



The Sea-Ogre's Eager Bride (Aspect and Anchor)

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Description: Valessa is in danger. Her town has been captured by Aventinian raiders, the women taken, and now she's on a ship destined for nowhere good. But when a terrifying, four-armed sea-ogre pirate boards the ships and demands compensation, Valessa's luck changes.

The sea-ogre demands a bride. It's the perfect opportunity for her to escape.

Valessa volunteers. She tells everyone she's very experienced with sea-ogres and knows just how to please them. She's very descriptive about it, too.

Thing is...Valessa's a liar.

She's never met a sea-ogre in her life. But it can't be that hard to keep one man-slash-monster happy, can it?

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VALESSA

It's funny how the Lords of Fate work. One day, I'm in a slave pen, chained up with seven others and waiting to be sold the next morning. The next day, the woman that was going to sell me is chained up next to me on our captor's ship.

And she is loud .

"This is an outrage!" Lady Dywan screeches as the slave chained to her left pukes on her gown. "I demand that I be treated as a lady!" She rattles her chains, determined to get to her feet, but one look at the slavemaster and Lady Dywan sits back down, a pout on her spoiled face. "I am a noblewoman . My husband is the Lord Ruler of Parness."

One of the soldiers on the ship just laughs. "You were a noblewoman," he says. "But Parness has fallen to Aventine, praise be to the Butcher God." He makes a gesture on his chest, his fists closing over his heart as if he holds Aron the Battle God's axe. "And now you're just a slave. And since you're an ugly slave past her prime, you're chained up with that lot."

He gestures at our group, and Lady Dywan sputters in outrage. He's not wrong, though. Lady Dywan is bony and gray-haired. When the Aventine soldiers broke through the walls of Parness and sacked the city, they stole every woman and child that could walk and that might fetch a price in the Sunswallow slave markets. We've fared better than the men—those that were left were put to the sword. The Aventine soldiers looted and burned all of fair Parness, and loaded the newfound slaves onto their heavily laden ships. As they did, they sorted us into two groups—the pretty

slaves and then the rest of us.

I've been through this before, and I know I don't want to be with the pretty slaves. Even now, the men are touching them and flicking up their skirts, enjoying the women's screams of outrage. Nope. In this particular instance, it's far better to be ugly. So I've knotted up my thick curls and fixed a stupid look on my face. I've rubbed dirt on every bit of my exposed skin, and it looks terrible next to the bruises on my arms and legs. I hitch up my ill-fitting Parnessian tunic, which belts right under my very large breasts and makes me look as if I'm carrying even though I'm not. And I'm tall. Tall, dull, and pregnant? I'm not going to be bothered, not when there's prettier girls nearby.

I should probably be more upset that I've been enslaved (again), but there's a spiteful sort of pleasure in being chained up with the haughty Lady Dywan. She ruined my life. I guess it's only fair that I get to watch hers be ruined, too.

Six years ago, my father's farm on the outskirts of Parness was "claimed" by Lord Dywan. He needed my father's funds to support his emptied coffers, and the war with Aventine was right at the city's doorstep. My father refused...so Lord Dywan had my father killed and his only child—me—sold into slavery. Luckily, I was sold to an elderly man who wanted a kitchen wench, and I was happy to bake and cook for him. One of the other slaves—a kind man named Luseth— had purchased his freedom and offered to purchase mine so I could marry him. I wasn't in love with Luseth, but a respectable wife instead of a slave is a much better living. I was hand-fast to Luseth, only for him to be put on the front lines to defend Parness in the ongoing war.

Luseth didn't last long.

Now, here I am, still a slave, but glad, at least, to see Lady Dywan suffering next to me. She and her husband have brought this awful war down on Parness, and now the city is destroyed, all its inhabitants decimated. I don't even know what the war was

about. Some sort of land dispute, but I've heard over and over that Lady Dywan is the one responsible. She wouldn't let her husband call off the war, because she didn't want to lose face. It was Lady Dywan's greed that caused my father's farm to be snatched, and Lady Dywan's arrogance that made the war continue on and on and on.

So am I smug that she's sitting next to me? A little.

It doesn't change the fact that my status is still in danger. I'm still a slave. And I've got to figure out how to save my own hide so I don't end up in the Sunswallow brothels for the rest of my days.

If an opportunity arises, I have to take it, no matter how terrified I am. This is a time to be brave and bold, because I might not get another chance. The last thing I want is to spend the next several years next to Lady Dywan in a whorehouse. So I edge closer to the water as the ship slices through the waves, and I twist my hands in the cuffs. If I can get free close to shore, I'm going to swim for it, I decide.

By the gods, if I get my hands free, even if we're not close to shore, I'm still going to swim for it. I'd rather face the monsters of the sea than the ones on land. At least if they kill me, it'll be quick.

So I sit on the heavily laden, crowded ship and I plot. I keep my ears pricked and I listen for any sort of opportunity. I'm not going to let these raiders decide my fate.

I've had enough of that sort of thing.

"Land!" one of the men cries.

I sit up straighter, my senses pricking with attention. The afternoon sun has been beating down upon us captives for hours on end, making the travel in the boat a miserable experience. Add in salt water, hunger, thirst and the endless weeping of the

others and I've never been more miserable in my life, not even when I was enslaved the first time...and that's saying a lot.

At least when I was first sold, I knew I wouldn't be killed unless I misbehaved. A slave is valuable alive, not dead. But after watching the "pretty" slaves get fed food and water, and our group does not? I'm worried that they won't feed the rest of us until we get to Sunswallow, and whoever lives gets sold. Whoever doesn't probably gets tossed overboard. The situation just keeps getting worse and worse. I lick my dry lips and send a prayer to Vor, the God of the Seas. Help me survive this, I pray quietly. I have no offering to send to the depths at the moment, so I'll have to hope he's in a benevolent mood. I'll sacrifice the biggest fish I can find if you help me find safety. Please, great Vor.

We sail into the shadow of a large cliff, cooling my overheated skin for the first time in hours. I breathe a sigh of relief and hope that's a good sign. The gods are fickle, Vor especially so, but sometimes they help. I can only hope.

"What do you mean, land?" The captain pushes past the soldiers manning the oars of our long, flat boat and strides toward the far end of the deck. "Of course there's land. We're hugging the shore because we're too heavy."

"No, I mean land on all sides." The man gestures ahead, holding out his spyglass for the captain. "Look."

I crane my neck, trying to look, too. We're still passing the tall cliff in the middle of the water. A strait, someone called it a while ago. Land is on the other side, the cliffs just as high and forbidding. I could swim to shore if I wasn't chained...not that there's a shore. There's just cliffs and more cliffs.

And between the two cliffs, up ahead blocking the way? Is something that looks like an island. It's mostly flat with a gentle slope towards the center, and there it looks

like a tent of some kind is set up, and a spindly tree right smack dab in the middle of the strange island. It doesn't seem all that threatening to me.

As the captain raises the spyglass to his gaze, his man continues. "We're trapped."

"We can't be trapped. This is open sea. This is..." He trails off as he squints into the spyglass. "Is that a turtle?"

"A hamarii turtle," the navigator agrees. "And Vor protect us, but it's got a sea-ogre on its back."

A thread of terror races up my spine. Vor is apparently not in a good mood this day. A sea-ogre? A giant turtle? I've never heard of such a thing except in legends, but the expression of fear on the navigator's face is very real. I crane my head to look, fascinated despite my fear. It could be a turtle shell, I think. One covered in thick moss, but still a shell. But why is there a tree? And a tent?

As I try to get a better look at the mysterious island, it somehow moves, turning slightly in the waters, and seems to wedge itself even tighter between the cliffs. A figure emerges from the tent and stares at our wide, heavily laden ship, at our dead sail and our flustered oarsmen.

The tingle of terror in my spine turns to a knot of dread in my belly. Some of the soldiers break into terrified prayers to Aron of the Cleaver. A few others grab their weapons, and I flinch back against the other captives huddled in the center of the boat.

"Not here," another slave hisses at me. "Go away. You'll drown us all. We'll capsize."

"The captain got greedy. We've got too many slaves. Look at how low we're sailing

in the water. If one takes a shit we'll go under."

I eye the edges of the boat and we do seem to be rather low in the water. That just adds to my panic, and I twist at the chains again, frantic.

I have to get off this ship. Now.

As I stare ahead, the large form dives into the water from the turtle's back and disappears. More soldiers panic. "Is he gone?"

The captain snaps the spyglass shut. "Turn us around. Quickly."

"There's no room. We're too heavy," the navigator says again. "I warned you?—"

The captain backhands him. "Enough! I want solutions, not complaints!"

Before the navigator can answer, the boat dips and tilts to one side. Everyone screams in alarm, and then the sea-ogre hauls himself onto our already struggling boat.

The screams abruptly stop.

He's terrifyingly huge. Water trails off his skin in rivulets, and his greenish body gleams despite the shadows of the cliffs. He's got four big arms, two on each side of his body, and all of them thickly muscled and strong, with tiny fins along the backs and next to his wrists. His chest is massive, and he wears nothing but a loincloth made of some strange dark material. Criss-crossing his chest and along his waist are a few belts covered with what look like small knives, and I have no doubt he could tear us all apart with ease. He has the look of a predator to him.

The strange sea-ogre has no hair, just a large fin-like crest atop his head, and as he looks around at the ship, a membrane slides back from his gaze. He barely spares a

glance in the direction of the captives and instead seems to be sizing up the soldiers.

I am too, and they're not going to win if he picks a fight.

Instead, he gives a cruel smile and puts his large foot on the other side of the boat and shoves. The entire craft bobs again, and more of the women scream. "Stop that!" the captain yells, and the message is clear—we could sink at any moment. The sea-ogre has our lives in his hands, all four of them.

I want to laugh hysterically, because a few moments ago, I was in danger of being sold as a slave. Now I'm in danger of dying at the bottom of the ocean, because if he topples us, I'm still chained to everyone else, and I know they won't be able to swim. I just know it.

The crest on his head flicks and he straightens, giving the captain a challenging look as if saying, well, what are you going to do about it?

"We didn't realize this was your territory," the captain says, his shoulders flung back and his chin in the air. "We are simply passing through."

The sea-ogre crosses his arms over his chest. He glances back at the massive turtle as big as an island, blocking the strait, and then at the captain again, as if to point out that we are not going anywhere.

"We are at your mercy," the captain says, his gaze on the foot still on the side of the boat, and I can't help but notice how close to the water's edge we are. A few more people on board and the ship would sink from the sheer weight of its passengers. The captain seems to be thinking along the same lines that I am—that greed is going to get us all killed—and he eyes the sea-ogre, standing tall. "We must pass through. Surely you see that we cannot turn our ship around. You have us pinned in place. Move your hamarii at once."

The ogre puts one hand out, palm up.

Lady Dywan jumps to her feet, jerking on the rest of our chains. “I demand to be freed!” she cries. “I am the lady of Parness, stolen from my lands unlawfully—” She cuts off with a yelp as one of the soldiers brandishes a knife in her direction. “I don’t belong here!”

She blurts the words out quickly and then thumps back into her seat near me, cringing away from the knife-wielding soldier.

I hold my breath, glancing at the sea-ogre to see what he’s going to do. Is he going to help Lady Dywan? Or barter with the enemy soldiers?

The sea-ogre gives the lady a dismissive look and then focuses on the captain again. He rubs his fingers together and then flattens his hand, his request the same. Pay me.

“Make a deal with him,” the navigator whispers.

The captain shoots him an ugly glare, but I know we’re all thinking it. Just pay the monster and let us through. But the captain? No. The captain has to think about it. He looks the ogre up and down, and after a long, terse moment, states, “Name your price. Surely we can pay you something.”

The sea-ogre lifts his foot off the side of the boat and stands at his full height, that strange crest of his drawing the eye. He says a single, ominous word.

“Bride.”

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Chapter

Two

VALESSA

B ride?

Surely I didn't hear him correctly? He wants a bride ? I've heard of pirates taking food or weapons—or riches—from ships. But taking a woman ?

The captain seems thrilled at this request, though. His face is suddenly wreathed in smiles. "We have a great many slaves taken from enemy lands. You can have your pick of them. Here."

The captain points at the chained line I'm tied to—the dull slaves, the ones they think they won't get much coin for. The sea-ogre narrows his eyes at the captain, as if realizing he's being shown the rejects, and I wait for him to explode at him, to toss him overboard, to twist his neck with those huge, powerful arms of his.

Lady Dywan speaks up again. "Are you mad? No woman in her right mind would want to be the bride of a monster!"

And I suddenly realize how I can get off the boat. How I can get free of the future awaiting me in Sunswallow, where—if I'm lucky—I'll get sold to a whorehouse.

So I raise my chained arms into the air and speak as loudly as I can. "I'll do it!"

All eyes turn to me.

I realize my disguise is probably not doing me any favors. I'm filthy, with my hair in my face and my dress-waist moved up to make me look as unappealing as possible. I struggle to my feet —no easy task given that I'm chained to people on both sides and on a crowded boat—and while all are staring at me, I adjust my dress, lowering the hemline so my cleavage can be shown to its advantage and push my hair back. I'm not the greatest beauty in the land but I can be pretty when I smile, I'm told.

I smile brightly at the sea-ogre. "I'll do it. I'll be your wife."

The captain is eyeing me—and my newly bountifully revealed breasts—and I can practically see the coins clinking in his head as my price just doubled. "Sit down, tart. The ogre gets to pick."

"Yes, but I'm sure he'd want an eager bride," I say in a cheery voice, giving the monster my most winning smile. "I'm very eager, and I'm also experienced. I know all about pleasuring sea-ogres."

I might also be a bit of a liar.

The ogre just stares at me with hard, strange eyes. He hasn't said a thing. My heart is racing with terror. If this doesn't work, my fate is going to be worse than ever. I'm putting everything on this moment, just like Lady Dywan is. Unlike Lady Dywan, though, I'm willing to work with the enemy.

"Pleasuring sea-ogres?" the captain repeats, a sneer on his face. "You?"

"Me," I agree, continuing to lie with audacity. "Look at me. I'm tall and strong, the perfect sort of woman for a sea-ogre. They like their women with a little meat on their bones, am I right?" And I give a sly wink. "Plus, I know all about the two-finger

tease.”

It...sounds specific. Like something an insider might know. I figure either the ogre himself will call me out for the liar I am, or he'll be intrigued enough by whatever a two-finger tease is and take me with him.

I would rather service one man—monstrous or not—than an entire brothel full of them. I would rather run off with the sea-ogre than end up at the bottom of the harbor with the rest of the slaves on this overloaded boat.

My father said that the gods smile upon those that make their own luck. I hope Vor of the Seas is watching because here I am, making luck. I just need one of the gods to smile upon me and nudge things in the right direction.

“Two...finger...tease?” the captain asks, highly skeptical.

As he should be. I'm making an absolute fool of myself, but I don't care. I'll say whatever just to get off this cursed, doomed ship. I'll do whatever to get away from the fate awaiting me at Lady Dywan's side. The fates have yet to be good to me, but a sea-ogre's bride can't be any worse than what I've already gone through.

I smile and wiggle my first two fingers.

I'm not a virgin. I doubt most women in my situation are. I've spent a few nights in the stables, tumbling a handsome boy, and I know how to pleasure a man. Surely a sea-ogre man is much the same. They like their balls jiggled and their cock sucked just like any other man. I'm sure I can think of something inventive to do with my fingers.

I've got nothing to lose.

The sea-ogre stares at me, eyes narrowed. It's a distinctly unfriendly look, but I don't know that he has any other looks. He scowls in my direction for so long that I'm positive that he's going to say no, that he wants to pick out a pretty blonde or a small, dainty thing. If so, I'll have to figure out my next course of action, since I've revealed myself to be a liar, somewhat attractive, and the purveyor of the great two-finger tease. All these things will be sure to be used against me by my captors.

But the sea-ogre flicks his hand at me. "You."

He nods at the captain and dives back into the water.

Just like that, the deal is done. I'm going to be a sea-ogre's eager, knowledgeable bride, Vor help me.

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Chapter

Three

RANAN

Why, by all the gods, why did I say bride when I meant to say bribe ? My foolish, clumsy mouth has gotten me into trouble again.

I want to snarl at the sea around me, but that will solve nothing. Like it or not, I have a woman now instead of a donation from the human travelers. I could go back and demand both, but then I seem less decisive in their eyes, and in piracy, strength is everything.

It's why I don't talk much—so there's no risk of stumbling over my words.

Ha.

I swim through the waters to Akara's side and tap her beak, letting her know we're moving. I send a mental image to the hamarii of where I want her to go, clearing the narrow strait so the humans can pass through as agreed. Akara's thoughts are grumpy—she just settled in. Why must she move again? But I fill my mind with thoughts of the chin scratches I will give her as a reward, and she pushes off against the narrow cliff, turning and drifting away a short distance.

She will not go far, nor will she submerge. Hamarii like the sun upon their back, and Akara is no different than her brethren, for all that she's bad tempered. I send her

thoughts of gratitude as I surface again to watch the ship nearby.

I don't know the kind it is. I've seen different sorts of ships from the humans. Some have heavy bellies that drag in the waters and tall sails above. This one is long and flat, with a great many oars and an unimpressive sail. It's clearly meant to stay in shallow waters, which is why they're being forced to pay my ransom. Once they've passed again, I'll let Akara move back to her spot in the strait and we'll wait for the next unfortunate human ship to pass.

Perhaps this time my tongue won't trip me up.

The human boat is a flurry of activity. The female—my bride—is holding her wrists out to one of the soldiers. He frees her from her chains and she moves to the side of the boat even as others cry and wail and argue. Without hesitating, she gives a clumsy jump over the side. At least she is brave.

Gods. What am I going to do with a woman ?

The human surfaces and immediately begins to paddle with her hands and feet like a dog, all splashing and very little movement, and I bite back a sigh.

I'll have to show her how to swim since I'm now stuck with her.

I watch as the woman paddles out to Akara, who is drifting farther and farther away. The human wench will never make it at this rate. It serves her right for being such a bold liar. Two-finger tease indeed. I've never heard of such a thing. It was clear from the way she stared at me with fascinated horror that she'd never seen one of the seakind before.

I don't like liars.

But the woman was desperate to leave her situation and eager to join me while the other females shrieked in horror. I've heard too many stories of females that would fling themselves over the side of a turtle to drown rather than be in the company of the seakind, and that's the last thing I want.

I want peace and quiet. I hope the new female—my new bride —understands that. If I liked the company of others, I'd still be part of my family flotilla. When Akara started showing signs of territorial aggression, I would have taken her far out to sea and released her to be wild and free. But I like my quiet, and I like Akara, so I drift up and down the coast instead, demanding tithes from humans who find themselves caught in my strait.

I know others from neighboring flotillas that live the same life I do. If I were lonely enough, I could have saved up and purchase a hound trained to hunt in the shoals. Instead, I now have...her. I watch the female paddle gamely forward, still in roughly the same spot she was when she started.

Biting back another sigh of annoyance, I glide through the water to her side. Her eyes widen in alarm as I swim up, but I ignore that. I lock an arm around her waist and anchor her against me. As I do, her arms go around my neck, cutting off my air.

I ignore that, too, though it's more difficult, and swim out to the retreating Akara's side. A dozen splashes tell me without turning that the oars are back in the water, and the humans are now going to paddle madly to try and get as far away from my territory as possible. They'll spread the word when they arrive back in port that a vicious sea-ogre is robbing ships that pass through, and eventually I'll have to find a new strait to guard.

That's a problem for tomorrow, though.

For today, I have a human clinging to me that I don't quite know what to do with. I

make it to Akara's side and send her comforting thoughts, even as I all but heave the human onto the edge of her shell.

What exactly am I supposed to do with a human bride?

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Chapter

Four

VALESSA

Crawling onto the back of a sea turtle feels strange, yet it's not the strangest thing so far this day. I should think nothing of it after all that this day has brought. And yet...it's not like being on land. It bobs like a ship, though with a different sort of motion, and one that makes me instantly queasy. I shiver, my slave-shift soaked and clinging to my skin. Every bit of my body is outlined under the thin fabric, but there's nothing I can do about it. I tug it off of my skin as best I can, cross my arms over my breasts, and study my new environment.

It's very...flat. Empty. Underneath my bare feet, the turtle shell is warm and rough, a bit like a cow's hoof, and the most surprising thing of all is the thick clumps of moss that grow in cracks on the shell. They hang from the back like tufts of pale green fur, dry from the sun's rays and crusted with salt from the water.

The turtle is also even bigger now that I'm upon it. When I was a young girl back in Parness, we once walked half a day to see a traveling menagerie at an amphitheater. The amphitheater had been huge, like a giant bowl set down by the gods in the midst of the city. I remember the base of the bowl being sandy and large enough that you could fit several buildings inside. That's how big the turtle's back is.

As I get closer to the center, I see that the tree on its back is not actually a tree at all. It's a bony protuberance—a spike—in the dead center of the shell, and more of the

strange moss hangs from it. A wooden cage of some kind has been attached at the top, and it looks like more moss and seaweed hang on it to dry. I turn to look at the sea-ogre's tent. It's made of the same strange glossy leather that he wears, and I don't dare go inside if I'm not invited.

I might be brave, but I'm not that brave.

I rub my arms, continuing to shiver as I look around. There's no spot for a fire to warm the camp. Of course there's not. This is the back of a turtle, I remind myself. Why would anyone build a fire? And yet it's disappointing to realize because I'm freezing with cold and there's no relief to be had. I glance over at the sea-ogre but he's ignoring me, and I suspect it's not the time to demand dry clothing.

The turtle moves into the sunshine and it feels good. Maybe if it stays here, I'll warm up. I sit near the tent and hug my knees close, watching my new "husband." He moves around the turtle's back, looking busy. I watch as he checks the strands of moss and seaweed hanging on the cage and then ducks into his tent. He emerges a moment later with a nasty-looking trident and gazes out at the waters as the ship slowly moves past the turtle.

It's a warning. It's him telling them that he's letting them pass, but if they try anything, he'll attack. You wouldn't think that a single man could intimidate an entire ship full of soldiers, but they watch him warily. He might not win if they all attacked at once, but he knows these waters. I have no doubt he could tip over the entire ship with a few movements and I doubt many of them could swim. If it fell to hand-to-hand combat, he's nearly twice as big as the men and could take down a great many of them without breathing hard.

No one wants to risk their lives over a single slave—me—and I don't blame them.

I continue to shiver, watching as the ship drifts past, the oars digging into the waters.

Just when they're about to pass, Lady Dywan struggles to her feet, the chains dragging on her arms. "We won't forget you!" she cries. "When I'm free, I'll find a way to save you from this monstrous fate!"

I'm touched. Perhaps I've misjudged Lady Dywan. I doubt she'll be able to do anything, seeing as how she's heading for a Sunswallow brothel and likely to a fate worse than mine. I'm actually not feeling too bad at the moment.

When my father was killed and I was sold into slavery, I cried bitter tears. When my first master died, I cried again, knowing that my fate was uncertain. I'm far more used to the cruelties of the Lords of Fate. There are no tears this time, only planning. I need to please this sea-ogre. I need to be a charming companion, one that makes his life easier. A happy master is a benevolent one, and I don't kid myself into thinking I have any rights as a monster's bride. I'm a slave again, regardless of the title. But I know what's expected of me. Make the food, tidy the house, be willing in bed.

Except there's no fire to make the food.

There's no house, just a lone tent on a turtle's back.

That leaves just one task for a slave, and it's not one I'm particularly looking forward to. My new sea-ogre "husband" is oversized, and he's sure to have a huge cock. Nothing to be done about it save for practicing my "why yes, I love a huge pike shoved into my innards" face.

I smile brightly as the ship passes, only for the sea-ogre to jump over the side of the turtle and disappear into the water. Oh. Perhaps he's going to follow and make sure that the ship leaves his territory. I wait patiently for him to return, keeping my expression eager. Like this is all I have ever wanted, to be a sea-ogre's bride. Like I have no thoughts and dreams of my own, and that I want nothing more out of life than a giant prick in me.

Time passes, and there's no sign of the sea-ogre. I scan the waters, looking for the sail atop his head, but find nothing. The ship is long gone, and I'm alone on the turtle's back.

It makes me nervous. He's coming back, right? If he leaves me here, I'll have to swim to shore. It's just that...there's nothing but sheer cliffs in this strait, and there's no shore to be had without a very, very long swim. I'd drown before I made it to shore. He'll come back, I tell myself. It's his turtle. His territory.

Something splashes in the water, and I automatically look over. It's not the sea-ogre, just a fish jumping, but it reminds me of my promise. I swore to the god Vor that I'd find him a huge fish and offer it up as thanks. I clasp my hands and bow my head, thanking the god for saving me from the brothels, and that as soon as I figure out how to get him his fish, I'll offer it. I'm grateful that the capricious Lord of the Waves saved me. Being a sea-ogre's woman isn't exactly what I asked for, but I hadn't been specific, either.

You get what the gods give you, and you're grateful for it.

The sun warms me for a time, but then the shadows move and the turtle's broad back falls into the shade of the cliffs once more. I'm chilled to the bone, shivering and hungry, and there's still no sign of the sea-ogre. Am I supposed to be doing something, I wonder. Does he expect me to make him dinner? Set up a bed? Something?

I get to my feet, stretching, and my muscles protest. I've held myself in the same cramped position for hours, and I don't know why. I'm free. I rub my raw wrists, now rid of the manacles, and love how light they feel. Whatever else happens...I'm free. I stretch, my arms over my head, and then shiver at the cold.

"Are you here?" I call out. "Lord Sea-Ogre?"

There's no response. I didn't expect to hear one, but I figured it was worth a try.

"Your bride is in danger of freezing her tits off," I call again. "Have you anything warm I can wear? A fire I can build? Something? Anything?"

No response. I'm alone on the turtleback island.

Right, well, if he's not coming back, I'm not going to sit out here in the open. I dust off my ragged gown, noticing that it's practically falling apart now that it's gotten wet, and head for his tent. I'm curious what he's hiding in there.

Inside, everything is in bags. There's no bed, no cozy sitting chair, no nothing. Just bags and bags. Well, sort of. There's dead fish as well.

The strange, puffed-up fish look like a child's ball, each one as big around as a circle I can make with my arms. The mouth of each one is sewn shut and they're dried and hard and hollow. There's a cord through the mouth, and on the other end of the cord is a small bag made out of more of the strange leather. I run my hand over the leather itself, because it looks scaly and strange. Is it from a snake, I wonder. Or something else? I've never seen anything like it. It's tied tightly in one spot and then stuffed with a cloth rag and tied lower down below the rag. It seems like a lot of work, and I'm not entirely sure what the reasoning is behind it. Ritual? Spellcraft?

I finally get the last knot worked through and peek inside the bag. It's dark, but I can make out the gleam of...gold? I reach in and my fingers brush over cool metal, encrusted with gems. A few more touches and I realize the entire bag is full of jewelry.

By the gods, the sea-ogre is rich .

A throat clears behind me.

I slump. Of course he'd come upon me nosing through his bags. Of course . He's gone all day and returns the moment I touch his gold. It's like the Fates are determined to show me their disdain by making my luck absolutely rotten. But I'm not going to let this beat me. Papa always said we make our own luck and I'm going to make mine right now.

So I turn and toss my hair, giving the sea-ogre my most winning smile. "It's about time you came back. Do you have anything warm to wear?"

He crosses his arms over his chest—all four of them, which is an alarming, intimidating sight. "Stealing from me?"

His voice is low and raspy, gruff and full of anger.

"Looking for something dry to wear," I repeat, and hold my hand out. "My fingers feel like ice, and jewels might be pretty but they won't keep me warm."

He eyes my hand but doesn't take it.

That's fine. I continue on. "My name is Valessa. You can call me Vali if you like."

No response.

"What's your name?"

Again, no response. He just glowers at me.

"I know you can speak. You just did. Silence only works in certain situations, and this isn't one." I tilt my head and study him. Gods, but he's tall. The sail atop his smooth head just makes him seem taller, and his shoulders are impossibly broad. He's still wearing nothing but that loincloth over his deep golden skin, and he doesn't

seem to be suffering from the cold like I am. “Since I’m your wife, don’t I at least get the benefit of your name?”

But he just continues to glare at me. He acts like I’ve done something wrong, when I’m the bride he requested. If this is how he acts around women, it’s no wonder he has to demand one like a pirate instead of acquiring one the normal way.

Has he demanded other brides from sailors in the past? If so, where are they ? It’s a terrifying thought, and one I push away quickly. Instead, I focus on getting his expression to crack. I’m here now, and I must make the best of this. So I arch a brow at him, using my most flirty look. “Good sir, are you waiting for your wife to service you?”

His gaze flickers, but he still doesn’t speak.

It’s a start, though. I lift my chin. “I’ll happily do so.” It’s a lie, of course, but he doesn’t need to know that I’m less eager than I pretended. I’m excellent at pretending. “If I’m to service my new husband, however, I need for you to ask for it aloud. It would make things very odd between us if I started gobbling your cock and all you wanted was for me to pass the salt.”

It’s a tease, a joke. It’s meant to make him laugh, to open up, to respond. Even if all he does is drop his loincloth, I know what to expect. This is me figuring out what my new master wants from me so I can anticipate his needs. If I make him happy, life will be easier. Running away is out of the question. There’s nowhere for me to go and I have no coin. Parness is in ruins, and a woman alone on the roads to Aventine will be quickly enslaved once more.

This sea-ogre is the trouble I know, so I’m going to stick this out.

I almost expect him to continue to stare at me in stony silence, as if there’s some

secret to making him respond that I'm unaware of. But he finally speaks. "Two-finger tease, eh?"

So he's thinking about that, is he? "Indeed. Popular with all the sea-ogres back home."

"Sounds like you're more experienced than I am. Very well." With his gaze locked on me, he unbuckles his belt and unwraps his loincloth, dropping it to the ground.

Not one but two cocks unfurl from the depths of his loincloth.

Two.

Two very large, very un-hard cocks.

"Oh." For once, quick and easy words escape me. I stare, my jaw hanging open. I'd expected him to be large. I hadn't expected two. And of course it seems reasonable that he might have two, what with the fact that he has two sets of arms. All right. I can handle this. I can.

Before I can say anything else, though, he snorts at my stunned expression and stalks away.

I've been completely caught in a lie.

Here the sea-ogre took me for a bride because I promised all kinds of naughty pleasures, and he's realizing now that I have zero experience with his kind. My shock at his doubled anatomy made that plainly obvious.

I'm an idiot for thinking I wouldn't be called out, and now I have to fix this. He's storming away from me, and I need to do something.

“Fine!” I call out, chasing after him. “You caught me. I lied about the two-finger thing. I just had to get off the ship and your appearance seemed like a good opportunity. I’m sorry if I’m not as skilled as you expected me to be. That ship was going to end up at the bottom of the sea. If it ever made it to the city of Sunswallow, I’d end up sold off to a brothel. I figured one master would be better than a hundred.”

He remains silent, so I race in front of him and drop to my knees, clinging dramatically to his leg. “I’m ready for my punishment, my husband.”

That gets his attention. He stops walking. “Punishment?”

I nod, pressing my cheek to his warm, damp leg. I don’t have to feign panic. I’m desperate—I need him to like me. “You can whip me. I’m told I heal fast.”

“Because you’ve been whipped before?” he asks, voice icy.

I nod again. I’m not the most obedient of creatures. I tend to run my mouth—some would call it lying—to try and grease the works. Sometimes I get caught.

The sea-ogre huffs, the sound one of irritation. He pries me off of his leg and continues to stalk away. As I sit on the ground, trembling in fear, he moves to the edge of the turtle and dives into the water.

Gone again.

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Chapter

Five

RANAN

Well, that went well.

I swam for hours, thinking about what I'd say to the woman when I got back. How it had been a mistake and I'd drop her at the nearest port as soon as I could. How she doesn't have to remain here as my bride. That I truly don't want company. I'm not the sort that's good at conversation, or keeping people entertained. I'm best alone.

But the moment I saw her digging around in my sacks, I forgot everything I planned. And from there, it just got worse. She kept talking and talking, and before I knew what I was doing I was lowering my loincloth just to catch her in a lie. To prove that I knew that she was full of stories, and that she didn't need to pretend around me.

Instead, my actions just made her frantic. She clung to my leg and begged me to whip her.

Whip her.

It's absurd. Why would I strike her just because I'm annoyed? If anything, I'm annoyed at myself. It's my fault we're both in this situation, all because I couldn't say to the human captain, actually, no, give me your gold instead of a woman.

So I swim again, because at least if I'm swimming, I don't have to look into her pleading gaze, her hungry, desperate-to-please eyes. I don't want to hear more about the terrible fate that was awaiting her and why she thought being with me would be better for her than staying on the boat. Of course she spoke up and volunteered to be with me. I might be hideous and have too many limbs, but like she said, one master is better than a hundred.

I feel like a churl for scaring her. I feel like a churl for keeping her.

Tomorrow I should call to Akara, touch minds with her, let her know that I want to head to shore. We can get close to a human city with a morning's easy travel.

We'll set the woman on the beach there and forget we ever laid eyes upon her. Let her be the problem of the land dwellers.

Decided, I haul myself up on the turtle's back once more and shake the excess water free from my skin. The red moon is high and there's a distinct chill in the air that isn't felt under the warm waves. I contemplate going back under the water and drifting in sleep. I can sleep as the whales do, automatically coming up for a breath when my lungs are emptied. But curiosity makes me approach my tent, because she will no doubt be there adorning herself in the many necklaces and gold jewels I've taken from others that have passed through my domain. I want to see her reaction when I wake her up and kick her out of my tent. I want to prod her and remind her that she's not safe with me, because I didn't want her in the first place.

I don't even make it to my tent. Underneath Akara's back spike, huddled around herself, is the small, shivering form of the human female. She's not in my tent. She's not wearing my stolen jewels. She's a small, pathetic lump out in the open, with no blanket, and her teeth are chattering loud enough to raise the dead.

I stop in my tracks and stare at her. I don't know what I feel, looking at her so

pathetic. Is she doing this to earn pity from me? Or because she is truly afraid of me? Does she truly think I'm that much of a monster?

It doesn't matter that I was planning to kick her out into the night a mere moment ago. A mere moment ago, she was draped in jewels in my mind's eye, reveling in my riches. This is just...pitiful. A doomed soul should be sent to Vor's arms with a quick slice to the throat, not forced to endure a long, painful death by freezing. I might not like the female, but I am not cruel.

Kneeling at her side, I jostle her shoulder rudely.

She comes awake with a start but makes no sound. Her eyes blink large into the darkness and then focus on me. "Husband?—"

"No," I growl. I don't want to hear that. Not from her. Not right now. I point at my tent, indicating she should go inside.

The female opens her mouth to speak and her stomach growls so loudly it comes up her throat. Horrified, she claps a hand over her mouth. "Well, that was a wretched sound. Apologies...master? Can I call you master?"

I get to my feet and glare down at her. Did she not see me pointing at the tent? Are we truly going to talk about names right now? I just want to sleep.

"I'm Vali," she tells me again, tapping her chest. "I don't expect you to remember it, so I'm happy to help out until you do. Let me serve you, master. It'd bring me great joy. Can I?—"

She breaks off as I stab a finger at my tent, indicating she should go into the shelter and out of the cold wind.

“Yes. Your tent. Of course. Time to earn my due. I don’t know why I didn’t realize that.”

Vali hops to her feet and heads for the tent. Finally. By the gods, it’s like trying to steer Akara when the stubborn hamarii is in a wandering mood. Relieved that we’re finally getting somewhere, I put a hand on her back and guide her into my tent.

It’s a mess, I realize, as we step inside. The red moon is bright, casting enough light to see by near the entrance. I have no bed in here because when Akara and I are on the seas, I sleep in the cradle of the waves. It’s only when I’m in my grotto that I use a bed with blankets and padding. I use my tent for nothing but storage, keeping bags tied and primed for a submersion. A few of them have spilled open because I chased her out earlier, but nothing in here looks comfortable or warm enough for a human woman who’s shivering with cold.

The woman—Vali—steps inside and immediately pulls her dress over her head and tosses it to the floor. She sinks to her knees and throws her shoulders back, her breasts jiggling with the movement, and she gazes up at me. “How would you like me to serve you, master?”

I might be seakind, but I am not dead. The sight of her, naked and willing, makes both my cocks quickly engorge. Even in the near-darkness, I can see the heavy weight of her rounded breasts, the dark tips that are always visible, even through the flimsy fabric. Her belly is gently rounded, her hips thick and her legs strong. If I were to pick a human for a wife, I’d pick one exactly like her, with a robust body and magnificent large breasts.

Her gaze flicks up to my face, full of uncertainty at my silence. Then she smiles, the expression coy and sly, and reaches for my belt. “I’m happy to take the initiative, master. Like I said, I know just what males like?—”

I grab her wrist before she can touch me. She's misunderstood why I brought her in here. Of course she has. I've been nothing but cold and unfeeling to her since she arrived. I said I wanted a wife, and now she thinks she needs to fulfill her wifely duties. And while I might get aroused at the sight of her naked body, I have no wish to touch a female that clearly does not want me back. She's offering because she's afraid, and that's not an offer at all.

"Sleep," I bark out at her.

She flinches at my tone, pulling her hand back. "Yes. Of course. My apologies, master. I'm just trying to please?—"

"Not your master," I say, exasperated. "I don't own you."

Vali blinks up at me. "I don't know what to call you."

I bite back a sigh of frustration. "Ranan."

She smiles, the expression startlingly sweet. "Ranan. What a nice name. Does it mean anything in your tongue?"

"It means sleep," I growl at her. I grab her discarded dress and shove it into her hands. "Put your clothes on and sleep."

Vali meekly puts her dress back on, and I can hear material ripping even as she does. The garment is about to fall to pieces, I suspect. It looks hard used. But she smooths it down her body and then looks around my tent, cluttered with sacks and buoys. "Any particular spot you prefer I should sleep? I don't want to be in your way."

I step forward and shove three of the lighter bags aside, clearing out a spot. When I gesture at it, she immediately sinks to the floor and curls up there. "Thank you,

Ranan.”

The way she says my name makes my cocks twitch again. I grunt, determined more than ever to find a human settlement and get rid of her. She’s distracting me, and the last thing I need is a distraction with pretty tits and all kinds of willing words born out of desperation. A hamarii is no place for a human, not even the wife of a sea-ogre. She’s not staying.

She wraps her arms around herself and shivers amidst the bags, and I realize she’s still cold. I have no bedding with me, not even fish leather that I can use as a makeshift blanket. Everything’s in my grotto a few days away.

By Rhagos’s eye, I’m going to have to provide the warmth for her.

Clenching my jaw, I lie down on the floor of the tent next to her and pull her against me. She makes a pleased sound and immediately turns into my embrace, putting her arms around my neck.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to pleasure you, Ranan?” she breathes, her voice soft and liquid against my neck.

“Sleep,” I growl at her.

“Right. Sorry.”

She doesn’t sound sorry, though. She sounds a little amused. It irks me for no reason at all, and I put my arms around her and close my eyes, determined to sleep despite the hard, unyielding scratching surface of Akara’s back. If the human can sleep here, so can I. Tomorrow I’ll find a beach and dump her so she can be on her way and I can be free of her. I’ll even give her a necklace so she won’t be totally destitute.

Vali tucks herself against me, her breath fanning against my neck. I start to drift, my nose full of her pleasant scent and tickled by her tangled hair, when she speaks up again. “Ranan? I don’t want to bother you, but I have to find a great fish to give Vor as thanks for bringing me to you.”

I pat her arm, letting that be my answer. I don’t tell her that she won’t need a fish, because she’s not staying.

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Chapter

Six

VALI

Sleeping on the “floor” of the tent isn’t the most comfortable, but I’ve had worse. I wake up surprisingly refreshed to find myself alone in the sea-ogre’s quarters. He didn’t awaken me when he left, but that’s fine. He strikes me as a bit of a loner, and it’s going to take him some time to get used to having a wife around. I wonder if we’re going to live on the back of this turtle or if there’s a more suitable place. I can’t exactly ask. My new husband is already prickly with me.

At least, I think he’s my husband. I’m not certain what the marriage laws are with his people, but I know in certain lands, all it takes is a declaration towards a woman and then you’re bound to one another. We could be wedded at this point. I prefer to think of it like that. It gives my new situation a little bit more permanence, and my life has had very little of permanence thus far.

Yawning, I try to tidy the bags on the floor. I’m not sure what the reason is behind attaching a dried fish to each one, but I’m sure there’s a reason. Perhaps an offering to Vor if the bags should fall overboard? I should ask so I can do the same. I still need to give my offering to the great god of the seas, but I think he’ll understand that I’m not exactly equipped to fish at the moment. The bags in the tent are heavy, most of them laden with what sound like metallic objects. There’s a crate, too, but I don’t open it or any more of the bags. Ranan gave me a sour look yesterday when he saw me opening one, and I’m determined to get on his good side today.

I need him to like me because sleeping in his arms was far more comfortable than shivering out in the open. Plus, I'm absolutely famished with hunger, and he's no doubt got food around here somewhere. If I make him annoyed at me, he'll swim off again and then I won't see him for hours, and I can't catch my own food.

At least, not yet. If we're to live on the back of a turtle, though, I suspect I'm going to have to learn.

Once the bags are straightened into (mostly) neat piles by the sounds they make when the objects inside clink together, it leaves a lot more room on the floor of the tent. Room enough for both of us to spread out comfortably, and I wonder if there's bedding somewhere, or if it's just not something he uses. I suppose I can ask when we get a bit more comfortable with each other.

I wish he'd let me suck his cock. Men are far more amenable to a woman's demands when they've had their cocks sucked.

The ground shifts underneath my feet and I wobble, falling against the side of the tent with a yelp. I manage to catch myself before I crash through the strange leather and tear it, and stagger outside, looking around.

We're...moving?

Even though I don't see the turtle's head, I can feel the strange surge of the body moving, and every so often, the lift of a long, angular flipper rising through the waters. The sea around us glimmers in the sunlight, startlingly beautiful, and I can see why someone would live on the waters. It's so pretty. Seagulls fly through the air high overhead, clouds dot the blue sky, and it's an absolutely gorgeous day with fair weather and a gentle breeze. It's so much nicer than the cities, where everything smells like last night's chamberpots and the only greenery to be seen is on sale in the market, and won't be eaten by slaves because it's too expensive.

I take a deep breath of the sea air and hug my arms to my chest. Get a blanket and some food and I could be happy like this, I think...provided my new husband will speak more than two words to me.

As if my thoughts have summoned him, Ranan's head surfaces through the waters nearby. He tosses a fish the size of my arm onto the turtle's back and then hauls himself over the side and onto the shell. He's dripping with water, wearing nothing but his usual loincloth and the knife-belts that cover his chest. The sail atop his head shivers when he shakes himself off, and I raise a hand to shield my eyes from the flying droplets that go everywhere. "Good morning, Ranan," I say cheerfully. "Are we going somewhere?"

There's no answer. Why am I not surprised? The man acts as if he doesn't even like me, which is quite odd considering he's the one that asked for a bride. Perhaps he's just not a chatty sort. If he prefers silence, I'll have to learn to be a bit quieter. The old man I served when I was first enslaved liked for me to talk. He said it filled his empty house a bit, so I learned to chitchat as I did chores and talked about everything and nothing. If Ranan doesn't want that, though, I can learn to be quieter.

I can be anything he needs, as long as he keeps me safe. And last night, he was kind to me. He saw me shivering and pulled me in his arms and kept me warm. If he truly hated me, he wouldn't have done such a thing. Pleased at this realization, I beam at him.

Ranan eyes me with a hard gaze.

"If I do something that bothers you, please let me know," I say, keeping my voice gentle and even. "I'm not here to make you miserable, but I won't know you're displeased unless you speak up."

"It's fine," he says, voice gruff. His gaze falls to the gaping neck of my slave shift

and then just as quickly veers away again.

I noticed him looking at my body last night. I might not be a noble lady, but I've got a strong frame and rather nice breasts, if I do say so myself. My slave shift is old and showing its wear, and I'm starting to think that dirt was the only thing holding it together. Now that it's gotten wet, pieces of it have started to fray and tear quickly. The neckline gapes open far too low for a modest household, but we're on a turtle's back. I don't know the etiquette for this particular location.

If I'm to stay with him, I should probably get something a bit more suited to sea life, though. Something that won't fall apart too much. Something warmer, perhaps. Then again, he's not offering and I'm not going to ask. It'll do until it falls off of me, and then I can just run around in a loincloth like he does. I have to bite back a smile at the thought as Ranan stalks away.

He moves with purpose, I notice, as I follow after him. Every step is one made forcefully, as if he has a battle plan in mind and is simply executing it. I like it. Slave men tend to meander, because a prompt and eager slave just gets more work handed to them. You learn to be slower—cheerful but slower—and you learn to lie a lot.

Lies serve a slave more than the truth. I learned that very quickly. No one wants to hear from a slave that their work is too much, their master's cock is not appealing when waved in one's face, and the lady's arse does look big in that. Lies are a slave's armor. They're our safety. Of course we lie. It's to protect ourselves. I do it as naturally as breathing nowadays.

Ranan picks up the fish flopping on the turtle's back and then pulls one of his knives from the loops on his leather straps. I study them, noting that there are several loops and the knives themselves look to be made from large sharp teeth, some from hard scales, and some look like they were crafted from thick flakes of rock. All of them look rather deadly, and when he cuts open the fish with a single stroke, I realize

they're sharp, too.

With expert, quick movements, he slices the fish and guts it, tossing the innards over the side of the turtle. A moment later, he cuts a large, thick chunk of pink flesh out and holds it up to me with one of his many hands. Oh.

I take it gingerly and try not to wrinkle my nose. Parness was farther inland, too far from the shore for fresh fish, and the ones we got from the river were smelly and unpleasant. "I don't mean to be a bother," I say to Ranan, knowing that he's going to hate my question. "But I truly don't know how to cook without a fire of some kind. Can you advise me?"

He narrows his eyes at me. A moment later, he carves a second chunk from the fish and shoves the entire thing into his mouth, eating it raw.

Oh. Oh my. My nostrils flare and I swallow hard, because I've never had raw fish, and I'm not sure I'm prepared to eat such a thing. Growling stomach or not, food has to go down when one eats it, and right now my throat is locked tight. "I've never had raw fish," I whisper, as if a quieter protest will somehow make him less irritated with me. "Won't we get sick?"

He takes another chunk from the fish and eats it, staring deliberately at me as he chews. It feels like a dare, a challenge. If I'm to be a sea-ogre's wife, I have to learn to eat like a sea-ogre, don't I? Bracing myself, I take a small, nibbling bite, expecting it to taste horrendous.

It's...quite nice. The flesh is tender and flavorful, and I pop the entire thing in my mouth with a noise of surprise. "I didn't realize it'd be so good."

He cuts off another piece and holds it out to me. "Never ate fish with all the other sea-ogres, eh?"

He's determined for me to admit that I'm a liar. But I just smile sweetly at him and lick my lips. "Never."

Ranan rolls his eyes, and I can tell I've annoyed him again. He carves up the rest of the fish for me and disposes of the ends and innards over the side of the turtle once again and then rinses his hands in the water. His feet are huge but powerful as he grips the side of the shell where it slopes, whereas I practically have to lie upon my belly just to rinse my hands, because otherwise I'll fall off into the waters below.

But I follow him to the edge and rinse my hands, and when I nearly tumble in (just as I suspected), he grabs the back of my dress and holds me steady. "Thank you," I say, ignoring the fact that the fabric ripped in his grasp. It's not his fault. "Will you teach me how to fish so I can get a large one for Lord Vor?"

Ranan doesn't answer me. He studies the waters instead. "We are going to shore."

"We are? Is that why your turtle is moving?" When he doesn't answer, I prod, "Are we going someplace in particular?"

He shrugs, not looking at me. "Near a human settlement."

"Oh, so you can sell your jewels? Do you need help with that? I'm happy to assist. I've gotten pretty good at haggling." I give him a cocky smile. "I once talked the armor off a soldier headed to war."

Ranan snorts, the sound full of derision. It's clear he doesn't believe me. "Stay here until we make land."

As if I have anywhere to go?

It's a long, lazy morning.

I have to admit, I'm not used to those. Mornings as a slave are full of early starts and endless chores. Even before, when I wasn't a slave, I had to take care of my father's house and feed the chickens. There's nothing for me to do here, though, so I sit and admire the scenery, watching the view change from alarmingly rocky cliffs to sandy shores. I soak up the sunshine and finger-comb my hair, and it feels both odd and pleasant to sit around and do nothing. It's jarring, of course, but...still nice.

Ranan works as Akara swims. He fills the strange-looking cage with more seaweed to dry, testing strands and removing ones that have crisped up in the sun. He weaves them into a long length that he stores away, and frowns at me when I ask what he's doing. Then he works on sharpening his strange little knives and disappears into the waves again, swimming alongside the turtle for a time. He fills a barrel with a sand-based filtering system that pulls the salt from the water and makes it potable and keeps refilling it throughout the day so we both have drinking water.

I might as well not exist for all that he pays attention to me.

He's just not used to having a wife, I remind myself. He'll need time to get used to another person around.

We come upon a long, sandy stretch of shore with white beaches leading up to tall hills of vibrant green. I've heard the lands to the south of Aventine are nothing but dirt, that all the magic has been soaked up from the ground, leaving nothing able to grow. This obviously isn't that place, but I don't know where we are. There are a couple of broken-down-looking boats at the far end of the beach, near some jagged-looking rocks, and a hut on stilts. Someone lives around here, then. A friend of Ranan's?

Somehow, I find it difficult to think of Ranan as having friends. He barely speaks to his wife.

My face feels hot as the massive turtle steers towards the shore, jostling us when she climbs over a sand bank. I glance down at my bare arms and they're reddened from the endless sunlight. I'm sure I'm going to hurt later, but for now, I'm just enjoying the warmth. I'd rather be warm than shiver, and since my only dress is getting worse by the day, I'll be happy with nothing but sunshine.

The turtle skims her way into shallow waters and then turns slightly, settling into the sands. Waves crash against her shell, jostling the ground underneath my feet. I look over at Ranan, who wades out to the shore. "Can I go look around?"

He glances over at me, and I get the impression that he'd almost forgotten I was here. "Stay close."

"I won't go far," I tell him brightly. "I just want to look around. Maybe find some pretty shells."

Ranan makes a flicking gesture with his hand, indicating that I should follow. I move to the side of the turtle and slide into the water...and sputter when it goes over my head. I keep forgetting how very tall my new husband is. A large hand fishes me out of the water, and then an arm locks around my waist. He hauls me toward the shore like I'm a sack of grain and plops me down on the sand the moment we clear the waves. I cough, brushing my wet and wave-ravaged hair off my face. "Thank you."

"Stay close to Akara," he growls at me.

"Who's Akara?"

He gives me an irritated look and stabs a finger at the turtle. Oh. The turtle has a name? Of course it does. Why wouldn't a turtle have a name? Is it some sort of pet to him, then? More than just a moving island he lives atop? Perhaps Akara is all these things, and I feel foolish for assuming that the turtle is nothing but a means of moving

about. Even farmers name their chickens.

“Hello Akara,” I call out to the turtle from my spot on the shore. The creature doesn’t answer, but that’s not unexpected. I can’t even see its head from here. As I straighten, Ranan stalks down the beach. All right, that message is clear—we’re not spending time together.

At least now I have an entire beach to explore.

I spend the next while going up and down the small inlet beach, curling my toes in the warm sands. I’m thirsty, but Ranan didn’t leave the waterskin with me so I’m just going to have to wait. I do find shells, though. There are some large ones, bigger than my palm, and with a deep belly full of shine. I hold each one, determining if it will make a good cup. Two of them are very close in size, and I hold them up to my breasts, wondering if I can make myself some sort of corset with leather straps that will keep everything from bobbing.

The shells are so lovely that I can’t help but gather all of the ones that I find. There’s one that gleams iridescent in the light, and another spiky blue one that has a tiny hole bored through the center that would make a lovely necklace. Like a greedy child, I grip the edges of my dress to act as a sack, using it to hold all the shells as I wander about. Perhaps we can go to a market and I can sell my finds for a few coins at least. I’m sure people farther inland would pay for such charming oddities. They’d make great decorations, and I immediately start to think of all the things people could make with them. Bowls. Spoons. Candle-holders. Shiny bits could be sewn into the neck of a tunic?—

“Well, well, well!”

The voice is so raspy and unfamiliar it makes me jump. Several of the shells tumble out of my skirt and land on the sands at my feet. I turn, eyeing the man that’s snuck

up on me while I've been distracted with my finds.

It's a stranger, no more than ten paces away from me, and far too close to make me comfortable. The man is a peasant from the look of things, with a scraggly graying beard and weathered clothing. His face is lined and deeply tanned, and when he leers at me, he's missing a few teeth. "Aren't you pretty."

"My thanks," I say, though I'm not thankful at all. Then, I put my lying skills to work. I crane my head, trying to peek over his shoulder. "Did you pass my husband? He was just here."

"No one here on this beach but you and me and the boys," he says, taking another step towards me.

I take a step backward, still clutching my skirts. The boys? I scan the shore quickly and sure enough, there are two other grown men—both larger than I am—watching from nearby, their eyes covetous. I'm a woman alone, which is problematic...but I'm also dressed in what's clearly a slave garment.

"You're wrong," I correct, keeping my tone cheerful. "I'm positive my husband is nearby. You'd know if you saw him. He's a sea-ogre, and quite a fierce one."

"That his turtle?"

"Yes it is." I'm relieved they noticed, though I'd prefer if Akara came out of the water and chased these men off. They're making me uncomfortable.

Or she could eat them. Truly, I wouldn't mind that either.

"Call for him," the bearded man says, and there's a gleam in his eyes I don't like. "If he's nearby, I'm sure he'll answer."

I haven't seen Ranan since I stepped onto the beach, though. He keeps avoiding me as if he hates me, and I don't know what to do about it. I'm not sure how sea-ogres treat their wives normally but surely better than this? I don't have any authority to complain, though, and so I've ignored it. But my heart sinks as the man takes another step towards me.

If I call for Ranan and there's no answer, these men are going to snatch me...or worse.

"RANAN," I yell, as loud as I can.

We wait. I hold my breath, hoping for his crested head to appear. There's no response, though, and as the moments slide quietly past, my anxiety rises.

The bearded man glances behind me. "Jos, ready the boat. Kep, you know what to do."

Rough hands grab my arms, and I drop my shells to the sands, screaming.

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Chapter

Seven

RANAN

“ R ANAN .”

The woman screams my name, and I fight back a surge of irritation as I swim through the waters of the cove, back toward where I left her. I went up and down the coast, looking for a human settlement. The hut near the water’s edge made me think there would be a city nearby, but all I’ve seen are a few rude farms that look far too poor to take on another mouth to feed, and a few travelers—all male—that eye me as if they’d like to rob me.

I can’t leave the woman with them. They’ll have her on her back before my back is turned. And while she irritates me, she also prayed to the gods that I would save her, and I’m loath to put her back in the same position. There has to be a place I can leave her safely. An inn of some kind, or a shop. Somewhere where I can give her a few necklaces to sell and send her on her way.

But when I find nothing, I head back to the water’s edge and slip into the waves so I can think. The sea always helps me clear my thoughts, and as I swim through the rolling blue waters, a large fish moves past, a fish much larger than should be in these waters. It reminds me of the human woman and her vow to offer a sacrifice to the god Vor.

She wants to thank him for bringing her to me.

I don't know what to make of that. I've treated her badly ever since she arrived and yet she still wants to thank the gods. Her situation must have been terrible for her to enjoy my company. I think of how she was chained with the other slaves, how she'd mentioned that she was going to end up in a brothel, and I feel a twinge of guilt. What happens if I leave her on the shore to her own devices?

But I can't be responsible for her, I tell myself. She doesn't belong with me. What happens to her after we part ways is in the hands of the fates.

Even so, I follow the large fish and make note of where it dives when it heads into the reefs, just in case I come after it later. If she doesn't have a chance to make her sacrifice to Lord Vor, I'll make it on her behalf, I decide. It's the least I can do.

Now I suppose I had better see what she's screaming over. Probably a crab of some kind. Served many sea-ogres, my arse. I'm the only sea-ogre she's ever met. She's a liar and I despise liars. My mood sours again, I surface from the waves and stride towards the shore, only to hear another scream.

It's her—Vali.

"Don't touch me!" she cries.

I scan the beach, my senses on alert, and spot multiple figures on the sands. She's found other humans, it seems, her dark, long hair easy to spot. She's closer to Akara than I am. You told her to stay close, I remind myself. I stride towards her location, scowling, just in time to see one of the men grab her by the front of her dress and rip it down her body.

She plants a fist in his mouth and kicks at the one holding her, screaming with

outrage.

My temper soars, too. Who do these men think they are that they can grab a woman and attack her? There is a scatter of shells near their feet, evidence that she was minding her own business.

I snarl as I approach, storming toward them and flexing my four arms to look as intimidating as possible. They're so focused on Vali's flailing arms and legs that they have yet to notice me...which only pisses me off more. "What do you think you are doing?"

They turn to look at me, and as they do, their eyes widen. The one clutching Vali by the waist drops her immediately and she falls to the sand, her breasts spilling out of her ripped garment. She cries out, remaining where she is, and glances up at me. There's a trickle of blood coming from her nostril, and the sight of that incenses me.

They hit her? They came upon a pretty female on the beach and attacked and hit her? Are all humans such monsters?

"Why are you touching my wife?" I snarl at them, moving to stand in front of all three fishermen.

"We didn't know she was yours," the oldest—the one that ripped her dress—stammers. "We thought she was an escaped slave. A free prize for anyone."

"And because you thought she was a slave you attacked her?" I march up to the bearded one, glaring down at him. "Explain this to me."

He shoots a glance at the other men. "If she was an escaped slave, there'd be a bounty on her head. Easy coin. If not, then we could sell her again. That's all. We were just looking to have a little taste and make a few coins."

So they would rape a stranger and sell her to the first buyer all because they thought she might be a slave.

“She’s got cuff marks on her wrists,” protests one of the others. “And she’s wearing a slave shift. We did nothing wrong.”

“I should cut your throats and feed you three to my turtle,” I hiss at them. They quail, shrinking back from me and eyeing my trident. I tap my leg. “Vali, come here.”

That makes her look up. She gives me an indignant stare, clutching the remains of her dress to her breasts, but slowly gets to her feet and moves to my side.

“Should I kill them, wife?” I ask, folding two of my arms over my chest and brandishing my trident with a third hand. “Say the word.”

“Yes,” she says immediately.

I’m surprised. I thought she’d beg for their lives, say it was all a mistake. But her tone is hard and just as angry as mine, and it’s clear there’s a dark streak in her.

“Wait! Wait!” the bearded human says. “We can come to an agreement!”

“We have gold,” says another, taking a step back and glancing at the shack in the distance. He clearly wants to run for it. If he does, he’ll find my trident lodged in his spine.

“Show me your gold and I’ll tell you if it’s enough to buy your lives.” I turn to Vali, gesturing at Akara in the distance. “Return to the tent.”

She shoots me an equally venomous look—and I am surprised by her all over again—but does as she is told and retreats to the safety of the turtle.

The humans do have a fair amount of gold for poor fishermen, and it's clear Vali is not the first they've attacked. I clean them out of their riches and find out which one hit Vali and deliver a hit of my own...and a warning. If they touch what's mine again, I'll kill them and rob them. The smell of urine follows me as I abandon them on the beach, as the eldest has pissed himself with fear.

I return to Akara's side, moving to her head and running a hand over her sharp beak. She blinks large, dark eyes up at me, reaching out with her thoughts. She smells humans on the shore and doesn't like it. I prod at her, wondering if Vali's scent bothers her, but she only sends a mental picture of me back—she associates Vali with me now, her scent with mine. Hunh.

The humans are troubling, though. If they attacked Vali, then I cannot simply leave her near a settlement. If I do, she will be enslaved again before the day is out. I've seen the cuff markings on her wrists as well, though I didn't know slaves had a particular sort of garment. All seakind wear as little as possible, our women as bare as our men. I know nothing of human dresses. It's not my fault they mistook her for a slave.

Even so, I'm glad I arrived in time. I don't like that they hit her. I don't like that they tore her clothes and attacked her. Just thinking about it makes me furious, and I'm tempted to go back up to the hut and cut their throats anyhow, just to sate my anger.

I stroke Akara's bony head and think of the large fish I saw earlier. Is this Lord Vor telling me that this female should be my bride after all? Did he send her to me? It is something I will have to think about. For now, I need to return to Vali and reassure her, as she will no doubt be full of tears and gratitude that I have saved her yet again. I'll give her the gold from the men, I decide. And if she offers to touch me again, I'll still turn her away, but I like the thought of her offering.

If she is to be my bride after all...the idea irks me less this day. I think of how warm

she was, how soft in my arms last night. I don't need a bride, but perhaps I am too much alone after all.

I duck into the tent, looking for the woman. She is seated in the back, the bags neatly arranged to allow more floor space. Her dress is off and she's busy knotting it, trying to piece it together again. The blood still trails from her nose, and when I enter, she looks up and sends me a look of pure anger.

"What am I to you?" she demands.

I am taken aback by her tone. She has been pleasant and eager to please all this time and now she is like this? "Excuse me?"

She grabs another torn end of the fabric in her hands, not caring that she sits naked in front of me. Her hands knot material in jerking, angry movements. "I want to know what I am to you. You asked for a bride. I volunteered. You said yes. Yet you treat me like I'm a wart that has suddenly appeared on your nose. It makes me wonder, and so I am asking you—what am I? Your wife or your slave?"

I scowl.

"I'm asking because I can't tell. You treat me like I am nothing to you. You don't answer when I talk to you. You act like my questions irritate you. Your home has no comforts for a person, much less a man seeking a bride." Her accusing gaze flicks up to me as she makes another furious knot in the clothing. "You address me in front of others as if I'm a dog, tapping your thigh and telling me to come."

I narrow my eyes at her. True, I did do that. I simply wanted to get her away from those men attacking her.

"So am I a dog? A slave? Because you tell me not to call you master. What am I,

then? You cannot say I'm not a slave and then treat me like one around others. I don't know how to act. I don't know how to please you. Tell me what I am to you so I can behave accordingly. If I am a slave, I know how to behave. If I am your wife, I know how to behave. But I cannot be both."

She's chastising me, and it only makes my mood blacker because...she's right. I don't know how to act around her. My plan was to abandon her at a human settlement, but she doesn't know that, just as she doesn't know that I've changed my mind now that I've seen the humans in question. I have to figure out what to do with her. "Where is your family?"

Vali laughs and shakes her head, the sound mirthless. She makes another tight, furious knot in her garment. "Dead and gone. My father was killed years ago and I was sold into slavery. My city was just now razed by Aventine, so there's no one to send me back to, if that's what you're asking. Parness is nothing but stones and burnt fields."

She's more observant than I've given her credit for. I'm not surprised by her answer, either. While it would have made my life easier to turn her over to family members, I somehow knew there weren't any. Who would let a young, clever, pretty woman in their family get taken by slavers if they could do anything about it?

Vali makes another knot in the clothing and then jerks it back over her head, shoving her arms through the holes and settling the garment on her body. It's a terrible fit, the material bunched at her neck and jagged, held together only by the knots she's made. Her dress is now a great deal shorter, the neckline completely changed thanks to the rips, and yet she's not demanding a new gown or fretting over the tears. She's making do with what she has.

Something tells me this is not the first time that Vali has simply made do with scraps.

A dark bead on her bare arm catches my attention. As I watch, a line of blood slides down her skin. It's not from her nose, which has dried on her upper lip. This is a different cut on the fleshy part of her bicep. "You're bleeding."

Her hand goes to her nose and she winces. "Aye. Those cretins hit me. May Vor fill their pants with nothing but sand lice."

I hold back a snort of amusement at her creative prayer and reach out to touch her arm. "Here, too."

She glances down at her skin and then gives a quick nod. "I fell on the shells I'd been collecting. Some of them were sharp."

She'd been collecting shells, like a child. And those men came along and threatened her. I'm filled with rage all over again. Taking the hem of her much-shorter gown, I lift it and use it to wipe at her face, then her arm. "I don't like that they touched you. Should I go back and murder them?"

"They were just treating me like a slave. They saw my garment and thought they could make coin." Her tone is bitter. "I hope you robbed them good, though."

"I did." It doesn't feel like enough. I dab at the blood on her arm. "Are any of these cuts deep?"

"No. Thanks for ruining my one garment, though. It'll look vastly more appealing with blood all over it."

She's forgotten all about being a sweet, happy liar and is flaying me with her sharp tongue instead. I rather like it. It feels genuine. The real Vali is someone I can understand, not the smiling liar. I wipe another trickle of blood off her arm and glance up at her face. "My people do not wear much, so I do not think about clothing."

It is clear you do, though. Do you need a new dress?"

Her expression softens. "I find it cold at night. I wouldn't mind something warm to wear."

I grunt, thinking of the fish leathers I have in my storage grotto. I also have some attractive bolts of fabric that fell overboard from a sinking ship that I rescued. They were in the water for a short period of time only and I dried them in the sun. They're wrinkled, but still better than what she has.

"You...you didn't answer me, Ranan. Can you please just tell me straight? What am I to you?" Her dark eyes gaze up at me, full of vulnerability. "I won't be angry if you are keeping me as a slave. I understand it, I do. It's just...if you decide to sell me, please make it to someone fair? I won't ask for a kind master, because those are as rare as jewels, but perhaps not to a brothel?"

Here I have been saying I am not a monster, and yet I have been one to her. Is she convenient? No. But I demanded a bride, and she has volunteered. I brush the dried blood from her upper lip and study her face. I think of Vor, and the large fish that swam in front of me in the reef. Perhaps he has placed this woman in my path. Perhaps the god thinks I am lonely after all.

And I make a decision, though I might regret it later. "You are my bride."

I will not dump her near the human settlements. To do so would surely see her enslaved again. It is not her fault my tongue twisted and I did not correct anyone. She is mine now, and I must see to her.

Relief brightens Vali's face. She manages a trembling smile. "All right, then."

I feel like a monster all over again. It's never been my intention to be cruel to her, and

yet I can't seem to help myself. I should probably apologize, but the right words fail me. "I don't talk much."

"That's all right. I'll try to stay out of your way." She hesitates and then adds, "And if I do ask something, could you please answer me without looking as if I just walked on your ancestor's grave?"

Have I been that foul to live with? Looking at her worried face I suspect that yes, I have been. "I can try."

"Thank you."

I should feed her. Probably. That's what one does with a wife, yes? "Are you hungry? I can get fish."

"I don't want to be a bother...but I'm absolutely famished." She grimaces. "If you could show me how to get my own fish, perhaps I can hunt for myself..."

"Soon. Not today." I don't like the purple showing up under her eye. I stroke my fingers over her chin again. "Stay here in the tent. Akara's going to start moving and I want you hidden until we leave the shore."

She nods. "Where are we going?"

"To my home." Home means many different things to one of the seakind. I haven't yet entirely decided where we're going, so the vagueness of the answer suits me. For now, she simply needs to know that we are leaving the shore—and the fishermen—behind.

And if I see them again before we leave, I will gut them and leave their innards for the gulls to pick through.

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Chapter

Eight

VALI

Ranan is impossible to read. I don't know what to make of him. He's promised to talk more, and yet he dives into the waters and retreats over and over again, spending most of his day away from me. He brings more raw fish for me to eat, and when I ask him to show me how to gut it and prepare it properly, he dismisses my request. Later, is all he says.

When the sun sets and it grows cold, he comes into the tent and wraps himself around me, still silent.

Well, he did say he doesn't talk much.

Lying in Ranan's arms does make the hard floor—the turtle's back, I remind myself—a bit more comfortable. There's fluffy, tufted moss growing on the shell outside of the tent but nothing inside it, which makes the "floor" feel like stone. The sea-ogre puts his arms (all four of them) around me, caging me against him, my back to his front. I tuck one of my hands under my cheek and wait for him to make a move.

If I'm his wife, as he says, he'll want me to fulfill my wifely duties and serve him in bed. I know from past experience that most men want something when they get into bed with you, and I wait for him to give me a signal—a suggestive touch, a tug on my

clothing, something.

Yet there is nothing from Ranan. Again, I don't know how to read him.

I stare into the dark, wide awake, and decide to press my luck and ask a few questions. "Are we far from shore?"

He takes a moment to respond. "Not too far."

"I see."

"Don't try to escape." His voice is harsh and annoyed, and my shoulders tense. He notices my reaction and adds, "If you want to go to shore, I will take you, that's all. You can't swim."

Here I thought I was a decent swimmer. "I'm not going to run for it. There's nowhere for me to go. My parents are gone, and my land destroyed by Aventine soldiers. If they hear Parness in my accent, they'll enslave me. If someone thinks I'm a runaway slave, they'll enslave me. Gods, even if they just see a woman alone, they'll enslave me. I'm safer with you."

He grunts. "I know nothing of humans other than they like to carry gold on their ships, but it seems unfair to you."

"Very," I agree. "But that is the world we live in."

He grunts.

I take the lull of conversation to ease into a new topic. "What made you want a bride, Ranan?"

It's silent for so long that I worry I've offended him all over again. But he sighs and then says, "It was a sudden decision."

That's...not much of an answer. Something tells me it's all I'm going to get from him tonight, though. Clearly Ranan does not like to share his feelings. There are many reasons why someone would seek out a bride. Another set of hands to do the work, for example...though if that's the case, I don't think Ranan would have chosen a human. Perhaps he was lonely, I tell myself. Perhaps he wants to start a family.

Lord Vor's mercy, I can't imagine having a child atop a turtle's back. I'm going to have to ask about that at some point, when Ranan is feeling more amenable. For now, I can dance around the idea. "Will you let me know what you will expect of a wife?"

"I'll let you know as soon as I figure it out myself."

"Ah." An honest answer, but not a particularly helpful one.

He shifts behind me, one of his hands resting on my arm and twitching. Is he touching my skin deliberately as a lead-in to something else? It's so hard to tell. "My silence is not anger. I am...not good at expressing myself with words." He pauses. "I am used to being alone."

I appreciate his words, and reach out to pat the hand resting on my arm. "I'm probably going to have a great deal of questions for you. Is that all right? I'm not familiar with your life or your people and I will probably ask a lot."

"And here I thought you had pleased a great many sea-ogres."

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. I'm frozen. I don't know what to say to him. He's calling me out on my lies, but we both already know that I'm a liar. Is he chastising me? How do I respond to that?

He gives my arm a squeeze. “Joke.”

Oh.

I feel as if I can breathe again. A tense laugh rushes out of me. “You had me worried.”

“I don’t like lies.”

I wait for him to go on, and when he doesn’t, the silence turns awkward again. Do I tell him I won’t lie again? I’ll surely be lying then, because lies have become second nature to me. I don’t know when I’m going to lie. They just sometimes slip out. “I...understand.”

The quiet is so intense in the tent it starts to feel oppressive. Is he waiting for me to say something more? I chew on my lip, fretting.

Just go to sleep, I tell myself. Quit asking him so many questions since you’re not prepared for his answers. But I’m not ready yet, not when I’m just now really and truly talking to Ranan for the first time since we met. “Do you have family?” I ask brightly. “Brothers? Sisters? Parents?”

Pause.

“You’re asking now?”

“Is now a bad time?”

I get the impression that he bites back a sigh before he answers me. “I have parents on the flotilla.”

Well, now I have more questions. “A flotilla? What’s that?”

“Hamarii cluster together into a family unit, laying their flippers atop one another and drift in the open waters while they eat. It allows many of us to live close together. Like your land-bound villages. That is where my family is. Our flotilla.”

How very fascinating. He sounds fond of them. He says the word “flotilla” almost like a caress. “And yet you are not with them?”

A hint of a smile touches his hard mouth. Just a hint. “Akara is at an age where she is territorial. She does not like other females near her. Some hamarii are more aggressive than others, and Akara is one. I raised her from a hatchling and we have a bond. I could choose to release her from our bond or leave with her.” He shrugs. “So I left with her. I still visit my family, but never for long.”

There’s no resentment in his tone. Whatever his bond is with his turtle, it’s enough for him. Of course, a territorial turtle raises new kinds of issues. “Is she...going to be upset that you have a wife?”

“No.” He pauses and then adds, almost reluctantly, “She already thinks of you as mine. Do you have more questions?”

“Far too many. Should I stop asking?”

His mouth flattens again. “You should sleep.”

I probably should, but now my mind is whirling with all kinds of thoughts. Things like what I’ll do to get on Akara’s good side. What I’ll do to get on Ranan’s good side. Surely he has a good side. There seems an obvious way to get him to like me and yet... “Can I ask one more question?”

Another heavy sigh. “Go ahead.”

“Since I’m your wife, are we going to have sex soon?” I blurt out, and continue on before he can interrupt. “I’m just asking because we should think about prevention of some kind unless you want to have children. Back in my village, there was a wise-woman that sold honeycombs packed with dung, and we could use those as a preventative. But I have nothing like that right now and I’m not sure where I’d even find a honeycomb.”

Ranan pauses. “You would eat that?” Disgust is clear in his voice.

“Um, no. You put it inside you to catch the seed and make it go sour.”

His big body jerks in response. “That’s disgusting. You won’t do anything like that.”

Oh, very well then. I suppose he feels quite strongly about things like that. Some people don’t like a wise-woman’s methods, but I’ve never heard anyone complain. I’m just as happy not stuffing dirty honeycombs anywhere myself. “Then you’ll have to pull out. Which is fine, truly—you can come on my tits or my belly, and that’s always a nice thing. I’m just bringing it up so there’s no surprises.”

“It’s not a concern for us right now.” His voice is tight.

It’s not? He’s so very confusing, my new husband. Perhaps he doesn’t want a wife for bodily pleasures. Or companionship. Perhaps he just wants me to work alongside him. I suppose it could be worse. “If you say so.”

“Go to sleep.”

“Can I ask you more questions tomorrow?”

“Go to sleep, Vali.”

Oh, he used my name. That means I’ve pushed beyond his patience. “Good night, then, Ranan.”

I wake up before dawn the next morning with the irritating urge to pee. Using the necessity is one of the things I like least about living upon the turtle’s back. I have to get into the water and relieve myself, or I have to hang my arse over the edge of the turtle’s shell and do my business that way. I can’t help but worry that the turtle’s going to take offense in some way to my doings and fling me off her back.

So because I know it’ll be a while thing, I lie quietly in Ranan’s arms and listen to him breathing.

It’s...oddly nice. Our sleeping arrangements aren’t the most comfortable, but I’m not sure what can be done on a turtle’s back. I can’t imagine a bed full of down pillows and soft blankets. They’d get ruined quickly. Ranan’s body is warm, though, and his arms don’t feel as strange as they did when I met him. He’s got four arms and a sail-like fin atop his head, yet he is normal in every other way.

Well, almost every other way.

Truly, I’ve slept in worse. After my last owner died and I was enslaved again, I slept in a stable when things were pleasant and on the hearth in the kitchen when the stable grew too crowded. There’s no one here to flick my skirts, there’s no lice, no one’s stepping on me or slapping me to wake me up because the chamberpots need to be emptied. There’s just Ranan to keep happy, and he’s a bit moody, but I can handle moody.

He’s just one person.

Well, I need to keep him and his turtle happy. But this feels doable. For the first time in a very long time, I'm not worried about what my future will be.

Vor of the Seas is looking out for me.

...I've really got to get that fish for him. To show him my thanks.

Turning in Ranan's embrace, I tap him gently on the chest to try and wake him and then get distracted. He's got hard pectorals, but that's expected. His entire body is hard and lean. It's the fact that he's got a second set of pectoral muscles below the first set, like his upper chest has been stacked twice by whatever god made him. It's fascinating to get a chance to truly study our differences, and I trace my fingertips over that lower set of muscles.

His hand closes over mine, stopping me.

"Sorry," I say, breathless. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Yes, you did." He doesn't open his eyes, his body relaxed except for the one hand pinning mine.

"Very well, so I did. It's just habit for me to say things like that. But I do need you awake. I want to get a fish for Vor today. I don't want him to think I've forgotten about him." I tap my captured hand against his skin. "So if you could please show me where the big fish are, I shall stay out of your way."

That makes him crack an eye open. He stares at me. "How would you get it?"

"The fish?" I consider for a moment. I haven't really thought how I would hunt one. "Could I borrow your trident? I think that would work."

“Because you’ve used a trident before?”

“Well, no.”

“Have you ever fished before? Lured a fish to the surface?”

“I actually don’t know how to do those things, now that you mention it.” I smile brightly at him, determined. “But I’m willing to learn, and I promise you won’t have to tell me twice.”

“You’d fall over the side trying to spear the fish,” he says, closing his eyes again. “And the bigger the fish, the deeper the waters. It’s dangerous for someone like you.”

“Someone like me? A human? A woman?”

“Someone that doesn’t know how to swim.”

Oooh. I smack his chest. “I do so know how to swim.”

He snorts. Ranan opens his eyes and releases me, sitting up. “You’d drown before I even had my back turned to you. That’s the first thing we’re going to do—we’re going to teach you how to swim.”

“But Vor—the god?—”

“The god will understand. You’re doing everything you can to get him what you promised. He can be patient for the right offering. And you want to give him the right offering.”

I chew on my lip, because I really do. The god has saved me. I need to give him the best offering I possibly can. “You’re right. You’ll show me how to swim, then?”

Ranan grunts. He scrubs a hand over his face, looking surprisingly boyish with that small move. “Aye. I’ll show you how to swim.”

“Thank you. You won’t regret it! I’m a fast learner.” I beam at him, pleased. Swimming seems important to him, so I’ll let him teach me. “After the morning meal, then?”

“We’ll get the morning meal in the waters,” he says. “Put your dress in one of the bags.”

I’m not swimming with it on? The realization catches me by surprise, and then I feel foolish. Why would I? He wears as little as possible, so it makes sense that I’d do the same. My dress will just get in the way of swimming anyhow. I try not to feel vulnerable as I pull it off and fold it into a tidy square. He leans over one of the bags and unties the strange knots, then gestures that I should put my rags inside.

“Can I ask you something?” I glance up at him.

“Can I stop you?”

“You can by being grouchy, but then I’ll remain woefully ignorant,” I say, changing my tone of voice to a grave one. “Better to get the questions out of the way rather than deal with the consequences of a foolish and useless wife.”

His mouth twitches. “Ask, then.”

“Why are your bags tied like this? With two knots and the leather in the middle? And a dry fish on the end? I cannot figure it out.” I gesture at the heaps of bags surrounding us in the tent. “And it’s been driving me mad.”

Ranan’s eyes light up with realization and he lets out a rusty-sounding chuckle. “I

suppose it would be confusing to a human.”

“Or anyone with eyes.”

“Or anyone with eyes,” he agrees, sounding far more agreeable this morning. “The seakind always bag their goods. A turtle’s back is broad, but if Akara is threatened, she will submerge herself. It’s rare because her kind love the sunshine, but it has happened. If she does go under, anything upon her will spill into the waters.”

“I see.” I study the bags with greater understanding now. “So you’re making sure that your valuables are easy to find should Akara dump them into the water?”

Ranan nods. “The bags are heavy and will still sink, but finding one large bag instead of twenty necklaces is much easier.”

It makes sense. I touch the strange knots. “Why the double-tie, then? Does it have a purpose? And the dead fish?”

“The double tie is to prevent as much water as possible from going into the bag itself. Not everything does well when exposed to seawater.” He crouches next to one of the bags and shows it to me. “The top is knotted and then knotted again and then twisted below and tied with a cord directly under the leather oilcloth. One set of knots will not keep the seawater out, but twisting the bag and adding a second set helps.”

Interesting.

“As for the fish...” He picks one up and taps on it. The surface is hard like a child’s leather ball, and nearly as spherical. “This kind puffs itself to look fearsome to predators. We dry them when they are bloated and they float. With a bag tied to it, even if the weight of the goods keeps the bag on the sea floor, the fish will drift above it and make it easier to spot.”

“So it’s like a marker. How very clever. I understand now. I thought you were just, well, I actually didn’t know what to think.”

His expression is hard. “Just because we do not live in cities does not mean we are fools.”

“Cities certainly have their share of fools as well, no worries about that.” I touch the bag, trying to follow the complex knots. “I wasn’t saying your way was wrong. It’s just very different from mine. I’m going to have a lot of questions as I get used to your lifestyle. Please don’t take it the wrong way. I’m not defending my people. They enslaved me twice and caved the moment the Aventine army showed up on our doorstep. They can all rot as far as I’m concerned. But it’s also the only way I know.”

He grunts acknowledgment.

“Yours is the first turtle I’ve ever seen, much less lived upon.” I give him a rueful smile. “Are they all as big as this one?”

Ranan’s expression softens at the mention of his turtle. “Hamarii are big, yes, but Akara is large for her age. She’s fierce, too. I’ll introduce you to her but don’t approach her head unless I’m with you.”

Well that’s not terrifying at all. “No worries about that. Anything else I should do so she doesn’t eat me?”

“She won’t eat you. She doesn’t eat people.”

“You never know, I could be a particularly tasty woman, all nice and juicy.” I let a little flirtiness into my voice.

“I don’t eat people either.” Ranan’s tone grows hard. “My people are not monsters.”

“That-that wasn’t what I meant?—”

He glares at me and gets to his feet, then flicks a hand indicating I should follow after him. “Come. You need to learn to swim.”

How is it that I manage to offend him constantly?

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Chapter

Nine

RANAN

My ears are hot as I stalk to the edge of Akara's shell. How is it that I mistook her words? She was teasing me, and I assumed she was thinking the worst. Now I've snarled at her and she's gone quiet.

I wasn't entirely truthful with her as to why I live alone with Akara. Yes, she's territorial. But I am also not good with people. I find the less I say, the less my mouth gets me in trouble. It's another reason why living a nomadic life with Akara suits me.

But now there is this woman.

And she has a great many questions. And she wants to talk constantly. Yet every time I say anything to her, I get it wrong. It makes me angry at myself, and at the same time, I feel foolish.

I dive into the sea, hands above my head, and let the cool waters soothe the heat from my face. I surface, tossing my head-sail to shake loose the droplets, just in time to see that the woman—Vali—has tried to copy my movements. Her arms are over her head and she bends over the waters to attempt a dive, but it is clear she has never done one before.

She flops into the water, belly-first, and the smack of her skin against the surface is

deafening.

I cannot help it—I bark with laughter.

She surfaces a moment later, her face contorted. “Owww.”

“Diving is a skill that takes time,” I say, moving to her side to support her before she starts her flailing paddle. “Get the basics first.”

“You made it look easy,” she complains, but a hint of a smile is on her face. Even in her humiliation, she is light and relaxed...unlike me. When I am humiliated, I snap at her as if it is her fault.

I am a cur.

Self-loathing makes me speak up. “I didn’t know you were teasing,” I blurt out. “Earlier. With your words.”

She curls her arms around my neck, pressing her breasts to my chest as I tread water. I tell myself it’s no big deal. That she’s simply holding onto me because she can’t swim. And yet she’s wet and warm and soft and I can feel everything , including the light scrape of her nipples. “Is that an apology?”

“Does it need to be?”

Vali brushes her wet hair back from her face. “Not if we both know the truth of it.”

I manage a sharp nod. Her face is very near mine, her arms tight around my neck, and yet I don’t hate how close she is. Her skin is damp and golden and lovely and I can’t stop staring at her.

“We’re going to be learning about each other for a while,” Vali continues. “I promise not to get upset at you if you do something that bothers me, and you can promise not to yell at me if I do the same.”

She makes it sound so easy. Yet I know myself, and I know my sour temper. It’s almost as bad as Akara’s. “I cannot promise that. I’m too used to living alone. I might yell at you without thinking. Habit.”

Vali tilts her head, considering. “Well, if you do yell, just know that I will probably resort to acting like a slave. That means I’ll cry at your feet and beg for mercy and all kinds of pitiful groveling like that. Habit.”

I scowl. “I don’t want that. It sounds awful.”

She laughs, the sound bright and lovely as it echoes on the waters around us. “Well then, don’t yell at me!”

Truly, she could not have said anything more effective to make me pause. I hate the thought of Vali cowering in front of me, whimpering like a slave and begging for mercy. It would make me feel like a monster, and yet I suspect she’s done such things in the past.

The thought makes me angry. Irrationally so. I give her a little push away from me, even though I want nothing more than to clutch her bare skin against mine. “Let’s just focus on teaching you to swim.”

She immediately starts to paddle with sharp, frantic motions.

I have to grab her arms, holding her in place. “Not like that. Large strokes. Confident, slow strokes. You are pushing against the water, not beating at it. Never thrash in the water or make quick, jerky motions.”

“Why not?”

“That’s how an injured animal moves in the water. It flails, and in doing so, calls every predator in the sea to come and feast upon it.”

Her eyes grow wide, the whites of them enormous. “There are things in the ocean that are going to try and eat me? Things like...Akara?” Her gaze goes to the bright blue, clear waters around us and she gazes at it suspiciously—as she should. Fear of the sea is a good thing, especially in a fragile human. Vor’s creatures would feast upon her flesh in a moment given the chance.

“Akara will not eat you. She eats the waters.”

“She what?”

I’ll have to show her some other time. For now, all that is important is that she learn to swim. “Just listen. You need not fear Akara, but there are things in the waters with sharp teeth that prey upon the wounded and the weak. If you are injured, stay atop Akara. Do not get in the water. And never thrash. If you do those two things, you will be fine. And if you keep to my side, you will always be safe. Understand?”

She gives me a wide-eyed nod. “I’m rather terrified right now.”

“Then stay close to me and listen well.” I can feel her trembling in my grasp, and that won’t do. I don’t want her to be afraid for her life every moment we are on the waters. She needs to respect the sea, but she need not live in constant fear. “Learn to swim, listen to my instructions, and stay close. I will keep you safe.”

Vali immediately puts her arms around my neck again, clinging to my chest in the water. Her breasts push up against me and she twines one leg around my hips. “This close enough?”

I cannot tell if she is flirting or if she is serious. “Swimming might be a challenge this way.”

“I’m less concerned with swimming and more concerned with being eaten.” Her breasts are practically in my face, and very distracting. In fact, all of her is distracting.

I need to teach her to swim before I lose my concentration. Gently, I pry her away from me. “I have an uncle with a human companion. We’ll ask what he uses.”

Vali nods. “Until then, can I just hold on to you?”

I should tell her no. I should tell her that her nudity won’t sway me. That I’m not interested in making her my wife in all ways. That she’s clinging to me like a barnacle and I don’t like it.

But all of that would be a lie.

Because I do like the feel of her against me. My cocks are waking up, stirring with interest, and every time she rubs against me, it takes everything I have to keep my face neutral. I know if I pushed my interest upon her, she’d happily mate with me, but not because she feels desire. She’d do it because she wants to ensure her safety. As a bargaining tool, a coin to barter with.

And I want no part in that. Yet I am still weak, because I don’t shove her away. I just hold her against me. “Let me show you how to float upon the water.”

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Chapter

Ten

VALI

L ord Gental, the god of families, has a twisted sense of humor...because I get my monthly menses the very next morning.

Right after Ranan gave me lessons in swimming and made it very clear that I'm not to go into the deep waters of the sea if I have a wound because I'll be seen as prey? Blood trickles from deep within me. I lie on the floor of the tent, hating the cramps and feeling utterly panicked. I don't have rags to stuff into my undergarments. Gods, I don't even have undergarments . I have nothing to soak up the blood with and I'm surrounded by the sea—a sea I am very much not supposed to get into right now.

What do I do?

I roll carefully on my side, hoping that will somehow keep the blood inside me until I figure out a solution. Ranan isn't in the tent, and I'm relieved. He was gone this morning when I awoke to belly cramps. I should have known I was about to get my moon time—night before last I had utterly filthy dreams about Ranan holding me in the water and shoving me up against the turtle's shell so he could drive into me from behind. I always have naughty dreams right before my period.

So much for swimming lessons. I'm going to be a burden to Ranan for the next several days. A bloody, messy, crampy burden. He's probably going to be furious at

me. If I was back in Parness, the wise-woman would offer me a charmed plug made out of wool and wrapped with herbs, but I'm starting to think her solution to all ailments is to shove things into holes where they don't belong. It would at least be a solution, though. Right now I don't know what to do. The stink of my period feels as if it's permeating the tent and I need to fix this somehow.

I grab my ragged dress and rip a thick strip off the hem, then shove that bit of material between my thighs. It's not enough to soak up much if my flow is heavy, but perhaps I can rinse it in the sea without Ranan noticing. It feels like a terrible idea, though—he said sea creatures could smell blood for leagues, and I'd be washing blood right into the waters where we are. What choice do I have, though?

Worse yet—what if Ranan decides he wants his husbandly rights? I won't get pregnant, but something tells me that he won't like my bleeding, either. I'll still happily have sex with him, but I never feel less unappealing than when I'm crampy and bleeding and bloated.

I want to cry. I'm not much of a weeper, but today, I feel like wailing in frustration. Why does my body have the worst timing ever? Why can't I be like one of the other village girls who skip their monthly cycle when the slightest stressful things happen? No, I have to bleed like a stuck pig.

Clutching my gut, I try to come up with a story. Back in Parness, a woman with her menses was considered unclean, a curse by the god Gental every month as punishment that we did not bear children. I'd have to hide from all men until Gental's curse was lifted. Some women look forward to their menses because they can hide out from their husbands and children, but for me, it just meant the usual work and cramps.

Ranan's going to think I'm unclean and avoid me if I tell him the truth. I need a good lie as to why I can't swim today. Why I need to just stay here in the tent, stinking of

old blood. An old wound, perhaps? That seems the most likely answer. Yes. I've opened an old wound I need to nurse it. I can swim later. I adjust my torn dress around my waist, hiding my loins. The wound is on my inner thigh, I decide, prepping my story. Perhaps I was gored by a bull once and now the salt water has made it flare up again. Completely believable?—

The tent flap jerks back, and I yelp in surprise. I've been so tense that the sight of him sets my heart to pounding. "Oh, it's you."

Ranan scowls at my words.

"Not that I was expecting anyone else," I blurt out, sitting up. My dress gets shorter by the day, and to make sure that I have everything covered that needs covering, I'm wearing it as a skirt and leaving my breasts bare. The women in Parness would do so when the weather got hot and no one looked twice, but it's just me and Ranan here, and I haven't gone bare-breasted save for our swimming lessons.

He stared at my breasts then, and he's staring at them now, too. I mean, they are rather nice breasts, but now is not the time that I want my new husband aroused by the sight of me. "I can't swim today," I blurt out. "Apologies. I'm just going to lie here in the tent."

Ranan narrows his eyes at me. "Why?"

He seems suspicious, as if I'm deliberately working against his wishes. Gods, I wish I could reassure him. What if his people toss unclean women overboard and make them swim until the monthly curse is lifted? What if he abandons me on shore again? "Nothing much," I say in my brightest voice. "The salt water has just opened up an old wound of mine and I need to rest it until the bleeding stops."

"You're bleeding?"

“Not much,” I blurt out, wondering if I should have gone with a different tactic. “Just enough that I can’t swim today, as you said. I’m sure it’ll be gone by morning. It’s truly fine.”

He gives me such a look that I quail inside. “Where?”

I swallow hard. “Where what?”

“Where are you bleeding?”

Oh, by the gods. Surely he doesn’t want specifics. “Nowhere important. Like I said, it’s an old wound?—”

“Show me.” Ranan’s expression is unyielding.

“Truly, it’s nothing at all, I swear.” I adjust my skirt, hoping that no blood is coming through. “But if you have some rags I can use to clean up the blood, I’d be ever so grateful...”

My excuses die in my throat as he continues to glare at me.

“Show me,” he says again, not moving a muscle.

“I really don’t think that’s necessary.” I primly smooth a hand down the hem of my skirt, making sure it covers me to my knees and hides everything.

That small movement gets his attention, however. He points at my lower body. “Is it on your leg?”

“If you must know, it’s the inside of my thigh,” I lie. “An old goring from a bull. I—eep!” I yelp when he grabs my legs, sliding me onto my back, and spreads my

thighs far apart. “Don’t! Please!”

He ignores my protests and gazes between my legs, and I want to die of shame. Just fall right off the turtle and drift down into the deep waters of the sea and forget all of this. I cover my hands with my face, embarrassed.

“You’re bleeding.”

“I know! I said that!”

He’s quiet, and I keep my hands over my face, trying to draw my legs together. His hands hold my knees apart, though, and then he strokes the outside of my thigh. “I see no old wounds. Is this your menses, then?”

I fight back the urge to cry. So much for hiding it. “Aye, it’s my menses. Please don’t toss me onto shore and leave me behind.”

He grabs my hands and pries them away from my hot face. “I am not a monster. I am not abandoning you. Understand?”

I bite my lip...and then whimper when a fierce round of cramps sets in. I manage a nod. “Th-thank you.”

Ranan leans back, two of his hands still on my knees, and gazes down at my body. “How long does this last?”

Is he asking because he doesn’t know about women, or is it because the women of his people don’t bleed like this? If so, that makes things worse. His human wife is a bleeder. “It should pass in about five days.”

Rubbing his mouth, he gently closes my legs again. I immediately snap my thighs

together and turn on my side, curling into a ball.

“You are in pain,” he points out.

“Cramps. They’re worst the first two days.”

“What do you require from me? How can I help?”

Part of me wishes he would go away, because I just want to be left alone. I’m not used to someone paying attention to my cramps, much less offering to help out. I wrap an arm around my belly and shrug. “Willow bark tea? If you have that, it helps with the aching.”

“I have none.” He rubs his jaw. “Tell me what this tree looks like and I will try to find it.”

“I genuinely don’t know. I bought it from the apothecary. It’s fine. Thank you for offering.” I reach out and pat one of his hands. “If it’s all the same, I’m going to sleep through the worst of it if I can.”

He blinks at me, gaze somber, and nods. “Do you require food? Drink?”

I shake my head. “The thought of raw fish is nauseating right now. I’ll be fine. Truly. It’s like this every month.”

Ranan’s mouth flattens. He gets to his feet and abandons me without saying a word.

It’s not the worst round of cramps I’ve had, but it’s up there. I’m tired and thirsty and sore, but I don’t have the energy to get up from the bottom of the tent and find a waterskin. I doze instead, and when I wake up, my lips are dry and chapped and the cloth between my thighs is soaked. Ugh. I rub a hand over my face, wondering if I

should go to the water's edge and rinse it, or if that's a bad idea.

As if my thoughts summon him, Ranan steps inside the tent. He's got a wet trunk with him the size of a barrel and sets it down in front of me. "I brought you cloth."

"You did?" I sit up, touched at his efforts. "You didn't have to do that."

"You are hurting and feel unwell," he says simply. "If this will help, I will do it."

It won't fix my cramps, but I'll definitely feel better cleaned up. I watch as he pulls out a knife and breaks the wax seal around the edges of the trunk, something I've never seen before. It's to make it waterproof, I realize. A trunk full of sodden fabric would be twice as heavy and likely ruined, too. He opens the trunk and grabs the first bolt of fabric and offers it to me.

My jaw drops. I touch the delicately embroidered silk, a cloth that's probably worth more than Lady Parness's entire castle. "I can't use this."

"It is dry?—"

I shake my head before he can finish. "It's too fine. Too beautiful. I'd ruin it."

"It's just fabric." He glares at me.

"And you're 'just' like a human man, right?"

Ranan huffs, amused by my comparison. "Very well, then."

He digs deeper into the trunk and pulls out another fabric this time, this one a rich green brocade with gold thread shot through it. I decline again, and we go through the trunk of fabrics, all of them more beautiful than I ever imagined, and finally go with a

dark, elegant, burgundy linen, as it seems the best choice. I hold the fabric and it's the softest linen I've ever touched, with little white flowers sewn onto the edges. It feels wrong, yet I've no other choice. I worry that if I keep turning down Ranan's thoughtful gifts, he'll get annoyed and decide to get rid of me after all.

"Thank you," I tell him, clutching the fabric to my chest and managing a smile. I decide I don't care how stained the fabric gets. I'm keeping this and making a dress out of it and it'll still be the finest thing I've ever owned. I pet the soft linen and ignore how my callused fingers catch against it.

He watches me for a moment and then turns, pulling a satchel off his shoulder. "I brought more."

"More fabric?"

The sea-ogre shakes his head and opens the sack. Out spill something like...cattails. Cattails and a large berry that looks like a milky pink bubble. I'm perplexed at the sight of these things, but he picks one cattail up and breaks it open, and downy fluff pours out of it. "Absorbent," he says. "It might help."

"Gods, this is perfect," I cry, so relieved I could weep fresh tears. "You're wonderful."

The sail atop his head flicks and he picks up one of the pink bubbles. "For you."

"What is it?" I sniff it, but it doesn't smell like anything. It looks waxy and strange, the size of a small plum. There's dozens of them in the bag, too.

"After you said that you couldn't eat fish today, I remembered that my mother likes a certain type of seagrass fruit once a month. I thought the reason might be similar. You eat them." His eyes are dark, his expression cagey, as if he's uncomfortable

sitting here with me. “Try one.”

Oh. Food and fabric? I’m touched that he went to such effort, and a little worried, too. What if he decides I’m not worth all the trouble? Gingerly, I lift one of the bubbles to my lips and try to take a bite. The skin of it is hard, like an enormous grape, and I end up popping the entire thing in my mouth and chewing so it doesn’t splatter everywhere. A sweet, milky flavor floods my mouth when the bubble bursts, and it’s the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted. It’s like berries and sweetness and milk all combined into one syrupy bite. His mother must crave sweets during her menses, too. I snatch another up and eat it.

“Better?” he asks, rich voice oddly demanding.

I nod enthusiastically, raising a hand to my mouth to cover it as I chew the tougher skin. “You are too kind, truly, Ranan.”

He crouches in front of me on his haunches, silent but full of tension. “You lied to me again.”

A shiver runs down my spine. His voice is so low and deep that it makes everything sound ominous. I can’t tell if he’s pointing this out as a fact or if he’s upset with me. “Aye, I did. I thought an old wound might be better than my menses. Most men think a woman unclean while she bleeds. I’m making a mess, I can’t practice swimming, and I worried you’d be upset.”

“I am more upset at the lies. You said you would stop.”

“I know.” My voice is small and frightened. “It’s...habit. No one wants to hear the truth from a slave.”

“I do.” He puts his finger under my chin and forces me to look him in the eye. “You

are my wife.”

But I’m not. He can say I’m his wife, but we haven’t had a ceremony. We haven’t shared a bed and we barely know each other. Nothing is permanent yet and it would be far too easy to walk it back. “I just didn’t want you to change your mind. I don’t want to be a bother to you.”

I’m still thinking about that day on the beach, and how he’d almost left me. In that moment, I realized that my future is more fragile than I’d realized, and it could end up being worse than the fate I’d had in Sunswallow.

Ranan’s eyes flash with irritation. “I told you that you were my wife. How do I prove this to you?”

“I don’t know.” All I know is that I’m going to do my best not to anger him. I’m going to be the sweetest, most eager bride ever. Perhaps I should try touching him to ease things along. My abdomen cramps with another painful squeeze and I shove another seagrass fruit into my mouth so I can avoid answering him.

With another frustrated growl, Ranan gets to his feet and stalks out of the tent.

Chapter

Eleven

RANAN

This human female is infuriating. No matter how many times I tell her that she is my wife, yet she does not believe me. She looks at me with doubt in her eyes, fear in her posture. She frets that the smallest inconvenience will make me change my mind and I will abandon her on the nearest shore.

She is...right.

That is the worst part of it.

Because I did try to get rid of her. I did attempt to find a human settlement and leave her there, only to realize they would treat her far more poorly than I would. So I am keeping her, and yet the promise of that is not enough. I must somehow prove to her that I have truly changed my mind. That I will not abandon her just because she has her monthly moon courses, or that she does not feel well. I will not leave her behind just because I am inconvenienced by her presence.

I don't know how to prove this, though. I do not need to make clever conversation to the rocky shores and the waves. I do not need to entertain the fish I catch. I certainly do not need to please the humans I rob with my presence. I am good at being alone, and I bring my wealth back to my family's flotilla. It is an arrangement that suits both of our parties well.

And yet now I have a wife, and I must change something, because it is growing increasingly clear to me that she will not be able to survive with the few amenities I keep stored on Akara's back. I think about the look on Vali's face when I offered her cloth—the sheer wonder when she touched the silks, the way she held the burgundy fabric as if she had never caressed anything finer. It makes me want to find the nearest human settlement and shake them all, one by one, for treating such a pleasant female in such a manner.

It makes me want to find more pretty things to please Vali, too. That urge annoys me, because she should be grateful I am keeping her, and yet I am the one eager to please. Hmph. I do not need to do anything to give her a better home than she had.

I tell myself this even as I spend all night hunting the seagrass fruit.

I tell myself this as I make the swim to shore and cut down more cattail pods for her.

I tell myself this as I spend half the night swimming ahead of Akara to my grotto, where I store the goods I steal from humans and look for things that might please her. I have jewels and weapons and a few statues and vases, but nothing that seem as if they would appeal to a woman in pain. Frustrated, I dig through the fabrics I have stolen from laden ships and use them to make a large, soft pile that will act as a bunk. I normally drift in the water at Akara's side when I sleep, but she clearly needs a bed.

I remember that she mentioned raw fish, too. The humans cook their meat, I recall from the few human settlements I've passed through. They cook their meat and cover it with salt and add roots, as if they are trying to make up for all the flavor they have burned out of it. She will want to cook her food once I bring her to the grotto, I suspect. She liked the raw fish I gave her before, but she could have been pretending. I look around at the treasures and pick up a jewel-crusted pot, wondering if this is used for cooking. My people do not cook. We eat what the sea provides, cold and raw. It irritates me that I must go to such lengths to suit her, and I toss the pot aside

with a huff.

I swim back to Akara, my mood sour. Through our mental bond, I know automatically how to find her, letting our link guide me to the hamarii despite the endless sameness of the open waters. I climb back up onto her back as dawn nears, and glimpse into the tent at my human wife.

She lies upon the floor in a huddled ball, curled around her limbs. Cattail pods are emptied, the shells neatly lined up by her feet, and the scent of cattail fluff—and blood—is everywhere inside the tent. The burgundy fabric is carefully folded under her head, acting as a pillow, and she uses her torn dress over her loins instead of the fabric I gave her. Vali is asleep, her breathing regular. Even in her sleep, however, her brows are furrowed, as if she cannot escape the pain even then.

All of the annoyance I have felt at having to accommodate her vanishes in a moment. She hurts, and I want to make it better. She has been all smiles and eagerness since I met her, and I do not like seeing her like this. I do not like how helpless it makes me feel.

I drop my bags of cattails and seagrass fruit just outside the tent, hitch one of the pouches of gold to my belt, and head into the waters again. Perhaps I can find a place where they will trade gold for this “willow bark.”

As I tend to move along the same stretch of shoreline, I also have a few villages that I visit from time to time for trading. They provide me with supplies, and I trade them necklaces and gold and they do not ask questions. It works well for both of us. There is a village not too far from my grotto, so while Akara continues her leisurely swim towards my home, I head farther up the shore to Godsthorne. It’s a peaceful, tiny village at the crossroads of a major Aventinian trading route. While few farmers live here—the soil is too rocky for most crops—there’s a small population of traders, and an inn that stays busy.

I know the innkeeper, and he also peddles supplies from time to time. I shake off the water from the sea and make my way inland as the sun comes up over the horizon. It illuminates the craggy hills here and the cattle that graze upon them. There are few trees. I'm told that inland, in the heart of the continent, there are trees big enough to house entire villages, but I cannot picture it. A few shepherders stare at me, covered in their human clothing from head to foot, and for the first time, I wonder whether I shouldn't wear human-like clothing when I go into their towns.

Vali would know. She would be full of advice. Perhaps my wife will be of more use to me than I thought.

The road is a familiar route to Godsthorne, and before the sun grows too high in the sky, I can see the thatched roofs of the cluster of homes that make up the village. I head toward the largest one, the inn, and push the door open.

No one is inside. The inn itself reeks of too many people, spilled beer and last night's food. The benches are propped atop the tabletops and the wood floors gleam wetly, having recently been washed. There's a young woman with yellow braids behind the bar, rubbing a tankard with a rag and yawning as she does. The innkeeper's daughter. She immediately straightens at the sight of me and races to the back room. "Papa! Visitors from the sea!"

I move to the bar and put my hands atop it, waiting impatiently. I want to get back before Vali is awake for too long and panics that she's been abandoned. I should have said something to her last night, I realize. What if she awakens and thinks I've left her and jumps into the sea? She'll sink to the bottom for certain, where Vor's dark children will feast upon her. My mouth flattens at the thought. Why didn't I say anything? She's already skittish. I am three times a fool.

"Papa!" the girl screeches from the room behind the bar. "Papa?—"

“I know, I know,” calls out a grumpy voice. “I’m coming. Hold your woales, girl.” A fat, bald man enters the bar from another part of the house. His name is Anellas, and I’ve dealt with him for many years now. His eyes gleam with avarice at the sight of me, near naked, in his inn. “Hello again, old friend.”

Old friend. As if we are companions more than business partners. It reminds me that I’ve never told him my name. I have never seen the need to, and yet his words make me pause. Does he consider me a friend or is this a politeness? Should I be answering differently? I have never cared what humans thought. I don’t know why I care now.

I toss my bag of gold onto the bar top. “Trade.”

It’s all I ever say. When one word suffices, all I give is one. Today it feels impolite. I have a great many things I want to ask about. What is it that human women like to eat? What can I give my human to ease her pain with her menses? Why won’t she trust me?

“Of course, of course.” Anellas hustles over to my side, opening the bag with greedy fingers. “Been a while since I’ve seen you, sea friend. How’s the weather?”

“I have a wife,” I blurt out, and then my jaw clamps at how foolish I sound.

His bushy brows furrow and he looks up at me. “Felicitations...?”

“She needs willow bark,” I bite out.

“Ah. The monthly pains,” Anellas says with a knowing smile. He picks up a piece of gold and bites it, then shines it on his apron. “Willow bark isn’t cheap, though. Get her belly full of your child. That’ll take care of the willow bark thing. She’ll spend all your coin with her demands if you let her. Women are like that.”

Are they? I glance down the bar, where the yellow-haired daughter is watching us from the doorway, half hidden. She doesn't look as if her father is spending coin on her at all. Her dress is ragged and patched, and she's always been working here, even when she was very small.

Anellas bites another medallion, hums to himself, and then starts to rake it toward his apron.

I stop him before he can, hands slamming down on the countertop. "Wait."

He pales, taking a step back. His gaze flicks over my four arms and my chest. "Is there a problem?"

I take a deep breath through my nose, frustrated. I came here for willow bark, true, but I also came for answers. I wanted to ask about human slaves and how they're treated. I wanted to ask a great many things about human women, but looking at this man and his timid daughter, I do not think he will be the right one to answer most of them. I tap a finger on the bar as I think. Finally, I come up with a good question. "You have a human wife?"

"I did, aye. She died three years ago, my sweet Bessa." He sighs and makes the sign of Gental. "Haven't had a chance to find another, what with the Anticipation and all. Business has been too steady."

I look around the empty inn, but perhaps the time of day is wrong. Still, this man had a wife. He has a daughter. Surely he knows some about females. So I eye him and slide one of the necklaces out of the pile. "Trade for the others. This one you can have for free if you answer my questions."

"Gladly, sea friend." He smiles broadly, perhaps a little too broadly.

“How do I prove to a human woman that she is my wife?”

Anellas’s face screws up and his heavy chin jiggles. “Prove? Prove what? You are her man. She should be glad to have a strapping, virile man like yourself. She’s the woman. You don’t have to prove anything.”

Unhelpful. I glance down the bar at the daughter, hovering in the doorway. She bites her nail and looks as if she wishes to say something. “Speak.”

Her gaze flicks to her father uncertainly. When he waves to indicate that she should speak up, she takes a step forward. “What kind of marriage was it?” she asks. “What kind of ceremony? Did you offer a bribe to goddess Belara?”

I lean back, surprised. “Ceremony?”

“Why yes,” Anellas slides back into the conversation, his tone as greasy as his brow. “Surely you had a wedding ceremony? And after that, the bedding ? Ho, ho.” He chortles, quite pleased with himself.

The daughter continues to watch her father, creeping forward another step. She twists her hands in her apron. “A ceremony would make it feel real,” she says in a soft voice. “A ceremony in front of family.”

“I am not near mine.” A ceremony? Truly? The only weddings I have gone to have been lavish affairs between a sea lord and his bride, involving days of feasting and many sacrifices to Vor, and so many flotillas joined together that one could step on turtlebacks for as far as the eye could see. That does not strike me as something that Vali would want.

Then again, I do not know Vali.

“A handfast is just your word,” she continues. “Words can be dismissed. A promise can be broken. But in front of family? That makes it real.”

Hm. Her words are wise. I imagine taking Vali to my flotilla and introducing her to my parents, my sister. They would insist upon a feast. They would fuss over my bride once they got over the strangeness of a human in their midst. And they would accept her.

Perhaps that is what I need to do, then. If I take Vali to my family and have her meet the flotilla, she will know that I am telling the truth. That she is my bride, that I will not abandon her. I grunt, oddly pleased. “Thanks.”

She smiles.

I pluck out a bracelet from the pile before Anellas can get his hands on it and shove it down the bar towards her. “For you. For your help.”

Anellas frowns, but the girl is fast. She snatches up the bracelet and runs away before he can complain. He shakes his head as she retreats, glancing back at me. “Women. She’s not wrong, though. Fuss over your female a bit and she’ll be eating out of your hand.”

Eat out of my hand? I imagine Vali slurping fish out of my grasp. Is this a human custom? I’d rather she eat out of her own, but I try not to let my repugnance show.

“Now, my friend.” Anellas rubs his hands together and gives me another too-big smile. “Let us trade. What can I get for you today? Willow bark tea, yes. What else?”

“Ribbons,” calls the girl from the back. “Ribbons for her hair!”

“Hush, girl,” Anellas yells back.

But I like the idea. “Ribbons,” I echo, thinking. “And ugly cloth.”

“Ugly cloth?”

I nod. “Functional. Not pretty. Cloth you can get dirty.”

Anellas nods. “I think I know just the thing. I have some in the back. It’s expensive, though.” His expression turns woeful. “Almost as expensive as the willow bark tea. You’ll want a cup for your lady to drink out of. Or do you have one?”

I flick a hand at him, indicating he should include a cup. If she needs this to drink tea, I will get it for her. Tea, a cup, ribbons, and ugly cloth she won’t be afraid to get stained. I cross one set of arms, thinking, while Anellas touches my gold with covetous fingers. Then, I know just the thing.

“Cooked food,” I blurt out.

“Cooked food? I can make you a fine meal?—”

I cut him off with a hiss. “For her .”

“Ahhh. Is the lady near?” When I scowl, he elaborates. “Should the food be portable?”

I nod.

He waggles a finger in the air. “Let me get you hardtack and dried meat. And cheese. And some dried fruit. Does she like nuts?”

I have no idea. But I imagine she will like anything more than raw fish. “Give me some of all of it.”

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Chapter

Twelve

VALI

I sit at the entrance of the tent, letting the breeze touch my overheated skin, and I try not to panic.

Ranan is gone.

He's been gone all morning. Normally if I wake up and he's not in the tent with me, he comes and checks in on me before he swims out again. I've waited for hours, though, and there's been no sign of him. He didn't sleep with me last night, either. Not that I expected him to, what with my courses, but it just means I haven't seen him for that much longer.

Dread bubbles in my belly.

If he comes back, perhaps I should tell him my menses finished early. That I'm fine and I'm not cramping at all. They're certainly better than yesterday but not gone. If he considers me a burden, though, I worry that he's going to grow impatient. That no matter how much he swears he's not going to abandon me, he might change his mind. People say all kinds of things to your face, but they will act very different in private. I don't know Ranan well enough to trust him yet.

So I do what I can to tidy up and make myself presentable. There's a waterskin left

by the door for me, along with another pack of the sweet fruits. I eat and drink, and then clean up, changing out my rags. The fluff from the cattails helps immensely—I make a thick pad of it between two layers of cloth—and toss the messy scraps into a bag that I keep tightly sealed. By the gods, I’ve never appreciated living in a town as much as I have until now. I’d give anything for a copper tub by a hearth, or even a chamberpot.

But I feel much better once I’ve cleaned up and eaten. I stay away from the water’s edge and keep to the tent on the center of Akara’s back. And I wait for Ranan to return, because there’s nothing else to do. Even if he doesn’t come back for me...he’d come back for his turtle, surely?

I’m relieved when I see the sail atop Ranan’s head crest through the water. He swims towards the turtle, and then climbs up on board, water sluicing down his strong body. His gaze immediately goes to me. I wave, awkward but pleased, and he doesn’t look annoyed at the sight of me.

Ranan crosses over Akara’s broad back to my side and then drops a heavy pack in front of my feet. He crouches near me, his expression full of concern. “How are you feeling?”

I manage a smile. “Better today. Truly, I’m fine.”

“Do you bleed?”

His blunt question startles me. “I’m going to bleed for a few days more, aye.”

“Then you are not fine.” He nudges the sopping pack towards me. “Here. I got you things. Human things.”

“Human things?” I echo, surprised. Is this where he’s been all morning? Are we near

a city? Is he planning on taking me there and leaving me? I don't know how to react to this tidbit of information. "Is...there a city nearby, then?"

Ranan shakes his head, opening the large bag since I don't reach for it. "I swam to meet a trader I work with. He is a short journey from my grotto."

His grotto? "What's a grotto?"

"A sea cave. I have one not far from the shore. I keep some of my things there." He pulls out a wrapped bundle. "Here. This is for you."

I take it from him, and as I do, it crinkles. It's a large square of waxed paper, with more wax melted along the edges to seal them and form a pocket. I turn it in my hands to figure out how to open it, and when I find it, I run my finger under the wax and peek inside.

It's food. There are strips of dried jerky and squares of what look like a traveling hard-tack, all wrapped in the wax paper to protect them from the sea. My mouth waters at the sight of them, the first real red meat I've seen in days now. "Oh, by the gods. You didn't have to do this."

Ranan pauses, studying my face. "You don't like?"

I clutch the envelope to my chest. "I love it! But I feel guilty that you've spent your coin on me. You truly shouldn't have."

He shrugs and pulls out another packet. "This one has nuts and dried fruit. And this one..." He picks it up and shakes it, then frowns. "I do not know what is in this one."

I wet my lips nervously. "All of this is for me?"

He nods, pulling more things out of the bag. There's a beaten copper mug that looks like it's seen better days, but I'm still thrilled at the sight of it. I clutch it as he pulls more and more out of his bag, demonstrating all the things he purchased. There are several packets of dried food stuffs, one of hard cakes, and one full of loose tea.

"Willow bark, just like you asked," he says. "You will drink this and feel better."

He says it like a command, but I don't care. It's so wonderfully thoughtful. There's no fire to steep my tea with but I can put it in my mug and just let it sit for a few hours to steep in the sunlight. "This is incredible, Ranan."

He pulls out two more packets, one large and flat, and when he opens it, I'm surprised to see a plain brown cloth of moderate weave. He's got cloth already, all of it far superior to this new fabric. My confusion must show on my face. Ranan takes the fabric and pushes it into my grasp. "This fabric is ugly. If you must save the others, at least use this one."

Oh. He noticed I was hesitant to use the fine silks. I'm even more touched. "This is wonderful, thank you."

The final packet has...ribbons. Bright ribbons of multiple different colors. I touch one pale yellow strand that has a lovely green vine embroidered on it. "I...don't understand. What are these for?"

His strange brow furrows. "For you. All of this is for you."

I touch the ribbons with careful fingers, uncertain of what this means. Do I owe him a favor, perhaps? Are these wedding gifts or something else? Did I somehow communicate to him that I need ribbons?

At my hesitation, he speaks again. "The trader's daughter said women like pretty

things. That I should buy you ribbons. Did she lie to me?"

My lips part and I look up at him in surprise. "You...no. She didn't lie to you. Thank you."

"But you are not happy," he points out.

"I am overwhelmed," I admit. The covetous, greedy part of me wants to snatch up all the ribbons and pet them for hours. Underneath the yellow and green one is a ribbon in a shade of purple I've only seen in the skies, and another looks velvety soft. I've never owned such impractical things. Even as a child, before I was a slave, everything I owned was cut down from my mother's things, and none of it was for simple beauty.

Yet Ranan has gone out of his way to get "human" food because I don't like the thought of raw fish at the moment. He's brought me cloth for me to use since the others are too fine. He's brought me the tea I asked for...and now pretty nonsense ribbons that serve no purpose other than to delight.

No one has ever been so kind, and it scares me. I must not understand what this means. There is an unspoken message I am not understanding. "You did all of this...for me? Why?"

He almost looks offended by my question. "You are my wife ."

Is that the reason? That he has gone so far out of his way simply because I am his wife? It makes me wonder about his expectations. He has not looked at me with desire in his eyes once, and I worry there's something wrong with me. That he feels stuck with me. "I thank you, Ranan. It was not my intent to make you feel unappreciated with your efforts. I am not used to such kindnesses."

He says nothing. Simply watches me. When I figure he's done speaking, I pick up the pouch of willow bark and sniff it, wondering how much I can put into my cup for a dose, and if we have enough fresh water to waste on tea. My waterskin is near empty and I don't want to bother him for more simply for a cup of tea.

"We will be at my grotto soon. This afternoon."

"We will?"

He nods. "I go there sometimes when I have goods to store, or when the weather is bad and I do not wish to spend time on Akara's back." He leans closer, studying me. "I made a bed for you there. I thought you might like to visit."

Would I? I think I would love that more than anything right now. Someplace that's not a tent on a turtle's back sounds rather delightful...but I don't want to seem ungrateful. "I'm fine here if it's too much trouble."

Ranan's expression ices over. "Speak truth to me, Vali. I do not like your lies."

Oh, gods. I've done it again. In trying to be accommodating, I've annoyed him. I reach out and grab one of his hands. "I would love to go see your cave," I blurt out. "I'm not used to being asked my opinion, that's all."

He relaxes, and gazes down at our joined hands. Mine looks small against his, and I automatically twine our fingers. It's the first time we've held hands...or touched voluntarily. No, I think back, we touched when he was teaching me to swim, but every other time he's acted as if I am a wild animal meant to be skirted around but never approached. Yet he's not taking his hand from mine right now. That's a good thing, I think.

"In case I don't seem appreciative," I say softly, stroking my thumb over the back of

his hand. “I am humbled that you have done so much for me. It makes me happier than you can possibly imagine.”

He gazes down at our hands and nods once, then pulls his hand from my grip. “I will return when we arrive. Eat your food and drink your tea.”

I’m left alone for a few hours, and make myself a strong cup of willow bark tea with the rest of my fresh water and a large chunk of the bark that I swirl in the cup with my finger to steep it. Tastes awful, but my cramps disappear like magic and I’m able to enjoy the day. The landscape is changing, the distant land coming closer. We’ve been following the shoreline from a distance far too great for me to swim, but now we’re approaching.

It’s not the most comforting shoreline. The gentle sands are gone, replaced by bleak gray cliffs with jagged rocks at the base. Nasty-looking waves crash against the tumble of boulders at the edge of the water, and I shudder to think of anyone swimming in that. I’ve heard from travelers that the shore gets more and more forbidding the closer one gets to the great city of Aventine, so we must be close.

That makes me nervous. Aventine is, among other things, a slave hub. Is Ranan taking me there after all? It’s the ideal place to ditch an unwanted wife, no questions asked. He said he wouldn’t...and yet he hasn’t kissed me, either. Hasn’t shown me any sort of husbandly interest.

And yet...he showered me with gifts.

He is a confusing man.

My belly clenches with nervousness as I work on cutting the serviceable fabric he gave me into a dress. I have no needle to sew it together, but I cut the edge into small tabs, and then I knot the tabs together, and it’s almost as good as sewing. I’m able to

make myself a sheath dress with no sleeves, and I slip it over my head just as Ranan approaches.

The sea-ogre immediately frowns at me, eyeing my dress. “What is that?”

“Does it look bad? I made it just now.”

He shakes his head, his mouth thin with disapproval. “You should not be doing anything of the sort. You should be resting.”

“I can still help out. If you give me fish, I can clean them for you. Or dry them. Whatever you need.”

“I need you to rest.” Ranan’s hands go to his slim hips. “It doesn’t matter now. We are at my grotto. Do you think you can swim a short distance?”

I’m surprised he asks. “Even if I’m bleeding?”

“It is a short distance, and we are out of the deepest waters. I will hold your hand the entire time. You do not need to be afraid.” He holds a hand out to me, a silent invitation.

I get to my feet, uncertain. I haven’t seen anything that looks like a cave amidst the craggy rocks of the shoreline, and I’ve been looking hard. Even now, we’re still farther from the shore than I’d like. While the rocks are close and the crashing waves near enough that they fan a light mist over my hair, we’re still far enough out that the waters are deep enough for Akara to swim in. If Ranan lets go of my hand, I have no doubt that I will drown.

Yet dying in the sea sounds better than being returned to slavery. If he steers me towards Aventine, I suppose I can always jump into the waters or let go of his hand.

With a bright smile, I push my hand into his outstretched one. “Let’s do it.”

He leads me to the rounded edge of Akara’s shell, and the choppy waters bounce and splash against the turtle’s side. “I will return for your things. For now, I want to get you situated somewhere safe. Follow my lead, and when I say hold your breath, do so.”

I eye the tall, sheer cliffs close by and nod nervously.

We jump into the water together. For all that the seas are rough, they’re warm. I surface with a sputter, and Ranan’s hands immediately go to my waist. “You’re still wearing your dress.”

“It’ll dry. It’s fine. Let’s just go.” I’m anxious to get this over with.

He nods and then takes my hand in his. I lock both of mine onto his one as he pulls me forward, his strong three free arms cutting through the water with ease. He tugs me along at his side, speeding us through the choppy waves. I expect him to head for the rock-strewn shore, but he heads for the sheer cliffs instead. I can see nothing that looks like a cave—just sheer rock—when he turns to me. “Hold your breath.”

I suck in a deep breath, my cheeks puffing.

Ranan dives, looking for all the world like a sleek fish darting beneath the waves. I can marvel at this for but a brief moment before I’m yanked under with him, the water blasting my face. I hold my breath, my eyes squeezed shut in the darkness, and try not to panic. My lungs burn after a few moments and I hold his hand tighter, dread slipping into my veins despite my best efforts. I’m going to die. I’m going to drown holding onto his hand because he doesn’t realize that humans can’t hold their breath as long as he can. I’m going to?—

His hand tugs me upward, hard, and then my head breaks the surface. I gasp, drawing in deep lungfuls of breath as I push streaming wet hair out of my face.

The grotto.

Oh. It's lovely.

I stare around me in wonder. Sunlight streams into the water from a hole in the rock high above my head. The grotto is a cave all right, and it seems the only entrance—other than the hole far above—is to swim in through the pool I currently float in, feebly clutching at Ranan's hand. There's a lip that leads to the cave floor, and the cave floor itself is littered with stolen goods. I see statues of all shapes and sizes, bolts of cloth, chests of jewelry, ornate pottery jugs, and more of the strange bags that Ranan is so fond of.

It's an absolute clutter of treasure, and everywhere I look, there's something appealing to the eye. "By all the gods, Ranan. This is yours?"

He pulls me forward in the water, to the shallowest part of the pool, and my feet touch the floor underneath. "Aye," he says. "Sometimes I have more, but I trade things and bring some back to my flotilla."

I sit on the edge of the pool, my mouth hanging open as I spot a statue of the goddess Tadekha covered in gold necklaces, a staff with a large gemstone held in her hands. Even at Lady Dywan's house, there were never such riches. "What do you do with all of this?"

He shrugs, hauling himself up to sit next to me. "Don't know. Sometimes I just take it even if it doesn't have a use. I figure someone will want it at some point, and better in my hands than theirs." His gaze watches me closely. "Do you like it?"

I laugh with delight. Everywhere I look, there's a glitter of gold. I think I even see a jewel-encrusted chamber pot perched atop what looks like a Yshremi woven rug. Like it? I feel as if I've stepped into a wonderland. "It's absurd," I tell him, and when he frowns, I add, "Absurd in the best of ways. There is so much here, Ranan! How long have you been stealing for?"

He shrugs. "I have little else to do with my time. It seems a good use of my strength and Akara's size."

That it is. I get to my feet, ignoring the drip of wet clothing sticking to my body, and marvel at the cave. The ceiling of it is tall, a bit like a bottle with a long neck. The chamber I stand in is the large, comfortable belly of the bottle, and the sunlit hole far above the neck. This is the grandest place I have ever seen, and the most cluttered. When I step over a chest, I see the "bed" that Ranan has prepared for me, a large stack of textiles and embroidered pillows all piled together. I want to fling myself down upon it and roll around, but I'm dripping seawater everywhere. "This is marvelous, Ranan. I swear I won't breathe a word of it. Your secret is safe with me."

"Why is it secret?" he asks, puzzled. "These are my things."

"You are richer than a king," I point out. "Anyone that knew of this would try to rob you."

He snorts. "They can try."

I continue to walk in the cave, pushing past piles of tapestries to examine a chair covered with gold-inlay. "This is all incredible."

"You like it here, then?" There is an uncertain note in his voice, as if he wasn't sure I'd approve.

I turn and give him a surprised look. “Do you jest? This is the most spectacular sight I have ever beheld.”

“Take any of it,” he says with a shrug. His body language is casual, but I sense he’s pleased. “You are my wife, so you are free to help yourself to any and all of it.”

This is the utter opposite of what I’ve been thinking. Instead of giving me away, he’s giving me his treasures. I’ve never felt more unbecoming, either. My hair is wet with seawater, my dress made from the ugly cloth shapeless and damp. I’m well aware of my menses and the sunburn on my face. Surely I cannot be his dream of a wife.

So I sit next to him, because I need to understand. I fold my legs under, tucking my skirts around them and compose myself. “Why me?” I ask him. “Why a human wife?”

Ranan gestures at me. “Why you? You volunteered. You were eager to go with me.”

I bite my lip. This is an easy explanation, and yet it doesn’t feel like the right one. “Ranan,” I gentle my voice in advance of my words, so he will realize the delicacy of the situation. “You are a man in the prime of your life. You are richer than any man I have ever met. You are good looking and strong. More than that, you are kind. You could have any woman, human or otherwise. Why get the first slave that volunteers and make her your wife?”

His eyes harden, and for a moment I think he’s going to avoid answering me. That he hates my questioning and wants me to be silent. But then his shoulders slump, just a little. He runs a hand down his broad, strange face. “I am...not good with people.”

My heart squeezes a bit. Is this why he picked me? Because I volunteered and he knew he would be awkward? That he’s lonely by himself on Akara’s back and wants company? I reach out and put my hand over one of his. “You’re good with me.”

Ranan shakes his head again, dismissing what I've said. "I'm not good with words."

"Words aren't everything." I give him an encouraging smile. This is the closest I've been to him since our last swimming lesson, and I wonder if he feels anything for me. If he truly is as shy as he claims to be, it's going to be impossible to tell.

I'll be the one that has to make all the moves.

So I shift my weight, moving a little closer to him. "Aren't you curious about kissing me?"

His eyes widen and he stares at me for a long moment. His strange, flat ears twitch, the muscles laying flat against his head. Ranan's gaze dips to my mouth and then back to my eyes again. "I have considered it," he says slowly. "But we are new to each other. You are seeking to anchor your place at my side by pleasing me. It is not the best environment in which to ask for a kiss."

"You're wrong. The asking is the important part." I slide my fingers up his arm, exploring his skin. "Like now. I'm touching you. If I ask to touch you more, and you say no, that's the end of it, right?"

"It is...different." There's a rasp to his voice, his gaze locked on me.

I wonder if anyone ever touches him. I wonder if he needs it. I have had days in the past where I have felt so achingly lonely that I've sought out a lover just to feel something. Yet I imagine Ranan lives like a monk out here on the waves.

"How is it different?" I ask, my finger dancing along the inside of one arm. "Would you like for me to stop?"

His nostrils flare. "No."

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” I smile at him and run my fingers along his skin. It has a slightly different texture than mine that I find fascinating. Is it because he’s in the water so much? Because his body is hairless? Whatever it is, I like the feel of it.

“It is different, because I hold all the power,” Ranan replies. “You will not tell me no simply because you want to please me. You will let me do whatever I want to you and you will not complain a word, because you are afraid of offending me.”

I still, because he’s not wrong. It’s how a slave survives. If the master’s happy, everyone breathes a sigh of relief. I can’t just simply change the way I think because he promises he will be kind to me. But I suspect he’s been avoiding me, and this is no way for us to build upon our marriage. We cannot be strangers forever, and the longer we leave distance between us, the more difficult it will be for us to conquer later.

I consider all of this as I study him. In the end, all we have are words and deeds. For now, I will have to accept his words. “Ranan, are you going to put me aside? Or send me back to the human settlements? Or make me a slave again?”

His lip curls as if I have offended him. “Of course not.”

Words are easy, though. I need more than that. “Swear it. Swear it upon the gods. Swear it upon Lord Vor.”

Ranan grabs my chin, our eyes meeting. “I swear it by Lord Vor and all the gods in the heavens.”

“That might not be many of them, given that there’s an Anticipation going on,” I tease, pulling free from his grip.

“You know what I mean,” he all but growls at me.

“I do.” I reach up and tap a finger on his nose, because when I’m comfortable, I like to be playful with my partner, and I want to see how he responds. He recoils in shock, rubbing the tip of his nose. “Very well then, I shall believe you. I will tell you no if I don’t feel like kissing you or touching you. And you should tell me no if I do something that makes you uncomfortable, like me touching your nose.”

He continues to rub the end of his nose, his face drawn in lines of disapproval. “I am not uncomfortable.”

I want to laugh because his words say one thing and his expression another. I am going to have to go by his words, then, and assume that Ranan’s scowls are just normal for him and not to be taken that he is in a poor mood. I reach for him again. “So I can tap your nose as much as I want?”

He snags my hand before I can do so. “I did not say that.”

There’s a teasing note in his voice that I like. It makes me a little bolder. “I know right now, I’m not at my best, but I would like to kiss you at some point. Just so we can see what it is like between us. It will be a strange marriage if we have no spark, after all.”

“And do you think that will happen? That there will be no spark?”

I give him a sly smile. “No. I’m good at making sparks.”

His ears go back against his head again, and I wonder if that’s the Ranan version of a blush. “I would like to kiss.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. I lean in close, full of curiosity and anticipation.

His gaze drops to my mouth again...and then he jumps to his feet. “Perhaps

tomorrow we will try it,” he says, tone brusque. “After you have had a chance to rest and feel better. Explore the grotto. I will get some fish and make sure Akara is situated.”

Before I can say anything else, he dives into the pool and disappears, and I’m left surrounded by riches. I cross my arms over my chest and frown at the ripple he left. By all the gods, are all sea-ogres skittish or is it just this one? I wait for him to come back, to tell me that he changed his mind and he wants to kiss me now after all.

I wait for a long time.

Chapter

Thirteen

RANAN

My heartbeat pounds in my ears as I swim into deeper waters. Vali is safe in my grotto, and so I can hunt for the bigger fish, the larger fin-backs with the tough hide and chewy meat. They reside in the darker waters of the sea, where the reefs drop off to colder temperatures, and they're dangerous, but they also have the best skin. It dries and makes a flexible, waterproof leather if treated properly. Vali will need clothes and gear of her own. Belts, shoes—she needs everything.

I should be thinking about hunting a fin-back right now, but it will be impossible to do any sort of hunting with both of my cocks standing at attention.

All because she touched my arm.

I ignore it at first. There's nothing to do but ignore my body's reaction to her. I'm not going to return to her side and demand that she touch me. Just thinking about her, though, makes my cocks stay erect, and when the ache continues despite the chill of the water, I grit my teeth and take myself in hand. I tread water with two slashing arms while my other two hands frantically work my cocks. It's not a satisfying release, and I swim away from the ropes of seed I've left behind, ashamed of my actions.

She's my wife. She has agreed to be my female, and I have decided to keep her. Why

am I being like this? If I went to her right now, she would welcome me with open arms.

And that is exactly the problem. Vali is far too eager, and we barely know each other. For her to fling herself at me feels...false. She is eager because she is anxious, not because she wants me. I know I am not a great speaker, and that I can be abrupt. I am more silent than talkative around her. We are strangers. Bedding her seems wrong.

Yet the more I push her away, the more I hurt her feelings and make her fret. There has to be a solution that will satisfy both of us.

I ponder this endlessly as I swim, looking for a school of fin-backs. I find nothing, though, and return to the cave empty-handed and chilled.

Vali has been busy while I was gone—a large area near the fire pit has been cleared out, the bags I toss carelessly into the grotto neatly organized and tidied. Statues have been lined up along the cave wall and golden dishes stacked in a semblance of organization. The fire is nothing but coals, but the scent of food lingers in the air.

My human wife is asleep in the pile of blankets I've left for her, her arms curled around one of the pillows. Her hair is combed out and neatly plaited, the ends tied with some of the ribbons I gave her. A few strands have come loose, the dark curls fanning over the blankets. My fingers itch to touch one, to see if it's as soft when dry as it looks, but I don't want to disturb her. She needs her sleep.

I'm so focused on the picture Vali makes that I almost step on the tray that she's left for me. Atop a plate, she's set several dried pieces of fruit, arranged in a flower pattern, and a handful of nuts accompanied by some of the dried meat I purchased for her. Beside it is a cup that has a fruity scent and a pink liquid in it. I bring it to my nose and sniff it. Another tea? I take a sip and the water is tepid but sweet. She clearly left this out for me, and my guilt returns.

When will I be at ease with what she offers? Something has to change between us.

I take the tray she left for me and carry it across the cave so I can eat without disturbing her. Sitting at the water's edge, I munch on the treats and watch her sleep, considering. The dried food makes me think of the trader and his daughter. She'd suggested that I take Vali to my family, to have a ceremony there. That it will feel like a true marriage if done in front of family.

At that point, if Vali reaches for me, she does so because she knows she's my wife, not because she feels the need to please me.

It's the perfect solution—once she feels better, I will take her to the flotilla. We will go before the leader and speak vows in front of everyone, and then she will truly be my wife.

I wake up with a crick in my neck from sleeping on the edge of the pool, and something warm pressed up against my back.

Vali.

She must have woken up and joined me. I roll onto my back, looking over at her, and her eyes are open. She gives me a shy smile, her body wrapped in blankets. "You looked cold. I thought we might share heat. Is that all right?"

My throat seems full of knots. She is so near, her soft skin pressed against mine. "I am not cold."

"Oh." Her expression falls.

"But you can join me."

Her smile returns, and she slips an arm around my waist, pulling the blanket with her. She tucks her chin against my shoulder, watching me. “Is this where you normally sleep when you’re here in the grotto?”

I shake my head. “No. I am only here because I didn’t wish to disturb you.”

“You can disturb me. I’m your wife.” And she beams another smile my way.

I do not know what to say to all of this, so I simply grunt.

Her hand strokes over my side and I freeze. It seems a small, simple gesture and that I should ignore it. I can’t, though, because both of my foolish cocks rise once more. “I hope it’s all right that I rearranged some things to give additional living space,” she murmurs, watching my expression. “I tried to remember where everything goes so if you don’t approve, I’ll move it back.”

“Do what you like.”

Vali grins at me. “Are you just being accommodating because I’m your wife?”

“Yes?”

She chuckles, running her fingers over my skin. “I should complain about that, but I can’t bring myself to. It’s rather nice.”

I just watch her, my heart thudding in my ears. Her nearness is distracting, to the point that thoughts float out of my head and disappear, and I am left with nothing but silence between my ears. All because she smiles and her face lights up.

She pokes my side. “How do you live here with all this clutter anyhow?”

“I...don’t live here?” At her confusion, I elaborate. “I spend more time on Akara’s back, raiding. Sometimes I visit family, but most of the time I just...drift.”

Vali bites her lip. “Am I going to be keeping you from your lifestyle? Or will you be leaving me behind when you go raiding?”

I frown. “Why would I leave you behind?”

She shrugs, the movement nudging her chin against my arm. “I don’t know. I just thought you wouldn’t want me around. You do leave a lot.”

“Because you can’t swim with me.”

“Oh, so when I feel better we’ll swim together?”

I haven’t given it much thought, but I also didn’t think about leaving her behind, either. So I grunt. It seems as good an answer as any.

“I do need to get a fish for Lord Vor,” she says. “I haven’t forgotten my prayer to him.”

“I can get it for you.”

She shakes her head. “No, it has to be me or it doesn’t mean as much. I want the god to know I am truly grateful that he’s looking out for me. So I need you to take me fishing.” She flinches, as if realizing how demanding that sounds. “Please.”

I grunt again, distracted by the hand playing against my side. “When you feel better.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I feel pretty good now.” Her tone takes on a singsong cadence, and her fingers tickle across my stomach. “The first two days are always the worst. I

think the tea is helping, too. You?—”

She breaks off as her hand grazes over the head of one straining cock.

“Oh,” Vali breathes. A bright smile wreathes her face and she reaches down and firmly grips my cock in her hand, sending a near-ecstatic clench of pleasure through my sac. “Look at how hard you are. Shall I help you with this, my husband?”

I want to say no. That I have a plan. That we’re going to wait.

But my foolish mouth betrays me.

I don’t say no .

“ Now .”

Her eyes light up. “Now’s a very good time, aye. You sit back and let me handle everything. I’ll make you feel so good.”

And there’s so much delight and pleasure on her face that I can’t backtrack my words...and gods help me, I don’t want to. Her excitement fuels mine. This can’t be real—her enthusiasm. I am trapped, and like the weak, selfish fool I am, I’m going to let her do with me as she pleases.

Chapter

Fourteen

VALI

I think he likes me after all.

My happiness bubbles over this morning, like a pot of stew filled far too full. He's here with me, he's letting me touch him, and he wants me. A man can say all he wants that he's not interested, but the moment a woman caresses him, he changes his mind. His cock will always rise.

And I'm so glad it does. This, I understand.

I give him a confident smile and tug his kilt down on his hips. The strange fabric falls away, and I make a mental note to ask him about it sometime. Not right now, though, because I want him focused. "Don't worry about anything," I tell him in what I hope is a sultry voice. "I'm an expert at?—"

He grabs my chin before I can finish the sentence and forces me to look up at him. "No lies between us, Valessa. I mean it."

"I wasn't going to say sea-ogres," I protest, though I was going to embellish a little. "Just that I know what I'm doing with a cock. That's all." If I wanted to lie, I'd tell him I'm great in bed. I'm actually pretty rotten because if I don't want to be there, I lie there like a dead fish.

But it's different with Ranan. I haven't forgotten that he saved me, but he's been rather nice to me in his way, lately. I want to show him that I can be nice to him in my way, too. I want to show him that he made a good choice in taking me as his bride.

I reach down to grip his cock and not one but two cockheads brush against my fingers. Because he has two . I haven't forgotten. I caress one, then reach down and stroke the other. "Just like I've seen before so many times," I whisper. "Though not so much at once."

He grunts, but his gaze is so very intense upon me. His ear fins flick, as if he's wanting to touch me but doesn't dare to interrupt.

I smile up at him, feeling confident for a change. This I know how to do. I might have lied about knowing all about sea-ogres, but I know men. I trail my fingers up and down one length, and then the other, keeping my touches exploratory and light. Like the rest of him, his skin has a faint greenish cast, like a glass bottle, and I'm entranced by how that color deepens in this most private area of his body. I stroke my hand up his lower cock, comparing it to the top one. They are stacked atop one another, like peas in a pod, though I don't think he'd like my comparison. He's only got one sac, a prominent bulge underneath his second cock. I reach down and toy with it, rolling the globes underneath the soft skin gently under my touch.

He's being utterly silent as I caress him, and I'm used to more reaction from my lovers. I glance up, and his face is tight and hard and impossible to read. "Tell me if I do something that doesn't feel good to you."

"Should," he blurts.

I pause, because no matter how many times I repeat it to myself mentally, it doesn't make sense. "Should...?"

“Good,” Ranan enunciates, and his mouth pulls down in a frown. He looks furious for a moment, and then slowly admits, “I am silent for long periods of time when I am alone. Sometimes I get nervous about speaking and the wrong thing comes out.”

Oh. I can tell just by the expression on his face how difficult it was for him to admit that to me. There was a girl in our village that had a stutter, and the local boys teased her so much that she just stopped speaking around them. It makes me ache with sympathy and I stroke my fingers over his hard belly. “I understand. I’m just used to hearing something from a lover when I touch them. Would it be better for you if we set up some sort of physical cue? You can tap my arm twice if I do something you don’t like.” I give him a shy little smile. “And maybe touch my ear if I do something you do like. I enjoy knowing if I’m doing things right.”

Ranan reaches out and runs his fingers along the shell of my ear, his gaze flicking to mine.

“Then I’ll keep going?” I ask softly, even as I reach for his cocks again.

His fingers move along my ear, tracing. His response is soft but firm. “Yes.”

Encouraged, I lower my head and take him into my mouth. The first taste of him is salty and musky, and the tip of each cock is bigger against my tongue than anticipated. I make a little noise of surprised pleasure in my throat, because what woman wouldn’t be intrigued by a lover that has a healthy, fat cock? Two cocks initially threw me off. But a large, meaty cock? That excites me.

Two is just, well, double the excitement.

I wrap my fingers around the shaft of his first cock, not entirely surprised to notice that my fingertips don’t touch. “You’re very big,” I comment, even as I lap at the head of him as if he’s a sweet treat. I take his second cock in my other hand and give

it gentle, teasing squeezes before I move over to lick the tip of it, too.

His breath huffs out and he touches my earlobe, a silent reassurance that he's enjoying himself.

I'm enjoying myself, too. Initially I just thought to pleasure him because of the mercenary aspects of it—a happy husband makes a wife's day easy. And if he's happy with me, my place at his side is secured. But I'm liking exploring him. I'm liking that he's big and unusual and yet somewhat shy. I like that he confessed to me about his words. It makes him seem less silent and broody and more quiet and thoughtful. It makes him vulnerable, and it's that vulnerability that attracts me.

I move back and forth between both of his cocks, giving teasing licks to both heads. "I feel a bit greedy to have so much," I confess. "I'm not entirely sure how to best handle things. Do I pleasure just one cock at a time, or do I give both small bits of my attention? What do you like better?"

He thinks for a moment and then reaches down. He takes his cock in his hand and then guides it towards my parted lips, the answer obvious.

I take him in my mouth, eager. My hands work his shaft, and his second cock presses against my breasts as I lean over him, and it gives me another idea. As I work his upper cock with one hand, I grip his lower one with my other. I drag the leaking head of him back and forth between the valley of my breasts until they're lubricated, and then I focus my full attention back on his primary cock, the latter cradled between my breasts. I push my upper arms hard against my sides to make my breasts stay together and hold him tight, and I can tell by the way he sucks in his breath that he likes this idea.

Stroking his free cock, I use my tongue to toy with the underside even as I use my hands to work his length. His fingers touch my ear again, his breath heaving like a

bellows, and his excitement makes mine pulse. Heat curls low in my belly and I touch him with greater enthusiasm, my mouth wet and hungry on the head of his cock.

Ranan groans, reaching up to touch my ear again. His hand goes flat and he cups the side of my face instead. I look up at him and our eyes meet just as he comes, flooding my mouth with hot salt. I jerk in response, surprised, and more warmth spreads across my breasts. Oh. So when he comes, he comes in both places. Why do I find that so fascinating? I swallow what I can of his release, still pumping his shaft with my hands to try and squeeze as much pleasure out of this moment for him as I can, and I'm entranced by the sounds he makes. Rough, ragged sounds that tell me more of his loss of control than anything else. I soak in every one of those heated breaths, knowing that I've pleased him.

He gently pulls away from me, his eyes hot with silent emotion. We're sticky with his release, both of us, and I gently trace a finger through the mess he's left atop my breasts. "My thanks, my husband. I enjoyed that thoroughly."

Ranan's eyes immediately narrow as he goes still. "I told you I didn't like lies."

I stare at him, open-mouthed. He thinks I'm deceiving him? "Why would I lie right now?"

"Because you're still trying to please me." He gestures at me. "You got nothing out of that. It was all for my benefit. I should have pleased you, too. I didn't think about it. It was...difficult to think."

That makes me smile. "That was my intention—to make you feel so good that you couldn't think. And just because you were the only one that came doesn't mean I didn't get pleasure out of it. I liked touching you. I liked knowing that you enjoyed my touch. I liked making you come. If that's wrong, well then, I guess I'm wrong. Because I got a great deal of pleasure out of that."

His expression remains skeptical.

With affectionate exasperation, I try a different tactic. “Do you pet a cat expecting it to reciprocate? Or do you pet a cat because the cat likes it and you enjoy making it happy?”

“I have never petted a cat.”

“Well, perhaps you should get one. They’re good at keeping mice and rats away.” I trace circles in his seed, noticing his gaze flicks there, and then lift my messy finger and lick it clean. “I promise you, if I don’t want to touch you, I will let you know. But I wanted to touch you today, and it pleased me to make you come.”

“Not as much as it pleased me,” he grumps, gesturing at my slick breasts. “Obviously.”

I giggle. That might be the first joke he’s ever made. “You make it sound like that’s a bad thing.”

He sits up, grimacing, and eyes me. “It is when you are in pain. I should have let you rest.”

In pain? It takes me a moment to realize that he’s talking about my menses. “I’m faring better today, and it’s just my moon flow. I can’t laze about clutching my stomach for a week every month or I’d never get anything done. I’ll just do like all the other women I know and grit my teeth through the worst of it.”

His expression still seems worried. He reaches out and affectionately brushes his fingers over my ear, and that small touch means more to me than a dozen flowery admissions of love. “Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?” he asks. “More tea?”

I shake my head, because I'm going to pace myself on the tea. My menses are a regular visitor and I don't want to be greedy with the tea. I can make it stretch. "Perhaps a towel so I can clean off?"

He's on his feet immediately, digging through the fabric. I grimace when he pulls out a dainty scrap of something that's edged in what looks like very expensive, crumpled lace that manages to be pretty and delicate while soft at the same time. But when he kneels next to me and gently cleans off my skin, I decide it doesn't matter how nice the material is because his touch is even better. Ranan is so sweet about taking care of me that it makes me want to preen under his touch, and my nipples harden as he moves the fabric over them.

"Can we talk a little?" I ask. "If you want to know what would make me feel better, I'd love to know more about my future as your wife."

His gaze flicks over me and he goes back to wiping my skin, this time taking a clean corner of the lacy material and mopping my cheek and chin with it. He's quiet for a long moment and I worry he's going to ignore my request, but he finally speaks. "Tell me what you wish to know."

"Well...is this where we're going to live? Here in this grotto?" I gesture at our cluttered surroundings. It's not the most ideal house, but I'm already thinking of ways I can make it more like a home. A makeshift hearth of some kind. A bed. An area that I can set up a loom in...

"Here?" He huffs, as if the idea is ridiculous. "No."

"Oh." I'm disappointed, strangely. Sure, it's a cave, but it's cozy enough and I feel safe, especially given that the only way in and out is through the tunnel in the water.

"It's too isolated," he adds.

“I don’t mind isolated. Not after running into those scoundrels on the beach.”

Ranan’s expression darkens and he shakes his head. He takes the fabric he used to clean me and drags it over his cocks, cleaning himself off, and I watch him discreetly, eyeing the still-solidly enormous lengths of him. “We’re going to the flotilla once you’ve recovered.”

I look up at his face in surprise. “We are?”

He nods. “We are going to visit my parents once you can swim again.” He eyes me as he finishes cleaning himself off and then tosses the priceless lace aside, adding, “Once you can swim properly .”

That might take a little time. No rush, then. I relax a bit. “So I’m to meet your family? Will they like that you have a human bride instead of a sea-ogre bride?”

“We call ourselves the seakind, not ogres. That’s a human term.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.” Gods, I’m glad I didn’t say that in front of his family. “A seakind bride, then.”

He reaches out and touches my ear again, stroking my earlobe as if to comfort me. His face remains stony, but that small touch reassures me. “My uncle has a human partner.”

“And they like him? Your family?”

Ranan just keeps stroking my ear.

As the moments creep past and he doesn’t reassure me, I grow worried. I put my hand over his to stop his caresses and repeat my concerns. “Your family likes your uncle’s

partner? They won't mind that you have a human bride?"

"It is what I want."

I study his face. "Is it?"

Ranan scowls and tugs his hand from mine. He gets to his feet, pacing away. "You ask too many questions."

"I do," I admit, keeping my voice light. "It's gotten me slapped in the mouth a lot."

That makes him stop in his tracks. He turns around, scowling. "I would not hit you."

"Didn't say you would. Just said it's happened a lot in the past."

"I don't want you scared around me."

I arch a brow at him, tossing my hair. "Then don't act scary."

His hands go to his hips and he shakes his head. I can't decide if he's annoyed or amused at my retort. Probably doesn't know how to respond.

That's fine, I'm a champion at carrying a conversation away from an awkward spot.

"Once my menses are done, you'll teach me how to swim, then?"

Ranan's posture relaxes a bit. "Aye. So you can get Vor a fish. I haven't forgotten."

I beam at him. Honestly, a man that doesn't beat me and remembers the small things I tell him? Lady Dywan never had it so good.

Chapter

Fifteen

RANAN

I hate that I am so easy to please. So pathetically obvious.

Because I am in a good mood for the rest of the day after Valessa touches me. I am in a good mood when I trawl through my underwater caches, looking for bits to trade in. I am in a good mood when I hunt through the waters, looking for just the right location for a large school of fish. Not that it'll be there in a week from now when Vali can join me in the waters, but it doesn't hurt to search.

I'm in a good mood the next day when I wake up with her curving bottom snuggled up against my cocks. I'm in an even better mood when she rolls over and starts to touch me, and as she strokes my cocks and mouths them, she grinds her hips and moans. She tells me she enjoys herself, but...it feels too easy. Too simple. Surely she wants something out of this?

I hate that I am so susceptible to being touched. That a pretty woman runs her fingers over my cocks and suddenly I am ready to smile...almost.

It makes me wonder, though. Even as the days pass and the pinch of discomfort is no longer on her face, Vali does not ask for anything from me. She kisses me all over my chest. She strokes my arms, my legs, and most especially my cocks.

Yet it doesn't always have to be about me. I like it, of course. No sane male would be displeased at a woman who attempts to pleasure him every chance she can. I enjoy it, even as it doesn't sit right for me. Vali should want more from me than just some fabric and a few trinkets, shouldn't she?

But what do I give her? Any jewels that she wants, she can simply take from my grotto. The same for fabrics, or statues, or other shiny things. Those do not count as gifts, as far as I am concerned. Nor is food a gift, because she needs to eat. If I make a meal a gift, I worry she will feel she will need to buy each mouthful from me, and I do not like that idea.

Yet if I let her continue to pleasure me in bed, I am using her.

My thoughts trouble me, almost as much as the weather troubles me. It is unbearably hot over the next few days, and the fish that normally teem off the reefs here seek cooler waters. Hunting is bad near the cave, so I swim farther out, into the deep blue depths after several days of poor meals. Akara's mind touches mine with worry, but I send her thoughts of reassurance and an image of Vali. Even if I am gone all day, she needs to stay with my human female, who has proven to be more fragile and vulnerable than I'd hoped.

And thus lies another problem. How can Vali be the mate to a sea-ogre when my world does not welcome her? She does not swim. The endless sun blisters her fishbelly-colored skin. The people on shore hunt her, and she bleeds heavily at least once a month. How can she live upon Akara's back at my side as I rob the human ships that sail up and down the shipping lanes here? It's not safe.

My uncle has a human mate, but his is male. There is no monthly bleeding there. My mother sheds an egg once a month so that must be similar.

The smartest thing would be to take Vali to the innkeeper with the daughter and ask

them to help her find a home. To accept that I cannot have a human wife and leave her with people I trust.

Yet...I find I cannot bring myself to entertain the idea. Every time I consider it, I think of Vali's smile of pleasure as she tongues one of my cocks...

...and I am a selfish, rotten bastard, because I am going to keep her.

I swim along the sea floor, distracted by thoughts of Vali and her warm, enticing, eager mouth. The corals grow thick here, with colorful fish darting around me as I move. I prefer the more open waters, as a rogue wave can slam me up against the sharp corals and scrape a layer off my skin, but I don't want to go out so far that it's impossible for me to return to Vali at the end of the day. I glide past the thick wall of corals and dive deeper, to the shelf of deep blue waters behind it. If Vali wants a large fish to please Vor, I'm going to have to lure them closer to the surface. She can't dive this far.

But if I'm going to lure, I need to be familiar with the waters. I breathe out, letting the remainder of the air in my lungs escape to the surface, and dive deeper. The light from the surface grows distant, and the protective membrane that slides over my eyes when I swim flattens everything I see. I rely on my underwater senses instead, where I can "feel" the positions and sizes of other things in the waters around me by how they affect the waters we swim in. I can feel the fluttering movements of a school of fish off to one side, and the slower, more thoughtful movements of a large predator across from them.

I skim through the waters, seeking just the right movements that will tell me that what I'm looking for is nearby.

The sea floor stirs, and something impossibly large rises from below.

Immediately, I dart for the surface, alarm flaring through me as the entire bottom of the sea seems to rise up. A sea dragon, I realize, and I've wandered into its hunting grounds. Around me, the fish scatter in a panic, and I dart in the opposite direction of the large school of skipjack I've been following in the hopes that the sea dragon will go after the fish and not me.

I am not so lucky, though. I can feel it rising in the waters behind me, the sea shivering with the force of its movements and confusing my senses. I need to get away at all costs. Sea dragons are similar to the eels that hide in corals, but ten times the size, and as fiercely possessive of their territory as their smaller cousins.

Something sharp closes in around my leg, sending white-hot pain lancing up my calf. I cry out, the sound escaping away in a bubble. I'm dragged downward, my lower leg trapped in the creature's jaws. If he takes me into his cave, I won't make it out alive. I have to break free. I pull one of my short knives from my chest harness and stab at the creature's face, but the beak of it is tough like Akara's shell. I stab again and again, desperate to hit something that will make a difference, even as the waters around me fill with blood.

Blood is bad—if the sea dragon doesn't finish me off, the sharks will. In a panic, I continue to stab—and finally hit something soft. A nostril, perhaps.

The creature thrashes, the head flinging back and forth, and then I'm flung away into the inky waters. Panicked, I claw at the sea, desperate to get away, but all is dark and I don't know the way up. I'm blinded in the darkness, and I could swim right back into the creature's yawning mouth if I'm not careful.

I need to go soon, too, or it might change its mind about releasing me and come to finish me off.

Ignoring the fluttering panic in my gut, I cup my hands around my mouth and let out

an air bubble, noting the direction it heads, and I follow after it, doing the same over and over again until the light begins to seep through the blue waters, and this time I can see the bubbles heading to the surface.

Clawing my way forward, I surge to the surface and take a deep gasping breath of air. I tread water for a moment, trying to orient my senses, but I'm far from the grotto. I can feel the torn flesh of my leg dragging in the water, and the dull, hot pain increases by the moment.

I have to get to shore. I can't bleed freely in the water or I'll bring every shark in the area to my side. I mentally reach for Akara, but her thoughts feel distant. I try to head toward them, but my own thoughts are foggy with pain.

Stupid. I'm so stupid. I practically wandered into a sea dragon's mouth just because I was trying to chase fish for a pretty human. I should have known better than to venture so deep. I swim for a bit, noting that the shore is a dim line of color on the horizon. Closer than that, a gray fin breaks the surface, circling.

I'm not going to make it to the shore.

I turn, looking for alternatives. There's a sandy spit not too far away, with a lone tree clinging to the rocks. I head there and barely manage to pull myself to the shore. Sand clings to my skin as I pull myself to safety, getting into my wound and sending more pain shooting through my limbs. I turn onto my back and look down at my bad leg—the flesh of my calf hangs off, as if the beak of the creature was trying to strip meat from bone and didn't get a chance to finish. The sight of it makes me ill, as does the blood pooling around me in the sand.

Pulling my chest harness off, I make a tourniquet to slow the bleeding and then lie back on the sands, dizzy. I'll rest for a bit, wait for the sharks to dissipate, and then swim back to the grotto. It might be morning before it's safe, though.

Hopefully Vali won't be too frightened to spend the night alone.

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Chapter

Sixteen

VALI

Ranan doesn't return for supper.

Normally when the sun sets, he returns with a freshly caught fish or two and an eager look in his eye. I like to pretend that the eager look is for me, that he's happy to return to my side. It's more likely he's just hoping for me to use my mouth on him before bed, but I don't mind. I like pleasuring him.

Tonight, though...no Ranan.

Huh.

I mentally go through our last conversation, wondering if I said something to offend him. Wondering if I've irritated him enough that he's decided to just not come back for me at all. It doesn't seem like something Ranan would do, however. If he was done with me, he'd say so.

Wouldn't he?

I keep myself busy, tidying up the cave and sorting through a few more bags of treasure that have been carelessly tossed together. There are delicate dishes mixed in with cloth, vials of exotic spices flung in with jewelry, and fascinating-looking

weapons mixed in with the lot. I neatly sort through everything, not because I'm calculating their worth, but because it'll be easier for Ranan to realize what he has if it's all placed together. By the time I'm done with three of the biggest trunks in the back of the grotto, I've got a chest full of Yshremi coins, a smaller one of Adassian, and bags of jewelry. The weapons are rolled into leather to keep them tidy, and the fabrics gently folded.

Still no Ranan.

My heart aches. I must have offended him, then. Said something stupid or careless...or lied again.

Gods, that must be it. Some silly lie has tumbled off my lips without me realizing it, and he's furious at me once more. That's why he hasn't returned.

Crushed, I go to sleep alone in our nest of blankets.

I wake up to sunlight streaming in through the hole in the roof of the grotto, and still no Ranan. Sitting up, I rub my face and yawn...and then I hear it.

A low, morose bellow. Like a woale searching for her calf, only much larger and deeper.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I get to my feet, listening for it again. Is that...his turtle? What's her name? Akara? Did he not take her with him if he was leaving?

None of this makes sense.

Since I didn't eat last night, I nibble on a few of the treats he'd brought me from the mainland— dried fruit and nuts. I clean up after myself and get fresh water, and am

relieved to note that my period is finally gone. There's nothing to stop me from learning to swim now.

Nothing except for the fact that the person I wanted to learn for is gone.

Akara makes another low moaning sound, and it unsettles me. I don't know anything about turtles of any size, but that doesn't sound happy.

Is it possible that something has happened to Ranan?

I glance up at the hole in the ceiling of the cave, but it's far too high up for me to climb to. The only way out of here is to go along the watery tunnel I entered from. The thought makes me shiver. I can't swim, and this time I don't have Ranan to guide me through. What if I get lost underwater? What if I drown?

Akara moans again, and I scrub my hands against my scalp. I can't stand it. I have to see what's going on. Ranan wouldn't leave his turtle behind. I like to think he wouldn't leave his wife behind either, not without some sort of word. Something must be wrong.

Decided, I move to the edge of the pool and stare into the blue depths. My teeth chatter with fear, imagining all the monsters that could be lurking just outside the cave entrance, waiting to gobble me up.

Don't thrash, Ranan had told me. Only prey thrashes.

The watery tunnel itself seems to be narrow. I remember bumping along against the uneven sides of the wall as Ranan pulled me through. Perhaps instead of swimming, I can pull myself through to the other side. It'll be just like climbing into the hay loft in a barn, I tell myself.

Except narrow and underwater and dark.

Gods.

Vor, help me, I pray silently. Help me find my husband.

I ease into the water, tucking my clothing tight around my body. After a moment's hesitation, I emerge, grab a jeweled dagger, and then return to the water with my weapon in my belt. It takes some doing before I'm brave enough to submerge myself, and even more before I can convince myself to go underwater for longer than the span of a breath.

"Just do it," I chant to myself. "Just go. Think about it later."

I suck in a deep breath, hold my nose, and plunge myself underwater. I tell myself not to panic, to grab the rocky wall just as I've been practicing, and guide myself forward. I pull myself along in the tunnel, and when I can't hold my breath any longer, I open my eyes. The salt water stings them, but I see a circle of light up ahead and push through, inwardly whimpering.

I come out the other side with a sobbed gasp and cough hard, water dripping down my face. It's a weird sense of triumph to feel after swimming (pulling) myself down a short span, but I'm thrilled at my progress. I did it. I did it by myself, and I didn't think it was possible.

I pull myself to the rocky shoreline and sit upon it, gasping and streaming water. Immediately, Akara bellows again and then the massive turtle is heading in my direction. She's enormous, twice the size of any modest farmhouse, and for a moment I'm frozen with fear.

But she stops short of my spot on the shore and slaps her flippers in the water and

bellows again.

“I see you,” I tell her. “But I don’t know what’s wrong.”

The turtle bellows again, her sharp, triangular face looming ever closer to mine. I swallow hard and then gently reach up to stroke her nose. She could snap me in half with that terrible beak of hers, but Ranan adores the turtle. He speaks to her somehow, and I wish I could. “I don’t know how to help,” I tell her, running my fingers along the ridges of her nose. “I don’t know how to talk to you.”

To my surprise, my mind floods with images of Ranan. All of them blurry and unfocused, but all of them Ranan. I jerk my hand back in surprise.

Like a puppy, Akara shoves her nose under my hand again.

Once more, a flood of mental images of Ranan pierce my thoughts.

“I’m worried about him, too,” I tell her, hesitantly stroking her nose. Is this how Ranan communicates with her? Through mental images? “But I don’t know where he is.”

Akara’s great head swivels and she tosses it, splashing me with water as she thrashes. She lets out a low bellow and then looks at me expectantly.

“You know where he is?” I guess.

The turtle bellows again, nearly shaking the rocks with the force of her response.

I get to my feet, wobbly. “Can you take me there?”

The noise she makes is affirmation, I hope. Either that or a burp. She pushes back

from the shore, as if taking off already.

“Wait,” I call out, chasing after her. “Wait for me! I can’t swim like you!”

I paddle out to the turtle’s head and when she nudges me, I try to get on her sloping back. The top of her shell is flat, but the sides are mossy and slick with slime and water, and I can’t find purchase. I scramble to climb on board and manage to do so after several pathetic attempts. Akara is patient, at least. Panting, I get to my feet atop her and put my hands on my hips. “Let’s go find him, then. I’m with you.”

The turtle lets out another burp of air and sinks into the water, just a little. I spread my feet to steady myself as she shifts, turning about in the shallow cove and then the powerful, sail-like flippers push off.

I float off on a turtle’s back, alone, into the wide open sea.

Chapter

Seventeen

VALI

Time passes slowly. Akara continues to swim, heading constantly in what feels like the same direction. For a long time, there's nothing on the horizon but more endless blue, and it makes me nervous. Where is she going, exactly?

But then a thin needle appears on the horizon and grows steadily larger. As we approach, I can see it's a lone tree, out in the middle of what feels like nowhere. A lone tree, and the tiniest slice of rocky, sandy shore.

And upon it? The familiar, greenish skin of one of the seakind.

"Ranan," I breathe as Akara gets close enough that I can make out his collapsed form. I shield my eyes from the afternoon sunlight. He doesn't stir as Akara pulls herself against the rocks and bellows again, loud and plaintive.

When she doesn't move closer, I realize she can't. Akara is meant for swimming and floating, and if she tries to get over those dagger-like rocks that line the shallows around the land-spit, she'll end up stranding herself.

It's up to me, then. I move to the edge of the turtle's shell and jump into the shallow waters. There are schools of small fish here, and little crabs that scurry away when I splash down. I wade over to the tiny slice of shore, where the sand looks as if it's

mixed with stone, and the lone tree clings to the rocks, its roots like a gnarled hand gripping the land tight. There's a few dark blobs scattered in the shadow that look like oversized nuts. If I were here alone, I'd be intrigued by this little bit of land in the midst of nowhere. For someone who has lived all her life on the outskirts of the same city, the openness here is unnerving and fascinating at the same time.

But Ranan comes first.

I scramble to his side, ignoring the sharp jabs of the rocks on the undersides of my bare feet. "Ranan!" I touch his throat, feeling for the pulse of his heartbeat, and I'm relieved to feel it thrumming underneath his greenish skin. He's hot and dry, though, his skin burning under the endless sunlight. He needs water and shade. Did he pass out from exhaustion? Heat? I skim my gaze over him, looking for issues...and stop when I see one leg tucked under another. There's a tourniquet tied around the calf of one leg, and it's swaddled in what looks like strands of seaweed from the shallows.

The sand around him is dark with blood. How am I just now seeing this? I thought it was a shadow. My body clenched tight with fear, I reach down and brush some of the seaweed away. It's even worse than I thought. His leg looks as if it's been ripped at from the knee down, like a sleeve being torn from a dress. I can see bone. I can see loose flesh. And over all of it is sandy grit.

No wonder he's fevered.

"We're going to fix this," I swear to the unconscious Ranan. I won't allow myself to panic. He needs help, and I'm the only one that's around, so it has to be me. I'm not much of a medic, but I've sewn up many torn robes. Hopefully I can start from there. Stopping the bleeding is the first issue.

I glance around the tiny land spit, but there's no shelter except under the fronds of the lone tree. I eye my surroundings and then Akara's empty back, thinking longingly of

the shelter that is normally set up there. Ranan must have removed it when we went to the grotto. I should have considered this when I climbed on Akara's back earlier, but I was too panicked. All I've got is my knife and my tunic.

It'll have to do.

Eyeing my clothing, I decide Ranan needs it more than I do. I pull off my brand new tunic and slit up the sides of the careful stitches I'd made just days ago. With the fabric, I make a long length and then roll Ranan's heavy, limp body onto the end of it. I use the fabric as a makeshift travois and drag him to the shade of the tree itself. The leaves protect from the worst of the sun, so I settle Ranan against the trunk of it and then get to work on cleaning his leg.

The sand is everywhere, which is annoying, but I can hopefully get most of it cleaned. I end up ripping the material of my tunic in half. Half of it remains under Ranan so he has a relatively dirt-free spot to lie down, and the other half I take down to the water's edge with me, soaking it and then returning to his side with my streaming bundle. With the seawater, I rinse the sand away and carefully try to push the brutalized flesh back into place. It needs stitches, like a ripped sleeve would, but I don't even have a needle and thread with me.

Ranan moans in pain, drawing my attention.

I touch his cheek, noting that he's burning up. "Are you waking up? Ranan?"

No response. His lips part and they look cracked and dry. I don't know how much water he drinks, but I'm guessing that someone that spends most of his day submerged probably needs a fair amount to keep his throat wet. He needs a drink. I look around, helpless. There's nothing here but those stupid oversized round nuts. I kick one away, and to my surprise, it sloshes.

Oh.

When I take a closer look at the nut, I recognize the outer shell. It's some sort of exotic fruit that Lady Dywan would have on her table occasionally. I've never tasted it, but I have had a taste of the milk that comes inside. It's something for Ranan to drink at least.

I claw at the nut's hard-but-spongy exterior, trying to open it. Doesn't work. Frustrated, I stab the knife right into the heart of the damned thing, and a clear liquid spurts out. I yelp, grabbing the oversized nut before all the liquid can pour out, and hold it carefully over Ranan's parched mouth. It dribbles against his lips, and I stroke his throat to encourage him to swallow. When it runs down the sides of his face, I set the nut aside, tilted carefully so the precious liquid remains intact, and stroke his face to comfort him. "Ranan?"

Still no response. All I can do is hope that things aren't as dire as they look.

I press my fingers to his skin, but he still feels hot and feverish all over. I soak the fabric one more time, then drape the wet length over his body to cool him. He sighs at that, and I feel as if I've done something right, at least.

There's a splash in the distance, and I think guiltily of Akara. Is the turtle anxiously awaiting news about Ranan? Or does she know I have under control? I move to the water's edge and wade back out to her, reaching for the enormous face. She could take my entire body in her mouth and snap me in half, and yet I'm not afraid of her any longer.

We both want the same thing—for Ranan to survive.

I stroke the hard beak, sending her warm thoughts. "He's going to be fine," I reassure her. I'm not sure if that's true or not. I don't know how to take care of him out here

with no supplies, but I'm going to do my best. Ranan's going to need food to keep up his strength, though, and I'm no fisherwoman. We can eat the fruit, of course, but I think Akara will need something to do to keep herself busy. I know I would. "Can you patrol the waters for us, Akara? Make sure no predators are coming this way?"

The turtle makes another bellowing sound, and then she pushes off away from the land-spit, leaving me alone with the unconscious Ranan. For a moment, I panic as she leaves. She's my way back to the grotto, to safety. But as I watch her go, I relax a bit more. Akara is loyal. She's devoted to Ranan. There's no way she'd leave him here. She'll make certain we're safe here and once Ranan's awake and able to walk, we'll get him on her back and to the grotto where I can take proper care of him.

I sit down next to him, stroking his too-warm brow, and wait.

The stars glitter high in the sky and the night is absolutely clear. The weather is beautiful and the sea around us calm. If it weren't for the fact that Ranan is grievously wounded, I might appreciate the quiet, perfect night.

As it is, it just emphasizes how much is wrong.

Ranan continues to sleep, but his dreams are fitful and unpleasant. He sweats. He tosses. He turns. He breathes rapidly sometimes, as if he's running up a hill, yet he remains asleep. I keep his leg wet, because seawater has to be more sterile than the sand that crusts everything, but I worry it's not enough. If we were in a city, I'd insist the local healer come by. They'd sell us some stinky potion for him to drink, sew up his leg, say a few prayers to Kalos, the Lord of Disease, and ask him to stay his hand.

And while I can do the prayers here, I don't know if they'll do any good if his leg doesn't get sewn up. Right now it's just an open wound, and I know that isn't good at all.

I prop his head in my lap throughout the night, stroking the delicate fin that rises from his head. Even it feels overly warm, and it worries me. At least back at the grotto I could give him my willow bark. I could bathe him with fresh water and feed him soup. I could sew up his leg.

Being out here in the middle of nowhere will be death for him if he doesn't awaken.

Daylight comes, and Akara returns with a bellow. She slaps at the water with her fins to demand that I come greet her. I wade back out to her, my face raw from the sunlight and my mouth parched. My stomach rumbles, but I've been saving the white flesh from the nuts for Ranan in case he should wake up. But now that Akara has returned, I have a new idea.

"I'm glad you're back, because we need to talk," I tell the turtle as I wade out to her side. Akara immediately comes to me and pushes her nose against my hands, not unlike the barn cats used to back at the farm in Parness. I stroke her nose and images of Ranan drift through my mind, pushed to me by the turtle. She's asking how he is. I send my thoughts back to her, filling my head with the unconscious Ranan and then mental images of Ranan back at the grotto, Ranan awake and smiling. "We need to go back. I can't tend to him here. Can you take us?"

She makes a sound I don't quite grasp and turns her head in a different direction, as if pointing at something. I hope we're thinking along the same lines. There's no way to tell.

I'm going to have to gamble that she understands me. I think she does, because when I move back to Ranan's side, she remains calm, leisurely turning her large body in the shallow waters. That's a good sign. I bend over Ranan, ignoring the throb of my bare feet and the pain of my overly pink sunburned skin. I can bear all that if Ranan lives.

Touching his cheek, I stroke it to try and wake him. "Ranan? Can you rouse? I need

to get you on Akara's back and it's going to be a lot easier if you're awake."

There's no response. I stroke his cheek again, and he moans, the sound heart-wrenching.

I need to get him back to the grotto and soon. Leaning in, I kiss his cheek and stroke his face. "I'm going to fix this. I promise."

I have to.

It takes a long time for me to tug him back to the water's edge. The sandy strip turns into rocks, and I don't want to knock him against them. Plus, he's twice as heavy as me. Using the fabric as a travois, I manage to drag him a little at a time, and the fabric rips and tears in my grip. By the time I get him into the shallows, it's practically shredded. I manage to pull him through the water over to Akara's side, and then have to figure out how to get him up the turtle's sloping back. I send a lot of mental images to Akara and use the strips of fabric to make a harness over his shoulders, and brace myself on the join of Akara's head and neck, straining to haul him upward.

The hamarii turtle flicks her head, sending me tumbling backward, but it also shoves Ranan's limp form high enough that I can haul him up.

I want to weep with joy as Akara pushes off from the spit, heading out into the deeper waters once more. But there's no relief for me just yet. I gather the ripped remnants of fabric and start to piece it back together with knots, because Ranan needs to keep his head covered from the relentless sun.

I can rest when we return to the grotto, I tell myself.

Nothing else matters if Ranan dies.

Chapter

Eighteen

RANAN

I slowly come to.

My mouth feels like a wad of dried out seaweed. It tastes rotten and yet is somehow parched. Something pricks my hot, throbbing leg, sending a dagger of pain sheeting up my calf. I jerk, trying to move away from the stinging pain, but something heavy weighs down my thigh.

“Of course now you’re awake,” I hear Vali mutter. “Your timing could not be worse.”

My eyes feel gritty, and I manage to open them a sliver. As I do, I see her naked back—fiery red with sunburn—facing me. She’s sitting on my thigh. Another hot, stabbing pain shoots up my leg and I vaguely remember the sea dragon. It’s hard to talk—my tongue feels as if it’s coated with sand. “What...are you...doing?”

“Sewing your wound. Be still or I’ll have to strap you down.”

She’s sewing my wound? I repeat the thought several times.

She’s...sewing...

...my wound?

When did she get here? Wait, where is here? I focus my gaze on the ceiling and see the familiar stone of the grotto. Another stab lances up my leg and I hiss. "Ow!"

"This was easier when you were unconscious," she mutters.

"How long...?"

"Almost two days that I know of. I'll give you some water once I'm done with this." She pauses, blows out a loud breath, then breathes in again just as deeply.

"You...all right?"

"Great, just great." She doesn't sound great, though. Her voice sounds tight.

I lie back, exhausted and weak and still slightly dazed. I'm so thirsty. I feel hot, too, but that can't be helped...can it? My leg feels as if it's on fire, and I wonder if it's even there or if the sea dragon bit it off. "How bad...is it?"

"Bad."

And yet she went out and found me? I don't know how, and I can't imagine why. I haven't been kind to her. "Leg...?"

"Still on, but it's not pretty. It needs sewing."

"Doesn't hurt that bad."

"Well, thank the gods for that. Could be all the willow bark tea I've been dripping down your throat."

Has she? I didn't realize.

"I'm lucky I had some steeping for a long time. It's really strong. You'll feel it when it wears off, though. I guarantee that."

Lovely. Something to look forward to. Vali has obviously been hard at work tending to me. "Could have...robbed...me. Left. You'd be rich."

"I'm your wife," she points out, her weight shifting on my thigh. If I didn't feel like I'd been pounded by an entire flotilla of hamarii, I might be able to appreciate that she's straddling my thigh naked, her cunt snugged against my flesh. "I wouldn't be robbing you if you died and I got your things. And besides, where would that get me? I'd be murdered at the first town I went to."

"Mm." I lick my lips. They feel like fish scales.

"Besides, I like you," Vali continues in that determined voice. "Even though you make it difficult at times. Now, hold still. I need to stitch again."

Hot pain flares through my leg, and this one seems to go on for longer. A growl rises in my throat and I clench my fists together to keep still. She's helping me. I know she is. I'm grateful, even if I want to pull her off my leg and have her never stab me with a needle again. The pain ebbs and I wheeze, collapsing back against the soft fabrics under my body. As I do, I think about her admission. "You...like me?"

"You've always been kind to me. Even when you didn't have to be. In my world, that means a lot." She flexes her shoulders as she moves and then hunches them again, going quiet.

"I...haven't...been...that kind."

“Sure you have. We’re still getting to know each other. And this next part is going to sting, because I think I need to sew the muscle together before I sew the skin over it.”

It sounds like she knows what she’s doing. I’m awash with gratitude that she’s tending to me. She found me, brought me back, and she’s going to help me get better. “You know what you’re doing?”

“I can sew a straighter stitch than anyone,” she says. “The scar will hardly show. Trust me. You ready?”

I grunt. “Do it before I think about it.”

White-hot pain sears up my leg and I let out a groan of agony. It goes on for far too long, and sweat beads on my skin. She tugs, and I feel the stitch tighten in place, and then her shoulders hunch. Vali is quiet for a long moment and then tilts her head back, breathing deep.

Is she...gagging?

“You...sick?”

“The muscle was just a bit much. Lots of blood.” Her voice sounds oddly tight. “Just gimme a moment and I’ll keep going.”

“You said you’d done this before.”

“I lied. You can beat my arse later.”

A rusty laugh barks out of me. I’m both surprised and yet not by her answer. The fact that she’s doing this for me tells me just how strong she is. Not many people would do what she has to help me heal. I’m suddenly grateful for her and her stubbornness.

And yes, even her lies.

Vali takes a deep breath and then glances back at me from over her shoulder. “This next one’s gonna sting again...”

May Rhagos take me. I grit my teeth and wait.

Chapter

Nineteen

VALI

Ranan is an absolutely terrible patient. I actually start to long for when he was unconscious, because conscious Ranan is a bear. He's in pain, that much is obvious. He wants to examine the stitches I've made, never mind that I've wrapped them in bandages soaked with more willow bark. Never mind that the nasty red lines on his flesh that spoke of infection have disappeared thanks to my tireless cleansing of his wound.

Never mind that I'm constantly making tea and soup for him and helping him piss in a pot so he doesn't have to stand upright. I bathe him when he sweats, and I change the linens so he has something clean to sleep in every day.

And what do I get in return?

The worst, most uncomfortable peeling sunburn of my life, and an absolute grouch of a husband.

I do understand his frustration—I hate being sick. But by the gods, he's cranky. The first few days were easier, because he was resting and unconscious for a lot of them. The healing herbs make him sleepy but also have done wonders for his leg. It's swollen, a hot, fiery red ridge of flesh upraised around my stitch-work, but he can move all his toes (some better than others). It means I did something right with my

stitches, and he mends a little more every day.

He mends so much that he gets cranky and lashes out at me when he hurts.

“I’m tired of this tea,” he grumps as I hand him another cup of willow bark.

“That’s the last of it.” It’s not, but he can just cope when I hand him the next cupful. It’s doing him good so he’s going to keep drinking it, I’ve decided. “Down it and I won’t make you any more.”

“Lies,” he grumbles, even as he tips the cup back and swigs its contents. “Deceit. You’re going to shove more at me the moment I turn around.”

“Is your leg less swollen? Then quit griping.” I turn back to the large beaten metal basin I’ve been using to soak the worst of the bloodied fabrics and wring them out. There’s a lot of work that goes into taking care of an ill person, and there’s no one else to do it but me. “You can beat my arse for lying when you’re back to yourself.”

“You keep bringing that up,” he says in a sulky voice. “I would almost think you’d enjoy it.”

I snort. “Or perhaps I’m just wise to your complaints.”

“There’s a healer on the flotilla. He’d have this taken care of quickly.”

I grit my teeth. “Great. Should we chop off your leg and send it away to him then?”

He’s silent at that. I lift up a heavy wad of fabric and wring it, but no matter how many times I soak it, the blood stains aren’t coming out. It breaks my heart to see such expensive fabric ruined, but there’s nothing to be done for it other than to keep soaking it and try again.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Tending to the laundry.” I turn and glance over my shoulder at him. I have him set up in fresh bedding, a mixture of ungodly expensive fabrics that are soft and won’t irritate his skin. His wound is wrapped, his leg propped up on a small, pricey-looking pillow that likely belongs on some rich queen’s bed. More pillows are behind his back, and two of his arms are crossed over his chest, the others flicking with impatience. “Do you need something? I can make more soup, but I’ll need to put on fresh water to boil. Or do you need help to pass water?” I straighten, rubbing my aching shoulders. “Or a bath, but again, I’ll need to draw more water. Or I can change your bedding?—”

“You’re tired. Do you ever pause to rest?”

Rest sounds lovely...and very far down the list. “If I do, who’s going to take care of you?”

Ranan scowls. He hates being reminded that he’s a burden.

I turn back to the wet fabric in my hands.

“You look awful.”

That makes me pause. I turn to look at him. “If you’re trying to impress me with flattery, that’s not the best way to do it.”

He flushes, and one hand twitches. He rubs his neck. “I didn’t mean that. Just...you look weary. And you have a bad sunburn.”

Oh. “I got that rescuing you. It’s fine. It’ll fade soon enough.”

For a moment I think he's not going to respond, but then he grunts. "I...appreciate it. You saving me. It wasn't expected."

His quiet words of appreciation leave me flustered. "Well, I don't imagine the injury was expected, either. Perhaps next time you'll get injured a bit closer to home, mmm?"

"I still appreciate you. I know this has been difficult." He pauses. "I am not good at being useless."

I chuckle. "Now that, I do understand."

"Why are you washing the fabric? It seems like a great deal of work."

Oh. I turn and face him, soaking the fabric in the basin again and then twisting and wringing it once more. My hands ache with the effort, but it doesn't seem to be making much of a difference. The red, rusty stains remain on the delicate embroidery. "It's very expensive cloth. I'd save it if I could. You could make a great deal of coin on a few squares of this."

Ranan waves a hand, dismissing that. "There's more of it. We can throw the stained cloth out."

"It's a waste."

"Yes, but you're tired." He tilts his head, eyeing me. "Does no one ever take care of you, Vali?"

His quiet words unsettle me. I give the fabric another vicious twist, and more water trickles out. "Why would they? I'm a slave."

“You were a slave. Now you’re my wife.”

“Seems like that’s your job then, doesn’t it?” He doesn’t respond to my offhand joke, and I grow even more flustered. “You can still get rid of me, by the way. I won’t hold it against you.”

“More lies.”

“I’m full of them, yes.” I chuckle. “But I mean it. If we’re not meant to be, then we’re not meant to be. I’ve had greater disappointments.”

He just eyes me. “You’re my wife.” He states the words again, calm and assured. “And I am thanking my wife for healing me.”

I set the wet fabric down and wipe my sweating brow. “Thank you. It means a lot.” I take back everything I said about his earlier crankiness. This sincerity unnerves me. I don’t know how to react. I can joke and be cheerful and lie whenever he’s being impossible, but I don’t know what to say when he’s earnest like that. I automatically wonder what he wants to hear, and my mind starts to come up with ideas...but most of them don’t feel as sincere as his careful words, so I keep them locked in my throat.

So I manage a small smile and wring out the fabric one final time before draping it over the makeshift clothesline I’ve created in the back of the cavern, strung between two statues with arms upraised.

“Valessa?”

I pat the wet fabric, smoothing it over the line and turn back to him. He probably needs pain medicine. “Yes?”

But Ranan is eyeing me with an intense, thoughtful gaze, all four arms folded across

his chest. “I am unfamiliar with...humans. If I were to take care of you, what would that look like?”

I frown, moving towards the small fire pit I’ve made in a shallow basin of smooth rock. I find the gorgeous steel kettle with the ornate engraved designs and put it into the coals. Maybe I’ll fix him regular tea, not the medicinal kind. Or a stew. I still have some of the jerky he brought for me. I can soak it and make a beef broth?—

“Vali?”

I blush, flustered. “I’m not sure what you’re asking. What do you mean, take care of me? You did when I had my menses.”

“Not like that. Like...the way you take care of me,” he continues, words chosen oh-so-carefully. His gaze never wavers from being locked upon mine. “With your mouth.”

Oh. He wants to take care of me in bed? My face grows hotter. “I suppose it would be much the same. You have a mouth, too, after all.”

“Has anyone done this for you?”

I hesitate before answering. My past with sex is fraught. I’ve been a slave ever since I was old enough to have sex, and I was eager to marry because it meant pleasing only one man instead of whomever decided they wanted to toy with me at the master’s house. I do enjoy sex, though, most of the time. I enjoy giving pleasure, and sometimes it feels good to rub up against another person. But pleasuring me back? Pleasuring me? Just me? “You recall I was a slave.”

“So...no? No one has done this for you?”

“No.” It takes everything I have to meet his gaze. “And I’ve never asked, either.”

“Will you let me do that for you?”

“What, right now?” I glance down at his leg.

“Not right now. When I’m stronger.” He leans back against the wall of pillows.

“We’ll do it then.”

“Of course.” But for now, I can take care of him. Unsettled, I move to his side and adjust some of the pillows against his back before they slide away. “Let me just?—”

He grabs my hand before I can reach behind him, and forces me to meet his gaze.

“Are you lying?”

My cheeks feel scalding hot. “No. Not lying. If you still want to, then we will.”

“I’ll want to.”

What can I possibly say to that? I bite back a shy smile.

Chapter

Twenty

RANAN

I hate lying on my back like a beached whale. I feel helpless, and pathetic, and my limbs twitch with the need to do something. I need to swim, to hunt, to walk...anything. Instead, I lie here and feel my bad leg throb in time with my heartbeat.

I lie about while my wife runs herself ragged around the cave, taking care of me.

My wife. I taste the words and I rather like them. They're strange, much like a new hunting knife or uncharted waters, but I don't mind it. I'm grateful to Vali. She's saved my life in multiple ways. Not only did she come after me, but she's worked on healing me. If I'd been alone...the flotilla would have run across my bleached bones eventually.

I glance over at Vali, who is working on some sewing nearby. There are hollows under her eyes from lack of sleep and she yawns as she stitches, but even now, she works. There is hot tea bubbling and a soup of seaweed, fish, and clams simmering over the coals in a kettle. She never stops to rest, even when she's falling over with fatigue, and I admire her more with every day that passes.

True, she might lie as easily as she smiles, but Vali has more good qualities than bad. Her actions tell me more than her words ever would. I can learn a lot from her. Not

the lying, of course, but the determination. The strength to push through even when I'm exhausted.

It's time for me to do something.

The way I see it, there are two routes to my recovery. I can lie here, useless, and hope that my leg works properly after I have slowly healed, or I can test it now. If it can support my weight, we go to the flotilla sooner rather than later. I see the healer there. I marry Vali in front of my parents so she no longer questions me. I return home with a happy, eager wife.

I like that version of events much more than the other.

So I sit up and curl the toes on my bad leg, testing things. Pain lances through me, but all my toes obey—some more than others. It's a good thing, though. I try to push off the floor as normal and am unable to do so, however. I glance over at Vali. "Help me up?"

"Wait? What? No!" My pretty little wife scrambles to her feet, tossing aside her sewing. She races to my side, an intense frown on her face. "Lie back down! You'll hurt yourself."

"I've lain down long enough. I want to test my leg."

"Ranan, no ."

"Valessa, yes." I hold a hand up to her. "Are you going to help me or are you going to sit and watch me do this on my own?"

She scowls, but holds out her hand. "You're a stubborn bastard. If you bust the stitches, I'm going to be incredibly pissed at you."

If I bust the stitches, it'll make the choice easy at least. I'll have no recourse but to lie on my back, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about the sea dragon that even now lurks far too close to my territory. I haven't told Vali about it yet because I don't want her to panic. Truth is, once I've recovered, we're leaving this place. If the waters here aren't safe enough for a sea-ogre, they're certainly not going to be safe enough for a delicate human female who can barely swim in a shallow puddle.

I take Vali's hand and she braces her feet wide apart. Even though I'm twice her weight, having her to balance myself against helps and I'm able to heft myself to my feet. I keep my weight off my bad leg and gingerly test putting my toes down on the stone floor of the cavern.

"The stitches look like they're holding so far." She sounds proud.

"Aye, they seem to be." I put more weight on my leg, and crushing pain flares through me. I force myself to continue to press my foot to the ground, testing how long I can put any weight on it.

"How did that happen anyhow?" Vali asks. "Was it a trap of some kind? A shark?"

"Big shark," I agree, since it sounds less fearsome than a sea dragon. "I wandered too close into his territory."

"Lord Vor is sending you a message," my wife tells me. "He wants you to keep close to me, obviously, since he's the one that brought us together."

I eye her. Is she teasing or does she truly think that? "I doubt the gods care that much."

"Yes, well, you can think that all you like. All I know is that I promised Lord Vor a fish and I haven't given it to him yet. I don't want to face his wrath for not fulfilling

my side of the bargain.”

She does have a point. “Lord Vor will understand that you haven’t had a chance to honor his wishes yet.”

“You hope.”

“Aye, I hope,” I chuckle. “But the good news is that I can stand upon my leg.”

“Now who’s the liar?” Vali asks, voice tart. She takes a step back from me and I wobble. “A stiff breeze could knock you over, husband.”

She’s not wrong, yet I’m still encouraged. “It will get stronger every day,” I reassure her. “I simply need to exercise it.”

Vali looks unconvinced. She drops to her knees in front of me, pulling aside the bandages so she can inspect the stitches. “Everything still looks pretty bad. I worry I’ve stitched it wrong. Or what if there aren’t enough stitches to keep everything together?” Her fingers move lightly over my flesh and I hiss in pain. She draws back and eyes me, clearly worried. “Perhaps I should find the nearest town and pay the healer to come out here.”

“There are no towns near here. That’s the point.” The thought of Vali venturing off into the human lands alone terrifies me. I remember how those men on the shore treated her. “And I don’t want a human healer. I have you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You know what I meant.” I reach down and lightly touch her ear. “You have saved me. You know I am thankful.”

She gazes up at me, smiling, and her mouth is so inviting and pretty that I graze my thumb over it. My cocks respond when she blushes, but another jolt of pain shoots up my leg and puts an end to any amorous thoughts.

“Let me try to walk around the grotto,” I tell her as she continues to kneel in front of me. “See how far I can move.”

“Please, please be careful,” Vali breathes as I move out of her grasp.

I take one wobbling step, hissing with pain when I have to put my bad leg down. A second step proves to be too much and I nearly topple. Vali is right there as I do, putting her arms around me to steady me. I lean on her heavily...and then we both spill to the ground, legs flying into the air.

“Gods!” she cries, even as I snort with laughter. Her gaze searches my face as she struggles to sit up. “Are you all right, Ranan?”

“Nothing hurt but my pride,” I tell her. “But I am encouraged. It is painful, but I can use my leg.”

“Well, I don’t want you doing it! You’re just going to make things worse!” She fusses over me, her hands moving over my bare chest as she frets. “You just need to sit down and relax and?—”

“No,” I say, capturing her hand in one of mine. “I have sat about enough. We will pack tonight, and tomorrow we will head out to the flotilla upon Akara’s back.”

“I still don’t know how to swim,” she reminds me, her expression doubtful. “Are we sure that’s wise?”

“I will not be doing much swimming, either. It is simply a change in plans.”

She tries to pull her hand free from mine and get up, but she looks so worried that I refuse to let her go. Her gaze locks onto mine and a small smile tugs at her mouth. She pulls at her hand again, and I drag her toward me. Her soft mouth looks lush and appealing, and I want to kiss away her concerns. Vali leans forward over me, her other hand splaying across my chest. “What are you doing, Ranan?”

I love how breathless she sounds.

“I’m going to kiss my wife.” I slide a hand along her side, caressing her through the fabric. “But only if she wants it.”

Her gaze flicks over my body. “But your leg?—”

“Not using it at the moment.” I’m on my back, half on the bedding. Vali is practically sprawled over me, and she’s being careful to avoid my injury. “Does this mean you don’t want to kiss me?”

“I’ll kiss you,” Vali blurts. “I just...I worry. I don’t want to hurt you. I know you’re in pain. Your leg?—”

“Is nowhere near my mouth,” I remind her, tugging her close once more.

Her lips quirk, and she leans in, meeting me halfway. Her kiss is tentative at first, but I’m reminded of how much I enjoy the feel of her. The soft, delicate sweetness of her mouth, mixed with the warmth of her body. Her lips give under mine, parting, and when I stroke my tongue against hers, she makes a sound of pure delight.

I pull her closer, leaning into the kiss. I’ve forgotten just how enjoyable it is to meld my lips to another’s. To lose myself in the joining of our mouths, to feel a body yielding against mine. Kissing Vali feels...different than what I recall when I kissed women of my people. She’s made the same as them, but she’s Vali, and somehow

that makes it different.

Makes it better . She's warm and loving and gorgeous and her pink tongue feels like a dream against my own. My cocks stir, and I'm reminded of our conversation from yesterday.

She takes nothing for herself in bed. No male has ever given her his mouth between her thighs.

I suddenly want this more than anything. "Let me taste you, Vali."

My wife pulls back from me, her dazed expression glorious. Her gaze darts to my lips and then she licks hers, as if wanting to make my taste linger. "I thought that's what we were doing."

"I want to taste you between your thighs," I point out. "Like we talked about."

She grows flustered, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. "Your injury?—"

"Need not affect us when I have four strong arms." I lift one to graze her thigh, play with her hair with another, and pat the blanket with a third hand even as the fourth strokes her cheek. I am tiring, it's true. The wound has sapped my strength, yet this is something that I want desperately. "I can hold you and taste you, or you can come and sit upon my face and let me lick you to my leisure."

"Oh." Her flustered gaze darts over my face. "You...you truly want that?"

I groan at the hint of excitement in her voice. Just the thought of Vali straddling my face, her warm cunt pressing against my mouth, makes me crazy with need. "I want it very badly."

She hesitates.

She's going to decline. I recognize the stubborn look on her face, and my disappointment is immeasurable. But then she shakes her head. "I'll only do it if we put your bad leg on the pillow again."

Is that her only request? "Done."

Vali detangles from my embrace, her cheeks flushed dark with color as she adjusts the bedding. I'm forced to lie back and watch, hiding my fatigue, as she straightens the blankets and then fluffs my leg pillow. When I'm settled down to her satisfaction, I gesture that she should come toward me. "You look at me as if you are afraid."

"I'm not afraid."

"Good, because I don't bite. You think I won't be gentle?"

"I'm sure you will be."

"Then be brave and claim your pleasure, wife."

She wrings her hands. "What if I don't enjoy it? I've never done this before."

"Then we will stop."

"But what if you enjoy it and I don't?"

"There are a great many things I enjoy, Vali. If you hate it, I can avail myself of one pleasure and focus on the ones that bring both of us joy."

She hesitates for a moment longer and then sighs heavily. "Your pleasure is far more

important than mine. You realize that, right?”

“You’re my wife now and no longer a slave. You realize that, right?” I jab back.

Vali scowls and sits delicately on the blankets next to me, folding her legs under her. “I see your point, but this is new territory for me. You’ll have to forgive me if I seem reluctant. It’s not that I don’t like pleasure or don’t trust you...”

“It’s that it’s vulnerable and you don’t like being vulnerable,” I guess aloud, and she grimaces again. “I would be honored if you would let me try this. If you hate it, we never have to do it again.”

Vali chews her lip again, then nods and smooths her hands down her simple dress. She gets to her feet, eyeing me. “How do we manage this?”

I gesture at my head. “I thought you could sit upon my face.”

I say the words casually, as if I haven’t been contemplating this very thing all night. As if I haven’t been wondering what it would feel like to have her thighs clasp my ears, to feel the weight of her upon my face as I press my mouth and tongue against her cunt. As if I haven’t been making myself crazy with the thought of touching her.

Of what sounds she’ll make when she’s pleased.

Gods, I’ve been thinking of nothing else since we mentioned this yesterday.

Vali sinks down to her knees by my shoulders and then carefully leans forward, easing one leg over until she’s straddling my neck. Her dress falls over my face and I sputter.

She giggles, pushing the fabric off my chin to expose my grin. “Do you want me

naked for this?”

“I’d love to have you naked,” I admit.

With a little smile, she pulls her dress over her head and tosses it away, and then she’s atop me, gloriously naked. Her weight is solid for a human, but to me, she’s light. She trembles, but she doesn’t beg off again. She’s determined to see this through.

My brave wife.

I run my hands up her thighs as she adjusts herself, her knees parted and her feet out to the sides. She leans forward on her hands again, then hesitates, clearly trying to decide the best position. “I’m still not entirely sure how to do this, Ranan.”

“Let me.” I grip her flanks, holding her in place, and one of my lower hands anchors at the small of her back so she can lean against me. We maneuver and wriggle about a bit more, and then she relaxes, leaning back against my grasp.

The scent of her envelops me, and it’s intoxicating. She smells like musk and arousal, and I know without touching her that she’s turned on by the prospect of me putting my mouth on her. My own cocks are fully engorged, throbbing with an aching need that won’t be fulfilled. This is about her.

I take one hand and put it between her legs, running my thumb over the seam of her cunt. It’s shrouded by a nest of dark curls, but I don’t mind that. In fact, I rather like it. It’s just another small difference between our bodies, and I enjoy all of hers. Exploring Vali is like adventuring to new, fresh waters...yet even when I have learned every bit of her form, I suspect I will still enjoy touching and caressing her.

She trembles as I move a hand between her thighs, and that makes me pause. “I have

you, Vali. I have four hands to hold you up. I will not let you fall.”

Vali doesn't look down at me. “I'm not scared you'll drop me.” Her voice sounds tight. Uneasy. Uncertain.

“Then what is there to be afraid of?” I want to brush my mouth against the soft skin of her thighs, but I want to make sure my touch is wanted, first.

“I...I don't know.”

“Do you trust me, wife?”

She nods jerkily, as if she hates to even give this small concession. Her unease makes me ache, because pleasure is such a simple thing. Has no one ever thought to touch her in a way that would bring her joy? I hate that she has been surrounded by people that have used her only for what she can give them...and I am no better.

That changes today.

I stroke her thigh with a confident hand, as if I am soothing a fractious hamarii. “Relax, my wife. We will try this, and if you hate my touch, we will never do so again, I promise.”

“I've never hated your touch,” she says, voice soft. Her hand goes to her ear, as if recalling all the times I've been tongue-tied around her and showed how I felt with a caress there.

It makes me ache all the more. “Then trust me to pleasure you and enjoy myself while I do so.”

“It's just...difficult.” She squirms against my grasp.

“Because you are giving control of your body over to me,” I state, guessing why she is so hesitant.

“I just...in bed is the one place where I have some control. Where I can get the upper hand. Are you sure I can’t just pleasure you?” She sounds desperate.

“I’m positive.”

She makes a pouty sound and puts her fists on her thighs. “Then let’s just do this and get it over with.”

If I didn’t know her better, I’d be offended at her reluctance to let me touch her. But I know the reason behind her reticence. I know how Vali likes to put on a brave face to hide her vulnerability. I am not put off by her actions. It just makes me want to taste her even more.

I nuzzle along the inside of her thigh, pulling her down towards my mouth.

“If your leg hurts,” she begins, “we should?—”

“Hush,” I tell her. “Just hush, my Vali.”

“Hushing.” Yet she trembles all the same.

I kiss along the inside of her thigh, moving towards the tuft of curls that cover her cunt. She smells delightful here, of salt and brine, of feminine musk and delicate skin. It’s a combination that feeds the feral side of me, the side that wants nothing more than to toss her down onto the bed and thrust both cocks into her willing body.

But that is not happening. Even if my leg were whole and I were capable, I want Vali to want to be with me because she enjoys the pleasure of our bodies equally. I do not

expect her to simply service me. That is not the act of a wife, but an eager slave.

And I am not interested in slaves.

So I put all my focus into making this moment good for Vali. I touch her all over, and with twice as many hands as her, it's easy enough to accomplish. She makes soft little sounds when I caress her thighs and the curve of her belly. I want to touch her breasts, too, but her arms rest over them. Next time, then. I move my face closer to her cunt by small increments, and when she no longer tenses at the feel of my lips on her skin, I give her a tentative lick and then wait to see her reaction.

Vali sucks in a breath.

“Was that good?”

She squirms in my grasp again. “I...I don't know. It felt different .”

Hm. I do not have to think if Vali's mouth is good when she tongues my cock. I know all of it is good. The fact that she has to pause and consider means I am not doing it the way I should. I drag my tongue over the seam of her cunt again, experiencing more of her taste, but I do not get the rapturous moans that I want from her. “Better?”

“I think so?”

It feels like a lie. Her mouth says yes but her body is still full of uncertainty. And Vali lies when she fears I won't like the truth...so it is not better. I move my tongue over her again and her folds delicately part under my seeking tongue. I use one hand to gently expose her flesh, and she is damp and her skin is darker here. A small nub protrudes from the apex of her cunt folds, and then her folds veer down to the opening of her body, and then the pucker of her anus. It's all fascinating, and I touch a reverent finger along the inside of one delicate fold. She jumps in response, and the

tension re-enters her body.

I wish I was not so ignorant of how to please her. She knew just how to please me. I need a demonstration of what touches she enjoys and?—

Aha. That's the solution.

I slide my hand away from her cunt and tap a finger on the outside of one leg. "Show me."

"What?" Her voice wobbles and she glances down at my head from where I'm perched between her thighs.

"Surely you've touched yourself before, aye?"

Her face colors and she gets an embarrassed expression. "That is a private question."

"I already know your answer from your reaction. Why so shy? I have touched myself many a time for a simple release. I expect you would do the same. So...show me." I gesture at her spread thighs. "Show me how you touch yourself."

She blusters, clearly reluctant. "What, like you'd show me if I asked?"

"Absolutely."

That quiets her. Her mouth snaps shut and she purses her lips.

"Come now, where is my bold, eager bride?"

"She's being asked to diddle herself with a face between her knees," Vali mutters.

I chuckle at her response. “It would please me greatly if you would show me, my wife. I will not ask if it troubles you, though.”

Vali chews on her lip again, then licks her lips. One hand slides down her belly, and then she skims it over the curls on her cunt.

And by the gods, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so gorgeous—the swing of her heavy breasts as she expertly pushes her folds apart with first and third finger, stroking the longest finger along the side of the nub. I am fascinated. I am entranced.

I am going to spend myself all over my belly if this continues.

And yet it does, thank the gods for that. Her eyes flutter closed, and when I say nothing to interrupt, she continues. Her hand moves faster, her middle finger pressing inward, and she rubs back and forth alongside that bit of flesh, moving faster. Her hips rock in my grasp once, and then she goes still, her eyes flying open.

“Keep going,” I say hoarsely. “I have you.”

Nothing would convince me to let go of her at this point. I watch in utter fascination as she touches herself a handspan from my face, my hands gripping her thighs and buttocks and holding her in place. She pushes her hand lower, pressing that middle finger into her body, and I hear the wet sound of arousal as she pulls back, spreading the slickness over her skin.

My cocks throb at the sight of this, and I scarce dare to breathe. I want to put my mouth on her now, but I don’t dare interrupt. This is too entrancing a show. All the while, my cocks ache and leak a response, my sac tight and pre-cum dripping onto my belly and thighs from my excitement.

Vali rocks her hips again, dipping her hand down once more, and the slick sounds

grow greater, as does the salty scent of her. She moves faster, giving up on spreading her folds apart and soon just rubs that spot with all of her fingers, growing rougher and more urgent.

When she comes, she quakes and shivers, her lips parting on a silent cry.

I'm fascinated. Fascinated, and I want to experience it for myself. As she catches her breath, I slide my hand between her legs and brush over the little nub she put so much focus upon. "What is this called?"

"That's my clit."

"And it is sensitive? Like the heads of my cocks?"

She gives a jerky nod.

"Do you just have the one?"

For some reason, this makes her chuckle. "Most humans only have one cock, Ranan. They'd be jealous to know you have two."

Interesting. It's not something I've thought of until now. "I see. Does it bother you that I'm built differently?"

"I seem to recall running my mouth all over you," she muses, her tone drowsy and delicious. "So no, it doesn't bother me."

Good. I focus on her lovely flesh again. She's flushed now, her skin slick and gleaming with her juices. I drag my thumb over her clit and watch her reaction. Vali shudders, her lips parting and her body jerking in response.

“Sensitive,” she gasps.

“I imagine so,” I murmur, and try a couple of different touches. I skim around the small bud while she whimpers and jerks above me. She’s no longer tense, though, and I feel confident enough that she’s relaxed. I pull her hips down toward my mouth and close my lips over that small bead.

Vali cries out. “Gods!” Her hands go to my head, flattening against the sides of my crest.

The taste of her is incredible, and now that she’s slick with arousal, I get so much more of it. I use my lips to nibble gently at her clit, then take it between them one more and suck on it. She gasps and rocks against my face. I lap at her, determined to induce another orgasm, this one for me. With tongue and lips, I tease her clit and it’s not long before she’s driving down against me, sobbing her need, her hands pressed against my skull as she rides my tongue.

It’s incredible.

This time when she comes, there’s a rush of wetness from her cunt, and I greedily lap it up. “Beautiful,” I murmur as I tongue her. “Perfect.”

“No more,” she whimpers, bucking and trying to get away from me. “Too sensitive.”

I let her go, pleased with her orgasms. She rolls off of me, panting, and sprawls on her back on the bedding next to me. I reach down and take myself in hand and with two quick pumps to each cock, I come, spraying over my chest. My muscles tense and I hiss in pain as my leg clenches along with the rest of me.

“Ranan?” Vali sits up, alarmed.

“I’m fine,” I grit out. “Just...my bad leg. Flexed it.”

“You idiot,” she tells me, but her tone is affectionate. She sits up and gets some of the newly cleaned cloth and gently wipes down my stomach and cocks, and then cleans herself up. “No more of that until you’re feeling better.”

“Mmm.” It’s not an agreement. I’m going to taste her again, I decide. Tonight. Daily. I liked the taste of her. More than that, I liked her responses. I liked watching her lose control. I catch her hand as she tosses the fabric aside and search her face. “Did you like that?”

Gone is the awkward Vali from before. My wife chuckles and plants her hands on the sides of my face and gives me a smacking kiss. “You even have to ask?”

I manage a small grin even though my leg is throbbing and exhaustion is catching up with me. “I do.”

“I did like it. I’ve never done that before.” She smiles.

“Will you let me do it again?”

“Aye, I imagine I will.” Some of her shyness returns, and she wags a finger at me. “But not until you’re feeling better.”

We’ll see about that.

Chapter

Twenty-One

RANAN

I tongue Vali's cunt again that night. My wife isn't nearly as shy the second time, and climbs onto my face eagerly. Now that I know what I'm doing, I'm able to bring her off quickly, and she grows far wetter and louder this time, which makes my pride bloat like a pufferfish. I love the taste of her, the soft heat of her skin, but most of all, I love the surprised little noises she makes, as if she didn't realize her body could feel so good.

I love doing this for her.

I use my tongue on her three more times throughout the next day. Vali blushes now when she looks at me and she giggles frequently. She seems happy and relaxed, and I am relaxed, too. If it were not for my leg and the fact that I am bed-bound, I would think of this as a very happy period in my life.

At dinner, my wife hands me a bowl of fish stew. She makes it better than I ever have, and knows just how to spice it to bring the most out of the fish itself. If I must have it cooked, I prefer it this way. She fusses over my leg, changing the bandages and adjusting the pillow it rests upon, and then slides her hand up the inside of my thigh, a meaningful look on her face. "Can I take care of you?"

It's clear what she means. My cocks stir at her request, but I shake my head.

She pouts. “Why not? I thought you liked my mouth.”

Oh, I do. “I enjoy it far too much,” I admit. “But right now I am enjoying your pleasure instead of my own.”

I can see why she kept offering to touch me, and why she said she got pleasure from it. Receiving pleasure feels like a gift, but there’s a different sort of heady delight in satisfying your partner and taking nothing for yourself. Of making it about them rather than both of you.

Vali raises an eyebrow at me, even as her hand steals up under the blanket to cup my half-erect cocks. “You do know we can both come, yes? It doesn’t have to be one or the other?”

“I know.” I grip the bowl tightly and reach down to stop her hand at the same time. “But I want to focus on you.”

“And I love that. I do. But I’ve noticed that you jerk off after going down on me, and I keep thinking that it’s something I could do for you. Something that would give me joy to do for you.” She casually flicks my hand away and then reaches under the blanket again to stroke my lower cock. “Have you ever thought about me sitting on your face while I play with your cocks? I could lie on your belly, turned around.”

I am thinking of it now. I am thinking about it, hard. “You have done this before?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know about it. We could try it, right? What’s the harm? Your leg won’t be affected.” And she strokes my cock, her enticing gaze on me.

I set the bowl aside.

Some time later, a sated Vali is sprawled across my stomach, her flanks framing my face as we both pant for breath. My seed is in her hair and on her face and hands, and when I stroke her buttocks, she quivers in the aftermath of our pleasuring.

She is right. That was nice. Even if my leg doesn't heal up as well as it should, we can still enjoy a great deal of pleasure.

But I won't be able to provide for her, to hunt for her, or to protect her. And I've learned that human females need protecting, most especially from human males. I need my leg better, and soon. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

Vali scrambles off of me, wiping her face and breasts with a towel even as she turns to look at me. "What did you just say?"

I blurted out the wrong thing, as I often do, and I curse my tongue for not letting my head catch up. "You are coming with me."

She relaxes a bit at that, the hurt disappearing from her face. "Oh?"

"I would not leave you," I reassure her, embarrassed at my words. "I misspoke."

Vali brightens, scrubbing at her skin with the towel. "I just...thought maybe you were tired of me."

"You are my wife. There is no tiring of you."

"You haven't been around a lot of married people, then," she jokes.

"My parents have been married for a very long time and they are quite content. The more you tell me about human men, the more convinced I am that they are worthless."

“Not all of them. Just...a lot of them.” Vali rubs some of my seed out of her hair. “Gods, you sprayed everywhere that time.”

I like that she sounds proud of my lack of control. “So I did.”

She grins, toweling her thick, dark hair. “Regardless, we can’t go anywhere yet. You’re not ready to travel.”

“No, I am as ready as I can be. We leave in the morning. Together.”

Her mouth falls open in surprise. “But your leg?—”

“We will be on Akara’s back. I am no longer bleeding, so there is no concern about leaving a blood trail. She will take us safely to the flotilla, and I will have the healer there examine my leg.”

“But—”

“Vali,” I say gently. “I promise you, if I am well enough to pleasure you several times a day, I am well enough to ride upon a turtle’s back.”

My wife still seems uncertain about this. She gnaws on her lip, considering, and then wads up the fabric in her hands. “I still don’t know how to swim. You said I needed to know how.”

“Neither of us will be swimming for a while.” Especially not now, considering there is a sea dragon lurking all too close nearby. Just the thought of Vali dog-paddling in the water to try and catch a fish and wandering directly into its territory fills me with terror. “We leave first thing in the morning. Pack what you will need.”

“What I need?” She sputters. “You’re the injured one. Tell me what we should bring

for you.”

But I am already quite familiar with traveling upon Akara. I know what to bring—my trident, my makeshift tent, my drying rack, the dried pufferfish...but no, I will not need all of that, will I? I will need different things this time. “Blankets. Dried food.”

She jumps to her feet, eyeing the cave. “I don’t know if we have enough. We should stay for a while longer, at least a day or two, and make sure we have everything we need.”

“Are you stalling so you don’t have to meet my family?”

Vali scoffs at my suggestion. “No, of course not.”

“Lies.” How did I miss the cagey look she gets on her face whenever she’s not telling the truth? It’s rather charming, the way her gaze darts around even as she curves her mouth in a too-sweet smile. “Tell me the truth.”

“Why? Are you gonna spank me yet?” She tosses her hair defiantly. “Or have you come around to thinking my lying is cute?”

A slow grin curves my mouth, because she’s figured me out. I actually am starting to find her lying charming. That’s a new one for me.

She points a finger at my face triumphantly. “I see you grinning. I’m glad I can make you smile.”

“You will like the flotilla, Valessa. It’s very safe and my family will like you. I promise.” Once they stop being hurt that I am not returning to the flotilla permanently, that is. My family will not understand at first. They will expect me to eventually settle with them once Akara is through her wild phase. They will expect

me to mate someone from another flotilla to bring fresh blood to our clan, because our flotilla is closely related and cannot mate one another.

Well...Valessa is fresh blood, that is for certain. It is simply human blood.

"I just...I'm nervous," Vali blurts. "It's a town on the open water, right?"

"It is perfectly safe. You can stay close to me."

"As if I'm going to wander off into the sea? I still need to make my sacrifice to Lord Vor."

"The gods can wait a little longer. There's an Anticipation going on right now anyhow. He might not be there to hear your prayers, and an Anticipation can last for years."

She snorts at my response and gets to her feet, her large, dark-tipped breasts bouncing as she does. I forget everything as they sway hypnotically, but then Vali puts on a shift dress and my view is gone. She clutches the simple dress to her body, a panicked look on her face. "Gods, Ranan. This is my only dress! I don't have anything to wear around your family!"

"You don't need clothing. My people are comfortable with nudity."

"I will fry like an egg in a skillet under the sun," she tells me. "The clothing isn't just for modesty."

She's right—I've seen how reddened her skin can get if she's not protected. She's still peeling from when she rescued me, though her color has changed from a sandy shade to a deeper bronze. I get an idea, though, and sit up in bed. "There are things you can wear."

“Like what?” She tosses a length of cloth to me so I can towel off from our mating.

I glance around the grotto. Before she’d reorganized things, I recall a few impressive pieces that I’d stolen. One in particular was a series of golden necklaces that hung like a net from a thick, jeweled collar. It would look perfect on Vali. The idea thrills me so much that I try to get up from bed so I can find it and make certain she wears it.

Vali squawks like a seagull the moment I try to get up. “What are you doing?”

“The jewelry, where is it? There is a piece I want you to have.” I flop back down against the bed because pain lances up my leg. I’m pushing too hard too soon, but I hate being trapped in one place like this.

She moves to my side and pushes on my shoulders, making certain I remain where I am. “I put it all in the chest in the corner. Is it really important that you look at it right now?”

“Bring it here,” I say, imagining her pretty breasts framed by the golden strands. It’s the perfect thing for her to wear, and she’ll feel treasured then, won’t she? I’m excited to prove my fealty to her once again.

“Just wait there,” Vali grumbles, but she pulls the chest out from its spot against the wall. It’s a fairly large one, and she ends up leaning against it with her hip and shoving it forward in small increments.

Once it’s close enough that I can reach it, I drag it the rest of the way toward me. Vali has thoughtfully organized things by making fabric dividers so the necklaces don’t all tangle together like I had them. It’s easy to find the piece I’m looking for—it’s the most ostentatious one. I pull out the choker, the golden filaments cascading down from it like water. “This.”

“It’s beautiful,” she says automatically. “Thank you.”

Another lie. I drop my hands, studying her face. “You don’t like it?”

Vali flinches at being caught in her lie. She hesitates. “It’s very expensive looking.”

“It is, but I want you sparkling and radiant.” I push it towards her, proud that I have this piece to give her.

“It...” She hesitates, staring at it as if it is a sea snake. Then she looks up at me, her eyes wounded. “It looks like chains, Ranan. Chains and a slave collar.”

I stare down at the piece in my hands, at the thick choker and the net of golden strands. It didn’t occur to me that she wouldn’t like it, but I have never been a slave before. But when she rubs her neck as if she can feel the weight of the band there and hates it, I shake my head. “Then it won’t do.”

“I’m sorry,” she says quickly, the worried note in her voice. “Please don’t be upset?—”

“Vali, I’m not upset.” I set it back in the chest and think of what else she might like, what else I might have that would make her feel confident to walk amongst my family. My fingers brush over a new piece and I hold it out. “This, then.”

The anxious, pinched look immediately leaves her face and she giggles as she takes the new item from my grip. “A tiara?”

“Aye. It won’t bother your neck, and it sparkles. Do you like it?”

She giggles again, touching the large blue stones that have been expertly fitted into the metal. There are three of them, clustered together like turtle eggs on a thin golden

band made to look like a braid. “I’m not royal.”

“No one will care.”

“It’s very ostentatious,” she says, but she keeps touching the stones.

“Aye, and it’ll look glorious in that thick hair of yours.”

Her eyes glow. She puts it on and perches it atop her head, the sides of the tiara disappearing into her messy, tangled hair. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“Not at all. I want you sparkling and lovely. I want my family to look at you and think I am lucky.”

“Do you feel lucky?” Her voice grows timid again.

I want to answer her, but I’m afraid of my tongue betraying me once more. I gaze into her lovely, worried eyes and then slowly reach out and caress her ear.

Vali smiles.

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Chapter

Twenty-Two

VALI

Days Later

“What do you mean, ‘we have to swim the rest of the way’?” I’m trying not to panic, I really am. Surely he just misspoke, as Ranan is sometimes known to do when he’s stressed or flustered.

“Just that. We will have to swim. To there.” He points at the dark line on the horizon. “Akara can take us no closer.”

I open my mouth to protest, but nothing comes out. Instead, I get to my feet and climb out of the shade of the sun-awning anchored on her back and move closer to the edge of Akara’s massive shell. I put my hand to my brow and squint at the waters as if that will somehow help me see the distant smudge and have it magically turn into the flotilla village that I’ve been anticipating for the last several days of travel.

Nope. Still looks like a smudge to me.

I turn back to Ranan, my belly in knots. “I don’t understand. Why can’t we move closer?”

He tries to get to his feet, grimaces, and flops gracelessly back onto the blankets.

Immediately, I rush to his side. Ranan is the worst at being ill. He pushes himself hard every day, and he's not giving his leg a chance to heal up. Throughout our travel on Akara's back, I've been doing everything that needs doing—making fresh water with the sand filtration system, drying seaweed, pulling up nets, making food, tending to Ranan, and adjusting our tent so the strong winds that come through don't knock it down. It'd be fine if there were two people to do such things but with Ranan being injured, I'm the one handling all of it.

And I am exhausted. Truly and completely bone-deep exhausted. My initial nerves at going to the village of his people have gone away, and now I'm just ready for someone else to help with the chores. Ranan does what he can, but he's still weak and gets fatigued easily. Most things also have to be completed on the edge of Akara's back, and Ranan has to stay under the tent, so I just handle it all.

I thought as we traveled that perhaps I'd have time to practice swimming lessons, but there's been no chance.

Ranan tries to push up from the bedding again and I make it to his side, putting my hands on his shoulders. "Stay down! How do you expect to heal?"

"I expect the healer to take care of that," he tells me in a surly tone.

"Well, they're not going to be pleased that you've pulled your stitches twice," I snap at him, forgetting to be pleasant and ever so eager to please. The moment I realize I've lost my temper, I flinch.

But he only laughs, the sound as rusty as the smile that tugs at his lips. "No, they will not like it at all. I cannot sit here forever, though. We must get to the flotilla and Akara can go no closer."

"Why not?" I try to keep the panic out of my voice. Surely there's a logical

explanation. “You said there would be no swimming, remember?”

For a moment, he seems chagrined. “I did not mean to lie, my wife. I thought this would be easier. Akara’s older than the last time she was near the flotilla, but she is just as belligerent as before. Her thoughts are becoming increasingly territorial. The reason why Akara and I are not with the flotilla is because she is at the age where she is confrontational to other females. Once she is older, she will calm, but until then, we cannot get any closer or she will grow aggressive. If the hamarii split apart because she is challenging a female, they will submerge. It will cause those aboard their backs to lose their supplies. Akara will stay back here and you and I will have to swim the rest of the way.”

“But...your leg.”

“I am buoyant in the water. It will not pain me to swim. I will just use my arms more than anything.” He reaches up and takes my hand in his. “I am far more worried about you. Do not fret, Valessa. I will not let anything happen to you.”

I want to argue, but he twines his fingers with mine and I swallow back my fears. He’s not happy about this either, I remind myself. He thought Akara would be calmer. I’ve noticed myself that she seems agitated today; her movements are choppy, making our shelter shift and shake in place. I eye our joined hands, running my fingers over his larger knuckles, and I confess my biggest fear. “I’m not worried about drowning, Ranan. I know you won’t let that happen. I’m just worried that you’ll think I’m hopeless. That you’ll be disappointed in me for not being able to swim and I’ll embarrass you in front of your family.”

That you’ll decide you no longer want a bothersome human wife.

“No,” he blurts. Then he closes his eyes, pauses, and elaborates. “You won’t embarrass me. I know you cannot swim. It is inconvenient but not your fault. I would

not hold that against you. I swear to you on Lord Vor.”

He knows just what to say. Invoking Lord Vor’s name reminds me that we are in the god’s territory now, and Ranan’s people are probably his favored. “Just don’t remind Lord Vor that I haven’t gotten him his fish yet.”

A hint of a smile flashes on Ranan’s somber face and he squeezes my hand. “The gods will understand that you have been occupied with other things.”

I’m not so sure. The gods aren’t known to be incredibly understanding. I’ve promised Vor of the Seas a sacrifice, and I’ve let weeks pass without fulfilling my promise. I’m suddenly thankful that there’s an Anticipation going on right now—like Ranan said, Vor might not even be there to accept my sacrifice. Here’s hoping.

Sighing, I turn and look at the smudge of darkness on the edge of the horizon. It’s farther away than I’ve ever swam, and we’re in the middle of the sea. We’ve seen nothing but blue waters for days now. I’ve found the vastness a bit alarming, but safe on Akara’s back, I’ve been able to stave off my fears. Now I get to jump in and swim next to my husband who will swim better with one leg than me with both.

Lovely.

“What about our supplies?” I ask Ranan. “Do we leave them here?”

“For now. We’ll send someone back to retrieve them once we’ve arrived on the flotilla.” He releases my hand and turns on his side, extending his legs out behind him. “The sooner we go, the better. Help me stand?”

Stand? He’s ready to go now, it seems. I’m not ready. I might never be ready.

I swallow my fear and nod brightly and lie through my teeth. “Great. Let’s do this.”

It takes a bit of maneuvering to get Ranan to his feet—he might have four arms, but having only one uninjured leg plays havoc with his balance. He puts all his hands on me and uses my sturdy form as a lever to haul himself upright and then leans his weight over my shoulder and hops towards the edge of the water. Once we get close enough, he dives in. I hold my breath until he surfaces and gives his head a toss, flicking water from his proud head fin. “Better already.”

“How’s your leg?” I ask, stalling as I curl my bare toes against the moss on Akara’s back.

“Stings a little, but I’ll just use my arms,” he says, and demonstrates by flicking a bit of water at me.

He seems buoyant enough, all right. My turn. Biting back my fear, I hold my nose and run towards the edge of Akara’s shell, then jump into the water. It’s biting cold out here despite the warm sunshine, and the shock of it makes me flail momentarily.

I surface, sputtering, and then immediately sink again.

I claw frantically at the water, desperate to get air, and then a hard arm locks around my waist and hauls me to the surface. I cough right into Ranan’s frowning face.

“Quit flailing,” he tells me. “You’re going to tire yourself out.”

“I’m trying to swim?—”

“Hold onto me,” he says. I wrap my arms around his neck, shivering, but he’s not able to keep both of us afloat. We go under once more, my weight hanging on him like an anchor.

I immediately release him so we can both suck in air and paddle at his side, splashing.

“Just go,” I tell him. “I’ll swim as best as I can at your side and we’ll manage.”

“Take your dress off,” he says. “It’s keeping you from being able to move your limbs properly.”

“And show up naked on your family’s doorstep? I think not!”

His frustration is evident, and he tries again and again to keep me afloat while he propels us forward. It never works for long, and in the end, I simply paddle in my flailing way at his side while he slowly moves at my side. I try to copy his movements, but he can hold his breath for far longer than me, so it doesn’t matter nearly as much when he goes under for long spells...whereas it matters for me. We push on, though, and somehow manage to make some progress away from Akara. I can tell he’s getting tired because his movements grow slower, his breathing labored. I watch him anxiously, which just makes me swallow even more water. We swim and swim and...gods, the flotilla looks just as far away as it ever was. I want to weep with frustration because my limbs are cramping from fatigue, but I keep going because there’s no alternative. I paddle and claw at the water, paddle and claw, and somehow I keep going under over and over again.

“Vali?” Ranan calls as I submerge again, only to come up coughing once more. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I reassure him between gasps for air. “Worry about yourself!”

I go under again and he growls with frustration, moving to my side and tearing at the dress tangling my legs. I’m too tired to protest as he rips it free from my legs. It helps, but only a little. At this point my limbs feel like painful knots and every breath hurts. My hair is in my face, salt water stings my eyes, and that gods-damned flotilla still looks as if it’s the size of my thumbnail.

I might be drowning. Just a bit. But Ranan's tired, too. I just have to manage.

Something brushes under my foot and I yelp, swallowing a mouthful of water as I do.

I go under, thinking a shark is surely going to eat me. Under the surface is so peaceful, though, and for a moment I stop paddling and moving just to drift. Drifting is so very nice...

Dimly, I'm aware that I'm hauled to the surface again and someone slaps my back, hard. I cough up water, and hear the sound of Ranan arguing with another man, who seems to be yelling right in my ear. I can't focus. I'm too tired, and I just want to go back under the cold waves and drift a bit more. But I have to keep swimming. I try to paddle again, only for a hand to push my arm back to my side.

"Stop your windmilling, lass. I have you now." The hand moves up to my chin, tipping it toward the sun and keeping me above the water.

I sag against my savior and listen to muffled, waterlogged conversations between him and Ranan. No words register, just the newcomer's warm, friendly voice and Ranan's sharper one.

Then I'm hauled bodily into the air and the world tilts around me. I'm flung on my back on a hard surface and squint up at the sun for a moment before hands are pressed on my abdomen and push, hard.

I immediately vomit saltwater.

Someone turns me on my side as I puke, and I stare at delicate feet with a sparkling bracelet around one ankle. A woman's feet. When I roll onto my back again, I see there are multiple people standing over me with looks of concern on their faces. They all have the head sails like Ranan, four strong arms, and the same greenish cast to

their skin.

That's how I meet Ranan's family—upon my back, covered in vomit, half drowned and naked.

Lord Vor has taught me so much humility this day.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

RANAN

The healer's home is a crowded one.

Daidu's tent is usually full of jars with cork stoppers—each containing fermented brews made from seaweed, various fish guts, and Vor knows what else—all for use with his healing. There is a small padded bed tucked amidst the jars, and a second padded bed for those that require healing. That alone is enough to fill his domain, but on this day, my tall mother hovers over the healer, frowning down upon him as he works on my leg.

And at my side, Vali is fast asleep, her hand clutching tightly to mine even unconscious.

After we were rescued from the water by my uncle Dorran and his mate Balo, I insisted that the healer examine my Valessa first. My wound is old, and she took in a lot of water in her valiant attempt to swim at my side. Now that she has been deemed well enough, she remains with me, but she is so fatigued that she has passed out.

My poor wife. I reach over and brush a lock of still-wet hair from her brow. Ever since I have been injured, she has not gotten a moment's rest. Vali just burrows closer to my side, her breathing steady.

“What bit you?” Daidu asks, leaning in close to get a good look at my leg. “Doesn’t seem like a shark. The bite is too deep.”

“Sea dragon. One has settled near my grotto.”

Daidu clucks his tongue, reaching behind him to get fresh towels while examining my wound. “Bad luck, there.”

“Aye. I’ll set up elsewhere. Akara is still too wild to return to the flotilla.” And I am not sure what Vali would think of being here permanently. She loved the grotto and didn’t seem to mind that it was isolated, but she hasn’t seemed particularly excited about meeting the rest of my people. Perhaps she’s shy.

My mother paces while Daidu pokes and prods my leg. She finally loses her patience and leans over both of us, getting in my face.

“What is the meaning of all this, my son?” My mother keeps her tone low and even so she does not wake my slumbering wife. Her expression is full of emotion, though. Her mouth is pulled down into an angry frown and her eyes are full of concern as she watches Daidu poke and prod at my wounded leg.

The healer pushes my mother aside. “You’re in my light, Ajinai.”

Mother steps over my legs to move to my other side. This puts her closer to the sleeping Vali and her expression changes to one of distaste. “You know this is inappropriate. What will the other flotillas think?”

As if I care? “They’re not here.”

“But they will be in a month! You know the Laena flotilla’s chieftain has that lovely daughter about your age. She’ll be looking for a mate and our flotilla could use new

blood.” She crosses her arms over her chest, giving me the same stern, motherly look she has all her life.

“Vali is my wife,” I state again. I have said this twenty times since arriving, and it seems I must continue to say it.

“But...why?” My mother leans forward again and then draws back when the healer shoots her another irked look. “Why, my son? Why a human?”

“Does it matter if she is human or not? I have chosen her.”

“I am not questioning your affection for her,” my mother says. Her expression is genuinely puzzled, as if I am speaking in a strange language. “But a marriage should be about strengthening the flotilla and the bloodlines there. It is about strategic alliances amongst others for the stormy season. It is about strong children, my son. It is one thing for your uncle to have a human mate, but another for you.”

“I do not see why.” I’m trying to keep the impatience out of my voice. I continue to stroke Vali’s hair back from her face, feeling the need to touch her softness, to reassure myself that she’s here and she’s fine. My heart nearly leapt from my chest each time she went under the waves. She tried so very hard even though she knew she didn’t have the skills to keep up with me, but she did not complain. Not once. “My uncle could have contributed to the flotilla’s bloodlines as easily as I could have, but he was allowed to mate who he chose. No one is more giving or thoughtful than Vali.”

My mother lifts a hand and plays with one of her dangling earrings, a sure sign that she’s agitated. “That might be, but keep her on the side and marry a nice woman of the seakind instead.”

I bite back my impatience, because my mother has always been like this. It is no

surprise that she refuses to accept my marriage to Vali. I knew she would be difficult about it. “I told her I would marry her, and I do not lie.”

Mother sighs heavily, just as Daidu yanks out a stitch, making me grimace silently with pain. The healer glances up at me, two of his hands pinching at my wound while the other two move to pull the next stitch. “These are crooked and clumsily done.”

“My wife stitched me up after I was injured. She has not done it before.”

“It shows.” Daidu wipes away a bit of welling blood. “But it was smart of her to attempt it anyhow. I imagine you’ll keep the leg, thanks to her.”

I want to squeeze my wife against my side for her quick thinking. “She saved my life in more ways than one,” I tell them. “I owe it to her to marry her.”

“Well, that’s it, then.” My mother seems displeased. “I will let your father know, and he will tell the chieftain.”

I doubt either of them will care nearly as much as my mother, but I just nod as she leaves the tent, wincing as Daidu yanks out yet another stitch and then another. He tuts at the jagged line of my scabbed wound, now bleeding from his ministrations.

“Can you give me anything to help with the healing?” I ask him.

“You’re lucky it’s healing as well as it is.” He pulls dripping seaweed from a jar nearby and places it on the angry wound. “But yes, I have something to help. Essence of seaworm and the ground heart of a scaly eel, left to ferment for a hundred days.” Daidu pauses. “It won’t taste good.”

“It never does.” Daidu’s potions are effective, though.

“I’ll prepare it for you.” He pulls another stitch and then straightens. “Ignore your mother. She dreams of grandchildren with taller head sails than her own. It clouds her vision.”

I nod. Vali and I might still have children—halfings are not unheard of—but it is not a particular concern of mine. I care more that she is safe and happy. Strange how I am focused on her needs now, when a month ago all I could think about was how much she would slow me down. How quickly minds change.

How besotted am I that the thought of not waking up with Vali tucked against my side makes the future seem incredibly bleak? Every time I tell myself that I should find a nice safe human settlement to send her to I...just can’t bring myself to do so. It’s selfish, but I want her with me, wherever we end up.

“I need fresh water,” Daidu says, unfolding his legs and getting to his feet. He puts two hands at the small of his back as he stands, bones creaking. “Be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Our healer loves his own jokes. I bite back a sigh. “Funny.”

Then I’m alone with Vali. All is quiet for a time, with nothing but the sound of sea birds calling to one another and the gentle lap of waves against the shells of the flotilla’s turtles. There are distant murmuring voices of others, likely the chieftain’s family and my mother. Akara’s thoughts brush against mine now and then, calm and distant. She does not mind waiting, and will sun herself and enjoy the waters here. She will grow restless if I stay here long-term, and our bond will weaken without close connection, but for now all I need to do is heal up and tend to Vali.

My Vali.

I glance down at my wife. Her eyes are open and full of worry. I know my wife’s

penchant to lie to protect herself, but for some reason I'm not annoyed that she might have been pretending to be asleep through my conversation with my mother. "Have you been awake long?"

"I heard everything," she whispers. "Should we not marry? Is it wrong?"

I shake my head. "No, we will marry. I said we would."

She hesitates, her fingers moving along the spiny fin on one of my arms. "I just...they don't seem happy you brought me. I want your family to be pleased with me as your bride. I want you to be pleased with your bride."

Her words irk me. After all we've been through, she is yet uncertain? "You don't please me."

She flinches, gasping. Her eyes immediately fill with tears and she sits up. "Oh."

By Vor, will my mouth ever stop getting me into trouble? I must learn to think before I reply. "No—wait. I misspoke, Vali."

"It's fine," she says, but I can hear the tears in her voice. She stands and won't look at me, her arms hugging her chest, a length of fish-hide tied at her waist to clothe her nudity that she hates so much. "I should have known?—"

"You should please yourself, not others. That is what I meant."

"And not you ." There's a wealth of hurt in her words.

"Just yourself," I repeat again. "No one else matters."

"Maybe not in your world," she says, voice small. "But my survival has been about

pleasing others.”

She’s right, and the more I talk, the more of a mess I make of this. “You have to understand, Vali. No one will be pleased you’re here. Not because you are human, or because you are you. They simply do not understand. Among my people, the young marry to bring new blood into the flotilla. They expected me to take a bride from a neighboring chieftain’s tribe, and not for a while yet.”

Vali turns and shoots me a frustrated look. “Then why demand a bride from the slave boats? I thought you were lonely!”

My tongue feels like a stone in my mouth. “Bribe. I meant to say bribe. I misspoke then, as I did now.”

Her face crumples. “Ah. I’m a fool.”

“It’s fine, Vali?—”

“No, it isn’t. I’m not wanted anywhere. And this—” She gestures at my leg. “A sea dragon? When were you going to tell me, Ranan? Or is a human you didn’t want not important enough to tell these things?”

I clench my jaw. I should have told her, but I never found the right time. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

“So I get to save you and feed you and bathe you, but I’m not good enough to talk to about the important stuff? Got it. Guess I should have stopped thinking of myself as your wife. At least as a slave, I knew my place.” She tosses her hair, magnificent in her outrage, and storms out of the tent.

Vali storms back in a moment later, her hands balled into fists at her side. “I don’t

know where to go .”

“Find my uncle’s husband—the human. His name is Balo and he has a thick beard. He’ll help you find a tent.” I want to do this for her, but I’m stuck here in my sickbed, and I hate it. I try to get up anyhow, because Vali shouldn’t have to face the curious, unwelcoming eyes of my people alone.

She puts a hand up. “Stay down. I don’t want to talk to you right now, and I sure don’t want to help you if you fall.”

And she storms back out again, all righteous fury.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

VALI

I 'm such an idiot.

Bribe .

Not bride .

Ranan is always tongue-tied when he feels too much too fast, and of course a dangerous situation like the robbing of ships would mean he'd lose control of his mouth. I know he misspeaks and it shouldn't hurt as much as it does.

But oh, gods, does it hurt. He's never wanted me. I gathered that from the very beginning, but then he'd protest and make me feel special, and I'd forget what my instincts were telling me. I feel shattered and numb inside.

I don't even have anywhere to retreat to, because I'm surrounded by strangers in the middle of the sea. Even if I jumped off the side of the nearest turtle, Lord Vor probably wouldn't give me a swift death, because I still owe him a sacrifice.

It is a miserable spot to be in.

I straighten my shoulders and swallow my tears, ignoring the curious looks of the

people around me. Seeing so many of the seakind together reminds me of just how different they are. Sometimes I forget that Ranan has four arms, or that he has spiny fins along the backs of his elbows and calves. I've grown used to the spiny sail atop his smooth head. That's just how Ranan looks. But when I glance around me at the village, I feel even more alone. They stare at me, most with one set—or both—arms crossed.

I'm not welcome.

But I've survived situations like this before. I march to the nearest person and give them a polite smile. "I'm looking for the human man. Can you point me to him?"

They stare at me, and then someone points at a tent, nestled in among a few others. It looks nondescript and made of the same strange material as the wrap I'm wearing. There is a flap over the entrance. I approach it and hesitate outside, unsure how to knock and get someone's attention. "Hello?"

The curtain draws back and a man steps out. He's wearing nothing but a loincloth, and is unmistakably human. The first thing I notice about him is that he's hairy. He's got dark hair and deeply tanned skin, and the most hair on a chest I think I've ever seen on a man. A full beard frames his face, with a small gold ring pinching the thickest part of his beard into a tail. His eyes are bright blue and he beams at me with pure kindness. "You must be the human bride everyone's talking about!"

"You must be the only other human here," I joke, feeling a little less alone by the cheery expression on his face.

He laughs, the sound booming and deep. "That's me! I'm Balo. It's nice to meet you. My husband is off fishing, or I'd introduce you." Balo beams at me as he walks forward. "Have you met everyone in the flotilla?"

Gods, that's the last thing I want to do right now. "Not yet!"

There must be something on my face that clues him in to how I feel about that. He laughs, putting a friendly, hairy arm around my shoulders. "Oh, my friend. I know how unwelcoming they can be to outsiders. I promise you will survive this. I wouldn't take it personally."

"I'm not sure if there's another way to take it." I let him steer me out and away from the tent, walking together. Just his easy, cheerful mood calms me and makes me feel less despairing.

"My husband told me when I first arrived that seakind do not think the same as other people. Not quite. You are either flotilla, or you are other. Once you are in the flotilla, you are family. People would lay their lives down for you. Anything you need, the flotilla will provide. You will always have a place once you have been accepted. But until then, you are an outsider." He chuckles, the sound raspy. "Wait until you see the flotilla gatherings. They make it sound like it's cozy when they all get together, but the reality is that it's more like peace talks among warring nations."

That...fits. "So why do it, then? Why get together? Why not just float off and do your own thing?"

Balo keeps his arm on my shoulders as we walk, and I notice the others no longer stare at me with such suspicion. It's like his approval is slowly greasing the wheels, which is silly. It should be Ranan at my side, making everyone feel good that I'm his wife, and it makes me ache that I'm here with a stranger instead.

"Flotillas meeting up is beneficial for all. People trade and learn crafts from one another. Marriages are made. Information is shared about fishing, or what the humans are up to, or what areas are no longer safe to raid."

“So everyone raids? Not just Ranan?”

“Oh, everyone,” Balo says with a chuckle. “It is a rite of passage for most of the younger men. When their turtles are in their wilder years, they strike out alone and raid the coastlines and bring the spoils back to their families. With it, they can afford the things that the flotilla doesn’t provide, like steel knives or specific delicacies.” He leans in as if confessing a secret. “My husband has a terrible sweet tooth and loves to trade for syrup.”

I smile at that.

“Do you want me to introduce you to everyone?” he asks, walking through the village and ignoring the eyes upon us. “Or do you want to just find someplace to hide for a while? I know it can feel overwhelming when you first arrive.”

“Can we just keep walking?”

His thick mustache twitches. “Of course we can.”

He continues to steer me along, and I’m surprised to see there are woven mats that act as bridges between one turtle and the next. We cross over one to another turtle, and this one has so much thick mossy growth upon it that there are even trees. An entire orchard of trees. I’m fascinated, because Akara’s back is mostly bare, but this turtle must be a great deal older. I eye one of the trees and see the same large tree nuts that I’d seen on the sand spit. “Do all the turtles grow trees on them?”

“The ancient ones do, aye. As they grow older, they submerge less and less, and are content to drift with the flotilla for what we provide.” He leads me to the side of the bridge and points down at the crevasse between the two turtles. Water laps and splashes in the gap between them and tiny minnows jump into the air. “There are a great many small fish attracted to the flotilla and they keep the undersides of the

turtles clean. The turtles pull their food from the water and the particles in it. Don't ask me how. I'm just here to look pretty."

"It's fascinating," I admit. "But it's so different from the world I come from."

"I'm Yshremi," he agrees, laughing. "A landlocked people. So I know very well what you mean."

I'm surprised. Yshrem is halfway across the world. "However did you end up here?"

"It's a long story." He grins, his tanned face crinkling at the corners of his eyes. "Want to hear it while you watch me scrape some fish leather?"

I hesitate, because my every instinct tells me to go and check on Ranan, to see how his leg is doing. To see if he's comfortable...or if he misses me. But then I remember his words.

You don't please me.

Bribe. Not bride.

How do I know Ranan's not hiding behind his words when he misspeaks so often? I push my hurt—and my thoughts of my husband—aside. "You know what? I would love to learn how you make the fish leather. Is that what this is?" I touch my wrap. When he nods, I continue. "I also need to learn how to swim. I don't suppose you could teach a fellow human how to keep up with the seakind?"

"I'm sure I can," Balo says, voice friendly. He squeezes my shoulder. "Learning to swim is half the trick of fitting in here."

And I desperately need to fit in. "Good, because I need all the tricks I can get."

Chapter

Twenty-Five

RANAN

D aidu's potions taste like the underside of a hamarii turtle, but they're effective. They also make me sluggish, and I spend most of the day sleeping in the healer's tent. When I wake up, my leg no longer burns, and the skin is less swollen than before. My stomach growls fiercely, and I sit up in my bed, wondering where the healer is.

Before I can get up, the tent opens and Vali steps in with a large bowl in her hands. Her hair is dry and piled atop her head, and her nose is pink from being out in the open all day. She still wears the wrap given to her earlier, but there is a new belt around it and it fits better. It emphasizes her large breasts and her long legs. She looks good. Fresh. Beautiful.

I sit up, eager to speak with her. To hear her thoughts on the flotilla. To hear if she still hates me. "Where have you been?"

Her brows go up.

My face grows hot. Perhaps that sounded demanding. "I was worried about you."

"Your job is to lie here and rest up," she says in a light, cheery voice. She sits next to me and holds out the bowl of food. "Don't worry about me. I can handle myself."

“I still worry about you.” I deliberately brush my fingers over hers as I take the bowl. “How are you feeling? Do your lungs ache? I worry you took in too much water.”

“I’m fine. You eat.” She flicks a hand at the bowl.

I hold it back out to her. “Share?”

“I’ve already eaten. Balo’s husband caught a large fish and there was enough for several people.” She clasps her hands in her lap, watching me.

“You found Balo then? What did you think of him?” The dish is one of my mother’s favorites—fermented fish wrapped in dried seaweed. It reminds me of being a young minnow and eating everything put before me so I could grow up strong and tall like my father. It is a very typical dish for my people, and a delicious one. It is also one I suspect Vali would not like, as Balo hated it when he first arrived. It is my mother’s quiet way of enticing me to rejoin the flotilla.

A nice thought, but I like my life on Akara’s back...and I think Vali would prefer it to being with the flotilla. What she wants matters to me.

“Balo is very nice. I like him. It’s impossible not to.” She smiles. “He took me under his wing and was showing me around. He’s going to give me swimming lessons, too.”

Hearing that makes me bristle. I think of Vali, with her wet clothing clinging to her breasts, rubbing up against me when I’d tried to give her lessons. Balo is not interested in women, but it does not mean I am not jealous that he’s going to spend so much time with my wife. “It should be me teaching you.”

She eyes me warily. “It should, but I am pleasing myself.”

Her words wound me. They are my words, and I hate them as much as she does. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“You say that a lot, Ranan, yet you still keep hurting me. At some point I need to learn not to put my hand into the fire, right?” Her smile is bright but unnatural. “I can’t trust that the things that slip out are the truth or not. You say they are not, but it keeps happening. How can I believe you?”

“You judge me on my actions instead.” I hold a hand out to her.

She doesn’t take it. Her own hands remain on her thighs, curled into fists. “I need to think, Ranan.”

Her shoulders tense as she says it, as if she expects me to strike her, and I have to remind myself that she was a slave before she was my wife. She has to learn that she is safe even if she disagrees with me. “Take all the time you need, my Vali. I understand.”

She eases a bit at that, glancing around the tent. “Where is the healer? Do you need him?”

I grunt. “He’s probably preparing another foul potion to shove down my throat.”

Her lips twitch. “But are the foul potions working?”

“Aye, they are.” I sound woeful, even to my own ears. “Which means I’ll have to drink more of them.”

She chuckles and gestures at the dish forgotten in my hands. “Eat. You need your strength. You’ve been weak ever since you were injured.”

I take another large bite.

“A sea dragon, hm?” Vali asks. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sea dragons sound fearsome but they are not dangerous unless you wander into their territory. I didn’t want you afraid because there was no chance you would stumble across it. You cannot swim deep enough.”

“But you can.”

“Aye.” I sigh. “My grotto will have to be moved. One does not fight a sea dragon for its territory.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It happens. I am glad I made it out alive and whole. Moving some trinkets is nothing. I might just leave them behind.”

She sputters. “No you’re not! There’s so much money there! You can’t abandon it.”

“If you want me to keep it, I will.”

“I do. Absolutely. You robbed a lot of selfish pricks to get all that loot.”

I bite back a chuckle. Why is it so easy for us to sit here and talk, even when things are bad between us? I want to grab her hand and beg her to understand, to swear that I never meant any of it, and yet I suspect she will not listen. She needs to think on it, as she says. And I need to show her my truth with my actions.

Not an easy thing to do when I’m bedridden.

I finish eating and she brings me a drink, and I hate that even now she waits on me. “Thank you, Vali. For everything. I have not said it enough, but you saved my life. And you keep saving it by taking care of me. I know it has not been easy.”

My words make her pause. She studies my face and a small smile creeps onto hers. “I am doing what any wife would do for her husband. Even if they’re mad at each other.” Then her expression falls as she remembers something. “But you didn’t want a wife, did you?”

“I might not have started out wanting one, but now I cannot imagine my life without one.”

Her smile seems a little more forced, a little sadder. “Do you need anything else? Balo has offered to set up a bed in an empty tent for me to sleep in. Are you sleeping in here?”

Again, I want to throttle Balo and his helpfulness. “Aye, the healer wants me where he can keep an eye on me. And one tent is the same as another...but I would like it if you stayed with me. I like waking up with you.”

“I can sleep here,” she agrees easily.

I expected her to argue. Her easy capitulation surprises me. “I am glad.”

Vali moves in close to me, settling on the blankets. I shift my body, mindful of my leg, and make room for her. She squeezes in next to me and then relaxes at my side, and it feels so familiar and so right that I automatically put my arm around her shoulders, tucking her against me.

“Better already,” I say.

“Behold the healing power of sharing blankets,” Vali teases. “You’ll be so tired of me hogging the bed that you’ll miraculously get better faster.”

“More like having a pretty wife at my side makes me realize how much I hate being helpless.” I rub her arm, and it feels so easy to be with her. It makes me happy. Vali makes me happy. I gaze down at her, at her lovely, upturned face. “May I kiss you?”

“If you want to.”

Her answer bothers me. It’s as guarded and neutral—and permissive—as when I first met her. When she was trying to please me. “It’s not about what I want, Vali?—”

“But it is. You didn’t want a wife, and I’ve nowhere to go if you get rid of me, so I’ll be whatever you want me to be. If you want to kiss me, kiss me.”

It feels like we’ve gone all the way back to the beginning, thanks to my careless mouth. “Then we don’t kiss if you cannot be honest with me about whether or not you want my kiss.”

“Very well.”

We don’t kiss. But we don’t get up, either. I Just hold Vali against my side and wonder what I can do to fix this. How do I woo and prove myself when I’m in my sickbed?

Can I afford not to?

Chapter

Twenty-Six

RANAN

A week passes, and the easiness between myself and Vali remains gone. She sleeps curled at my side every night and wakes up in my arms every morning...but there is something missing. Gone is the spontaneous affection for each other. Gone are the quick kisses and her laughter. I have not asked her to sit upon my face and she has not reached for my cocks.

We are very friendly strangers, and I hate it.

It is difficult for me to do anything, however, thanks to the fact that I am forced to sit in bed and rest my leg. That, and Daidu keeps pouring potions down my throat that make me sleep for most of the day. When I am awake, I always look for Vali, though. I hunger for the sight of her, for her soft smiles and the sweet fan of her lashes when she looks down. The way her nose wrinkles adorably when she smells what Daidu keeps feeding me.

I'm utterly besotted with my wife, and she has pointed out to me that we are not truly married. My pride has withered into dust.

When a few more days pass and Daidu proclaims I no longer need potions to speed my healing, the days grow even longer with nothing to do. With the healer's help, I move outside of the tent and work on mending nets, since that only requires hands.

Today, I am outside the healer's tent in the sunshine. It rained yesterday, keeping those with projects from doing their work. They are spread out today on the flotilla, the humid air full of the sounds of voices. People have hides spread out, and someone is drying fish. My father's father is weaving, my father is off fishing for the day's meals, and I have nets.

So many nets.

I mend nets, knotting and weaving cords, and I watch my mate laugh and talk with Balo and my uncle Dorran nearby. They stand in front of Dorran's tent, near the center of the flotilla, and the breeze catches Vali's hair and makes it drift against her face. She carelessly pushes it back, and I watch her graceful movements and her delicate hands.

I think of those hands as they stroked my cocks, and her sultry smile of pride as she did so. And I sigh and watch my woman with the two men and try not to feel resentment.

Try, and fail.

They have become fast friends, those three. My uncle is as good-natured as his husband and has a great affection for humans. He's old enough to be Vali's father and he looks upon her like one. Balo is the one she spends the most time with, though, and I grow to hate the sight of his bleached, easy grin. I hate the way he is always at her side, being helpful.

I hate that he is teaching her all the things I should be, and instead I am sitting in the sun and mending nets like my mother's mother's father, who is so ancient he cannot even walk straight and spends most of his days seated under a nut tree, napping.

"What did that net ever do to you?" my mother asks, sinking down to sit next to me.

“Eh?” I look over at her in surprise.

She brings a conch full of juice to my side, sinking down next to me and offering it. “I’m not sure if you’re repairing that net or trying to tear it apart with your hands. Does something trouble you?”

I scowl down at the net I’m working on, because my knots might be a little tighter than they should be, and the rope might be stretched, just a little. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Oh, you were. Just not to the net.” My mother indicates the shell in her hand. “Drink this. It’s good for you.”

I roll my eyes at her pushiness, but I take the shell and drain it. Vali’s laughter echoes over the flotilla and I lower the drink so I can watch her. She has a sling spear in her hands, and Dorran is trying to show her the proper way to fit the sling around her wrist so she can fire it through the water at great speed. Vali tries again, and instead of launching itself, the spear clatters to the ground. Balo and my uncle burst into laughter, and Vali holds her sides, giggling wildly.

I scowl down at the shell in my hands. Does she laugh so brightly when I talk to her? It seems that Balo makes her giggle all the time.

“I have decided I like her,” my mother declares in a lofty tone, as if sensing my thoughts.

“She is my bride whether you like it or not,” I tell my mother sourly. Well, as long as Vali accepts me in marriage. I have not broached it again.

“I know, but it makes it easier that I like her.” My mother is unruffled. “She works with Balo every day to learn how to swim, and she has made great strides in it. She

gathers water without asking, and refills the canisters if she sees them. She helps clean the fish and she never complains or demands to be given easier chores. She is a hard worker. It is a good thing to have in a wife.”

“Mm.” Vali could be lazy and I would still want her in my bed, so my mother’s reassurances annoy me. She does not know that Vali is a people pleaser and thus works herself to the bone in order to ensure that everyone is happy with her. “Don’t give her too much work, Mother. She is still a guest. I don’t want her to think the seakind are testing her.”

“But we are,” my mother says lightly. “Do you know how much fishing your father had to do to win my hand? It wasn’t until he brought back three swordfins in one day that I relented and agreed to be his bride. You have it easier. I think if you snapped your fingers, the human woman would fall at your feet.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“No?” Mother tilts her head, her earrings tinkling as she does. Her expression is one of utter casualness as she holds her hand out, examining a bangle on one wrist. “She watches you when you think she is not looking. And she comes into your tent many times a day to make sure you’re sleeping well and that you haven’t woken up or require anything.”

I am stunned to hear this. “She does?”

“Well, not as much now that you are awake more. But Daidu’s potions worried her, I think. She’d hover over you and one time I caught her with her finger under your nostrils, checking your breathing.”

Interesting. It could mean nothing, but this time when Balo laughs heartily, I no longer want to cram the shell in my hands into his face.

“Have you told her how you feel?” My mother prompts. She reaches out and touches my ear fin, the fussing of a parent. “I have noticed you struggle to talk to her. You have always had such difficulty with words, my son. Just like your father.”

Have I told her? I have tried, but words seem to only make it worse. “I do not think Vali will listen.”

“Then you must make her listen.”

My mother makes it sound so simple. As if nothing more is required than putting a hand on Vali’s shoulder and demanding that she listen to my words.

My words have been the problem all along. I have to show her how I care without them, or else I am doomed. “Thank you, Mother.”

She pats my arm. “I’ll let you get back to strangling your nets.”

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

VALI

I never knew that slingshot fishing could be so much fun. It's not something that ever occurred to me—I thought fishing always happened with a net or a fishing pole. I know Ranan uses a trident, but he swims underwater so I figure the rules are different for him. But slingshot fishing makes me feel powerful and strong, like a water goddess of fishing.

“You're getting pretty good at this,” Balo tells me as we tread water at the side of one of the older turtles. Its head is covered with fuzzy seaweed that drifts in the sea around it and I'm told her name is Sjaata and she likes chin scratches. I rub the enormous chin while I hoist my spear into the air, a wriggling blue fish on the forked end.

“I love this,” I gush to him, and I mean it. I kill the fish and toss it into the large hole-strewn basket on Sjaata's side. There, other fish float in the water while waiting for someone to come and prepare them. I've seen the elders and some of the children go and grab the fish to clean and gut. No one declares ownership of a catch. It's assumed that if it goes in the basket, it's for anyone to use. It all gets used, too.

And I'm happy to contribute. After a week of being on the flotilla with the others, I'm starting to get the hang of things. I can swim now, and while I can't tear through the water like Dorran or Ranan, I do all right. Balo has a pair of long reinforced leather

flaps that he straps to his feet to help him paddle, but I don't have those yet. It's not the speed of my swimming anyhow. No one cares if I'm fast or slow, they just want to make sure they don't have to rescue me. Now that I know how to swim, Balo's been teaching me how to do some of the chores. I'm not great with fish leather; it requires extremely careful handling and very fine cutting, and after I mangled a skin, we decided I'd be better at other things. For the last few days, I've been practicing with Balo's sling spear. It's a thin spear with a two-pronged tine at the end, and the other end has a rubbery strap that I'm told is made from the guts of a particularly nasty deep-sea squid. The band is wrapped around the lower arm and elbow and made taut, and when I see something I want to spear, I release it and the spear goes flying through the crystalline waters. There's a second, longer leash on the spear that keeps me from losing it in the depths, or else it'd have disappeared several flubbed "throws" ago.

But today, I speared a fish. Today is awesome. It's just a little one, but as I get more comfortable in the water, I can go deeper and get the bigger fish.

Maybe if I work hard enough, the people here will accept me. They're already giving me easier looks, but I want more than that. I want to be loved and accepted. If they love me, maybe Ranan will, too.

Ranan. I wrap the sling around my arm again and contemplate my failing relationship with my not-quite husband. We sleep together every night, but things are off between us. I want to beg him to love me, to forgive me for getting upset at his words...but at the same time, I'm trying to be stronger than that. Braver than that. Because Ranan is always saying I should want things for myself.

Well, I want a husband that loves me, and if Ranan decided that we're going to be married out of pity, I don't want it.

My new plan is to learn all that I can here while I'm stranded, and be a strong,

valuable part of the flotilla. Then when this flotilla joins up with another for a meet, I'll move over to another, or find someone that will take me to shore. I don't have to stay here with Ranan, not if it's going to carve my heart out of my chest just by looking at him.

Because I wanted what I thought we had. We were becoming so good together. And now I'm crushed that it might have been all in my mind all this time. That he never cared for me the way I cared for him. That he was just humoring me.

That he wanted a bribe all this time. Ugh. Just thinking about it makes me want to curl up into a ball of misery.

"Well, well. Look who's up and around," Balo calls out cheerfully. He tosses his thick wet hair back and runs a hand over his face, wiping away water. "Long time no see, my friend."

As if my thoughts have summoned him, Ranan hobbles over to the edge of Sjaata. He's using a spear as a walking stick, and his injured leg is bent, so he doesn't put weight on it. There's a seaweed bandage wrapped around the wound, but I know from my own examinations of it that it's so much better than it was before. He looks good, though. Healthy. There's a light sheen of sweat from his exertions, but if anything, it just reminds me of how nice it feels to touch him. How his hard muscles feel under my fingertips.

Gods. I'm still lusting after him even knowing that he doesn't want me. I'm a mess.

"Aye," Ranan says with a heavy, contented sigh. He shifts his weight, then awkwardly leans on his good leg again, as if he'd forgotten his injury for a moment. "I'm allowed to get off my tail, finally. I can't put much weight on the leg but I hope it will get stronger every day."

“Don’t push yourself,” I say. I worry he’s going to tear something and I’ll be responsible for not tending to him correctly in the first place.

His gaze lands on me, lingering. “I won’t.”

Good. Well. I swallow, trying to think of something to say. Normally I’m not tongue-tied around Ranan, but this doesn’t seem like the time for casual chatter about the flotilla or how many fish I’ve gutted today. Not when he regards me with that almost caressing expression, as if it’s pleasing just to look at me. I wish he looked at me like that, always. Maybe then I wouldn’t be so dismayed when he misspeaks.

Ranan continues to gaze down at me with that soft look in his eyes, as if he’s feasting on me. “You’re swimming well.”

I grow flustered because now he sounds proud of me, too. “Stronger every day, just like your leg.”

He chuckles, his gaze lighting up with amusement at my retort. “Indeed.” But when he looks over to Balo, his expression ices over and becomes remote. “Teaching her spear fishing when she’s new to swimming seems dangerous. She could get hurt.”

Balo shakes his head at that, swimming over to my side. “She’s a natural. She’s doing a great job and picking it up very quickly. You’d be proud of her.”

Ranan bristles.

Actually bristles.

“I’m always proud of her,” he says, voice stiff. “Vali is strong and smart. She knows how to take care of herself. How to survive. I would never imply that she’s helpless.”

I'm a little startled at his fierce reaction. Balo has been nothing but complimentary and encouraging of my spear fishing. I absently twist the stretchy cord tight around my hand, as if I were about to launch my spear. I don't know what to make of Ranan's words. He's acting jealous of Balo, which makes no sense. He has known Balo for far longer than me. Balo is married to his uncle. And yet he hates the thought of him teaching me things? "I'm just trying to learn," I say quietly. "So I can be a contributing member of the flotilla."

"That's not why I brought you here," Ranan snaps.

I recoil as if stung, staring at the waters even as I tread in them silently.

"You don't have to prove anything to anyone," Ranan says after a long, reluctant moment. "That's not why you're here. If anything, I'm the one..."

Just then, a large shadow passes under our feet, swimming below us. Ranan trails off.

Balo puts a calm hand on my shoulder. "Not a shark. A thunderfish. Tasty eating if?—"

Perfect. That's all I need to know.

Before he can finish, I duck under the water and surge down toward the thunderfish. It's the answer I've been looking for. It's the sacrifice I need for Lord Vor. Maybe if I present this to him, my luck will change. Ranan will look at me with that affectionate, devouring gaze always.

He'll love me.

I surge down into the waters, towards the fish. Balo is splashing behind me, probably to stop me. It's huge, I realize in a flash. Longer than my body, and swimming

slowly. This will be a true feast for the god of the seas. I let my spear fly.

It all happens in the space of a breath. Going under, a dive toward the fish, the sling of my spear. Time moves slowly, and I watch my spear sail through the water. I can almost hear the thud as it sinks into the large fish's flank and blood blooms in the waters.

Then, there's a jerk on the cord. The large fish jolts, and I'm pulled along in the water after it.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

RANAN

Before Vali's spear connects, I know what's going to happen.

I shout even as the fish bolts away, swimming at top speed, and drags her smaller form along with it.

“—if they weren't such a pain to catch,” Balo finishes, his voice rising in panic. “No!”

I toss aside my crutch and dive into the water. There's no time to think—I have to get to Vali before the fish swims so deep and so far that she drowns. I move through the water, using all four arms to surge as fast as possible. Balo will call for help rather than attempt to save her himself—he knows he won't be fast enough—but by that time, it might be too late. I kick in the water, ignoring the hot shock of pain that lances up my leg. I swim, following along behind that fish, moving so speedily that it's nothing but a blur in the waters.

And dragging behind it, frantically clawing at the water, is my Vali. She flails as the fish darts back and forth, trying to shake her loose, but she's got the safety loop tied to her ankle. The fish drags her along, feet first, and zigzags back and forth along the ocean floor. I know these fish—I know that they bolt and head for deeper waters when startled, and that is a death sentence for Vali. I fight my own panic as the fish

darts, moving entirely too close to a coral reef. My leg throbs in pain but I ignore it, because I'm gaining on the impossibly swift thunderfish.

With every bit of energy I have left, I surge forward and reach for one of Vali's flailing arms that windmill in the water. I grasp onto her and she clings to me, a bubbled scream emerging from her throat. The fish jerks and slows, trying a different route for escape with more weight on the line, and I clutch my mate even as I climb up her body, heading for the offending cuff. When I reach it, it takes a few moments for me to undo the tight knot, and then her foot slips free. She immediately darts for the surface and I grab her hand, hauling her along with me. She hasn't been under so deep and so long that she needs to surface slowly. Right now, she needs air more than anything.

I want to shout with relief when I break the surface and drag Vali upward until she crashes through. She immediately coughs and chokes, spewing water from her mouth and nose.

"I've got you," I tell her, anchoring an arm at her waist that will keep her head above water.

She sobs as she coughs, clinging to me and sputtering. More water pours out of her and her ragged breaths sound wet. She's shaking all over and the realization that I almost lost her hits me. If I hadn't been standing there, Vali would be gone. Dead. Balo—or any other human—can't swim fast enough to catch up with a panicked thunderfish. She would have just disappeared, never to be seen again.

The idea terrifies me. I shake her, frantic. "What were you thinking, Vali?!"

She coughs harder, managing to sputter, "Lord...Vor..."

"I said I would take you! What, you think a few days with a spear and a few

swimming lessons and you can suddenly do whatever you like? Don't be foolish, Vali!"

She pushes at me, another sob breaking her throat. "Can't you wait until we get back to the flotilla to get mad at me?"

"You almost didn't make it back! I almost lost you!" I give her another little shake. "Do you understand that?"

Vali splashes water at me, as frustrated as I am. "I know it was wrong now! Quit yelling!"

"I'm not yelling!" I bellow.

"I'm just trying to prove my worth!"

"Your worth?" I roar, trapping her above the water's surface with my right arm while my left arms swim frantically for the safety of the flotilla. A brief glance shows me just how far Vali's been pulled, and it makes my leg ache just seeing how far it had taken her so quickly. "You don't need to prove anything! To anybody!"

Vali lets out a scream of rage...that she ruins by coughing. "I don't understand you, Ranan! If we're not here so I can prove myself to your people, then why are we here?"

She clings to me, even as she argues, and I don't mind that with every cough she's spraying my face. I welcome every ragged breath she takes. Even though I'm furious, I'm starting to grow angry at myself, too. Vali thinks that I brought her here to see how she'd fit in with my people? Doesn't she realize I don't care if she fits in with them or not?

“We’re here,” I say, rolling onto my back so I can let her rest her upper body on my stomach as she shivers and quakes, “because I am proving myself to you . I am going to marry you in front of all of my people so you will no longer think I am trying to get rid of you. So we’ll have truth between us and you won’t feel the need to pretend out of fear that I’ll give you away. So you’ll realize what I’ve been trying to tell you all along. That you are my wife , now and forever.”

She stares at me as she clings to my abdomen, and I anchor my arm tighter around her waist. I can’t help but notice that she’s still wearing the foolish dress she insists upon, though now it is bunched and gathered at her waist, stuck around the belt. Her magnificent breasts heave against my chest, and she sputters. Her hand slaps against my chest, though it doesn’t hurt. “You...idiot! Are you serious?”

“Very.”

Vali bursts into tears and holds onto me tighter.

I...hope that’s a good sign. I run my knuckles along one cheek even as I continue to backstroke the long way back to the flotilla. “You’re not hurt, are you? I can’t bear the thought of you hurt.”

“I’m fine,” she sobs, even as I continue to swim us to safety. “You could have told me.”

“I’ve tried. I’m terrible at this. At us. At telling you how I feel. You deserve better.”

Vali just shakes her head and holds onto me tighter. “I don’t want better. I want you. I thought you hated me. That I embarrassed you in front of your people.”

“Never. And...I don’t care what they think. I just want you to realize that I want you.”

“Even if I’m a bride and not a bribe?” She sniffs hard, lifting her head.

“You are the greatest prize I’ve ever pulled off a boat. I didn’t realize I wanted you at first, but now I’m glad I have you.” I give her another little shake, still terrified at the sight of her disappearing under the water, tugged along by the thunderfish. “And for the love of all the gods, do not go fishing without me!”

“Oh no, your leg!” she blurts out, her hands moving frantically over me and nearly causing me to dump her back into the water. “Is your leg all right?”

“I’m fine. I’ll live. It doesn’t matter. All that mattered was saving you.”

She clings to my wet chest and gazes up at me with dark, aching eyes. “Please tell me this isn’t you misspeaking. Tell me the truth, Ranan. I can handle it, I swear.”

Exasperated, I roll forward and grab her in all four of my arms, holding her tight. My leg throbs and aches, but I ignore it so I can look her in the eye. “Woman, I am going to drag you in front of my people and marry you because I love you. Will you be my bride, Vali? My wife?”

She squeals and flings her arms around my neck.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

VALI

My wedding day is a magical one. Even though I have yet to give Lord Vor his fish, it feels as if the gods are smiling down upon myself and Ranan. The weather is beautiful, the sun shining and a light breeze making the warmth pleasant. Ranan's mother Ajinai is in our tent with me. I've placed my tiara in my hair and woven the ribbons Ranan gave me through my curls. Ajinai helps me dress in the traditional garb of a woman of the seakind—several long, thick necklaces made of shells and pearls, and a long, pearl-lined wrap skirt made of fish leather. She has made these garments in anticipation of Ranan's future bride, and so they're all a bit oversized. The skirt is so long it drags on the ground behind me, made for a much taller woman. I don't care. Ajinai looks at me with approval and happiness, and I feel beautiful.

"You will keep these," she says to me. "Use them as an example so you can make them for your daughter when she is old enough."

I'm not sure if we'll want children, but I like that this is mine to keep. I give her the cobweb of gold collar because I'll never wear it, and she smiles with radiant happiness, immediately putting it on.

Now we're both adorned for my wedding, and I feel a little closer to Ranan's mother.

We emerge from the tent to the gathered flotilla's occupants, and everyone looks

happy to see us. I don't even mind that I'm topless under the necklaces—I feel like I fit in. Ranan devours me with a hot look as I come to his side, and a few steps away, his father stands behind him. Lakos has never said two words to me, his expression as impossible to read as Ranan's. Lakos says he's shy and suffers from the same tongue-twisting his son does, so he rarely speaks in the presence of others. Today he gives me a small nod of approval as I put my hand in Ranan's.

And then I stop looking at the crowd and pay attention to my bridegroom, because he looks magnificent. There are no bandages on his leg, only an ugly, jagged, bright-pink scar. He leans on a crutch that has been decorated for the ceremony, and he wears several necklaces that match mine. Instead of a wrap at his hips, though, he wears a slender fish-leather loincloth decorated with seashells. His skin has been rubbed with oil and he gleams in the sunlight, all gorgeous muscles and shining skin. More attractive than any of that is the smile that curves his mouth as he looks down at me, his expression flicking between happiness and possessiveness.

I could float away with the joy I'm feeling right now.

I put both of my hands in his, and since I only have two of them, he double-holds each one. As tradition dictates, the priest of Belara is bribed with a pouch of money, and then the vows are said. I practically float when Ranan declares to honor me as his bride for all eternity, as is tradition. But then he adds another line that takes my breath away. He looks me in the eye, his thumb skating over the back of my hand. "My Vali. You have always said that you want to belong, that you never have a home. But I need you to know that your home is with me, at my side. Your place is in my arms. You are my home, and I hope I am yours."

I lift our joined hands and kiss his knuckles, tears of happiness threatening to brim over.

"In the eyes of the gods, you are now joined," the priest says.

Ranan pulls me close, no doubt for a chaste kiss. I fling my arms around his neck and press my lips to his, eager to show him just how much love I have to give.

He lifts me off my feet, ignoring my squeal. “Your leg!”

“I’m not lifting you with my leg,” he says, and kisses me harder.

To the sounds of laughter and cheering, he carries me across the flotilla and back into the tent that is set up for our wedding celebration. He limps a little, but my protests are forgotten as we kiss, and kiss, and kiss. As is tradition with the seakind, the new couple feasts in private and emerges the next day at dawn to present another offering to Belara and the rest of the gods. I’m less interested in feasting and far, far more interested in touching my new husband.

He keeps kissing me as he carries me into the tent and finally sets me on my feet. “My Vali,” he murmurs. “Were there human customs you wanted? Was the ceremony to your liking?”

“It was perfect,” I say, moving in close and pushing aside the necklaces so I can press kisses on his bare chest. “Let’s have sex now.”

He chuckles, a hint of tension in his voice. “You do not want to eat first? My mother and father have spent many hours preparing our feast?—”

“Don’t care,” I say, and turn my head to lick a particularly enticing nipple. It’s been so long since we’ve kissed and touched. So long since I’ve sat on his face or had his cocks in mine. There’s an ache deep in my belly that tells me that I need to be filled by my husband. I slide one of his arms around my waist, but he doesn’t pull me any closer and it worries me. “Don’t you want to have sex now, Ranan? Don’t you think we’ve waited long enough?”

“I have not had sex,” he confesses. “For some reason, the thought makes me nervous. I want today to be perfect for you.”

Is he being shy? Right now? After we just were joined in front of his people and the gods? “You’ve seen all my bits,” I tease, running my hands over his torso. “I’ve seen yours. I can help you if you need assistance figuring out where everything goes, but I’m sure you have an idea.”

“Are you...I have two cocks, Vali. I know humans do not.”

“We’ll make sure they both get attention,” I reassure him, sliding my hands down to that shell-covered loincloth and pushing it aside so I can touch him. I grip one already hard cock and sigh with pleasure at the feel of him. There’s nothing quite like the weight of a very fine cock in your grasp and the reaction of the male it belongs to.

Ranan makes a choked sound, even as he presses into my hand. “You...always...so eager...”

“Of course I’m eager. Just look at you.” I use my other hand and run it down his side, fascinated with his hard abdomen. How can he possibly think I’m not excited to touch him? Everything about his body is perfection. His chest is a wall of muscle, and all four arms are taut and corded with veins. I even like his bubble of an arse and the delicate fins along his limbs. I stroke his side even as I tease his cock...

...and he jumps, moving out of my grip.

Startled, I look up at him as he rubs his side, a sheepish expression on his face. “Ticklish.”

What? How can this be? Have I never run my hand down his side before? Have I somehow missed this perfect, touchable spot in my focus on his (admittedly

fascinating) cocks? I need to try it again. I abandon playing with his shaft and try to put my hands in that spot on his side again, but he bats them away.

Well, that's just encouraging me.

Our caresses turn into wrestling, as I try to tickle him and he uses all four arms to prevent me from doing so. I'm a wriggly sort, though, and I manage to get a few tickles in even as he tries to stop me. He grunts every time my fingers make contact, and I slide out of his grip just to tickle again, laughing with delight. This is the best.

Ranan wraps all four arms around me and propels me into the bed on the far side of the tent. Then I'm on my back, a heavy male pinning my arms to my side. We're both grinning and slightly sweaty, and my smile fades as I remember that my gorgeous husband is still injured. "Your leg..."

"Not using it at the moment." He keeps my arms trapped, even as he leans in and presses kisses on my neck.

I wriggle, squirming against his hot mouth, and angle my chin so he can kiss as much of my throat as he likes. "Just don't hurt yourself."

He huffs and doesn't even lift his head from me. He nibbles on my ear with delicate teeth and lips, making me whimper, and then returns to my neck and jaw. I'm peppered in light, soft kisses that make me ache with arousal, and I squirm against his grip, desperate to put my arms around him.

"I want to touch you," I whisper.

"You can, but later, after you've forgotten all about that spot on my side." His mouth grazes my collarbone.

“I promise not to tickle.”

I get another huff as an answer, and then he’s pushing necklaces aside so he can nuzzle the tip of my breast. I moan, hot desire licking through my body. Gods, that feels so good. It’s been a while since we’ve touched like this, and I’ve forgotten how much I adore his caresses. I stop trying to get away and arch my back, giving him free access to everything he wants to kiss. His lips, his tongue, his enthusiasm are the best feeling in the world. I would pick his touch over a thousand gold necklaces, the soft noises of approval he makes as he strokes me, over hundreds of pretty dresses. I want him and this moment, nothing else.

He lavishes attention on my breasts, until I’m panting and needy underneath him. My nipples are taut and aching from his ministrations, and when he leans in to give them more affection, I whimper a protest. “Let me touch you, Ranan. Let me suck your cocks.”

“Later,” he murmurs, and then takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks on it. When he releases it with an audible pop, my breast aches in the best way, and I practically whine a protest that he stops. “I want to be inside you this time, my Valessa.”

An even better idea than mine. Just the thought of it makes my core ache, as if my body is desperate for the very same. “Oh, I want that, too.”

He moves up my body and kisses me, this time on the lips. A small smile curves his mouth as he gazes down at me, and that hungry, possessive look comes over him. “You’re certain?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I’m bigger than a human male. And I have two.”

“I noticed, aye.” His uncertainty is adorable, and ever so slightly baffling. “Why would I have a problem with that?”

“My bride should enjoy her wedding night. I just want to make certain we both are enjoying.”

“I’m enjoying everything, I swear.” I run my now-freed hand over his shoulders, appreciating his strength. “I’ve had sex before, Ranan. Nothing we do will surprise or frighten me.”

He nods. “I’ll get the sacred pot, then.”

Did I just say he wouldn’t surprise me? I guess I was wrong, because I have no idea what a sacred pot is for. But I want Ranan to keep on going, so I prop up on my elbows, necklaces sliding to my sides, and watch as he crosses the tent. He picks up a small earthenware jar and returns to my side, his expression the one he wears when he’s ill at ease. I’m curious what he’s so uncertain about, so I watch with interest as he pulls the small lid off the jar. A light, perfumed fragrance fills the air, and he dips his fingers in. They come out gleaming and slick.

Oil.

Of course there’s oil involved in a wedding night if the groom has two cocks. It makes perfect sense to me, and I smile my approval at Ranan. It’s very considerate—as a virgin, what wouldn’t I have given for someone to oil me up to ease things that first time? “What a thoughtful custom. I’ve never used such a thing.”

“No?” He flexes his greased fingers, and they’re so large and blunt that the small movement sends a hot needle of arousal through me. I can’t wait to watch him touch himself with his slick hands. They’ll just glide over his cocks like butter on a hot roll, and the thought makes me bite back a moan of hunger. I’ll get to watch that before he

puts himself inside me, and it feels like the best sort of present.

But Ranan doesn't touch himself. He puts one slick hand on my pussy, stroking his thumb over the seam of my sex. "I want to make sure you can take me without pain, Vali."

"I don't mind a little pain." Sometimes it can be exciting. And it's not as if he's setting out to hurt me. If he gets a little too eager and doesn't go as slow as he could, I wouldn't hold it against him. I'd just coach him through it for next time.

Ranan's gaze meets mine. "I mind your pain."

That might be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me. I open my mouth to tell him so, but then his slippery, oiled fingers stroke over my clit, and I nearly come out of my body with the intense bolt of pleasure that soars through me. "Ranan!"

"I have you," he murmurs, and strokes his fingers lower, teasing two of them into my core. My body is already wet, and the oil on his hand makes a wet, squelching sound as he fingers me, but gods, it feels so good. I don't even care about the loud, embarrassing noises of my cunt. All I care about is that he keeps doing this.

I fall back on the blankets, my thighs spreading wider. "What...what about children? Should we do something to prevent them?"

He shrugs. "There are sea plants that prevent a pregnancy, if you want such things. I'm happy either way."

"I am, too."

"My lovely, eager bride," he murmurs, and there's such pride in his voice that it makes me ache. His fingers glide in and out of me in a careful, precise rhythm. He

strokes into me a few times, then adds another finger, stretching my body.

I've never been so slippery, so wet, and so damn eager for my lover. I whimper his name, my hands going to my nipples to tease them while he drives into me. "Ranan, please."

He groans, moving up my body to kiss me even as he pounds into me with now four fingers. "You think you can take me, sweet Valessa?"

"Yes," I whine, nipping at his mouth as he pulls away. "Give me everything."

"Not everything. Not yet." He kisses me again, his tongue teasing lightly against mine, and then puts his hands on me to turn me over.

I roll, helping out, and push my hips into the air as I get on hands and knees. I'm eager, all right. So very eager to have him over me, inside me, filling me...

Ranan's larger body presses against my backside, and as I watch, he takes one cock in hand and drags it through the slippery mess between my thighs, slicking it. He notches himself at my entrance, and then presses in. And...gods. It's glorious. I gasp as he pushes into my channel, and his cock feels enormous and thick. The other brushes against my thigh, and I reach between my legs to touch it and press his length against my pussy even as he feeds the other into me.

He hisses with approval, then grunts as he seats himself to the hilt inside me. His other cock pushes against my hand, and I drop my elbows, pressing my cheek against the blankets so I can use my hand on him.

"How does it feel?" he asks.

"Shockingly good," I breathe. I want to flex my hips, to try to get comfortable with

what feels like the world's most enormous prick spearing me to my core, but the feel of him brings its own sensation. My skin prickles all over with awareness, and I can feel his every twitch. It's like we've become one.

And I'm very, very thankful for the sacred pot.

Ranan strokes my back with one hand, even as he pulls back to thrust again. "My wife."

"Yours." I feel dreamy with bliss, and when he surges into me again, I want to stay in this moment forever. I feel good. Sexy. Wanted. "All yours."

I work his lower cock again and he groans, pushing against my hand. My grip is awkward due to the angle, and it doesn't feel like enough. "Can I put my legs together?" I ask him. "Will that bother you?"

He makes a tortured sound and one hand tightens on my hip. "The flotilla could fall apart and it would not bother me in this moment."

Smiling at the thought, I bring my legs together slowly, and as I do, I rub the slick length of his cock between my thighs and grip it. It changes how everything feels—now he can't plunge as deep inside me, but when he thrusts forward, his second cock shuttles between my tightly-pulled-together legs. "Is this better?"

"All of it...is good," he answers, voice thick. "So good..." He sinks deep again, squeezing my arse as he does.

"But is this how your people do it?" I ask, my toes curling when he bottoms out inside me.

It steals my breath away and I forget all about making this as good as I can for him,

because my own pleasure gets in the way. Keeping my thighs rigidly together increases the friction on my pussy, and when he thrusts his second cock forward, it drags against my cunt. The head pushes between my thighs and I press it up so it can rub against my clit when he moves again. My whimpers turn into choked cries as he works me relentlessly, and when an orgasm quivers up my legs and spirals through my body, I welcome it. I cry out his name, clenching around his cock, and Ranan's gritted curse tells me he feels my body reacting. I wring every bit of rapture I can from his thrusts, until I'm so sensitive between my thighs that I have to move him away or it'll drive me mad.

"Amazing," I wheeze, when I catch my breath.

"You...I felt that," Ranan says, his hands roaming over my back. "That was incredible."

By the gods, it absolutely was. My toes want to curl again when he twitches inside me, and I feel every bit of it. I move my fingers between my legs, seeking out his second cock. The head of him is slick with seed, but not enough for him to have come. He's still hard inside me, too. "You didn't come."

"Not yet. I'm enjoying myself." His thumb grazes the cleft of my ass.

"Is that how your people do it?" I ask him again, drowsily curious.

Ranan pauses. "Women of the seakind have...two entrances to receive a mate."

Two wombs. Two channels. Whatever you call it, I've only got the one...but I've also got a nice, erotic imagination. "So do I, if you think about it. And we've got plenty of oil."

He goes still over me. "Is...is that something you would want, Vali?"

“We could try it. I don’t mind trying. We can see if it’s something we both enjoy. If you want to, that is.”

He makes a pained sound, as if the very thought is almost too much for him to take in. “I would try it, aye. Bury myself in both of your wet heats? I would love to.” He skims a hand along my buttock again. “It wouldn’t harm you?”

I chuckle. “Not if we grease everything properly.”

“You truly are the most amazing of wives,” he tells me. “To think I found someone so eager and willing to take me, all of me...”

He sounds amazed, like he’s not handsome and gorgeous and rich and thoughtful. He doesn’t realize that I feel like the lucky one. That I should be sending a dozen fish to Vor every day in gratitude for bringing Ranan into my life. We’re still figuring each other out, but there’s nothing wrong with that. I want to spend the next fifty years of my life figuring him out. “I’m the lucky one.”

“To have a tongue-tied boor of a mate?” He scoffs at the thought.

“You can’t help it,” I murmur, arching against his touch as a bit of oil is dribbled into the crease of my backside. A moment later, his fingers are there, teasing at my back entrance. “And we’re getting better at figuring each other out...ooooh.”

He presses something into my arse. It might be a finger. Might be a thumb. It just feels big and invasive and intriguing all at once. Ranan plays with the pucker of my arse for a time, easing first one finger and then adding a second and stretching things. All the while, he tells me how beautiful I am, how enthusiastic and clever, and how I’m the perfect bride for him. All the while I wriggle and moan under his fingers.

“You think you’re ready to take me?” he asks after I’m squirming once more.

I nod.

He pulls his cock from my body, leaving me hollow and aching. Behind me, there's the sound of wet oil being slicked over his cocks again, and then his cock is at the entrance to my body...and at the entrance to my backside. He presses in slowly, pushing against my body's natural resistance even as I try to relax and bite back my whimpers. It doesn't feel bad, just...strange. Different. My body relaxes, letting him sink in, and then his other cock is filling my cunt.

Ranan presses forward, and I feel very...full. Perhaps overly full, but as he pushes into me, I notice that every sensation is heightened. Even breathing in feels like an explosion of nerves. I can feel Ranan's every twitch, the pulse of his body. And when he moves forward and then draws back to gently thrust into me, I let out a sobbing breath.

"Good?" he asks, voice tight.

I have to think about it for a moment. Do I like these new sensations? The strangeness of it is melting away, and I'm left with trembling, breathless enjoyment. Of my body stretched taut. Of being pierced doubly by the man I just married. It's the most wicked and fascinating sensation.

Aye, I'm enjoying it. I manage a nod.

And when Ranan slides a hand along my front to gently rub at my clit while he pumps into me with short, shallow thrusts, I come undone. I float on a sea of sensation, climaxing again as he thrusts into me twice over.

I'm dimly aware of his movements growing erratic, his hips jerking and his control shattering, and when he comes, his entire body quakes over mine. Ranan falls over me, caging my body in his arms even as he continues to work my clit. I have to grab

his hand and twine his fingers with mine to get him to stop.

“I...came...” he announces, breathless. He sounds as dazed as I feel. “That was...amazing, Vali. You are incredible.” He squeezes my fingers. “You...did you enjoy that?”

Did I enjoy that? “I think at one point I came so hard I nearly blacked out, so aye, I enjoyed it.”

He chuckles and squeezes me tighter. Then he sighs and gently eases off of me from where I’m collapsed in the blankets. When his body leaves mine, I feel a little raw, a little achy, and used. A good used, I decide. I roll onto my back, trying to find the strength to get up and clean off after sex. To my surprise, Ranan brings a towel and water to me. “I’ll take care of you, my bride. Let me tend to you.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I relax back, spreading my thighs obediently so he can clean away the mess of our lovemaking. “We should do that again,” I say. “Maybe not every time, because I won’t be able to walk straight, but we’ll definitely need to do it more.”

Ranan’s sail flicks and he’s quiet. Feeling shy again. He brushes his fingers over my ear, and that small touch tells me everything.

I curl up on the blankets and turn towards him, hands under my cheek. He puts away the water and towels, then approaches the pallet of blankets and joins me on it. I smile when he lies down and faces me. “How’s your leg?”

“Better every day.”

That’s the same answer he gives every time I ask. “I mean right now. Does it hurt?”

“No.” His gaze roams over me. “Do you have regrets?”

“Why would I have regrets?”

His expression turns solemn. “Because now you’re stuck with me.”

I reach out and flick his nose. “Don’t be silly. I’m here because I want to be. Or is this you fishing for compliments? If you are, I am happy to reassure you that the sex was incredible and I want to do all of that over and over again.”

Ranan’s hard mouth curves into a wry smile. He brushes a lock of tangled hair back from my brow. “I am not fishing for compliments. I just...want this to work. It feels too good to be true.”

“You won’t be saying that when I get cranky over eating fish every day,” I joke.

“Yes, I will.”

Gods, he’s making me want to kiss him all over again. Then again, there’s nothing stopping me from doing so. I lean in and press a kiss to his mouth, touching his chin as I do. “Don’t worry so much. I’m happy to be your wife.” I brush my fingers over his jaw and trace the lines of it. “So what happens now? Is this our new home?”

He pauses. “Do you want to stay with the flotilla?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“I want what will make you happy.”

By Belara, we’re still dancing around each other’s feelings, aren’t we? I move a little closer to him, until our noses touch and our breaths mingle as we lie down and gaze

at each other. “I want us to be honest with each other.”

Ranan thinks for a moment and then says, “My mother would like for us to stay with the flotilla, but I’m not sure I’m ready to abandon Akara. She’s too young to join the flotilla.”

“I don’t want to abandon Akara either,” I tell him. “And I don’t mind going around on her back, but it’s nice to have a permanent home. We can’t stay at the grotto?”

He shakes his head slightly. “Not with a sea dragon in the area. It’ll chase off most of the larger fish—or devour them—and it’ll be dangerous for swimming. But there are plenty of other grottos along the coast. We can pick a new one and make it a home.”

“What about the stuff you have in your old one?” It seems so strange to me to just abandon it. I think of all the statues he has there, the trunks full of goods, the jewelry, the coin, the delicate dishware...

He moves closer, his nose rubbing against mine, as if he just wants to be that much closer to me. “We can retrieve what we need as long as we are quick and stay in the shallower waters. There’s nothing I require from there. If you want anything specific, we can always get it later.”

I consider that, running my fingers along his smooth jaw and stroking his skin. “I suppose we can always get that stuff later. There’s nothing I wanted. It’s just that it seems like a lot of treasure to abandon.”

“No one will find it. The grotto is impossible to access except underwater. It’s safe there.”

True. “And will you continue to rob ships? To pirate?”

He grins at me. “I like doing it. Most of the ships along this coast are merchants or slavers, and I don’t feel bad about robbing them.”

I wouldn’t feel bad about robbing them, either. “Can I help out?”

“It can be dangerous.”

“Not if we’re smart about it.” I tap the tip of his proud nose. “I’ll get some of those sea herbs you mentioned so I don’t conceive until we’re ready and we’ll work together. We can come up with some sort of storyline—that I’m your slave and being forced to help you out. I can do the talking for you so you can just stand there and look scowly and fearsome.”

He’s surprised at my enthusiasm. “You want to do the talking?”

“Yes, because if you ask for another bride, I’m going to pull her hair out.”

Ranan chuckles and then touches my ear. “I have the only bride I want.”

We gaze into each other’s eyes for a long moment, and it feels natural when he leans in and kisses me. Our lips meld, and time slips away, and there’s nothing but my husband and his hungry, tender mouth on mine. He pulls away and rubs his nose against mine once more.

“I still need my fish for Lord Vor,” I whisper.

Ranan groans, and then his hands are on me, tickling.

RANAN

Weeks Later

“Are you ready to do this?” I ask Vali as we float in the waters outside our new grotto. The waters here are a bit cloudier than the crystalline waters near the sea dragon’s nest, but the cave here has easier access for my human bride. It’s a large opening hidden behind a tumble of rocks off of a coast of steep, forbidding cliffs. No ship comes near enough to this particular cave because the rocks are too jagged, but those rocks also provide a natural barrier to keep us safe. The interior of our cave is smaller than the last, but cozier, and Vali has been working hard to make it a home.

She floats in the water next to me, a sling-spear in her hand and her new swimming gear on her sun-browned body. Instead of her foolish dresses, we’ve made breast-bands of fish-hide leather and a small loincloth so she has freedom of movement. I’ve crafted her a pair of reinforced feet fins like the ones Balo uses when he swims, but this time there is no retrieval line on her spear. If she tosses it too far, I will get it for her. I’m not about to let my pretty bride get dragged away by another fish.

“I’m ready,” Vali tells me. Her eyes glitter with excitement. “Do you think the shieldfish are still here? Or do you think the school has swam away?”

“They’ll be nearby,” I reassure her. There’s a cool current running through the waters, and the shieldfish like to drift in and out of it, plucking at smaller fish as they do. “You know what to aim for, yes?”

“The face.” She makes a stabbing motion with her spear. “And if it swims away, let

it.”

“Exactly. There are many, many fish in the sea, my sweet wife. If you do not catch the perfect one for Lord Vor today, you will tomorrow.”

Vali nods and swims the short distance over to my side. She slides her wet arms around my neck and pulls me in for a kiss. “Let’s do this.”

“I’m going to swim at your side the entire time,” I reassure my too-eager wife. I am the one that is always thinking twice about things, the one that hesitates. Vali loves to fling herself into a task without stopping to think of the consequences. I love that about her, even as it terrifies me. “Remember the signal to make if you have concerns and I will surface immediately?—”

She kisses me to stop my lecture. “I know, Ranan. Let’s go.”

“Let us go, then.”

Even so, I watch until my wife dives, swimming deeper, before I follow after her. I’m doing my best to try not to hover over her or to be anxious about her fishing. She’s come so far in the last few weeks. Vali now swims for much longer lengths and can hold her breath for twice as long as before...but she is still my fragile, lovely wife and I fret over her. She does not have the lungs or the strength of one of the seakind. She has to come up for air frequently. But she is very determined that Lord Vor should wait no longer for his fish, so we are seeking one today.

We swim along in the surface waters, and I watch Vali’s movements carefully as we head out away from the cliffs and into the depths. She points out a distant shark, and I’m pleased that she moves like I’ve shown her—with careful, precise strokes and not the flailing of prey that will bring it closer. It swims away, uninterested, and we continue on. Soon enough, I see a shieldfish swim past, and point it out to her. She

nod, surfacing to take a big breath, and then dives deeper, towards the beds of coral, so she can truly begin her hunting.

It takes everything I have not to wrestle the spear from her hand and take care of things for her. In the weeks since our marriage, everything has been going smoothly between us, and every day I wake up more besotted with my bride. I cannot imagine life without Vali at my side. I want her with me every hour of every day, and I'm obsessed with making love to her. That, and hearing her talk. Her laugh. Her smile.

I'm obsessed with all of it, truly.

I follow along behind her, giving her enough room so that I don't chase off her prey, but not so far away that I can't immediately be at her side if there's trouble. I've deliberately picked shieldfish because they are a fish that is slower to react. They do not dart like a thunderfish does, their heavy, flat bodies making it trickier for them to maneuver. One veers off from the school, gliding over an outcrop of coral, and she signals to me that she's going after it. I watch her kick with slow, powerful strokes, propelling forward with the help of her fins, and she lifts her spear. She swims overhead then dives down and lets her spear fly.

It sails through the waters, spearing the target. The fish flutters and immediately drifts, the forked end of the spear having pierced through the fish's head and come out the other side.

Vali looks to me, waving her arms under the water with excitement. If she could scream with joy under the waves, she would. I indicate she should surface, and I swim down to collect her prey. This was perfect. Lord Vor is smiling upon us this day for certain.

When I surface with the heavy catch, Vali squeals with delight. "Did you see? Wasn't that a good shot?"

“It was flawless,” I agree, holding the end of the spear out to her. The hefty fish is on the other end, trailing blood in the waters. I’m not going to let her swim back with such a weighty load, but she can hold it for now and relish her victory. “You did very well.”

She takes the spear without complaint, bobbing under the water at the weight of it, and I realize the size of the thing might be bigger than my mate is. She surfaces again with a chuckle and a rueful look at me. “Think the gods would mind if you carried this to shore for me?”

I grin at her. “Why would they give you a strong husband if not for such things?”

“Why indeed.” Vali gives me a playful splash. “So we take this to shore, light a fire and burn it for Lord Vor. After that...” She gives me a meaningful look and licks her lips.

“We celebrate?”

“Absolutely.” Vali smiles, her expression full of giddy promise.

I like the way my wife thinks.

VALI

Five Years Later

I watch the oncoming ship approach with interest, a stolen spyglass held up to my eye. Akara is in her spot, blocking the narrow strait with her large body, and the approaching ship is just now about to figure that out. We're at the other end of the channel on a raft, and when the two ships slowly make their way into the channel, we move in behind them, neatly blocking them in the pass.

"A more agile ship could avoid all this," Ranan comments, musing. "You would think the Aventinians would learn."

"I'm glad they haven't," I tell my husband. "Their ships are the easiest to rob."

"And the easiest to tip," he agrees, smiling at my enthusiasm. "Are you ready to board, my sweet wife?"

I put on the fake slave collar we've made for such adventures and adjust my torn, tattered clothing. I love the pretending most of all. "Ready."

He puts a hand on my shoulders, mouth twitching. "Quit looking so happy. You're supposed to be a slave."

I adjust my features, trying to put an appropriately grim expression on my face. Truth is, I love this. I love the thrill of robbing bad people. I love that we're taking their spoils from them and giving them to the people we love or using that money for

ourselves. I love that after we're done, my husband's blood runs hot and we make love like wild demons.

So yes, I absolutely love a life of piracy.

We watch as the ships come along the bend, skirting the jagged rocks and moving close to the cliffs. The straits are narrow here, and they've yet to notice that we're behind them. I want to laugh at how low the long, heavy ship is in the waters. There's one smaller boat and a much larger one with rowers. It's the one with all the cargo. I count heads. They have far too many people on board, and not all of them are rowing. "Slave ship," I point out to my husband.

"Aye, I see it."

"Can we rescue them? The slaves?"

"Always."

Another reason why I love the man. I hide my feral grin as the occupants on the ship notice us behind them and begin pointing. Time for the acting to begin. I pick up the large copper bell at my feet and ring it with the striker. As I do, I put on my "slave" expression. I make my face worried and fretful as I step forward. I ring the bell again and again as the two boats slowly approach Akara. Someone turns around in the boats and points at our raft behind them, and a cry goes up.

"Stay where you are," I call out. "Listen to my master and no one gets hurt!"

We'd had the idea for me to pretend to be his slave the moment I volunteered to assist him. I can't do the things he can in the water, and I don't have the strength he does. But if people view me as an unwilling servant, they're more likely to keep their focus on Ranan instead of taking out their anger on me.

And if that doesn't work, I have a few strategically placed knives under my costume. I'm not afraid to jump overboard, and that stops most people from following me.

The ships pull up closer to Akara, and the captain of one stands up at the prow of the small boat, the men lifting their oars from the waters. "There's a turtle blocking the way! We can't pass!"

"The turtle belongs to my master," I reply. "Do as he says and no one will come to harm!"

The captain's face turns ugly. "You're interfering with Aventinian ships. Tell your master to move through."

"He will not," I call out, stepping forward. "Not until you give us your valuables and your slaves. Then he'll command the turtle to move."

"Robbing sea-ogres," the man snarls, stabbing a finger at Ranan. "You can't do this!"

Rude.

Ranan gestures at the water, indicating that they have an alternative route. They can always swim all the way back to Aventine.

"Please," I say, adding desperation to my voice. "My master will not be swayed. Just put your valuables in the basket he brings you and send your slaves over and he'll let you pass."

"Or we'll fight you?—"

"Then you'll still have to turn around," I point out. They always get desperate before they give in. "He can speak to the turtle, I cannot. She will only move if he tells her to move. If you harm him, she might lash out and sink your ships."

“Why would we do as you say?” the captain yells back. “We can just turn our ships around and move right past you.”

The men shoot panicked looks at that. They know as well as I do that the heavy ships, laden with goods, don’t move easily through the waters. They’ll have to go through us, or through Akara. Ranan takes the basket from my hands, and I act dramatically frightened. He dives into the water and while I shiver and act like a fearful idiot, he surfaces and immediately pulls on the prow of the boat to haul himself in. The men shout and immediately move to the other side to counterbalance, and the captain almost falls in himself.

I jump into the water, too, moving over to the smaller boat. I have a bag tucked into my belt, a knife in my teeth. When I climb on board, they all scurry to the far side of the craft like I’ve got the plague. I pull out the bag and gesture to it. “Valuables in here.”

“This is ridiculous,” cries the captain of the other ship.

“Don’t upset my master,” I yell out. “He’s likely to do something drastic.”

The captain isn’t buying it. He marches up to Ranan, moving down the narrow aisle between the rowers. He puts a finger in my husband’s scowling face. “You?—”

Before he can finish the statement, Ranan picks him up and tosses him overboard as if he weighs nothing.

Someone screams. Another person sobs aloud.

“He can’t swim,” one of the men says, getting to his feet. “Help him and we’ll give you what we have.”

Ranan crosses his arms, ignoring the request.

The man in the water splashes and flounders, his head never breaking the surface.

This is all part of the play-acting, too. “Please, my master,” I say, glancing at the bubbles on the surface of the water, the only sign that the armor-wearing man was here. “Spare his life? I’m sure they’ll all do as you say now.”

He glares at me. “Slave...”

I clasp my hands under my chin. “Please, my lord. Please! I’ll collect the funds and slaves and be quick about it!”

With a heavy sigh, Ranan scowls in my direction—and I have to admit, it arouses me. He’s just so good at being cranky and domineering. I’m getting better at hiding the fact that I’m turned on, but if this goes on for too long, I’ll lose my composure. The trick with our raids is to startle everyone, quickly get in and steal what we want, and then send them on their way.

And then afterwards, Ranan and I go through our booty and then frantically make love, our blood rushing from the excitement of it all.

Ranan continues to glare at me, and everyone looks anxious. There’s a bit of thrashing in the water from the man that went overboard, but he doesn’t surface.

“Please!” I cry again. I know Ranan won’t let him drown, but it doesn’t hurt to seem nervous.

My husband looks at the people on the ship. The man in front of him immediately takes off a heavy golden necklace and dumps it in the basket. “Just save Bridic.”

With that, Ranan sighs and dives overboard, sending the boat rocking and people scrambling to hold on once more.

It's my turn to play things up. "You all need to do what he says," I yell out dramatically. "He tore apart a man on the last ship for disobeying him! Please don't make him angry!"

"In the basket," the man tells them, pulling off his rings. "Everything you've got."

Oh good. This is going to be easy, after all.

They make quick work of stripping off their valuables, and once I'm confident there's no uprising, I turn to the occupants of my boat and hold the bag out. The man closest to me scowls, but he pulls off a jeweled brooch and asks no questions. I turn around, and to my surprise, there's a large guardsman standing in my way.

"You don't have to do this. We can help you."

His mouth doesn't move, and it takes me a moment to realize it's not him talking after all. There's someone behind him, using him as a human shield. Coward.

"Show yourself," I say, holding the bag out. "My master wants all the jewels. Please make this easy on yourself and no one will get hurt."

The woman steps out from behind the guard, and to my surprise, it's a face I recognize. I stare into the hard, sneering face of Lady Dywan. She's not a slave like I'd wondered, but covered in jewels and wears a fine dress. And she's riding in a slave boat wearing those things, which tells me that she's found a way to regain her fortune. Why is it that bad people always somehow find a way to survive?

She looks at me with equal surprise. "You."

"Me," I agree, and hold the bag out.

"The monster kept you? All this time?"

“Aye, he did. I’ve seen terrible, horrible things that would make your hair curl. Please, Lady Dywan, do as he says.”

She doesn’t strip off her jewels. Instead, she takes a step forward and holds her hands out to me. They’re covered in gaudy rings, her bracelets clinking as she extends her fingers. “You don’t have to do this,” she tells me. “We can save you. I can save you.”

I’m touched...at first. It’s kind of her to offer to rescue me. I remember five years ago, when she was the only one that protested that I’d be given to the sea-ogre. But I know now that Lady Dywan’s rescue isn’t a rescue after all. I’d just be patted on the back even as shackles were put around my wrists. Lady Dywan is the type that gets ahead by stepping on others. The fact that she’s a slaver now tells me everything.

Not that I’d ever take her up on her offer. I clasp her delicate, bony fingers in mine...and slip the biggest ring off of her hand, a huge ruby surrounded by knots of gold. “I’m good.”

Some time later, the seven slaves are huddled on Akara’s back in the fish-hide tent as the turtle lazily makes her way out to sea. The slaver ships are floating somewhere in the channel where we’d left them after taking all their oars and tossing them into the water. If they’re smart, they retrieved them and went on their way. If not...well. Lord Vor tends to those who tend to themselves.

I lounge near the water’s edge with Ranan’s arms around me. We pick idly through the riches we stole from the slavers, but I’m more concerned with the poor souls we rescued. My husband’s chin rests on my head and we watch as they ravenously tear through our stored supplies that we’d given them, eating everything down to the old, dry bits of fish jerky.

“I don’t think they were fed on those ships,” I tell my husband as his fingers stroke along my arm. “You’re going to have to fish tomorrow to feed all these hungry bellies.”

“I can do that.” He presses a kiss to my temple. “Did you have fun today? You were very convincing.”

“A lot of fun. It occurs to me that we don’t need this gold nearly as much as our new friends do.” I point at the rescued slaves. “The fun is in the stealing anyhow.” After seeing all the riches that pour in from our piracy, I’m less excited about pretty, sparkly things. It’s more fun to give them away to others and to watch them light up with delight. I’ve got a few particularly jade-encrusted pieces I’ve kept aside for Balo. It’s become a tradition for him to give me jewels with rubies and for me to give him jade or emerald. It started when he joked that the red gems matched my hair, so I gave him green for the same reason. Never mind that we both have the same hair color.

The flotilla probably thinks all humans are as silly as the two of us when we get together.

“You want to give all our ill-gotten goods to the slaves?” He just chuckles. “If we keep doing that, my lovely wife, we’re going to be the poorest pirates in all the seas.”

I snuggle in his arms, loving that I’m cocooned in his embrace. There’s nothing quite like a four-armed snuggle to make you feel truly safe. “You’re just annoyed I suggested it before you did.”

“Not annoyed.” He nips at my ear and then notices the big ruby I’m still wearing on my finger. He picks up my hand and admires the ring. “You keeping this one?”

I muse as I admire Lady Dywan’s ring on my finger. “I might. It’s a good reminder.”

“Of what?”

I turn to gaze up at my husband. Five years together, and I never grow tired of looking at him. The proud sail atop his head is a little taller, his cheeks a little leaner,

but otherwise he's as hard and unyielding-looking as the day I met him. Ranan still misspeaks from time to time, but I'm confident in my place at his side, and we're able to laugh off the worst of it. "It reminds me that pretty words are nice, but sometimes you're better off picking the sea monster."

"I'll show you sea monster, wife," he snarls, and then tickles me ferociously.