. My guard had taken positions out of view, ready to attack, while others surrounded me, their decoy princess.

Bryony was gone, the rowboat already hidden in the mist.

She was safe, and that was all that mattered. What happened here, now, was of no consequence.

The men were large and bearded, their long hair pulled back in braids and knots. They carried swords and axes, and they boarded us as if they owned us.

I stood with my head held high, like a queen-to-be, my grip tight on the sword hidden in the folds of my skirt.

The men surrounded us but didn't attack. They didn't speak.

What were they waiting for? "We have nothing of value!" Tomas yelled over the raging storm. "Please leave us."

One of the men grinned, showcasing gold-capped teeth, and stepped aside to reveal a smaller man draped in robes. His skin was so pale it was almost translucent, his eyes so dark they were coals pressed into his face. He spoke, and the wind ceased its howling, dropping to a whisper to underline his words.

"You will come with uss," he wheezed. "Fight us not, or you will die."

Of course they wanted the princess. News of the betrothal must have gotten out. They thought they could hold her for ransom and fleece both the Northern Sea Kingdom and mine.

By earth and blood, they'd learn differently soon enough. "Leave now with your lives or stay and surrender your souls."

One of the marauders laughed, and his companions joined him.

Anger simmered through my veins as I lifted my chin, the signal for my hidden men to emerge and surround the intruders.

My guard rose behind the marauders like dark shadows.

I smiled, cold and calm. "Your souls it is, then." I drew my sword, reveling in the look of surprise on the wheezy bastard's face. "Attack!"

I rushed him, sword mid-swing, but he vanished, and my cry of shock was buried beneath the screaming of the wind. Around me, swords clashed as my men fought the brigands. Our numbers matched theirs with the deck crew factored in, but they outnumbered the guard, leaving us short on skill, and it showed as the invaders cut down my men.

I clashed with the golden-toothed invader, pushing him back with quick, hard strikes and relishing the shock in his eyes. But the rain dragged at my skirts, slowing my step, causing me to falter. Earth and blood, I needed to tear them off, but the assault on me was too focused. There was no time to divest.

Chaos reigned, dancing around me, and I was peripherally aware of the fall of my people, but I kept fighting. Gold Teeth was relentless and fast, almost as fast as me.

Almost.

My blade found a home in his gut. I yanked it free, and he looked down at the wound as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. His bellow shattered my eardrums a moment before he ran at me.

The move was unexpected, considering his injury, and I froze for a fraction of a second. It was enough to prevent me from evading, and he grabbed hold of me, taking me to the deck with him. Fire sliced into my side a moment before my head smashed against wood and darkness claimed me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Five

VAARIN

The blood-stained deck of the Marilise rocks softly beneath my boots as if gentling the dead that litter its boards. Bodies, so many bodies. It's impossible to decipher who was friend and who was foe.

"We're too late," Petyre calls from across the deck. "They've taken the princess."

Urchin runs across the deck toward me, his dark hair plastered to his skull by the downpour. "The boats are missing."

That means that someone got away. Maybe the princess. "Search the ocean. Find those boats." I give the deck of death another sweep, my heart heavy with this loss of life even as hope blooms with the possibility that the savior of my people may not be lost to me.

I'm about to turn away when a flash of blue catches my eye, the color bright and defiant against this gray landscape. I'm drawn toward it, and my pulse races as I spot a bare slender arm trapped beneath the bulky frame of a man.

Oh...Tides.

I hurry forward and shove the dead man to one side to reveal the woman beneath him. She lies so still that I would think her lifeless if not for the slight rise and fall of her chest and the light in her sea-green eyes. Her skin is frosted, her lashes sparkling with

the crystallization of cold. Her features are striking, sharp planes and angles softened by full lips that are a pale blue right now.

Tides, I need to get her warm. My gaze catches on the broach pinned to her dress. I know that emblem. Its image graced King Bronan's last correspondence to me. Only a royal would be permitted to wear it thus.

This is the princess.

Anger rages through my veins like fire because if she lies here, then it is clear that she was abandoned by those charged with her protection. Cowards who fled by boat leaving her to...to fight...Because there is a sword clutched in her other hand.

I pull a handkerchief from my pocket and wipe the ice from her face.

"Ah, there you are. I am sorry we did not arrive in time to save your virtue and your entourage." I scoop her up into my arms. She weighs barely anything, and yet her body feels firm and strong in my grip. Her head falls against my shoulder, and I catch her scent, a sweet, floral aroma like the sea peonies that grow on the cliffs of Merida.

"I have her! Everyone back to the ship." I cross the deck, doing my best to shield the princess in my arms from the last of the elements.

A whimper of pain drifts from her frozen lips. A wave of protectiveness washes over me, and before I can check myself, I've pressed my lips to her temple.

"Worry not now. You're safe, Little Princess."

* * *

"Her wound is dressed and packed. It will heal," Urchin says, glancing at the door to

my quarters where the wounded princess is now ensconced. “The wound was not deep and did no damage to vital organs. She will heal in a few hours.”

The sea mage is the best healer we have—his herbal remedies are strong indeed—and the news that the princess will recover is a relief. And yet he continues to look perturbed. “What more is there? Tell me.”

“The princess’s body temperature is much too low for a human. If we cannot raise it, she may die regardless of our efforts.”

“Then raise it.”

“We are trying to do so with furs, but I fear the chill is bone deep.”

No, I will not have this boon ripped from my grasp over a little chill. I won’t allow her desperate bid for survival to mean nothing. “There must be something to be done.”

“Body heat shared could work,” Urchin says, but once again, there is an unease to his expression. “Both parties must be skin to skin. I fear it is not appropriate for a maiden to?—”

“It is less appropriate to let her die. Her virtue has been taken; I will not let her lose her life over the quibble of a little skin.” I shove past him to the door. “See that we are not disturbed. I would have her preserve her reputation. Speak of this to no one else.”

He nodded. “Yes, sire.”

I slip into the room lit by a single candle and move toward the shivering pile of furs. The click-clack of teeth is audible in the relative silence.

“Little Princess, can you hear me?” She moans a soft plea that tugs at something within me. “I must lie with you a while. To warm you. I must divest to do so, and so must you. It is the only way to save you.”

She peeks out from beneath the furs, her sea-green eyes catching the candlelight. “Please...I’m...so....cold.”

“I know.” I kick off my boots and reach over my shoulder to pull off my shirt.

She gasps, and my stomach tightens at the sound. “Take off your clothes.” My voice is gruffer than intended, and I recognize the spiraling low in my belly as arousal. I grit my teeth as she vanishes beneath the furs once more to oblige. The furs move as she undresses, and my cock jumps. I will it to be still. I am no nave to fall slave to my primal demands. I am a king. One who will ensure that he fucks more often in the future so that shivering princesses, intended to be his daughter-in-law, don’t evoke such inappropriate responses.

She belongs to my son.

Not me.

I reach for the waistband of my pants just as she peeks from beneath the furs. I expect her to look away, but she stares blatantly. I arch a brow, and she arches one back.

“Well?” she says. “Are...we...doing this...or not? I’m not...getting...any...warmer...”

A surprised laugh huffs out of me. I pull down my pants to reveal my underwear, constricting human attire, and—wait, is that disappointment in her pretty eyes?

Had she wanted to see my cock?

No. She's a princess. A sheltered lady of refinement who has been through a terrible ordeal. She's frightened. Understandably so. It is my responsibility to put her at ease.

"I won't hurt you. Turn around and I'll hold you and loan you my heat."

Her gaze flicks up to meet mine, and there are questions swimming in her eyes, but she simply nods and turns away, burrowing beneath the furs.

I take a breath and cross the room to join her.

I cannot recall the last time I lay with a woman. Too long if the quiver in my lungs is anything to go by. Her sweet floral scent fills my head. Her skin is smooth and soft but cold as ice.

She sucks in a breath as I press my chest to her back and pull her against me. I curl my large frame around her smaller one, cradling her to me, and her stiff body relaxes against me inch by inch.

A sob breaks from her lips. "Thank you," she says. "Thank you so much."

I rest my chin on her head and breathe evenly and deeply until her shivers ebb and her breath echoes mine. We lie like this for long minutes, silence pressing in on us until her breath deepens and I know she's fallen asleep.

My eyelids grow heavy, and I stifle a yawn. When is the last time I slept with a woman? Too long.

Much too long.

* * *

I open my eyes to the princess's green gaze fringed in thick, inky lashes. This close, I can make out the flecks of gold in her irises. She's turned in my arms, and a layer of furs separates our bodies now. Her warm brown skin gleams in the candlelight, lips blushed with color, parted to reveal the edge of even white teeth.

My heart skips a beat, yearning twisting my gut for the first time in a century. I want this woman viscerally, primally. I haven't wanted a woman like that in over a hundred years.

I clear my throat before speaking to ensure a steady tone. It would not do to communicate my desires to this woman. "You're warm now?"

She nods, and I can't deny the pang of disappointment that grips me because there is no cause for me to hold her any longer. I make to slip from the bed, and she reaches for me before catching herself.

"I...I'm sorry." I catch the flash of confusion in her pretty eyes before she masks it.

"Don't be." I climb out from beneath the furs and began to dress with my back to her. I care not for modesty. Nudity is nothing to be ashamed of, but human customs are different, and now that the princess is no longer a shivering wreck, it serves to reassert a little decorum. "You've had a shock. What the marauders did to you..."

"My people...?"

"All dead, I'm afraid." I turn to face her, fully dressed now. "Even the cowards that abandoned ship on a rowboat."

Her face freezes. "What?"

Ah, she was not aware of the desertion, then. "My men found the remains of the boat

and the partially eaten bodies of the absconders.”

Her mouth trembles before she presses her lips together. “No survivors? A woman?”

“All my scouts found were...pieces...It is impossible to tell if there was a woman among them, Princess.”

Her head whips up and she blinks sharply. “I...I was supposed to go with them, but they left...left without me.”

“They betrayed you.” A sour taste fills my mouth. “And they paid with their lives. I am sorry I did not arrive in time to save your virtue.”

“My...what? No. I wasn’t...I killed him.” Her chest heaves, panic setting in as she recalls the incident.

“You killed the invader?”

Another sharp blink. “I’m not sure how. He attacked, and I had a blade and...it all happened so fast.” Her eyes well, and a sob breaks from her lips.

I take a step toward her, intending to comfort, but she sits up, and the fur slips to reveal her smooth brown shoulders and the tops of her breasts.

I turn away. “I’ll leave you to rest. We will be at Merida soon enough.”

“Wait!” she calls out.

I stop at the door. “Yes?”

“To whom do I owe my life?” Her tone is thick with emotion, and of course, she does

not know who I am.

I turn to face her. “King Vaarin. You are to wed my son, so best that we keep this incident to ourselves. As innocent and necessary as it may be, there are those that would not understand.”

I slip from the room, closing the door softly behind me, her renewed sobs echoing in my ears.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Six

THALIA

Bryony was dead.

She was gone.

Eaten...

No...No, no, no.

Grief shook me, burning my eyes and my throat until I was spent and dry-eyed.

Stop it, Bryony's voice whispered in my mind. Get up and fix this. You have to fix it.

I sat up, panic a fist around my aching heart, because what now?

Without my sister, the alliance was ruined. Only royal blood carried the gift of fertility. Only she could have blessed the Northern Sea Kingdom through marriage to Prince Dylan, and now...What now?

Think, Thalia, think. I would not let Bryony's death be in vain.

King Vaarin's gravelly voice filled my head. "You're safe, Little Princess." And just now too, he'd addressed me as Princess.

He thought I was Bryony. Of course he did. I'd been wearing the royal crest, after all. My eyes welled again, and I dashed away the useless tears. Crying would serve no purpose here. Best to save the tears for a more opportune moment because the solution was so obvious, so deviously possible, that it stole my breath.

I'd become the princess.

Pretend to be royal blood for as long as it took for the alliance contract to be sealed. I'd marry the prince and consummate, thus sealing the alliance, and once it was sealed, it could not be undone.

Knots formed in my belly because a lie such as this...A betrayal to a crown meant death. But only for me. For not even the king could blame my father for this. A man so far away that he couldn't possibly have known what happened to his true daughter or what his adopted one chose to do.

Bryony was dead, and once I'd saved our people, then I would gladly join her.

I took a deep breath and exhaled.

It was time to become a princess for real.

* * *

My dress was ruined, but King Vaarin had left me with fresh clothes. Soft britches, a baggy cream shirt, and a thick tunic to go over it. There was a large jacket too. My boots were still damp, but there was a pair of long black socks laid out to keep my feet dry.

I dressed slowly, mindful of the dressing pressed to my side, of the throb and burn of the wound that would no doubt take days to heal. I was warm now, swelteringly so,

as if King Vaarin had infused me with an everlasting heat.

King Vaarin...

I would not have imagined him so. A century old, I would have expected him to be physically aged, gray-haired, and wrinkled, but it was obvious that the sea folk aged differently than we humans. The king was toned and large with eyes like a gathering storm and a scent to match.

I bit down on my lip as an image of him half naked and gleaming in the candlelight filled my mind. He was a powerfully built male. Broad across the shoulders, tight and toned down his torso so that the muscles made cobblestone that led down to the tantalizing V of his hips. I'd heard tales of the sea fae, of their prowess and carnal hunger. Heard how they shifted form when beneath the waves, had read tales of their undersea city. I'd imagined them to be lithe and light beings. But King Vaarin was a monolith of a man, and when he'd wrapped his body around mine, heat had ignited deep in my belly, blooming outward from there.

If his son had inherited his attributes, then bedding him would be a fine send-off to the afterlife.

As I pulled on my boots, still damp from the storm, a thought occurred to me, one that should have occurred to me sooner. The blue coral route was supposed to be a protected stretch of ocean, free of brigands and marauders, but we had been attacked, and although the men who attacked us had certainly looked the part, they had been accompanied by another. A cloaked figure with power to command the storm. I needed to tell the king of this.

I scraped my damp hair up into a knot and left the chamber in search of the male who would help me save my people.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Seven

VAARIN

The deck rocks beneath my boots as I study the storm pushing in on us from the east. Another gathers in the west. This one is a natural storm, but the one to the east is moving too fast to be normal.

“They’re coming for her again,” Petyre, my ship’s captain, says. “I don’t understand. Surely they thought she was dead. Isn’t that why they left her there?”

“The Obsidian Pearl has spies in the air. They must have seen us retrieve her.” The Obsidian Pearl will do anything to stop my people from thriving. If we thrive, then the guard against their efforts grows. If we thrive, we may be in a position to assist the other sea kingdoms. Any niece or nephew of mine will carry the gift of fertility, and a marriage between sea realms would spread the good fortune we have stumbled upon. It will unite us.

This woman, this princess is the key to saving us all, one that was hidden from us for too long. If I’d known about the Faircaster royals and their boon, I would have approached them sooner.

Now that I have her, I won’t allow her to be taken.

The wind howls across the deck as if in agreement.

“What will we do, sire?” Petyre runs a hand down his face and the rainwater that

soaks him dries beneath his touch. “If we fight, then our precious cargo may be injured, and we cannot take her into the depths with us where we are strongest.”

“No, we can do neither of those things. So we will hide her on land, beneath a natural storm.”

“The Cursed Isle, of course.” His eyes light up. “Genius.”

“You’ll take to the sea. The ship will find its own way home. The princess and I will head west in the rowboat into the natural storm where their eyes cannot see us.”

He nodded. “May the waves be kind.”

“May the depths embrace you.”

“You can’t be up here, Princess!” one of my crew calls out.

I turn to find the princess striding toward me. She’s knotted her dark hair on her head, but the wind tugs at her locks, and tendrils tear free to peck at her cheeks. I can’t help but marvel at her statuesque beauty highlighted even more by the men’s clothing that I provided.

Her face lacks the soft beauty I would expect of a lady of fine breeding. Instead, she has been favored with strong, sharp features that remind me of the ocean warriors of old. Ones that I have only ever seen in pictorial depictions. On her feet now, matched against my men, she is taller than I recall. Or maybe it is just how she holds herself, with a commanding presence, and yes, my men step aside to let her pass, recognizing that command.

A flutter unfurls low in my belly, and irritation flares in its wake, forcing a frown to my face because this is wholly inappropriate.

She comes to stand before me, lifting her face to mine, like a flower to the sun solara, and what am I thinking? Focus, Vaarin.

“King Vaarin, I need to tell you about the men who attacked my ship. I do not believe them to be simple raiders.”

“You do not?”

“No. The blue coral route is under the four sea realms’ protection, is it not?”

“It is,” I confirm.

“I understand that there are those that might break the rules and risk the wrath of the tides, but there was a robed man with the marauders. One who, I believe, was able to command the storm.”

My suspicions are correct, then. “You were attacked by the Obsidian Pearl. They are sea folk who worship the abyss and the creatures who they, misguidedly, believe reside within. The Obsidian Pearl will do anything to prevent my kingdom regaining its fertility. Less of us mean more power to their efforts, which have been growing the past century. They came for you, and I believe they thought you dead. But they know better now.” I point to the skies. “The rapidly approaching storm is coming for you again.”

I expect her to pale, but instead she clenches her jaw, eyes flashing with a defiance that speaks to my soul.

“Let them come,” she practically growls, her hand going to the hilt of the sword at her waist.

I arch a brow. “You would fight?”

She blinks and drops her gaze. "If I must."

"I was told the princess wielded a paintbrush, not a sword."

She smiles thinly. "I can do both. I trained a little with the guard. I'm no swordsmith, but I can defend myself if needs be."

"As you did on the ship. Prudent of your father to permit your training."

Something passes across her face, an emotion I cannot define, but there is an edge of defiance to it that gives me pause. There are depths to this female, ones which are not for me to explore. And why does that knowledge leave me hollow?

"Sire, if you are to leave then it must be now." Petyre reminds me.

"Yes, come, Princess." I gently grip her elbow and guide her toward the stern.

"Where are we going?"

"To the rowboat and under cover of the natural storm that rages to the west. It will shield us from the Obsidian Pearl's airborne spies. I will explain more once we disembark on the Cursed Isle."

"Cursed? Why do I get the impression it is not a friendly place?"

The fact that she can employ a little humor at such a dire time once again speaks to my soul, for isn't it what a good commander is able to do? Lift morale in dire circumstances.

"I will allow no harm to come to you." It is a promise that I do not give lightly.

“Nor I to you,” she says.

It is not the response I expect, and when I look down at her, there is fire in her eyes.

For the first time in forever, I’m intrigued.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Eight

THALIA

The bastards who caused Bryony's death now had a name. But how could I avenge her if their home was beneath the waves? As King Vaarin helped me into the rowboat, I couldn't help but wish that I could stay and face them here on the deck of this ship.

But I couldn't let my need for vengeance cause the death of my people. The alliance had to come first, and my being alive was essential to that happening.

So I climbed into the boat and took my place on the bench as King Vaarin rowed us into the western storm.

The boat rose and fell on the tumultuous waves, water sloshing on board. I clung to the sides, crouched against the assault of icy sea spray.

King Vaarin grabbed hold of me and dragged me toward him so I was sitting between his thighs. "Hold on to me," he ordered, his voice rising above the symphony of screaming wind and howling sea.

I crouched low, wrapping myself around his leg so tightly that the flex and release of his muscles joined the beat of my heart.

He rowed with powerful strokes, his biceps bulging, form stoic and unyielding against the shattering elements. His dark hair whipped about his face, sapphire eyes

blazing in the gloom.

He was power, and the elements were nothing against him, but as if to prove him wrong, they attacked harder, tearing at the boat and shaking it so that all I could do was whimper and hold fast because no sword or axe could best this foe.

A bubble of terror ballooned in my chest, choking me and stealing my breath. If we capsized, then the sea king would survive, but I'd drown.

I couldn't die. Not yet. Not like this.

But as the fear threatened to overwhelm me, a melody cut through the cacophony of the storm. Low and haunting, it was a vibration that carried the sound of appeasement. A plea to the elements to hold their wrath from us and provide us safe passage. I wasn't sure how I knew this; it was merely a conviction deep in my bones.

The roll and dip of our vessel ebbed, and the roaring elements quietened. The only sound was the smack of oars as they hit the water followed by the drag as we were propelled forward.

I looked up, never relinquishing my grip on the king. The water ahead was smooth and noncombative, and although dark clouds still hung low overhead, churning in fury, and although the storm still ripped at the waters several meters to either side of us, it did not touch us.

The melody continued to flow, louder now in the relative silence. It hummed against my skin, vibrating my bones. I reached up with one hand and placed my palm on King Vaarin's abdomen to confirm my suspicion. The vibration was inside him. The sound was coming from him.

It was a demand wrapped in a plea.

The king of the Northern Sea was creating safe passage for us with his song. His muscles contracted beneath my touch, but the melody continued.

He glanced down at me, eyes like sapphire flame boring into me with such intensity they left me aching in a way I didn't understand. In that moment, I wanted to be bathed head to toe in the fire of his gaze. I wanted it to devour me whole.

He blinked sharply and tore his gaze away, releasing me from the strange compulsion. I dropped my hand, my chest tight with emotions that I could only define as bone-aching longing.

I tucked myself against his legs and held on once more. Whatever this feeling was, it would pass. Whatever it was, it wasn't important.

It couldn't be.

* * *

The storm passed, and the sea lay smooth as glass ahead. The sky was a vista of twinkling stars. The elements were mercurial indeed.

"We shall be at the island soon," King Vaarin said. "Do you see it? The gray shadow against the night up ahead?"

I pushed up on my knees, one arm still hooked around his leg, to look out at the sea. "I don't see it."

He secured the oars then leaned in so that the heat of his torso pressed to my back. "There." He pointed, and I followed the trajectory, searching the horizon until...

"I see it."

He sat back, picked up the oars once more, and began to row, but there was less power in each drag, and when I looked up at his face, it was too pale in the moonlight.

“You’re tired.”

“I am fine,” he said. “Do not fear. We will get to our destination.”

“I know but...why don’t you let me row for a bit?”

He looked so affronted at the suggestion that my indignation warred with amusement. “Please tell me you’re not a chauvinist.”

“I’m the king of the northern sea,” he said in response.

“Which doesn’t serve as an exemption. Besides, even kings can tire.”

“The sea song has tired me a little,” he conceded. “Pacifying the elements is...draining.” The admission crinkled his brow. “But I am not depleted yet.”

“Then let me row. For a little while.”

I thought he would argue, but instead he nodded. “Very well.”

I switched places with him, careful not to rock the boat, holding on to him for balance, our bodies touching more than I’d like, his hands warm and secure on my arms then my hips as we maneuvered ourselves.

Finally, I picked up the oars and set to work.

He sat across from me, his muscled frame taking up all the room and too much of my

attention.

I made sure to return my gaze to the horizon each time it strayed to him, checking the stars every now and then to ensure we weren't straying off course.

"Where did you learn to row?" he asked.

Shit. Princesses did not row their own boats. "I...I had the head of guard teach me. We have ships...But you know that."

"I do."

I glanced down at him to find him watching me with narrowed eyes.

Had I sparked suspicion?

His eyelids slipped closed for a beat, and his chest rose and fell a little too erratically.

Something was wrong. "King Vaarin?"

He groaned. "I fear I must leave you for a moment," he said. "I must take a few breaths beneath the waves. The exertion from the...the..." His eyelids fluttered, and he went limp.

Fuck! I secured the oars and then made a grab for him. "King Vaarin? Wake up!" I shook him, or tried to, but the man was like a monument of stone, and even a hearty slap did nothing to move him. I'd have to tip him into the sea.

I unhooked an oar and used it as a lever, managing to get him over the edge of the boat, the whole thing tipping beneath his weight. I had to act fast to push him over before I went in with him. I dropped the oar and shoved him with all my might.

He slipped into the sea, and the boat rocked. I lost my balance and hit the deck on my ass. There was a soft plop, and my heart shot into my throat.

The oar!

It was gone. No!

How would I row with only one oar?

Oh...shit.

I peered over the edge of the boat at the spot where I'd dropped the sea king.

There was nothing to do now but wait and hope that King Vaarin would be back soon.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Nine

THALIA

I was drifting off course, and there was nothing I could do about it. Panic was a live, writhing force in my chest. I used the single oar to fight the current as best I could, but as the minutes dragged by, my hope dwindled.

Where was King Vaarin? Surely he should have recovered and been back by now?

But what did I know about the sea fae? Only the most superficial of things, things they wanted us to know.

Things like the fact that the royals could stay on land for days, if need be, but the song that he'd sung? I didn't know about that. It had drained him to the extent that he was forced to go into the waves.

He'd be back.

I just needed to wait.

A dark shadow passed over Thalor's silver face, hiding the moon from view and leaving me floating in endless darkness. With thirteen moons, each chasing Lyra, the daughter sun, across the skies, you would hope to see more than one night watcher in the sky, but this far north, with the days short and skies wreathed in clouds, only Thalor succeeded in making himself known.

A splash starboard had my pulse kicking up. I peered into the darkness and was about to call out when my scalp tightened in warning.

I held my peace, straining to see into the gloom. A ripple and another soft splash.

There was something out there, and it wasn't King Vaarin, because I had no doubt that he would have announced himself. My sword sat on the other side of the boat. I would have to move to get it, and doing so might alert the intruder that I was aware of its presence.

Instead, I slowly, silently, drew the single oar out of its nook and gripped it tightly, a proxy weapon if I should need one.

Something knocked against the boat, and then long, pale fingers curved over the starboard edge. My heart beat, sluggish with fear at the sight of the inhuman digits, and my breath snagged in my lungs as a dark head rose above the lip of the boat, followed by black eyes and a noseless face. I blinked in shock, and the face morphed into something else. A young man with thick dark hair and inviting dark eyes. He smiled tentatively.

"You're lost," he said. "Allow me to help you." He held out his hand.

Yes, he could help me. All I needed to do was take his hand. But even as that thought filled my mind, my body reacted by gripping the oar tighter.

His gaze dropped to my hands, to the oar, and the look of disappointment on his face made my heart ache. "You don't need that. You don't want to hurt me. Come..." He beckoned. "Take my hand."

I wanted to. Yes. I should. I lowered the oar, my grip on it slackening a fraction.

“Yes.” His eyes lit up with joy. “Come, I can take you home.”

Home...But...I wasn't going home.

The creature's face flickered, dark eyes, no nose, and wide mouth filled with serrated teeth.

“Don't fight, delectable one,” he said. His features were human again. Achingly beautiful. “Come with me.”

My heart pounded faster, blood ringing in my ears as I fought what I now recognized to be compulsion.

“No...” I ground out even as I dropped the oar. “No...” I leaned toward the thing.

It dropped the facade of humanity and lunged at me.

My scream cut through the night as its cold, wet fingers grazed my skin, but in the next moment, he was gone. Tugged beneath the surface of the water. Its hold on me snapped.

I sat back with a thud, a sob breaking from my lips just as another face appeared over the side of my boat.

A woman with green hair and eyes like an abyss.

This time, I grabbed my sword. “Get away from me!”

“Is that any way to treat the person who saved your skin?”

“You're not a person.”

“No, I suppose I’m not. Name’s Meredith. These are my waters, and that thing that attempted to coerce you into the waves was a scavenger. I do not permit scavengers in my waters.”

“I’m not a scavenger.”

“Oh, I know who you are. A guest of King Vaarin. You are under his protection and now under mine.”

Several faces appeared around the boat, and my pulse went into overdrive. “What are you doing?”

“Relax, Princess. King Vaarin has sent us to take you to the Cursed Isle.”

How could I trust them? What if they were scavengers like the thing that came before?

“I can see you have doubts,” Meredith said. “But what choice do you have?”

The gentle lap of water punctuated the silence that followed her question.

She was right. I was trapped. “Where is he? Where is King Vaarin?”

“Meting out a little justice. But he will find you at shore, have no doubt.” She smiled, showcasing a row of neat, pointy teeth that made my blood run cold. “Let us get you to land where you belong.”

The rowboat turned until it was aimed for the isle and began to move, drawn by these merwomen. I had to trust and take her at her word, but I kept a tight grip on my sword, just in case.

Chapter Ten

THALIA

The merwomen drew my rowboat steadily across the water for several long minutes in silence that seemed to press down on us.

I decided to fill it with a question. “What justice is the king meting out?”

“I understand that your ship was attacked, no?” Meredith said.

A weight settled on my chest. “Yes.”

“King Vaarin came across a few members of the faction responsible for the attack and is dispensing justice.”

My hand went to my sword, and she tracked the motion. “You wish you were with him? Meting out justice?”

“Those things are responsible for the death of my crew and...my best friend.” Had the scavengers been responsible for Bryony’s rowboat’s collapse? Had they killed her?

“You have seen much death, it seems,” Meredith said. “But you bring life to the northern realm. This alliance gives us hope. Hope of stopping the Obsidian Pearl and preventing the abyss from opening.”

“The abyss? Yes, the king mentioned it.”

“There are ancient beasts trapped within, and the Obsidian Pearl seek to free them. The Obsidian Pearl worship the monsters as gods and believe that the seas belong to them.”

“But not all believe the stories of monsters beyond the abyss,” one of the other merwomen said in a sibilant tone. “Some believe the Obsidian Pearl to be misguided. Mad even. The faction has taken many females as sacrifices to their trapped gods in the hope of opening the abyss. Our people are in constant danger, and waters that were once safe are now lethal.”

“The Obsidian Pearl would not want the sea fae numbers to swell,” Meredith continued, “because then we will have the forces required to bring them to heel, which is why you, dear princess, are a threat to them.”

“Great.” But I wasn’t the princess. I wasn’t a threat to anyone. I was a lie, and these people...they were banking on me to stop the Obsidian Pearl threat.

Guilt wrapped icy fingers around my throat, but I shook off its punishing grip.

I couldn’t let the sea faes’ plight overshadow mine. My people must come first. I’d do what needed to be done to ensure their safety.

Land drew closer, rushing up to meet us, mountainous terrain beyond a sandy inlet.

“The water is becoming shallow,” Meredith said. “We will leave you here with King Vaarin’s strict instructions that you remain on the beach. Do not venture inland. It is not safe. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

They shoved the boat forward into the shallows, and I searched for an anchor, finding none. Shit. Once I got out of the boat, there would be no going back to sea. But the king was on his way. All I needed to do was wait. He obviously had a plan.

I climbed out into water that was calf deep, then reached for the rope attached to the inside of the boat, my instinct to drag the boat with me to shore, then decided against it. King Vaarin had used the natural storm to hide us from the Obsidian Pearl, and if I brought the boat to shore with me, then the Obsidian Pearl's aerial spies might see it and report back to them.

Best to let the boat drift out to sea.

I hurried toward shore before too much water could make it into my boots. I hated having wet feet.

Once on sand, I looked back at sea, at the rowboat already being carried away by the current. Meredith and her companions bobbed in the water for a moment before vanishing beneath the waves.

I was alone.

At least, I hoped so.

The inland was surrounded by trees, and one side was a sheer cliff face. Thalor had wrangled himself free of the clouds now, blessing the inlet with silvery light, enough to chase back the unsettling shadows. A chill swept over me, reminding me of my wet boots and the risk of catching a serious cold. I couldn't risk my health, not now.

There was driftwood littering the sand, which I gathered in the hopes of making a fire. I ventured to the edge of the woods to search for flint, anything that I could use to make a spark, and after ten minutes of squinting in the gloom, I found some. I

gathered bracken for kindling next and carried it back to the shore, where I built a small fire.

It would keep me warm and also help King Vaarin to find me. I lifted my shirt to take a look at the dressing on my wound. It was dry, and there was no blood seeping through, which was good. I prodded it lightly. No pain either. Strange considering how new the wound was and how I'd been exerting myself with it. Either the sea fae who'd treated me had added some kind of numbing agent or whatever remedy he'd packed the wound with was working fast.

The flames had reached a good height, enough to throw off some decent heat, and I was about to shuck off my boots to dry my socks and feet when a cry of distress sliced the silence. I froze, heart pounding my ribs, as the echo of that cry resonated around me, the only evidence that it had ever been aired.

Long seconds passed, and I was beginning to doubt myself when a scream shattered the silence.

I shot to my feet, turning this way and that, unsure where the sound had come from.

"Help me! Please help me!" a woman cried.

I grabbed my sword and ran toward the sound, diving into the woods.

"No, please! Somebody help!"

"I'm coming!" I smacked aside branches that threatened to slow me down, crunching over bracken and leaping over a fallen log.

"Help me! Please help me!"

Dark tree trunks closed around me, the stench of death crowding my nose.

“No, please! Somebody help!”

Alarm bells went off in my mind even as my feet carried me deeper into the woods, because there was something wrong here. Something strange about those cries.

“Help me! Please help me! No, please! Somebody help!”

The same words. The same cadence and inflection.

Exactly the same.

“Help me! Please help me! No, please! Somebody help!”

I ground to a stop, a cold flush flooding my body because the voice was now all around me.

“Help me! Please help me! No, please! Somebody help!”

Above me...

I tipped my head to the canopy to the dark shapes perched still and silent now that they had their prey in sights.

Do not venture inland. Do you understand?

Fuck. I should have heeded the warning. I slowly raised my sword and took a step back.

The things above me shifted in the branches, and I caught a glimpse of curved beaks

and the glint of red eyes. Birds? Yes, they had to be. And there was nothing to fear from a bird, so why were my insides blaring at me to run?

I took another step back, and the canopy erupted with sound as the birds dropped to surround me, cutting off escape. Four feet tall with thick powerful haunches and webbed wings, these were no birds. That and the fact that they had faces. Human faces with beaks where their noses and mouths would have been, but the eyes...The red eyes were all too human.

“Stay back!” I swung my sword in an arch.

They hopped out of range but then advanced, screeching. “Stay back! Stay back!”

I jabbed at the nearest one, and it flew out of reach. Another one attacked. I spun and sliced, but it evaded.

The next few moments were more of the same where they attacked one at a time, and I defended. They were playing with me. Playing with their food.

My stomach knotted, my pulse thundering because once they got bored with their game, they’d attack as one and then...then I was done for.

I needed to find a break and make a run for it. But they were constantly moving, circling, and lunging, making it impossible to focus on anything but evasive maneuvers. I was tiring, and was it my imagination or were their red eyes glowing?

A bat bird to my left lunged at the same time as the one to my right in a pincer movement. I hit the ground, rolled to avoid their lethal beaks, spotted a break in the circle they’d created around me, and made a scrambling dash for it.

The edge of the clearing rushed to meet me, but something snagged the back of my

tunic and yanked me away from escape.

I hit the ground on my back hard enough to wind me.

The creatures surrounded me again, covering me in shadow before tipping their heads back and letting out a collective blood-curdling scream, and I knew with a primal instinct that the game was over.

I was about to die.

Chapter Eleven

VAARIN

The sea fae writhes and bucks in my grip, his black eyes saturated with venom. We float above the Everdeep Chasm, a place filled with sea horrors. He's aware of the threat to this life, and yet there is no terror in his eyes.

A part of me marvels at the conviction that lends him such boldness in the face of death. To believe in something so completely. To want it, ache for it. To be willing to die for it...That is indeed a wonder.

I squeeze his throat a little harder, and his dark eyes bug. "Tell me where your leader is. Tell me the location of your base." My voice is a sonic vibration in the water that surrounds him.

He curses at me in the old tongue, something about fake kings and impostors, and I know I'll get nothing from him.

I break his neck and allow his body to drift into the chasm below to join his comrades. The deep-sea creatures will surely relish the feast of flesh. Three Obsidian Pearl members and no answers from any of them. I would consider it a failure, but I am coming to realize that these zealots would rather embrace death than betray their cause.

My wounds heal as I swim toward the riptide that will bring me close to the Cursed Isle. Willing scales to form over my body and my legs to shift to a tail, I'm able to cut

through the water like a dartfish. The ocean fuels me, rejuvenating me, but I find no pleasure in it. My thoughts are with the princess alone on the isle.

How terrified must she have been to see me weakened. But her fortitude in successfully tipping me into the ocean must be commended.

Meredith will have ensured her safe passage.

The princess will be on the beach as instructed.

The Cursed Isle is a perilous place, filled with hungry, lethal creatures, and it is why I chose it as the location of one of our secret ships. Hidden in a cave on the far northern side of the island, accessed only via the mountain pass, the ship is an escape vessel, should my people ever need to leave these seas for another. It will allow us to traverse above the waves and above any dangers that may spawn below it.

But we will not be taking this ship to Merida Isle. We will commandeer one of the smaller vessels docked beside it.

The riptide appears up ahead, a vortex spinning in shades of blue and purple. I dart into it, swallowed by a rainbow of colors for but a moment before I'm ejected into warmer water.

Red coral lines the ocean floor here.

I'm close. I'm tempted to use my power to swim harder and faster, but the trek across the isle will take two days, and I must conserve my energy for it.

I swim as fast as I can, drawing from the ocean as I go, siphoning its natural power and storing it inside me. The coral bleeds from red to purple, and I rise, breaking surface to see the isle fifty lengths away.

A fire burns on the shore, but there is no sign of the princess.

Would she have disobeyed my instruction?

No...

Tides!

I shoot toward shore like a dagger shark looking for its prey.

* * *

I wade out of the sea, and my body absorbs the water clinging to it before allowing my human clothes to reappear to cover me.

The fire blazes, a fire that this sword-wielding, boat-rowing princess has built. But why did she leave it, and where did she go?

For a moment, I'm not sure which way to run. Which way she will have gone, but then a desperate cry rises from the eastern side of the isle.

“Stay away! Stay back!”

Ice crystallizes in my veins because although the voice sounds like hers, it isn't, which means she is in mortal danger.

I dive into the treeline at a sprint, following the resonance of that cry. It hangs in the air like a beacon, a crimson thread that I latch on to.

I burst into a clearing to find the manavis converging on a figure on the ground.

The princess!

A roar gathers in my chest, and I expel it in a sonic vibration that neither I nor the princess can hear, but the manavis scream and double over in pain, clutching at their heads.

The princess locks gazes with me from the forest floor, her eyes flare wide as she makes the connection, and a moment later, she's running toward me. She slams into my chest, grabs my hand, and yanks me out of the clearing. She's fast, but I'm faster, and so I scoop her into my arms and break into a sprint.

She clings to me wide-eyed and breathless, and the urge to protect her surges up to choke me.

We exit the forest in a valley that leads to the mountain pass, and I stop. The manavis won't follow us here. Their domain is the forest. But that doesn't mean there aren't threats ahead. Any of which could kill this fragile human in my arms if she doesn't follow my orders.

I can't risk that. "Meredith told you my instructions? She told you to remain on the beach, that inland was not safe."

"Yes." She swallows hard. "But?—"

"She told you not to leave the beach. That it was my instruction."

A small frown mars her forehead. "Yes, but?—"

"Then why did you disobey me?"

She blinks rapidly. "Disobey? I'm not a child." She shoves at my chest. "Put me

down.”

I hold her tighter. “Why did you disobey me?”

“Because I thought someone was in trouble and?—”

“You knew inland was dangerous, and yet you disobeyed and put yourself in danger. You could have been killed!”

“Put me down!” She struggles in my arms, and I know what it is I must to do. She must fear disobeying me if she is to survive.

I stride over to the nearest log and sit with her.

She stills and stares up at me in confusion.

“You acted impulsively, like a child. And when a child disobeys, they are punished.”

“What?”

I lift her easily and turn her on my lap. Pinning her there with one hand, I bring the other up to deliver a hard slap to her backside.

She cries out in shock then squirms to get away, but I hold firm and deliver another smack.

This time she makes a sound that’s a cross between a grunt and a moan, and my lower spine tightens. I smack her again, more to hear that sound than anything else, and she rewards me with a gasp and a moan, and tides...I’m hard.

What. The. Fuck?

Chapter Twelve

THALIA

The first smack was a shock, and I cried out. What the fuck? I tried to break free, but he pinned me down, rendering me helpless as his hand branded me again, this time landing at the juncture of my thighs, smacking my private parts more than my ass. A shock wave of sensation spreads out, leaving me tingling. A moan slipped past my lips, and I clenched my teeth, because fuck that felt good.

Another smack had me gasping to swallow my moan because although it stung, the spread of heat that came after left me wet and throbbing.

His hand came down once again, and I thought I was ready to swallow my groan, but when it landed, a sob of need broke free from my lips.

His hand stilled, fingers coasting my private parts. I wanted him to press down. I wanted him feel him there. I wanted him to pull down my britches and?—

No!

I rolled off his lap, and this time he let me go. I landed on my sore ass and looked up at him, pulse humming in my throat, chest heaving for breath. He stared at me, his large hand hovering in the air where my ass had been but a moment ago. His eyes were dark, mouth parted, powerful chest heaving as hard as mine.

A wild, untamed tension crackled between us, leaving my lungs hungry for air.

“You will not disobey me again,” he said, his voice a thick, gravelly rumble. “Do so, and I will punish you.”

“You think that was a punishment?” Why did I say that? “Maybe I liked it.” For Thalor’s sake, shut the fuck up, Thalia. “Maybe I’ll misbehave so you can do it again.” Why was my mouth still moving? And, oh Luna, that look on his face—pure primal hunger—had my stomach flipping and my thighs begging to open. I hadn’t wanted a man with such visceral intensity in a long time, and it frightened me. Enough to shut my mouth.

His jaw flexed, and he stood slowly, towering over me, a mountain of a man that I was suddenly gripped with the desire to climb.

“Get up, Princess.”

“Thalia. My name is Thalia.” Why had I given him my name? But it was all right. Bryony had only ever been referred to as princess in the correspondence.

“Thalia...” He said my name as if he was tasting it. “And you may call me Vaarin.” He held out his hand, the same one that had assaulted me a moment ago, and I took it, allowing him to pull me to my feet.

He held on to me, drawing me close, and my pulse thrummed hard in my throat at his proximity.

“Look at me,” he said.

I lifted my gaze to his, careful to shield my depraved thoughts behind a veil of decorum.

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, and I suspected that he could see right through

my shield. “You will obey me or you risk death. This isle is not safe, but I can navigate it. I can get us to where we need to be.”

“And where is that?”

“The far north side to a ship that can carry us to Merida.”

“Then why did we not sail the rowboat directly to that part of the island?”

“And risk being spotted by Obsidian Pearl’s aerial spies?” He snorted. “No, we stayed to the west, hidden in the storm to avoid being tracked. I need you to listen to me, Princess. Do as I ask.”

I dropped a nod. “Very well. No running off to save imaginary damsels.”

“Come, we should find shelter till dawn.”

“How far is the cave?”

“A day and a half trek.” He set off down the valley, and I followed.

The next day and a half in this male’s company was going to test my libido because even his scent made me ache. I wanted him, but I couldn’t have him.

I had a job to do, and it didn’t involve satisfying my desires.

* * *

Vaarin didn’t speak to me for the rest of the journey to shelter, and I was glad for the chance to reflect on what had happened between us. The valley was narrow, cliffs rising on either side. We ventured into the gloom, only stray beams of moonlight to

guide us, but my night vision had always been good, and I was able to make out the rocks and nooks in the ground that might have tripped me up.

After a while, Vaarin led us onto a path that hugged the side of the cliff into an aperture that wound up toward the night sky.

I stumbled once, and he was quick to grab my arm, the heat from his hand searing me through layers of cloth.

How could a sea fae be so warm? I would have thought them to be cold-blooded creatures, but he'd loaned me his heat earlier today, and I imagined it still coursed through my body. Maybe that was the reason for my inexplicable desire for him.

Or maybe it's simply been too long since you got laid.

I shut down the inner voice because it was more than that. He'd been affected by me just as I was by him, both in the bed on his ship and here on the island. I'd had my dalliances, but I'd never been drawn to a male like this before. Maybe he had this effect on all females? Maybe it was a sea king thing?

If Bryony had lived, then maybe I would have had a chance to explore this...whatever it was. My cheeks heated at the selfish thought, and my stomach turned.

What was wrong with me? Relegating my sister's death to weigh up what might or might not have happened between Vaarin and me.

I'd give up everything to have her back.

My eyes welled, and guilt dug claws into my chest.

Vaarin let out a heavy sigh. “You’re tired.”

I wiped at my tears and lied. “Yes. I guess I am.”

“Then you’ll be pleased to know that we are at our destination.”

We took a turn onto a platform that led to a small cave. Vaarin ducked to squeeze inside, and I followed him into the warm, dry space. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, but there was enough moonlight filtering in to make out the general structure.

Vaarin crossed the chamber in quick, sure strides, telling me that his night vision was much better than mine. I trailed after him at a sedate pace, not wanting to trip up.

Something rustled, and I peered harder to make out what he was doing. “Are those baskets?”

“Yes. Supplies.”

“You come here often, then?”

He snorted, not indelicately. “Just the once to pave the way to the ship. Supplies for whoever may come after.” He pulled out blankets and a smaller basket which he handed to me. “There will be dried meat in there. It will sustain you.”

I was used to ship supplies on long voyages, and a little dried meat didn’t bother me. I was accustomed to the leathery texture, and I hungrily unwrapped a piece and took a bite.

His brows went up. “And what do you think of that, Princess?”

Shit. Bryony would probably be sick if she ate this. I settled for making a face that communicated my disgust. “Needs must.”

“They must indeed.”

As he unpacked supplies and made up a bed, his shoulders relaxed.

“Will we make a fire?”

“Best not to alert any more locals of our presence.”

The wind whistled past the cave entrance, and a flurry of ice flakes swirled in.

“Frack,” Vaarin growled. “We must retreat farther into the cave.”

He gathered the bed he’d made and led me deeper into the cave where the ground was covered in soft moss and it smelled of earth and hidden life.

He arranged the blankets, then tugged off his boots.

I stared at them, bone dry leather... “You were in the water.”

“Yes.”

“But when you found me, you were dry.”

He smiled, a secretive smile that lit up his sapphire eyes. “You have much to learn about the sea fae.”

“Then teach me.”

He lay down and patted the spot in front of him. “It will get colder soon. Best we create a cocoon of heat now.”

Wait...He wanted us to share? It had been different on the ship. I’d been about to freeze to death, but now...Now I was a little too aware of him and his...assets.

“Thalia? Your virtue is safe with me.”

But was his safe with me? I fixed a smile on my face. “Of course, I know that.” I quickly lay down before I could say something foolish, and he pulled a blanket over us both.

“Would you like me to tell you a little about my people?” he asked. “After all, they will be your people soon enough.”

“I’d like that.”

“Some sea fae can move between land and sea without needing to remove their vestiges. My human clothes become a part of me when I’m beneath the waves, and when I emerge, they too appear.”

“Do you have...legs underwater?”

“I can have legs or a tail. I can choose. But there are those that cannot. The sea fae are like humans in many ways, just as varied and different. Here in the northern waters, our body temperatures run hotter than in other sea realms because the water here is so much colder. But we can reduce our body temperature at will. We are born to exist in the ocean, but we may also traverse the land for short periods.”

“How short?”

“Hours for some, days for others. But we must always, inevitably, return to the sea, for without its embrace we die.”

“Can you speak beneath the waves?”

His chest rumbled in a chuckle. “Of course.”

“How?”

“Maybe I will show you sometime.”

“But wouldn’t I need to be beneath the waves too?”

“Yes.”

I turned in his arms, curious and confused. “I cannot breathe beneath the waves.”

His warm gaze tracked over my face. “When you are married to my son, then you will be afforded some of his abilities.”

“Wait...that’s possible?”

“You will be able to visit the undersea for a few hours at a time. I am sure Dylon will show you our kingdom, the place where your children will one day reside.”

My excitement cooled because it had no basis to thrive. I wasn’t the princess. I wasn’t royal blood, and there would be no children for me.

Once my deceit and duplicity were discovered, I would most likely be executed.

“You are afraid...” He lightly touched my cheek. “He will not harm you. I will see to

it.”

I tucked in my chin, not wanting him to see the guilt in my eyes.

“I will protect you.”

This was the moment I could claim an oath from him. A vow that would compel him to keep me alive, but my honor wouldn’t allow me to do it. I’d lied enough. So instead, I changed the topic of conversation. “What is this place? This island and the creatures on it.”

“We call them the lost because the knowledge of who they were and where they came from is lost in the chronicles of time. They call this the Cursed Isle due to the popular belief that the creatures native to it are in fact trapped here by a curse.”

“What kind of curse?”

“Nobody knows.”

I was intrigued now. “I wonder if we could find out.”

His eyes lit up, and a slow-burn smile painted his beautiful lips. “Curious little thing, aren’t you?”

No one had ever called me little before, and I had to admit that I liked it. Once again, I dropped my gaze, and it fell to the amulet around his neck. A silver trident.

“Pretty.” I lightly touched it, and I was sure that it glowed for a moment.

“It’s a family heirloom,” he said. “Passed down through generations from father to son. The stories say that it once held magic that would draw the monarch’s heart’s

desire to him.”

“Heart’s desire?”

“His soul mate. The story says that the first kings were each given a gift from the moon for their service to the tides. A promise that their heart would always remain full, and with their gifts they each found true love.”

“Did you find yours?”

His expression closed off. “There are no such things as soul mates, Thalia. It is all a story, and this...this is merely an amulet.”

“But you had a queen once. A son and?—”

“Marriages do not always lead to love, especially for royals.” He winced. “Although I hope you find it with Dylan.”

“You could marry again? Find love?”

“You should sleep now.” His expression remained closed off. “We have a long trek ahead of us.” The conversation was over.

Chapter Thirteen

VAARIN

Thalia is an idealist? She believes in soul mates, or at least she wants to. Is that what she hopes to get from Dylan? A band of guilt wraps around my chest. Dylan is handsome and charismatic, but his heart is fickle, and he flits from female to female. Will he give Thalia what she desires? Will he love her? Why does it matter so much to me?

I glance down at her sleeping form. She's left her people and her home to forge an alliance with us, and I owe it to her to ensure that she is happy.

But will she be happy with Dylan?

I'll kill him if he hurts her.

She moans softly in her sleep, and I hold her tighter, something warm and alien unfurling inside me. Exhilarating and yet frightening. I swallow the lump in my throat, my mind whirring. What is this feeling? Could it be....? No. I'm attracted to her, that is all. Her body. Her scent. Nothing more. It will pass.

It must.

* * *

It vexes me how well I sleep with the princess in my arms. I wake refreshed, her

scent in my nose, her pliant body pressed to mine. Her face turned up toward me as if she's offering me her lips for a kiss. I'm tempted to claim them. To taste her just once, and it takes all my will to extricate myself from the cage of her warm limbs and step out into the cold where the icy air can cool my ardor.

I feel her stir behind me before she speaks. "Time to move?"

I glance over my shoulder to see her propped on an elbow, hair cascading over her shoulders, eyes still heavy with sleep, and that mouth...that delectable mouth parted slightly.

I turn away and take a breath of icy air. "Yes, it's time to go. There's heavy winter clothing in the basket by the wall. Put it on. This isle is renowned for its blizzards, and one could hit at any time."

She's ready fast—boots on, hair up in a knot, a few sips of water and a seed and nut bar, and we're on our way.

I'm impressed.

She talks for a while, asking about the island that will be gifted to her people, about its soil and its topography. About the town that was built there. I answer as best I can, but truth be told, I'm too captivated by the cadence of her voice. There is a sultry undertone to it that teases the male in me.

She falls silent as the terrain gets rougher, focusing on the path, or lack thereof.

She's fast and nimble on her feet, and we make good time over the rocky land. The pass narrows and widens at intervals, rising and dipping, but she doesn't beg to stop and rest, keeping up easily as I forge the path ahead, searching for any hazards.

It irks me that I find myself stealing glances at her. I tell myself that here, surrounded by brush and stone, there isn't much to look at, and Princess Thalia makes for interesting scenery, and so I ogle where I can. The curve of her cheek, the arch of her brow, the swell of her breasts and her ass. That ass...it had felt good beneath my hand, firm yet pliant, and the sounds she'd made...

My cock stiffens, and I clench my teeth. She is not mine to covet. I must relieve myself of these thoughts.

She slips, and I grab her arm. It's enough to steady her, but I pull her against me regardless, hungry for the feel of her in my arms. She doesn't resist, clinging to me and breathing hard. I inhale her sweet scent, and it leaves me dizzy.

"I'm sorry. I'll be more careful." Her gaze flickers across my face, a caress I want to lean into.

And tides save me, the way she looks at me with her wide green eyes makes me want to push her up against the rock face and plunder her mouth with my tongue, and maybe other places too, like the hot wet place between her thighs. I wonder what she'd taste like.

"Vaarin?"

Frack, my name on her lips...I release her and stride ahead, suddenly irritated with this whole thing. "Hurry. Daylight is wasting. We have a good few hours till we reach out next rest stop."

Chapter Fourteen

THALIA

Vaarin wants me. I saw it in his eyes and felt it in the way he held me. My little fake stumble had allowed me to get close and personal. Fuck, he smelled good. Lickably good. Falling asleep last night had been no easy feat with all that taut muscle pressed against me and his delicious aroma surrounding me, but I had.

I'd slept deep and unfettered, and for a moment when I'd woken, I'd been happy, and then the reality of my situation had set in.

Bryony was dead, and I was walking to my own execution, and so what if I distracted myself with heavenly biceps, and yes, Vaarin was over a hundred solar revolutions old, but he looked damn fine, and if I was honest, I'd always had a thing for older men so?—

A gust of icy wind sliced at my face. I cursed and adjusted the scarf Vaarin had given me to cover more of my face.

“The storm is coming in fast,” Vaarin said. “Maybe an hour before it hits.”

“How much farther to shelter?”

“About the same.” He grabbed my hand. “This way.” He took us off the path and into a crevice that I'd missed, barely wide enough for him to squeeze through. It brought us out onto a wide, clear path nestled between two rocks, but the road ahead was a

dead end.

“No...” Vaarin rushed forward, pressing at the boulders that blocked our way. “Curse the tides.”

“What do we do now? Is there another route?”

He turned to me, jaw flexing. “Yes, but it is vastly more dangerous than this one.”

“So far today, this lethal isle has been kind to us. Maybe our luck will hold.”

The smile he gave me was one you’d give a clueless fool, and my spine stiffened. “What? You believe I can’t protect myself?”

“Oh, I have no doubt you have skill with a sword, but the creatures you will be forced to battle aren’t flesh and blood.” He led us back through the crevice, and I followed, eager to know more.

“Then what are they?”

“Ice wraiths. They appear with the storm, so if we hurry, we may succeed in avoiding them altogether.”

We came back out on the narrow path. “And what if we can’t avoid them?”

He inhaled through his nose, his expression grave. “Then I will fight.” His sapphire eyes blazed down on me. “You will be safe. I swear it.”

I was tempted to give him the same assurance but held my tongue and did the princess-like thing of merely nodding and smiling.

Hopefully I wouldn't need to unleash my skills in his presence. To do so would be to cast suspicion on myself, for princesses weren't given the raw tutoring that I'd received.

All I could do was hope we beat the blizzard to shelter.

* * *

The storm hit as we made our way out of the mountain pass and onto flatlands, the blizzard so thick I could barely see a few feet in front of me. The wind screamed and shrieked, battering at my eardrums and tearing at my clothes as it tried to find a way past the barrier and to my skin.

Vaarin held my hand, steering me through the blind spots. I kept my head down to shield my eyes from the clawing grip of ice.

My breath shivered in my lungs, each inhalation like swallowing needles.

I was going to freeze.

But Vaarin drew me along with him, and I focused on putting one foot ahead of the other.

The howling ebbed a little, and Vaarin brought us to a halt. I looked up, and my squinted eyes popped wide at the scene before me.

Spectral humanoid forms fought with swords and axes that collided with no sound. They wore cloaks that swirled and whipped about their bodies and armor that glinted, opaque one moment and translucent the next. I caught a flash of a face, a skeletal thing with blue neon orbs burning in the dark sockets where eyes should be.

Vaarin drew me close, leaning in so that his mouth pressed to the fabric of the scarf wrapped over my head.

“Wraiths,” he said. “They cannot see us. We can pass if we take the safe route. But you must stay close. Follow in my steps. One misstep will bring a warrior on your head. Two missteps, and the whole army will be on our heads. Once we start, there is no going back. We must move forward.”

What safe route was he talking about? There was no path through this carnage.

“Thalia. Trust me.”

What choice did I have? I nodded. He squeezed my hand and led me forward. A strange prickling skated over my skin, and my vision blurred before the ground bloomed with criss-crossing lines that formed huge squares like a chess board. Each was a meter squared.

Oh...Oh wait...the specters, these wraiths, they had roles. Now that I studied them, they wore uniforms. Plain leather and simple swords for pawns, heavier armor for the knights, and thick robes for bishops. There was no king or queen present, though, on either side.

This was a game. What the fuck?

“Focus,” Vaarin called over the wail of the wind. “Follow my steps exactly.”

He dove into the fray, left, then right, then forward across the squares. The wraiths ignored him. Blind to him just as Vaarin had explained they would be. I mimicked his movements, stepping on the same squares that he had. He waited till I was a step behind him, then took three more moves.

I followed.

We made progress across the battlefield this way, past a bishop and a knight, sword to javelin, then between two pairs of pawns parrying with expert urgency.

The blizzard thickened, the howling rising like a mournful cry, and I was momentarily blinded. When the snow cleared a little, Vaarin had already moved his steps.

Fuck. I stared at the squares then back at him, shaking my head hard to let him know I was stuck, but he couldn't even retrace his steps to show me.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted.

The wind grabbed his words and ripped them away so all I caught was "left...."

"Mine or yours!" I called back.

He frowned and then jabbed a finger at me.

Mine then. I hoped I'd interpreted that correctly. I leapt onto the square diagonally left of me, my attention swinging to Vaarin.

He grinned, and the knots in my chest eased. He was close now. Just a few meters.

"Left again!"

I heard him clearly this time and jumped, but a blast of air hit me as my boots left the ground, knocking me back onto my previous square.

Vaarin's bellow rang out, clear as a bell in the sudden silence. The warriors had

frozen.

“Thalia,” Vaarin said. “Left, then to me. Do it now.”

But if I did that, if I moved now that I’d fucked up, wouldn’t that release the whole battlefield? “Vaarin, won’t that free them all?”

“We’ll worry about that if it happens, just?—”

The specter on the square beside me slowly turned its head and fixed glowing blue eyes on me.

Vaarin took a step toward me in my periphery.

“Don’t move!” I held up a hand. “You’ll release them all if you do.”

The wraith turned its body my way, and I drew my sword.

“Thalia, what are you?—”

“Hush and let me focus.”

The wraith attacked.

Chapter Fifteen

VAARIN

“Hush and let me focus,” she demands, and something in me stills because there is confidence in those words. An age of experience, and she proves it a moment later as she swings her sword up to counter the wraith’s attack.

She dances around it, dodging its blows yet somehow managing to remain on the same square. How is it that a princess can fight like a seasoned warrior? This level of skill cannot be learned in a training room. But my questions will wait until she subdues the wraith, and there is only one way to do that.

“You must land a strike!” No easy feat against these ancient warriors, but with Thalia, the way that she parries and evades, I have hope. There is a shrewd look in her eyes, focused and intense, that tells me that she’s gauging the situation and biding her time. Still my muscles strain, the urge to leap to her defense coursing through me, but to do so would be to bring the whole army on our heads.

She was wise to counsel me to halt.

Beautiful, accomplished, wise, this woman is a unique creature indeed. My heart flutters.

A moment later, she spins on her heel, bringing her body low to avoid the swipe of the wraith’s blade and taking advantage of his exposed torso with the slice of her sword.

The wraith shatters silently into fragments of spectral energy.

She stares at the spot where it stood a moment ago and then straightens to look at me, her stormy eyes bright with the thrill of triumph, waiting for me to congratulate her. I want to. She deserves it, but the hammer of my heart and the strange sensations blooming in my blood confuse me so that when I speak my tone is brusque and angry.

“Hurry up!” I beckon her to join me. Her mouth tightens, but she obliges by leaping onto the square beside me. I want to hug her, but I instead I bark instructions. “Focus and stay close.”

I move off, slowly this time, checking back to make sure she’s watching, taking one step at a time so that she’s only a step behind me.

We make our way across the battlefield in silence, and it’s only when we reach the other side that I breathe a sigh of relief.

I turn to her, shoulders relaxing. “You did well back there.”

She lifts her chin. “I know. I don’t need you to tell me.” She shoulders past me into the woodland. “I’m cold. Get me to shelter.”

I’ve upset her. Good. That’s good. It will add a distance between us, one that I believe is much needed if I’m to keep myself from crossing a boundary that could ruin everything.

* * *

Shelter is in an ancient everness tree surrounded by barbed brush and brambles. Getting past the defenses is no easy task. We chose it all those solar revolutions ago

for this very reason, and I etched a path to the center, to the hollow nestled at the base of the tree, hidden by a berry bush.

I lead the way now, holding back the brush so it doesn't scratch at Thalia's skin. She slips past me, her body lightly brushing mine as she enters the short tunnel that leads into the earth and to our shelter for the night. I allow the berry bush to fall back into place, trapping us in gloom.

She glances back at me. She's pulled down the scarf now, and the little light filtering in from between the tight-knit branches of the bush finds her face and highlights every plane, dip, and angle.

I want to touch her.

She arches a brow that asks what now ?

She hasn't spoken to me since the battlefield, and although it has not even been half an hour, it feels like an age. I miss her voice. I could pretend not to see the question in her eyes and make her speak, but that seems petty.

"There's a door ahead."

She nods and continues deeper into the gloom, reaching out with her hands as it gets darker.

My eyesight adjusts so that I can see the path clearly. The ground is about to dip, and I open my mouth to warn her, but something stops me, long enough for her to trip. I grab hold of her and hold her against me for long seconds, reveling in this excuse to touch her before I say, "I forgot there was a step there."

"Oh really?" Her voice touches me in hidden places, and I can't help but sigh. "I

doubt very much that you forget anything, King Vaarin.”

I bite back a smile because although she’s talking to me, her use of my royal title makes it clear that she is still annoyed.

This woman...

She pulls out of my grip and continues into the dark, finding the roughly made wooden door. She pushes it open to reveal yawning darkness and falters.

“Let me...” I move forward, and she shuffles back to allow me to take the lead. I fumble at the threshold, fingers searching for the small table and the lantern that should be there. I find it, and a moment later, the chasm is filled with light.

Her gasp of shock brings a smile to my face. “It’s a room. An actual room.”

The sitting room with its soft furnishings, neat rug, and hearth makes a pretty picture. There is a bed to one side and a dresser also. I can’t claim credit for this place; we found it years ago. An abandoned hovel, home to some creature who was unable to return to it. There is a story here but no one to tell it.

Part of me hoped to spend this night in silence. Best for us both because tomorrow we will be on the ship to Merida, and she will be married to my son, and these feelings burgeoning inside me, emotions that I do not wish to examine, will be quashed.

But the stiffness has melted from her demeanor now. There will be no silence tonight. Not until we sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

T HALIA

I wasn't sure why this small, cozy space brought tears to my eyes. Maybe it was because it reminded me a little of the small tower sewing room that Bryony loved to hide away in and where I'd often joined her with a book, teasing her by saying she'd ruin her eyes with all the intricate needlepoint. She'd retort with, "Better than risking losing a limb in battle."

And we'd had our fair share of those. Father had loaned the guard to neighboring provinces, kingdoms, and isles over the years in exchange for grain, and I'd fought on varying terrain. I'd slept on hard ground in the cold with my guard and come home weary and hungry to the castle where Bryony and Father had been waiting.

This room brought an influx of memories, and with them came a surge of emotions because my sister was dead, and we would never sit in the sewing room together again.

"Thalia?" Vaarin cupped my shoulders. "Look at me."

I lifted my chin to view him through a sheen of tears. I was tired and homesick and scared. So fucking scared.

He pulled me into a hug, and I accepted the comfort, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my cheek to his chest. He was the sea and power, but right now, he was safety and comfort, and I needed that, even though he might ultimately

become my undoing.

“I’m sorry for my reaction earlier,” he said. “I was...afraid. Afraid of what might have happened to you, but you...you fought, and you won and...Your skill is of a seasoned warrior. How?”

There was nothing to do but offer him half the truth. “I fought with my father’s army a few times fending off invaders to our shores.”

“Your father would risk you this way?”

He had no idea. “He fought also. We do what we must to protect our people.”

He was silent for several heartbeats, and when he spoke, his tone was warm and intimate. “You are an amazing woman. You’re not just beautiful, but you are intelligent and strong of body and mind, and I am so very honored to know you.”

A sob clawed at my throat, the armor that I’d spent years building cracking because how long had I wished for someone to say these words to me? How long had I yearned before I’d convinced myself they didn’t matter? I’d made do with the scraps my adopted father was able to throw my way. The soft smile or pat on the shoulder when the queen wasn’t watching. I’d thrived in Bryony’s need for me to protect her, finding myself useful in that, and when lying with a man, I’d accepted the sexual compliments, allowing those words to warm me, but this...Vaarin’s words...they unraveled a part of me that I’d thought dead long ago. I kept my head down, cheek pressed to his chest where his heart beat steady and sure against my cheek because in this moment, if I allowed him to look into my eyes, he would see... everything . He would see it all, and then...then I would be wholly undone.

So I allowed him to hold me for a little longer, long enough for me to rein in my emotions and lock them away before I extricated myself from the embrace.

“I think I’m tired. And hungry.”

He searched my face, looking for something that I could not, would not give him. “We can do something about both of those things,” he said finally. “Why don’t you wash up. There’s a pump in the room next door and a basin. I’ll start a fire and find us something to eat.”

I ducked into the small washroom that held a tiny hand basin and a small tub. Someone had lived here once. I made a note to ask Vaarin about it. My face looked back at me from a mirror that had lost some of its silver so that all I saw were my eyes, dark and haunted, and my mouth, lips dry and chapped. The water was icy, but I washed my hands and face before redoing my braid. The small latrine was a blessing after such a long trek, and by the time I rejoined Vaarin, I felt almost human.

The room was now lit by firelight, and Vaarin sat with his back braced on one of the sofas, long legs stretched out in front of him. He’d pulled a low table close to the hearth and placed a small offering of leathery meat and berries on it.

My stomach rumbled in anticipation of the meager meal. “When did you get the berries?”

“Just now,” he said. “There is a berry bush outside this hovel.” His gaze roved over my face, probably searching for signs of distress. I offered him a small smile to let him know I was fine. My emotional display, unusual for me, was probably something he’d expect from a woman of high breeding such as a true princess.

It was just as well I’d allowed myself to be vulnerable, even if only for a moment. “Do you know who lived here?”

“No. It was empty when we found it. I can’t help wondering what happened to the creature who owned it, or what this isle’s true story is.”

I joined him on the floor by the fire and tucked my legs beneath me. “Does no one know?”

“No one that I have met, and I have met many people.”

The flickering flames played in a dance of light and shadow across his face. He’d shucked off his overcoat and boots and rolled up his sleeves to expose strong forearms. I forced myself to look away from the feast of flesh and turned my attention to our supper.

I picked up a berry and popped it in my mouth. Flavor, sweet with a tart edge, exploded on my tongue. “Oh, that is nice.”

“Yes, but do not eat too many. They can play havoc with your stomach.”

The shits...I got it. I ate a handful more, then turned to the leathery meat.

He watched but didn’t partake. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“No. I do not require the same kind of sustenance as you do, or as much of it. The sea sustains me, and I was able to replenish myself yesterday.”

“So...how long before you need to replenish again?”

“A day, maybe two. I will do so once we are on our ship and in safe waters.”

“Are any waters safe any longer?”

“The Meridian seas are heavily patrolled by the North Sea Guard. You will be safe there.”

“Guards like Meredith?”

“Yes, and others.”

Food consumed, I relaxed against the armchair behind me, unfurling my legs to stretch them out parallel to his. In one day and night I’d be on Merida Isle, and then the marriage would happen, and then... “How quickly will I be married to Prince Dylan?”

His expression clouded. “Eager, are we?”

“My people are starving, so yes, you could say I’m eager.”

He sighed. “As soon as we return, we will do the ceremony, and then...once the union has been consummated, Dylan will take you to the undersea realm to visit our people as is customary.”

“Then what?”

“You will return to the isle and live in the castle, and your people will be permitted to join you as is agreed in the contract.”

I needed to be sure the contract wouldn’t be overturned, that once it was sealed, it couldn’t be overturned. “And what if...what if the prince doesn’t like me? After...after it’s done. What if he says I’m not the princess he wants?”

“Then you will be free to do as you wish. Your union with my son will have granted us the fertility we require.”

“You won’t send my people away?”

“The contract is binding, Thalia. A Faircaster princess will marry and consummate with the prince of the Northern Sea. Once these terms are met, the Merida Isle will belong to King Bronan.”

There was nothing in there about the fertility having to take hold. The princess wasn't named, and I was a princess, the king's adopted daughter. The contract would hold, and even though guilt writhed in my chest for the deceit I was weaving, there was a part of me at peace with it.

He was looking at me strangely now, and I didn't like the shrewd look in his eyes. “Let's play a game to pass the time.”

The shrewd look melted. “A game? What kind of game?”

“A secrets game.”

“Oh? Do you have many secrets, Princess?”

“A few. But I'll share mine if you share yours.”

The timbre to his voice dropped, his sapphire eyes darkening as he said, “They say that disclosure brings closeness. Are you looking for closeness, Thalia?”

My pulse quickened. Was the air suddenly a little too thick? “Maybe...” Why had I said that? “What do you hate the most? What won't you tolerate?”

The intensity in his eyes melted away. “Lies and betrayal,” he said simply. “I cannot. Will not abide it.”

His words left me cold. “Really? I sense a story.” I kept my tone light even though my insides were quivering. “Do tell.”

He responded with a half smile and a one-shoulder shrug. “There is not much to tell. My wife had liaisons with my best friend behind my back, and when I discovered the truth, she lied about it. Dylan was barely five years old. He does not remember and does not understand why his mother left.”

“Left? I thought she was dead.”

“She is dead. Dead to me.”

Just like I would be once he found out the truth. But in my case, it would be a real death.

“And you?” he asked. “What won’t you abide?”

“Honestly, I don’t have the luxury to not abide things.” The words were out before I could think them through, and I wanted to kick myself, because surely a princess had every luxury.

But if he found my response off, he didn’t show it. In fact, he merely nodded. “I suppose much that you do is chosen for you.”

I exhaled and smiled to mask my relief. “All the time.”

“Except learning to fight?”

“A small concession my father made.”

“You must have had an excellent tutor.”

“I did.” That part wasn’t a lie. Berand had been an excellent teacher, and now he was dead. The whole situation weighed on me, leaving me suddenly bone-achingly tired.

A yawn popped my jaw, and I covered my mouth and shook my head. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You should sleep now.”

I glanced at the bed. A structure made for one. A small someone. I pulled myself up and gathered the blankets. “We’ll make a bed by the fire.”

He watched me, his expression unreadable as I laid the blankets on the floor. They weren’t big enough to cover us completely, but the fire would keep us warm, and the mattress would provide a little cushioning for the top half of our bodies if we laid it vertically.

I threw a quick glance his way. “You might want to move the table.”

He did so but didn’t join me on the makeshift bed.

I arched a brow. “Do you intend to stay awake all night?”

“You wish for me to lie with you?”

Hadn’t I made that clear? And was I imagining the suggestiveness in his tone? “Yes. Please. In case it gets cold,” I added quickly.

He joined me, lying behind me like he had the night before and framing my body with his. I bit back a sigh of contentment because how could this feel so right?

He draped his arm over my waist, and my fingers itched to caress his skin, so pale where mine was brown. I wanted to see the shades side by side, but instead I curled my hand into a fist.

“I could get used to this,” he whispered softly, his breath moving through my hair.

His words echoed my desires. “Then why don’t you?” I squeezed my eyes closed as if that would make the words I shouldn’t have said disappear.

He rested his chin on the top of my head, tucking me against him. “You deserve love, and that is not something I can give you.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because I’m cursed.” He exhaled heavily. “I never allowed myself to say it out loud before. I’ve made it a point to disbelieve it. But there is a part of me that has always known that I am broken. I can want to possess and own. I can feel pleasure and pain and physical yearning, but I cannot love or be loved. It is why I did not execute my wife, as was my right. She needed love, thrived on it, and was given to a cold-hearted king unable to provide her with this most basic need. She betrayed me, and I understood it. But I did not forgive Chorles’s betrayal because he was my closest friend.”

“Did you...Did you kill him?”

“Yes.”

A little chill entered my blood. “He was your closest friend. Could you not have forgiven him too?”

“I did wrong by my queen Evya, but Chorles I was always a loyal friend to. He did not deserve my clemency, but had he come to me and expressed his feelings for Evya, then I may have seen it in my cold heart to set them both free. Instead, he chose to lie and cheat and deceive, and in doing so he broke the sanctity of our friendship.”

Would Vaarin help me if I told him the truth now? Would he still help my people? I didn’t want to sully what was growing between us, this warm, real thing that I

believed could become more and?—

What was I thinking? There could never be a him and me. Not even if I confessed. I was no one. Nothing. And he was the fucking sea king. Any connection between us, any tender feelings he might have were for a princess. Not for her bodyguard.

I blinked back hot tears. “We should sleep.”

He hugged me close. “Then close your eyes, Little Princess.”

With guilt building a nest in my chest and all the awful possibilities of what would happen to me once my deception was complete, I doubted I’d ever fall asleep. But the steady beat of Vaarin’s heart and the crackle of the fire soon proved me wrong.

Chapter Seventeen

VAARIN

I can't read her this morning. It's as if she's taken all her emotions and locked them away, and I miss them. But I respect her guardedness, especially now that she knows I cannot be the man she needs.

There is a hollowness inside me as we take the final stretch of our journey toward the cove where our ship awaits. The gorge we're in will take us all the way to the coast, where a perilous path will lead us into the cavern where the ship is hidden.

She hasn't spoken since we left the shelter, and I long to hear her voice. "Tell me about your isle."

"My isle?" She arches a brow. "There isn't much to tell. It's overcrowded and all but barren. My people are starving, but we have beautiful coastal views and plenty of fresh air. A shame that air cannot fill a child's belly or bring milk to its starving mother's breast. There are deaths, many of them. But the births come quickly to replenish us."

I cannot imagine such an existence. To live with constant gnawing hunger. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, so am I."

"I heard you had alliances?"

“Yes, with the Rootborn of Thyraelis. At least for a while. We provided workers for their mines, and they furnished us with grain. But they are in the grip of civil war, and we have not received a shipment of grain for...a long time.”

“And your workers?”

“Have not come home.”

She lapses into silence again, and something stirs at the back of my mind. An awareness that is followed by the scent of the sea.

We are not alone here.

I keep my stride easy and relaxed and my gaze ahead, and when I speak, my voice is low and intimate so that only Thalia may hear it. “Princess, do not react, but we are being followed.”

I expect her to stiffen or look back, as is a natural reflex for most people, even when given instruction to the contrary, but she remains at ease by my side.

“I thought I sensed something,” she says. “And I saw a shadow in my periphery a few moments ago, to our left, high up.”

“There is a ledge up there. Narrow but passable.”

“What are we dealing with?”

“I fear that the Obsidian Pearl is tracking us.”

“Why aren’t they attacking?”

“I believe they wish to find our vessel.”

“Shit.”

“Precisely.”

“So what’s the plan? We stop and fight?”

I can’t help but smile at her willingness to shed blood. It calls to the primal beast inside me, but now that I’ve taken a moment, I can scent several signatures, too many to risk a skirmish. Her life is too valuable. I must get her to safety, and there is only one way to do that. A way that will require the bulk of my reserved power. But it will be worth it.

“Vaarin?” She looks up at me with a frown. “What’s the plan?”

I call to the moisture in the air, and it answers, rushing to surround us and create a vortex. My insides tremble with the expenditure of power, but I hold firm, dragging more and more toward me.

I grab hold of her and pull her to me.

“Vaarin?”

Oh, how I love the sound of my name on her lips. “I’m getting us out of here.”

A bellow rises beyond the roar of water. Our trackers know what I’m about to do, and I sense them hurtling toward me.

Too late.

The vortex forms and rushes toward us, swallowing us whole.

* * *

We emerge inside the cavern, which opens out onto the cove. The Yarissa rocks gently on the waves, anchored and moored to keep it hidden. The vessel is the largest of its kind, built to house a small town of people, to transport them to safer seas if the undersea becomes hostile.

This is my promise to my people, and now the Obsidian Pearl is about to discover it. I can't allow any of them to live to tell the tale.

Thalia stares in shock at the ship then back at me. "What did you do?"

"I opened a vortex."

"Wait—you could have brought us straight here at any time?"

"Not at any time. The distance and..." I pause to catch my breath because the feat has drained me. I need the sea, but not yet. Not until Thalia is safe. "Come. Quickly."

Roughly hewn stone steps lead down to the dock, built so long ago that it's barely visible beneath algae. I take her hand here to prevent her from slipping, but she's steady on her feet, and it's I that stumble, my lungs tight. She grabs hold of me and braces her frame to steady me. She's surprisingly robust for a human.

"Vaarin?" She studies me with sharp concern, and I shake my head.

"I'm fine. Hurry." I help her onto the ladder and climb up behind her onto the ship.

"We're going to sail this thing?" She shakes her head. "We need a crew."

“I know, which is why we’re not taking the main ship.” I hurry starboard, where a smaller boat is bound to the main ship. Large enough to house six, there are cabins below and a decent sail and navigation system. “Get in.”

She obliges, climbing down a second ladder and landing on deck. She looks back up at me. “Vaarin, come on.”

I smile down at her. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“What?”

I undo the knots holding the boat to the ship. “Steer north and you’ll be in safe waters by nightfall. You’ll see land by dawn.”

“Wait!” She reaches for the rope ladder just as the final knot comes undone.

The boat drops to the ocean, taking her with it.

“Vaarin! What are you doing? Come on!” She looks out to sea then back toward the cavern.

“I can’t leave. Not until they’re all dead.”

“Then fight them undersea. You’re stronger there.”

“And so are they. It would take too long for me to recharge. At least on land I have a chance.”

Her eyes widen. “A chance? A fucking chance? Against how many? No!” She makes to climb the side of the boat, her eyes on the rope ladder still dangling down the side of the ship.

I haul it up out of reach. “Goodbye, Thalia.” I use the last of my power to call to the current beneath the waves and push the boat out of the cove and into the wide sea.

“NO!” Thalia cries as the current carries her away. “Vaarin, no!”

And then she’s gone.

I allow my legs to give way and collapse on deck, depleted. Drained. The Obsidian Pearl will be here soon, and I’ll have to fight them without my elemental power.

But this ship comes equipped with tools I can use to my advantage.

I don’t have long, and so I get to work.

Chapter Eighteen

THALIA

My heart beat like an erratic drum as the boat shot out to sea, taking me with it. The cove and island grew farther and farther away. Vaarin was going to take on the Obsidian Pearl alone, and that wouldn't be such a terrible thing—he was the king of the Northern Sea after all, but he was depleted. Drained of power from opening the vortex.

What if he didn't survive?

He thought I was the hope of his people.

He thought by saving me he was saving them, but he wasn't. I was no one. An orphan taken in by a king as an act of benevolence, a princess in name only, but Vaarin...Vaarin was the helm of his people. Their anchor. Their savior. Without him they'd be lost.

His life mattered more than mine.

There was only one thing to do.

I ran to the back of the boat and hauled the anchor over the edge, hoping to Thalor that we weren't too far from land for the anchor to hit the seabed. The chains unraveled for what seemed like forever until the anchor hit bottom.

I tugged off my boots, limbs flooding with heat, ready for action, climbed onto the stern, and leapt into the water.

Ice stole my breath, and I came up gasping, taking in more icy water.

Move, Thalia.

I started to swim, sure, strong strokes cutting a path to land. I'd always been a strong swimmer, but I'd always kept close to the coast back home. These were deep waters. The water was frigid, clawing and cutting at my skin, and the current was strong, attempting to snag and drag me down by my clothes. My sword added weight to each stroke, but I kept my eye on land and forged on.

I wouldn't let Vaarin do this alone. I couldn't let him die.

Please, please, let me be in time.

But the cold seeped into my blood and bones, slowing my progress, making movement harder. Each breath spawned needles in my lungs.

My legs seized, and I went under.

No!

Move!

I kicked out for the surface, sucking in air, only for my body to give up on me and drag me back under.

Panic formed a fist around my torso, squeezing and crushing, commanding me to breathe. But breathing beneath the waves meant death. I reached for the light even as

darkness closed in around me.

I was going to die, and Vaarin....Oh Thalor, please...I can't die here. Not now. Not like this.

Movement in my periphery tightened the band around my chest. There was something in the water with me. Someone.

A woman with a pale elfin face swam toward me, a crimson tail of hair streaming out in the water behind her. As she grew near, her dark eyes bloomed to a stunning silvery gray. She hooked an arm around me, her face too close, her eyes too bright as they bore into me, and something inside me unfurled. A memory, knowledge...a hidden truth.

The light grew brighter the closer to the surface we got, but the urge to draw breath ebbed. Was I dead?

Was I?

She smiled, close-lipped, and pressed her pale palm to my chest. Warmth bloomed outward, permeating my limbs and freeing them from their paralysis.

Go quickly. Take the sea with you.

She released me with a shove that sent me hurtling to the surface, and a moment later, the pale triangle of her face was swallowed by dark depths.

My skin began to hum, the heat intensifying as I shot up and broke the surface. One breath was all I needed before turning to land once more. This time the chill of the water barely registered. This time the ocean didn't fight me. It embraced me, carrying me to my destination, undoubtedly an effect of something my undersea savior had

done.

My exhaustion was replaced with a humming energy that saturated my being.

The cove grew larger and larger.

I was almost there.

Chapter Nineteen

VAARIN

So even Obsidian Pearl members enter the cavern and board the ship. They move with stealth, gliding across the ground, black cloaks brushing the deck. There are rumors about their kind, about their true nature being that of abominations. But if that is true, then they hide it well. I have yet to see evidence that they are anything but misguided sea folk. Insane, irrational, and delusional.

I watch from the crow's nest as they split up to cover the ship, gut tightening as one of the groups reaches my first trap—carefully spilled netting, counterweighted to snap them up and into the air once they tread on it. I've made sure that there is no way around the trap, not unless they double back on themselves.

Any moment now....

The leader of the group pauses at the netting, and the others stop behind him. He stares at it for several beats then rises into the air and floats over it.

My heart thuds hard in my throat, because how is this possible? This level of power is blessed only to the royal bloodlines, and even we cannot use it on land. Not like this...not like they do.

My heart sinks as the second group bypasses my other trap, a hatch left carefully open beneath sandbags. They can see...They know.

They must.

My suspicions are confirmed a moment later when they come to a standstill on the deck beneath me.

They slowly raise their heads to look up, pale oval faces and ink-stain eyes finding me easily.

Kraken's ass, these sea folk aren't the same as the ones who I fought in the deeps. These have crimson marks inked on their faces, and as I stare back at them, pinpricks of crimson bloom in the centers of their obsidian eyes.

"Give us the female," they say in unison. "Give her to us and you may live."

The thought of giving Thalia to these monsters evokes a visceral reaction of despair and rage and the realization that I would die for this female. Not because she is vital to my people, but because she is vital to me .

My heart, cold and dead for too long, warmed for the first time with her in my arms. It beat a staccato rhythm when I held her to me as she slept, and in terror of losing her when the wraith attacked.

It awakened for her. There is no denying it. And the emotions that course through me can no longer be denied.

I would die for Thalia because...because I love her. The truth is a blow that almost knocks me off my perch, and the desire to tell her courses through me like a tsunami, and I know in that instant that I will not give her up. Not to the Obsidian Pearl, and not to my son.

I must survive this. Survive, join her, and tell her what I have known deep down all

along. That she belongs to me.

A renewed purpose blooms in my chest. If fully charged, I could take these zealots down easily, but drained and depleted as I am, it will be no easy feat.

But when have I ever taken the easy route? “There is no prize here for you. Only death. Turn away now and be spared. This is your last chance.”

“You are weak. We sense it. It is you who require a chance. Give us the princess and you may have it.”

Good, they may have seen through my traps, but they are not all seeing. They believe that Thalia is somewhere on this boat. “You can’t have her. I won’t allow it.”

“Come out, Princess!” they call. “Come out and we will spare the king’s life. Otherwise on your head be his death.”

“Don’t come out!” I bluff. “Stay hidden. Remember your oath to me.” It’s all a lie, but they seem to buy it.

“Then you will die, King Vaarin, and we will take her regardless.”

With the final vestiges of my strength, I summon my weapon of choice.

The trident glows bright in my hand, lending me a jolt of residual power. I siphon it greedily, then leap from the crow’s nest and into the fray.

Chapter Twenty

THALIA

The unmistakable sounds of battle shook the cavern, echoing off stone and amplifying. Pulse beating hard, blood singing with the thrill of the swim, I made my way silently and quickly onto the dock, keeping low to avoid being seen.

Once on deck, I moved toward the sounds. The clang of metal on metal. The fizz of power raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Alarm bells went off inside me as I approached spilled netting and stopped, gaze raking over the mess until I spotted the carefully laid trap. Shit. I would have walked into that, so what had made me stop?

Vaarin's bellow galvanized me into action. I skirted the trap then pressed my back to the cabin wall, moving slowly forward. If I could catch the bastards unaware, then I could?—

Vaarin cried out again, but this time, the sound was filled with pain. My stomach clenched hard, and I peered around the edge of the cabin to see several cloaked figures surrounding something. The figures stepped back, forming a loose circle, and my heart squeezed in panic at the sight of Vaarin lying on the deck, his hand clutching his bloody chest. His lips were bloodless.

“Come out, Princess,” the Obsidian Pearl said, their unified voice swelling to fill the cavern. “Come out or he dies.”

Vaarin let out a raspy laugh. “She's gone, you fools. In safe waters by now. You

lost.”

“Then there is no use for you.” The crackle of power singed my senses as they prepared to attack him once more.

He lifted his chin, defiant, prepared to die, and something inside me snapped and broke. My own defiance. My own will. The shell that lived around my heart.

“Stop!” I stepped into view, sword held loosely at my side. “I’m here. Let him go.”

They could have me. It didn’t matter.

Vaarin’s head snapped my way, his eyes wide with shock. “Thalia...No....”

I wanted to tell him the truth then, that all was not lost, because I wasn’t the savior he thought me to be. That it didn’t matter whether I lived or died. But these bastards needed to believe otherwise.

“Let him go, and you can have me.”

Laughter, low and resonant, filled the air. “There is no reprieve for the sea king.” One of the cloaked ones pushed back his hood. “But you may watch him die.”

It was him...the cloaked sea fae that had attacked my ship. “You...”

“My brigands mistook you for dead, the fools. But blessings of the deep ensured that you live. Your blood will fuel the true gods.”

“Leave her be!” Vaarin cried.

The sea fae released a jet of power that hit Vaarin in the chest. He convulsed, eyes

slipping closed as he fell onto his side.

Dead.

“NO!” My scream shattered the silence.

He was dead. Like Bryony, like my crew. Dead, all of them dead, and this fucker, this cloaked bastard was responsible for it all.

A tsunami of rage swelled inside me, eclipsing all reason, all thought. I attacked, senses in a red haze of fury, not caring whether I lived or died, wanting only vengeance. Wanting only the bastard’s head. All their fucking heads.

My blade found its mark, slicing and stabbing, but they refused to fall. Their laughter rang out to mock me, fueling my impotent rage.

“Why won’t you fucking die!”

“You cannot harm us with mortal weapons, human. We are almost gods, and we cannot be put down by mere steel.”

Amidst the fray, I caught a glimpse of Vaarin, still and pale in death, and by his side, glowing and pulsing, was his trident.

His weapon.

A sea king’s fucking weapon.

I ducked in time to avoid a blast of red power. It hit the cabin behind me with a soft fizz.

They wanted me alive, so that blast must have been some kind of disabling power. I had to get to the trident.

I feigned left, then went right, slicing at a cloaked one's throat to force him out of the way, then ducking to avoid another blast of power before sliding across the deck toward Vaarin's weapon.

"NO!" the Obsidian Pearl cried. "It will kill you!"

My hand closed around the weapon's hilt, and a pulse of power rocked through me, fire lancing down my spine, stealing my breath so that my scream was nothing but a strangled gasp.

But then the pain melted into a pulsing heat. My palm tingled. A greeting...an assurance.

The weapon began to glow softly.

"No...this can't be," the Obsidian Pearl said in unison. "A mortal cannot wield a relic of power."

I stood slowly on steady feet and turned to face the closest one "It looks like someone got their information wrong."

The trident glowed brighter, and a tingling sensation traveled up my arm and into my chest, settling at my solar plexus. I gasped as a connection took hold and power flooded my limbs.

It was as if the weapon was both feeding me and feeding off me.

The air crackled and thunder rolled in the distance, and when I spoke, my voice held

an unearthly resonance.

“Time for you to die.”

The thud of the hilt on deck emitted a shockwave that sent all the figures flying back several feet, allowing me the luxury of taking them out one by one. This time when I attacked, each blow drew eerie screams. The cloaked figures disintegrated with every stab and cutting swipe of the weapon until only one was left.

The one who'd taken my ship.

He cowered on his knees now, crimson pupils pinpricks in the depths of his black eyes as he stared up at me.

“What...what are you?” he asked.

“Your death.”

I stabbed him in the throat, exhaling as he disintegrated to nothing.

The trident dimmed, and the light went out. I sagged on my feet, released from whatever connection it had forged with me.

Silence surrounded me. Deep and final.

I forced myself across the deck and fell to my knees beside Vaarin's still form. Laying the trident beside him, I pulled his head into my lap, my chest aching with the weight of loss. His face was beautiful in repose. Almost as if he was merely sleeping. “I'm sorry...Vaarin...I'm so fucking sorry.” My vision blurred as I pressed my palm to his cheek...still warm.

A soft glow fell across his pale cheek.

The trident...it was glowing.

Wait...I pressed my fingers to where I would expect to find a pulse in his throat. Nothing. I checked for breath. Nothing.

The trident pulsed insistently.

Bryony's voice filled my mind.

Did you know their hearts are on the opposite side to us? And they have two sets of lungs.

So maybe sea fae didn't have pulse points where humans did, and maybe...maybe they didn't need to breathe the same way that we did?

I scooted down to press my ear to his chest and held my breath, listening. Long seconds passed, then I heard his heart beat once.

Several seconds more, then another beat.

He was alive!

Oh praise Thalor.

I needed to get him into the water. I tried to lift him, but he was too heavy. I could drag him, but getting him over the side of the boat would be impossible.

How could I get him into the sea?

A voice filtered through my rapidly thickening haze of panic.

Take the sea with you...

The sea fae who'd saved me from drowning had said those words...She'd given me something...energy...and then...the sea had fueled me and the trident...

It was all connected.

Connected.

That's what I needed to do—connect to him, and I suddenly understood how.

I grabbed the trident, biting back a cry as fire pulsed down my spine. Once the pain ebbed and I felt its energy low in my chest, I turned my attention to Vaarin, gaze dropping to his mouth.

Take the sea with you... Yes, I had it with me and now...now I could bring it to him.

I pressed my lips to his and closed my eyes. A second passed where nothing happened, and I might have lost hope, if not for the growing swirl of energy in my chest. But I held firm, heat gathering behind my eyes because I needed this to work, I needed my conclusion to be right.

Another second passed, and doubt attempted to seat itself in my mind, but wait...something was happening—power unfurling slowly, my hand tingling, energy sweeping up my arm in waves.

I gasped as the vibrant energy rushed up my throat and into my mouth, spilling into Vaarin.

My eyes popped open, and his skin began to glow. His arms wrapped around me, crushing me to him as he siphoned from me, through me, every iota of power loaned to me by the ocean. Power that belonged to him, and I surrendered it all, allowing it to spill from me into him until darkness gathered around me, thickening into a forever night.

Chapter Twenty-One

THALIA

I woke to Vaarin's rumbling voice, and memory rushed in to crowd my mind and tense my limbs.

"You're safe," he said softly. "It's all right."

I blinked up at his handsome face, no longer pale. No longer dying. There was color in his cheeks now, and his sapphire eyes burned with fire. "You saved my life, but I am at a loss to understand how."

"You're not the only one." I was on a bed, propped on real pillows. Vaarin sat at my hip, his keen gaze assessing me. "Where are we?"

"On a boat home."

"You swam me out to the boat?"

"No, we took a second boat. I'll have both returned to the Yarissa eventually."

I plucked at the oversized shirt that covered me. "You undressed me?"

He nodded curtly. "You were soaked, and I didn't want you to catch a chill. Don't worry; I was quick. I did not linger on the task."

I wasn't shy about my body by any means, but I found my cheeks heating regardless.

He studied me with sharp intensity. "What happened, Thalia? What happened on the Yarissa?"

"I'm...I'm not entirely sure." I filled him in on my almost drowning and the woman who'd saved me, then on the fight with the Obsidian Pearl and how I'd been able to wield his trident. "She told me to take the sea with me, and so I brought it to you."

A slight frown marred his forehead. "A mortal cannot wield a relic without being burned to ash. The fact that you did...it means you are no mere mortal."

"You're wrong. I'm human and?—"

"Maybe, but you also belong to the sea. It is in your blood. There is no other explanation." His eyes narrowed. "There is sea fae in your bloodline. An ancestor maybe?" He chewed on his cheeks. "It is the only explanation."

But his words spawned a different understanding inside me. Because I wasn't who he thought I was. I was an orphan found at sea and adopted by a human king. Was my mother a sea fae, then? Coupling between female sea fae and human males always resulted in half fae offspring unable to live beneath the waves, while the offspring of sea fae males and human women produced pure sea fae. Had my mother abandoned me because she couldn't raise me beneath the waves?

It was time to tell him the truth.

"Vaarin, I?—"

He cupped my face and spoke in a rush of words. "I want you to be mine."

Heat rushed up my chest to hug my neck. “What?”

“Marry me, Thalia. Be my queen.”

Was I hearing him correctly? The penetrating look in his eyes told me that I was. “I...but...”

“I know what I said about not being able to love you, but I was wrong. I realized it on the Yarrisa when I thought I’d never see you again. I finally understood what I’ve been feeling all this time. The heat and turmoil, the longing to touch you...” He stroked his thumb back and forth against my cheek. “To be close to you, to hear your voice...” He let out a tremulous exhale. “My bloodline is cursed, Thalia. We were doomed a long time ago to never find our heart’s desire. But I’ve always denied the curse’s validity, all this time. Hoping...praying...but I felt nothing. Nothing until you.” He dropped his forehead to mine. “I love you, Thalia.”

His words were like a key in a lock opening the door of acceptance with a click, and I knew him to be right. Had felt it from the first time he’d held me in his arms.

The sense of belonging.

The sense of coming home.

“Thalia, will you have me?” The vulnerability in his tone grasped at my heart, and the part of me that wanted to tell him the truth was overruled by my own desperate yearning.

I wanted him. I needed him. Even if it would only be for this one night. “Yes.” I tipped my chin up and captured his mouth, tasting the sea on his lips. He let out a ragged groan and sank into me, fingers threading into my hair and forming a fist to hold me firm. My pulse spiked, and I gasped into his mouth.

He drew back a fraction, lips ghosting mine as he spoke. “I won’t hurt you, Thalia. Surrender to me, and I can make you feel so good.”

I’d taken the helm all my life, been the person in control, and why? Because there’d been no one I could trust to relinquish that control to, but now, here with Vaarin, I knew I could finally let go. That I could be vulnerable. This male who could persuade a storm to give us safe passage, this king who could call a vortex from thin air and who had been willing to give his life to save mine would never hurt me.

I relaxed in his grip and surrendered.

VAARIN

I’ve known my fair share of females. A sea fae’s body is not much different from a human female in the places that arouse. But I’ve never wanted to please a woman as much as I want to please Thalia.

I peel away the fabric guarding her silken skin, noting the flush that stains it, and how her nipples peak beneath my gaze.

I’m painfully hard almost immediately. “Lie back.”

She obeys, and I touch her, feather light at first, accustoming myself to the sensation of her soft skin beneath my calloused fingertips, then firmer as I explore the dips and planes of her body. She heats for me, her breath coming faster when I skate close to her pubic bone, then stopping as I trail over her sex.

“Vaarin...”

“Hush now.” I lie beside her so that I can watch her face as I slide a finger along the seam of her cunny. She lifts her hips and I stop, arching a brow in warning.

She glares at me but obliges by going still.

I touch her again, and she bites her lip, holding still as I trace her wetness to its core. She is silk around my fingers, tight and hot, and tides, her moans leave me aching to replace my fingers with my cock.

“Open your legs wider, Thalia. Open for me.” I can hardly breathe. Barely think past the ache in my soul and the throb in my groin.

She obliges, and I go deeper, curling my fingers inside her. She sucks in a sharp breath. “Vaarin. Yes...Oh please, don’t stop.”

She grabs at my arm, fingernails digging in as she lifts her hips to meet the thrust of my fingers. She swells around me, gripping me tightly, so fucking tight. Tides, how will I fit? I push a third finger into her, and her body shudders. She cries out, body milking me as hot wetness washes over my hand.

Her scent fills the room, fills my lungs. I bring my fingers to my mouth and suck them clean, and the sweet taste of her scrambles my thoughts.

I need her.

I need her now.

THALIA

Blood pounded in my head as the knots of needing unraveled in my chest. My cunny throbbed with the aftershocks of release, and yet there was a sweet ache that made me yearn for more.

Vaarin brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked them clean, his gaze locked with

mine. His pupils dilated, and a primal growl vibrated his chest. He cupped my throat, hauling me up to claim my lips in a crushing kiss that was a clash of teeth and the rasp of tongue.

I was drowning in him, defenseless against the assault of his mouth as it tore from my lips to settle on my throat before moving to my breasts. He cupped me, laving my nipple until it ached, then pinched it. I let out a cry as a flush of heat shot to the juncture of my thighs, tipping me over the edge once more. My hips jerked, and I grabbed hold of his shoulders.

“Vaarin?”

He kissed me again, fingers threading through my hair, fisting and holding me captive as he shifted to lie between my thighs.

I looked down between us, down the smooth expanse of his muscled torso to the V that pointed to his cock, and my breath stalled.

He was thick and long, the head wide and ridged. My cunny throbbed, eager to take him even as panic clawed at my chest because how would he fit?

“Do you trust me?” Vaarin said.

I licked my lips and lifted my gaze to his. “Yes.”

“Then relax.” He slid his fingers between my folds and found the nub of nerves that always set the pace of my desire. “Yes...that’s right, Thalia, look at me.”

I groaned, rolling my hips against his fingers, gaze locked with his, heart thump thumping as the desperate need for him to fill me grew.

“Please...Vaarin, I need you.”

He pressed the head of his cock to my entrance, his fingers still working me. The sensation of his ridges as he inched into me was a minor explosion in my head. I forgot to breathe for a moment, and when I did, each breath was a pant. My hips jerked up to meet him, to accommodate him.

More, I wanted more. I needed it. All of him. “Yes, oh tides, yes.”

He rocked against me, inching deeper and deeper. The burn of the stretch, the delicious invasion was tempered by the ridges that woke sensations that I didn’t know existed. Ribbons of inexplicable longing formed in my chest, twisting and reaching for him.

He pressed his lips to mine as he withdrew, leaving me momentarily empty, only to fill me with a thrust that sent a cold fire spreading out from my cunny to my thighs. He did it again, and again, each thrust faster, deeper, timed in a way that sent heat rushing up my body, tightening it, preparing it for the ultimate pleasure.

My chest ached with a spiraling heat I’d never experienced before.

“Fuck, Thalia.” Vaarin’s eyes swam with flecks of silver that seemed to glow, and a soft blue glow bathed his features as the trident pendant around his neck began to glow.

I dug my nails into his arms, thrusting up to meet him, wanting to be closer, to take him deeper. To keep him.

Oh Luna, I wanted to keep him.

Pleasure claimed my body in a flood of sensations, tipping me over the edge and

whiting out my vision, and in that moment, I knew that one night would never be enough.

Chapter Twenty-Two

VAARIN

Thalia sleeps deeply, soft lips parted, dark hair spread on the pillows like inky rivers. I lie with her for a while, lightly stroking her shoulder. Her skin is so soft and silken, and I harden at the memory of it beneath me, of the feel of her grip around my cock.

I want her again, but she needs rest. I must curb my ravenous appetite. I press a kiss to her temple and climb out of bed. It will be dawn soon, and it is rare that I have the chance to watch the sun rise.

I pull on my pants and shirt and head up to the deck barefoot.

The icy air tinged with salt is food for my soul. I breathe it in and tip my face up to drink in the moisture in the air.

There was a time in my youth when I would journey to the surface simply to watch the dawn, but that joy faded over time. I became jaded. The pressures of court, of protecting my kingdom, of alliances and treaties—and then Charles's betrayal.

The memory still stings to this day.

He was the brother I never had. My confidant, my closest friend. I trusted him with my life, would have given him anything he desired. If only he had come to me and confessed his feelings for Evya. It wasn't as if he hadn't known how cold our union was. I'd confided in him, of course. But he'd lied and deceived, and his only excuse

once caught in his subterfuge had been that I hadn't loved her anyway.

True. But she'd been my wife. I did not love her in the way she required, but I cared for her. There was fondness between us.

Would I have ordered his death if the affair had remained between the three of us? Would my ire have been less if no one else had known? Being with Thalia has unlocked doubts where there was only steely conviction. Being in love is changing me, and for the first time in forever, I'm afraid. Not of being in love but of losing this feeling.

Far on the horizon, the sky is gray. The sun will rise soon enough, and in a few hours, we will see land.

Dylon will undoubtedly be relieved to be excused from the betrothal, and the people will rejoice to know that their king has found his heart's desire in the very same woman that will return fertility to their lands, for it is surely a sign that the curse is not infallible. That it is weakening.

There is hope for us all.

The sky is tinged red as the sun awakens, and the ocean, gray and cold, begins to come to life. The dappling of tiny islands that make up the Lone Isles come into view. The mass is so small that I doubt it is on any map, and the land is nothing but sand. Uninhabitable, but wait...What is that? There is someone on the beach.

Chapter Twenty-Three

THALIA

“Thalia, wake up.”

I groaned and cracked open one eye. “Is it morning already?”

Vaarin grinned down at me. “It is, and I have a surprise for you.”

I was wide awake now because who didn’t like surprises? “What is it?”

“If I tell you then it wouldn’t be a surprise now, would it?”

The playful twinkle in his eyes heightened my excitement. I slipped out of bed and began to dress.

He groaned softly. “I almost wish I didn’t have a surprise for you now.”

I shot him a coquettish look over my naked shoulder. “Can the surprise wait?” He looked torn as I padded naked toward him, shirt clutched in my hand. I tipped my face up to his. “Well?”

He sank his fingers into my hair and made a fist, drawing me forward roughly against his taut frame so that I could feel his thick arousal against my belly.

“You’re fortunate that I have excellent control over my desires, because the sounds

you'll make when I have my way with you will certainly traumatize your surprise."

It took a moment for the implications of his words to register. "Wait...how can a surprise be traumatized unless..." I stepped back. "Vaarin?"

His smile was back. "Get dressed and join me on deck."

He dropped a kiss on my head and left the cabin.

I hurriedly pulled on my clothes, then scraped my hair up into a knot before following him.

Voices drifted down the steps as I ascended to the deck. Vaarin and another. Male...Familiar.

Oh god...I rushed up the last few steps and onto the deck, coming to a halt to face my surprise.

He was pale and thin, his lips chapped, his hair matted, but it was him.

Tomas was alive.

He bolted out of his seat as I rushed toward him, opening his arms for a hug.

I punched him in the face. "You cowardly bastard!"

He clutched his jaw, his eyes dull and flat. "I know. I know what I did, and I'm sorry, but I'm glad that you're alive. When the king told me that the princess was on board, I thought Bryony was here. You never use the title but..." His frown deepened. "Where is the crown princess?"

“What?” Vaarin said. “What are you talking about?” He looked from Tomas to me, and my heart sank because this was something I meant to tell him. Something I should have told him last night. “Thalia? Why is he asking you where the crown princess is?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I meant to tell you last night, but...I’m not the princess that your son is betrothed to. I’m the king’s adopted daughter and the crown princess’s bodyguard.”

He stared at me for several beats before speaking. “Adopted daughter? Not of Faircaster bloodline?”

His expression, which had been so warm and filled with excitement a moment ago, was cold and stiff now. I should have told him the truth last night. Instead, I’d chosen to be selfish and now...Now I had to face the consequences.

“Bryony, my sister...she was on the rowboat that your people found. The remains...the remains of...” I blinked back tears. “When you told me about it, I thought all was lost for my people, but you’d mistaken me for her, so I...” I shook my head. “I...I can’t bring your people fertility.”

A series of emotions flitted across his face, each more devastating than the last before it closed off completely. “You were planning on marrying my son in your sister’s stead to claim Merida Isle?”

There was no point in denying it. “I was. My people are dying and?—”

“You planned on betraying me?”

My eyes heated. “I did, but then I started to feel things for you, and last night I?—”

“Stop talking.” His tone was as cold as ice as he slowly turned his head to look out to sea. “You lied to me. You planned on deceiving me. There is no place for you in my world.” He strode to the edge of the deck. “Take the ship and go.”

“Wait! Please.” I choked back a sob. “Vaarin, please don’t punish my people for my decision. They’re dying. Starving. You have the means to save them.”

His shoulders slumped. “King Bronan will be informed of the death of his daughter, and his people will be invited to live on Merida Isle on one proviso.”

“Anything?”

“You will never show your face in these waters again.”

His words were a gut punch that knocked the breath from my lungs. “You’re...you’re exiling me?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that? After everything we’ve been through, everything we’ve shared.” I took a step toward him, and he held up his hand to halt me.

“What we shared was a lie.”

“I lied about my title but not who I am. The person you spent the last three days and nights with is me, Thalia. I’m the person you said you loved.”

His lip curled in disgust. “I could never love someone who would betray me.”

“I was going to tell you.”

He spun to face me, sapphire eyes burning with rage and betrayal. “When? After the wedding? After you had the alliance sealed?”

“Last night, and then...this morning but?—”

“Excuses, Thalia.” His lip curled. “I’m done with them.” He leapt over the edge of the boat and into the sea.

Gone.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm

Chapter Twenty-Four

VAARIN

The ocean churns and writhes beneath a melancholy sky preparing for another storm when the sand is still wet from the last. Cool grains sink beneath my bare feet and push up between my toes, grounding me.

Thalia's people will begin arriving in a week to take their place on this isle. A gift from me. And maybe, one day, there will be another princess to match to a royal sea heir. Maybe one day my people will be saved also.

There is a cold place inside me, nestled beside my fractured heart, one that I know I will never fill. The only person that can heal it is gone.

A month since I have seen her.

A month since I exiled her.

It hurts every day, and yet I stand firm in my decision.

I cannot flounder. I will not submit to the aching desire to retract my sentence.

A shadow moves on the outcrop of rocks that overlook the ocean up ahead. A figure...female.

Long crimson hair flows down her back as she looks out to sea. Who is she? Not a

subject I recognize.

An interloper? I lengthen my stride, eating away at the distance between us to climb the rock face. Wind whips at my hair, pulling it out of its braid so tendrils slap at my cheeks. “Excuse me?” My voice is stolen by a gust. “Hello!” My greeting is loud in the sudden silence as the wind decides it’s had enough of blowing for now. “Excuse me?” Irritation taints my tone because how dare she ignore me, on my land?

“I was wondering when you’d show up,” she says coolly before turning her head to look me directly in the eye.

My heart stutters at the ancient wisdom in the depths of her gaze. “Who are you?”

“A friend...for now,” she says. “I felt the need to visit and give you some advice.”

My instinct to scoff at her words is tempered by the aura of power that she exudes, one which calls to my own, telling me that I should listen. “Go on.”

“Put aside your pride and claim what is yours.” She arches a brow. “You know of what and whom I speak.”

“Thalia...”

“I did not save her life and awaken her power for you to exile her. Are you so arrogant as to punish the woman who saved your life?”

My mouth is dry. “She lied to me. She?—”

“You sound like a petulant child. Yes, she lied, and would you have done differently in her position? Would you not do whatever it takes to save your people?”

I'm lost for words because yes, the answer will always be yes.

“Your pride was hurt, and you made a choice. The wrong choice. Because, dear King Vaarin, the legends that you readily spurned are true. Well, mostly. The four sea kings of old did trap horrors in the abyss, and to do so, they employed the aid of ancient sea mages called the Neath. But the seal, the powerful wards, required an equally powerful sacrifice. Each king sacrificed something they prized. The Eastern Sea King was an artist, and so he relinquished his ability to see the colors he so loved. The Western Sea monarch had the most beautiful face, and so he sacrificed his good looks. The southern king had the voice of an angel and loved to sing, so he sacrificed his voice, and the Northern Sea monarch, your ancestor, loved only one thing more than life itself. His wife. His soul mate. And so he sacrificed his ability to love her.

“But there was a consequence to this sacrifice that no one foresaw. The fact that it would feed down for generations, tainting the royal bloodline. To be heir to the crown is to be cursed.

“The eastern kings are blind to color, the western kings are beastly in appearance, and the southern are mute. And you, King Vaarin, could not love. Not because you lacked the ability but because the key to your heart, your soul mate, was born on land, again and again. Out of your reach.”

“Are you saying...You're saying that Thalia is my soul mate?”

“Yes. And that fact that she has found you is a portent we must heed.”

“What do you mean?”

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. “It is not for you to concern yourself with. What you must focus on is the fertility of your heart. My advice is that you reconsider your choice.” She stands and smooths down her flowing skirt. “It looks as if the new

tenants of the island have arrived.”

I follow her gaze out to sea to where a fleet of ships is visible on the horizon. Thalia’s people.

When I look back at the woman, she’s gone, leaving me stranded with the unshakable conviction that I’ve ruined everything.

I know what I have to do. But first I must welcome King Bronan and his people.

As I hurry back up the beach, I spot Lyam running down to meet me.

He joins me a moment later and doubles over, hands on knees, panting heavily.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

He looks up at me with bright eyes filled with hope. “Good news. So much good news.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

THALIA

“These are the coordinates, miss,” Harper calls from the crow’s nest.

I hurry out of the cabin to stare out to sea. This was where my father found the rowboat with me inside. Off the coast of Pincher Isle, an uninhabited rock that marked the rim of uncharted seas.

Seas that I was about to chart. The ship that Vaarin left me with had been traded in for a larger one, under contract to bring back new maps to a merchant in the western isles. He provided me with a cartographer and a small crew for my travels, and after a week of sailing, I was at the location my father had told me about.

I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting, some kind of clarity, a revelation perhaps, not this crushing disappointment.

What did you expect, Thalia? For your mother to be treading water and waiting for you? She abandoned you, remember?

Or had she?

I was a child of human and sea fae, unable to live beneath the waves. Maybe she’d seen no other choice. Whatever the reason, I would find out. The past two months I’d gathered tales of sea folk living beyond the Pincher Isles. Of ways to summon them with bloody bait and music. I had both on hand. I was sure I’d be able to enlist their

help in locating my mother.

Vaarin exiling me had been the best thing, because if he'd asked me to stay, then I might never have taken my discovery voyage. Yes. Losing him was for the best.

"You all right, Captain?" Freya, my second, joined me at the pulpit. "Ready to venture forth into uncharted seas?"

I summoned a smile. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"Then give the command."

A frisson of excitement raced up my spine, not just at the possibility of finding my sea folk family but also at exploring the uncharted waters. And after everything I'd lost, why shouldn't I allow myself the joy?

I dropped Freya a nod and turned, ready to call out for Barnaby to hoist the sails when Freya let out a shriek and pointed out to sea. "Whirlpool!"

I followed her gaze to the swirling vortex that had opened in the ocean ahead of us. It swirled with color, glowing softly.

"That's no whirlpool!" Barnaby said.

"No, it isn't." My heart beat hard and fast, unbidden hope flaring in my chest. "That's a vortex."

Could it be...?

A figure shot out of it—male, muscular, and large, dark hair streaming out behind him. And, oh Thalor, my heart felt fit to burst because Vaarin was here.

Had he come to find me?

Had he changed his mind?

Anger licked at my chest, a reminder of how he'd so callously dismissed me, and my joy winked. I hadn't deserved to be treated that way.

He didn't deserve me, and I'd reminded myself of this over and over during the past couple of months. Yes, I'd lied, I'd planned to deceive him, but I'd done it for my people, something I knew he would have done too. If he'd given me a chance to explain, then I would have told him that getting to know him and falling in love with him had changed everything. But he'd discarded me so quickly it had me doubting everything that I'd felt, and now he was here, rising out of the sea like a fucking god, all rippling muscles and taut abdominals, and damn the tides, I still wanted him.

He climbed onto my ship, dripping wet and glorious, but as soon as his feet hit the deck, the water clinging to him evaporated.

"Um...Thalia?" Freya stepped closer. "Is that?—"

"Yes." I'd shared my woes more often than I cared to admit over whiskey or ale. My crew knew my story. They knew that we were being graced by the king of the Northern Sea and as he approached, they made themselves scarce, giving us the illusion of privacy while being close enough to eavesdrop.

I crossed my arms and fixed a glare on my face, no difficult task because I was recalling that morning on the boat, the way he'd simply turned his back on me and walked away after I'd shared my body with him, after I'd offered him my heart. My throat pinched. I could do the same to him now—turn and walk away. But no, I was better than that, and...and I wanted to look at him, to drink him in. Even if it was only for a moment.

He came to stand a few feet from me, and the urge to move toward him had me locking my knees.

“Thalia...”

The shield I’d been building back around my heart cracked a little at the sound of my name on his lips.

I gritted my teeth. “What do you want?”

“I want your forgiveness.”

His words knocked the breath from my lungs. “What?”

“I’m sorry, so sorry for the way I treated you. For walking away. For not coming to find you sooner. I...I was a fool. A stubborn fool.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “You should have stayed and listened. You should have given me a chance to explain.”

“I know. I’m here now, but I don’t need any explanations. I understand why you lied. I understand what was at stake, and I...I would have done the same. Truth be told, I was afraid of the feelings you evoked, of how they were not in my control, and your deception was the excuse I needed to justify running.”

For him to stand here and admit he’d been wrong. To ask for forgiveness...Could it mean...I had to be sure.

My eyes burned with the threat of tears. “What are you saying, Vaarin?”

“I’m saying that I exiled you from my waters, but I couldn’t exile you from my heart.

I'm saying that I want another chance. I'm saying that I want you to marry me."

My heart punched my ribs, blood rushing in my ears because I'd fantasized about this very turn of events over and over between bouts of telling myself I hated him. In those fantasies, I always turned my back on him. In those fantasies I hurt him .

But the reality was something wholly different. The reality was flesh and blood and the scent of the sea, the reality was heat rushing through my veins and filling my heart.

The reality was that I loved this man with every fiber of my being, but I had fears of my own now. Fears he would need to assuage. "I won't be hurt again, Vaarin."

"I swear to Thalor I will never hurt you. Please...Thalia."

I would be deceiving myself if I said no. He was my heart, but before I could give myself to him wholly, I needed to find out who I truly was. "I can't go back with you. Not yet, not until I find my mother. I need to know where I came from."

He exhaled sharply, his body going still. "Is that...Is that a yes?"

The surprise in his tone, the vulnerability on his face shattered the last of my reservations. "Yes. Yes, it's a?—"

I let out a squeak as my feet left the ground and I was crushed to his chest. I melted into the embrace, inhaling his scent greedily.

He was here. He'd come for me. This was real. "What took you so long?" It was a light comment, but he tensed against me. "Vaarin?" I pulled back so I could study his face.

His mouth turned down slightly. “You’re right. I should have come sooner, but I didn’t want to admit I was wrong, and then I had a visitor. An ancient sea fae with crimson hair, she said she saved you from drowning. She confirmed what I knew already, that I was a fool for letting you go, and then...she told me that you were my soul mate.” His throat bobbed. “You, Thalia, are the key to my heart.”

I took a shuddering breath because I felt the truth of those words, had felt the longing for him even across the vast expanse of this ocean. But there was more. I could sense it, and so I held my tongue, waiting for him to continue.

“After she left, two things happened at once. Your people arrived, and I was given the news that there were four pregnancies confirmed in my undersea realm.” His gaze flicked over my face as if he was looking for something. “I had a suspicion then that maybe your adopted father was indeed your blood father, but he denied it, which left me with only one conclusion. That unlocking my heart freed my people from the curse of their infertility. My adviser confirmed it. The archives show that our fertility problems began after my ancestor sealed the abyss...after he lost his ability to love. It’s clear now that the fertility of my people is linked to the fertility of their monarch’s heart. Of my heart.” He lightly caressed my cheek. “By loving me, you’ve saved not only me but my people.”

I didn’t need more words. No more convincing. In truth, he’d had me as soon as he stepped on board my ship, and now...Now I wanted to lose myself in him.

I took his hand and tipped my face up to his. “How about we finish this conversation in my quarters?”

THALIA

The sea glittered with starlight, waves rippling gently as we cut a path through uncharted waters beyond Pincher Isle. The cages containing bloody bait had been dropped an hour ago, and Freya sat at the stern, violin to her chin, playing a lilting melody to attract the natives of this stretch of ocean.

I was hopeful that we'd make contact soon, but in the meantime, I was content to simply be.

I leaned back against Vaarin, and he wrapped his arms around my waist. We'd spent too long in my quarters, not talking. My body was satiated yet ever hungry for his. This feeling, this sense of belonging was something novel, and it was both exhilarating and frightening because what if it went away? What if he took it away again?

"Thalia?" Vaarin rested his chin on my head. "What is it? What vexes you?"

"Nothing."

His chest vibrated against my back. "You can't lie to me now. Our connection is forged. I can feel your disquiet. Tell me."

"I don't want to lose this. Us. I...I'm scared."

He held me tighter. "You will never lose me. I swear to you, Thalia. Only death will part us now."

I turned swiftly in his arms and pressed my fingers to his lips. “Don’t. Don’t say that.”

He gently grasped my wrist. “I mean it, Thalia. I will never willingly leave your side.”

The tightness in my chest eased because I believed, of course I did. Then why did I feel as if I didn’t deserve this?

He cupped my face. “I know about your past. I learned how you were treated from speaking to some of the royal staff. You did not deserve to be ostracized, and yet your adopted mother insisted on it. I met her also.” He shuddered. “I was tempted to drown her.”

I bit back a surprised laugh. “She wasn’t all bad.”

“Really?” He arched a brow.

“Fine, she was a witch, but Bryony...” I exhaled past the weight that settled on my heart. “Bryony made up for all of it.”

He kissed my forehead. “I’m so sorry, Thalia. I cannot bring back your sister, but I can promise you that I will help you heal. I will remind you every day that you are worthy. That you are my chosen queen. And when we find your birth family, then I will accept them also. They will become my kin.”

But what if my birth family didn’t want me as their kin? No. I wouldn’t allow myself these negative thoughts.

I wrapped my arms around Vaarin and pressed my cheek to his chest. “Thank you.”

He kissed the top of my head. "I'm so grateful for this second chance with you."

I drew back and tipped my face up to his. "What would you have done if I said no?"

He sighed, looking weary. "Well, in that case, I would have had no recourse but to stalk you until you changed your mind."

"Really? Stalked me across the oceans?"

"I'd have no choice. You are my soul mate, after all. You carry a piece of me always."

"You and your pretty words falling from your pretty lips."

He arched a brow. "You think my lips are pretty?"

My gaze dropped to his mouth and lingered there. "Undeniably. And delicious."

"Oh? I feel the same about your lips. I want to taste them right now."

I offered him my mouth.

But he pressed his finger to it and slowly shook his head. "Not those lips."

My face heated. "Oh..." Heat bloomed low in my belly, and his eyes darkened.

He leaned in so that his breath kissed my cheek. "I find I'm suddenly ravenous."

"Movement starboard!" Barnaby cried. "Three incoming sea folk."

My heart lurched. It was happening; the bait had worked. We were about to make

contact. “Vaarin, I’m scared.”

He took my hand in his. “I know, but you are not alone on this journey. I am with you. Together we will weather any storm.”

I squeezed his hand, ready to embark on this new adventure with him. “Together.”

Continue your Lunaterra adventure and pick up *The Promise Born* by Jessica Cage.

The Born Promise

By Jessica Cage

Chapter 1

There was nothing more annoying than the thunderous sounds of dragon wings drowning out the sweet tune of the morning birds. Each day started the same. I would stand beneath the sun, a cup of gem leaf tea in hand, and clear my mind. Most mornings, I woke up with rampant thoughts and that was the only way to get myself ready for another day running my shop.

Simple Delights. That was the name that hung over the door to my very own shop. Opening the place had been a dream of mine since I was a small girl. Of course, I had to fight my mother on the idea. But she wasn't around to stop me anymore. So, I could do whatever I wanted to do. The first chance I got, I ran to a new town and started working on my dreams.

I was the outsider in a town that had accepted me when I stumbled into their territory. The one who'd shown up and swooned the locals with her delicacies. I fed them and kept to myself. I'd created a refuge for myself, a quiet corner where I could escape the noise and worries of the world. That meant keeping out of business that wasn't my own. And the large convoy of dragons flying ahead was just that. None of my business.

Unfortunately, I sometimes fell victim to boredom. The sight of them flying ahead ignited a burning curiosity within me, a feeling both thrilling and unsettling.

I squinted my eyes against the rays of sunlight to see the signs of opulence hanging from the dragon and the device fastened to it, signifying a rider. The only people who rode dragons anymore were the royals. The rest of us would shift and use our own wings to carry us across the land. Not the royals. They had to keep themselves presentable and shifting often got ugly. How could a queen be dignified when her appearance was a mess?

Within minutes of hearing their approaching sound of dragon cries, the town's people ran out of their homes. In the large grassy center is where the dragons would land, the Royal's special spot. Overgrown and full of weeds because they never came. I understood the excitement of the others. They wanted to see what could bring the royals our way.

The nagging curiosity propelled me; I wrapped a dark scarf around my head and joined the throng of people, their hushed whispers hinting at the surprise visitors. All around, I heard the frustrated sighs and muttered complaints about unpaid taxes and fines. That was the only reason the royals ever made an appearance. As long as taxes were paid, they didn't care about what we did. And even then, they would send the guards to handle it, not fly in themselves. It was the way I liked it. It was why I chose the small town of Clayhorn as my new home. I didn't want too many eyes on me or my work.

"Kiala, even you're out to catch sight of the visitors." An aged voice called out to me. I turned to see the familiar face of Mesi, the first woman who ever tried my food and my most loyal customer.

"I figured it might be a big deal. They rarely come here." I answered the gray-haired old lady, who nodded and shuffled forward to join her friends.

From what I knew of the trio, they had been friends since they were kids. When they were old enough, they traveled the world together, each choosing friendship over love. Neither had ever married or had children. When their wings grew tired, they

chose Clayhorn as their home. I often imagined that if one passed, the others would soon follow. They were one soul in three vessels.

I listened to their chatter and laughter as I followed them into the growing crowd.

“I think that was the prince’s dragon.” Mesi looked at her friends and hooked her arms through theirs.

“Maybe he’s here to find love.” Margo, the redhead one who always wore too much perfume, blushed. “Wouldn’t that be sweet? He’s at that age, you know. “

“Or maybe he’s here to collect taxes.” Soki, the dark-haired one, scoffed. “A royal coming here to find love is a ridiculous thought. Who would he find here that would ever be accepted by the royals? That would be a cruel joke to play.”

“How could you say that?” Mesi sucked her teeth and glanced back at me. “There are plenty of quality eligible girls here. I’m sure one of them could catch his eye.”

“Always the optimist with your head in the clouds.” Soki fussed, and they all cackled.

“Well, you know, she could be right.” Margo spoke again. “I hear the queen has been pressuring him to find a bride. Avin, who works in the castles, told me they are preparing to pass the torch. If they do, he would need to at least have a love interest. I mean, they’re still old-fashioned like that. They think that if he doesn’t have one, it shows weakness.”

“A shame. He is next in line now.” Mesi’s voice was suddenly heavy with sorrow. “His brother was a fine prince. He would have made an excellent king as well.”

“This Asante is fine as well, but from what I hear, his head is in the clouds. I don’t think finding a wife is something that can fix that.” Soki added. “But it is time. The king and queen have done a fine job ruling. They deserve to step down.”

“A good woman can work miracles!” Mesi clapped. “But can she make a prince a king?”

“Are you applying for the position?” Soki poked her side. “Do you think you can make him a king?”

“If the prince would have me!” Mesi wiggled her hips. “It doesn’t really matter what I think. Besides, with my bad knees and wrinkled neck, he won’t be asking my opinion!”

The trio cackled as they shuffled forward, and Mesi glanced back at me once again. I waved shyly and fell back, putting more space between her and I. There was something about the way she looked at me that made my stomach cramp. That fear of being found. It was paranoia, nothing more.

We made it to the center of town in time to see the dragons all poised to let their riders down.

In Saldann, there were two types of dragons. Those who could shapeshift and change their forms into a bipedal state. And those who were always dragons, locked in a form that made it impossible for them to integrate with other populations. We all descended from them, but something changed the bloodlines, creating three branches. The stagnant, the fire, and my bloodline, the ice.

Stagnants could not shift and had no power of their own. Fire were shifters who produced fire, and Ice were the opposite. Stagnant dragons had a special gift though, they could replicate the power of the rider. So, if an ice shifter rode a Stagnant, they could then breathe the same ice as the rider. The same for the fire.

Royals rode the stagnant and never felt bad about it. It never sat right with me. These were our cousins, our family, and we treated them like they were nothing more than mules. I wondered how they felt. Gone were the days when shifters and stagnant

could still communicate with one another. Some say we lost the ability to. I always thought they just stopped talking to us. Maybe they felt betrayed, a valid emotion if it were true.

I pulled the scarf tighter around my head as, one by one, the members of the royal visitors appeared. A murmur spread across the crowd as we all waited to get a view of the most important person. Sure, guards and aides were nice to see, but aside from their attire, they were no different from the rest of the regular people who gathered to see them.

I admired their appearance. They were all dressed in black leathers adorned with red and gold trimming. Simple and clean looks that echoed the taste of the queen. It was something I'd admired about her. She didn't subscribe to the gaudy show of wealth often displayed by those in power.

Then it happened. The gasps erupted as he appeared. He stepped down from the shaded seat atop the dragon, his cape swaying around him in the wind as he moved. He was tall, with dark brown skin, broad shoulders, and full lips. Long braids hung down around his face, perfectly framing his strong jawline and wide nose.

The prince of Starwell.

Prince Asante was everything I had heard. Though I'd never encountered him, the villagers' accounts of the man—his height, his build, his distinctive walk—were confirmed by my own observation. With each step, he straightened more, pushing his shoulders back and lifting his chin with pride. The corners of his lips lifted in a soft smile. And then his eyes scanned the crowd, quickly assessing the faces of the gathered.

While others swooned, I narrowed my gaze. Asante was handsome, but I could sense the air of arrogance under that soft smile. He was still from a royal bloodline, which meant he was inherently full of himself.

I waited for one of his aides to make an announcement. Tell us why they had come, but the prince skipped over the typical formalities. Instead, flanked by guards and aides, he walked around the crowd and addressed only the elders while simply glancing at the women. He gave each woman an appraising look before moving on to the next.

The old women were right. He was there to find a mate. And the available women were actively posing themselves to be perceived by him. Even a woman I knew was in a relationship with the local blacksmith. She had no shame as she pushed her breasts up and pursed her lips. Apparently, any man could lose the love of his life if the prince saw it fit.

Disgusted with the display, I turned to leave. I had no intention of being perceived or of being chosen by the prince. Marriage was not an option in my mind, and being anywhere near the royal family was the absolute last thing I wanted.

When I moved to flee, one of the cackling trio tumbled. Actually, I could have sworn she did it on purpose. Mesi looked me right in the eye and then her little body jerked toward me. As I tried to catch her, she flailed her arms like a madwoman and knocked me over. I turned to catch myself, but after clutching for anything to disrupt the fall, I found myself face down on the ground with everyone staring at me. So much for not being seen.

I took several deep breaths to calm myself in the embarrassing moment before trying to get up.

Kneeling, I saw a gloved hand offered to help me up. Without questioning who it belonged to, I accepted the assistance. What I hadn't realized was that the long scarf I'd used to hide my face had shifted. The end of it snagged beneath my foot and as I stood, it ripped away. I panicked and tried to grab it, but failed. Once again, the hand was there, picking up the discarded scarf to give to me.

“Here you go.” The rich voice spoke as he returned my scarf.

“Thanks-,” I paused as I looked up to see the face of the man I’d hoped to avoid.

“Are you alright?” he peered at me with an expression dripping with concern.

“Yes, thank you.” I snatched my hand away from him as soon as I was on my feet, did a short curtsy and turned to leave.

I hadn’t made it far before I heard him say the words that made my insides boil.

“That one will do.” The prince’s low voice announced.

I knew those misogynist words described not a thing that could be purchased, but a woman who had every right to deny whatever it was he intended with that statement. I could have continued to walk and ignore it, but that wouldn’t be like me if I did. Instead, I turned around to find the prince.

He spoke to a short aide who stood next to him. The man was older, with gray whiskers sprouting from his face. He had two golden talons pinned at his chest. The markers of someone the royals deemed important.

While the prince didn’t look at me as he made his remarks, he pointed at me. “She looks good enough to get my mother off my back.”

The aide, eyes sharp and alert, noticed me before the prince.

“Sir,” the aide said, his nose wrinkling in disgust as he eyed the dirt now covering my clothing after my fall.

“My mother wants me to marry. I will.” The prince spoke, seemingly oblivious that I was staring right at him. “But I will choose who I spend my life with. She won’t force

me into being with someone I don't want."

"But she is... beneath you." The aide said, making full eye contact with me.

"She will serve her purpose. That's all that matters." The prince answered, but there was a softness to his tone that betrayed his dismissive words. Were there other motives behind his choice?

"Excuse me?" I couldn't help myself. I wasn't going to just stand there and let the man talk about me like an inanimate object.

"Did you need something?" the aide looked at me.

"I need to understand why you're talking about me like I'm not close enough to hear you." I rolled my eyes.

"Is that a problem?" again the aide spoke, but Prince Asante held his hand up, quieting the little man.

"How would you like it if I discussed your potential future without your input?" I scoffed. "I have no interest in whatever it is you think is going to happen here. Choose another woman for the job."

"How could you say you have no interest in the prince?" The little man spoke, and Prince Asante said nothing. "Do you know who you are?"

"Yes, I do. I'm a woman who makes my own choices. And right now, I'm choosing to end this conversation." I looked the prince in the eye. "Find another girl to hang on your arm. Look around, there are plenty who want the chance."

I turned, stomping off, dirt covered and proud of my response. The prince of the fire dragons could kiss my ass!

To continue reading...