



The Siren & the Sea

(Creatures of Domhan na Rùin)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: After her bakery went up in flames, Maura left her homeland, Beitar, behind for the shores of the Vaporad Sea. Though the locals warned her of the vicious sirens that made that coastline uninhabitable, she doesn't take their warnings seriously until an unfortunate slip sends her tumbling into the brutal, icy waves.

Siren prince Anatolius never quite fit into the role his fathers expected of him. Though he is meant to spend his days monitoring the northeastern coast, he finds himself watching the curious human he discovered inhabiting the old fishermans cottage. Watching her is the highlight of his day, until one afternoon he sees her fall into the unforgiving sea. He rushes to her aid, determined to get her out before the other sirens find her and punish her for entering their territory, only to find her as... an otter.

To keep Maura from facing the wrath of the other sirens, Anatolius claims she is his bride-to-be. The two must work together to navigate the delicate situation in the siren court and get Maura back home alive.

The Siren The Sea is a standalone novelette set in the world of Domhan na Rùin. The three books in the series can be read in any order.

Total Pages (Source): 14

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Chapter 1

Maura took a deep breath of cool, salt-laced air and savored the the wind nipping at her cheeks. The expanse of the Vaporiad Sea sprawled before her. The sea was a new friend of Maura's; she had spent most of her days in the snowy hills of Beitar. Until her life went up in smoke, in every sense.

She forced her spiraling thoughts down, refusing to let herself dwell on the home she'd left behind. It wasn't much of a home by the time she'd left. She much preferred this wild, rocky northern coast and its reckless icy waves.

The sea occupied a large portion of the center of the continent of Domhan na Rùin, and she had always dreamt of seeing it. Though, with Beitar's isolation, that hadn't seemed like a dream likely to come true. Gazing out at the endless depths, she couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

Maura decided that—since she was in full possession of her time—she would take a walk up to the cliffs. She had made the walk dozens of times in the month she'd been here, and she'd never seen a soul. It had been strange at first to get used to being so alone here, but she had quickly grown to enjoy the solitude.

The human population of Aphaona avoided this particular stretch of coastline at all costs. Tales of vicious sirens dragging unsuspecting people down to their city beneath the waves were told to children at bedtime here. The moment Maura had inquired about the fisherman's cottage, the locals had vehemently warned her against living here. The sirens were one of many non-human species native to Domhan na Rùin, but unlike the minotaurs of Mistreon or the vampires of Ichorna, they were not fond of

humans. It was said the siren city lay far beneath the waves near here. Anyone with sense stayed far away. Well, anyone with sense and money.

Maura didn't have the coin for anything but the little cottage she now called home. She didn't mind, though; she had yet to see any sign of vicious water-folk. Perhaps they had left off guarding these waters with the shores abandoned for so long.

As Maura hiked, clouds churned in the sky, mirroring the turbulent motion of the sea below. She was close enough to the cliffs that there was no point turning back. A little rain never hurt anyone.

Savoring the burn in her muscles from the rugged ascent to the clifftop, Maura finally reached her destination. From this vantage point, she could see for miles out to sea. This place was wild—and quiet in the way she needed quiet. As she stared out, committing the view to memory, fat drops of rain began to fall.

Water slowly coated the rocks she stood on, but she didn't move to leave. She stood on the very precipice of the cliff, feeling the thrill of the sea's vastness before her. She let the rain soak into her clothes and delighted in its cold bite. She felt alive, like the water below was a part of her soul that she'd always been missing.

There was a sudden crack of thunder, its warning flash of lightning hidden in the roiling clouds, and her body jolted—forward. Right over the edge of the cliff. She was standing too close to the edge for such a sudden movement, though, and before she even truly felt what was happening, the sensation of falling registered in her mind.

The cliff where she'd been standing loomed above her, framed by the backdrop of the stormy sky, and grew more distant by the second. The sounds of restless surf grew louder as she fell, and everything she tried so hard not to think about spun through her panicked mind in an instant.

Her bakery. The smoke. The ash that was left behind. Her mother succumbing to the fading magic, her father's broken heart. Her midnight escape from her country, the only home she'd ever known. All the sadness and loss and loneliness, all at once, until the searing sting of cold took her under.

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Chapter 2

A natolius didn't feel like singing that day. Storm clouds had rolled in, and the human he had been watching for the last month had hiked up to the cliff that jutted proudly above the rocky beach. A siren's song came from the heart; it was how they expressed their emotions. The effects on humans, however, were extreme. The sirens used the magical allure of their song to their advantage when needed, but from the moment Anatolius had seen her near the old fisherman's cottage, he had only been curious about her—he had no desire to lure her to her death.

Siren protocol demanded that anyone on patrol around their borders handle human threats efficiently and without remorse. This human undoubtedly would fall into this category, but he just...waited. And watched. He didn't know what to make of it, really. He had always thought their laws a bit harsh, but he'd never had a reason to violate them like this. The humans had kept away from their coast for a long time—it hadn't been an issue.

Now, he watched the human as she stared out across the sea. Her dark brown curls caught the wind and danced behind her shoulders. Her brown skin was the only warmth in a landscape of blues and grays, the stormy light above casting her in a mystical glow.

Tiny ripples danced on the surface of the water—raindrops falling just above his head—and he hoped that the human would return to her cottage soon. Even he knew how slick the rocks could get in the rain.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, she was falling. For seconds that felt like an

eternity, he watched her drifting toward the waves. Before he knew what he was doing, his body was moving.

He flicked his powerful tail and glided through the water. He saw her impact; her body, in such violent motion only a moment before, now eerily still as she floated in the water, weightless. The sea had given way to her with a great splash; now it silently wrapped her in its embrace. Anatolius knew she needed air to breathe, so he swam toward her, intent on taking her up to the surface. When he reached out to touch her, a flash of bronze light startled him, and he froze.

His panic shifted rapidly to confusion. A great brown otter floated in the water before him. It was much larger than a regular otter, but otherwise looked the same as the few he'd had occasion to see. They were mostly river creatures and didn't venture out into their sea.

It blinked, cocked its head, and observed him with keen, albeit frightened, eyes. Anatolius looked around him at the empty water and rising bubbles where the woman's body had been, slowly realizing what had occurred, however unlikely. It must be, though; where else would the woman have gone? He had heard tales of human shifters before. Could this woman be one of them?

He supposed he should just...ask.

"Hello, there. Are you...alright?" he asked, tone hesitant. A siren's voice was made to travel through water, and he'd spoken in the common tongue of Domhan na Rùin in the hopes this otter might understand. He couldn't believe he was trying to talk to an otter.

The otter considered him another moment before looking down to examine itself in a disturbingly human gesture. It looked back at him after a long moment, and without warning, flicked its lithe tail and swam for the surface.

Anatolius followed close behind and popped his head above the water along with the otter. The storm raged on, and the otter looked around as if searching for something.

"It's alright, you fell. From the cliff, up there? And you're...well, you're an otter now." Anatolius had done a lot of things in his life, but this might be the strangest thing yet.

The otter stared at him again before a lovely, albeit annoyed, voice drifted into his mind. Well, obviously I'm an otter, thank you so much for that astute observation.

Anatolius couldn't keep the shock from his face. She had just spoken directly into his mind. The Tuanadair of Beitar must have powerful magic, indeed. "I heard that," he said with a touch of indignance.

The otter whipped her head to face him. What?!

"Yes, I heard that too. You're speaking into my mind."

Well...good, now we understand one another. I assume you're one of these fearsome sirens I was warned about?

This otter—human—was extremely confident. It was an unexpected, if enjoyable, turn. "I am," he answered simply, wanting to hear what else she would say. "My name is Anatolius."

You don't seem that vicious. I need to get back to the beach by my cottage. I think I know the way, so I'll be going now, if it's all the same to you. With that, she dipped back beneath the waves and began to swim away.

Anatolius followed, not wanting to let this fascinating human get away so soon. He'd spent weeks watching her, the least he could do was try to have a conversation.

"You're a shifter, then? I've heard of your kind—from Beitar, if I'm not mistaken?" She ignored him and kept swimming. He was about to ask her another question, or tell her more about himself, or something, when he heard the lilting song of his kin in the distance. If there were other sirens headed this way, this human's life was in grave danger. She would not find them so curious—they would kill her on sight.

"Wait! There are other sirens approaching. They will kill you if they find you here."

Again, the otter whirled toward him.

What do you propose I do? she asked, with a bite to her voice.

"Just...play along with me. I'll handle it." Anatolius' mind raced through possible solutions, but only one completely ridiculous and slightly terrifying option would be certain to save her life. "Just stay close to me," Anatolius whispered to her, drifting closer.

After a long moment, two other sirens materialized from the deep green of the sea—Yiorgos and Lugana, two of Vathós' most ruthless guards. Anatolius' pulse kicked up. He didn't know why he was so determined to protect this human, but for some reason he didn't want her to die.

"Anatolius, my prince? Why are you not at your post? We grew worried when we passed it and did not find you there as usual." Lugana's dreamy soprano voice glided across the waves as the two sirens closed the distance. The sirens' tails were long, and covered with opalescent scales. The delicate, frilly fins on their forearms moved with the subtle currents around them, and their bluegreen skin blended eerily into the water. Anatolius knew the exact moment they noticed the human shifter, could sense the slight tensing of their bodies at the foreign presence. No siren would think twice about ending her. Except him, apparently.

"I am sorry to have alarmed you both. I seem to have been too distracted spending time with my Chosen and have been negligent today. I offer my most sincere apologies." Anatolius put every ounce of his will into sounding calm and sure, as if there was nothing the least bit odd about having a human otter fiancée.

"Your Chosen?" Yiorgos did nothing to disguise the shock and disgust in his voice.

"Yes. My Chosen. We were just about to make our way back to Vathós to begin the proceedings. If you don't mind taking over my post a bit early? I know it's outside of protocol, but," Anatolius glanced over at the otter, still floating next to him.

"Of course, your Chosen is an exception to protocol, we'll handle things here," Lugana interrupted, taking in the otter shifter with even more interest now.

"I know you both likely have many questions, but for now, you must excuse us." Anatolius scooped the otter into his arms as he spoke, and every nerve ending in his entire body lit with a flash of heat. It was a palpable, visceral rightness that was all at once exhilarating and peaceful. The shifter tensed in his arms for a split second before he gathered himself enough to flex his tail and begin swimming. He'd never felt anything like that, and his mind raced with the possibilities of what had just happened.

He took them in the direction of the shifter's seaside cottage, swimming slowly, surely, hoping beyond hopes that the two sirens would be so surprised at his news that they wouldn't notice which direction he went.

"My prince?" Anatolius froze and turned to look back at Lugana and Yiorgos.

"Yes?"

"Why are you not heading toward Vathós?"

Anatolius' mind clambered for some reason why he would be swimming in the opposite direction. "We need to stop and get some of my Chosen's things for her stay with us."

The two sirens exchanged a confused look. "Anatolius, you know very well that your family has had everything prepared for the day you find your Chosen for nearly a decade. She will want for nothing in our city," Lugana said, genuine confusion lacing her voice.

"I suppose it wouldn't be the most practical detour," Anatolius said, trying desperately to think of some other reason not to take this human to the very place most dangerous for her in this whole vast sea. After a beat of silence, he couldn't think of anything compelling enough to go against what was expected without raising suspicions. The traditions surrounding finding one's Chosen were ancient. It would be highly unusual for a Chosen to bring their own things to the siren court. So he reluctantly turned to swim deeper, away from the shore and toward the siren city of Vathós. The other two sirens continued their patrol, drifting toward the edge of their territory, singing as they went. The human's claws dug into his arm as he carried her into the depths.

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Chapter 3

Maura was, frankly, still adjusting to the fact that she wasn't dead, and the startling fact that she had shifted, as this massive blue fish man cradled her in his arms. She dug her claws into his arm, tensing to flee—but flee where? She could never outswim this creature.

In addition to the absolutely bizarre situation she now found herself in, she was...an otter? The people of Beitar almost all had an animal form, but their magic had been dying slowly for so long that most never knew what their animal was. Her fall from the cliff must have caused her to shift intuitively. She was a Tuanadair—a wielder of Beitar's ancient shifter magic.

She glanced down at herself as the siren glided through the water and admired the rich brown of her fur. It wasn't so different from the color of her hair in her human form. Maura had always longed to be near water; now it made even more sense.

As they went deeper and deeper into the sea, the cold light of the sun far above became dimmer and dimmer. This was far deeper than any human would normally swim. How was she not holding her breath? She didn't know all that much about otters, but she knew they spent a good amount of time underwater. She would have to breathe at some point, though, and she began to panic.

She realized with a start that the siren had been able to hear her thoughts before. She wasn't sure how that was possible, or if she could control it.

"I can still hear you," the siren said. Damn.

Well, if you can hear me, why don't you answer my question? How am I this far beneath the waves safely, and how am I not suffocating? Also, I suppose I may as well introduce myself. My name is Maura.

"Nice to meet you, Maura. You are under my magic's protection. The magic of the sirens is in our song to some extent, but we have other useful abilities. While you are close to me down here, water will be as air to you."

That was...not what Maura was expecting. She wasn't sure what she was expecting.

Why, exactly, are you taking me hostage right now?

"Sirens are...private beings. We do not generally take kindly to humans entering our waters, even by accident. Those other sirens would have slaughtered you without a second thought, and this is the only way I could think of to keep them from harming you."

Maura let his words sink in. She wasn't opposed to avoiding slaughter, but she was basically being kidnapped. Trepidation and anxiety roiled in her chest. Usually she was a decisive person, but she found herself now not knowing quite what to do.

You told them I'm your 'Chosen'? What is that, some kind of personal pet?

Anatolius laughed, a rich, melodic sound that Maura felt all the way down her spine. His fingers absently stroked her fur, and she shivered at the pleasant feeling.

"No, not a pet. I'm not sure what the word for it would be in human culture, but it means we are to be wed."

WHAT? You told your siren friends we're engaged?! How could that possibly have been the only way to keep them from killing me?

Maura replayed the conversation with the other sirens, and everything made much more sense now.

Wait, they called you a prince...do you think I'm about to be some kind of siren princess just because I slipped and fell off a cliff? No, you need to let me go right now. I can't be stuck in this ocean for the rest of my life!

Maura squirmed in Anatolius' hold, but his fingers ran over her neck gently as he made a soothing noise.

"Don't fret, feisty one, I will get you back to your home as soon as I possibly can. We need to be careful about handling this or I won't be able to protect you from my people."

Maura muscled her panic down and tried to decide if she believed him. She knew nothing about siren culture except the stories of their violence—human heads on pikes and all—so it would be foolish not to take the danger seriously. She felt so horrifically not in control of her situation that she thought for a split second that she would rather Anatolius had not shown her mercy. She just...really didn't want this to be happening.

"I know you don't want this to be happening; I wish there were another way."

Maura grumbled internally and was about to retort when the spires of nearly a hundred buildings slowly materialized from the murky depths. A pearly glow rose from the darkness below, illuminating a city of white stone covered in deep green algae. Coral grew from the buildings in colorful bursts, and patches of bright, bioluminescent plants dotted the landscape.

Above all, though, Maura heard the singing.

She closed her eyes and let the ethereal notes wash over her. It was like nothing she had ever heard before. For a moment she was worried she might be in some danger from hearing the song—but surely nothing so lovely could hurt her.

"You are right; this song is not meant to harm. It's the song of home, of peace."

Maura let herself enjoy the sights and sounds as they made their approach to Vathós. Even she could appreciate that likely no human living had seen this sight. She wanted to go back to her cottage, but she had left Beitar to see the world. What a world it was.

Wait, you never answered my question about the other sirens calling you a prince.

"I am a child of our kings, it's true. I am not their heir, though, thankfully. That job falls to my elder sister."

So when they said we were going to your family's house...

"Yes, we are going to the palace." Anatolius shifted to point at the massive ornate building that sat at the center of the city.

Maura's stomach dropped. She was just a baker, and now she was supposed to pretend to be a siren prince's intended?

"Everything is going to be fine," Anatolius chuckled. "Just follow my lead."

Maura wasn't sure if she could scowl as an otter, but she was certainly giving it a try. Maura didn't follow; she fended for herself.

"I don't mean to question your competence, feisty one, I'm sure you handle yourself. Here, though, I'd just like to keep you alive, and unless you are somehow familiar

with all of the customs and rites associated with finding your Chosen, I think you should accept my help."

Fine.

They approached a balcony at the top of one of the palace spires and Anatolius swam straight into a small enclosed room. Maura couldn't stop herself from squirming again at being in such a small space. The door they had just entered through slid shut and Maura's panic increased.

"Shhh, it's alright. We'll be out of here in a moment." Anatolius' voice was, Maura thought begrudgingly, rather soothing.

She looked up to see a pocket of air slowly lowering toward them. Maura watched, confused and silent, as the water continued to drain out of the room, the weight of her oversized otter self settling into the cradle of Anatolius's massive arms. With a light sneeze, Maura was breathing again.

She startled slightly as the wall behind them slid open to reveal a hallway glowing with soft, warm light. She couldn't believe she allowed him to continue holding her, but for some reason, being close to him felt safe. She chastised herself for that thought, given the small fact he'd just kidnapped her. Then, they were moving again, and instead of the smooth motion of swimming through the water propelled by his tail, she noticed a rhythmic rocking. He was walking?

"Our palace is filled with air, and we use our two-legged forms here. A bit of a holdover from the days when our people actually had visitors from the surface, but it's tradition. That, and...no one could figure out how to undo the magic binding the air in place," Anatolius whispered conspiratorially. Everything he said sounded like a flirtation somehow; not in his words, but in his tone. He held a hint of lilting laughter in his voice that irked Maura. Was this a game for him?

He tensed as he wound them through empty corridors. "Your safety is not a game to me, Maura," Anatolius said softly. "Here we are; this will be your room during your stay in Vathós."

He pressed a hand to an ornately carved stone panel on the wall, and it slid up to reveal the most lovely, cozy space Maura had ever seen.

It was rendered from the same moon-white stone as the rest of the city, but soft, warm shades of coral and pink made the space feel homey. A large window out into the ocean took up most of the far wall, and a massive inset pool sat directly in front of the window, steam curling lazily off its surface. A large round bed occupied another wall; it was really more of a nest of coral-colored pillows and blankets. A small vanity and a wardrobe, both white, sat opposite the bed.

As she took in the space, Anatolius lowered her to the ground, and she stepped out of his arms. Her claws made soft clicks on the stone floor, which was surprisingly warm given how cold the sea was.

"What do you think?" Anatolius asked. Maura turned to look up at him, forgetting that she still couldn't speak aloud, and jolted in surprise as she took in the sight of him. He had human legs, alright, and he was absolutely naked.

His blue skin and hair had been somehow less startling in the water, but here, it was impossible not to notice he wasn't human. His long, deep blue hair hung wet around his shoulders, and Maura could see dozens of tiny braids scattered throughout. Lace-like fins adorned his forearms. His beard was a beautiful shade of teal, too, and Maura had the urge to touch it. He was...glorious. And very naked. And she was staring. Her eyes drifted below his hips, and she was shocked at the lack of...well, anything. And he could still hear her thoughts.

Anatolius smirked down at her. "Siren culture doesn't really bother much with

clothes, feisty one. I am sorry I forgot to warn you, but I hope you can forgive me given the circumstances. Oh, and siren genitals are all internal until we need them," he said, obviously trying to suppress a smile.

They don't....wear clothes? Shit. Did that mean Maura would have to be naked this whole time, too? Maybe she should just stay in her otter form after all.

"No no, just because we don't bother doesn't mean you have to follow suit. I'll go to find something for you to wear to greet the kings. They'll want to see you as soon as possible to start the rites."

You want me to meet the kings? Suddenly, Maura felt truly in over her head. She was at the bottom of the sea, trapped in a palace with a bunch of deadly sirens who would kill her instantly if they could, and everyone was going to be naked, and...

"Take a deep breath, Maura. We are going to get through this together."

Hearing her name from his lips had her eyes snapping up to meet his. There was a hurricane of emotions as she looked at him: anger that he brought her here, gratitude that he apparently saved her life, frustration at her own curiosity about him. More than anything, though, she felt overwhelmed, and she was cornered, and she just...

Without thinking any more about it, she darted forward and sank her teeth into the smooth blue expanse of his leg and then took off into the hallway at a run.

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Chapter 4

Did she just...bite him? Anatolius stared after the rather ridiculous image of Maura in her otter form scampering down the hall. By the old gods, this woman was going to be the death of him. He couldn't help the smile that overtook his face.

He sighed and started after her. She was quick enough in the water, but a bit awkward on land, and he caught up with her easily. She kept running, however, and rounded a corner blind. She squeaked in surprise as she ran straight into the shins of his understandably shocked sister.

"Oh! Hello there," Cornelia said, looking down at the otter that now stood frozen at her midnight-blue feet.

"Sister, I see you've met my Chosen." Anatolius closed the remaining distance and met his sister's confused gaze.

"Your...Chosen? Is an otter?" Cornelia hadn't yet sensed Maura's humanity, apparently. Maura made an offended- sounding chuff. Her thoughts were too much of a tangle to make out any specific words.

"She's a shifter, actually. One of the Tuanadair of Beitar. Maura, this is my sister, Cornelia. Cornelia, Maura. We were just headed to her room to get her ready to greet our parents." Anatolius gave Maura a pointed look.

"I see," Cornelia said slowly, glancing back and forth between the two of them. He could see her mind working, realizing that there was something going on here. He

widened his eyes slightly in a way that had always meant 'I'll tell you later'.

"Maura, if you'll follow me," Anatolius said, gesturing back the way they came. She chuffed again and reluctantly moved in front of him.

"I'll see you in the throne room shortly, Sister."

Cornelia only nodded as they left her in the hallway.

When they arrived back at Maura's room, Anatolius stepped in after her and pressed his hand onto a carved spot beside the door. It slid shut with a soft thud.

"Maura, I know this is overwhelming, and I know you have no reason to trust me, but I need you to try if you want to get out of here alive. I have every intention of helping you get home at the earliest possible time, but until the moment is right, everyone here needs to believe we are engaged to be married and deeply in love."

Maura's thoughts were still for a long moment before Anatolius felt the rush of powerful magic. He blinked once, and Maura's human form stood before him, still wearing the simple dress and cloak as when she'd plummeted from the cliffside, her rich brown hair damp and falling over her shoulders in thick waves. Her smooth, brown skin had the prettiest undertones highlighted by the watery light of Vathós. Gods, she was...so beautiful. He had only ever seen her from afar before her accident today, and then he'd only had a moment before she shifted. Standing before her now, her frustration burning in her deep brown eyes—she was a force of nature.

"So not only do I have to be trapped down here against my will, I now have to play nice with royals, and pretend to be in love with you?"

The sound of her voice rang out into Anatolius' soul, a call that he had been waiting his whole life to answer. What he felt when he held her in his arms, this tug on his

spirit at the sound of her voice...he knew what it meant. He just couldn't believe it. He couldn't allow himself to believe it—he had to get her home, no matter the cost to himself.

"Did you hear what I said?" Maura asked, and he realized he'd just been staring at her.

"I'm sorry, Maura. Truly, I am, but I don't know how else to keep you safe right now. I know you did not intend to enter our waters, but that doesn't matter to most of my people. You will be in grave danger the moment anyone finds out that our relationship is not real."

Her eyes flashed, but after a moment her expression softened. Her dark brows relaxed, and she rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Alright, tell me what I need to know. You said we're going to meet your parents?"

A wave of relief washed over him at her words. The urge to protect her overwhelmed him, and he was grateful that Maura trusted him enough to at least try.

"We will present you to the kings, my fathers, in the throne room. It is likely word of our arrival will not have spread too much just yet, so I doubt many of the nobles will be there. This first meeting will be brief, but they will ask you a bit about yourself and welcome you to Vathós. The true celebrations will start tomorrow."

The look of dread on Maura's face made Anatolius want to spirit her away this moment, consequences be damned. He knew, though, that would only end badly.

"Is there anything...nicer I can wear?" Maura asked, gesturing down to her slightly damp dress and cloak. Fascinating that somehow the Tuanadair kept their clothes when they shifted—and just the slightest bit disappointing. He wondered if sirens

would keep their clothes through the shift if they wore any. Anatolius must have given away his line of thinking in his expression, because Maura's lovely face lit up with laughter.

"If you're wondering how I still have my clothes, I wish I could tell you," she said laughing. "I've actually never shifted before today. My people lost their magic, and well...it's a long story. One for another day."

Anatolius nodded, still speechless at the beauty of her laughter. He tried desperately to remember what she had asked him, but being close to her was intoxicating. He wanted to know everything about her.

"So...about that wardrobe change?"

"Of course. I'll return shortly, but please feel free to use the bath." Anatolius gestured toward the steaming pool on one side of the room.

Maura glanced over at it and nodded. "Thank you, Anatolius."

His name on her lips was, possibly, the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

"You can call me Ana, if you like," he offered with a smile. She returned it, and he noticed her eyes flick down to take in his body. He had never thought much of nudity, but the way her gaze heated truly laid him bare.

"Ana," she said, her eyes locked back on his.

He needed to get out of here before his cocks began to protrude; his slit was tingling, and he could feel the wetness of his lubrication.

"Alright, Ana, I'll take a bath and try to make myself decent to meet your parents. I

don't like any of this, but I suppose I can at least try to enjoy seeing a city no human has set foot in for...how long did you say?"

"About two hundred years."

"Right. A very long time, then." Maura sighed and removed her cloak, laying it on the bed as she walked past it toward the massive window.

"Is anyone going to—you know—swim by and see me bathing?" Maura asked.

Anatolius chuckled.

"They won't get close enough to your window to make anything out. But like I said, nudity isn't really a problem for sirens."

"Right. Well, it is for me, so..." She made a shoo-ing gesture toward the door.

"I'll be back soon, princess," Anatolius said, the words out of his mouth before he could stop them. He didn't dare wait to see Maura's expression as he turned to leave.

Chapter 5

Maura stood at the doorway to a massive, cavernous hall. It was filled with the strange floating lights that were everywhere in Vathós. Beautiful shells lined the walls, giving the space an opalescent tint.

Her hair was still a bit damp from her bath, so she had twisted it up and secured it with the long pin she always kept in the pocket of her cloak. She thanked the old gods it had somehow stayed with her thanks to her Tuanadair magic.

She was self-conscious of her bare feet as she strode forward into the hall next to Anatolius. Even standing on two legs, he was massive; the top of her head barely reached his chin. The flowing blue fabric Anatolius had found for her to wear as a "dress" had her feeling completely out of her depth.

A siren woman, Galana, had appeared with the fabric and had helped her drape it around her body, securing it with nothing more than a brooch at Maura's shoulder. Galana had assured her she didn't need to worry about it falling, but Maura still felt almost naked, especially with her legs exposed from the knees down.

Maura reasoned that whatever magic served to keep the palace free from water must also banish the cold. She was surprisingly comfortable, at least physically. Mentally was another story. Though—for some confounding reason—having Anatolius next to her did, she realized, make her feel safe. What a horribly annoying turn of events. This siren was her captor—but he had also saved her life. Maura's thoughts were as tumultuous as the waves far above, and she didn't realize that they had arrived in front of the dais.

Anatolius cleared his throat softly and she startled. She dropped into a deep curtsy without a second thought.

"My kings, I am pleased to present you to Maura, my Chosen. We met and courted while I was patrolling our northeastern border." Anatolius' words sent a chill down Maura's spine. Something about the term 'Chosen' was so intimate, and she'd never been courted by anyone. She tried to stay focused and take in the two beautiful men who sat before her on the dais.

The one on the right had dark teal skin and piercing violet eyes. His hair was styled similarly to Anatolius', mostly down with many tiny braids scattered throughout, and his stature was similar to his son's as well. He had broad shoulders and a thick torso corded with muscle.

The other king spoke first. His coloring was lighter, his skin almost pearly white with eerie sea-green eyes. He was lithe and graceful, and his lavender hair lay in tight braids over his shoulder. Maura tried very hard not to think about how everyone in this gods forsaken palace was naked; but at least their dicks weren't out.

"Maura, we welcome you to our home. As our son's Chosen, you are a part of our family now, and we rejoice to know you." The king's voice was rich and melodic, a kind warmth to his eyes, despite that unsettling sea-green color.

"Indeed. My husband and I are overjoyed at your arrival. Maura, tell us where you hail from?" the other king asked.

"I am from Beitar, your majesties. Thank you for your warm welcome and for your hospitality." Maura tried to muster a smile to accompany her words. She was only moderately successful, and she guessed it probably appeared more like a grimace.

Anatolius spoke then. "Maura, forgive my ill manners. These are the kings, my

fathers. Xander," he gestured to the willowy, pale man on the left, "and Demitrios," pointing to the burly dark teal siren on the right.

"It's wonderful to meet you both." Maura tried so hard to sound sincere.

"If you need anything at all, you need only ask my dear," King Demitrios said.

She smiled at them, feeling slightly more at ease. Anatolius moved closer to her side, and before she knew it, he was slipping his arm around her waist. His massive hand came to rest on the soft curve of her hip, and gods he was so warm. This close to him she could smell the salt of the sea lingering on his skin.

Maura glanced up at him, and she knew she must be blushing furiously. He was so beautiful, and no one had ever touched her like this; like they wanted to just be close to her. The men and women she'd been with before had always been purely transactional; she didn't let herself get close enough to anyone to feel this kind of...intimacy.

And frankly, this reaction she was having was why she had initially kept her distance. One touch—as part of a ruse no less—and she was thinking about love?

"With your leave, my kings, I'll take Maura back to her room to rest."

"Of course. We will see you both tomorrow," Xander said with a friendly smile. The kings shared a knowing glance, and they looked...happy for their son. Maura felt a pang of longing and a touch of sadness that she couldn't quite place as she and Anatolius turned to go.

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Chapter 6

The walk back to Maura's quarters was quiet. Maura seemed lost in her thoughts, and Anatolius wondered what about the short meeting with his fathers had her so pensive. When they had turned to go, he had slid his hand off her waist, and now the small distance separating them felt wrong.

"I owe you an apology," Anatolius said as they arrived at her door. "I should have asked privately if I had permission to touch you like that. I'm sorry."

Maura turned to look at him with her brows furrowed slightly. "Yes, you should have. But I suppose we can discuss our boundaries now?" She gestured toward her door and turned to go in, expecting him to follow. She was right in a way deeper than she knew—Anatolius would follow her anywhere.

Once inside, the door slid shut, and Maura turned to face him. She sighed deeply and pressed the heels of her hands to her forehead. Anatolius wished he could take away all her stress and exhaustion. He intended to, as soon as it was safe to do so. He would return her home as she wished and not burden her with the knowledge of what she truly was to him—no matter how much pain it caused him.

"I take it sirens are rather...open with their romantic relationships?" Maura asked, lowering her hands from her face.

"You are right. We are not shy in showing physical attention to our partners in public. We don't have to do anything you're uncomfortable with, but this ruse will be more believable if we have some physical contact."

"Very well. You have my permission to put your hand on my waist as you did today. Is holding hands something you all do?" Anatolius nodded in response to her question. "Then that's acceptable, too. I'd prefer to avoid kissing, if at all possible, but I suppose if we're really in a bind..." Her eyes flashed up to meet his, and he didn't miss the flush of her cheeks.

"Of course, only as a last resort." Anatolius fought to keep the mirth from his voice. The fact that he was standing here negotiating the terms of his false engagement to his actual Chosen was...just the sort of thing that would happen to him, actually. His older sister had always been the model child, while he struggled at every turn to fit into the roles expected of him. While other princes would have been eager to learn the politics of the siren court, he found he would rather spend his days patrolling the deserted, lonely waters of the borders. Perhaps he knew, deep down, where he needed to be to find her.

"Very well," Maura said, plopping down onto her nest of pillows. "Anything else we should discuss?"

"Ah, there is one other...custom we should account for." Anxiety tingled at the pit of his stomach at what he was about to tell her. "I will say first that we do not need to do this if you aren't comfortable with it."

Maura looked at him incredulously for a long moment before nodding.

"A Chosen couple typically shares a bedroom for the duration of the rites." There. He said it. He braced himself for the sting of rejection. If a hand around her waist offended her human sense of modesty, then surely this ask would be out of the question.

Maura's eyes went wider than he'd yet seen them, but she didn't say anything. He wished he could still read her thoughts. Then, she blinked, closed her eyes as if

gathering her fortitude, and said, "Alright."

"Alright?"

"That's what I said. But we aren't actually sleeping together."

"Obviously," Anatolius said, nodding.

"Obviously," Maura said, as if she was trying to convince herself.

Anatolius' thoughts quickly pivoted away from anticipating rejection to the reality that he would be here in this room with her, alone. All night. Gods what had he gotten himself into. Here he was, his very soul calling out to her, longing to know her, to hold her, and she wouldn't have the slightest idea. But nothing came before her comfort and safety; he had to focus on that.

"Do you need anything to be comfortable here? Galana will be by shortly with some food, but other than that, what can I do to make you feel at home?"

"Feel at home?" Maura chuckled. "I'm at the bottom of the sea. But I don't need anything, thank you for asking."

"Very well. I will return later. Thank you for helping me to keep you safe, Maura. I am...truly sorry we are in this situation." Anatolius turned to go, his mind a tumult of worry. He prayed to the old gods that he was strong and clever enough to get them both out of this unscathed.

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Chapter 7

Maura watched Anatolius leave, and tried not to think about how he would be back soon to sleep in her room with her. The muscles of his back were...sort of comically well-defined. All that swimming, she supposed. She couldn't help but flick her eyes a bit lower just as he stepped out of the doorframe, and a rush of arousal pulsed through her at the sight of his toned rear and massive thighs.

She had to pull herself together. She was here to avoid being murdered, not to ogle her rescuer. Captor. Both.

Maura didn't know what to do. Logically, she knew she was stuck here. She did believe Anatolius that he intended to help her escape. He did seem to want to keep her safe. Why else would he have had a reason to save her right after her fall? She also strongly suspected trying to escape on her own would get her killed. She believed what Ana had said about his siren magic allowing her body to withstand the long journey to the surface.

As desperate as she was to run, she wasn't a fool. She would bide her time, and if Ana's plan to get her out wasn't materializing, she would take matters into her own hands. Rushing into an escape wouldn't serve her well.

A soft rap on her door interrupted her thoughts. Galana entered a few moments later carrying a tray. Steam wafted from one of the dishes, and Maura's stomach instantly grumbled in response.

"Your dinner, princess," the young, lavender siren said, and Maura must have visibly

recoiled at the title. Galana laughed good-heartedly. "That's what you are now, may as well get used to it!"

Maura would certainly not get used to it. She felt a twinge of sadness and a bit of guilt—whoever Anatolius' true Chosen was should be here, using that title, charming his fathers, sleeping in this room.

Maura stood and walked to meet Galana where she had set the tray down on the vanity. Only a few of the dishes looked familiar, but everything smelled incredible—even the small plate of what appeared to be seaweed and the tiny bowl of something with tentacles.

"I hope everything is to your liking, princess," Galana said with a genuine smile.

"Thank you," Maura answered, sitting down on the small bench. Galana was just about to turn to go when a thought occurred to Maura. It was past her lips before she could think better of it.

"Galana, why are outsiders not allowed in Vathós?"

Galana froze with a look of surprise lighting her eyes.

"Oh, uh..." Galana hesitated.

"I am sorry for the abrupt question, but I feel like I need to know if this is going to be my home now." Those last few words nearly caught in her throat.

Galana hesitated for a moment, worry clouding her lovely blue features, before she spoke. "There was a time when we were plagued by human poachers. They hailed from Illathir, and they used their illusions to trap our people and steal their scales. Sirens...do not survive the loss of their scales."

Galana's words wrought horror in Maura's heart. She was sure her disgust was written on her face.

Galana continued, "The only way to keep ourselves safe was to expel all outsiders from Vathós and set vigilant patrols. Our isolation is our survival."

"Galana, I'm...so sorry. For your people to be hunted so is unforgivable. Thank you for explaining." Maura didn't know what else to say. Galana nodded once, her eyes heavy with sadness for what her people had endured all those years ago. Then she turned to go and left Maura with her thoughts.

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Chapter 8

A natolius made his way to the edge of the palace and strode into one of the small sinking chambers that let the sirens shift more gracefully when they went out into the sea. He needed space to think about how much had happened in the space of a few hours.

The water slowly rose in the chamber, and Anatolius cleared his mind to focus on the feel of it against his skin. When it was up to his chest, he let his magic take hold to transform his legs. His arm fins fanned out involuntarily at the pleasant sensation of the shift.

When the chamber was full, the opposite door slid open, and the sea in all its vastness stretched out before him. Right now, though, he didn't crave the open water. His destination wasn't far as the border waters that always soothed his mind, but he knew it would bring him peace.

He swam down the length of the palace to the expansive coral garden that the royal family tended for the use and enjoyment of all Vathós. It was a lush oasis of glowing coral, anemones, and kelp. Normally, these plants and animals would not survive at these depths, but the magic of the sirens allowed them to flourish. Small reef fish, too, made an unusual home in the garden, darting here and there across the paths. It was his favorite place in the world.

Anatolius floated slowly along the paths of the garden, letting his thoughts flow where they may. Part of him, deep down, wasn't surprised that the human woman he had been so fascinated with from afar would turn out to be his Chosen. Chosen

weren't given that name because they chose each other—it was the old gods that did the choosing. Or at least, that's what the sirens believed.

Many sirens were blessed to find their Chosen during their lifetimes. Since they'd closed their borders, though, the number of mated couples had dropped. Anatolius' heart ached to think of those who would never cross paths with their Chosen, if they were another species.

It pained him to think that he, too, nearly missed meeting Maura—strong, brave, self-possessed, Maura. She had fallen into his life today, and he knew he would never be the same, even when she was gone.

And she would go. She clearly hadn't felt the same zing of energy that Anatolius had felt—didn't experience their intuitive connection the same way. He would never force a partnership on her that she didn't want. He would not keep her tied to him against her will. He would enjoy the time he had with her. If all went to plan, he would be able to get her out of Vathós in three weeks' time, at the final banquet before the week-long marriage ceremony began.

Anatolius was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice he was no longer alone as he swam into the entrance of one of the garden caves. Its walls were covered in softly glowing anemones, casting everything in a gentle purple light.

"Brother, what are you doing here away from your blushing otter bride?"

Shit.

"Cornelia," he said, turning to find her sitting on a small stone bench with her tail coiled around her. Her dark blue hair floated in the water around her, and her eyes glowed with the reflection of the anemones around them.

"So, what happened?" his sister asked casually. How she managed to be so perceptive was one of the great irritations of his life. He sighed.

"She fell."

"She fell? Into the sea?"

"Yes, she slipped on the cliffs to the northeast and fell in. Her shift saved her."

"Why was there a human woman alone on our northeastern coast? No one has lived there for years."

Anatolius debated how much to tell his sister. If he gave away how much he knew about Maura before today, she would instantly know there was more to this than just saving her life. Apparently, his silence was clue enough for her, though.

"Ana, tell me what's going on. This isn't like the men and women you've dallied with in the past, you've introduced her as your Chosen. You know your secrets are safe with me," Cornelia said, more gently. Anatolius did trust his sister, more than anyone else in his life. Perhaps having her as an ally in keeping Maura out of harm's way wouldn't be the worst thing. He sighed and crossed his arms.

"Maura is my Chosen, that much is true. She just doesn't know."

Cornelia squinted her eyes incredulously. "Go on."

"She fell, and before she could get back to shore, Yiorgos and Lucana found us. I knew the only way to keep her safe was to claim she was my Chosen. Then I touched her, and I knew..."

"Oh, Ana," Cornelia's voice didn't hold pity, only genuine disappointment over his

predicament. "She wants to go home, doesn't she? She doesn't feel the connection."

Anatolius nodded, unable to admit the harsh facts aloud.

"Alright, what do we need to do?" Cornelia was ready to help, just like that. Anatolius felt lucky to have such a sister.

"I think the best time to get her out will be during the gathering on the last night before the marriage ritual begins. Practically all of Vathós will be caught up in celebrating a royal wedding, and it's...not unexpected that the two of us would slip away then." As he said the words, his mind conjured flashes of what he and Maura would be doing when they slipped away if their bond were reciprocated—if this were real. He imagined the feeling of her thick, curly hair in his hand, the softness of her cheek against his lips, the press of her rounded body against his. He wondered what she tasted like.

"Yes, I think that makes the most sense," Cornelia said, unaware of the direction his thoughts had taken. He hoped she couldn't see his flushed face in the dim light.

"And you'll help us? Help me keep her safe?" Anatolius asked. Cornelia rose from where she sat on the bench, closed the distance between them, and placed her hand on his arm. He lifted his eyes to meet hers, and felt seen. He knew his sister would be there for him, but the fact that she so unquestioningly offered her help to his mate as well? He pulled Cornelia into a hug.

"We'll keep her safe, Ana. Just keep up the act for a few weeks," Cornelia said, still returning his hug. He nodded into her shoulder with a sigh. He had a feeling he was in for the most trying three weeks of his life.

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Chapter 9

Maura did not remember laying down in her bed. She had been so anxious about Anatolius returning to share her room with her, but her exhaustion must have won out. She rolled onto her side and stretched before lifting up onto an elbow to survey her surroundings.

No sign of her siren anywhere. The pile of cushions lay undisturbed on the other side.

Maura stood and made her way over to the window, letting herself truly appreciate the view for the first time since arriving. It really was a beautiful sight. The city stretched out below in dreamy shades of white, green, and blue, sirens swimming through the pathways between the buildings, their song drifting through the deep.

She took it all in and—despite the harrowing nature of her visit here—she could admit she was grateful to see this beautiful place. She had left Beitar to see the world; now here she was, gazing upon a sight that no human had seen for hundreds of years. She wondered how long she would be able to explore before Anatolius was able to sneak her out.

Her musings were interrupted by a flash of teal off to the right of her peripheral vision. Maura's eyes locked on the languid, distant movements of a massive blue-green tail, scales shimmering in the glowing lights. Slowly, she realized she was looking at Anatolius. She hadn't really had time to fully take him in after her fall; everything had happened so fast.

He was...ethereal. Truly a creature worthy of legend. His tail was long and graceful,

and an array of fins danced in the water as he moved. His long hair caught the current around him as he glided through the water above the city. He was about a hundred feet away, out in the open water. He carried a satchel under one of his muscled arms.

She studied the graceful curves of his body, and found herself wondering what it would feel like to be close to him. He had held her in her otter form, but she wanted to know what it would feel like for her body to be flush with his like this. She'd had partners back in Beitar, but it had been a long time since she had been that close to someone. She wanted to explore every inch of him with her fingers, with her mouth.

Would he ever want her like that? Not that it mattered. She would be leaving soon enough. Gods, she had to pull it together. Enjoying the view was one thing, but fantasizing about a siren prince was entirely another.

As she did battle with herself internally, she noticed another siren swimming toward Anatolius. There weren't many so high above the city, so Maura assumed they must have some business at the palace. When they got closer to Anatolius though, they waved in greeting. He smiled at them in return, and they both slowed, clearly conversing.

The other siren was lovely; a long green braid trailed behind them, and their tale shimmered in shades of deep purple. The way their smile lit up their face was beautiful, too, even from this distance. The body language of both sirens made Maura think they were friends; they seemed easy, familiar.

An emotion Maura couldn't name settled behind her sternum. She sat with it, following the thread of her thoughts that had led to this feeling. She was...jealous? She wanted to have that same familiarity and ease with Anatolius. How she had managed to become this curious about her siren rescuer in such a short time was beyond her. She only knew that, somewhere at the back of her mind, he felt...safe.

Galana came in a short while later carrying a bundle of clothing in her arms, while Maura soaked in the massive steaming tub.

"Good morning, princess! You'll have the royal receiving line today, as I'm sure the prince explained."

He most certainly had not explained, but Maura wasn't about to admit that.

"Would you like to choose which dress to wear? Or will you be going without today?"

"Oh I will definitely not be going without," Maura said, climbing out of the pool and quickly wrapping herself in a towel. "That deep blue one is lovely. I'll wear that, thank you Galana."

After a great deal of fussing from Galana, Maura was dressed and ready for whatever the day would hold. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. Just then, the door slid open, and Anatolius stepped in. She still couldn't believe everyone walked around here naked; his thick torso was incredibly distracting.

He gave her an absolutely decadent smile as his eyes raked over her. His gaze was so searing that she felt slightly less guilty for ogling him out the window this morning.

Today's dress was a similar wrapping situation to yesterday's, but this one went almost to the floor, silky fabric clinging to her body and leaving little to the imagination. Maura had always been told she was beautiful, but she didn't think about it much. She was thinking about it now. Rather, she was thinking about how he was obviously thinking about it.

She needed to keep her head on straight.

"You look ravishing, Maura," Anatolius said, his voice just as startlingly pleasant as the first time she heard it. A trail of tingles ran down her spine.

She ran her eyes over his naked form before answering, "Thank you. You do, too." She gave him a knowing smirk, and was rewarded with the most incredible, robust, joyful laugh she had ever heard. She would do anything to hear that laugh every day; the mirth was contagious, and it sat in her chest feeling warm and bright.

"Are you ready? We'll be standing with my family to greet all the nobles that are arriving at the palace for the rites."

Maura had never been great with meeting new people. Back at her bakery, people definitely only came because her bread was amazing, not for her company. Suddenly, pretending to be engaged to a prince seemed like the easiest part of this ruse.

"Alright, lead the way." Maura looked up at him as he offered his hand. She took it, and a wave of heat washed through Maura's whole body. She knew her eyes must be wide with surprise. The expression she read on Anatolius' face was not surprise but...sadness?

She didn't have time to examine that before he whisked her away to the throne room.

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Chapter 10

Even Anatolius, with a lifetime of experience attending royal events, was ready to leave by the time the last noble came down the receiving line to offer their congratulations. Maura had handled the whole thing with a quiet strength; he could tell she was uncomfortable, and every instinct screamed at him to get her out of this situation.

The moment it was appropriate, he excused them both, and took their leave of his parents. Maura took his arm, and the feel of her skin against his was...distracting at best.

"Would you like me to show you around the palace? I thought you might like to know your way around so you don't feel stuck in your room."

Maura looked up at him, and he was struck not for the first time by how expressive her eyes were. This woman felt things deeply, and she lived brightly and openly, and Anatolius knew he was falling harder with every moment that he spent in her presence.

"Yes, I'd love that. Thank you," Maura said earnestly. She looked a bit confused.

Anatolius leaned down to whisper in her ear, "I know I am both your rescuer and your captor, but I don't want you to feel trapped or unwelcome here, Maura." He heard her suck in a soft breath at his words. Perhaps she was not wholly unaffected by him.

"Where should we start?" Maura asked, adjusting her hold on his arm.

"Would you like to see the garden?"

Maura's eyes lit at his words. "Yes," she said without hesitation.

He led her through the halls of the palace, pointing out various spaces that might be helpful to her, before they came to the door closest to the garden.

"Hold my hand," Anatolius said as they stepped into the sinking chamber. Maura took his offered hand, and Anatolius felt—for this one small moment—that all was right with the world.

He focused enough to call his magic, and it cradled Maura to ensure she remained safe as they entered the water. He looked over at her once they were submerged, and her halo of curls floating in the water around her took his breath away.

They swam out toward the garden—Ana much more slowly than normal—and Maura gasped as it came into view.

"Ana, it's so beautiful! How does all of this grow down here? Don't plants need sunlight?" Maura was still able to speak because of his magic, but her voice didn't cut through the water like a siren's would. He had to remain close to hear her.

"I'll explain it all, but do you want to shift? This may be an easier outing if you're in your other form."

Maura laughed, and it was like the sun's light flashing on the surface of the sea.

"Right, I forgot!"

Anatolius laughed too then, and then they couldn't stop, and Maura was clutching her stomach from laughing so hard. If they hadn't been underwater, Anatolius suspected he'd have tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. Finally, Maura collected herself and closed her eyes. In a flash, her otter floated in the water before him.

Wow, I don't think I'll ever get used to that. What an odd feeling.

"I imagine it feels similar for us when we take on our legs," Anatolius answered. "You asked about how all of the coral and plants grow down here? The lights you see around the city, they're all sort of magical pockets of sun. Our siren magic allows us to trap water glowing with sunlight on the surface, so all of the life-giving energy of the sun is here with us in Vathós."

Alright, well, that's really neat. I always assumed siren magic would be the same as the Aphanians, but it actually seems really different.

"Yes, it is quite different. We share the Vaporiad Sea with the Aphanians, but their magic is centered more around controlling water than drawing from its inherent magic. And we're much stronger swimmers," he finished with a wink.

Anatolius led them through the winding paths of the garden. The tiny fish darted through the elaborate coral formations, and Maura and Anatolius traded tales of their homes. Maura told him of her bakery back in Beitar, and of the night she had decided to flee. She told him how her family had succumbed to the fading magic of Beitar, leaving her on her own, and of the fateful night her whole life had gone up in flames.

Anatolius listened, and his respect for her deepened as he learned her story. She was so strong and had endured so much, and Anatolius wished with every fiber of his being that he had been with her to support her and carry some of the weight of the trials of her life.

He, in turn, told Maura of his life here in Vathós, of all the ways he had been a disappointment to his fathers, of his hopes and dreams for his future. When he told her the story of his spectacular failure at managing a petty squabble between two nobles as a teenager, she only laughed, and told him—with no malice or judgment—that ‘everyone has their own path to finding their talents’. He told her of his desire to have a family and a quiet, simple life.

After a long walk through the gardens, they made their way back to the palace. They both shifted in the sinking chamber, and walked back to Maura's room hand-in-hand, comfortably silent.

When they arrived at her door, Anatolius found himself struggling to let go of her hand. She didn't seem eager to let go, either. She looked up at him like she was seeing every piece of him, and he wanted to kiss her more than he had wanted anything in his life.

Maura's eyes flicked down to his lips, and his breath caught. She wanted to kiss him, too, he was certain of it. He leaned closer to her, giving her time to pull away, but she didn't.

Just before their lips connected, the sound of footsteps sounded down the hall. Maura gasped and pulled back, blinking as if awakening from a trance.

Anatolius gave her hand a squeeze and let it go. "Thank you for your company, Maura. I'll see you tonight."

She nodded, still surprised, and he winked at her before he turned to go.

Chapter 11

The following days passed in a blur for Maura; so many formal functions, so much chatting. The times that she got to spend alone with Anatolius were what made it all bearable. She was self-aware enough to know she was beginning to have feelings for him, but he had told her that night in the garden that he'd always dreamt of finding his Chosen. She couldn't take that chance away from him. She also couldn't live at the bottom of the sea.

Every day was filled with official activities and stolen moments with Anatolius, and every night Maura fell asleep alone and awoke to an empty room. She asked Ana one day where exactly he was sleeping, and he gestured to the pool. He had been shifting to sleep sitting up in the tub. Maura thought it was both very sweet and respectful, and highly ridiculous. She had told him he could sleep on the other side of the bed, but he had insisted on not invading her space just for the sake of appearances.

Maura thought back on her time in Vathós as Galana helped her into a beautiful white silk wrap. The fabric caught the light and looked for all the world like a pearl. Anatolius arrived shortly after, and they walked together to the banquet hall. Maura was surprised they hadn't had a formal dinner before tonight, but most evenings had been rather quiet.

They entered the hall, and the sight before them was overwhelming.. Rather than the usual white light, orbs in all the shades of a sunset dotted the hall, casting it in balmy shades of orange, pink, and purple. One long table ran the length of the hall, and beautiful arrangements of coral and shells and deep green kelp adorned the center. Siren nobles gathered in small groups around the hall, talking and laughing and

sipping from delicate shells.

Anatolius led Maura to the far end of the table and pulled out a seat for her before taking his place to her left. Once they were seated, the rest of the nobles took their cue and made their way to their seats as well.

The kings were the last to arrive, walking arm-in-arm across the hall to the head of the table. Maura was surprised to see that the nobles didn't stand; they simply inclined their heads in acknowledgment as the kings passed. Maura had spent a bit of time with the kings during her time here, and similar to her first meeting with them, they both seemed kind and genuine and happy for their son. Knowing how their deception would hurt them weighed more on her with every day that passed.

When the kings reached their seats next to Maura, Demitrios gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze. Xander took his place at his husband's right hand, and Cornelia sat opposite Anatolius. Demetrios cleared his throat, and the hall fell completely quiet save for the distant singing of the sirens in the city below.

"Welcome, friends. We are here, as you well know, to celebrate the union of two of the old gods' Chosen. We rejoice that they have found their partner, their friend, their soul-deep love. May their union bring joy and understanding in abundance." With that, the king raised his glass in a toast, and all the sirens present followed suit. Maura took a delicate sip from her shell as well, the bubbly tang of some sort of wine dancing across her tongue.

"Maura, Anatolius, would you like to kiss your Chosen to bring good fortune to your union?" The king's eyes crinkled as he smiled at them. This was all real to them, and Maura was suddenly struck with a deep pang of sadness that it wasn't real for her.

Maura felt the now familiar warmth of Anatolius' hand on her arm and she looked up into his face to find a flurry of emotion. His brows pinched with a hint of the worry

he must be feeling, but his cheeks were flushed a lovely dark blue. His eyes flicked down to her mouth for a split second. She gave him an almost imperceptible nod, and he bent toward her.

Their lips met, a gentle touch, and Maura's whole world shifted on its axis. Kissing Ana...felt like home.

After a long moment, Maura sat back, and the gathered sirens erupted in cheers and applause. Ana was the only thing Maura could look at, though. She saw all of the longing and fear she felt mirrored in Ana's face.

Xander clearing his throat and broke the spell enough that Maura was able to face forward again and focus on what was happening around her. She glanced up to see the crown princess, Cornelia, eyeing her and Anatolius from across the table. Ana said his sister had agreed to help with her escape next week, and Maura was grateful. The look she was giving them now, though—Maura had a feeling Cornelia saw the true secret Maura was keeping.

The rest of the banquet passed in a blur. All Maura could think about was that kiss, and how much more she wanted. She wanted Anatolius; she wanted to touch him and be close to him and spend time with him. She didn't want this to be a ruse anymore. But it was. She was not his Chosen.

Maura's unsettled thoughts still plagued her as Ana walked her back to their room late that night. When she stepped inside and he turned to go, she reached out to catch his wrist.

"Will you stay?" He must have read all of the emotion behind her words, because his face softened and he gave her a small smile.

"You only ever need ask," he said softly.

Maura pulled him inside her room, and they stared at each other for a moment before Maura decided to take a risk. She stepped closer to him, went up on her toes, and kissed him. Not a soft peck this time, but a kiss as desperate as she was.

Ana didn't hesitate—his arms immediately wrapped around her waist, and he kissed her back like he'd just been waiting for permission. The thin silk of Maura's dress was the only thing between them as their bodies pressed together.

Ana deepened their kiss, stroking her tongue with his, gently at first, but growing more insistent. He moaned when she matched the strokes of his tongue, and her hands explored the muscled planes of his back.

Maura pressed her hips against Ana's thighs and pulled back in surprise at the hardness against her stomach. She glanced down between them to see not one, but two hard cocks protruding from the slit between Anatolius' legs. They glistened with some sort of natural lubricant, and delicate ridges that almost looked like tiny fins spanned the length of both.

"I'm sorry, it's very hard to maintain my control around you, Maura," Ana said quietly.

"Don't be sorry. Can I..." She trailed off. Summoning every ounce of boldness she possessed, she made herself continue. "I'd like to touch you, Ana, is that alright?"

"Yes," Ana's voice came out as a gasped plea, as if he'd been waiting to answer her question for a long time. Maura reached out her hand to brush her fingers against Ana's top cock and he shuddered. She ran the pad of her finger down its slick length, enjoying the feel of the ridges that spanned its length. She wanted to feel it inside her.

Growing more confident, she wrapped her hand around his length and stroked once. Ana moaned in pleasure and caught her wrist gently in his hand.

"Do you want me to touch you too, Maura?" He asked, his eyes alight with desire.

"I do, yes," she answered. Gods help her, she wanted it more than anything.

Before she knew what was happening, Ana had bent and scooped her up in his arms. He carried her the short distance to the bed and laid her down amongst the cushions.

"Is this alright?" he asked as he began to unfasten the brooch keeping her dress in place.

"Yes," she answered, holding her breath as he unwrapped the silk. The way it slid against her skin, against her hardened nipples, was torture and bliss all at once.

"Gods, Maura, you're so beautiful," Ana breathed as he stared down at her bare before him. He touched her face first in a soft caress before his hands drifted to her collarbone. His fingers were gentle as he traced along it before continuing his exploration. He cupped her breasts for a moment before he ran his hands down her sides, fingers pressing into the soft expanse of her rounded stomach. "Every inch of you is perfect," he whispered.

Maura thought she might simply perish. She had expected him to be passionate—she had not expected to be worshiped.

Their eyes met as he gently pushed her knees apart. "Is this what you want, Maura?"

She nodded.

He spread her legs further and groaned as he looked at her. After a moment, he gently swiped a finger across her opening; she could feel how wet she was already.

He began to gently explore her, as if they had all the time in the world. He watched

her closely, observing every reaction, every inhale and facial expression. He worked her clit until he found exactly the right spot that had that telltale tightness building in her lower back. Maura had never been able to orgasm with a partner before; the men and women she had been with hadn't had the patience to figure her out, but it seemed Ana had no qualms about taking the time she needed.

He kept stroking the spot that felt so good, his pressure consistent, until every thought left Maura's mind. She had never been one to cry out as she came, but she did then as her pleasure crested. He stroked her through her release, and then he was there, kissing her neck, his hands caressing her sides.

"Gods, Maura, you're so perfect," he said into her ear. All Maura could think about was how badly she wanted his cock inside her.

"Please, Ana," she moaned.

"Please what, darling?"

"Please take me, I want your cock buried in my cunt."

"Filthy words from these perfect lips," he said, kissing her. "I'll give you everything you want, love."

Maura didn't have time to process what he'd just called her before she felt the slickness of his cocks against her opening. The bottom one pushed in while the top one slid against her clit. She cried out in pleasure, eyes locked with Ana's above her. His brow was furrowed in pleasure and it was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen.

He worked himself into her slowly, the slickness of his cock easing the stretch until he was seated fully inside her. He paused then, closing his eyes in pleasure. "Fuck,

Maura."

His words sent a thrill down her spine and her inner walls clenched around him. He began moving then—not the full in-and-out thrusts that she had experienced with other partners, but a deep, grinding, rocking motion. The way his hips moved was a revelation, so fluid and controlled.

His lower cock rubbed the spot on her inner wall that had her orgasm building again. Maura raked her nails gently down his back, and Ana grunted in response, increasing the pressure of his hips against hers.

"Maura, I'm sorry I'm not going to last," he said, his voice strained. She was beyond words, but she didn't mind—she wasn't going to last either.

He kept his rhythm steady, and Maura focused on the sensations in her body, toes going numb as her orgasm inched closer. One final stroke sent her over the edge, but this time, she felt herself...clamping down in intense pulses of pleasure.

Ana's eyes closed again and he whimpered, "Oh fuck, Maura, what..."

The sensation of her orgasm continued to roll through her, and the feel of Anatolius' cock inside her became tighter and tighter. Through her haze of pleasure, a word flashed through Maura's mind. She knew what was happening. The rare Tuanadair mate bond was all but a fable back in Beitar, but she could not name what she was experiencing with any other word; he was her Còmhanam.

"Ana I'm so sorry, it will end after a few minutes," Maura said, trying to keep her voice even.

"Don't apologize, I..." Ana's word cut off, and he moaned as he came. His top cock painted the soft curve of her belly with his release just as his lower one filled her.

Maura cried out in pleasure at the sensations that overwhelmed her, and she pulled Ana to her to kiss him deeply. His arms wrapped around her, cradling her body to his, and they lay like that, riding out the waves of pleasure.

After long moments, Ana pulled back. There was resistance as he pulled out of her, which only solidified Maura's theory of what had just happened. She was very glad that Anatolius' cocks were so well lubricated; she suspected if they weren't, he wouldn't have been able to pull out at all for quite a while. Perhaps the sirens' Chosen was the same as the Còmhanam? Maybe this could all be real and they could find a way to stay together. Maura's heart filled with a dangerous emotion—hope.

Without a word, Ana scooped her up and walked them over to her pool. The hot water felt divine on her sensitive skin. He sank down into the water, and a flash of magic had his beautiful tail filling the space. His cocks were still hard, protruding from a slit on his tail that was usually invisible.

He cradled Maura to him and sighed, kissing her hair.

Maura's mind churned with what this meant, what she should do—but exhaustion won out, and she fell asleep in Anatolius' arms.

Chapter 12

Maura woke with a start. The color of the lights outside made her think it was still the middle of the night, but it was hard for her to tell down here. Memories of what she and Ana had done came crashing back to her, and she looked to the side, expecting to find him sleeping next to her—but the bed was empty.

She sat up and glanced over to the pool—it was empty, too.

He left. After all of that, he just left. She had thought it had meant something to him, even if she wasn't his Chosen. If he'd felt something, he wouldn't have just left her, though. The fragile hope she'd felt last night shattered within her.

Gods, what a mistake. If she hadn't given in, she never would have known he was her Còmhanam. Of all the cruel twists of fate. He wasn't a Tuanadair, though, so he wouldn't feel the mate bond the way she did. She had been foolish to think it could be the same for him.

Maura decided right then that she couldn't do this anymore, couldn't stay. She knew she'd probably die trying to escape, but perhaps the old gods would be kind to her.

She didn't have anything to pack, so she slipped on the dress she'd been wearing when she arrived, and stepped out into the hall. She remembered the path to that door at the top of the tower they'd used when they first arrived and quickly made her way back there, willing her steps to be silent.

Gods, she was so stupid. She had learned in school that only a Còmhanam could talk

with a shifted Tuanadair. She should have known the moment he first heard her thoughts.

Maura stepped into what Ana had called the sinking chamber, and she hoped it would start automatically. The door thudded shut behind her, and water began to rise. She summoned her magic to shift, trying to keep her racing heartbeat under control. It was so reckless to get her feelings involved in this; she should have known better, should have stayed distant until it was time to go. Her heart was breaking in a thousand different ways.

As the outer door opened, Maura darted out into the freezing depths. She swam straight up, hoping beyond hope that she could make it to the surface.

She was so focused on her escape that she barely noticed the flash of scales below her. Before she could fully register what was happening, strong hands circled her in a vice grip.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before you'd run, human." The voice was vicious, and Maura couldn't quite place it. She turned to try to get a look at her captor, and recognition dawned in her mind. It was one of the guards that had found her with Anatolius the day she fell.

"A Chosen would never run from her mate. You will be dealt with swiftly, outsider."

Maura struggled, trying to free herself from the siren's grasp, but it was no use. She curled her body inward and latched her teeth into the hand that held her, and the siren hissed in pain.

"Horrible creature," he said, but his grasp didn't loosen. He swam toward the palace, and for the first time since her arrival in Vathós, Maura felt truly afraid.

Chapter 13

A natolius had left Maura resting comfortably in her bed. He needed to think, and he always did so best in the peace of the garden. Gods, she was a revelation. He wanted to be hers for all of his days—but she wanted to go home, and he could never trap her here.

He was lost in his thoughts when Galana approached.

"My prince, you're...needed in the throne room." Galana's tone held a note of worry. Ana didn't blame her—he had never been summoned to the throne room in the middle of the night.

A sense of dread took hold in his chest, and Ana nodded, gesturing for Galana to lead the way. They made their way to the nearest entrance, and in a matter of moments, they were striding into the throne room. What Anatolius saw made his blood run cold.

His fathers sat on their thrones, expressions of disappointment and anger on their faces. Yiorgos, one of the siren guards who had found Ana with Maura that fateful day, stood before them, holding Maura by the scruff of her neck in her otter form.

The rage Ana felt as he beheld this siren handling his Chosen was overwhelming. "Get your hands off her!" he yelled, storming toward the other siren.

Yiorgos sneered and dropped Maura to the ground. She yelped, then turned to hiss and rushed at him, biting his ankle. Anatolius reached them and scooped Maura up in his arms. Ana registered the tingle of Maura's magic, and then she was stepping away

from him, a look of hurt and anger on her perfect face. He didn't understand.

"Enough!" Demitrios said sternly. "What is the meaning of all this, Anatolius? Yiorgos tells us your Chosen was trying to leave the city?"

Anatolius glanced over at Maura and, despite her angry expression, tears filled her eyes.

Before he could speak, Maura's voice rang out across the throne room. "Yes, your highness, I was trying to escape. Your son is very noble, and I beg you not to blame him for this deception. The day we met, I fell into your waters; Anatolius knew I had no ill intent, and so did what he could to save my life. I was always meant to leave when the time was right, but tonight I took my escape into my own hands, rather foolishly. I put myself at your mercy, but truly, my trespass was an accident."

Everyone stared at her in silence before Yiorgos scoffed and started to speak.

"Silence!" king Demitrios said, cutting Yiorgos off with an air of authority Maura had not yet heard from him.

King Xander spoke more softly, addressing Anatolius. "My son, why have you lied to us so? For the sake of a human you did not know?" Pain was written on his face, and Ana felt it like a punch to the gut.

He glanced over at Maura, who now had tears running down her beautiful face. Her eyes, too, told of her pain, and he understood. He had not meant to hurt her or make her think he had abandoned her after what they'd shared. The truth, he realized, was the only possible remedy to this situation.

"Father, I did not lie to you." The kings exchanged a confused look, but Anatolius pressed on before anyone had a moment to ask any questions. "Maura is my Chosen;

only, I did not know that when our ruse began. Even she did not know. Because we are different species, she must not have felt our bond the way I have. Once I realized, I...I could not trap her here when I knew her wish was to return home."

King Xander' eyes were wide with surprise, but it was Yiorgos who broke the silence.

"She must be executed, your highnesses, according to siren law. None of this matters. If she does not accept Anatolius as her Chosen in return, it makes her no more than an outsider."

Demitrios sighed at Yiorgos. "Oh Yiorgos, be silent and get out. Your theatrics are not needed here. Our law is in place to protect our people, but Maura has lived peacefully among us for weeks. Our son would not have shown mercy to someone who meant our people harm. If she is his Chosen, whether she accepts her place here or not, she is one of our own."

The other siren hesitated, his mouth hanging open in shock.

"Out, Yiorgos! Now!"

Anatolius took the opportunity to step closer to Maura, who now watched the scene unfold with less anger marring her features, but no fewer tears.

"Maura, would you still like to return home? It can be arranged the moment you are ready. We are sorry our harsh customs have made a prisoner of you here," King Xander said calmly.

Maura looked from the king to Anatolius, her lips parted slightly as if she couldn't decide what to say. Anatolius gave her a gentle nod, and she took a deep breath before she spoke.

"I'd like a word with prince Anatolius alone, if you please." A dangerous flicker of hope took root in Anatolius' soul. Was it possible she might want to stay, even after he kept the truth from her? All he had done was to keep her safe and give her her freedom, but it had still been deceitful.

His fathers nodded, and Anatolius offered Maura his arm. She took it, swiping her tears away with her free hand. Anatolius led her out of the throne room and into one of the small sitting rooms nearby that allowed the kings a private respite during official functions.

They barely made it in the door before Maura spoke. "Ana, you're my Còmhanam. It's what the Tuanadair call their mates, and we learned about them in school, but they were so rare. All the signs are there, but it didn't occur to me what was happening with everything else that has happened. The fact that you can hear me when I'm shifted, the feeling of safety and familiarity I have when I'm with you, the uh...anatomical effects we encountered last night...you're my mate." Maura looked at him with awe and hope and Anatolius felt like he might simply drown in his feelings for her.

"Say something," she said softly, her brows tipping up with worry.

"Maura, my brave, bold, perfect Chosen. I...cannot tell you the relief I feel knowing that you can sense what we share. I feel it too, and I never want to be parted from you. My friend, my love, my mate," he finished softly, pulling her into his arms. She returned his embrace, and the feeling of her body cradled in his arms was transcendent.

"Where will we live?" she asked.

"Wherever you want to go, I will follow. We can always come back to Vathós to visit."

"I love you," she whispered into his neck.

"My love for you, Maura, is as vast and enduring as the sea itself. My soul is yours until the very oceans run dry."

Epilogue

Maura bent to open the oven door and a rush of steam billowed out around her. She inhaled the smell of fresh-baked pastry—croissants to be precise—that now filled the small kitchen of her seaside cottage.

She had gotten the recipe from the sweetest couple that had passed through the nearby town of Easton. Maura had never seen a dryad before, but Ilex and their partner Dahlia were lovely. They had been in Ichorna for the turn of the millennium celebration, and had picked up the recipe for their favorite buttery pastries before they left.

They had also brought news of the rather horrifying and dramatic end to the celebrations. They didn't have too many details, but Maura wondered how her homeland was faring with the unrest.

Maura set the tray of croissants on the countertop and admired her work. This batch was rolled into a sort of crescent shape, but there was a version that was filled with chocolate that she was eager to try sometime.

The door creaked as it opened behind her, and she looked up to find her glorious siren mate stepping into the cottage. He always managed to make the space look comically small. They had plans to rebuild the cottage to be larger, but they weren't in any particular rush.

Maura and Anatolius had spent the last few months splitting their time between Vathós and her cottage, and Maura found that she was...happy. Content.

Anatolius came up behind Maura, wrapping his arms around her waist. "These smell incredible, love. What are they?"

Maura picked up a croissant and tore it open, admiring its flaky layers. "A croissant! They're Ichornian!" She handed Anatolius half, and he moaned in satisfaction as he tasted it.

"Amazing, we should have these all the time," he said with a grin. "As amazing as they are, I was thinking..." he trailed off, giving her waist a gentle squeeze with his massive hands.

"You were thinking...?"

"Would you like to go for a swim with me?" He winked at her, and she laughed. He thought he was suave, but he was so transparent.

"Yes, I'll go for a swim with you, you insatiable menace."

Anatolius took her hand and led her out to the rocky beach before he scooped her up and carried her into the water.

Anyone else would surely have frozen to death in the cold winter waters of the Vaporiad Sea, but siren magic was powerful in so many ways that Maura had delighted in learning about over the past months.

Once they were submerged, Anatolius shifted. Maura would never get tired of how beautiful he was. The delicate fins on his forearms fluttered with movement as he pulled her close and began unbuttoning her dress.

"You have to put that back on the beach, I don't want to lose it!" she laughed as he smirked. Once he had helped her out of her dress and undergarments, he flicked his tail and swam to shore as she'd asked. He was back in a matter of moments, and he

stared at her like it was the very first time he'd seen her naked.

She kicked her legs and started to swim away, laughing as he easily caught her and wrapped her in his arms. He kissed her neck, his hands kneading her backside, and she pressed her breasts into him as she arched her back.

"I want to taste you," he whispered in her ear, and the sensation sent a wave of tingles down Maura's arms.

He lowered himself to be level with her hips, and Maura felt the end of his tail curling against the small of her back, supporting her and holding her in place. He looked up at her with a hungry gleam in his eyes as he pushed her legs apart.

The first brush of his tongue was all-consuming; he pressed it from the bottom of her opening all the way up to her clit. He had spent hours during their months together finding exactly the way her body worked. He never forgot now that he knew, and his tongue found the tiny spot to the left of her clit that always had her on the edge of orgasm within minutes. He worked it, rubbing and applying pressure until she was about to break apart with the sensation of it.

Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, his finger found her tightest opening and began to tease the tight ring of muscle. She moaned, and tried to relax enough to let him in.

"What a good girl you are, opening yourself for me. Just relax, love," Anatolius' words sent her straight over the edge, and she came with a cry as he worked his finger gently into her rear.

"Ana, please," Maura begged. She knew where this was going, and she was impatient.

"You only had to ask, love," Ana answered with wicked laughter in his voice.

He positioned himself at her entrance with a deft flick of his tail. He rubbed his lower cock against her ass, spreading its natural lubricant over the tight opening. He held her gaze as he slowly, gently worked the tip into her. She willed her muscles to relax, and he slipped further into her with a groan.

Once he was about halfway in, he lined up his second cock at her entrance, and on his next thrust, he filled her so completely that Maura's whole world started and ended with this moment.

"Fuck," he whispered as he pulled out slightly and worked back in, stretching her. The tiny ridges on his cocks sent waves of pleasure through her whole body.

Ana pulled her torso to him, wrapping her in his arms, cradling her head in one of his hands. He used his other hand to guide Maura's body up and down on his cocks, matching the thrusts of his hips.

When he was finally fully seated inside her, he paused to let them both feel everything.

"Gods, Maura. I love you so much," Ana whispered.

"I love you too, Anatolius. Now, are you going to fuck me?" Maura smiled up at him.

His hips began to move in earnest, and he reached between them to rub her clit. He kept at it, his pace slow and sure, matching the insistent pressure of his fingers, and Maura couldn't help but come harder than she had in her life. She felt it in every part of her body.

Anatolius followed her over the edge the moment her internal knot formed; it clamped down on his cock, locking him in place inside her. He filled her with his release again and again as they floated in the depths, tangled in each other's arms.

When she finally released her hold on him, he gathered her up once more and took them back to the cottage. He wrapped Maura in a fluffy towel and sat her by the fire while he went to make her favorite tea.

He returned with the steaming mug wearing the human clothes Maura had given him for when they spent time on land. It was still a bit odd to see him in a chunky sweater and pants, but it did make him that much more snuggly, so she wasn't complaining.

She took the mug he offered and smiled at him. He pulled her close to his side and kissed her still-damp hair.

Maura stared into the fire and felt, perhaps for the first time in her life, like she'd truly found her home.