



SHIRA ANTHONY

MERMEN OF EA

INTO ^{the}
WIND

Readers Love Shira Anthony's *Stealing the Wind*

"In this novel, Shira has created a fascinating alternate world, rich in culture, political turmoil, and intrigue. This epic adventure is quite an undertaking. It's very different from the other books I've read by Shira and I applaud her versatility. It's high fantasy at its best...."

—Rainbow Book Reviews

"The underwater imagery was beautiful. I wanted the couple to be together and hated the bad guy. This was a majestic read and I'd recommend it to fantasy lovers."

—Live your Life, Buy the Book

"Romantic and sexy and really wonderful world building. Anthony gives us a rich and exciting story here and a great set up for the remaining books."

—Joyfully Jay

"*Stealing the Wind* is a magical epic fantasy tale, and a wonderful start to the Merman of Ea series. The writing is smooth and flows along beautifully, the characters are rich and colorful, the world Shira Anthony creates is mysterious and dark, full of legends and prophecy."

—Mrs. Condit & Friends Read Books

"I recommend this one for any lover of fantasy stories, mermen, or to those who simply want to enjoy the adventure. I'm looking forward to reading more about these two in book two."

—Hearts on Fire

"The originality, the world the author created, the balance between reality and fantasy, the obstacles Taren faced, and characters were described really well.... The sex didn't take over the book. The plots won this time...."

—World of Diversity Fiction

By SHIRA ANTHONY

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With EM LYNLEY

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Lighting the Way Home*

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FOR CODY. More than you could ever know, your friendship inspires me and gives my words wings to soar.

FOREWORD

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.”

~Albert Einstein

Reading, at its very best, is an enthralling experience, and a good story draws us into another world and stays with us long after the book is closed. The worlds, characters, and events live inside us, piquing our curiosity and fueling our imaginations for years to come. Einstein’s aphorism reflects the ancient dichotomy between knowledge and imagination and is seen in the contrast between rationalists and mystics, realism and surrealism in the visual arts, and between the brutal rigors of experimental physics and the feathery abstractions of superstring theory. Metaphors are plentiful, but more to the point, imagination is a good in itself.

Hi, I’m Cody Kennedy. I love a great fantasy novel not only for its imagination candy but because I appreciate and value the extraordinary effort required to write a good one. Fantasy authors have a duty to readers that goes above and beyond mere storytelling. They must build worlds, create races, and delve into the impossible and make it believable, something we can relate to. In doing so, they must not only capture a reader’s interest but also infuse the mind’s eye with fantastic visions and implausible ideas, and compel the reader to use his or her imagination. It’s a daunting undertaking, to say the least, and Shira Anthony has accomplished this magnificent feat in her first fantasy series, *The Mermen of Ea*.

Highly original, richly layered, and incredibly imaginative, *Into the Wind* tells the mystical tale of Taren and Ian, two mermen of Ea, and the suspenseful search for the mysterious Odhrán, a man rumored to hold a fabled rune stone. The very stone needed to save the Ea race. Aboard their ship, the *Phantom*, Ian and Taren are attacked and Taren is separated from the crew. Washed ashore on an island, Taren comes to know Odhrán, and his world forever changes in ways we couldn't have fathomed.

A masterful wordsmith with an exceptional talent for building not only adventure on the high seas but endearing love beneath it, Shira Anthony weaves a splendid tale of romance and suspense. Artists, geniuses, and rebellious spirits alike have claimed imagination as their territory, and Shira Anthony has certainly staked her claim. To the best of my knowledge, there is no Shira Anthony cult yet, but as a practitioner of the writer's craft, she is as good as they come.

Enjoy *Into the Wind*.

Cody Kennedy
Los Angeles, California
March 2014

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The mermen of Ea have hidden their dual nature for centuries after their race faced extinction at the humans' hands. Now at a crossroads, the mainland and island merfolk are at war amongst themselves for the future of their people. At the heart of the conflict are two Ea, Ian Dunaidh and Taren Laxley, reincarnated Ea priests who have just rediscovered the truth of their past.

Now safely living on the mainland, Taren and Ian rekindle their centuries-old love. But the civil war looms ever closer, and Vurin, the leader of the mainland Ea, asks them to risk their lives once again in his service. For the good of their people, they must reclaim the legendary rune stone, an Ea weapon of great power, which took the life of Ian's previous incarnation years before.

Mermen (Ea)

Taren Laxley: For most of his life, Taren lived as an indentured servant, helping rigger Borstan Laxley work on the ropes and guy lines of ships that put into port in Raice Harbor in Derryth Kingdom. Taren discovered he is not human but an Ea when he was rescued by Captain Ian Dunaidh and the crew of the *Phantom*, Ian's ship. Taren is the reincarnation of the Ea priest Treande. In his past life, Taren was handfasted to Owyn, the prior incarnation of Ian Dunaidh. Taren becomes Ian's lover again and is Ian's soul mate.

Ian Dunaidh: The son of Ea parents, raised near Raice Harbor, Ian Dunaidh is captain of the Ea ship the *Phantom*. Ian's parents were executed as traitors by the island Ea during the first war with the mainland Ea. To

avenge his parents, Ian became a spy for the mainland Ea, rising through the ranks of the Ea navy. He reveals himself when he saves Taren's life and rescues him from the island Ea prison. Ian is the reincarnation of the Ea priest Owyn. Owyn was the wielder of the powerful rune stone and died protecting it.

Renda: Renda is the quartermaster and healer aboard the *Phantom*. A mage and a warrior, Renda is Ian's longtime friend and also a spy for the mainland Ea.

Vurin: Leader of the mainland Ea and governor of Callaecia, the mainland Ea settlement near Raice Harbor, Vurin is a powerful mage whose gift is that of empathy. Vurin was present at Taren's birth and handfasted Taren's parents. He believes Taren is meant to wield the fabled rune stone, a weapon of immense power about which the last Ea priestess prophesized.

The Ea Council: The group of old and powerful Ea who rule the island of Ea'nu with an iron fist. The Council fear Vurin and the mainland Ea, with whom they fought twenty years before at great loss of life. The Council believe they must protect their people from humans at all cost, even if it means imprisoning or executing dissenters.

Seria: Once the Ea Council's eyes and ears aboard the *Phantom*, Seria has risen through the ranks of the island navy to become one of their most powerful political figures. Seria does the Council's bidding while manipulating them to take action as he sees fit. Seria hopes to someday lead the Council and the island Ea to victory over their mainland brethren.

Barra: Ian's former bedmate and sailing master of the *Phantom*.

Aine: The young cabin boy aboard the *Phantom*.

Humans

Rider: Captain of the human ship *Sea Witch*, Rider kidnapped Taren from the inn at Raice Harbor. Rider offered Taren his freedom for three years of servitude. Rider is Ian Dunaidh's former childhood friend and lover. He knows the Ea exist, and helps transmit messages from Vurin and the mainland Ea to Ian when he is at sea aboard the *Phantom*.

Bastian: Rider's lover and quartermaster of the *Sea Witch*, Bastian came to be part of Rider's crew as Taren did, first as a slave, then as a free man who chose to stay aboard and serve with her crew.

Borstan Laxley: The rigger who took Taren in as a baby and raised him. Borstan sold Taren to the innkeeper in payment of his gambling debts.

Fiall: The young cabin boy aboard the *Sea Witch* whom Taren rescued during a storm.

Odhrán: A pirate with a bloody reputation who is rumored to make his home in the Gateway Islands. Odhrán is said to enslave Ea and use them to protect his hideout. He is also rumored to possess the fabled rune stone, the Ea weapon prophesized to be the salvation of the Ea people.

ONE

DEAFENING CANNON fire rang out from the port side of the ship. Ian braced himself against the stair railing to keep from falling backward as the ship leaned deep and heeled hard to starboard. He heaved himself upward and crested the stairwell to the deck as the ship pitched again, forcing him to grab one of the barrels lashed to the deck to remain upright. Cannon shot landed off the bow, sending water over the forecastle and cascading down the already sodden deck. The acrid smell of gunpowder stung his nostrils and burned his eyes, and the familiar scent caused his adrenaline to skyrocket and set his mind racing.

“Renda! What the hell is happening?”

“She’s fired on us with no warning shot, Captain!” Renda, the ship’s quartermaster, barely looked at him as he struggled to steer the *Phantom* out of the line of fire.

“What colors does she fly?” Ian shouted as he ran toward the helm and lifted a spyglass to one eye.

“None, Captain! Her crew’s human! Navy ship!” Renda shouted above the cannon fire.

Ian felt it too. There were no Ea aboard the attacking ship. An entirely human crew? Only the Derryth navy sailed brigantines. But if he and the crew of the *Phantom* were fair game for the king and his navy, why didn’t they fly Derryth’s colors? They’d appeared out of nowhere. Had the mist been so thick that the men on watch had missed her?

Renda ceded the helm before Ian could think much more about it. For now, he needed to focus on their attackers and on gaining the upper hand. It had been more than twenty years since Ian had taken his ship into battle, but

his crew was well seasoned. He prayed silently to his goddess that the winds would favor them.

“Derryth?” he asked Renda as he steered to avoid another blast from the enemy’s cannons. “Aligned with the Council? Or is this just a coincidence?” He’d expected to face the island Ea in battle eventually, but never had he expected them to use humans to chase them down.

Renda scowled. “No coincidence. Magic, seeing as the fog cleared just in time for them to attack. They had help tracking us down. A mage, no doubt.”

Humans did not possess magic. When had the island Ea recruited the humans to their cause? The thought made Ian’s blood boil. Humans had nearly wiped out their kind hundreds of years before, looking for the fabled rune stone, a weapon more powerful than the Derryth Kingdom’s largest cannons. Had someone told the humans they were heading to the Gateway Islands to find the reclusive pirate, Odhrán, and recover the very weapon that had nearly been the cause of their destruction?

No. He mustn’t think about that now. He needed his wits about him to keep his ship safe. Then he could think more about the implications. He focused once again on the ship and her crew. The feel of the wood beneath his hands and the stiff wind against his cheek always warmed Ian’s soul, even in the midst of battle. The bright, crisp scent of the salt spray awakened his senses and mind. He’d been born for this command, although he’d paid a stiff price for it. His father before him had been a sailor, although he’d long given up the seafaring life by the time Ian had learned to sail in the Derryth navy. Sailing was in his bones and his blood. The only thing he loved more than sailing *on* the water was swimming *in* it.

Renda shouted more commands to the men manning the ropes, then turned back to Ian and scowled. “Their ship is fast. She’s shooting the sun and she has the weather beam.”

Stealing our wind! Ian cursed beneath his breath. With the enemy positioned between them and the wind, the *Phantom* could do little to maneuver. If he hadn’t been forced to stay within the Council’s reach, tied to the island, he’d have long before found the best clockmaker in Derryth and purchased a sextant. He was tired of others sighting guns upon the *Phantom* so easily. Their ancient astrolabe might have sufficed twenty years ago, during the civil war that cleaved his people in two, but it was useless

against a better-equipped navy. As things stood, Ian could only guess at the angle of the enemy's guns and what direction he might be able to steer the *Phantom* to avoid them.

He glanced skyward and was momentarily blinded by the sun's brilliant reflection in the lookout's spyglass. He moved his gaze to the mainsail and the seagulls that rode thermals alongside it. It had been a calm day until the enemy appeared. Now the wind raced the heavens. The telltales on the sails fluttered frantically with each powerful gust of the wind, making it difficult for Ian to determine the wind's direction. He fought the helm in an effort to maintain their course as the sea swelled and the ship bucked. Worse yet, the *Phantom* was poorly situated in the wind on a close reach that placed the ship at a crucial disadvantage.

The enemy's guns belched again and cannonballs spun past, spitting fiery tar and narrowly missing the main mast. The flames that licked from the metal nearly set the mainsail afire.

"They're using pitch!" Renda shouted as the pungent smell of burning pine reached Ian's nostrils.

Ian heard his father's words echo in his mind. "*There is nothing as deadly as fire at sea.*" If one of those cannon blasts hit the *Phantom*, she'd go up in flames.

Heeling starboard as the *Phantom* was, her portside guns aimed high above the waterline. Each cannon shot fired was nothing more than wasted ammunition. They were outmanned, outgunned, and out-positioned in the wind. *Damn.* Ian considered his options quickly, mulling their position relative to the enemy and eyeing the wind in the sails. He had no choice but to bring the ship about and take aim with the starboard cannons. Yet if he turned and lost the wind, they'd end up in irons and stalled in the water.

"Are the starboard gun ports open?" Ian shouted.

Another blast from the enemy ship's cannons landed within a yard of the *Phantom*. The ship shook with the impact, and several crewmembers scrambled to better tie down some of the supplies on deck.

"Aye, Captain! Ports open, guns loaded!"

A quick glance around the deck told Ian that his beloved Taren was not there. He reached out first with his innate senses and was relieved to feel Taren's strong heartbeat as if it beat within his own chest. Their connection had continued to grow stronger over the past few months. Among Ea, a

bond like theirs—what their people called soulbound—was rare. Where most Ea could only sense that one of their brethren was near, Ian and Taren could sense each other's presence in particular. Sometimes Taren's fear became Ian's, and although Taren had not spoken of it, Ian guessed his own anger and frustration sometimes became Taren's.

Ian looked up, searching the mastheads and rigging with his eyes, and found Taren atop the main mast. He worked furiously, tying Turk's heads in the rigging as fast as he could and adjusting the sails to compensate for the heeling *Phantom*.

"Trim the sails! Man the starboard cannons and tell the gunners to fire when I come about!" Ian knew it would do little good. If they headed farther into the wind, they'd lose speed and stall. "Tell the gunners to fire when they can!"

"Aye, sir!" Renda barked commands and the boatswains flew into action with whistles and hand signals. When Ian saw that Taren had acknowledged his orders, he brought the *Phantom* hard about. She bucked the squall and swell as Ian fought the wheel to turn her, and she listed her worst yet, her masts lying but thirty degrees off the water.

Damn.

At midturn, a volley of cannon fire caught the *Phantom's* bow, causing her to shudder angrily as wood splintered and flew, mortally wounding one of the crew in the chest. Bright red blood splashed the deck to mingle with salt water and run past the smoldering pitch.

Crian! Renda ran to help the injured sailor. Perhaps he could help the man long enough that he might transform and heal his wounds. But Renda's slight shake of his head and icy expression told Ian there was nothing to be done. Crian was dead.

Ian's gut clenched when he thought of Crian's family. Why was he so surprised that he'd lost a man? Had he really believed this voyage would be anything but risky? He'd naively hoped their mission would be a simple one: find Odhrán, retrieve the rune stone, and return it to Vurin, the leader of Ea's mainland colony, so he might better protect their people.

He searched the rigging for Taren again and couldn't find him. He'd felt Taren's steady presence only moments ago, but he'd been too preoccupied with the battle to keep track of him. At least he could still feel the steady beat of Taren's heart. He finally spotted Taren aft, now atop the

mizzenmast, clinging to guy ropes and swinging wildly with each turn of the helm.

Taren had left their cabin at dawn to work on the sails with the intention of increasing the ship's speed. He loved to toil on the rigging, and Ian knew how his spirits soared with the feel of the wind on his face. Taren's acrobatics never ceased to amaze Ian, but they nonetheless left him cold with fear. Taren was nothing short of a long-tailed monkey in the rigging.

"Taren! Taren!"

Ian's shouts went unheeded—Taren couldn't hear him over the chaos of the battle. Ian only hoped Taren had guessed what his next maneuver might be, and had good purchase on the ropes to keep him from falling.

The navy ship tacked in tandem with the *Phantom* and now aimed its sights at her stern. Ian couldn't risk a blow to the most vulnerable part of the ship and had no choice but to adjust course again to avoid a hit. He spun the wheel the hardest yet to starboard.

Hold on, Taren!

The ship protested the quick maneuver, her teak wood groaning and creaking under the strain as she stalled in irons. In his quick decision to turn hard, he'd been reckless. They were headed directly into the wind now and were dead in the water.

Ian looked up and found Taren as he kicked out like lightning and baffled the aft sail to back the ship. An eerie silence descended, and they waited to see if the *Phantom* would catch her wind speed. Not a whisper of wind touched the sail. Taren reached for the rigging and swung out hard, kicking angrily at the sail once again. The sail billowed once, twice, and Ian's breath stuttered, his warning shout lodged in his throat. He knew precisely what the aft sail would do. With a whoosh and an earsplitting snap, she filled and the *Phantom* regained her air once again, leaping to top speed.

Ian watched in admiration as Taren swung down on the ropes just in time to avoid the snap of the sail. He landed gracefully on the deck a dozen feet away.

"Ian!" Taren shouted as he ran over to the wheel. Another shot from their attackers landed close to the *Phantom*, causing Taren to grab a hold of one of the nearby rails.

“Excellent work,” Ian said as he adjusted the ship’s heading. “Now if we can only make some headway—”

“Why don’t you send a few men down?” Taren panted hard, clearly winded. Ian sensed his excitement and his fear. No. Sensing wasn’t quite right. Ian *felt* Taren’s emotions as if they were his own.

“Down?”

“Send them down with axes. Crowbars. Something. *Anything*. Have them transform and attack from below.”

Ian frowned. “It won’t work.”

“Why not?” Taren demanded. “If we could—”

Taren’s words were cut short by a volley that landed even closer to the ship. Ian fought to maintain his course. “It doesn’t work that way,” he shouted over the din of the waves crashing over the bow. “It’s far more—”

But Taren was already halfway toward the bow before Ian could finish.

“No! Taren! You don’t understand! You can’t just—” Ian had no one to blame but himself for Taren’s lack of knowledge of Ea battle tactics. He glanced around, hoping to find someone to take the wheel. He needed to stop Taren before he did something dangerous, but before he could call out to Barra, the *Phantom*’s guns fired and missed. The navy ship returned fire, and a loud crack sounded from overhead as the shot hit the mizzenmast and the aft sail caught fire. The mast shattered, sending beam and splinter out at light speed. The sound of the mast breaking into smithereens was the last thing Ian remembered before his world grayed, then faded to black.

TAREN TRANSFORMED as he entered the warm tropical water with a splash. He’d grabbed an ax as he’d run, ignoring Ian’s shouts. He didn’t need Ian to lecture him about the danger of attacking the brigantine from below. But if this worked.... He’d barely caught his breath when he had to dive deep to avoid a deadly blow to the head from the enemy ship’s keel as she passed over him. Pumping his powerful tail, he swam after the *Phantom*’s challenger. He knew Ian would be angry with him for taking such a risk—he could almost *feel* that anger burn hot within his own heart. He’d face Ian’s wrath later. Had the Ea become so complacent in their human forms that they’d forgotten what they were?

The enemy brigantine was sleek and faster than the *Phantom*. They'd been nearing the Gateways, the chain of islands just west of Ea'nu, looking for Odhrán, the pirate rumored to possess the rune stone, when they'd been set upon. Taren surmised the brigantine's captain knew the *Phantom* would be in the vicinity, and had waited in the mist until she could gain the weather beam over them. *Strange*. Stranger yet, he'd sensed that the ship held humans when it passed over him. Why would humans pursue them? Had they learned of the existence of merfolk, or did they believe them to be pirates?

No. It's more than that. This all felt so familiar, as if he'd dreamed it. Expected it. Sensed something he hadn't understood until just now.

Several more cannon blasts narrowly missed the *Phantom* and landed in the water nearby, bringing Taren back to himself. He fought the rising swells and powerful current as the wind picked up speed, echoing his own growing apprehension and worry for Ian and the *Phantom's* crew. He dove, pumping and flexing the powerful flukes of his tail to propel him toward the enemy ship.

He reached her rudder a minute later. As fast as she was, he fought to keep up with her as he swung the ax at the place where the pintles and gudgeons met to hold the rudder in place. He'd expected resistance when the axe struck the metal of the hinges. He didn't expect the force that threw him backward and knocked the ax from his hand.

Magic? Vurin had taught him to sense it, but he'd been too distracted by his work on the sails to feel it before. But how would a human ship use magic? What a fool he'd been to assume Ian and the other Ea wouldn't have sensed it as well.

Taren heard another explosion right before it reverberated through the sea, and he watched beneath the water as the *Phantom's* keel turned sharply and she suddenly lost speed. Even with her crew's skill, without the wind, the *Phantom* would have no chance of outrunning the enemy. Would Ian surrender to the humans? *Could* he? If the humans knew what they were....

Of course they know! They're using magic. He needed to get back to the ship. Help them fight the humans. On the ropes, he could do something. Here in the water, he was helpless.

He broke the surface of the water and glided easily over a swell using his tail to keep his head above the waves. He couldn't remain above the

surface long. His Ea lungs protested the air, created as they were to breathe oxygen through water. But he needed to see the plight of the *Phantom* for himself.

He watched as half a dozen men climbed the brigantine's masts. They were readying to raft alongside the *Phantom* and board her. In a minute, perhaps two, they'd swing from the masts and land on the *Phantom's* deck. Taren's heart grew cold with fear, and the air whipped around him as he prayed the wind would change direction. If the *Phantom* could gain even a modicum of speed, her crew might outmaneuver the humans.

The reverberation of multiple volleys of cannon fire radiated through the water and sent fear through Taren. The first missed its mark, but the second shattered the mizzenmast. Pain seared Taren's heart and he knew Ian had been hit. Panic shot up his spine as he felt Ian lose consciousness. *No! Goddess, no! Please, you can't take him! Not when I've just found him again!*

Taren prayed once more that the winds would shift. If the *Phantom* could gain some speed, he had faith their ship could outmaneuver the humans even with the damage to the mizzen—Barra, their navigator, knew these waters well, knew the reefs well enough to navigate between them, whereas the humans might not. *If he isn't too badly hurt.*

The surface of the water rippled, although this time it was not on account of the battling ships. *The wind.* Had the goddess heard his prayer? He closed his eyes and imagined the goddess's hand coaxing the wind to shift to favor Ian and his crew. He felt the wind stroke his cheeks, felt its fingers stir the water. Imagined the *Phantom's* sails filling and the feel of the helm as it pulled against the rudder.

Taren felt the zing of magic caress his skin—a familiar sensation he tried to place—but his attention was drawn upward by the sound of an explosion. He looked up in time to see something dark speed toward him: another volley of cannon fire. He flexed his tail and swam down. The cannonball missed him by inches. As he sank beneath the water with a heavy heart, a flash of movement filled his peripheral vision, the outline of a tail. Before he could turn to get a better look, something hit him hard in the back of the head.

He valiantly fought the urge to surrender to the darkness, but his eyes fluttered closed.

Rest now, a voice in his mind commanded, and he knew no more.

IAN LAY flat on his back, looking up at the mizzenmast—what was *left* of it. The mast itself was cleaved in two, the upper topsail was missing, and the lower hung from the ropes over the mizzen sail. With the help of a strong arm, he pulled himself up to a sitting position.

“Damn him! I should chain him to the ship.”

Renda frowned at him with concern. “Are you all right?”

“Of course,” Ian growled as he ignored the pounding in his head and the warmth of the blood that trickled from his scalp. “It’s Taren I’m worried about.”

“You’re not all right.”

“And what would you have me do about it?” Ian stood, swayed, then steadied himself on Renda’s shoulder.

“At least let me stop the bleeding.”

Ian ignored Renda and stumbled back to the wheel. He’d expected to see Barra there, since he’d been shouting commands to the other men while Ian steered, but instead saw Keral, one of the other hands. At least he’d the sense to take over the helm while Renda fussed over Ian like a mother hen. The ship bucked and shuddered as Keral turned sharply to avoid another cannon blast. Ian gritted his teeth and grabbed Renda’s arm, thankful that he was nearby.

They were out of options. Even with the mizzen sails intact, they’d been outpaced by the smaller ship. With the mizzenmast destroyed, they would be far slower and the *Phantom* would be more difficult to steer. Ian was just about to tell Keral to give the order for all but his officers to abandon ship when a gust of air brushed his cheek. For a split second, he sensed something familiar about the wind, as if it had stirred a memory buried deep in his soul. Then the feeling fled and he realized the wind had shifted to the northeast. A moment later, he felt the *Phantom*’s remaining sails catch the wind. The ship began to pick up speed, moving away from the enemy ship, which had slowed so its crew might board.

“Hard to starboard,” Ian ordered. “Now!”

Keral spun the wheel and the ship heeled dangerously close to the waves. “Fire!” Ian shouted to the men manning the guns.

The pain in Ian's head, which had until then been just a dull ache, lanced with reverberations from the cannon blast. At nearly the same time, he felt another pain at the back of his head.

Taren!

Ian dropped to his knees and clutched his head as his heart beat so hard against his ribs that it hurt. *Goddess! Taren!*

"Let me help you." There was none of the usual chiding in Renda's voice as he gently pulled Ian's hand from his left temple. Ian felt the warmth of Renda's healing against his skull. With the touch, Ian's pain abated.

"Taren," he moaned when he came back to himself. He reached out with his mind and felt the beat of Taren's heart. Slower than before, but steady. Knocked out, perhaps, by the last volley?

"You felt his pain?" Renda asked, clearly surprised.

Ian nodded. "He's alive. But he's unconscious. Injured. I must find—"

"A hit, sir!" one of the men shouted over the howling wind.

With Renda's help, Ian got back to his feet. He saw it now—the smoking wound in the enemy ship's stern. She floundered, her rudder damaged and no longer able to control her course. Even if she used her sails to steer, the *Phantom* would be long gone. Ian murmured a prayer of thanksgiving to the goddess. Now, if he could find Taren, he'd rest easy.

Two

Two weeks earlier

TAREN CHASED Ian through the surf, the water flying about him as his bare feet slapped the sand. The warm autumn sun on his shoulders and the salty tang of the water made him smile.

“You’re too slow!” Ian called from halfway across the beach.

Taren laughed and dove into a wave, swam in his human form until he came upon Ian, grabbed him around the ankles, then knocked him into the water. Ian spluttered and transformed, planting his powerful tail. He paused for only an instant, then pivoted and swam against a wave that crested and broke near shore.

Taren looked around, trying to sense Ian. During the time they’d spent together at Callaecia, the powerful sensations he shared with Ian had only grown in their intensity. Even though he couldn’t see him, Taren felt Ian’s heart race as he swam, felt his pleasure, heard his lungs fill with water, and knew he was nearby. He didn’t see Ian until he surfaced in a spray of foam, took Taren’s hands, and dragged him down, forcing him to transform as well.

You cheated! Taren wriggled away from Ian and took off for one of the underwater caves near the cliffs. He flicked his tail harder when he sensed the movement of water behind him. Ian was the stronger swimmer, although in the months Taren had lived amongst the Ea at Callaecia, he’d learned to use his Ea body to its greatest advantage.

Ian caught up with Taren a moment later, swimming beneath Taren before encircling his waist with his powerful arms, capturing him in his embrace.

I yield! Taren laughed and allowed Ian to pull him closer. *Besides, you've long ago captured my heart.* He nipped at Ian's neck, eliciting a low rumble he could feel in his belly more than hear with his ears. Taren still marveled that in his Ea form he could hear so much under the water. He'd asked Ian once why the Ea didn't choose to spend their lives in this form, so taken was he with the joys of his Ea body and the beauty of the sea. Ian had just shrugged and told him that the Ea viewed their transformation as a gift from the goddess that set them apart from humans, but that they believed they were meant to live on land.

They swam out from land as they held each other, tails beating the water in tandem as they spiraled in a dizzying dance. More than anything, Taren found the Ea mating ritual a beautiful thing. Ian's Ea body was also beautiful. In this form, Ian's chest was broad and the muscles of his belly and arms more powerful. As a human, Ian was strong. As an Ea, he possessed strength and surprising grace few others did. Taren loved to watch Ian swim, watch the sinews of his body ripple as he moved his tail, watch his hair twist in the current. More thrilling, perhaps, was the knowledge that Ian was *his*, that Ian desired him above all others, that Taren held Ian's heart.

Ian released Taren as they glided over the sand at the bottom. Large schools of silver fish followed the contours of their bodies, calling to mind the shimmer of moon across the waves. Here, many feet below the surface, the pressure of the water created a warm cocoon around Taren and drove the warmth in his chest to his extremities, making his fingers more sensitive.

Taren flicked his tail to propel him around so that he and Ian swam toward each other, arms extended, then moved upward as they laced their fingers together and floated perpendicular to the sea floor. They kissed and their tongues entwined. Ian tasted of the ocean and of the promise of Taren's new life. Their former incarnations, Treande and Owyn, had been equals in everything. Partners, friends, lovers. Taren both relished and feared the power of his connection to Ian and the unexpected turn of fate that had brought them together, as well as the revelations of their past.

With a grin, Taren spun around so that he faced Ian's tail. He rotated his arm so that the sharp tines that ran from his fingers to his wrist grazed the slick surface. He'd learned how to retract the barbs so they would not

injure; he'd also learned that if used properly, the gentle scrape of the barbs was a sensual treat Ian could not resist.

"Goddess!" Ian shouted in his mind. *"Is it your wish to render me completely helpless with lust?"*

Taren repressed a chuckle as he continued to stroke Ian's body. He might not be able to best Ian with his physical prowess, but he knew he held a stronger power over Ian. He relished the thought that he possessed Ian's heart and soul, for it made his own uncontrollable hunger to be near Ian bearable.

Ian moaned as Taren slipped a finger inside the opening at the base of his tail to coax forth his member. When it emerged, hard and proud, Taren took it in his mouth, ran his tongue over its veined surface, then swallowed it until his lips met the base. As he pulled and teased, he pressed a finger in Ian's other fold. Ian keened to meet the intruder and begged Taren for more as Taren slipped a second finger inside to Ian's stuttered gasp. Taren knew Ian loved it when he directed their lovemaking, although Taren preferred to take a less aggressive role. It sometimes surprised Taren, though, how Ian was able to cede control to him.

For Taren, the balance of power between them felt familiar. Taren guessed that he and Ian had tangled like this before, shifted in and out of dominance in their relationship as well as in their mating. Taren knew his prior life guided him, but much of what he shared with Ian still felt new and exciting. As he often did, Taren gave himself over to the memory and allowed his body to dictate his movements. He reached around Ian and clasped the place where his buttocks would have been had he been in his human form. The skin there was smooth and slippery, so Taren dug in his nails just deeply enough to maintain his grip. Ian's rumbled pleasure was an added incentive.

"Taren!" Ian writhed under Taren's ministrations, his movements propelling them forward and making them spin.

Tiny bubbles effervesced over Taren's sensitive skin, tickling and caressing, adding to the hypnotic mating dance, stirring his desire. He sucked harder and slipped a third finger inside Ian.

Ian's climax washed over them both. With each gasp, with each shudder of Ian's body, Taren felt the thrill of Ian's release as if it were his own. He wondered if he'd ever get used to the sensation of sharing in his

lover's climax or if it would remain one of the great wonders of his dual form.

"Fuck me," Ian gasped as he convulsed once again. *"Do it now."* Rarely did Ian ask Taren to take him, although this also felt familiar.

Taren caught his breath and pinned Ian against the sand by his wrists. Ian's eyes were glassy from his release, his breathing shallow. Taren sucked and bit at his nipples, then smiled broadly as he felt Ian's heart race at the contact.

"Please. Taren," Ian begged. *"Take me."*

Taren pressed his hard cock into the heat of Ian's fold, seating himself deep inside. Goddess, he loved Ian! His heart, his soul, the memory of his soul, his strength. Like this, bound to him in body and spirit, he could almost imagine himself inside the once-proud temple at Callaecia, singing the goddess's praises with Owyn at his side.

He released Ian's wrists and they floated upside-down as Taren gripped Ian more tightly and thrust. Ian tossed his head back, and his heartsong filled Taren's ears as well as his heart. The ancient Ea melody sounded nothing like the human songs Taren had learned as a child. Instead, he imagined the sound of the wind across the rocky shoreline of the Derryth coast as the gales of winter approached. Haunting. Beautiful. Primal.

Taren wrapped his tail around Ian and joined him in song. Their voices rose as one as Taren drove deeper inside Ian's body and lost himself in the physical. All doubts as to his place among his people, the dreams that still plagued him, and the uncertainty of his future—all this seemed lost in the moment. Taren knew nothing but the water, the feel of Ian against him, and the music of their souls. He climaxed long and hard and lost himself in Ian's embrace.

LATER, THEY lay on the grass overlooking the water, naked and spent. Ian stroked Taren's hair with his large hand and kissed him. "Does this have to end so soon?" he asked with a sigh.

"And here I thought *you* were the one who was anxious to return to sea." Taren rolled onto his side and smiled down at Ian. "Renda says you've had the crew scrub the decks twice just this week, and Kerisa says she's reinforced the sails again."

Ian laughed. “Better now than wait until we put to sea.”

“What’s your hurry? Has Vurin asked you to sail again?”

“No,” Ian said before he kissed Taren again. “At least he hasn’t yet. Still, I’d like to sail with you at my side. As part of my crew—not just a passenger this time.”

“I’d like that.” Taren had also dreamed of sailing with Ian. “But there’s plenty of time. We have nearly nine months before I return to the *Sea Witch*.”

Ian narrowed his eyes, and Taren knew he was fighting an internal war with his jealousy. “You owe Rider nothing. You’re a free man, Taren. Free to decide your own fate.”

They’d discussed the subject of Taren’s contract before, and it remained a point of contention between them—one of the few. Taren leaned down and brushed Ian’s lips with his own, hoping to reassure him. “I’ve no intention of returning to his bed.” Rider had made it clear to both Ian and Taren that he didn’t expect Taren to do so. Still, Taren understood Ian’s possessive nature, even if at times it troubled him. “But I will uphold my bargain and serve aboard the *Witch* as promised. I gave him my word.”

Ian’s frown deepened. “I’ll gladly pay the last year of your indenture.”

“What? And leave me beholden to you instead?” Taren shook his head. “That’s hardly better.”

“You wouldn’t be behold—”

“We’ve spoken of this before.” Taren’s gut clenched as he recalled some of their heated discussions. “It would change nothing. I’d have a different master, but a master nonetheless.” Ian encouraged him to speak his mind, but Taren still hesitated to do so. At the inn, he’d been beaten when he’d spoken out of turn. And although Rider had never berated him for it, Taren had always feared what might happen when his words came faster than his thoughts. That he could go as far as arguing a point with Ian surprised him. But more surprising still was that Ian professed his love even after they had disagreed.

“Never. I would never seek to own you.” The corners of Ian’s mouth turned upward in a gentle smile. “It is you who owns *my* heart, Taren.”

“Then let’s not speak of it again.” Taren smiled and traced a finger over Ian’s cheek. “Trust that I know my heart and I know what I must do. And know that I’ll never be unfaithful to you.”

Ian gathered Taren into his embrace and held him tight. “That was never my fear.”

Taren shivered as he felt Ian’s breath against the sensitive skin of his neck. “What do you fear?” he asked in an undertone.

Ian tensed at these words. “I don’t want to lose you again when I’ve only just found you.”

“You won’t.” Taren hoped he sounded confident in his answer. “I promise.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “But there’s something else troubling you, isn’t there?”

“It’s nothing you need worry about.”

“Do you trust me, Ian?” Taren pulled away and frowned.

“I.... What? Of course I do.”

“The truth is deeper than that.” He wouldn’t let Ian dismiss him this time, and although he sensed Ian hadn’t outright lied, he knew Ian wasn’t being entirely honest with him.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Ian stood up and walked to the edge of the cliff.

Taren followed and wrapped his arms around Ian’s chest. “Then tell me why each time we speak of Rider or of our time together aboard the *Phantom*, I sense turmoil in your heart.”

“I can’t forget what I did to you. I can’t forgive myself for it.” Ian’s voice was barely audible above the sound of the surf from below. “You forgave me when I did nothing to earn your forgiveness.” He closed his eyes for a moment, then let out an audible breath.

Too overcome to speak, Taren clenched his jaw.

“You should hate me. Of all people... I knew what you’d face at Seria’s hands, and yet I did nothing.”

Taren took Ian’s hands in his, then met his gaze unflinchingly. “I could never hate you. Besides, it wasn’t your f—”

“I had a choice.” Ian pressed his lips together, clearly fighting to control his roiling emotions. “I nearly died in that prison years before. But that was my choice as well. I chose to return to Ea’nu and face my parents’ murderers. I knew what might happen. You had *no* choice. I sent you to that prison.”

“No.” Taren’s breath stuttered. “Ian. Goddess. Don’t you see?”

“I could have let you go. I could have—”

Taren shook his head. “No.” He needed Ian to understand this once and for all. “You may believe you had a choice, but I know better.”

“But I—”

“No, Ian.” Taren brought Ian’s hands to his lips and kissed them, then smiled at him. “We’ve neither of us had a choice in this. From the day we were born, the goddess has decided our fates. We were meant to endure this. The goddess has tested us.” He wanted to believe they were both stronger for it, although he feared—no, he *knew*—the future held far greater challenges.

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness.”

“Yes,” Taren said, “you do. But even if I didn’t know this to be true, my heart would always forgive you.” *I would gladly brave Seria’s pain to keep you safe.* He put his hands on Ian’s face, then kissed him.

It would take time, Taren knew, before Ian would forgive himself. Until then, he would make sure Ian knew how much he was loved and how happy Taren was to be at his side. How happy Taren was to be his mate.

TAREN DANGLED from the cold metal shackles on the crumbling stone wall of the prison. His arms and hands had long since become numb. How long had he been here? Seria’s men had left him hours ago. Surely they planned it that way. Every encounter with Seria had ended in an ocean of pain. They knew he’d imagine what horrors awaited him upon Seria’s return. He wanted to die. At least in death, he’d find peace.

More time passed before Seria entered the room. “Missed me?” he asked with a look of pleasure that caused Taren to shiver in spite of himself.

Taren spat, hitting Seria’s cheek. He knew his punishment would come swiftly, but for the moment he felt nothing but satisfaction at having angered his captor.

Seria’s smile spoke of hatred and power. He reached out and touched Taren’s chest. Taren screamed and writhed, pulling his wrists in a vain effort to escape the metal bindings. The metal ground against his already abraded skin, opening old wounds. The pain was nothing, however, compared to the fire that Seria’s touch imparted. Taren opened his lips, but no sound issued from them.

Please, let me die!

The scene changed and the searing heat in his chest faded, only to be replaced by a different pain as he kneeled over Owyn's lifeless body, the rune stone clasped tightly in his fist. This pain was far worse because he knew it would not fade with time. Owyn, his love, his life, his reason for living. They'd only been handfasted a few years before, and now he was dead, and nothing could bring him back.

Treande had no choice but to plunge the dagger into Owyn's chest. Owyn was dying, and there was nothing he could do to save him. The rune stone became a physical part of its wielder's body, joining with it. The only way to unjoin the stone was to remove it from the wielder while the wielder was still alive, killing the wielder in the process. If Treande let Owyn die, the stone would cease to exist forever. Still, the knowledge that he'd hastened Owyn's death would haunt him the rest of his days. He'd paid a steep price for the safety of his people: the loss of the only man he would ever love.

Treande's tears mingled with rain. He knew he must leave. His people needed him to lead them to safety. With Owyn gone, there was no one else. He'd never wanted to be a leader; he'd only wanted to worship the goddess at Owyn's side.

Owyn! You promised we'd spend our lives together. You weren't supposed to leave me. What will I do without you?

His only answer was the screams of his people as the humans chased them toward the water.

"Go!" Owyn's voice said in his grief-bewildered mind. "You must lead them to safety. You must live so that they can live."

He bent over Owyn's lifeless body and pressed his lips against Owyn's. Already they felt cold to the touch.

"Forgive me," he whispered. He would leave Owyn here. There would be no burial. Owyn's ashes would not rise to the goddess on the wind.

Once again, the scene faded. He now sat by a dying fire in a small dwelling near the water, the sound of the surf against the rocks a reassuring melody that eased his restless mind. His body ached and he felt as though he'd never be warm again. Even the transformations did little now to renew his ancient body. Death was close, but ever elusive.

How many times had he prayed for the goddess to release him to rejoin his beloved Owyn in death? How much longer will you test me?

The fire crackled and an especially powerful wave broke nearby. He could almost hear Owyn's sighs in the sounds, feel his longing. Owyn's calls to him became stronger each day, and each day he imagined Owyn saying, "Just a bit more time, and we'll be together again."

For years now Treande hadn't cried, although the grief in his heart had only grown deeper with time. For the first time since Owyn's death, he felt tears burn his eyes and fall over his cheeks. It's too much. I can't go on!

"Owyn!" he cried. "Owyn!"

"OWYN!" TAREN sat up, momentarily unsure where he was. He reached up to clasp the black stone that hung around his neck only to realize it wasn't there. Tears rolled over his cheeks as he shivered.

"I'm here." Ian's voice brought Taren back to himself. He encircled Taren's waist with strong arms and gathered him into a loving embrace. "Another dream?"

Taren nodded.

"What about?"

Taren wasn't sure he wanted to. "I...", he began.

"You can tell me." Ian pressed his cheek against Taren's shoulder and kissed the skin there.

Taren nodded.

"I wish you'd speak to me about it." Ian kissed his cheek and sighed.

"There isn't much to tell."

"Please." Ian brushed a lock of hair from Taren's eyes and met his gaze. "Tell me. Did you dream of the rune stone again?"

"Aye." Taren took a long breath to steady himself. "I was wearing the stone. You—Owyn was long dead." Once again he'd been alone in the dream. The emptiness he'd felt at Owyn's absence had been all consuming. Why were all his recent visions from the time after he'd lost Owyn at the temple? He longed for the memories of the happier times they'd spent together—the memories that had sustained him when he'd been a prisoner on Ea'nu.

Ian brushed Taren's tears away. "I'm here. I'm not leaving you. Not this time."

Not if you can help it. Taren knew that. But he also knew that should the goddess will it, as she'd done before, Ian would leave him alone. He sighed and shuddered.

"Tell me, Taren. Please."

"There's nothing to tell." Taren settled into Ian's arms as they lay back down on the bed. "I dreamed of the stone. Of leaving the island for the last time. I knew I'd never return." He'd been old. Not frail, but his body had ceased to heal as quickly, and he knew death would take him soon. He'd wanted to die. Death meant that he'd rejoin Owyn in the afterlife. An end to his lonely existence.

Ian held him tighter. Taren found it easier to forget the memory of that vast emptiness when Ian held him. Easier, but he still could not forget it completely. What if they were doomed to repeat the past?

"It won't be the same this time," Ian said, as if he could read Taren's thoughts.

Taren prayed Ian was right.

THREE

TAREN KNELT by the ruins of the temple, as he had each day for the past three months. He wasn't sure why he kept coming back. "You're searching for something," Ian had told him as they'd worked to rebuild the foundation of the cottage on the bluff. "A heading in the storm. It's only natural to ask for the goddess's guidance."

Taren told himself he didn't need the goddess or the gods to show him his purpose. He wasn't even sure he believed they existed. And yet here he was, prostrate once again, imploring her for help. More than anything, in acknowledging that he'd lived another life as Treande, Taren feared he might somehow lose himself. And with that fear came restlessness. Questions.

"Back again?"

"Obviously." Taren didn't mean to snap at Vurin, but he tired of the man's paternal manner and preternatural ability to sense when he was troubled. Why couldn't Vurin have been a seer instead of an empath? At least then he might be of some use to Taren and could tell Taren what he should be doing instead of wasting his time here. But perhaps Vurin's empathy was what made him such a powerful leader for the mainland Ea.

Vurin chuckled. "Not finding your answers?"

"If I'd found them, do you think I'd still be here?"

"Perhaps you aren't asking the right questions." Vurin bowed to the remnants of the ancient altar and pressed his palms together in supplication. "Or perhaps you aren't listening to the answers."

"Perhaps you'd care to enlighten me, then?" Taren turned to face Vurin. In the fading afternoon light, he looked far more ancient as shadows

settled in the lines around his mouth and eyes.

Vurin sat on a rock and smiled. “You want to know who Treande was and how much of his soul still inhabits yours.”

“I....” As always, Vurin’s ability to know his thoughts disturbed Taren. “Yes. I want to understand why I keep dreaming of him. What purpose the dreams serve. What I’m supposed to learn from them.”

“No doubt you do.”

“Tell me more about him.” When Vurin regarded him with a knowing smile, Taren added, “Please. I need to understand.”

Vurin took a long breath, his eyes closing momentarily as if he were gathering his thoughts. “Walk with me,” Vurin said. “There’s something I’d like you to see.”

“All right.”

Vurin gestured to the road that led out of Callaecia. They walked for several minutes in silence, the only sound the screeching of gulls from the water and the rustling of the leaves in the breeze.

“You know that Treande led our people to Ea’nu,” Vurin said after a while. “He helped them settle the island colony and build the great temple there.”

“Aye.” Taren knew this much. In fact, when Vurin had offered to teach him about the Ea and their history, Taren had welcomed Vurin’s instruction. Now, however, he feared what Vurin might tell him and feared what the knowledge Vurin imparted might reveal.

“As children, we were taught that when the Ea arrived on the island, the volcano roared to life,” Vurin said as he rubbed his jaw and studied Taren with an unreadable expression. “Some say it was a dragon who coaxed it from its sleep. Legend has it Treande singlehandedly extinguished the flames and smoke.”

Taren laughed and bent down to retrieve a small rock from the road. He rolled it between his fingers, then tossed it onto the grass. “And you believe this? Have you ever seen a dragon?”

Vurin shrugged. “Before you met Ian and the others, had you ever seen merfolk? There are many stories of dragons. I hardly need to have met one to believe they may exist. There are stories of ancient magic far more powerful than what we mages now use. Stories of magic transcending time

and death. Stories of flying ships and underground cities. There are also stories of Ea priests who could control the elements.

“So much of our magical skills have been lost with time,” Vurin continued. “The Council systematically killed those Ea with strong abilities, or put them on tight leashes and used them like dogs to help them repress the islanders.”

“You believe I’m a mage?” Taren asked.

“Yes.”

“But my abilities—”

“Are untested and unexplored.” Vurin breathed deeply, then said, “I believe the rune stone is the key.”

“To my abilities? Impossible.” In all of Taren’s dreams, Treande was merely the keeper of the stone, never its wielder, as Owyn had been. “Treande never mastered the stone. If he possessed such power, it was his own.”

“You know this?” Vurin’s eyes widened and he turned to face Taren.

“I...” Taren hesitated. “I hadn’t really thought about it until now. Still, I know it’s true. Treande could not wield it.”

Vurin raised an eyebrow, then motioned Taren onward.

“I suppose I didn’t *want* to think about it until now,” Taren admitted. He’d dreamed it, as he’d dreamed many things about his past. The dreams—memories—still weighed upon him.

Vurin clasped Taren’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. “Sometimes the heart speaks for us.”

“I won’t lose him again, Vurin.” Taren clenched his jaw and tried yet again to banish the memory of Owyn’s death from his thoughts.

“You cannot live your life in fear, Taren. That’s no life at all.”

They walked to the edge of the clearing where the temple had once stood. From here, Taren could see the water shimmer in the harbor below. The *Phantom*’s masts looked like trees in the dead of winter—bare, yet proud.

“How did Treande die?” Taren asked after a moment. He was tired of fighting his fear. He needed to learn the truth, or as much truth as the stories held.

“We don’t know. There are writings from that time in the ancient tongue. They say only that the goddess led him home.”

“And the stone?”

Vurin raised an eyebrow. “Some say he entrusted it to a keeper. Others say it died with him.”

“What do you believe?”

“I believe the stone still exists. That you have dreamed of it is proof enough for me. Besides, as you’ve said, Treande was not a wielder. The stone may be hidden or lost, but it still exists somewhere. It did not die with him.”

“You believe we’re meant to find it again, don’t you?”

“Aye.” Vurin glanced toward the village, then back at Taren. “I believe you and Ian are meant to find it.”

“You want to use it—whatever power it holds—against the islanders?”

“No. I would never use such a thing against our own people,” Vurin said in a steely voice. “But the last of the ancient priestesses told me about the stone around the time you were born. She dreamed of it. She said it would be our people’s last defense. That it would protect us against powerful forces.”

“The humans?” Taren asked.

“Perhaps.” Vurin shook his head. “She told me little more than that.”

“And what of the Council? What of the rumors that Seria now speaks for them?” The thought of Seria controlling the Council made Taren shiver. He couldn’t escape the memory of his cruelty and of his power any more than he could forget the echo of pain and despair.

“I will not see our brethren harmed. Too many of us died when we fought each other two decades ago. Your parents were among them.”

“My parents.” Why had he hesitated to ask Vurin about them?

“I must admit that there are times I don’t understand you, Taren,” Vurin said with a wry smile. “Some empath I am.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Of what?” Vurin pointed to a path at the edge of the cliff, and they began to descend. “Of the pain of their loss?”

“Aye.” There was little point in denying it—he knew it to be true.

“There is pain in loss,” Vurin agreed. “But there is joy in understanding, as well.” Taren inhaled deeply in an effort to dispel the grief he felt at never having known his parents. “They were good people. They loved you very much. Enough to want to keep you safe from harm at the cost of their own lives.”

“You were the one who hid my true nature, weren’t you?” Taren asked. He had guessed this long before but had never found an opportunity to ask.

“Aye.”

“Ian told me of the prophecy. That the stone is our people’s salvation.”

Vurin nodded. “The old priestess, Zea, spoke of it often. She told me her mother knew Treande and Owyn. She said you would grow to be a powerful mage. She told me to protect you.”

“Protect me how?”

“She didn’t say.” Vurin studied him as if he knew what Taren might say next.

“You... guessed?” Taren wasn’t sure why this disturbed him. What if there had been another way? What if he’d grown up with others of his kind?

“I could have been wrong,” Vurin admitted, likely sensing Taren’s questions.

“They died protecting me, didn’t they?”

“Best I can tell, yes. After they left Callaecia with you, they were never heard from again. Except for the rumor of a mermaid found dead by the harbor, I know nothing of how they perished.”

Taren rubbed his mouth. Sometimes he wondered whether Ian was right—that the goddess planned something different for him in this life—or whether he and Ian were fated to relive the pain of the past as some sort of penance for failing to protect their people.

They reached the bottom of the cliff a moment later. The sun made the surface of the water glitter, and the sound of the waves crashing over the rocks made Taren long to transform. He closed his eyes and inhaled the salty air. He imagined the wind working its fingers through his hair, brushing his skin, helping him to forget his fear.

“What part of me is Treande?”

“You won’t learn the answer to that question until you understand what part of you is *not* Treande.” When Taren did not respond, Vurin asked,

“Who is Taren?”

More riddles. He hated it when Vurin spoke in riddles.

“What does Taren desire? What does he fear? What drives him?”

Taren drew a long breath but found he still could not speak.

“You love Ian. You want to remain at his side. Keep him safe. What then?”

“Aye.” A simple question, and yet other than loving Ian, he couldn’t answer the rest of Vurin’s question. “I want to rebuild our home,” he said, finding nothing else he desired except the wish to live out his life at Ian’s side.

Vurin picked up a white stone—the same rock from which the temple had been built—and rolled it between his palms. “Would you wish to rebuild the temple?” He replaced the stone and looked back at Taren.

“I... I don’t know. Perhaps if the goddess demanded it.” Or if Ian asked him to do it.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“I did,” Taren protested. “I—”

“You said you would rebuild the temple if someone told you to. You didn’t tell me if *you* wished to rebuild it.”

Taren didn’t meet Vurin’s gaze. He wouldn’t admit Vurin was right, even if he knew he was. He still didn’t see himself as a leader capable of overseeing the temple’s reconstruction.

“There’s nothing wrong with not knowing your will. You’ve lived your life to please others. It will take time for you to find your place.”

“I was a slave.” He’d almost said *I am a slave*, but he thought better of it. Ian had told him more times than he could remember that he hadn’t fallen in love with a slave, he’d fallen in love with a man. And yet Taren was still a slave, wasn’t he? He still owed Rider a year of his life in service. The thought of returning to his place aboard the *Sea Witch* comforted him. At least there he knew his place, his purpose.

Vurin put a hand on Taren’s shoulder. “Let me teach you to use your gift. Sometimes the past can illuminate the future. That is the reason for the gift of sight.”

“I’m not sure I want to see more of the past.” Taren saw himself plunging the dagger into Owyn’s chest. He still felt the pain of loss keenly,

even though he knew Owyn lived again in Ian's soul. "Isn't it enough that I dream of it each night?"

"Perhaps if you learn to use your gift, you will have no need to dream."

"Don't you mean that if I appease your goddess, she won't *force* me to dream?" Taren clenched his fists at his sides and struggled against his anger.

Vurin chuckled.

"Am I that amusing?" Taren retorted.

"I'm sorry, Taren." Vurin appeared genuinely contrite. "It's just that you remind me of myself, years ago. On Ea'nu."

Taren frowned. The last thing he wanted was yet another of Vurin's patronizing lectures about his youth and inexperience.

"Fifty years ago, I was much like you. Content to live my life in peace." Taren saw pain flicker in Vurin's eyes. Vurin drew a long breath, then said, "Then the Council arrested my only brother."

"What happened to him?"

Vurin looked briefly away, as if he didn't want Taren to see the pain flare again. "The Council executed him. Called him a traitor for daring to speak out about the conditions on Ea'nu."

"Your goddess is cruel."

"*Our* goddess is just, Taren. She expects her people to take up her cause. Seek justice. Too many people died because people like me did nothing." Vurin shook his head.

"How many of our people died in the war?" Taren demanded.

"Too many." Vurin spoke in an undertone. "But would you have done nothing if you'd been in my place?"

"I don't know."

"An honest answer." Vurin smiled at Taren.

"I need the same from you," Taren said, emboldened.

Vurin nodded. "What do you need to know?"

"Tell me about the rune stone." Taren had been afraid to ask this as well. "I want to know." He folded his arms across his chest. He wouldn't let Vurin avoid or change the subject, as he often did when Taren asked questions.

Vurin's expression was unreadable, although Taren sensed Vurin was pleased he had finally asked. He'd expected Vurin to chuckle or offer him a paternal smile, but this time Vurin did neither. "Aye. I daresay you deserve to know what little I've learned about it."

High time, Taren reckoned.

"I'm sure you've guessed that the humans attacked Treande's people because of the stone." Vurin drew an audible breath.

Taren *had* known this. Treande had known it, and Taren had remembered.

"Our people trusted the humans too much," Vurin continued. "Perhaps someone amongst their human friends knew about the stone and spoke of it offhandedly to the rulers of the ancient Kingdom of Derryth. We may never know.

"From the accounts of those who survived the attack that killed Owyn and many more of our people, we know that the humans believed the stone was a powerful weapon."

"Is it that powerful?" asked Taren.

Vurin shook his head. "I don't know. What I do know is that it can only be wielded by one of our people. One person, perhaps, given what you've told me of Owyn."

The image of a dying Owyn flashed through Taren's mind yet again. He willed it away with a shudder. "You believe I'm the wielder."

Vurin nodded and motioned for Taren to follow him as he moved behind one of the rock formations. Taren noticed an opening in the cliff face. He'd been down here before, but he'd never seen it. Vurin smiled at him, then slipped through the rocks and disappeared on the other side. Taren followed.

"You've returned to us for a purpose, Taren." Vurin's voice echoed inside the cavern.

Taren's eyes slowly began to adjust to the darkness. In here, the waves sounded distant. Water dripped from the high ceiling of the cave, landing with an almost musical tone as it hit the rocks underfoot.

Vurin stretched out his hands, then closed his eyes and muttered words in a language Taren did not understand. Taren blinked as two small spheres of blue light appeared, one on each of Vurin's palms. They floated upward and hovered above, illuminating the cave.

“What...?” Taren gasped.

“This is our past, Taren,” Vurin said as Taren took in the intricate carvings on the cave walls.

Everywhere he looked, Taren saw images of Ea swimming through underwater structures that appeared to be built from stone and coral. Ea children swam alongside their parents, men and women brought offerings to an underwater temple, and Ea swam in and out of an ornate building that looked very much like the drawings of castles Taren remembered from the picture books Borstan had read to him as a child.

“How old...?” Taren asked, overwhelmed with the beauty and the implications of what he saw.

Vurin shook his head. “Far older than the ruins of the temple, at least. Several thousand years old, perhaps more. The ancient texts tell of this place, and how our ancestors came to this land from far away, and of how they built their home here, in Callaecia.

“Few people have ever seen this shrine,” Vurin added. “In the time of Treande and Owyn, only the priests knew of it.”

“It’s beautiful,” Taren said as he walked over to the nearest carving and pressed his hand to the stone.

“I believe this place was meant to remind us of who we once were, and of what we might become if our people can overcome their fear.” Vurin joined Taren at the wall and put his own palm against the surface. “The first step to understanding your future is admitting your fear, Taren.”

“I don’t know if my heart can survive the past.” Taren could barely speak the words.

“It already has.” Vurin smiled. “Now is the time to gather your courage for what is to come.”

TAREN HAD planned on heading back to town to rejoin Ian, who was helping Renda and his wife rethatch the roof of the house they’d built on an ancient crumbling foundation. Instead, he walked the rocky shore and watched as some of the villagers tossed nets into the water. It still seemed strange to him that the Ea fished as humans. Not that there weren’t some in the village who fished in their Ea forms, but as best as Taren could tell, they did so more for the sport of it than to provide food for the village.

He reached the edge of the cove and stepped into the water to avoid the outcropping that blocked the sandy trail. The late-afternoon sun hung low on the horizon, and the temperature had begun to drop in its wake. He knew he had walked this trail a hundred—perhaps a thousand—times before as Treande. Each step felt familiar; each sound reminded him of the happiness he'd had here with Owyn and called to mind the promise of his future with Ian.

The sky filled with white clouds that danced about, taking on the shapes of familiar things. A boat, a bird, a dog. Taren watched as the dog seemed to sprout wings like a dragon's. He thought of what Vurin had said about dragons. A year before, he'd not have believed merfolk were anything but legend. Now, he wondered how much of the world he'd failed to see. Why not dragons? Or sea monsters? Or furies? Or sirens who caused ships to wreck? Why should he doubt the existence of things simply because he'd never seen them for himself?

He walked for nearly an hour, taking comfort in the peace he felt as his bare feet met the familiar path and the breeze off the water caressed his bare shoulders. He glanced at the nearby hill to where he'd seen the ruins of a small house once before. Much like what was left of the house he and Owyn had shared on the cliffs near the village, the vestiges of the white stone foundation were all that was left to memorialize the dwelling.

"You are troubled as always, Treande. Or should I call you Taren?"

Taren spun around at the sound of the familiar voice, sure that he'd imagined it. But the old woman smiled at him from the base of the crooked tree trunk where she sat, cross-legged, her milky eyes unseeing, her white hair so thin he could see her scalp beneath.

"*You*? But that's impossible. The last time I saw you—"

Her cackled laughter reminded him of the creaking sound the ropes on the *Phantom* made when wound tight against the winch. "I'm pleased you remember. I am Aerin," she added with a slight nod.

He remembered well—he'd seen her before he'd been thrown into the Ea prison. And before that in the marketplace when he'd still been a rigger aboard the *Sea Witch*. A vision! How had he not realized it before? Of course she wasn't real.

"Has it taken you this long to understand?" She laughed again. "Then again, you were always a bit naïve."

He bristled at her tone but wondered why he'd reacted that way. She was an old woman and deserved his respect. And yet the familiarity in his reaction made him wonder all the more. But if she was a vision or a memory, how could she speak to him like this?

She offered him a toothless smile as he studied her cautiously. "You're a mage," he said.

"I was a priestess once," she replied. "Many centuries ago. I studied with Treande and Owyn at the great temple. My daughter, Zea, was the last of the Ea priestesses. She died when you were still quite young."

"But if you studied with Treande and Owyn—" He stopped speaking as the realization came to him. There was no other explanation. Ea lived two hundred years at best.

"Ah, now you begin to understand, don't you, Taren? Not all visions are memories." She smiled and something in his memory stirred. She had been quite beautiful once. He was sure of it.

"You're... a ghost?"

She laughed. "Call me what you will. A ghost. A spirit. A promise made long ago."

"A promise? To Treande?"

"Now you understand, don't you?" She turned and looked out over the water as if remembering something, then cackled again. "You always called me a pest."

"I... I didn't—"

"I called him far worse." She grinned and her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

Taren stared at her in surprise, then laughed in spite of himself.

"You're younger than he was when we first met," she continued.

"Tell me about him," Taren said.

She smiled and shook her head. "You needn't hear about your own past from me. You can see the truth far more clearly with your own gift of sight."

"Then why are you here? What promise did you make him?"

Her smile disappeared quickly as her expression grew serious. "What are you waiting for, Taren?" she asked, ignoring his question. "You must find the keeper."

“Keeper of the rune stone?”

“Odhrán.”

“Odhrán? But where—?” he began, his words failing him as he saw her body dissolve in a spray of salt.

TAREN WALKED the bluffs by Ian’s side a few hours later. “Would you like to swim?” Ian asked as they reached the path that led to the water.

“Not tonight. Thank you.” They swam nearly every night together, often making love under the waves. Tonight, though, Taren felt compelled to remain on land.

Ian chuckled. “So formal. You’d think I was a stranger and not your mate.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Tell me how to help you.” Ian clasped Taren’s hand tighter.

“I wish I knew.”

“I can sometimes be patient.” Ian smiled, but Taren could see the concern in his eyes.

Taren led them back down the hill toward the village. “I spent the afternoon with Vurin,” he said as they walked.

“So I heard.”

“He told you?” Taren asked.

“He didn’t need to.” Ian stopped walking for a moment and turned to face Taren. “The entire village knows how much time you spend at the temple.”

“I’m sorry.” He knew it was selfish of him to spend so much time there.

“You mustn’t apologize to me for something the goddess calls you to do.” Ian squeezed Taren’s hand reassuringly.

“I once heard you say you didn’t believe the goddess existed,” Taren pointed out. He brushed his fingers over Ian’s cheek.

“I’ve said many things.” Ian chuckled. “Including some about how exasperating you can be. But I no longer doubt she exists. You’re proof enough of that for me.”

“You’ve been dreaming as well, haven’t you?” Taren studied Ian’s face carefully. He’d heard Ian mumble in his sleep, heard him speak Treande’s name.

“I’m no seer,” Ian replied. Taren could sense Ian’s reticence to say more.

“You’re avoiding my question, *Captain*.” Taren knew Ian feared the dreams, just as Taren feared his gift. “You cannot hide things from me either,” he added. “It goes both ways.”

“Indeed.” Ian stopped and kissed Taren. “I should know better.”

“You *should*.” Taren clasped Ian’s face in his hands and smiled back at him.

Ian frowned, then shook his head. “Some of the dreams seem almost real.”

“Not dreams. Memories. Why should I be the only one to have them?” Taren asked.

“Could be.” Ian appeared momentarily uncomfortable.

“Tell me, then. What did you dream of?”

“I dreamed we sailed to the Gateway Islands.” Ian slipped from Taren’s grasp and stepped off the path, pausing at the edge of the high cliff to gaze out at the ocean.

“The Gateways?” Taren knew they were so called because of their location as a waypoint between the Kingdom of Derryth and the Eastern Lands. “The last outpost of humanity,” Rider had called them. There had been talk aboard the *Sea Witch* of sailing to the Eastern Lands, but Rider had always refused when the men had asked. Taren knew now that Rider had continued to sail the Luathan Sea to assist Ian in spying for the mainland Ea.

“Aye.”

“Were we headed to the Eastern Lands?” Taren asked. He couldn’t explain why hearing this left him feeling strangely wistful and ill at ease.

“I don’t know. I only remember that you were with me but that we were not sailing aboard the *Phantom*. The ship was foreign to me. Peculiar rigging.”

“What did it look like?”

Ian frowned, then said, “The sails were like the wings of a bird, colorful, hanging from double masts. Like a noblewoman’s fan.”

“When I was very young, Borstan once described ships like that. Said they sail nowhere but in Astenya, the Kingdom of the East. He called them ‘dragon wings.’” Taren smiled at the memory. “I recall imagining the ships taking flight, borne on the wind.” He didn’t tell Ian he’d dreamed of the same ships—he hadn’t remembered until that moment. The coincidence seemed ominous. Taren shivered as the wind shifted direction without warning and blew Ian’s hair about his face.

Ian turned and gave Taren a strange look.

“Something wrong?” Taren asked.

“No. Nothing.” Ian shrugged. “It feels like rain.”

THE NEXT day Taren returned once again to the temple ruins. The storm of the night before had left him feeling pensive and more restless than usual.

“I sense something has changed in you,” Vurin said as he joined him a few hours later.

“Something Ian said made me think that perhaps the goddess has spoken to me.” He still wasn’t sure he believed she had.

“The goddess cannot tell you what you desire,” Vurin said, as if he’d sensed Taren’s unspoken questions. “She can only lead you to your heart. But if you choose not to listen to what your heart tells you, she cannot help you.” Vurin pressed his lips together and leaned back on his hands. “Your heart has spoken, hasn’t it?”

“I don’t know.” He knew Vurin would sense the lie, but he knew just as well he would not press him further.

“Let me help you, then.” Vurin got to his feet and gazed out at the ship floating in the cove. The *Phantom* looked a bit forlorn, like a woman awaiting her lover’s return. The crew had taken the sails down and some of the villagers were working to repair them. “I have asked Ian to sail to the Gateway Islands in search of the rune stone.”

“You... what?”

“We cannot let the rune stone fall into the hands of those who might use it against us.” Vurin’s eyes remained fixed on the ship. “You of all people understand this.”

Taren’s jaw tensed, and the helplessness and fear that always possessed him when he thought of the stone spread through his body like icy water. He shivered. “No one has seen the stone for hundreds of years. Perhaps it’s better to leave it be.”

“You and Ian are meant to find it, Taren. The goddess has shown me this.”

“What did Ian say when you asked him to find it?” Taren was pretty sure he knew the answer.

“That the choice must be yours.”

FOUR

The present

IAN WATCHED from the foredeck as the *Phantom* limped toward land. The scouts had transformed and circled Cera, the largest and closest of the Gateway Islands, in search of an isolated cove where they could anchor the ship away from prying eyes. Ian had been tempted to swim with them in hopes of locating Taren, but he knew his place was with his crew, who were licking their wounds and mourning the loss of their comrade. Already, Renda prepared for the ceremony to send Crian to his final rest in the goddess's arms, gathering long strands of the frilly derat plant from the ocean floor as well as flowers from the island forest.

"Captain," Barra said, bringing Ian back to himself. "Permission to take two men into town and search for news of Taren once we anchor."

"I...", Ian began, taken aback by Barra's concern. "Do you think you're well enough?" Barra had been thrown overboard during the battle and injured while in his Ea form. Renda had healed him, but he still looked a bit under the weather. True, Barra had looked tired even before they'd left Callaecia. He had relatives still on Ea'nu, and Ian guessed Barra feared for their safety now that he'd sworn allegiance to Vurin and the mainland Ea. Barra wasn't the only member of the *Phantom's* crew who worried their loved ones might be at risk.

"Renda's given me his permission. And I... well, I know Taren and I got off to a bit of a rough start, but..."

"Permission granted. But be careful. We don't know who the enemy is. They may be on the island as well."

Barra nodded. "Aye, sir." He began to walk away, then stopped and said, "I'm sorry, sir. If I'd known he was in the water, I would have—"

"You have nothing to apologize for." Ian squeezed Barra's shoulder. "We'll find him soon enough."

"Aye. That we will."

EARLY THE next morning, after Renda had completed his work on the enchantments meant to hide the *Phantom* from being discovered, Ian transformed as he dove into the warm water from the port side. He'd barely made it out of the cove where they'd dropped anchor when he sensed someone following him.

"*And where do you think you're going without me?*" Renda drawled as he caught up with Ian.

If you're here to lecture me about leaving my command, Ian said, *you might as well just turn around.*

"*If you think I'm going to lecture you about following your heart, then you're sorely mistaken.*"

Ian turned and eyed Renda with suspicion.

"*What? Am I such a rotten friend that you'd think so poorly of me?*"

What do you want? Ian knew Renda too well to believe friendship his only motivation. Renda laughed and shook his head, then swam around Ian in circles. *Enough! Say your piece, then be gone!*

"*Tell me more about what happened during the battle. When you told me Taren had been injured.*" Renda swam beneath Ian now, looking up at him and matching his speed so Ian had no choice but look directly at him.

What more do you need to know? I sensed his pain. I knew he'd been injured. Ian clenched, then unclenched his jaw. *Why do you think I'm so anxious to find him?*

Renda nodded but did not move away. "*How did you know he'd been injured?*"

Ian shook his head. *I'm not sure. I felt it. The pain of the blow. But I knew it wasn't my own pain.*

Renda moved to Ian's side as they continued to swim farther out. "*You won't find him here.*"

I know. Ian wouldn't fool himself. If Taren were this close, he'd have sensed it. I'm only hoping to find some clue as to where he's ended up.

When Renda said nothing more, Ian asked, *So will you tell me the truth about why you came with me?*

"Am I so obvious?" Renda grinned.

You forget how well I know you. Ian laughed and swam a bit faster. The water grew deeper and cooler as they headed farther from land. For Ian, who'd been pacing the decks since Taren's disappearance, swimming in this form felt as though he'd been released from a prison cell.

"All right." Renda pursed his lips, then asked, *"What else did you notice about Taren during the battle?"*

Other than his lack of concern for his own safety? Ian shook his head. *Nothing that I can recall. Why do you ask?*

"The wind," Renda began, as if trying to put into words what he'd been thinking. *"When it shifted during the battle... I felt magic at work. Powerful magic."*

Taren? I... I sensed something familiar, but I thought I'd imagined it. He frowned, then stopped swimming and turned to face Renda. *You think that was Taren?*

"What do you think?"

Ian ignored the urge to wipe the knowing look off Renda's face and instead answered, *We both grew up hearing stories of priests who could control the elements. Treande was one of them, but—*

"But Owyn wielded the rune stone. I know what you're thinking. If Treande was the one with the power, then why would Owyn have been the wielder?"

Aye.

"If Owyn had been able to use the stone, why was he unable to save his people?"

Ian shook his head. *Why do you insist on answering your own questions with questions?*

"Because it pleases me."

Why would the goddess have given Owyn the stone if he couldn't protect his people? Ian countered, enjoying the verbal parry.

"The goddess rarely reveals her plans for us."

Platitudes.

“Truths.” Renda met Ian’s gaze and held it. “You simply don’t wish to accept the truth, Ian. You’re afraid of losing him.”

Damn right I’m afraid of losing him! Ian shouted. I love him. More than my life. I’ve already let him down once. I have to live with that every day, knowing how he suffered because I did nothing to intervene. I won’t do it again.

“You can’t hold him hostage to your fear, old friend,” Renda said softly. “You can’t stop this. None of us can. If you try to rein him in, you will only end up losing him.”

I know. Ian sighed. But he’s so young, so inexperienced. He knows so little about his people.

“He’s younger than you, to be sure.” Renda smiled and clasped Ian’s shoulder. “And although he knows little about us, he’s hardly naïve. He survived a difficult life amongst the humans. Even Seria and the Council failed to break his spirit. He’s far stronger than you give him credit.”

Aye. He is. Perhaps I’m the one who isn’t strong enough to bear this.

“You may both survive this yet,” Renda replied with a chuckle. “Now let’s see if we can find a clue as to where he may have gone. I’m afraid I may not survive your damnable pacing if we don’t.”

FIVE

TAREN SPAT the sand from his mouth, rolled onto his back, and looked up to see a boy of twelve or thirteen staring down at him. He was blond, with eyes the color of the ocean. As he met Taren's gaze, the corners of his mouth turned upward in something resembling a smirk.

"Go away," Taren said as he struggled to remember where he was and how he'd come here. Maybe if he just closed his eyes....

Taren's head pounded and the muscles at the back of his neck ached. He reached up to discover a sizeable knot on his skull just behind his right ear. "I said, go away." His mind seemed blurred, his thoughts scattered. He remembered diving into the water and nearly being hit by a volley of cannon fire. He remembered the wind shifting and then a sharp pain from behind.

The memory of the battle returned, jarring him back to his senses.

Ian! He remembered he'd been unable to do anything but watch the mizzenmast as it snapped. He remembered feeling Ian's pain as keenly as if it were his own as Ian was injured by a falling beam. His gut clenched, his head spun, and he fought back a wave of nausea. His body seemed to float, carried away on his fear like driftwood battered by the waves. *Goddess, please don't take him from me again!* He struggled to clear his mind; he knew he'd accomplish nothing if he panicked. He drew several long breaths as Vurin had taught him, and felt the sand beneath his body once again, familiar and reassuring. Grounded once more, he reached out for Ian's presence.

Thank the goddess Ian was alive! On another island or at sea, but alive. No, more than alive. Ian was whole, powerful. If he'd been injured when the mast fell, he was now healed. Taren gazed out at the water, knowing Ian

and the *Phantom* were too far away, but hoping nonetheless that he might see them.

“Where are your clothes?” the boy asked.

Taren had nearly forgotten about him. His mind felt mired in fog, although he no longer felt the fear stab at his gut. The hot midday sun was beginning to burn his skin. Of course. If he was naked, he must have transformed after he’d been separated from the *Phantom*. Again he struggled to remember. If he’d been injured before he’d transformed, why hadn’t his body healed?

Ian is safe, he told himself once again, clinging to that truth as if by thinking it he might rein in his meandering thoughts. He needed to find Ian and his crew. But first he needed something. He rubbed his eyes. What was it he needed? Something that the boy had said.... Why did he keep forgetting? Instinctively, he reached for his waist. There was something he’d had in his belt? A weapon. Sharp.

The dagger! He was naked. If he’d transformed, he’d probably broken the belt he’d worn. “Did you see it?” he asked. “The silver dagger.” He needed that dagger, although he wasn’t sure why. It was special. *Sacred*. The word came to him as if someone else had spoken it in his ear to remind him.

“No.” The boy looked at him with obvious suspicion. “Perhaps it’s in the same place where you lost your clothes. Do you know where they are?”

Taren looked around to get his bearings. In the far distance, a few dozen shacks hugged the rocky coastline. A village, perhaps? He remembered the sweet scent of flowers mingling with the tang of the surf, and the crumbling, centuries-old foundation of a house on the bluffs overlooking the ocean. The house he and Ian had begun to rebuild.

Ian. Where was Ian?

“Did you hear me?” the boy asked. He appeared irritated, his hands firmly planted on his hips, his face set in a scowl.

“What?” Taren frowned and tried to remember what the boy had said before.

“I asked where your clothes were.”

“I don’t know.” Taren honestly couldn’t remember. *I must have transformed*. This thought was quickly followed by the realization that he’d had that particular thought before. “I... I don’t remember.” Whatever had

hit him in the water had hit him hard enough to jumble his thoughts. He'd seen that happen once before, when he'd been aboard another ship. Someone—a boy?—had hit his head on one of the masts. He struggled to remember the name of the ship but could not. And he needed to find the dagger.

“We should find you some, then.”

“Some what?” Taren asked, losing his train of thought once more.

“Clothes.” The boy offered Taren his hand. “I can help you.”

Taren considered the offer. Even as strange as he felt, he figured the boy could do him no real harm. He was smaller even than Aine, built far more like a girl. He was thin—thinner than a boy of his age should be—his ribs prominently visible since he wore no shirt. Taren wondered when he'd eaten last. He reminded Taren of himself a scant few years before, when he'd begged Cook to let him lick the pot before washing it.

Taren wondered vaguely how he could remember his time at the inn so clearly, when he could recall only some of the events that had brought him here. “I... yes. Thank you.”

The boy laughed.

“What's so funny?” Taren asked.

“It's rare I meet someone as polite. Usually it's ‘get ye gone, boy!’ and nothing more.” The boy smiled to reveal a set of white teeth with a small gap between the two largest. An endearing smile. This too reminded Taren of something. Someone. Red-haired. Freckled. Someone Taren cared for. Taren struggled to remember his name but came up empty. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. His head still ached.

Best get some clothing. Until his head cleared, he doubted he'd be able to find his way back to the *Phantom*. *Eat, rest, then...* His thoughts clouded once again, and he rubbed his face with his hand in a vain attempt to think clearly.

“Clothing?” the boy prompted. He scrunched up his face, then added, “Are you sure you're all right?”

“I'm fine.” Taren managed to get to his knees before the pain in his limbs asserted itself with a vengeance. He cried out as his muscles seized, protesting the movement, so he rested on his hands until the worst of it had passed. It struck him as odd that his body was so battered, yet he had no

broken bones, or at least none that he immediately recognized as being broken.

“You don’t seem well.” The boy eyed him with concern.

“Fine.” Taren spoke the word between clenched teeth. The last thing he needed was a mother hen half his age.

“Stay here. I’ll get you some clothing.” The boy waited until Taren nodded his assent, then took off at a trot down the beach.

Taren closed his eyes and breathed in the crisp air. He remembered a walk along the beach and how Ian had pulled him into the surf. He remembered making love beneath the waves, and how Ian had felt....

Ian. Taren reminded himself that Ian was safe and his racing heart calmed once again. Why did he keep forgetting things? *I need to get back to the ship.*

“Here you go.”

Taren looked up, surprised to see the boy standing there holding a bundle of fabric. *Clothing. Yes. He was going to find me clothing.* “Thank you,” he said.

“Do you need any help?”

“No. I can do it.” Taren took the clothes from the boy’s arms and tried to stand up. He swayed, then promptly sat back down again as the world seemed to tilt on its axis. The boy huffed and extended one arm. Taren ignored the offer of assistance and managed to get to his feet on the third try. He hadn’t felt this out of sorts since he’d been pulled from the water by Ian’s crew nearly six months before.

“You must have hit your head,” the boy said. “If you need some help, I can—”

“I’m fine,” Taren snapped.

“Suit yourself.” He watched in silence as Taren dressed in the gray linen trousers and slipped the simple tunic over his head.

“What’s your name?” Taren studied the boy a bit more carefully as he pulled his long hair from his face and knotted it at the base of his neck.

“Brynn.”

“I’m Taren.” He no longer used the name he’d taken from his former master. Borstan Laxley had never owned him, never loved him as a son even though Taren had wished he had. He’d once asked Vurin his parents’

family name, but Vurin had explained they had none: only Ea who lived amongst humans took a second name. Perhaps if he and Ian handfasted, he might take Ian's family name, but for now "Taren" was good enough for him.

Ian. Why was it he remembered Ian and the *Phantom* so clearly but nearly everything else seemed to blur in his memory?

"Taren. What kind of name is that?"

Taren shrugged. "The name my parents gave me."

"You're not from here. Do you come from the Eastern Lands?"

"Raice Harbor." Taren chuckled. The thought that the boy might think him exotic amused him.

"You sailed here, then." Brynn seemed pleased to have come to this conclusion.

"Aye."

"Where's your ship?"

A fair question. "I don't know." Taren wondered if Brynn might have news of the *Phantom*, but he decided to wait until he was sure of the boy's intentions to ask.

Brynn raised a pale eyebrow. "Why are you here?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"Does that bother you?" Brynn's eyes shone with a silent challenge.

Taren couldn't help but smile. The boy had twice the gall of Fiall and none of his self-control. "No. It's refreshing."

"But you haven't answered my question," Brynn pointed out.

"I'm looking for someone." He'd remembered this and saw no reason to withhold the truth. He might learn something to help them find the rune stone. And if Vurin was correct....

"A woman?" Brynn's smirk was charmingly naïve.

"A man."

"Oh. I see. You prefer men."

Perhaps not so naïve. Taren laughed at the boy's audacity. "I'm interested in speaking with him, not bedding him. Perhaps you've heard of him? The pirate Odhrán?"

"*Him?*" Brynn raised his chin and smiled outright. "Of course I've heard of him. I know him well."

Taren chuckled. "Indeed. And you must be one of his trusted crew."

Brynn's expression was one of obvious indignation. "He prefers to remain hidden, so I run errands for him from time to time. There are plenty of men around these islands who would like to see him dead."

"Another reason to be skeptical of your claim," Taren said as he sat down on a large rock and crossed his arms over his chest. "How do you know I'm not here to kill him?"

The boy shrugged. "You have no weapon." He pulled a knife from the waist of his pants and pointed the blade at Taren. "For a man who is here to kill a dangerous pirate, you're far too trusting. I could have killed you ages ago."

"You watched me when I was asleep?"

Brynn ignored Taren's question. "I can take you to him." He stood up and brushed a few strands of hair from his eyes.

"Take me?" Taren hadn't considered that the boy might actually know the location of Odhrán's hideaway. He'd intended to return to Ian and the *Phantom* as quickly as possible, but now he hesitated.

"You worried about your shipmates?" Brynn asked.

Taren jumped up, excited by the thought that Brynn might know of his crewmates' fate. "What do you know of them?" he demanded, knowing he sounded desperate but too worried to care.

Brynn swung his arms at his sides and pressed his lips together. "I know there was a battle not far from Cera. One of the ships sank. The other, the *Phantom*, is in port near Gate Town, on the main island."

"And her crew?" Taren's heart pounded against his ribs and he swallowed hard.

"Safe, I hear tell. Her mizzen was destroyed, but the crew survived."

Taren released a long, slow breath, then sat back down heavily. He'd never been so relieved. "Thank the goddess," he muttered. No doubt Ian would have undertaken repairs as soon as possible, but with damage such as that, the *Phantom* wouldn't be able to sail for several months. *Time enough to look for Odhrán.*

"You will take me to him, then," Taren said. If he knew Ian was safe, perhaps Ian knew the same was true for him. Delaying his return to the *Phantom* by a few days would change nothing. Ian might be angry with him, but he'd also forgive him.

“But you will have to pay me.”

“Pay you?” Taren would have gladly shared any coins he had if only the boy could eat. As it was, however, he had nothing of value to offer. “If I could pay you, would I have borrowed these clothes?”

“You can pay me with something other than coins. Your necklace would do nicely.”

Taren put his hand to his neck and felt the familiar rugged stones and colorful bits of shell strung there. He’d forgotten he still wore his mother’s necklace. Of course he’d never willingly part with it. Then again, he was pretty sure Brynn had no idea where Odhrán was. And if by some chance the boy wasn’t full of bluster and led him to Odhrán, Taren would figure out some other form of payment once he met up with the *Phantom* and her crew.

“All right.” Ian would have called him a fool for following the boy, but Taren reckoned it was a risk worth taking. Brynn certainly had been capable of injuring him, even if he doubted the boy would have killed him. And if there was a chance he was telling Taren the truth....

Brynn’s eyes lit up with pleasure as he held out his hand.

“You’ll not get paid until you deliver on your part of the bargain.”

Brynn frowned but did not protest. The boy was a quick study. “He lives on an island to the west of here. We will need a boat.”

“And where did you expect I might find a boat?” Taren asked.

“Borrow one?” One corner of Brynn’s mouth curved upward and his eyes sparkled with humor.

TAREN AND Brynn slept under the stars not far from the thicket of trees where they'd hidden the small fishing boat. It had taken them several hours to carry the boat through the thick forest to a secluded cove where they wouldn't be spotted by the villagers, and by then, it had been too dark to sail.

Taren hadn't wanted to risk making a fire for fear they might be spotted, so they ate the fish they'd caught in the small net left in the boat without cooking it. Brynn didn't seem to mind. Taren watched as Brynn thoroughly licked each of his fingers after tossing what was left of a fish—little more than bones—into the nearby bushes. Taren knew few humans who would eat raw fish without complaint. He guessed the boy often went hungry.

"Where do you live?" Taren asked as he drank the water from one of the coconuts he'd harvested from a nearby tree.

"Here and there," Brynn answered with a shrug.

"Parents?"

Another shrug.

Taren passed the half-empty coconut to the boy, who drank the remaining liquid and set the shell down beside him. "What do you know about Odhrán?"

"Not much. He pays me enough that I can eat." Brynn pointed to Taren's half-eaten fish and asked, "Are you going to finish that?"

"You're welcome to it."

Brynn took the fish and devoured it in the blink of an eye.

“Haven’t been paid recently?” Taren sat back on his hands and watched Brynn wipe his face with the back of his hand.

Brynn scowled and scratched his head. His hair was long, even longer than Taren’s, and so light that it appeared almost white in the fading light. Some of the strands near the front of his face were woven into tiny braids, knotted at the ends. Taren had seen few boys as beautiful. His delicate features called to mind a girl, but his forward manner was anything but feminine.

“What do you do aboard the *Phantom*?” Brynn asked after he’d settled back comfortably on the sand.

“Rigger,” Taren answered.

“Really? I’d’ve taken you for the sailing master.”

Taren laughed. “Hardly.” Ian often spoke to him about taking a more powerful position aboard the *Phantom*, but Taren always refused. He’d happily served as a deckhand on the *Sea Witch* before he’d met Ian.

The Sea Witch! How had he forgotten the name before? Taren felt profound relief to have remembered this. *Fiall*. The boy from the ship. He’d hit his head on a mast and the ship’s surgeon had tended to him. With this memory came several others: Rider, the *Witch*’s captain, offering him his freedom in exchange for three years of servitude, and the first night he’d shared his body with Rider and Bastian.

Brynn shook his head. “Don’t get many large ships around here. Mostly they stay away because of the pirates, but the town’s harbor is shallow, so most of the ships put into port on Cera.” He stared up at the sky, where a few stars were now visible in the deepening darkness. “Why did you leave your ship?”

“I wanted a drink at the town tavern.”

“You lie.” Brynn didn’t seem particularly concerned about this. “Did you fall overboard during the battle?”

“You really do ask too many questions, boy.” Taren repressed a laugh. Brynn was charming. Irritating, but charming.

“What do you want with Odhrán?”

“Nothing you need be concerned with.” Taren was tempted to point out that this was yet another question, but he found himself enjoying the banter.

Brynn smiled. “I hear he has a mountain of gold hidden in a cavern on one of these islands and a dragon who stands watch over it.”

Taren knew Brynn was casting for answers. “I’m not interested in gold,” he replied. He watched for the boy’s reaction.

“They all say that.”

Clever boy. Taren was beginning to believe Brynn *did* know the pirate. Odhrán had a reputation for being wily—no doubt a sharp boy like Brynn would be the perfect set of eyes and ears for the reclusive pirate to keep abreast of happenings around the islands. “Believe what you wish. Our bargain did not include sharing my secrets.”

Brynn kicked the sand with a slender foot. “Our bargain could include more than just information, you know.” The way he stroked his neck with the backs of his fingers was openly flirtatious.

“You’re far too young,” Taren said with a chuckle. “Besides, my heart is already spoken for.”

“Pity. I can see by the way you look at me that you think I’m pretty.” Brynn ran the tip of his tongue over his pink lips. “Who is he?”

Whelp. “You’re far too clever for your own good, you know.” Taren yawned and lay down in the sand.

“You admit it, then,” Brynn pressed. “You think I’m pretty?”

“You’re pretty. Now can we get some sleep?” Taren had no intention of sleeping—even if he believed the boy would do him no harm, he didn’t fully trust him either.

“Good night, Taren. If you should change your mind....”

“Good night, Brynn.”

SEVEN

“IS HE awake yet?” said a man’s voice, unfamiliar yet strangely comforting. Taren looked around to see where the voice had come from, but saw only the thatching of a roof. He inhaled the sweet scent of pine and incense and wondered if perhaps he was Treande once more, asleep beside his beloved Owyn.

“He’s still tired after the consecration. Aren’t you, little one?”

Taren gazed up into a pair of green eyes, then blinked and yawned in quick succession. He stretched his arms and marveled to see how smooth and pale they were. His hands were tiny, with chubby fingers he couldn’t quite control. When he tried to speak, the soft cooing sound that issued from his lips took him by surprise.

I’m a baby?

The man came into view. Brown-eyed, with dark hair, pale skin, and a hint of freckles on his high cheekbones, he wore an expression of genuine happiness. Pride. Pleasure. Love, perhaps?

“Taren,” the man said, as if he were speaking the name for the first time, letting it settle upon his lips. “What a strange name.”

“A human name,” the woman said. “The goddess’s choice for him. I think it’s quite beautiful.”

“Little Taren,” the man said in a gentle voice. “Vurin says you will grow to be strong.” He tickled Taren’s chin with a long finger, and Taren murmured happily.

Vurin?

“Larin,” the woman said, “he looks so much like you. Will you be a sailor like your father, my brave Taren?” she asked. “Or will you tend the

fields like your mother?”

My parents!

She smiled once more, then gathered him into her arms. Taren reached for her cheek and inhaled the scent of freesia and sweetgrass. She was as beautiful as he'd imagined, with skin the color of the moon and black hair like the finest silk. She smiled down at him and tiny creases formed in the corners of her eyes.

“He says he prefers to look like you, beloved,” Larin said with a chuckle. “You are far prettier than I.” He wrapped his arms around them both and kissed her neck.

“Did you see the old priestess fawn over him?” Taren's mother asked. “She held him for so long, Vurin had to take him from her to begin the ceremony.”

“How could she not admire his beauty?”

His mother laughed, a musical sound that filled Taren's heart as much as his ears. “Zea's been blind for ten years! Sometimes I wonder if it isn't only her sight that's left her.”

“Duri! You mustn't joke about her. The goddess will—”

“Laugh,” his mother finished. “Even the goddess has a sense of humor. Zea laughs at herself more than you know. And she loves to say her mother was even stranger. Some say she speaks to her mother, Aerin, through the veil of death.” She kissed Larin, then kissed her finger and pressed it to Taren's lips.

“What did she say about Taren?”

“That the blood of the priests runs strong in his veins,” she said, imitating the quavering voice of an old woman.

Larin chuckled. “Mage, indeed! Anyone could have said the same knowing our families. The Council's been testing our kin for centuries now. Goddess only knows what they'd have done if any one of us possessed the ancient gifts. No doubt our son will be as wonderfully ungifted as we are.”

“She seemed to think otherwise,” Duri said as she tickled Taren's belly and nudged his face with her cheek. “Didn't you see how she pulled Vurin aside after the consecration?”

“She's probably already decided on a mate for Taren.”

“And what’s so wrong about that?” Duri grinned at her husband. “She was hardly wrong about you. Or are you having second thoughts about our handfasting?”

“Never.” Larin kissed her cheek and gazed down at Taren again. “She may be a bit doddering, but she knows how to make a match. Still, you and I were a bit older than Taren when she suggested we meet.”

Taren yawned and struggled to keep his eyes open.

“You need to sleep now, my sweet,” Duri said as she placed Taren back in the basket and arranged the blankets around him. “Tomorrow we will take you to the water for the first time. You should see how handsome your father is when he transforms.” She began to sing, a sweet lullaby he knew he’d heard before.

I don’t want to sleep. I want to stay here with you!

“MOTHER. PLEASE let me stay,” Taren mumbled. Why was his mouth filled with sand? He was supposed to be sleeping. It had been so warm under the blankets.

“Wake up!”

Taren awoke to discover Brynn leaning over him, his expression set in a frown. “I... where...?” He felt disoriented, as he often did after a vision. It had ended too soon. Maybe if he just closed his eyes, he’d find himself back in the basket with his mother’s voice singing to him.

“Lost your mother?”

Stupid fool! If he’d wanted to harm you—

“You’re still worried I might hurt you, aren’t you?” Brynn appeared pleased with this conclusion.

Taren ignored this, although he figured Brynn had a point. As out of sorts as he’d been since he’d washed up on the beach, Taren knew he’d been careless with his own safety. “Go back to sleep,” he grumbled, unwilling to dignify the question with a response. “It’s *you* who should be worried of what I’ll do if it turns out you lied to me about Odhrán.”

Brynn crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “I haven’t lied. You’ll see.”

Taren repressed a chuckle. “That I will,” he said as Brynn lay back down on the sand. “That I will.”

EIGHT

THEY SET out at dawn after loading the small boat with coconuts. Brynn explained that it would take them nearly the entire day to reach Odhrán's island, and while they might be able to fish along the way, there would be no fresh water for them to drink.

Thankfully, the sun played a game of cat and mouse with the soft white clouds as Taren rowed. Brynn offered to help, but thin as Brynn was, Taren figured he'd let the boy rest a bit. Taren's body still ached from his injuries, but he embraced the physical labor. It helped keep his mind off Ian and his crewmates, at least temporarily.

The faster you find Odhrán, the faster you'll be reunited with them, he reminded himself as he pushed away his unease at being separated from Ian. He disliked making decisions such as this one, but having done so, he resolved not to doubt his choices. Or at least he resolved to *try* not to doubt them.

"Were you born on these islands?" he asked Brynn as the island grew small on the horizon.

"No."

"Where are you from?"

Brynn shrugged and gazed skyward at the gulls that had followed them since they'd left the beach.

Much as Taren wished to learn more about the boy, Brynn was clearly reticent to speak about himself, and Taren wouldn't press him. Best to try to draw him out first. Speak of something less personal. "What more do you know about Odhrán?" he asked.

Brynn looked back at Taren, clearly pleased to share what he knew. “He is powerfully strong. Stronger than you, even. They say he can kill a man your size with his bare hands.”

Taren supposed this was possible, although Odhrán would have to be a giant of a man to do so. “If he’s so powerful, why does he hide?”

Brynn shrugged again. “They say he has enough gold to last him an eternity and that he guards it well.”

“The dragon,” Taren said with a smile. Brynn nodded solemnly. “And the stories about merfolk?” Taren disbelieved the rumors that Odhrán kept Ea as slaves, but he was curious to learn more about how they had begun.

“Some of the fishermen claim to have seen them,” Brynn said. “Men and women with tails like fish. Myself, I don’t know.”

“You haven’t seen them?”

Brynn stretched his arms over his head and yawned. “I’ve seen something. Don’t know what to call it. Like a small whale. It vanished before I could see it clearly.”

Something the size of a whale, even a small one, was far too large to be an Ea. “Do you think merfolk exist?” He wasn’t sure why he asked.

“Nah. Although if they did, I’d like to meet one. Like to meet a dragon too. Can you just imagine, flying on its back as it swoops over the islands and lights the volcanoes?”

Taren laughed at Brynn’s broad grin. Perhaps after he’d found Odhrán, he might see if Rider needed another hand aboard the *Sea Witch*. This thought reminded him again of how alike he and Brynn were.

Night had nearly fallen when the island came into view and the familiar smell of the ocean mingled on the warm breeze with the earthy scent of trees and flowering plants. Birds sang to one another and insects added to their melodies. Unlike the other Gateway Islands, this particular island had little flat land or beach. Jagged cliffs seemed to rise directly from the water, and the vegetation was thick and green. There was no sign of any habitation. No boats, no trails visible from the water.

“Hundreds of years ago, they say the island was a volcano,” Brynn said as if reading Taren’s thoughts. “Those who weren’t killed when the mountain came to life fled to other islands.”

“They never moved back?” Ea’nu had a similar history, and yet the islanders made their home there. Taren had heard the soil on these volcanic

islands was rich and easy to farm, so he found it surprising no one lived on the island.

“The island is inhabited with spirits,” Brynn said in a voice that made it clear that he believed this as well. “The islanders don’t venture near.”

“A perfect place for a pirate to hide.”

“Many folk believe Odhrán himself commands the spirits.”

“Do you?” Taren asked.

“Don’t know. He doesn’t fear them. Maybe it’s true.” Brynn hopped out of the boat and grabbed the rope at its bow to drag it ashore.

Taren jumped into the water after Brynn and immediately felt the strong urge to transform. His need had grown less demanding during the months he’d spent at Callaecia with Ian, but he’d rarely gone more than a few days without giving in to the call. He would transform tonight, after Brynn had fallen asleep. In the meantime, the water felt good against his skin, cooling the burn he’d received from the hours spent on the water.

He was just about to take the rope from Brynn when he felt a strange sensation against his skin. Like the gossamer touch of thousands of tiny insects’ wings, it reminded Taren of the feel of passing through the enchantments that hid Callaecia from its human neighbors. Unlike those enchantments, however, this sensation was far more pleasant—a lover’s tender touch or the feel of silk gliding over his skin. Sensual and inviting. The feeling ended as quickly as it had begun, although his skin still vibrated after.

Goddess. What was that? Had the touch—whatever it was—aroused him?

“Taren?” Brynn frowned at him, causing Taren to wonder what sort of expression his face held. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he replied quickly, hoping to hide his discomfort at his body’s response.

“You looked strange.”

“We should get the boat ashore. It’ll be dark soon and we should fish.” He pretended to ignore Brynn’s probing gaze. Clearly the boy hadn’t felt what he had. Was it possible the stories of Odhrán’s merfolk were true, after all? If the strange feeling had been an enchantment, had Odhrán given Brynn the ability to pass through it and bring others with him?

Or maybe you're so enamored with the idea that there might be others of your kind here that you're dreaming things up. Better not to worry about things he knew nothing about. He needed to find Odhrán and ask him about the stone.

NINE

THEY CARRIED the boat over the rocky shore, and for once Taren wished he had shoes. Brynn appeared entirely oblivious to the sharp stones.

The beach was shallow, ending at a sheer cliff face that rose at least a hundred feet. Here and there, trees grew from cracks and holes in the volcanic stone, jutting outward, then reaching up for the sun so that their trunks were bent. Other than the sound of the water and of the birds overhead, it was eerily quiet, with no sign of Odhrán or his men.

“Where to from here?” Taren asked after they’d secured the boat to a tree.

“We climb.”

“We have no ropes,” Taren pointed out as he gathered their meager provisions into the small net they’d found on the boat.

“There’s a trail. It’s narrow but passable.” Brynn started down the beach without waiting for Taren to finish, forcing Taren to speed up. By the time he’d caught Brynn, the soles of his feet were battered and bruised from the rocks, as were his ankles. Brynn, however, seemed none the worse for wear. He sat down on a rock and waited until Taren made his careful way over to the edge of the cove.

Brynn laughed, then hopped up and slipped between the cliff face and a knotty tree. Taren followed. It took a bit more effort for him to squeeze through the tight passage, but as he emerged on the other side of the trunk, he saw the path Brynn had described. The trail was hewn from the volcanic rock, though it was surprisingly smooth.

Brynn scrambled up the trail with Taren following a few feet behind. The going was slow, as the trail ascended steeply. Vines had grown over the

rock, sometimes blocking their way as they climbed. Halfway up, Taren looked into the distance and saw several other islands rise like stepping stones over the aquamarine-tinted water. The air here was cooler than in the cove, and Taren could hear the sound of rushing water from above them.

Nearly an hour later, they arrived at the source of the sound: a waterfall created where a river exited the rock about thirty feet from the top of the cliff. Water cascaded over the trail and created a mist that caught the sun and glimmered like a rainbow when Taren looked across it. They'd need to take care crossing—the going was steep and the rock beneath slick with plants.

“This wasn't here the last time,” Brynn told Taren with a frown. “This time of year, the rains make the underground rivers swell.”

Taren eyed the way, noting several larger holes in the rock where he might gain a foothold. “I'll go first, then pull you up,” he said, deciding his more muscular body was a better match for the task of climbing.

Brynn's frown deepened. “I can climb this without your help. I'm stronger than you think.”

“I really don't think that's—” Taren began to say, but Brynn had already begun to scramble up the trail. Taren shook his head and followed.

For the first twenty feet or so, Brynn made steady progress upward. When he reached the beginning of the waterfall, he stepped underneath and glanced back at Taren. “Some tasks are easier if you're nimble,” he shouted over the water. Brynn scrubbed his face in the water and worked it through his hair.

Taren chuckled at the boy's self-satisfied grin, then followed him under the waterfall and did the same. It felt good to rinse the sweat and salt from his skin, and his legs welcomed the brief respite from the climb. They drank their fill of the water, which tasted sweet and clean, then emerged on the other side of the cascade. Taren guessed they had a scant twenty feet to go, but he also reckoned the going was the steepest yet. A trickle of water traced its way down the cliff by way of the path, and plants clung to the porous stone, crisscrossing over the trail.

Once again Taren offered to lead the way, but Brynn refused. Much as he feared Brynn might lose his footing on the slick surface, Taren marveled at the ease with which he climbed. From where he followed several feet behind, Taren could see the sinews of Brynn's muscles tense and relax as he

continued to work his way upward, pulling himself up by his fingers at times or scraping away dirt to clear a foothold.

Taren smiled when he realized they'd nearly reached the top of the cliff. With their goal in sight, Brynn picked up the pace of his climb.

"Boy," Taren warned as Brynn lost his grip on the rock several times along the way, "take your time. We're in no hur—"

His words were cut short as Brynn slipped and began to slide toward him. Brynn scrambled for purchase, grabbing frantically at some of the vines that followed the trail upward. For a moment his downward movement ceased, but then one of the vines holding him in place detached from the surface of the rock, its roots too weak to hold the weight of his body.

"Brynn!" Taren shouted as he tried to stop Brynn's descent with one hand. Taren's own foothold began to crumble beneath their combined weight, causing him to slide backward several feet. He managed to find an indentation with his foot, though the rough stone scraped his skin and he hissed at the stinging pain.

Brynn now dangled, still holding desperately on to a single vine with one hand, the fingers of his other hand wrapped around the root of one of the misshapen trees. Each time he tried to steady himself by planting his feet, they slipped against the wet trail.

Taren gritted his teeth, frustrated that he could do no better than hold his ground. If he could just manage to climb a few feet higher, he could snag the boy around his waist and haul him up. But try as he might, he couldn't find a place to dig his fingers in and shore up his own precarious position. If he could take advantage of his Ea strength, perhaps he could force his fingers into the stone, but in his human form, he wasn't nearly strong enough.

Brynn kicked and swayed, grunting with the effort of holding himself up with only his arms. "Stay still, boy! I'll come get you, just don't move!" Whether Brynn heard him or not, Taren couldn't be sure, because he didn't heed Taren's words. Instead, he continued to move about frantically.

Damn! The water that now ran over his hand reminded him once more of how weak he was as a human. *Or perhaps you've come to rely too much on your Ea abilities.*

The root Brynn clung to suddenly broke under his weight. It didn't snap in two, thank the goddess, but Brynn slipped farther down. Taren had

no time to think. He gritted his teeth and shoved his human fingers into one of the holes. He ignored the pain, instead digging deeper until he knew his grip was solid. He did the same with his feet as he reached up with his free hand and grabbed Brynn by the waist of his trousers. The net holding their meager supplies tumbled down onto the rocks below—a stark reminder that if Brynn fell, he'd take both of them. But if Taren could support his weight —

“Let go slowly, Brynn!” he shouted. Brynn glanced down at him, eyes wide with fear. “Slowly. I’ll hold you. Trust me.”

Brynn nodded, then slowly released his grip on the root and allowed it to slip through his fist. As he let go entirely, Taren snaked his arm around Brynn’s small waist and pulled him against his hip.

“I’ve got you, boy. Now hold on tight.”

Brynn wrapped his arms and legs around Taren’s neck and torso. When Taren was sure the boy wouldn’t fall, he let go of his waist and began to climb the rest of the way up. The going was slow and painful, the burn of his cuts and scrapes and the sound of Brynn’s labored breath in his ear reminding him what fate awaited them if they fell.

Goddess, lend me your strength, Taren prayed as he reached the steepest part of the trail and edged his way sideways until the edge of the cliff was in reach. “Go, boy,” he said as he pushed Brynn bodily over the top. Then he dragged himself up and collapsed, boneless, on the grass next to Brynn.

They lay there for some time, panting, bruised and bloody. “You...,” Brynn said in a hushed whisper. “You could have let me fall. If you’d moved over, I wouldn’t have hit you and—”

“And you would have died.”

“But... but why...?” Brynn sat up, then wiped some of the dirt off his face and hands.

Taren chuckled. “Why indeed.” He wouldn’t explain to Brynn that he owed his life many times over to men who’d seen fit to risk their own lives to save his. Instead, he said only, “I need you to lead me to Odhrán. What good would you be to me if I’d let you fall?”

Brynn stared at him for a moment, lips pursed, brow furrowed. He got to his feet and looked out over the water, then shrugged and turned back to Taren. “Thank you,” he said, his expression serious for once.

Taren only nodded.

THEY MADE camp after walking several hours toward the interior of the island. Brynn said very little, which was fine with Taren, who was tired and sore from their ordeal. The sense of unease he'd felt before had only gotten worse as time passed. His mind seemed constantly filled with thoughts of Ian. He imagined Ian pacing the deck of the *Phantom*, worried for his safety. He pushed the thought away.

Other than some berries they found on their way and some shrimp they found in a brackish stream near the campsite, they had nothing left to eat and nothing to keep them warm but the clothes on their backs.

"How often do you come here?" Taren asked as they settled down to sleep on a bed of moss.

"I've only been once."

"When Odhrán brought you?" Taren pressed.

Brynn bit his lower lip. "No. I came to explore and I..."

"And Odhrán found you." In spite of his exhaustion, Taren had noticed they'd circled several times before Brynn had decided on a direction in which to lead them.

"Aye." Something in Brynn's gaze told Taren Brynn hadn't easily escaped Odhrán's clutches.

"Why did he let you go? You knew how to find him. For someone who doesn't want to be found, it seems unlikely."

"I told you," Brynn said with obvious irritation, "I work for him now."

"Perhaps you do."

"Perhaps?" Brynn was indignant. He sat up and scowled at Taren.

"Or perhaps you have no idea where to find him." Taren crossed his arms over his chest and watched Brynn with careful attention. He suspected something else, in fact, but he'd not let on. At least not yet.

"Of course I know where to find him. He's here, on this island."

"I don't doubt that he's here." That much made sense. Taren couldn't have imagined a better stronghold than this unforgiving island. "But if you know where he is, why have we been walking around in circles for the better part of a day?"

“We have not.”

“My sense of direction is not as poor as you think, whelp.” Taren couldn’t help but laugh at the look of righteous anger on Brynn’s face. “Fess up. You came here, but you didn’t find him, did you?”

“I—”

“He found *you*.”

Brynn glanced around them, studying the trees, the underbrush, and the dirt beneath their feet as if they held great interest for him. “It... it’s not what you think. I *do* work for him. I swear it!”

“If you work for him, why would you lead me to him? Even assuming you know how to find him.” Taren waited patiently.

“I... well... it’s a bit complicated.”

“Aye,” Taren said with a chuckle. “I believe that. What I want to know is why I shouldn’t cancel our bargain.” When Brynn looked back at him without understanding, Taren added, “I was to pay you to lead me to him.”

Brynn fidgeted beneath Taren’s gaze. “You shouldn’t cancel it,” he blustered. “I’ll give you what you want. I—”

“Why should I believe you? You clearly don’t know how to find him. You may know he’s here, but even a fool can tell we’re lost. I might as well look for him myself.” Taren watched as Brynn squirmed a bit more.

“I....” Brynn paused, his shoulders drooping under the weight of Taren’s words. “Yes. You’re right. I don’t know how to find him.”

“Now we’re making headway.” Taren fingered the necklace of stones and shells Brynn had so obviously been eyeing since they’d left on their journey.

Brynn said nothing but shifted his gaze once more and chewed his lower lip.

“Tell me the truth, or I go look for Odhrán without your help,” Taren pressed.

“I... ah... well, you see...,” Brynn stammered.

“He told you to bring me here, didn’t he?”

Brynn opened his mouth as if he were about to speak, then closed it again and nodded.

“Good.”

“But aren’t you afraid he’ll kill you?” Brynn asked, eyes wide with surprise.

“Of course I am.” Taren saw no reason to be anything but honest. “But he may know where I can find something very important.”

“What’s so important that you’d risk your life?”

“I told you before. Our bargain doesn’t include sharing my secrets.” Taren smiled at Brynn.

“Does that mean we still have a bargain?” Brynn appeared buoyed to hear this.

“Aye. Take me to where they found you the last time. Assuming you can find it again,” Taren added with a chuckle.

“I can find it. We’ve been there already. The clearing where we found the berries, near the top of the cliffs.” Brynn cocked his head to one side and offered Taren a flirtatious smile. The boy was incorrigible! If Brynn made it back alive, Taren would make sure he found a better life than the one he had now.

NIGHT FELL with no sign of the pirates. As his stomach growled in protest, Taren considered leaving Brynn to fish in his Ea form but decided against it. If Odhrán was here, he wouldn’t risk being separated from Brynn. If tomorrow passed with no more sign of the pirate or his men, Taren would leave the island and find Ian and the *Phantom*.

As it began to rain, Taren lay next to Brynn under the impromptu shelter they had crafted from tree branches and leaves. Brynn shivered but did not move to close the gap between them and take advantage of Taren’s warmth. Taren wondered what might have happened to cause Brynn to fear the touch of another person, though he could well imagine the reason. How strange that one moment Brynn was offering Taren his body and the next he was pulling away.

Taren repressed a sigh, then pulled off his shirt and laid it over Brynn’s bare chest. It wasn’t much, but Brynn would be a bit warmer, at least. Taren closed his eyes and thought of Ian.

TEN

TAREN DREAMED he'd been swimming for days. Or was it weeks now? It could have been. He'd long since lost track of time. He'd eaten little since he left Ea'nu, but his stomach had ceased its weak protests days ago. He'd live long enough without food to do this thing. After that...

Owyn. You told me to live so that I might help our people. You didn't tell me I'd live so long without you.

He was so tired.

"Just a bit longer, beloved Treande, and we'll be together. I promise."
He heard Owyn's voice as if he were swimming beside him.

I'll hold you to that promise. Treande smiled.

When the priestess, Aerin, paid a call to the tiny hut where he'd made his home since he'd led the Ea to the island nearly two hundred years before, he'd been surprised. He hadn't seen her in at least a century. She'd insisted on remaining on the mainland, watching over the last of Owyn's kin who'd stayed behind as sentinels to warn their people should the humans once again become a threat.

"You didn't think you could hide forever, did you?" she'd asked as she walked in uninvited.

"I wasn't hiding from you."

She watched him through narrowed eyes for a moment, then laughed and said, "No. I suppose not. But you hide from them."

He knew she meant the island's other inhabitants. She was right. He was hiding from them. He'd been hoping to fade from the islanders' collective memory now that the new temple had been built.

“It’s high time they moved on,” he said as he sat heavily on the wooden stool in the corner by the fireplace. There was no fire burning there, but Treande caught the scent of charred pine and inhaled deeply. The smell reminded him of his days at the temple with Owyn at his side.

“They’re restless. They have no purpose now that the temple’s been built.” She sat in his only chair and crossed her legs beneath her. She’d been young when they’d left the mainland; she’d begun her studies with Owyn ten years before he’d been killed. She was far more powerful now; he could feel her gift radiate from her. It was a calm, steady sensation, much like the feel of the wind on his face when he stood at the edge of the water.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Aerin laughed again. “Too old for niceties, I see.”

“Yes.” Old and tired. Ready to move on from this life. “Might as well say it and be done with it, woman. I’m too old to wait around for you to speak your mind.”

“The goddess has shown me the future,” she said slowly, watching him for his reaction.

“Another prophecy?” He sighed. If he’d learned one thing about the goddess’s will, it was that she demanded much of him.

“Call it what you will.”

He let out a slow breath and said, with as much patience as he could muster, “What does she ask of me?”

“One last undertaking,” she replied.

“And then?”

She pursed her lips and her gaze met his. “What do you wish?”

He stood up and looked out the small window toward the water. How long had it been since he last transformed? His human body ached when he moved; his joints expressed their displeasure. The pain would pass temporarily, at least, if he transformed, but he no longer found pleasure in the water. “Peace.”

“Then perhaps you shall find it.”

“What must I do?”

Now, as he swam, he reached up and touched his hand to the sharp-edged dark stone around his neck. Better a noose than this horrible thing. He’d hesitated to take the rune stone when Aerin had held it out to him and

explained that the last of Owyn's relatives had died and there was no one else left to guard it. He'd only taken it when she'd told him the goddess wished it hidden away.

"For what purpose must I hide it?" he'd asked.

"Only the goddess knows the future, Treande," she had said.

As Taren swam, the tenor of his dream changed. He was near a sandy shore now—his destination? Was he to take the stone to this island? Old Aerin had said nothing about what he should do with it or how he might keep it safe. He transformed back into his human shape as he reached the shallow waters by a beach.

Unlike before, when his body was thin, weakened with age, he was once again young. He walked naked along the beach. The smell of flowers filled the air and the wind was gentle against his cheek.

In the distance he saw a figure walking, as he was, along the line where the water met the sand. A man. Tall, dark-haired. Taren recognized the strong line of his shoulders even from so far away. He began to run. "Ian!" he yelled as he ran. "Ian!"

TAREN AWOKE and, momentarily confused as to where he was, reached for the stone around his neck. He found nothing there but the necklace his mother had left him.

When he'd arrived at Callaecia with Ian, his visions had been infrequent. Now they dogged him every day. A foreboding sign. First his parents, then the memory of the stone. Now the priestess and Ian.

The old woman! The thought struck him with particular force. He'd thought Zea looked familiar. He was certain she was the same woman who had appeared to him on the beach near Callaecia, and twice before that. How long had it been since Taren had lived as Treande? More than eight hundred years, Vurin had said. "Treande led the survivors to Ea'nu and helped them build the first temples there." What power she must have possessed to speak to him from beyond the veil of death.

Not any greater than a power that allows you to experience the past as if it were unfolding before your eyes.

And what of the dream of Ian? It had felt so real, as if Ian had sat there, watching the water, waiting for him. He thought of how he could

sense Ian's presence when they were apart, and wondered if somehow Ian *had* been there on that beach. Waiting for him. Worried for him.

With this thought, Taren rubbed his eyes, inhaled slowly, then realized Brynn was watching him. "What are you looking at?"

"You were talking in your sleep," Brynn said with a frown. "Who's Ian?"

"Go back to sleep, boy." Taren tensed his jaw.

Brynn huffed softly but did as he was told. Taren closed his eyes and thought of Ian. He remembered sitting next to Ian on the beach and how the wind bound them together. His heart ached with longing to be with Ian once more.

The sooner you find Odhrán, the sooner you can return to him.

ELEVEN

IAN SWAM back to the *Phantom* with a knot in his belly and a pain in his chest. He'd taken no joy in his transformation, found no relief from his anxious thoughts in the warm waters. He'd spent the better part of the past few hours swimming around Cera, hoping to find some trace of Taren. He'd found nothing. If he was honest with himself, he'd admit he hadn't expected to find Taren on the island, just as he hadn't expected to find him at the scene of the battle with the humans. As distant as Taren's presence felt to him, he knew Taren was on another island.

At least he knew Taren was alive; their otherworldly connection was still strong. He thanked the goddess that they were soulbound, so that he might sense Taren's well-being. But as days passed and Taren did not return, he began to fear that Taren had been taken captive or, worse, that he'd been so injured he could not return to them. Ian had paced the decks, waiting for word from Barra and the men he'd sent into town dressed as merchants. Their primary task was to procure supplies for the *Phantom* and her crew, but they'd also been told to listen for news of Taren.

"Fine time to abandon your crew," Renda said as Ian climbed to the top of the rope ladder and boarded the ship. Ian bristled beneath his cutting glare. "The men have been asking after you since the ceremony to commend Crian to the goddess. What would you have me tell them?"

Ian said nothing as he retrieved the clothing he'd left by the railing, then began to dress. The memory of the funeral ceremony the day before and the loss of a good man had left him feeling more adrift than he cared to admit. First Crian, whom he'd known since he was a young boy. Now Taren.

No. Taren's alive. There was hope, he'd told himself as he'd watched Renda commit Crian's body to the afterlife. He felt the zest of Renda's power, saw the cool blue light flicker from the tips of his bony fingers before touching the water and stirring it. Crian's body was wrapped in thick kelp leaves and lacelike seaweed and adorned with a multitude of shells, each chosen with care by the *Phantom's* crew. As it floated away from the *Phantom* and out of the harbor, it dipped beneath the surface and vanished. Ian knew Crian would continue his final journey until he reached the open ocean, where he would finally sink to the bottom and find his rest in the goddess's arms. His heart ached for Crian's loved ones. It was far too easy to imagine the immense loss he'd feel if Taren's soul were to leave this world.

"Captain?"

"I heard you." Ian came back to himself and tucked his shirt into his britches.

"I know you're worried about Taren, but—"

"Don't patronize me," he snapped. "I know all too well what my duty is." He glanced up at the shattered mizzen in disgust. "Tell Barra to gather the men at sunrise. We'll need to repair the ship ourselves."

Renda nodded his approval. "Aye, Captain."

"Send word to Vurin. A messenger. Durat's a strong swimmer. If he rides the eastern current, he might make Raice Harbor in a fortnight." Ian turned, stormed down the stairs to his cabin, and slammed the door behind him before Renda could respond.

Damn Renda to hell for being right.

Ian closed his eyes and drew a long breath. None of this was Renda's fault. None of it was anyone's fault but his own. It was his responsibility to keep the *Phantom* and her crew safe. He should have realized the Council was keeping a close watch over him. They'd stranded Seria and his men. They'd stolen the Council's fastest ship. He was a spy and a traitor to Ea'nu. The Council would want revenge.

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes again was Taren's jacket, still on the bed where Taren had tossed it days before. Ian hadn't used the bed since they'd limped back to land and hidden their damaged vessel behind Renda's enchantments. The only sleep Ian had gotten—if you could call it that—was a few minutes when he'd closed his eyes as his men

boarded the launch, headed into Gate Town. He'd nearly gone himself; only Renda had made him see the impulsiveness of his actions.

"It's one thing to take to the water to look for him. It's quite another to wander around in town. If the humans truly are in league with Seria and the Council," Renda told him, "they'll be looking for you. They'll know the ship is here somewhere. And if they find you—"

"I can't stay here," he said, cutting across Renda. "If Taren is injured... lost... I'd never forgive myself for waiting and doing nothing." He spoke the truth. He grieved Crian's death and blamed himself for the loss. He found it too easy to imagine himself grieving Taren's death, too easy to imagine what Crian's family might feel when they learned his fate.

"You're hardly doing nothing. You know he's well—you sense his presence. But if the enemy knows you're looking for him, you could risk the very thing you wish to protect. Your actions might reveal him."

Taren. Ian lifted Taren's jacket from the bed and brought it to his lips. Taren's scent lingered on the wool. Ian inhaled deeply and conjured the image of Taren smiling as he splashed about in the waves. *Be safe. Come back to me.* He didn't know how he'd survive if Taren didn't return.

When had the walls around his heart crumbled?

He sat down on the edge of the bed and breathed Taren's essence in once again. The temptation to dive from the ship, transform, and look for Taren again was more than he could bear. But he wouldn't leave again. He couldn't. Thirty-nine—no, thirty-eight souls, now—depended upon him. His crew had left their families behind on Ea'nu and returned his ship to him. They'd risked their lives to mutiny. They'd given him their loyalty, and he owed them at least the same. He couldn't leave them for one man, even the one man he'd willingly die for... again.

Damn duty.

The knock on the door to the cabin startled him back to himself. "Come."

"I was wrong to speak so harshly to you," Renda said as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

Ian shook his head. "No, you weren't. You reminded me of my duty. My responsibility."

Renda sighed. "I don't envy your lot."

"I chose this," Ian said evenly.

“He will return to you. But not because you hold his leash.” Renda shook his head and laughed. “Much as I know you might be tempted to put a collar on him. He’ll return to you because he loves you.”

If the goddess wills it, Ian added silently.

That night, for the first time since Taren left, Ian slept. In his hands, he clutched Taren’s jacket. He imagined Taren lay beside him as the warm breeze blew through the open aft windows. The familiar sensation of the ship rocking beneath him gave way to dreams.

Ian walked along a deserted beach. The sand felt warm beneath his feet. Flowering vines scented the air as the breeze caressed his face.

“Ian.” Taren’s voice sounded like a whisper from afar, but when Ian turned to look, he saw Taren running toward him, barefoot in the sand.

Ian didn’t hesitate. He opened his arms and sighed as Taren accepted his embrace. “I’ve missed you... feared for you,” Ian said in a whisper. He pulled Taren’s head against his own, felt the silk of his hair between his fingers, and let his eyes drift closed so that he might better appreciate the weight of Taren’s body against his and Taren’s enticing scent. What did it matter if this was just a dream? Taren felt real.

“You needn’t fear for me.” Taren pulled away and clasped Ian’s face in his hands. “I’m safe. I promise I’ll return to you soon.”

“Swear it.”

“I swear it.” Taren kissed him, then took his hand and motioned him to sit before joining him on the warm sand.

The breeze from the ocean surrounded and enveloped them. Ian imagined Taren’s fingers ghosting over his skin, caressing him, reassuring him. “The wind,” Ian said, overcome by his emotions, unafraid to speak them here, in the safety of his dream. “It reminds me of you. Every time I feel it on my skin, it’s as though you’re here. Touching me. Binding me to you.”

Taren smiled. Another gust—warmer this time—wrapped itself around Ian. Like gentle vibrations, a thousand tiny kisses, the wind shimmered over Ian’s body. A lover’s touch. Welcoming, familiar.

“Come back to me,” Ian said again. “Do what you must, but don’t you dare leave me!”

Ian woke to the feel of the breeze from the open windows. Taren. Be safe. And know that you hold my heart in your own.

TWELVE

“DON’T MOVE,” a deep voice commanded. “Hands over your head.”

Taren felt the sharp point of a weapon against the skin of his back. He’d found a waterfall not far from where he and Brynn had slept and had been bathing. He hadn’t heard the newcomer approach over the sound of the water. Taren wasn’t concerned. He figured Odhrán’s men would find them—he’d counted on it, especially after Brynn’s admission that he didn’t know the way to Odhrán. And although he knew Ian would think it imprudent of him to seek the pirate out without arming himself, Taren believed Odhrán would be more inclined to listen if he did not feel threatened.

Taren lifted his hands and asked, “Who are you?”

Before the man could answer, two men appeared from behind a rocky outcropping, one of them dragging Brynn by the scruff of his neck.

“Samuel! Tell this”—Brynn tried to kick his captor in the shin, but his leg was too short to do much harm—“*beast* who I am!”

Samuel just laughed, his sword still touching Taren’s back. “Little runt. Odhrán told you he’d find you if he needed you. You can explain to him yourself why you brought a stranger to his door.” Samuel nodded to the third man, who pulled out a length of rope and proceeded to bind Taren’s hands, then Brynn’s.

“Wait! I told you! I was trying to help. Odhrán will be angry with you if you don’t—”

Brynn kicked and squirmed until Samuel said, “Gag him.” The hint of a smile played on his lips.

“May I put my trousers on?” Taren calmly asked. Not that he was particularly embarrassed to be presented naked to Odhrán, but he’d be more comfortable if the white skin of his ass didn’t burn in the hot sun.

“Help him, Ralph,” Samuel told the man who was not occupied with the squirming Brynn.

A few minutes later, Odhrán’s men led a blindfolded and gagged Taren and Brynn away from the waterfall. From the feel of the sun on Taren’s face and the retreating sound of the surf, he guessed they were headed toward the center of the small island, where he’d spotted several large rocky outcroppings. He suspected the entrance to the caves where Odhrán and his men hid might be there.

The men walked them for nearly an hour, around and around until Taren was no longer sure where they were. Finally, Taren heard a scraping sound and the rustling of leaves, and he guessed that the men were uncovering the entrance to a cave. From there, they descended what felt to Taren’s feet like carved stairs. The air grew cool around them and the stone was at times slippery from water. Though Taren’s feet were cut and swollen from the climb up the cliff with Brynn the day before, Taren was thankful he was barefoot. The wet rock was much like the slippery wooden decks of the ships on which he’d served, and he was far more agile without the smooth leather soles of his boots.

The stairs ended, though the rough-hewn feel of the stone under his feet was the same. A passage, Taren guessed, also carved out of the rock. How long would it have taken to carve the stairs and the tunnel? Years, perhaps longer. After a few more minutes, they stopped. Taren immediately noticed the change in temperature and the feel of the air itself—warmer and less damp than the tunnel or stairs.

Someone pulled Taren’s blindfold off. For a minute, maybe two, he could see nothing as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Then, slowly, the reality of what he was seeing became clear: they were standing in an enormous cavern, easily several hundred feet high and several times longer than any ship he’d ever seen. Nearly as big as the entire island town he’d stumbled upon two days before. And “town” was an appropriate choice of words, for Taren realized with surprise that small wooden huts dotted every ledge above them. Taren marveled to see dozens of huts that seemed to have

sprouted from the cavern floor as well. A rough mixture of wood and stone, they nonetheless appeared sturdy and well cared for.

More surprising still was that in spite of the darkness, Taren could see the houses quite clearly in the strange light emanating from the stone walls and ceiling of the cave. The light radiated from the rock itself, not from torches or lamps. When he looked closer, Taren realized the light was comprised of hundreds, perhaps thousands of tiny crystals embedded in the rock. The effect was stunning, the light warm, much like the sun.

How long had this settlement been hidden here? How powerful must Odhrán's hold on these people be that they'd not shared this secret with the outside world? Now more than ever, Taren wondered if some of the stories about Odhrán were true.

The smell of meat cooking over a fire wafted through the enormous cavern, causing Taren's empty belly to protest. Brynn stumbled over a small hole underfoot, then coughed several times as he righted himself. For the first time, Taren noticed how pale he appeared. Weak, as well. Not surprising, given that they hadn't eaten since the night before, and then it had been too little to sustain a growing boy.

"In here." Samuel pointed them toward a small room carved out of the rock.

The other men removed their gags, then shoved them inside. There was no place to sit but the damp floor. Brynn teetered, then nearly fell as he tried to sit. "He needs food and water," Taren protested. "He's weak."

"I'd be more worried about your own skin than this brat's," Ralph snarled as he unbound their wrists.

Taren stretched his aching arms as the men filed out of the room. A moment later Ralph closed and locked an iron gate that fit tightly at the opening to the room. An underground prison made of stone and steel.

Brynn shivered, looking paler still. "Rest," Taren told him. "I'll wake you when they return."

Brynn simply nodded, then curled up on the floor and shivered once again.

Taren had no shirt to offer for a blanket this time. He sat down next to Brynn. "Can I put my arms around you to warm you?" he asked.

Brynn shook his head and whispered, "M fine."

Taren huffed in frustration. “It’s not weakness to accept help when you need it.”

“Don’t need your help.”

“Suit yourself,” Taren said with a shake of his head. He leaned back against the hard stone of the cave wall and drew a long breath. He shouldn’t have allowed Brynn to take him as far as the island; he should have paid him to tell him where to go, knowing Odhrán’s men would have found him. Unable to sleep, he watched the shudders that racked Brynn’s body subside as he fell into a restless sleep.

We’re in your hands, Taren told the goddess. Please keep us safe.

THE WALLS of the cell seemed to close around him as he watched, powerless to stop their advance. Cold. So cold.... He stood and ran his hands over the damp surface of the stones, trying to find a weakness. Seria—he couldn’t let Seria touch him again. He wasn’t sure he’d survive it this time. He’d already told them everything he knew—he’d betrayed his crewmembers, betrayed Rider and Bastian. What more did they want from him?

The guard who unlocked the door sniggered to see him cowering in the corner, shivering, frightened. Terrified of what he knew would soon come.

Ian will find me. He’ll take me from here... keep me safe.

But Ian didn’t come. The guard dragged him over the rough stone floor, bloodying his knees. The pain was nothing compared to what he knew awaited him....

Taren woke with a start, fear lingering like fog after the sunrise. *This isn’t the Ea prison. They’re human.* No Seria. No Ea. Humans—capable of inflicting pain, but he could withstand that sort of pain. The reminder of his torture at Seria’s hands faded, and his frenetic heartbeat slowed along with his breathing.

He’d meant to stay awake and alert. When had he fallen asleep?

Brynn slept curled up against him, his head on Taren’s thigh. Not far from where they lay was a metal tray with two cups of water, bread, and cheese. “Wake up, boy,” he said with a shake of Brynn’s shoulder. “Dinner has arrived.”

Brynn's eyes fluttered open and he pulled away from Taren so abruptly Taren could only blink in surprise. Brynn struggled to sitting and nearly toppled over with the effort. When Taren reached out to help him, Brynn moved out of his reach. "I'm fine," he snapped.

Taren resolved to be a bit more careful with Brynn. It was almost as if he feared Taren's touch. Taren retrieved the tray, then set it between himself and Brynn. "You're hardly fine. Here." He handed Brynn a bit of the bread he'd dipped in the water. "Eat."

Brynn glared at him, coughed a few times, but took the bread without protest. He needed far more than bread and water. He looked ill. Feverish. The cold dampness of the caves had probably made things worse. He'd seemed fine the day before, but now....

Damn! He couldn't stay here forever. He needed to speak to Odhrán, and soon. Maybe he could convince him to let Brynn go. "I must see Odhrán!" he said as he stood up and walked over to the bars. His heart pounded in his chest and he clenched his jaw.

It didn't take long to rouse the guard posted at the door from his nap. He glared back at Taren. "What is it ye want?" he demanded, clearly angered to have been woken.

"I must see Odhrán," Taren repeated as he paced in front of the bars.

The guard laughed and turned to reclaim his spot a few feet away.

"I have something he wants."

The guard laughed again.

"Something valuable. A silver dagger." Bluster, since Taren really wasn't sure where he'd lost it, but the guard didn't need to know that. *Let them think I've hidden it.*

"He don't want no dagger," the guard said with a shake of his head. "He's got plenty of 'em. Swords too."

"This one's different." He'd have to risk saying more. But if Vurin was correct and Odhrán knew something about the stone.... "Tell him it's Ea. Priceless."

The guard frowned and eyed Taren with suspicion, then headed down one of the passages nearby.

Taren sat back down by Brynn, who had curled up once more on the cold stone floor. "You need to eat more, boy," Taren said as he pulled the

tray closer.

Brynn stirred. "Not hungry," he mumbled.

"You need to eat. You look terrible."

Brynn glared at Taren.

"Here." Taren handed Brynn a small piece of cheese. "Eat it slowly."

Brynn took the cheese, seemed to consider it for a moment, then put it in his mouth.

"Are you ill?" Taren asked.

"'M fine. And you're not my mother."

At least Brynn still had some fire in him. Taren figured that was a good sign.

A half hour later, having eaten most of the cheese and a good portion of the bread, Brynn looked far better. Taren finished the rest of the food, made sure Brynn drank some water, and then got back to his feet and began to pace the width of the cell.

After an hour or so had passed, Taren heard voices from the tunnel where the first guard had disappeared. "Captain!" the second guard barked as he stood at attention.

"No need to be gettin' so excited, John," said a deep voice that Taren now saw belonged to a bear of a man. Dark-haired and bearded, he stood nearly a head taller than all the other men. Odhrán, Taren guessed, judging by the guard's response. Human. But why would a human be the keeper of the stone? Had the old woman tried to mislead him, or had he simply not understood her words?

Odhrán peered into the cell and laughed. "Brynn," he said, "I might have guessed ye'd lead someone 'ere."

"Captain Odhrán... sir." Brynn's voice quavered as he spoke. Taren guessed he feared the pirate. *And for good reason.* Odhrán could probably break Brynn in two if he wished. "I.... He said he doesn't mean you harm. He said—"

"If he said he was yer long-lost mother, pup, would ye believe that too?"

"I said I wanted to meet you," Taren told Odhrán. "I was sent here by Vurin."

“Vurin?” Odhrán laughed. “That old dog? And what does he want with me other than gold? He wants my gold. Nothin’ more.”

“He says you may know something about the rune stone.”

“What stone? Don’t know of no stone he wants except gold. I told him before I ain’t sharin’ no gold.”

“I’ve got a dagger.” When Odhrán shot him a skeptical glare, Taren added, “I mean, I know where it is.” Odhrán’s expression softened a bit, as if he was considering Taren’s offer. *Of course he’d be more interested in a weapon.* “It’s very old. Silver.”

“Hoping to buy yer freedom?” Odhrán narrowed his eyes into tiny slits.

“Can you blame me?”

“You’ve got as sharp a tongue on ye as the boy, don’t ye?” Odhrán laughed. “I’ve no interest in yer dagger. I’ve got plenty of silver. Don’t need no more.”

“It’s valuable. Ancient. I dropped it in the water. Not far from where our ship fought the brigantine.”

“Needle in a haystack,” Odhrán said with a grunt. “Not worth my time to do yer dirty work for a little bit of silver.” He shook his head and then turned to leave.

“At least let Brynn go,” Taren said. “He’s ill. He’s—”

“I’ll not kill ’im. Least not this time. I’ll let ’im go if the mood strikes me,” Odhrán said, his blunt features set in a scowl.

“But the stone—”

“No idea what yer talkin’ about.” He shook his head, then left before Taren could respond.

TAREN AWOKESOME time later, having dozed off to thoughts of Ian and the *Phantom*. Once again he’d dreamed of Ian, and once again the dream had felt real.

The cell was still dark. From the regular pattern of the light, Taren guessed the crystals that lit the interior of the cave mimicked the sunlight outside and dimmed with the setting sun. Had they really been here in this cell for more than two days?

Brynn slept fitfully by Taren's side, his breaths now coming in raspy gasps. Taren had known boys like Brynn, fragile and easily sickened from the dampness of the dormitory at the inn. At least one of them had died. He needed to get Brynn out of here.

He stood up and began to pace. He couldn't remember ever being as restless. Even in the Ea prison, he'd never felt this way. The restlessness reminded him of Ian, whom he'd seen pace the decks just as he now paced the cell. Ian had often mentioned they shared a special bond—a bond few Ea experienced. Soulbound, Ian had called it. Was it possible that his unease was *Ian's* unease, communicated to him? Or was the island the cause of the strange thoughts he'd been having?

Stop this. You're overthinking things. You're worried about Brynn.

He rubbed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. He needed to think. Figure out how to get them out of here. He studied the bars on their cell, looking for weaknesses where he might loosen the metal. If Odhrán was lying, Taren could come back for the stone with Ian and some of the men. As important as Vurin claimed the rune stone to be, Taren wouldn't sacrifice Brynn's life for it. Perhaps Renda could use his magic to infiltrate Odhrán's stronghold. Or perhaps Vurin and the old woman had been mistaken and the pirate had never possessed the stone.

"Get up!"

Taren squinted, struggling to see the guard in the darkness. With his human eyes, he could only see the barest hint of movement beyond the cell.

"Time to go," the guard said as Taren got to his feet. "Back away from the door."

"Go? But what about Brynn?" Taren asked.

"Where you're going, the boy don't need to follow," the guard replied with a half-cocked grin.

They mean to kill me. Taren glanced around to see if Brynn was still asleep. In the darkness, he could barely see the rise and fall of Brynn's chest. Only his ragged breathing reassured him that he had not yet succumbed. If Odhrán left Brynn here much longer, Taren was sure he'd die. But if he tried to escape and take Brynn with him....

The rattling of keys and the sound of metal rubbing against metal told Taren the guard was unlocking the door. This close, Taren could see the sword in the guard's hand as he stepped across the threshold and shoved the

keys into his belt. If there had been only one guard, Taren might have attempted to wrestle the weapon away, but a second guard stood watch outside the open doorway, his hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword.

Taren wouldn't wager Brynn's life against two armed men, not in Brynn's weakened condition. He'd try to reason with Odhrán's men. If he told Odhrán his life had value—that if Ian and the crew heard of his captivity, they'd pay a ransom to see him returned—he might be able to bargain for Brynn's quick release as well as his own.

"Out ye go," the guard said as he shoved Taren over the threshold toward his companion. "Ye best not keep Captain Odhrán waiting."

Taren clenched his jaw and took a step, but the sound of a shriek from the cell stopped him in his tracks. He whirled around just in time to see Brynn launch himself at the first guard's back. The guard spun, trying to reach Brynn, who was clawing at the guard's face with his fingers.

Taren didn't hesitate. This wasn't at all what he'd planned, but he'd hardly pass up the opportunity to escape, especially if Brynn still had strength to fight. Taren blocked the second guard's way and kicked him hard in the groin. Before he could fully draw his weapon, Taren struck the guard on his wrist, causing the sword to skitter across the smooth stone floor to the corner of the cell. Taren and the guard traded blows. Out of the corner of his eye, Taren saw the other guard cease his spinning and back up, hitting Brynn hard against the stone wall.

Damn! Taren admired Brynn's mettle, but he'd not last long if the guard continued to pound his slight body with all his weight. Brynn, however, seemed undeterred. His laughter rang throughout the cell as he snagged the keys from the guard's pocket. Taren was tempted to point out that they didn't need the keys at this point, since the door was still ajar, but he held his tongue, instead kicking his opponent in his gut with all his strength. Winded, the guard bent over to catch his breath, and Taren took the opportunity to punch the man hard on the temple. He crumpled to the ground without a sound.

"Brynn!" Taren shouted as he charged the first guard, knocking him to the side and dislodging Brynn from the place where he was wedged between the man and the wall. "Run, boy!"

Brynn jumped down from the guard's back, walked a few paces, then teetered and collapsed with a sigh.

This time Taren didn't hesitate. He punched the remaining guard in the side before ducking to avoid the swing of his sword. He felt the air above his head stir with the movement of the steel but ignored it and grabbed the other man's wrist. They wrestled for several minutes until Taren managed to twist the guard's arm and disarm him. Taren hadn't realized how much stronger he'd become since he'd first transformed. It took only three more blows before the second guard joined his cohort on the ground.

"Brynn." Taren bent down and brushed the hair from Brynn's eyes. "Brynn. Boy. We have to go."

Brynn stirred and opened his eyes. Taren offered him his hand, but Brynn ignored it, instead struggling to his feet and steadying himself against the wall. Taren fought the urge to help and instead retrieved one of the guards' swords and shoved it into his belt.

As they cautiously made their way down the passage outside the cell, they encountered none of Odhrán's men. The tunnel split into two not far beyond. Brynn motioned to one of the entrances and whispered, "I think this way leads to the surface."

Taren had no choice but to trust Brynn's memory since he had seen nothing of the passages when they'd been captured. The faint sound of voices could now be heard from whence they'd come—there was no time to question the choice. They hurried into the semidarkness, slipping and sliding on the damp stone floor.

"Are you all right?" Taren asked when Brynn began to lag behind him. "I can carry you, if need be."

"I don't need your help," Brynn snapped back, the words barely comprehensible as he spoke them from between clenched teeth. He looked pale and sweaty, and he leaned against the side of the passage to support himself.

"You're ill. There's no shame in—"

"I don't need your help," Brynn said with an indignant huff. "It's nothing." He pushed past Taren and strode quickly away. Taren could do nothing but follow.

Several minutes passed wherein Taren watched Brynn stagger and weave his way forward. Each time Taren made to assist Brynn, Brynn pulled away and took off again, faster than before. "You'll wear yourself

out, foolish boy,” Taren grumbled to himself as he followed, careful to keep his distance.

Soon the tunnel began to rise more steeply. A good sign, Taren figured, although Brynn’s pace had now slowed to the point where Taren followed more closely behind, concerned for Brynn’s well-being. Moments later, Taren’s greatest fears were confirmed as Brynn gasped, then teetered. Taren caught him as he fell, then set him gently on the ground.

Brynn moaned, then coughed as his eyes fluttered open. “Taren? Where...?”

“We’re in the caves. Odhrán’s men are looking for us.”

“Caves? But I—” Brynn’s words were cut short by a coughing fit that made Taren cringe with its ferocity.

“Don’t you remember? We got past the guards.” Taren shook his head. If he got out of this alive, he’d give Vurin a piece of his mind. Had he misread the ancient texts about the stone? But the old woman? *No doubt you dreamed her.* He’d wanted answers; perhaps he’d created his own and imagined he’d met her. *It’s better this way. If a brute like Odhrán knew anything about the stone, we’d all be in danger for it.*

“Y-you... we... escaped?” Brynn shivered. “But what about Odhrán?”

“He didn’t have what I was looking for.”

Once again Brynn began to cough and wheeze, this time doubling over with the force of the attack.

“May I touch you?” Taren asked. He wasn’t sure if anything Vurin or Renda had taught him about Ea healing techniques would help a human, but he knew well enough that if he did nothing, Brynn could die.

“Touch?” Brynn’s voice sounded thin. Weak.

Taren offered Brynn what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Aye. Someone taught me a few tricks. Things to help a body heal.”

Brynn hesitated a moment, then nodded.

Taren took a deep breath and released a stream of air from between his pursed lips. “*You cannot call upon your power if you do not first rid yourself of extraneous thoughts.*” He needed to relax and calm his pounding heart.

Taren imagined the soothing caress of the ocean upon his bare skin, the taste of the salt water upon his tongue, and the familiar smell of the spray as

it met his nostrils. Then he reached out and gently touched Brynn's cheeks with his fingers. Warmth radiated reassuringly from his hands—the same warmth Taren had felt when he'd practiced the technique on Ian. He opened his thoughts and sought to sense Brynn's body's need. He was entirely unprepared for the thoughts and sensations that flooded his mind.

Flashes of light obscured much of what he saw, although Taren recognized the blue-green of the ocean, and the sun as it glinted across the waves. He heard strange music and the sound of tiny bells that chimed in shimmering harmony with the movement of bare feet. Memories both painful and vivid assaulted his mind in a cacophony of sound and a blur of images.

Not here, Taren told himself. *There is nothing wrong with the boy's mind*. He needed to find the cause of his body's weakness. Find the illness that was assaulting his body.

He probed further, reminding himself to stay away from the recesses of Brynn's thoughts and memories. He found something unusual: something that didn't belong in Brynn's mind but coiled like a viper, ready to strike. Was this the illness that had latched on to Brynn? When Taren had practiced this technique before, there had been no true illness to heal. Perhaps he was imagining things, or perhaps it was the fever that wracked Brynn's frail body that he sensed.

He focused on the unease in Brynn's body and imagined himself pushing it away, forcing it to flee. The thing—whatever it was—pushed back with such force that Taren fell backward and nearly hit his head on the stone wall behind him.

Goddess! What was that? He scrambled back to sitting to find Brynn leaning against the wall. His face was covered in sweat, but the color in his cheeks had begun to return. In this, as in other things Vurin had taught him, Taren still had quite a bit to learn.

"What did you do?" Brynn asked, clearly stunned.

"Nothing." Taren got to his feet and offered Brynn his hand. "A trick to help cleanse the body of sickness. Are you all right?"

Brynn nodded, and this time, for the first time, took Taren's hand to steady himself as he stood.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure what happened at the end. I'm not very experienced in the healing arts."

“I’m better,” Brynn said as they began to walk again. “Whatever you did helped.” He was still clearly weak, but Taren knew they needed to make progress or Odhrán’s men would catch up with them.

A moment later, Taren heard shouts from down the passageway.

“Come with me,” Taren whispered as he motioned to his left. Brynn nodded again and held on to Taren tighter.

Taren led Brynn around a bend, away from the voices. The passage led upward. A good sign, he figured, since when they had been taken to Odhrán’s lair, they’d descended a fair distance. They continued to climb, but with each step, Brynn appeared to grow weaker. In the dim light of the crystals, his skin appeared pasty, the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced.

“Let me carry you,” Taren finally said after he knew Brynn could move no more.

“I can do this.” Brynn furrowed his brow. “I’m not weak.”

“You’re ill. Please, let me help you.”

Brynn eyed him warily, then said, “All right. But just for a short while, so I can rest.”

Relieved, Taren gathered Brynn in his arms. Brynn sighed softly and rested his head against Taren’s chest. Taren would not be able to move as quickly as he might on his own, but they would make faster progress now. How much farther, he wondered, was the entrance to the caves? *How do you even know if you’re headed in the right direction?*

Taren walked for some time. The voices of Odhrán’s men still echoed throughout the tunnels. He could only hope they were far away. There was another sound too, which grew louder as they ascended. He continued to make slow progress for a while longer, and as he did, he realized the other sound was that of rushing water.

Minutes later, Taren reached the source of the roaring sound—a torrent of a river flowing through the caverns. The water spit and hissed as it sped downward. The strong smell of sulfur permeated the air and any hope he’d had of transforming fled. He might survive the acrid water long enough to escape the caverns in his Ea form, but Brynn would not. The air here was thick with it, and the heat was overwhelming.

Goddess, no! He would need to turn back. He wouldn’t risk harming Brynn. And yet he knew that if he turned back, he would likely encounter

Odhrán's men. Then he saw a small entryway on the other side of the underground river. Large enough for them to squeeze through. *If you can manage to get over the river without falling into it.*

"Brynn." Brynn stirred and looked up at him through half-closed eyes. "You must hold on tightly."

"Aye." Brynn's voice was barely audible over the sound of the rushing current, but he tightened his arms around Taren.

Taren looked around one last time, backed up a few feet, then ran with all his might and leapt into the air when he reached the edge of the water. For a split second, Taren believed he'd make it to the other side, but it suddenly seemed farther away than before. His knee hit the hard stone of the opposite bank, and he faltered but finally managed to grab on to it. The water wasn't as hot as he'd expected, more like the heat of some of the hot springs he'd frequented with some of the men aboard the *Sea Witch*, but the shock of it was enough to dislodge Brynn's hold on him.

"Brynn!" Taren shouted as Brynn quickly drifted out of his grasp. Taren had no choice. With a current this strong, the strongest human would only be able to keep his head above the water. In his weakened condition, Brynn would drown. Taren released his hold and transformed.

Brynn! In his Ea form, he had little difficulty catching up to where he sensed Brynn's movements in the water. He swam downward to the narrow part of the river where the current was the strongest, beat his tail as he passed Brynn, then maintained his position as best he could. A second later Brynn came hurtling toward him, bobbing up and down in an effort to stay afloat. Taren grabbed him and hoisted him over one shoulder, then swam to the riverbank and deposited him there as gently as possible. He flicked his tail once again, then reclaimed his human form as he pulled himself out of the water. That was when he realized he'd not only lost his clothing when he'd transformed, he'd lost the sword. *We'll make do without a weapon*, he told himself. If they could avoid Odhrán's men, they wouldn't need it.

Brynn eyed Taren warily. This didn't surprise Taren—he guessed Brynn had seen something of his Ea form, though he doubted he'd seen much. "How did you...?" he asked.

"I'm a strong swimmer." Taren fought the urge to offer Brynn a hand up; he was quite sure Brynn wouldn't take it anyhow. "We need to keep moving. Can you walk?"

“I can walk.” Brynn got to his feet and leaned against the wall of the cave. He looked a bit like a drowned rat with his hair plastered to his face and his trousers dripping wet. Taren wasn’t so sure, but he also wouldn’t argue with him.

They headed down the only tunnel in sight, slipping and sliding on the damp floor. From the smooth surface of these caves, Taren guessed the water itself had done the carving, whereas most of the other tunnels they’d explored appeared manmade. He doubted Odhrán and his men had created them, since the caves appeared far older than any of the pirates he’d seen. Hundreds of years old, perhaps.

Brynn tripped and fell, face-first, onto the hard stone. He whimpered as he struggled to stand up, then coughed and wheezed as he got to his hands and knees.

“You must let me carry you,” Taren said. This time Brynn allowed Taren to gather him into his arms. Brynn’s body trembled, though whether from fear or cold, Taren wasn’t sure. He knew only that if he didn’t get Brynn to safety soon, he would surely die.

Time seemed to move too slowly as he made his way through the narrow passages in the hopes of finding his way to the surface. Over and over again, he was forced to choose between several openings, and each time he hoped he’d chosen well. As he walked, he had the strange feeling he had passed this way before. The feeling grew stronger with every turn until he stopped and allowed himself a moment to think. No, not to think... to *feel*.

“Magic is natural, innate,” Vurin had told him when he’d first come to live in Callaecia. “Much is made of man’s ability to harness it, but it isn’t created by man at all—it is a part of nature. It’s something that has existed from the dawn of time. Something some of our people are able to harness. A gift from the goddess herself.”

“What’s wrong?” Brynn asked.

“There is magic here. Powerful magic.” Taren reached out and touched the cave wall. The sensation was much like what he’d experienced when they’d entered the harbor days before. Sensual. Different from the Ea magic he’d experienced, and yet also the same.

“How would you know about magic?”

Taren considered how he might answer the question without revealing his true nature. “I have a little experience with it.”

“Are you a mage?” Brynn looked up at him, eyes wide.

Taren laughed and shook his head. “I’m nothing.” How many times had he said that? He was beginning to believe he kept repeating it because he feared what it might mean to accept that he was something more.

“Can you defeat the magic?” Brynn asked.

Taren laughed and shook his head. “No. But someone once taught me how to see the truth behind magic.”

“You mean if it’s hiding something?”

“Aye. If this is meant to obscure the way, I might be able to see past it.” When Vurin had explained that he could do this, Taren hadn’t believed him. *“A mage imposes his will upon the world with his magic. If we don’t recognize it for what it is, we are bound by that will. But if we search for a deeper understanding and open our minds to it, we can see the truth beneath.”*

He knew he had nothing to lose in the attempt, and much to gain. He did as Vurin taught him, closing his eyes and allowing the magic to fill him. Unlike the more utilitarian magic guarding Callaecia from the outside world, this magic felt colorful and alive. He heard music in his mind, beautiful and haunting, like a song sung in a voice unlike anything he’d ever heard. It reminded him of Ea heartsong—the mating call—but it was sad. Pained. Full of longing, it called to him, and he felt its... loneliness.

Loneliness? Taren brushed this thought away as he opened his eyes. Perhaps his own longing for Ian colored his emotions. Vurin had explained that this was also possible.

“What do you see?” Brynn asked as he shifted in Taren’s arms.

Taren blinked to clear his vision of the shimmering wall. Where his hand had been resting was now a blurry veil of light and color that no longer felt solid to his touch. *Another passage!* “There’s an opening here,” he said. “And if I’m not mistaken....” He pushed his hand into the silvery-blue haze and it yielded to his touch. The haze vanished, revealing a dimly lit passage.

“Hold on to me,” he told Brynn as he took off down the passage at a run. If he was right about this....

They were climbing now. He felt it in the sting of his muscles as he continued to press onward. He imagined he saw light ahead, not the light of the crystals but sunlight, bright and warm. By the time he reached the source of the light, he was panting and covered in sweat.

He turned to his left around a sharp bend, expecting to see an opening, but stopped dead in his tracks when he saw one of Odhrán's men with a sword pointed directly at him. He turned to back away, but two more men had appeared there, cutting him off from the passageway. Odhrán stood behind them, watching with obvious amusement.

Another of Odhrán's men grabbed Brynn from his arms. Brynn kicked and squirmed, but he was too weak to break free of the pirate's grasp. The pirate set Brynn down and wrapped a large arm around the boy's neck. Brynn struggled to breathe and clawed at the man's arm.

Taren knew if he didn't do something, they'd probably both die. Maybe if he could hold off the pirates long enough, Brynn might be able to make a run for it. He prayed to the goddess for strength, then lunged at the man holding Brynn. He managed to grab the blade of the man's sword and push Brynn away.

"Run, boy!" he shouted. The pain in his hand came slowly. It always did with a sharp blade. First heat, then the sting of the wound and the warmth of his own blood. Strangely, though, the man did not force the sword deeper.

One of the other men grabbed Taren around the neck. Taren elbowed him hard in the belly with his free arm. Taren saw the glint of another sword as a third man came up from behind. "Let 'im go, or you're a dead man," the man said as the metal touched his bare skin.

Brynn didn't move.

"Brynn! Boy! Save yourself!" Taren yelled, hoping to wake Brynn from his trance. No doubt he was terrified. The only other person in the narrow passage who had not moved was Odhrán, whose face was set in a sneer. He stood between Taren and Brynn. Goddess, why wouldn't Brynn move?

"Brynn!" Taren felt the point of the sword pierce his skin. He gasped as the man whose arm was around his neck tightened his hold. Tiny points of light filled Taren's vision. He struggled to breathe.

“Stop this! Now!” It took a long moment for Taren to realize it was Brynn who had spoken. The authority that resonated in those few words took Taren aback. Instead of fear, Brynn wore an expression of calm control and focus.

Immediately, the man holding Taren by the neck released his grip and stepped aside, as did the man behind him. The third man, whose sword Taren still held by its blade, released the weapon. It slipped through Taren’s hand, cutting deeper into Taren’s tender skin. Taren relinquished his hold and allowed the sword to fall to the ground, where it landed with a clatter. Odhrán backed away from Brynn and watched him with keen interest.

“But Captain—”

“Enough.” Taren had expected Odhrán to respond, but again the words issued from Brynn’s lips in an unfamiliar voice.

“Brynn?” Taren tried to move but found he could not. “What...?”

“They won’t hurt me,” Brynn said. He walked past Odhrán and over to Taren. “But you’re hurt.” Brynn reached for Taren’s bloodied hand, then looked into Taren’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I let this go too far.” Whatever force had held Taren in place now freed him, though he did not pull away from Brynn’s gentle touch.

“You... what?” If his hand didn’t hurt so much, Taren might have believed he was dreaming.

Brynn smiled at Taren. The deep circles under his eyes had faded, and his pale cheeks were pink once again. Without answering, he pressed his free hand to Taren’s damaged one. Familiar heat warmed Taren’s hand.

A healer? “You... you’re... Ea?” Taren stammered. “But—”

“I’m not Ea.” Brynn spoke the words with something approaching disgust. He released Taren’s hand. Taren didn’t need to look at it to know it was healed.

“Then what are you?”

Brynn gestured to the men, including Odhrán. “Leave us.”

“But sir—?” Odhrán said, clearly concerned.

“Leave us, James. I’ll be fine alone with him.” Again, Brynn spoke with authority and confidence, although Taren heard respect as well. Brynn clearly viewed these men not as enemies but as compatriots.

“James?” Taren looked at Odhrán—the man Brynn had just called James—then back to Brynn.

“Leave us,” Brynn repeated. This time the men left without another word, though Taren thought he saw Odhrán, or James, glance back one last time.

“You...,” Taren began as the realization struck him. “You’re....”

“Odhrán,” Brynn said. “Aye.”

“But you’re a boy.” It made no sense. For years the people of the Gateway Islands had feared Odhrán and his men. The pirate’s reputation was a bloody one. Taren had heard tales about him from some of the crew aboard the ships he used to repair for Borstan when he was a boy.

“You see the form I choose you to see.”

“Form?”

Odhrán smiled, lifted his hand to his face, then slowly trailed his fingers in a line from his forehead to his chin. Taren watched, mesmerized, as the face of the boy he’d known as Brynn appeared to blur, then form once again. Brynn was now a young boy with almond eyes and dark features whose smile revealed slightly crooked teeth. Another movement of his hand and the boy became an old man with thin lips and white hair whose eyes sank into his skull and whose mottled skin sagged around his jaw. “But perhaps,” the old man said, “since you came seeking Odhrán, I should show you *his* face.”

Without thinking, Taren blinked as his vision once again seemed to blur. This time Odhrán’s body lengthened until he stood about the height of Taren’s shoulder. The sinews of Brynn’s arms and legs grew longer and slightly more muscled, athletic and lean like those of a young man of Bastian’s age.

Odhrán’s face was the last to change, though it was familiar, much like an older version of Brynn. Odhrán’s eyes remained the same piercing blue, his hair long and the palest shade of gold.

“Beautiful.” Taren hadn’t meant to speak the word aloud, but he didn’t regret having said it. Odhrán—if this *was* his true form—was one of the most beautiful men Taren had ever laid eyes on. Not quite masculine, yet not female either. The kind of man—

Odhrán completed Taren’s thought. “—other men might covet.”

“You can read my mind?” Taren was unsure whether to be angry about this. He was still trying to decide if he should be angry with Brynn—Odhrán—about having deceived him for days on end.

“In this form, only those thoughts you do not seek to hide are clear to me.” Taren thought he saw a hint of a smile on Odhrán’s delicate lips.

“Then this isn’t your only true form, as you put it?” He was quite sure he knew what Odhrán’s other form might be.

“I am *not* Ea,” Odhrán repeated. “But we share the same heritage, in part.”

“You’re a hybrid.”

“One of a kind.” Odhrán’s laugh was bitter. “At least I’ve never met another.”

Taren guessed there was more to Odhrán’s words, but something in Odhrán’s tone warned him off the topic. Later, perhaps, he would ask about his parentage. “Why did you lie to me? Why the elaborate ruse? Why not just tell me who you were? You’re clearly more powerful than I am.”

“I needed to know if you were the man I hoped you were.”

“Me? I’m nothing.”

Odhrán smiled. “So you’ve said before. And yet you’ve more than proven yourself as a man. You saved my life several times over. Risked your own life for a boy you knew nothing about.”

Why did Odhrán’s praise leave him feeling so ill at ease? “*Recognizing your strength*,” Vurin had once told Taren, “*means you must accept a future in which much will be asked of you.*”

Taren’s anger flared as understanding came. “You were testing me. All of this.... You did this all to test me.”

“Aye.” Odhrán motioned Taren down the passage, back toward the cave they’d escaped from only an hour before. “You came here to recover the rune stone, didn’t you?”

“You know about that?”

There was something of Brynn’s cocky grin in Odhrán’s smile. “Of course. But you didn’t really believe I’d just give it to you if you asked, did you?”

“No.” He had no reason to argue the point. He’d always expected he’d need to work to retrieve the stone—fight for it, if need be. Die for it, if

necessary.

Odhrán smiled broadly, crossing his arms over his chest in obvious satisfaction. “Your people did well to send you to me,” he said. “I am the keeper of the stone.”

THIRTEEN

A FEW hours later, back in the large cave, Taren and Odhrán ate their dinner in silence. Although Odhrán's rooms were hardly palatial, they were far more comfortable than the damp cell Taren had shared with Brynn.

From what he could tell as they'd walked across the cavern earlier, nearly forty men and women inhabited the dwellings carved into the bedrock. Children played in the open spaces and chickens pecked at the dirt. Taren's accommodations were quite comfortable. Although Taren had expected the underground dwellings to be as dark and damp as the caves, the rooms were warm and bright. Well furnished too, in a mixture of styles Taren recognized: the muted fabrics and carved wood he'd grown up with in Raice Harbor, the bright painted furnishings of the Luathan Islands, and jewel-tone silks and pillows he now knew must have come from the Eastern Lands. As they'd walked back through the caves, Odhrán had called his men a "ragtag bunch, with hearts as true as any." In the short time he'd spent in the caves, Taren sensed some of the same camaraderie he had felt aboard both the *Sea Witch* and the *Phantom*.

Before dinner, Taren washed in the communal baths and was surprised to find that many of Odhrán's men were human. They and Odhrán's Ea followers eyed him with obvious curiosity, although none of them spoke except to offer him assistance and direct him back to his room when he'd finished.

"As you can imagine," Odhrán said as he reclined on a tumble of pillows after dinner, "I guard my secrets well. Only those most loyal to me know how to find this place. They are both my crew and my people."

"But some of them are..."

“Human?” Odhrán finished. Taren nodded. “Aye. Both human and Ea live here together. Peacefully. I don’t care what they are as long as they serve me faithfully.”

“But how did I not sense this before?” Taren asked.

“I did not wish you to sense the presence of Ea here.” Odhrán smiled as he offered Taren a cup filled with wine.

“You can do that? Disguise their true nature?” He knew that Vurin had used his magic to hide Taren’s Ea form from himself and the rest of the world, but this was different. Odhrán had managed to hide more than a dozen Ea without altering their true nature.

Odhrán shrugged and filled a second cup with wine. “Aye. I can. I needed to be sure the stone was safe. If your people had sensed others of their kind here, it would have raised too many questions.” He paused as if anticipating Taren’s next question. “I *have* allowed your mate to sense your continued good health, however.”

“Ian?”

“Aye. My sentries tell me he’s been looking for you.”

“Looking for me?” Of course Ian had. Once again, Taren questioned his decision to seek Odhrán out by himself.

“You doubt your choices,” Odhrán said. “You wish others to choose for you, and yet you understand that you must make your own decisions. An interesting dilemma.”

“How—?”

James, the man Taren had believed to be Odhrán, entered the room and nodded curtly, interrupting Taren’s question.

“Taren, this is James Cairn, my lieutenant.”

James eyed Taren with obvious distrust but inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“James got a bit—” Odhrán chuckled softly. “—carried away with his role, I’m afraid.”

“I’ve already apologized,” James said, his obvious affection belying his gruff manner. “You told me to play my role well.”

“And that you did.” Odhrán laughed outright this time. “You called me a ‘runt,’ I believe?”

James scowled in response. Taren sensed Odhrán's fondness for the man. Odhrán stood and clapped James on the back, then turned once more to Taren. "Taren is here to retrieve the stone," he added as what sounded like an afterthought.

"He knows about the stone?" Taren blurted.

"Of course." Odhrán appeared to take pride in this revelation.

"But he's—"

"Human?"

Taren was tempted to tell Odhrán he didn't appreciate having his thoughts completed for him, but thought better of it. "Aye" was all he said. Judging by Odhrán's expression, Taren wondered if he communicated this last thought too clearly as well.

"James was born here," Odhrán explained. "And his father before him. I keep no secrets from him. I trust him with my life. He knows what I am."

"Wouldn't matter if I wasn't trustworthy, though," James said with a dismissive shrug. "No one can recover the stone but the wielder or a priest."

"Not even its keeper," Odhrán added with a glance in Taren's direction. Why was it that every time Odhrán looked at him like that, Taren felt as though he was transparent? "I'm keeping you from your duties," Odhrán told James. "You came to tell me something."

"Aye." James eyed Taren once more.

"I trust Taren as well." Odhrán shook his head. "Tell me."

"Sentries spotted several ships off the coast of Cera. Human, although there are several Ea aboard," James said. "There are stories of strangers in Gate Town. They've been asking about the ship damaged in the battle several days ago."

"The *Phantom*—!" Taren nearly jumped out of his seat.

"Is safe," Odhrán said with a gentling hand on Taren's shoulder. "For now, at least. She's undergoing repairs and hidden by enchantments." Relief tempered Taren's irritation at having been interrupted once again.

"What do you wish me to do, sir?" James asked.

"Send Garan," Odhrán told James. "Have him reassure the *Phantom*'s captain of his mate's safety. He should be able to manage the enchantments without too much trouble." Perhaps noting Taren's surprised expression,

Odhrán said, “Garan is a powerful mage. Even if he can’t pierce the barrier around the ship, he will make his presence known.”

“Aye, sir.” James left a moment later with a quick glance back at Taren.

“Much as I remind him that I’m more than capable of defending myself, he worries about me,” Odhrán said.

“How did you know about me and Ian?” Taren asked.

“That you are soulbound?” Odhrán smiled. “Any mage would sense this. The bond between you is stronger than any I’ve ever sensed. From the first time we met, I felt his emotions flow through your mind and body. But you’ve sensed this as well, haven’t you?”

Taren nodded and wondered vaguely how Odhrán felt this. Then he remembered what Vurin had told him: Ea hybrids were said to be more powerful than those with only Ea blood. And yet Taren sensed that Odhrán despised his Ea brethren. Feared them, even.

“You are curious about me.” Odhrán’s expression became pensive with these words.

“I... yes. Of course.” Taren hesitated a moment, then said, “Did the islanders harm you?”

“The islanders?” For a moment Odhrán appeared genuinely confused. “Oh. Do you mean those who live on Ea’nu?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Odhrán laughed. “No. I’ve never been to the island.”

Taren knew his shock must be obvious. “Then did Vurin...?”

“No.” Odhrán shook his head. “My reason for avoiding the Ea has nothing to do with the islanders or their mainland counterparts.”

“But the Ea cast you out?” Taren struggled to understand.

“Aye. But it was long before Treande and the others settled Ea’nu.” Odhrán refilled their glasses, then sipped his drink before continuing, “I was a half-breed. An abomination. Neither human nor Ea. Hideous.”

“You’re not—”

“I was to them.” Odhrán brushed a lock of hair from his eyes. “I swore I would have nothing to do with them. Then, years ago, I met an Ea who was kind and good. He didn’t fear me. We became good friends. The best of

friends. He asked me to keep something for him. Something important to his people.”

“The rune stone.”

“Aye. He told me that someday I would meet a young man who would come to reclaim it. I swore to keep that young man safe and to guard the stone until he came for it.”

“To whom did you swear this?” Taren asked. He was quite sure he already knew the answer.

“To you,” Odhrán whispered. “My friend. Treande.”

FOURTEEN

TAREN HAD known the truth even before Odhrán spoke the words, but the truth so overwhelmed him that he needed a moment to grasp the implications.

“You knew Treande?”

“Aye.”

“But how is that possible? He lived more than eight hundred years ago.” Taren shook his head in wonder.

“I am far older than you might imagine.” Odhrán, who had been sitting all this time, now stood up, walked over to the wall, and ran his fingers over the rough surface. The glowing crystals grew brighter with his touch, changing color like a small rainbow, as if they fed on his power. Was it Odhrán who caused them to glow?

“But Ea cannot live...,” Taren began, stopping as the realization of what Odhrán had just said began to sink in.

“Ah, the irony is not lost on you either, is it?” Odhrán’s mouth curved upward in something approximating a smile. “The Ea cast me out because I was *not* like them. They thought me weak, and who could blame them? They despised the humans. Feared them. And yet in spite of their fear, humans and Ea mated. The offspring of a human and Ea had never before survived. And yet I lived.”

“You outlived them all.”

“I am nearly a thousand years old.” Odhrán laughed, then added, “No one knows how long I will live because there are no others like me.” He stroked the crystals again, causing them to flicker. “The few children like

me from the time before the Ea colonized the island all died, abandoned by both their peoples.”

A thousand years old. Taren had only begun to understand the meaning of his own extended life-span. To him it felt like a gift, but only because it meant he had more time to share with Ian. But to Odhrán?

“I need the stone,” Taren said, unsure of how better to ask for it.

Odhrán chuckled. “You might not always *know* your mind, but you have little trouble speaking it.” Taren was about to apologize when Odhrán added, “I like that about you, Taren. It’s quite refreshing. In some ways, you are very different from Treande.”

Why were Odhrán’s words comforting? Was he so afraid of becoming Treande and losing himself that he feared to be anything like him?

“Do you understand what you are asking for?” Odhrán knitted his brow in obvious concern.

“I only know that I need it. That my *people* need it.” Taren wished he understood more, but even Vurin claimed to have no knowledge of how the stone functioned.

“Only the wielder may become one with the stone,” Odhrán told him. “Although a priest may carry it.”

“How will I know if I can wield it? Treande couldn’t.”

“I don’t know.” Odhrán offered him a sympathetic smile. “So much was lost when the Ea left Callaecia for the island. Treande refused to speak of it. The subject of the stone was too painful. There were other priests after Treande, but the mysteries of the stone died with him.”

“How did he die?”

“I don’t know that either, I’m afraid. They say he never returned to Ea’nu after he left the stone in my keeping.” Odhrán sighed. “I believe he knew his time was short when he came to me. He was nearly 350 years old. Perhaps he just swam until he could swim no more. He’d have wanted to die in the water, where he belonged.”

When Taren remained silent, Odhrán frowned and said, “You haven’t remembered your past, have you?”

“No.” He’d tried more times than he could count to use the techniques Vurin had taught him, but he still had seen only fragments of Treande’s past. “I’m sorry I don’t remember you. I truly wish I did.”

“I know little about reincarnation,” Odhrán said, his expression pensive, almost sad. “But I sense much of his soul in you. Perhaps you’re not meant to remember.”

“I need the stone,” Taren blurted, knowing he shouldn’t be so impatient but unable to contain himself.

“There is no rush.” Odhrán refilled his wine, then Taren’s. “The stone has been in my keeping for hundreds of years. Another day or two will matter little.”

Taren held his tongue, knowing it would be rude to challenge his host and afraid that if he did, Odhrán might not give him what he’d come for. And Odhrán was right, wasn’t he? The stone would be there tomorrow. Still, the restlessness he’d felt before stirred in his heart.

“Drink, Taren,” Odhrán said with a knowing smile. “We will talk about the stone later.”

FIFTEEN

TAREN PACED his small room. The bars were gone, but they might as well have locked him in here, for all the progress he'd made in his effort to retrieve the stone for Vurin and his people. He'd tried to speak to Odhrán that morning, but James had told him Odhrán had left the caves and would not return until evening.

Damn him! Odhrán had known how anxious he was to return to Ian and the others, and yet he'd gone for a stroll? The lights in the cave had dimmed hours before, and still Odhrán hadn't returned. In anger, Taren had nearly tossed the tray of food James had brought him for dinner. He still wasn't sure what had stopped him. In the end, he'd thanked James for the food and eaten it without caring what it tasted like.

He couldn't deny that this was exactly as he imagined Ian would act in this situation. But knowing that did little to change his dark mood. Even if somehow Ian's fear for his safety was the cause of his frustration, Taren knew the only thing that would give him relief would be to find the stone and return to Ian's side.

After another hour passed, Taren decided to find Odhrán himself. He'd expected it would be difficult and that Odhrán would try to avoid him. So when he found Odhrán in his rooms—the first place Taren looked—Taren was surprised.

"Taren," Odhrán said as he waved him inside. "So good to see you."

Taren took a deep breath and tried to school his expression. "I've been waiting to speak to you."

"So James tells me."

Odhrán smiled and motioned for Taren to sit. Taren ignored this. “You knew I was waiting for you? How long were you going to keep me waiting?” he snapped.

Odhrán eyed him warily and poured himself a cup of tea. “It seems you’re quite anxious to recover this stone.”

“And you seem not to care how important it is that I do so.” Immediately after speaking these words, Taren put his hand to his lips. Why had he said that? Odhrán had what he needed. Angering him was foolish. “I’m sorry,” he said when Odhrán did not respond. “I have no right to speak to you as I did.”

“You have every right,” Odhrán said. “You have been through much to find the stone.”

“Then why do you keep me from it?” Taren ran a hand through his hair and shook his head, uncomprehending.

“Why do you think I’m keeping you from it?” The edges of Odhrán’s mouth moved upward and he cocked his head to one side, as if appraising Taren. Or reappraising him.

The question took Taren aback. Why would someone like Odhrán, someone infinitely old and obviously wise, care what he thought about anything?

“It’s not a trick question, Taren,” Odhrán said as he leaned back on the cushions. “I truly wish to know your thoughts.”

Taren swallowed hard. “I...,” he began. “I think you don’t really care what happens to the stone.”

“And?” Odhrán prompted.

“And I think you don’t want me to leave.” Taren said these words so quickly, he barely realized what he’d said until he’d finished speaking. He immediately regretted having answered the question.

Odhrán chuckled and appeared entirely nonplussed. “Indeed. And why do you believe this is true?”

Taren hesitated.

“You risk nothing by speaking your mind.” Odhrán sipped thoughtfully on his tea.

Taren drew a long, slow breath. He sensed nothing but truthfulness in Odhrán, although he silently wished Vurin were here to tell him if Odhrán

spoke the truth. "I... I think you're lonely."

Rather than angry, Odhrán appeared amused to hear this. "And why would you think that?" he asked. "I have James and the others to keep me company. I'm hardly alone."

"It's not the same." Taren remembered the sensation when he'd felt the magic in the tunnels. *Odhrán's* magic.

"How so?"

"You care for them like children," he said. "You love them and see to their needs. But you long for more. You long for friendship. Conversation. Someone...."

"Someone like Treande?" Odhrán finished.

"Aye." Taren nodded.

"You really are like him, you know. Bold. Unafraid to speak his mind. Curious."

"I can't stay here," Taren said. "You know that. You've known it all along."

An awkward silence fell between them, one Taren forced himself to endure. He waited for Odhrán's response, knowing that he'd said all he could. Several minutes passed as Odhrán drank his tea, set the empty cup on the table, and appeared to consider Taren's words.

"Yes," Odhrán said at last. "I knew I couldn't keep you here. I knew it the moment I met you. I felt your determination. I felt the call of your bond mate, the one you call Ian."

"What are you afraid of?" As always, Taren spoke without thinking and immediately regretted it.

"I'm happy here. What do I have to fear?"

"That's no answer," Taren said.

"I never fooled Treande either." Odhrán pressed his lips together and smiled. "Although I'm not sure you will believe the truth."

"I might surprise you." Taren returned Odhrán's smile. "Often I surprise myself."

"I spoke the truth when I said I am happy here." Odhrán set his feet atop several pillows. Tiny feet, the size of a child's. Seeing him like this, Taren could hardly imagine he was old enough to have known Treande.

“I’m old. Tired of living.” Odhrán sighed. “Much like Treande when I last saw him. And yet unlike him, I know that I will not die soon.”

Months before, Taren knew he wouldn’t have understood the desire to die. “Have you lost someone as he did?” he asked.

Odhrán shook his head. “No. I’ve served my purpose. I’ve kept the rune stone safe for him for four hundred years.”

“And if I reclaim it, you will no longer have a reason to exist?” Taren shook his head. “That’s a coward’s explanation.”

“And what do you believe is the truth?”

“You know nothing beyond this cave,” Taren said without hesitation. “Perhaps once you lived in the world, but you’ve become complacent. You fear change. You’re content to live through others. You watch them, care for them, but you do not share yourself with them.”

“You’re young. You don’t know—”

“I know enough,” Taren replied. “I understand enough. You wish me to stay because you see me as someone familiar. Safe. And yet you keep the men and women who dedicate their lives to you at a distance because you do not wish to feel pain when they die.”

Taren knew he had spoken the truth when Odhrán frowned and did not challenge Taren’s words. Taren feared he had pushed Odhrán too far when Odhrán once more fell silent. Again, Taren braved the silence and waited.

“I will give you the stone,” Odhrán said at last. “I promised him—you—this.” His expression softened, and Taren saw longing there. “But there is one thing I ask in return.”

“Name it.” Taren met Odhrán’s gaze unflinchingly.

“I would like to get to know you, Taren. Perhaps it’s true that at first I saw you as someone familiar. Perhaps I still do.” Odhrán gestured for Taren to be seated, and this time Taren acquiesced. “But I think there is far more to you than what I remember of him. And I would like to discover it.”

“I would like that,” Taren said. “And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Odhrán said with a sigh, “I will take you to the stone.”

SIXTEEN

TAREN SLEPT little that night, too anxious to think of anything but claiming the stone and rejoining Ian aboard the *Phantom*. Several times he reached for Ian only to find himself alone in Odhrán's guest quarters. His dreams were murky, a tantalizing blur of images, smells, and sounds that called to him but vanished as soon as he awoke. The tinkling of tiny bells, the scent of incense, the taste of bitter fruit on his tongue, love, lust, and betrayal wound themselves through his consciousness, never settling so that he might understand.

The next morning Odhrán led Taren out of the caves to a brilliant sunrise. They climbed down the side of the island opposite the one where they had made landfall days before. The entry here was far easier. The clear water met the land on a sandy beach at a gently sloping angle.

"What if I had not caught you?" Taren said as he repressed a grin. "On the cliff face, when you—when *Brynn* faltered?"

"I never doubted you would" was Odhrán's answer. "But had I fallen," he continued, "I'd have survived."

"If you were so sure of who I was, why did you feel compelled to test me?"

This time Odhrán grinned. "A fair question, and one deserving of an honest answer." Odhrán looked out over the water and sighed audibly. "Would it trouble you to know that I believe I craved the excitement that might come of it?"

Taren considered this. "No. Although I feel I should be angry with you for lying to me."

“Misleading you,” Odhrán corrected, though Taren could hardly see the difference.

“How have you lived so long beneath the island?” Taren asked as he breathed in the fresh air and inhaled deeply of the salt and the ocean. He couldn’t imagine spending years, let alone hundreds of years, in the caves.

“I made my home long enough above the earth to know that it is a wretched place. In my caves, I found comfort. Peace. The generations of men and women who have dwelled there with me have become my family. And although they sailed without me, they always returned.”

Taren wondered what had happened to Odhrán that he so hated the world beyond his caves.

“If you wish, I will show you,” Odhrán said in answer to his unspoken question. “But for now, we will swim. I have promised to show you where you can claim the stone, and I’m eager to fulfill my promise to Treande.”

Odhrán shed his clothing and walked naked into the surf. Taren followed a moment later and they swam away from the shore. It had been less than a week since he’d last transformed, but to Taren it felt like ages. He allowed his body to change as he watched Odhrán, eager to see his transformation.

“No one alive has seen this form,” Odhrán told Taren. He’d clearly understood Taren’s curiosity, because he waited for Taren to swim near him before he said, *“But I suppose it’s time that changed.”*

Odhrán drew his arms above his head as if he were stretching skyward. His body grew, his arms and his legs now inhumanly long. The water around him flickered with a warm reddish light, and his skin took on a similar reddish cast. Small appendages grew from his elbows and wrists, similar to those of the Ea, but longer, more like the fins of an exotic fish. Like Taren’s, the fins sported pointed barbs, though they were more plentiful and sprouted from every juncture of the fins.

Odhrán’s tail was longer by far than Taren’s own. Unlike Taren’s, which was marked by silver, Odhrán’s was the color of the sunset, with trails of purple and fuchsia running in soft stripes from his waist to the fins at the end. Odhrán’s chest expanded, his delicate concave belly growing muscled and taut. It was difficult for Taren not to marvel at Odhrán’s size: he was nearly half again as large as Taren.

More surprising still was that, in this form, Odhrán's eyes shone as though illuminated from within. Not human, like the Ea, for at their center Odhrán's irises were a silvery grey, like the color of the full moon reflected in calm waters. Freed from its long braid, his hair cascaded over his broad shoulders like a waterfall. Its strands undulated with the current, as though blown about by the wind.

Odhrán was larger than any Ea Taren had ever seen. No wonder the Ea had feared the young Odhrán. In this form, he was nearly as large as the whales Taren sometimes swam with off the mainland. Like this, Odhrán was still beautiful. Taren, who had only begun to understand how to use his own magic, sensed power radiating from Odhrán's body. It pulsed fiercely, then ebbed, as though Odhrán consciously reined it in.

Terrifying and beautiful.

"But you do not fear me." Odhrán's words in his mind made Taren wonder if he'd meant for Odhrán to hear his thoughts.

"No. You did not choose to share your thoughts with me," Odhrán explained. *"In this form, I can sense all of your thoughts and your emotions. This ability, more than any other, is the reason the Ea cast me out."*

Taren realized with surprise that he could sense Odhrán's thoughts as well as his emotions.

"The ability is reciprocal," he heard Odhrán say. *"A fair trade, you might say."*

You are beautiful, Odhrán. Taren felt Odhrán's pride at hearing this. Something else as well: relief. *You feared I would reject you?* Taren found this difficult to comprehend. In this form, Odhrán was so obviously powerful that Taren assumed Odhrán would be confident as well.

"I do not doubt my power," Odhrán explained. *"But acceptance in others is something I cannot create for myself. To know that you accept me in your heart is a powerful balm."*

Taren did not answer. There was no need. He sensed the truth of Odhrán's words.

"You look much like him in your human form," Odhrán said as Taren followed him through the water. *"But in this form you are his twin. They say our true appearance is a reflection of our soul."*

My true form, Taren mused. He'd never considered his Ea form to be his natural state of existence, but Odhrán's words resonated in his soul.

Since he'd discovered his true nature, he'd nearly forgotten what it had been like to be human. It was as if he'd been reborn when he'd discovered the truth of his birthright, much like Treande's soul had been reborn in his body.

Tell me about Treande, he said as they swam side by side. *How did you meet?*

"Several years after Treande led the Ea to the island," Odhrán explained, *"he became despondent over the loss of his mate."*

Owyn.

"Aye. Owyn." Odhrán turned and met Taren's gaze for a moment, as if he were searching for some understanding there. *"He'd done everything to help his people establish the colony on Ea'nu, but his people wanted more."*

They wanted him to be their priest.

Odhrán shook his head. *"If they'd just wanted him to be their priest, he would have been content. Instead, they wanted not only a priest but a leader. A savior."*

"He was lost. He loved his people, but he was no god, nor did he wish to be treated as one."

In his visions, Taren had sensed Treande's despair. *He fled the island.*

"You remember, then?"

No. But I know it to be true. Treande had been quite young when Owyn was killed—no older than Ian. Taren once had been afraid to ask Ian how long Ea lived. And when he'd learned that the Ea lived hundreds of years, he'd taken no comfort in that knowledge.

"Mages live even longer," Odhrán put in.

Treande was a mage? Taren had never thought to ask, although it made sense: Vurin believed he, too, was a mage. Taren still wasn't sure.

"All of the ancient priests were mages. Some possessed more than their share of the ancient gifts."

How did you meet? Taren asked.

"By chance. Although Treande often said the goddess had a hand in it." Odhrán shook his head and Taren saw great affection in his expression. *"I had spent many years traveling. Exploring the Kingdom of Derryth. I found him on a beach in the northern part of the country. Frozen. Starving. Near death."*

“He was too weak to transform and heal his human body. He begged me to leave him be, but I couldn’t. I needed to understand...”

You needed to understand what brought him to that. Why he’d want to die.

“Aye.” Odhrán’s expression darkened, and he swam a bit faster. “My own experiences with love had been, shall we say, less successful.” Taren sensed the pain threatening to well up from Odhrán’s soul and knew it best not to ask more questions.

They swam in silence for some time until they reached a reef that stretched into the darkness of the depths. “When Treande gave me the stone,” Odhrán told him as they hovered over the black water, “I promised to guard it well. There are wards you must pass through. Wards Treande himself created. Only the stone’s rightful master may enter, keeper or wielder.”

Odhrán pointed. “The entrance to the cave is there. I will wait for you here.”

You’re not coming with me?

“I cannot. If you are who I know you to be, you can claim the stone.”

And if I’m not the rightful master of the stone? asked Taren.

“Then you will not pass. It is that simple.” Odhrán smiled. In his true form, he was far more beautiful even than before. “But I have no doubt you will return soon. So until then, may your goddess guide your path.”

My goddess?

“Aye. Although I must admit that my belief in her existence has strengthened since you came to me.” Odhrán shook his head. “But we can discuss that later, should you wish it.”

Taren nodded his assent.

“Before you leave,” Odhrán said, “there is something I have that belongs to you.” He motioned Taren to a small reef near the entrance to the cave, then swam down, dug in the sand for a moment, picked something up, and held his hand out to Taren.

The dagger! I thought I’d lost it forever.

Odhrán smiled. “You dropped it during the battle. I went back for it after I brought you ashore. I had a feeling you might need it.”

Thank you. Taren fought the urge to embrace Odhrán but took the dagger instead and gripped it in his hand.

“Be well, Taren.”

Taren nodded and sped off toward the entrance to the cave.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” he heard Odhrán say. The thought comforted him.

TAREN FOUND the cave opening on the underside of a large rocky outcropping covered in coral, just where Odhrán had told him it would be. Had he not been looking and had his eyes not been Ea, Taren knew he would have completely missed it. As he entered, he felt the familiar buzz of enchantments dance over his skin, causing his fins to tingle. The sensation ended quickly, replaced by the cool water of the cave.

He’d expected darkness, but as he swam beyond the opening, he realized that much like the caves of Odhrán’s hideout, these caves were lit with the strange rock crystals. Embedded in the walls, they made the water shimmer with light. Curious, Taren pressed his palm to one of the walls. The crystals pulsed with warmth and energy, both familiar and reassuring. Had Treande placed them here, along with the enchantments? He struggled to recall the past but found it ever elusive. If he had more time to spend here, he might have explored the sensation more thoroughly with his gift, but he knew he needed to move quickly. He needed to return to Ian as soon as possible; he would not cause Ian to worry more than he’d already done.

Taren swam onward, and as he did, the tunnel narrowed so that, in spots, he was forced to pivot onto his back and allow himself to be propelled by the steady current through the tight spaces. At last he came to a bend in the passage he could not pass through. Here, stalagmites and stalactites grew from around the tunnel in sharp, uneven spikes.

What now? He couldn’t return empty-handed. Odhrán had warned him the way would not be easy. Was this an enchantment he should be able to pass through? He closed his eyes and imagined the ocean, as he’d done when he and Ian had first entered the Ea settlement on the mainland months before. Nothing happened. He reached out and touched the pointed rocks—they felt solid. Immutable. Even his Ea strength did nothing to move them.

He rolled onto his back once more, hoping to squeeze past the rocks, but only succeeded in wedging his tail between them.

I must think! He saw no evidence of a rockslide by the placement of the protrusions. There were more of the lighted crystals here as well, making the way clear. Surely he was meant to pass through this. A man could pass if he opened and closed his legs and worked his way between, but an Ea....

Of course! A man! He'd been so preoccupied with swimming that he hadn't even considered shifting back into his human form.

Carefully, he pulled his tail free of the rocks. A trace of blood blossomed into the water from where the skin of his tail had scraped the rough points blocking the way. Nothing too concerning, but the wound was a reminder that he could be injured in this form. Nature had balanced his superhuman abilities with vulnerability. Vurin would have appreciated this observation, he thought with a chuckle.

Now freed from the rocks, he willed his body back to his human shape. Unlike the other times when he'd shifted, there was no air to fill his greedy lungs. He forced himself not to inhale the water that remained in his mouth and nose as he pulled one leg, then the other, over the sharp rocks. The salt water stung the scrape on his human leg. He ignored the pain. It would do him no good to waste his energy on anything but the task at hand.

He emerged on the other side of the rocks, intending to transform, but stopped when he saw the narrow space. There was no room to accommodate his long tail. His lungs hurt from lack of air. He could go back, but from what he saw on the other side of the second outcropping, there was enough room beyond to accommodate his Ea form.

Ignoring his discomfort, he made his way over the rocks to emerge on the other side. What had been relief that he would be able to breathe again quickly turned to panic as he realized the passage was far too small for him to transform. He had barely enough space around his human body to move forward.

Goddess, help me!

His mind blurred as he fought the urge to transform. For an instant he thought his body might surrender to his need, but he forced himself to focus on something other than his lungs' demand for oxygen. If he transformed in this tiny space, he might be too badly hurt to recover. What would become

of a broken tail if he was human? The reminder of his torture at Seria's hands and of what he had done to Taren's legs still burned brightly in his mind. For a moment he froze, terrified that Seria was close by, ready to hurt him again—a moment of panic that passed as his reason returned and, with it, his determination to survive this trial. He had no intention of dying here. He would return to Ian with the stone.

What had Odhrán said? "*The way is fraught with peril.*" A vague memory stirred at the thought of Seria. After Ian had rescued him from Seria and the island prison, Taren had dreamed he was drowning, only to awaken to Ian's voice reassuring him, "*You're nearly there. You're breathing, aren't you?*" He still remembered the pain in his legs. Had he partially transformed back then?

He closed his eyes and imagined himself shifting only to his waist, his lungs changing along with his chest and arms. He drew in a tentative breath, coughed, then breathed a bit deeper. This time his oxygen-starved body responded and his vision, which had gone completely dark, began to clear.

Thank you, he thought, knowing only the goddess herself could hear him.

Cautiously, he crept over what he now saw was a field of rocks that rose like spikes from the sides of the passage. He made slow progress, but nearly an hour later he emerged into a large cavern. As he fully transformed, he wondered if the obstacles he'd passed hadn't been placed there for the sole purpose of making the way impassable to anyone but an Ea with the ability to maintain a partial transformation. Later, he would ask Odhrán or Ian if this ability was unusual.

A quick glance at his tail showed that, indeed, his body could heal if he went through the entire transformation cycle from Ea to human and back to his Ea form. Another ability he'd known nothing of. How had he spent months living with Ian and his people and yet learned so little about himself?

I never asked. He'd wasted so much time fighting with himself that he'd not learned a single new thing about his Ea body.

At the edge of the cavern, he found another passage. Unlike the first, this passage spiraled downward and was wide enough that he found it easy to swim. Odhrán had warned him that the stone was hidden deep within the island's bowels, so he wasn't surprised that he swam for a long time. The

temperature rose with each flick of his tail—Taren guessed that much like Ea’nu, this island had been created by a volcano, now dormant, but ready to reassert itself at any time. The warm water relaxed Taren’s body and reminded him of his time in the hot springs on Lurat with Bastian.

The warm water made Taren feel heavy. Sleepy as well. He spiraled slowly as he swam, allowing the current to pull him forward in a lazy dance. He didn’t notice that the passageway had opened onto a large underwater cavern until he was well into the center of it. The current ebbed, depositing him unceremoniously on the sandy bottom. Had he fallen asleep? He shivered as his body adjusted to the cooler temperature here and the cold water brought him back to his senses.

He looked around for the passageway. There was none. He saw only the rough walls of the cave. He looked above him. The roof of the cavern was solid. There were no openings at all. No way forward. No way back.

Magic?

He ran his hands over the surface of the rock, but he felt none of the telltale signs of a mage’s gift. The rock was solid to the touch. He swam around in circles, seeking the magic he knew must be there. Still nothing.

“It confounds you, doesn’t it?” A familiar voice resonated in his mind.

Who...? Taren pivoted so quickly on one of his tail flukes that he stirred the sand. As the grains settled, he saw a man seated on a boulder that rose from the floor of the cavern. Both man and rock shimmered, even after the water cleared.

“You know who I am, Taren.”

Ian? But how are you here? No, it wasn’t possible. *You’re not Ian. Who are you?*

Ian—or whoever the man was—ignored Taren’s question. *“What do you desire?”* he asked again.

I want to find the rune stone.

Ian shifted on the rock, tilted his head to one side, and said, *“Far too easy an answer.”*

I want to return to the Phantom.

“Again, too obvious.”

Taren bristled at this response. Why had he bothered to answer at all? *You’re not Ian. He’d never—*

“Never press you?” Ian smiled. “No. He probably wouldn’t. But as you said, I am not he.”

Let me pass, Taren demanded. He had no time for riddles without answers.

“I’m not stopping you,” Ian replied. “The way to enter is yours, if you want it badly enough.”

Taren went back to work, trying to find a hidden opening in the walls of the cavern. He’d hoped to sense the magic but found only hard, unyielding rock beneath his fingertips. You lie. There is no way out of this place. Your magic has—

“What magic do you sense?” Ian’s form faded as the current stirred the sand, the outline of his body becoming leaner, more delicate. His face, too, changed. Ian’s face grew cloudy, then reformed itself.

Odhrán, Taren said. I should have known you were behind this.

“What do you want, Taren?” Odhrán asked.

Always the same question. I’ve told you the answer. What more do you want from me? Taren fought his growing frustration. He’d had enough of tests. Hadn’t he proven himself worthy of the stone? If Treande had created the wards, shouldn’t he be able to pass?

“Do you believe it is that simple, Taren?” Odhrán drew his legs to his chest and smiled. Taren bristled at the look of mischief in Odhrán’s eyes.

I’ve proven who I am to you. Why do you still block my way?

“Aye. You’ve proven it. But are you worthy? I wonder.” Odhrán brushed an errant strand of hair from his face. For the first time, Taren noticed something strange about Odhrán’s face. His eyes were not the color of the water that surrounded the island. They were brown. Like his own.

You... you aren’t Odhrán either, are you?

Odhrán raised an eyebrow and pressed his lips together. His expression reminded Taren of a child who hid a secret but wanted the secret to be known.

Who are you?

“I should ask that question of you, Taren,” Odhrán said. “The answer would be the same.”

Taren’s lips parted as he considered Odhrán’s words. I don’t... you are....

Odhrán's form dissolved in another flurry of sand, then grew more and more solid, coming into focus like the image in a spyglass. Solid and real enough to touch, but not a man this time. Ea. White hair, skin darkened from the sun, with lines that edged his mouth and framed his warm brown eyes. In his mind's eye, Taren could hear Odhrán say, *"They say our true appearance is a reflection of our soul."*

You are Treande. Taren didn't mean it as a question; he was absolutely sure of this. He'd only ever seen his Ea form reflected in the waves when he swam, but he had no doubts.

"Aye." Treande smiled gently. Kind. Sympathetic? *"Pleased to meet you, Taren."*

You're... alive?

Treande's soft laugh echoed in Taren's thoughts. *"Alas, no. Or, should I say, I am not alive in this form. I am only alive in you."*

Then this? I've created it?

"You might say we both have. I created this obstacle for you to overcome. You, Taren, dictate its form."

Taren considered these words. *Then the question you asked me...?*

Treande nodded. *"It is of your making, and I'm afraid you're the only one who knows the answer."*

But I don't know the answer. Taren ran a hand over his mouth and tried to understand what Treande had just told him. *I've answered the best that I can, and each time you've told me the answer is wrong.*

"Not wrong," Treande corrected gently. *"Incomplete."* When Taren shook his head in response, Treande continued, *"There is truth in the answers you've given. But the ultimate truth lies deep within your heart. Bound by chains of fear, it struggles to break free of its prison. Speak its name, Taren, and the rune stone is yours."*

Fear? Taren drew a long, slow breath. He'd been afraid to give it a name, but he'd felt it ever since he'd discovered his true nature.

"Aye."

The lump in Taren's throat grew as he met Treande's gaze. *How...*, he began, unsure of how to ask the question that burned inside, or if he should even ask it.

“You mustn’t be afraid to ask me,” Treande said. “It’s not a sin to want to understand the goddess’s plan for us. Neither is it a sin to ask yourself a difficult question.”

Taren marveled at how strange this was—was he truly speaking to himself? Or was Treande somehow here?

“Both,” Treande answered without hesitation. “What you see is indeed a part of me. A piece of my soul I left behind....”

To guide me, Taren finished.

“Aye.” Treande’s smile faded. The bright warmth in his eyes grew dim, the color fading with the weariness in his soul. “Ask it, Taren. You must understand this in order to understand the truth of your life.”

Taren struggled to master his emotions, struggled to tamp down the grief that welled up in his heart and threatened to overwhelm him.

“You cannot fight it any longer. You must embrace it, or you’ll be forever without a way to move forward.”

Taren knew Treande was not speaking of the cavern or of the enchantments that blocked his way to the stone. Had he not been underwater, he knew his face would be wet with tears. The grief he’d fought to hide rose up from within as he said, *How did you survive so long without him?*

Treande’s sigh was Taren’s own. *“I had no choice.”* Treande extended his hand, and Taren saw Owyn’s image appear there. *“He would have wanted me to live, even if it was without him. He knew the goddess had a plan for us. He knew someday we’d be reunited.”* The ghostly outline of Owyn faded and vanished as Treande turned his attention once more to Taren.

You knew you’d be reincarnated? Taren had clung to this idea—it seemed to explain why Treande could live so long and not lose himself in grief.

“No.” Treande’s smile was wistful. “Owyn once promised he’d find me again in another life, but I never truly believed it.” He laughed, then said, “In the end, he was partially correct.”

Partially?

“Aye. You know now that he was reincarnated, as was I. But he was wrong when he said he’d find me again.” Treande shook his head, then touched his chest over his heart. *“The truth is that he never left me.*

Throughout my life, he was with me. All that I did, all I accomplished, he helped me to do. He was my muse and my soul. The gift of his love was the goddess's gift to me, although it took me far too long to understand."

Taren swallowed hard but said nothing, so overcome was he to hear Treande say this.

"I asked the goddess to let me die," Treande continued. "And yet I lived. I thought she was deaf to my pleas." He shook his head, his lips pursed, his eyes full of pain. "Only when I understood that I would not die until I allowed myself to live without him did she finally grant my wish."

Three hundred years? What kind of god would torture you that way? Taren demanded.

"She didn't torture me. The pain was of my making, Taren. When I finally understood this, I knew great joy again. Friendship. Peace."

I can't bear to lose him again.

"You can. And if need be, you will."

No.

"Aye," Treande said, "you can. But perhaps this time will be different."

How do you know it will be different?

"I don't. But you cannot live your life in fear. I couldn't bear to see you waste the time you've been given with him worrying that you will lose him again. What joy can come of that? Besides, you are not me, Taren. You are unique. My spirit lives inside you, but you have your own destiny."

Taren said nothing. The thought of living without Ian, without Ian to help guide his way, to help him, was too painful to imagine.

"You still haven't answered my question, Taren. What do you want?"

I don't know.

"Still not good enough."

I want to find my way. I want to do what the goddess asks of me.

"You speak the truth, Taren," Treande said. "But there is more to the truth, isn't there? You want to do it with Ian at your side."

There's nothing wrong with wanting him there, Taren snapped.

"No." Treande's voice was patient. Understanding. "But what will you do if he's no longer at your side?"

I can't see the way forward without him. It would be like sailing into the wind. I'd go nowhere. I'd be lost. Of all people, Treande should understand this.

"You would survive. You're stronger than you know."

Taren wanted to protest, to tell Treande that they weren't the same person, tell him he wasn't that strong, but Treande vanished before he could form the words. Behind where he once floated was a passageway.

"The stone is only the first step, Taren," he heard Treande say as he flicked his tail and headed down the narrow passage. *"You must still find your way. You must learn to sail into the wind."*

SEVENTEEN

TAREN SWAM to the end of the passage and into another cavern. Smaller than the one where he'd encountered Treande, its center boasted a roughly carved pillar on top of which an object glowed brightly: the rune stone. He didn't need to see it to know it for what it was; he felt it in his bones. Like an old friend, it called to him. But for the stone, there would have been no light—the crystals were absent here.

He swam to where the rune stone awaited him. Was it his imagination, or did the stone glow brighter the closer he came to it? It urged him onward. His mouth felt dry, in spite of the water he breathed, and he struggled to keep his hands from shaking as he reached out for it. He paused, dropping his arms to his sides once more, and moved his tail and hovered over it so that he might better see. He clutched the dagger tighter in his fist, holding on to it like a talisman.

Such a tiny thing. Not much bigger than his thumbnail, the stone shimmered with the same bluish light Taren remembered from his vision of Owyn at the temple. The memory of Owyn's death caused him to shiver. He took comfort in the knowledge that Ian—his beloved Ian—was safe. He didn't understand how he knew it, but he knew that with this stone, he could keep Ian safe. More than that, he could keep his people safe.

My people. Taren hadn't realized he'd come to think of them that way. When had it happened? Perhaps the part of Treande that had loved his people enough to find the strength to endure after Owyn's death was now Taren's own strength. Had Treande imparted him with that gift? Taren wondered how much of his encounter with Treande had been his own making and not that part of Treande's soul left behind to guard the stone.

When he'd asked Vurin if someday all of his memories would return, Vurin had just shrugged. A part of Taren feared what more he might remember of Treande's life after Owyn. The pain he'd experienced recalling Owyn's death still lingered, and he'd felt Treande's deep pain in the short time he had spent with him. Still, he'd sensed something other than grief in Treande's soul. He'd sensed Treande's resolve.

How do you sail into the wind? The rune stone held part of the answer for him. He was sure of it. *Goddess, he prayed. Give me strength. Grant me understanding.*

He reached for the stone with determination this time and grasped its warmth in his hand. The second he clasped his fingers around the stone, the vision swallowed him up.

THE OFFERING glowed hot, the tree branches he and Owyn had set there to purify the altar having been consumed in the fire. All that remained now were the embers. Outside, night had fallen long ago and the crescent moon had set over the ocean. He and Owyn had waited until all the villagers had left. He guessed most were long asleep. They would do this with only each other to witness the rite.

Even now, Treande wondered if Owyn was making the right decision. He didn't doubt Owyn's reassurances that the goddess commanded this, but he feared what might happen. They had only been handfasted a month before, and Treande feared for Owyn's survival. The rune stone unyieldingly punished anyone who dared wield it without permission. The ancient texts were devoid of any mention of the stone, but the stories passed down through generations of priests contained accounts of horrible deaths attributed to the stone.

Treande also feared for Owyn and what the bonding might do to him. Would it alter him somehow? Would he still recognize the man he loved afterward?

Owyn's smile did not reassure him. "I will be the same," he told Treande as they prepared the altar for the rite by dousing the embers with water they'd carried themselves from the harbor. "The goddess blessed our union. She will not take me from you so quickly."

As he'd prayed when they'd been handfasted, Treande now prayed that the goddess would grant them a long and happy life together. He wreathed Owyn's neck with his arms and kissed him, hoping to express everything he couldn't bring himself to say in that single kiss.

"Why must you do this?" Treande asked as their lips parted. "The stone needs no host. You can guard it, as your ancestors have done before."

"My vision was powerful. I cannot explain how I know this, but the goddess wishes me to keep it safe in this way."

"Safe from whom? We have no enemies. Our lives are peaceful. Once you bond with it, there is no turning back. Only your death can free it once again." Taren told himself his eyes burned because of the smoke from the offering, but he knew better.

"The goddess's prophecy must come to pass. This stone will someday be our people's salvation." Owyn brushed his fingers over Treande's cheek. "I promise you, no harm will come of the rite."

Treande wasn't as sure. Even if Owyn was right to believe the goddess herself commanded the bonding, someday Owyn would have to give his life to pass the stone to the next generation or the stone would be lost.

No doubt Owyn read the concern in Treande's eyes, because he said, "Beloved. You know as well as I that we cannot escape the goddess's plan. Please. Trust me. What I do tonight will not take me from you." Owyn smiled wistfully and offered Treande his hand.

"What must I do?" Treande asked. He was a priest. He'd sworn his life to the goddess. He would not interfere, much as he knew the price Owyn might pay.

"Bear witness. Nothing more."

Treande nodded.

*Owyn approached the altar and slipped the chain that held the rune stone over his head. The bare skin of his chest glistened with sweat as he gently laid the stone on the altar. From the embers, he retrieved the silver dagger with his left hand. Owen gasped. Treande guessed the metal was still very hot. Owyn held the dagger over his head and chanted the words inscribed on its hilt: *Vea'nat, Ea'nat, Tur*. Outside the temple, the wind howled its greeting as if to announce the coming of a tempest.*

Treande forced himself to breathe through the thick zest of power that permeated the high-ceilinged sanctuary. He felt it dance on his skin, at once horrifying and exhilarating.

Owyn lowered the dagger and rubbed the skin over his heart. He turned the weapon so that it pointed toward his body, then drew it against his bare skin. He gasped and gritted his teeth as the knife easily cut through the soft skin and blood blossomed crimson there. Owyn replaced the dagger on the altar and picked up the stone, which glowed brightly as it hung on its chain.

“Vea’nat, Ea’nat, Tur,” Owyn repeated. A shriek of wind rent the air and seemed to amplify his voice. Blood dripped from his chest as he gently pressed the stone against the wound. His blond hair whipped about his face as the wind grew stronger inside the temple.

Goddess, protect him! Treande prayed.

The light from the stone grew brighter still, like the sun as it caught the surface of the water. Treande was forced to look away. The heat intensified and flames rose from the center of the maelstrom until Treande feared that Owyn’s life was at risk. He covered his eyes and moved toward where he had last seen Owyn.

“Owyn!” Something solid pushed Treande backward with such force that he fell on the stone floor. “Owyn!” He struggled back to his feet and ran at the fireball, desperate to do something to stop it.

“Treande.” Owyn spoke in a calm, clear voice.

Treande blinked but realized he couldn’t see. “Goddess! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Owyn gathered Treande in his arms and held him against his chest. Treande felt the reassuring beat of Owyn’s heart. Slowly, Treande’s vision began to clear. Even before he could see once again, he felt Owyn’s nakedness.

“Owyn.” Treande allowed his tears to flow unimpeded. “Goddess, I thought—”

“As you can see, I am well.”

Treande stepped back and brushed away his tears. Owyn was untouched. Unblemished. The place where he’d cut his chest was smooth,

his body completely unscathed. Clean. Purified. Treande closed his eyes and spoke a prayer of thanksgiving to the goddess.

“The stone?” Treande asked.

“Gone. It is part of me now.” Owyn touched his fingers to his heart.

“May I...?”

Owyn smiled and nodded.

Treande tentatively pressed his palm against the skin of Owyn’s chest. It felt warm and familiar. Encouraged, he pressed a bit more firmly and reached to touch Owyn’s soul. It too felt familiar, but where before he had only sensed Owyn, now his mind was flooded with something new. Power, like the vibrations of the waves as they pounded the surf, only this did not retreat. It pulsed, strong and unyielding, waiting for Owyn to call upon it.

“Thank the goddess.”

“I told you there was nothing to fear, my beloved.” Owyn’s embrace was a balm to Treande. He closed his eyes and thanked his goddess once again.

TAREN CAME back to himself to discover that he now wore the stone around his neck. He didn’t remember having put it there, nor did he remember that the stone had been attached to a chain.

“Taren?”

Taren took a deep breath and turned around. He struggled to clear the fog from his mind as he fingered the black stone. This vision seemed to linger longer than the others. He looked around, sure he would see Owyn there, but realized he was alone with Odhrán. No longer Treande. He repressed a shiver, shoved his fear back from where it had come. *I’m not Treande*, he told himself. What had Treande said to him? *“My spirit lives inside you, but you have your own destiny.”*

Odhrán hovered a few feet away from him. The chamber, the tunnels—all of them had vanished. Instead of light from the crystals, the sun shone through the water to illuminate their surroundings. Taren was back at the entrance to the cave near where he’d left Odhrán. The water felt heavy. Cooler than inside. Fingers of warmth from the current ghosted over Taren’s skin, reassuring him, bringing him back to himself. Back to the present.

“Are you all right?” Odhrán asked.

How long was I gone? Taren’s mind slowly began to clear. Everything had changed so quickly that he felt unsettled.

“I left you here a few moments ago.”

Moments? It felt to Taren as though hours had passed.

“Aye.” Odhrán seemed untroubled by this. “The enchantments must have ended when you retrieved the stone.”

Oh. The realization that Treande had vanished along with the enchantments left him feeling surprisingly empty. None of it was real, then. I imagined all of it?

“It may have been real. Who can say?” Odhrán eyed him with curiosity. “This saddens you. How strange.”

I... Taren began. He was here. Treande. I... I spoke with him.

“A guide.” Odhrán nodded his understanding. “But you always knew you’d have to make your own way, didn’t you?”

Aye. Still, he’d hoped for more.

“You had a vision when you touched the stone.”

Taren wondered how Odhrán knew this.

“I can sense your gift, Taren,” Odhrán replied to Taren’s unvoiced question. “Your magic is different from mine, but it is powerful enough that I can feel it.”

Yes. When I touched the stone, I had a vision of when Owyn bonded with it.

“What did you learn?”

Only how to become one with it. Taren sighed. I had hoped to understand more, but the vision ended.

“What will you do with it, then?”

I don’t know. Vurin believes my people need it. I’ll bring it to him. Taren paused for a moment, then said, Don’t you think it strange that in spite of all we know, its purpose seems to have been lost over time?

Odhrán appeared thoughtful. “Perhaps it’s better we not know. For now, at least.”

The stone is the salvation of my people. At least that’s what the prophecy says. The goddess has a plan for it, just like she has a plan for us.

Odhrán shook his head. *“Treande often said that. He tolerated my disbelief.”*

His belief wavered at times. When Owyn died.... Taren took a deep breath. *Enough of the past, he said brightly. It’s time for me to rejoin the Phantom. I don’t wish to worry my mate.*

“Ian.”

Aye. Do you wish to come with me?

“Come with you?” Odhrán’s eyes grew wide.

Why not? At least accompany me as far as the ship. Even I can sense you’re curious about your brethren.

“They are not my brethren.” Darkness clouded Odhrán’s expression once again.

Treande would have disagreed, Taren pointed out.

“Aye.” Odhrán pursed his lips, but Taren thought he saw a hint of a smile. *“He did, in fact. Treande was... unusual,”* Odhrán finished.

I ask only that you trust me as you trusted him.

Odhrán tilted his head to one side as if considering something. *“I already do. It’s the others I don’t trust.”*

Taren nodded. *I understand. My first encounter with my people was hardly a pleasant one. I spent weeks locked up in their prison.* He hesitated. The memory of Seria’s torture was still too painful, too raw.

“You needn’t tell me more,” Odhrán said. *“I can sense those thoughts. They still haunt you and probably will for a long time to come. This man—Seria?—he is the leader of the island faction?”*

Taren sensed that Odhrán had lived through something that had left him with emotional scars. He struggled to calm the cold dread that crept through his body and threatened to pierce his heart. He breathed deeply and focused on Odhrán’s question.

Seria wasn’t their leader when I was held captive. But since we escaped, there have been rumors that he’s convinced the Ea Council to resume their fight with the mainlanders.

“More reason for me to stay away from your people, I fear.” Odhrán’s voice in Taren’s mind was a low whisper. Devoid of emotion. Resigned.

Why? You’re far more powerful than they are. As usual, Taren’s curiosity had him speaking before thinking.

Odhrán chuckled, but his expression once again grew dark. *“Power is a frightening thing,”* he said. *“Perhaps it’s time I show you my past, that you might understand my fear.”*

How...?

“If you wish, your gift will allow you to see, Taren,” Odhrán said as he offered Taren his hands. *“But what I offer to show you is far from pleasant, I assure you.”*

I want to know. Though Odhrán’s words disturbed him, Taren *needed* to know. He’d never run from the truth before.

Odhrán smiled his understanding as Taren took his hands and clasped them tight. As with most of his other visions, Taren’s mind seemed to float free of his body, transporting him outside of himself. The familiar sensations of the ocean and water upon his skin faded as he lost himself in the past.

EIGHTEEN

THE HARD marble floor made Taren's knees ache. He blinked and looked around, unsure of where he was. Or who he was. *A vision?* The familiar sensation his gift imparted danced in his consciousness. He had never succeeded in directing his gift before, in spite of Vurin's attempts to help him. Yet when he'd reached out to touch the place in Odhrán's mind that felt familiar, the connection had been powerful and immediate.

Taren—no, he was no longer Taren, he was Odhrán now—kneeled in front of the king of Astenya, the Eastern Lands. Before this powerful man, he felt small, smaller even than the other men in the room. Cold, too, for he was naked but for the jewels that adorned his body, the collar at his neck, and the sheer silk Luka had wrapped around him. Each nipple was pierced with a gold ring, each wrist adorned with a hammered cuff that gleamed in the light that streamed in from the courtyard beyond. His cock stood proud from his body, held erect by the cool stone ring at its base. He felt no shame in his nakedness. Luka preferred him this way. But standing before the king, he felt vulnerable. Afraid.

He glanced over his shoulder to reassure himself that Luka was still there. Luka, who cared for him when he couldn't care for himself. Luka, who had taught him to speak the humans' language and who had given him a place where he finally felt safe. Luka had protected him from those who had cast him out. If Luka had brought him to the palace, Luka had a good reason to do so. Odhrán struggled to repress his fear, rose, and held himself proud before the king.

Taren experienced each of Odhrán's emotions as if they were his own. "*You have no power to affect what you observe,*" Vurin had told Taren when he had learned to use his power to see the past. "*What has been*

cannot be shaped—it is memory formed by its host. An echo of what was. You may speak, but only you will hear words differently than those spoken in the memory.” This memory was Odhrán’s past.

The tinkling of bells—tiny silver bells on Odhrán’s ankles—reminded Taren of when he’d touched Brynn in the caves. He realized he’d unwittingly brushed up against Odhrán’s past when he’d tried to help Brynn. The push he’d felt in response had probably been Odhrán forcing him away, not wanting him to see his memories. He hadn’t meant to invade Odhrán’s mind. Not then. Not now. He hurried to withdraw from the memory, fearful Odhrán might think he’d willfully entered his thoughts, but something held him back. He sensed Odhrán was allowing him to remain here, that Odhrán *wanted* him to see and understand.

The king was dressed in silks, a circlet of hammered gold set with blazing red stones peering out from dark hair that fell in waves over his shoulders. He was younger than Taren imagined he might be, younger than Rider, although strands of silver flecked his beard. His fierce gaze and air of self-confidence were powerful and attractive, although had he seen the man in a crowded marketplace, Taren guessed he’d not have looked twice. Several male courtesans lazed about on silk cushions, their eyes and lips painted like women’s, their hair adorned with jewels, their bodies covered in the finest cloth. They did not appear pleased to see Odhrán.

“Is he not beautiful, Your Majesty?” said a voice from behind him. Luka. Luka, the human who had rescued him from himself before he could take his own life to end his pain. The man he loved with his entire soul. He would do anything for Luka. Anything. Do anything. *Be* anything. Anyone.

“He is lovely,” the king said as he motioned Odhrán to rise.

“Turn around so he can better appreciate your charms.” Luka offered him a reassuring smile and gestured Odhrán to turn slowly. “He is more than just lovely, Your Majesty. He can be the most beautiful boy in the world if you wish it.”

Odhrán’s heart beat hard against his ribs when he heard Luka speak of him this way. Luka had loaned him to other men, but only when there was too little food to feed them or when the landlord came to call for the rent. But to be presented to the king? This he did not understand. When he’d asked Luka where he’d found the jewels, Luka had only replied that a

wealthy friend had loaned them to him and that he wished to display Odhrán as some of the slave owners did so that all could admire his charms.

“But I’m not a slave,” Odhrán had said.

“Of course not. And you are far more beautiful. But is it wrong for them to admire you and be jealous?” Luka laved his neck with kisses and stroked his back until he quieted. He trusted Luka. Luka was everything. Luka was life to him.

“He is quite beautiful,” the king said with a disinterested nod. “But there are many like him. I have no need for another.”

“He is unlike the others, Majesty.” Luka risked much, speaking thus to such a powerful man, and Odhrán’s fear grew.

The king laughed. “They are all alike. Eager to please. Well bred for it. Soft skin. Tight little holes. What do you offer that is different?”

“He has magic, Majesty.”

No. No one must know of my magic. Luka told me this himself! Odhrán turned to Luka, uncomprehending, seeking answers. The only response Luka gave was to tug on the leash and force Odhrán’s head forward once more.

“Magic?” The king chuckled. Some of the other men in the room snickered to hear this as well. “Every young man has a certain magic, I suppose.”

“No, sire. He is not like us. His magic is not like the others’.” Luka parted Odhrán’s lips and pressed two vellberries inside, letting his fingers linger so that Odhrán might suck them. Odhrán swallowed the bitter fruit as he always did, knowing only too well what the result would be. He did not understand why Luka would want the king to know of his magic, but he would not deny Luka. He owed Luka his life many times over, and he lived to please him.

Luka, who had taken him in when he’d lain dying by the water. He’d wanted to die, but Luka had insisted he survive. He’d nursed Odhrán back to health and fed his mind with poetry and books. Odhrán had been young, barely fifteen, but he’d been powerfully attracted to Luka just the same. Luka had given him a home where he felt safe, and for nearly five years, he had submitted to Luka willingly. Happily.

The king appeared intrigued by Luka’s words. He waved away the male courtesans, who disappeared from the room, looking sullen. Only

Odhrán, Luka, and the king's guards remained. "Show me this magic," he commanded, his gaze never leaving Odhrán's naked body.

By now Odhrán's cock was so hard it ached, the berries having done their work to ease his fear. The berries, Luka had once explained, helped free Odhrán's mind as well as his body, allowing his magic to flow.

"What do you prefer, Majesty? Dark hair? Ginger? Or blond?" As Luka spoke the words, he fingered Odhrán's hair. It had grown long in his time with Luka and now nearly reached his waist; Luka had forbidden him from cutting it. "How young? How delicate?"

Odhrán could see from the king's expression that the king did not believe he possessed magic. The king laughed and motioned for the guards to remove them both from his chamber. But Odhrán could already feel his body beginning to change in response to the king's thoughts. His arms lengthened and he grew slightly taller, his chest expanding, and downy hair covered the space between his tan nipples. His skin became paler than before, his hair a dark auburn. He wasn't sure about his eyes, although he knew they had changed too. He felt his body change even though he was powerless to control it, driven as it was by the king's thoughts and desires.

The king waved the guards away. They, too, were clearly enthralled by what they had just witnessed, though they moved to the entrance and stood at attention.

"What do you wish, Majesty?" Luka asked as he pulled one of the rings on Odhrán's nipples. Odhrán shuddered.

"Show me how you play with him." The king wet his lips and leaned back in his chair.

Luka grinned, then nodded. Odhrán watched, unsure of what to make of Luka's offer. The king's interest he understood all too well. But Luka? Did he intend to ask the king for money afterward?

"Come here," Luka said as he touched a finger to Odhrán's chin. "Help me show His Majesty how beautiful you are."

Odhrán shivered at the delicate touch and his cock strained against the stone ring. If he performed well, perhaps Luka would allow him his own pleasure. If not, he'd be happy just to have served Luka.

Luka drew the transparent silk wrap from Odhrán's body. Although it had hidden nothing, Odhrán felt far more vulnerable without it. He felt the

king's eyes on his body, sensed his appreciation, and breathed deeply to steady his racing heart.

Before, Odhrán had only noticed the king as he sat on the gilded chair. Now, he took in the surroundings. Heavy silk tapestries covered the stone walls, and beautifully woven rugs covered the wood floors, warming the room and giving it the feeling of a sumptuous cocoon.

"Bring him closer," the king commanded.

Luka did as he was told. This close, Odhrán could smell the musk of the king's arousal and hear his stuttered breaths. Luka kissed Odhrán, soft and sweet at first, then plunged his tongue between Odhrán's lips and claimed the prize of his mouth. Odhrán moaned his pleasure and pressed toward Luka, wanting more, *needing* more, breathless and hungry for it.

Luka once again tugged at a nipple ring, causing Odhrán to cry out in pain. "Pain and pleasure, Majesty," Luka said in a low voice. "See how he longs for more of it."

"Yes, please," Odhrán whispered.

"Lovely." The king's rumbled laughter filled the room as Luka caught Odhrán's lips again and plundered his mouth.

Luka traced his hand over the surface of Odhrán's belly and found Odhrán's hard member. He rubbed his thumb over the sensitive tip, spreading the wetness he found there before gripping Odhrán tightly in his fist.

"Goddess!" shouted Odhrán. As it often did when he took another form, his voice sounded unfamiliar to his own ears: melodic, throaty. Not a woman's voice, but mellifluous, like the sound of a lute strummed for a lover.

A hand brushed his ass cheeks, then kneaded them roughly. Not Luka's hand, Odhrán realized with surprise, but the king's. The king's hands were smooth, but his touch was anything but gentle as he pulled the globes apart and ran a single finger over Odhrán's opening. Instinctively, Odhrán tried to pull away, but Luka held him firmly in place and whispered reassuringly in his ear, "I wish this. I wish to share your beauty with him."

Odhrán forced himself to relax into the king's touch. If Luka wished to share him thus, he would not protest. Luka knew what was best for him. Luka was kind. Luka loved him.

“So tight,” the king said as he pressed the tip of his finger inside. Dry as it was, Odhrán gritted his teeth against the burn. Luka sometimes breached him that way; in fact, Odhrán liked the sensation. But when the king shoved several fingers inside without preparation, Odhrán whimpered and felt hot tears of pain on his face.

Once again Luka whispered to him, calming him like one might calm an anxious child, soothing him until the tears abated and kissing him again. “That’s my beautiful Odhrán,” Luka murmured as Odhrán stilled. “So beautiful.”

Luka allowed Odhrán to lay his head against his shoulder as the king continued to probe his opening with his large fingers. Each moan, each pant was met with Luka stroking his hair and making reassurances. The pain flared, then died as Luka began to stroke Odhrán’s cock once more.

The king withdrew his fingers and Odhrán gasped in response. “Enough of this,” he said. “I wish to see him take you in his mouth.”

“Of course, Majesty,” Luka said as he guided Odhrán to a wooden settee and pushed him to his knees before it. The cushions were covered in brightly colored threads that depicted a hunting scene where a doe lay bleeding on pale silver snow. The doe’s eyes were wide with fear, as if she knew her death was imminent. Beautiful and terrifying.

“Undress me,” Luka said as the king nodded his approval. Luka sat down on the cushion, obscuring the tapestry, and yanked on Odhrán’s leash. Odhrán knew Luka did this for the king’s benefit; he would never disobey Luka’s commands.

My life for you, Luka.

Odhrán lifted himself up off his knees, then drew Luka’s tunic over his head. He stopped briefly to admire Luka’s caramel skin and the smooth line of his neck and shoulders. He had never seen a man as handsome as Luka, with his strong chest and arms, narrow waist, and powerful thighs. Odhrán loved Luka’s masculine form, loved how fragile he felt in Luka’s grasp.

Luka stood up so Odhrán could untie his pantaloons, then waited patiently as Odhrán eased them over his hips. Luka was naked beneath the linen, as always. The thought made Odhrán ache for Luka’s cock.

“Only for you, beautiful Odhrán,” Luka had told him after he’d made love to Odhrán the first time. He’d taken Odhrán in his arms, caressed every inch of his body, tasted his skin, his mouth, his cock. In Luka’s arms he’d

learned his body could bring him pleasure. Luka taught him to give pleasure, as well. Before Luka found him, Odhrán had never felt the kind touch of another person, man or woman. The Ea had feared him, and his human mother had not survived his birth. He'd been raised by the people of his mother's village until he'd transformed when he was only ten years old. They'd called him a monster and nearly killed him. But he'd lived.

"Taste me," Luka told him as he leaned back on the settee. "Show His Majesty how beautiful your mouth can be."

Odhrán did as Luka asked. He loved the way Luka tasted, the salty sweetness of his seed and the aroma of spices from the scented oil he favored. Odhrán pushed back the foreskin to lave Luka's tip, then nipped playfully at the edges the way Luka liked. Luka tilted his head back and parted his lips, moaning loudly enough that Odhrán knew he did so for the king's pleasure, although the tremors in Luka's body were meant for no one other than him.

Odhrán dared lift his gaze to the king, who had shifted in his seat, the fabric of his silk pants stretched tight at his groin, his eyes glazed with satisfaction. Would the king take him after Luka? If Luka wished it, Odhrán would gladly share his body with another man.

"Yes, gods, yes!" Luka shouted.

Around and around Odhrán worked his tongue in circles as he sucked and pulled to Luka's increasingly bold words. As Odhrán sensed Luka near his climax, he realized the king had gotten up from his chair and was standing nearby, watching them both with approval. Luka cried out his release and shuddered beneath Odhrán's lips while Odhrán savored every drop of the precious liquid he offered.

"Would you like to feel his glorious mouth?" Luka asked the king in a voice rough with passion.

Odhrán smiled shyly at the king, not meeting his eyes. The king grasped him by his shoulders and plunged his tongue into his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye, Odhrán saw Luka was pleased. Seeing Luka's pleasure made his body thrum with renewed desire. The king grasped the globes of Odhrán's ass with his large hands and kneaded them until the flesh stung. Odhrán's moans encouraged the king, who traced a finger downward to find the prize hidden between Odhrán's nethercheeks.

By now Odhrán was painfully hard and longing for his own climax. He imagined the king's hands were Luka's. He glanced at Luka, who smiled and asked, "Do you want the king to fuck you?"

Odhrán nodded. A moment later, the king pushed him against the wall and probed his opening again with his fingers. It thrilled him to have Luka watch or take him in front of others. Feeling Luka's gaze on him as someone else used his body, seeing Luka's pleasure, knowing that Luka found him beautiful, gave *him* pleasure.

The king pushed Odhrán's shoulders down so that he stood with his ass splayed, his body vulnerable. His form changed again with the king's touch, sculpting itself to satisfy the king's desire. This didn't surprise Odhrán—he'd long learned his body would respond to his lovers' touches regardless of his own preference. If it pleased Luka, he didn't mind.

Luka stood up and petted his hair as the king kneaded his ass. There was no kindness in the king's touch, but Odhrán didn't care that it hurt. With each cry of pain, Luka was there to comfort him, following each of his cries with a gentle kiss. When the king swatted him, Luka was there to trace fingers over his back and shoulders. Pain and gratification in equal measure—oh how he loved this!

"Yes... Majesty... oh, yes!" he shouted as the king filled his hole with all four of his fingers, pressing inside up to his knuckles.

Odhrán heard the king's grunt of satisfaction as, a moment later, he withdrew his hand and plunged his member into Odhrán's body, ruthlessly thrusting as he twisted, grabbed Odhrán's hips, and dug his fingers into Odhrán's flesh. Luka was there, urging Odhrán to abandon himself to the sensation, praising his beauty and his submission.

Odhrán craved release. The cock ring was painful now, but he would wait, as he always did, until Luka gave him permission to come. He knew it pleased Luka that way.

The king pulled hard on his long hair, forcing him to lift his head. Then the king caressed his neck and his cheeks and traced his lips with his fingers, stifling Odhrán's moan with a hand over Odhrán's mouth and nose. For the first time since he'd been with Luka, Odhrán felt true terror. Not since he'd left the Ea had he felt so vulnerable. He struggled against the king's hand not because he couldn't breathe but because his fear was too

great. He remembered the Ea boys who had beat him as the others held him down.

No, please. Let me go! The room seemed too small, too hot. *Luka!* Luka would help him. Luka would make sure no harm came to him.

But Luka did not move. Didn't tell the king to stop. Luka said nothing.

Odhrán's vision clouded. He struggled to contain his rising panic, struggled not to fight the king's hand over his face. Just when he thought he could stand it no longer, the king shuddered and swore as he released his grip on Odhrán, then pulled out. Odhrán dropped to his knees on the hard stone floor, too boneless to cry out in pain.

"Stand up," Luka commanded. Odhrán struggled to his feet and swayed, only to feel Luka's steadying hand in the small of his back. "Now stroke yourself. Show the king your pleasure."

Odhrán's cock, which had softened in his panic, responded to Luka's voice. With several strokes, Odhrán grew hard once again.

"My beautiful Odhrán," Luka said in an undertone—words meant for Odhrán's ears alone. "With your lovely white shoulders and your graceful neck. You were meant to be admired by royalty. Show me your pleasure."

Odhrán closed his eyes and imagined Luka's hand in place of his own. His breath quickened and the pain in his knees abated as he squeezed and pulled. By now he knew he'd returned to his original form in response to Luka's desire—the soft caress of his hair tickled the bare skin of his ass. He parted his lips and exhaled, feeling Luka's steadying presence nearby and knowing he wanted this. Wanted him. Thought him beautiful.

"That's it," Luka told him as he reached down and unlocked the clasp on the cock ring. "Show me, Odhrán. Show us your beauty. Come for me!"

"Ahhh!" Odhrán shouted as he painted the marble floor with his seed. *Luka! For you, Luka! Only for you!*

The king smiled before taking Odhrán's softening cock in his hand. He rubbed the hypersensitive tip with his thumb, then licked his fingers and rubbed it once again. Too tender to the touch, Odhrán cried out and pulled away to avoid the contact. With his free hand, the king grabbed Odhrán by the wrist and shoved his arm behind him to the point of pain. Odhrán whimpered but forced himself to endure the touch. Luka looked on approvingly.

For Luka, he told himself. Anything for him.

“WHAT DO you want for it?” the king asked after he’d called for his servants to clean him up.

Odhrán shivered to realize the king had just referred to him as a thing, like chattel. “Luka?” he whispered as he shivered with fear and recognition.

Luka patted his head and murmured words of comfort. “I couldn’t possibly part with him, sire,” Luka said after a pause.

Odhrán relaxed to hear these words. For a moment he’d almost imagined....

“I can offer you much,” the king said. “Gold. A dukedom if you wish.”

“Really, Your Majesty, I couldn’t—”

“You may think about it, of course,” the king said.

“Your offer is quite generous,” Luka said. “But he’s not for sale. Are you, my pretty boy?”

Odhrán gazed at the floor and whispered, “No.”

“We really must leave, Majesty,” Luka said with a smile. “It’s getting quite late.”

“You will think about it,” the king said, the words sounding far more like a command this time.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Luka said as he led Odhrán out of the room by his leash. “Of course I will.”

NINETEEN

ODHRÁN CURLED up at Luka's side, his head buried under the blankets. He liked the feeling of being wrapped in Luka's warmth. His body still ached from his time spent with the king two days before, but he relished it. He knew he'd done well. Luka had offered to leave him be, concerned that he might need time to recover, but he'd told Luka he wanted him. He would share his body for Luka's pleasure, but it was Luka's touch he wanted to remember.

He still felt uneasy when he remembered the last conversation Luka had with the king. He knew Luka had agreed to think about the king's offer to avoid offending him, but what if the king were to take him without Luka's permission? Odhrán drifted into an uneasy sleep, arms entwined about Luka's waist.

HE AWOKE to the sound of hoofbeats on the cobblestones outside their tiny abode, followed by loud knocking on the front door. "Stay here," Luka told him. "Don't let them see you."

Odhrán did not leave the room, though he went over to the window to see who the visitors were. What he saw left him breathless with fear: several of the royal guards sat atop their horses, while two other guards flanked an older man Odhrán didn't recognize.

From the window, a normal man wouldn't have been able to hear their conversation. But Odhrán's hearing had always been more acute than that of normal men. If they made any move to threaten Luka, he would gladly defend him, even if it cost him his life.

“I am Ukyon, the king’s treasurer,” the older man said. “The king has agreed to your terms.”

Terms? Odhrán pushed the question from his mind. Of course Luka would do his best to appease the king.

“Indeed.” Luka folded his arms over his chest. “And how do I know I will get what I want?”

Ukyon frowned, clearly displeased that anyone, let alone a commoner like Luka, doubted his word. “My men will take you to your new abode. If your accommodations are lacking, we will make every effort to ameliorate them.”

“How do I know the king will keep his word?” Luka demanded.

“The king’s word is law,” Ukyon replied. “You will have your manor house.” He handed Luka a scroll set with a royal seal, which Luka opened.

Odhrán stepped back from the window. Manor house? Had Luka offered to hand him over to the king in return for a new place to live?

“...asked for was a manor and enough land to live off. Enough servants to tend to my needs and work the land,” Luka was saying when Odhrán came back to himself.

No. He’s protecting me. Odhrán was more sure of it now than before. *We’ll need to run. Hide from the king’s guards.* He would gather their things, and once Luka managed to send the men away, they would escape the city and head for the coast. He began to pile their belongings onto the bed. It wasn’t that difficult. They had very little. Luka had once said they didn’t need much.

Odhrán was gathering the sheet off the bed when the guards kicked open the door to the bedroom. They threw him down onto the uneven wooden planks of the floor, then bound his hands and attached a rope to his collar—the collar Luka had given him that Odhrán cherished. They dragged him down the narrow stairs, not caring that he stumbled and nearly fell.

Odhrán knew that when they emerged onto the tiny courtyard, Luka would be bound just as he. His Luka. The man for whom he’d willingly sacrifice himself. If only he had vellberries, he’d transform into a giant and kill the guards! But when the guards pulled him by the collar and into the bright morning sunlight, he saw Luka standing beside the king’s treasurer, watching, his expression unreadable.

“Kneel before Lord Ukyon, whore!” a soldier shouted.

Odhrán cried out as the man kicked him in the shins, and he dropped to his knees on the hard stones. His eyes filled with tears as the other soldiers laughed. “Luka?” His voice cracked as he spoke.

Luka turned to the king’s treasurer and smiled. “Feed him two young vellberries when you wish his cooperation. He likes to be fucked while others watch. He will retain his new form for several hours unless you desire a different form, but if you wish him to remain transformed longer, you must give him several more berries.”

Odhrán’s tears burned like acid upon his cheeks. “Luka,” he gasped as he struggled to breathe. “Luka, please. I’ll do anything for you. I’ll become whomever you wish. Please don’t give—”

The sting of Luka’s hand upon his cheek was nothing compared to his tears. He grabbed Odhrán’s collar and pulled it so hard Odhrán could barely breathe. “You will please His Majesty. You are his now, to do with whatever he wishes.”

“Please, Luka,” Odhrán begged. “Don’t do this. I love you.”

“Love?” Luka’s laughter was harsh. “You really are pathetic.” He eased up on the collar and Odhrán gulped in air.

One of the soldiers tossed him over a horse and tied him to it.

“Luka! No, please, Luka. If I wasn’t good enough, I’ll be better. Please don’t let them take me!”

TWENTY

ODHRÁN BALANCED like an acrobat on the sill of a second-story window. From his vantage point, he had a clear view of a large walled city. Outside the walls, hundreds of ramshackle homes dotted the landscape. The crumbling façades and broken tiles of their roofs reminded him of sores that wouldn't heal, festering, ignored. He'd once thought the city beautiful. Now he saw it for what it was: heartless and cruel.

He pushed open the windows and slipped inside the house unnoticed before making his way to a room at the end of a long hallway. A solitary figure sat at a desk, working an abacus and jotting down figures. A large tray of cheese and dry fruits sat on the corner of the desk, a sumptuous snack, carefully prepared and arranged like an exotic fan with various layers.

"In the end, everything has a price," Odhrán said as he stood with his feet planted slightly apart and drew back the hood of his cloak to reveal himself.

The man at the desk looked up and his eyes grew wide. Luka appeared older than before—fatter too. He likely ate better than he had when he and Odhrán had lived outside the city walls. "You! But—"

"But I'm supposed to be rotting where you left me ten years ago?" Odhrán laughed.

"I'm glad you're safe."

"Are you? It seems you've gotten what you hoped for from the bargain." Odhrán leaned on the edge of the desk and narrowed his eyes. In spite of his anger, seeing Luka again made him long for his loving touch.

"You served me well. You could serve me again, if you wished it."

“There was a time I wanted nothing more,” Odhrán said in an undertone.

“I loved you.”

“Did you?”

“Why do you doubt it?” Luka smiled and reached out to touch Odhrán’s face.

Odhrán leaned into the touch—wanting it and yet knowing it for what it was. Taren’s gut twisted as he felt Odhrán’s shame and self-loathing. “Ten years of hell so you could strike your bargain? Love had nothing to do with it. Not on your part.”

Luka lips curved upward with obvious amusement, perhaps even pride. “You always were clever.”

“Too naïve to be clever.” Taren fought the urge to shiver at the coldness he heard in Odhrán’s voice. He breathed deeply to counter the fire of anger that burned in his belly. Taren sensed Odhrán’s all-consuming love of Luka, even in the face of his betrayal. If Ian ever betrayed him thus....

Odhrán glanced down at his hands and turned them over as though he didn’t believe they were his own. How many men had he killed today? Odhrán felt horrified at what he’d done. *I never meant to hurt anyone. I only wished to be loved.*

Odhrán turned to leave. He couldn’t stay here. If he did, he’d lose himself again.

“Stay with me.” Luka’s words were more a statement than a plea. As if he sensed Odhrán’s desire. His weakness.

“I will not be used.”

“You *need* to be used. It is what you live for. What you were born for.” Luka stood and traced Odhrán’s jaw with his fingers.

Odhrán shivered and closed his eyes. Taren felt him waver. He understood the longing to be cared for, to want for nothing, to have others choose for him. He also knew, as Odhrán did, that it never could be. Luka was stalling, perhaps hoping the royal guards would reclaim Odhrán and he’d be rewarded handsomely for his recapture.

“How did you escape?” Luka asked as he feathered kisses over Odhrán’s neck, causing Odhrán to moan. Odhrán’s body responded to the gossamer touch.

“I... I...,” Odhrán stammered, unable to speak, so enrapt was he. Luka was like a drug to him, an addiction from which he couldn’t escape.

“Lovely Odhrán,” Luka said in an undertone. “You appear so fragile, and yet you’re far stronger than you know.”

The haze that seemed to engulf Odhrán’s mind cleared at these words. He pulled away from Luka. For a moment he just stared at Luka and allowed his thoughts to coalesce. “You...,” he began as realization dawned. “You knew all along I didn’t need the berries to transform, didn’t you?” He spoke the words without emotion, but the anger Taren had sensed now seemed to permeate every bit of his body, his mind, his soul.

“You needed to believe it was something you couldn’t control.” Luka’s expression was smug, self-satisfied, as he took Odhrán’s chin in his hand and drew him nearer. “I merely gave you what you wanted.”

“I wanted you.” He was pathetic. Weak.

“You can have me again.” Luka was close enough to kiss him.

Odhrán shook with anger and humiliation. “You know *nothing* about what I endured at their hands,” he shouted, unable to contain his pain any longer. “How they tortured me, beat me, cut me, then forced me to transform to heal my wounds. Do you care to know why they wanted me to heal? They wanted to fuck me until I bled again!”

Throughout all of this, Luka remained still, his face impassive. When Odhrán was done speaking, he said calmly, “Are you finished?”

“What?”

“Are you through playing the pathetic child? Because I see no harm in what was done to you. You’re as perfect as ever, and just as desirable. As you’ve said, you healed.”

“I haven’t—”

“You’re stronger than you were.” Luka smiled, then asked, “What did you do to the guards who held you prisoner?”

“I... I...” Odhrán saw the bodies of battered and bloodied men in his mind’s eye. He staggered backward, his hands over his mouth. Gods, had he killed them all?

Luka’s smile grew broader still as he sauntered over to Odhrán and took his chin between his forefinger and his thumb. “You’ve grown more powerful, my beautiful Odhrán. I know you want me. I know you want to

please me. Together, you and I can take this kingdom. We can have everything we want.”

“No!” Odhrán shouted as he pushed Luka away.

Luka stumbled backward but appeared unconcerned with Odhrán’s outburst. “Stop being a child,” he chastised. “You always were such a sensitive sort. When will you realize your body is your tool?”

“No. I don’t want... I can’t bear it again,” Odhrán whimpered as tears streamed down his cheeks.

“You can and you will. Come back to me. I promise I’ll take care of you. Treat you like the delicate flower you wish to be.”

“You lie!” Odhrán stepped away from Luka and waved his hand. Ice shot like blades from his fingers, pinning Luka against the wall of the study by his shoulders and arms. Blood spread from where the ice pierced Luka’s body, slowly turning his white tunic crimson.

Odhrán recoiled in shock, then stared at his hand. How had he done this? He wouldn’t hurt Luka. *His* Luka.

“Gods,” he gasped as he shivered in horror. “I never meant. I’m so sorry I—”

“I should have left you to die on the beach.” Luka’s expression was as cold as the ice that held him captive. “You deserve far worse than being the king’s plaything. I should have fucked you on the square for everyone to watch, then let them take turns using you until you cried for mercy. Until you bled like the animal you are.”

With each word, the temperature in the room dropped and the ice that immobilized Luka grew and spread until it covered his arms and chest. Odhrán imagined the ice working its way into Luka’s skin toward his heart. Luka’s eyes widened in what Odhrán would later recognize as fear. Luka’s cheeks paled, then turned nearly white. His lips were blue and his body shook from the cold.

“You truly are a monster.” The words were spoken in a whisper, but they cut Odhrán as though Luka had plunged a steel dagger into his breast.

Odhrán watched, unable to move, as if he too were frozen. He’d once had a heart that had beat for Luka alone. Now he felt nothing but pain and rage. “No...,” he said as Luka gasped, then took his last breath. “*You* are... you *all* are.”

TWENTY-ONE

TAREN CAME back to himself with a shudder and a gasp, the feel of the water on his body comforting, reassuring him it had only been a vision. He ached for Odhrán, felt the guilt that still inhabited his heart nearly a thousand years later, understood both his anger and his remorse.

Odhrán floated nearby—Taren sensed his curiosity as well as his self-loathing and disgust. *Could you not read my mind?*

“No.” Odhrán’s expression was unreadable once more, but the waves of his emotions buffeted Taren. *“I experienced the vision along with you, but I could not sense your thoughts. Only now do I sense the turmoil of your emotions.”*

And I yours, Taren countered, knowing Odhrán would sense his hesitation as he made sense of what he’d just seen. *No wonder you hate us all—Ea and human alike.*

Odhrán’s expression was hard, but Taren knew it now for the lie it was: the cold glare was nothing but the bulwarks of a castle, built to fortify and protect Odhrán’s heart.

“The night Luka sold me to the king,” Odhrán said in an undertone, *“I transformed eight times.”* He breathed in a long, slow breath, then continued, *“Each time, a different man. Each time they took my body and my dignity. I had chosen to share my body before, but they took the choice from me. I was chained like a dog where all could see me. They would use me when the king desired it. Sometimes he’d fuck me too.”*

“One night, after the king and some of his courtiers had taken turns using me, they left me chained to the floor. I awoke the next morning and realized one of my arms was free. I had dreamed I was a young boy again and my hand had slipped from my mother’s grasp.”

Odhrán sighed and shook his head. *“I am not sorry you know the truth, although I’m not sure I should have burdened you with it.”*

They are cruel, terrible people, Taren said as he trembled with anger. *Not a single one of them showed you kindness.*

Odhrán smiled sadly. *“I have lived a long time, Taren. I’ve had much time to think about my life as a slave.”* Odhrán shook his head. *“I knew very few of the people who lived in the city or even in Astenya. I never went back there. Even with everything they did to me, I cannot say all of the people who inhabit the land are as cruel.”*

You forgive them, after how they treated you? Taren found this hard to believe.

“They are long dead. There is no one left from that time left to forgive. But if you speak of their memory, or perhaps more directly, of my heart? Then yes, I suppose I have forgiven them. I no longer despise them.”

Why did you show me? Taren asked. *Why would you—?* But he didn’t need to finish his question. He felt it now. Understood it.

“I don’t think you are Treande,” Odhrán said.

But he was someone important to you. Someone you cared for.

“My only friend.”

Taren wished he could hide the pity and sadness he felt at hearing this, but he knew Odhrán had read his thoughts.

“You have no need to be ashamed of your feelings,” Odhrán said with a ghost of a smile. *“Once, I may have needed pity. Now, I have a home.”*

Taren thought of Ian. More than his home—his heart, his soul. Wasn’t love more than just a home?

“I’m quite happy with my lot,” Odhrán said. *“With few exceptions, love is an illusion. A thirst no earthly drink can quench. I have no need for it.”* He gestured toward the island, and they began to swim.

Odhrán’s words didn’t surprise Taren—he’d expected Odhrán to say as much—but the fact that Odhrán seemed to believe it did. *You believe this,* he said, even though he knew it was wrong of him to challenge Odhrán.

He feared he’d overstepped the fragile bonds of their fledgling relationship, but Odhrán’s warm smile set his mind at ease. *“I know you mean well, Taren. But you also know I speak the truth when I tell you I am far happier alone.”*

Come with me. The idea struck Taren with particular force, and as always, he spoke before he'd considered his words.

"*With you?*" Odhrán paused, using his tail to maintain his position in spite of the strong current.

To the Phantom.

"*My men will escort—*" Odhrán began.

Give Ian and his crew a chance to prove you wrong. That's all I ask.

Odhrán chuckled.

What's so amusing?

"*Only that I wonder if, before he lost Owyn, Treande was as impetuous as you are.*"

An interesting question, which led Taren to wonder yet again just how much of Treande inhabited his mind and body. He shrugged off the thought and forced a smile. *Since I'm impetuous,* he said in an effort to change the topic, *then I shall ask you again. Will you come with me? Meet Ian and his crew?*

Odhrán considered this for a moment and Taren felt his hesitation. His fear. "*I'll do better than that,*" he finally said, his lips curving upward as he spoke. "*I will take you there.*"

Take me?

"*Aboard my ship, the Chimera.*"

Taren stared at Odhrán, too surprised to speak. *Your ship?*

"*Aye. She's nearly as ancient as I, but she's soundly built and fast too.*" Pride glimmered brightly in Odhrán's eyes as he said this.

But you've been on the island for centuries, Taren said. *How is this possible?*

"*My men have sailed her. James,*" Odhrán said as a smile danced over his face, *"is quite adept at pretending to be me, as you well know. And before him, his father."*

Then the stories?

"*Of the 'cruel pirate Odhrán'?*" Odhrán swam around him as if buoyed by the topic. "*A lie. My men have only killed to protect themselves. From time to time they will steal another ship's bounty, but never legitimate cargo.*"

Pirate spoils?

“Aye. But we obtain most of the supplies my cave-dwelling men require through honest transactions with the locals. They sell the lighted crystals I enchant,” Odhrán explained.

Do you plan to reveal yourself, then? Show them your true form?

“My human form,” Odhrán said. *“Aye. High time too.”*

But your secret—

“I no longer need to keep that particular secret. I never hid to protect myself. I only hid to protect the stone. Regardless of whether you change my mind about the Ea, I no longer have a reason to remain apart from the world.” Now Odhrán smiled openly. *“Besides, much as I love to swim in the open sea, there are few things I love more than to be upon it.”* He gestured Taren toward the island. *“Come, Taren. We have much to do to ready my ship. It’s been far too long since she sailed.”*

“THE *PHANTOM* is under repair on Cera, not far from the port city,” Odhrán told Taren as they boarded the *Chimera* the next morning. “She is surrounded by enchantments in a secluded cove. No doubt your captain fears the humans will seek to destroy her and her crew while she is vulnerable.”

“You... you knew that the attacking ship was human?” Taren shouldn’t be surprised. These islands were Odhrán’s stronghold, and a battle just offshore wouldn’t have escaped his attention. Still, Odhrán clearly knew far more about the *Phantom*’s precarious situation than he’d expected.

Odhrán laughed, the sound bright and melodic. “Of course. How do you think you ended up on the beach?”

“You? You pulled me from the water?” Taren struggled to remember but still recalled nothing.

“You were unconscious. As badly injured as you were, you might have drowned.”

“Thank you for coming to my rescue.” Taren inclined his head. “I remember watching the battle, hoping the wind might favor our ship.” Even now he recalled the wind shifting direction, and shivered with pleasure as a gust lifted his hair from his neck. He focused his attention once more on Odhrán and noticed the corners of his mouth turn slightly upward.

“What do you find so amusing?” Taren asked, as always unafraid to speak his mind.

Odhrán ignored Taren’s question and pointed to Taren’s necklace. “I still haven’t been paid.”

“I doubt it would do Brynn any good.” Taren chuckled, knowing Odhrán had said this in jest. “It’s worth little to anyone but me.”

“I know it may seem strange, but it reminds me of Astenya,” Odhrán said with a wistful expression. “The country is quite beautiful.”

“The Eastern Lands?” Taren fingered the necklace and considered this. Had his parents traveled there before they died?

“Aye. Nowhere else can you find shells like those. Where did you come by it?”

“My mother left it with Laxley the rigger when she left me in his care. He gave it to me only recently. Perhaps my father found it in a marketplace and gave it to her. I’m glad she left it with me.” Taren smiled. “But I do owe Brynn payment. He did well in finding you.”

Odhrán’s laughter reminded Taren of the sound of the tiny bells from the vision of Odhrán’s past. “I’m sure Brynn will exact a price at some point in the future. He’s a wily one, that boy.” Odhrán winked before turning and shouting, “Time to set sail, James! We haven’t all day.”

“Aye, sir!” James stood tall and proud. Taren guessed he was anxious to show Odhrán how well he’d kept his ship for him. “It’s a pleasure to have you aboard, Captain.”

Taren found it hard not to admire the *Chimera*. Though slightly smaller than the *Sea Witch* or the *Phantom*, she was sleek and built of wood lovingly polished so that she shone in the sunlight. The wood had a slightly reddish cast to it, with hints of purple and orange. Taren caressed the foremast, marveling at the smooth surface, drawn to it like he’d been drawn to some of the reefs Ian had shown him. A beautiful thing. Vibrant. Almost alive.

“Wythene wood,” Odhrán told him with a note of obvious pride in his voice. “From the Eastern Lands. Quite rare. The trees are only found in the high mountains near the northern coast.”

“One of a kind, she is,” James added as he walked by before barking a few more commands to the crew.

Odhrán nodded and smiled. “After I left the capital city,” he told Taren, “I spent some time in those parts. Quite isolated. Mostly fishing villages. I designed the *Chimera* myself. Supervised the men who built her.”

How old was the ship? Taren had heard of ships decades old. But centuries old? He glided his fingers over the wood again, then looked back to Odhrán. “She...,” he began, unsure of how to explain what he felt when he touched the wood. “It’s strange. She feels almost...”

“Magical?” Odhrán finished. His smile broadened. “That she is. Like the crystals in the caves, the wood conducts the energy I provide her.” He touched the wood much like Taren, then added, “She is nearly eight hundred years old.”

“Eight hundred? But—”

“The magic protects her from the elements. She’s hardly invincible,” Odhrán told Taren, “but she is far sturdier than she appears.”

Much like Odhrán, Taren silently observed as one of the men shouted that the anchor was aweigh, and the ship silently moved out of the safety of her island anchorage and into open water. *Closer to Ian*. Taren felt Ian’s heart stir within his own chest as they passed through the island’s enchantments. *Closer to home*.

TWENTY-TWO

IAN PACED the deck as he'd done every day for nearly a week now, ever since the *Phantom* had limped to shore. Their mission to the Gateways had always been to find Odhrán and secure the rune stone before Seria and the island Ea took it for their own. But when Ian had sent several men to look for Odhrán, they'd understood they were also to report any news of Taren. There had been none until the night before, when an Ea had shown up off their port bow, asking to speak with Ian.

He'd not gone to look for Taren himself since Renda had taken him to task for it. Renda's sharp tongue and equally sharp words had helped him keep his promise to remain with the ship. "You are captain of this ship first, the boy's protector second," Renda had repeated when Ian had been at the limits of his patience. "Your men need you to reassure them."

"He's no boy," Ian had snapped.

To which Renda had just smiled and said, "Then my point is well taken."

It had been six days since Taren had disappeared during the battle, but Ian could sense his presence. This was the only thing that kept Ian reasonably sane, even with all the repairs that needed to be made to the *Phantom*. He'd already decided that if his men had no word of Taren by the end of the week, he'd look for Taren himself, Renda be damned. And then the Ea calling himself Garan had told Ian that Taren was safe and would return to the *Phantom* in a few days.

"Why should I believe you?" Ian demanded.

Garan answered with a shake of his head. "Because I speak the truth and Odhrán is a man of his word. But I'll gladly remain aboard as your

hostage should you require a guarantee of his safety. As you can see, I'm unarmed."

"And a powerful enough mage to defeat my enchantments," Renda wryly observed.

In the end, Ian decided to lock Garan in the brig, though he doubted the bars would keep him there long should he wish to flee. Garan, however, did not attempt an escape, giving Ian more reassurance that Taren would return as promised.

"Do you trust them?" Barra, his navigator, asked Ian when yet another day passed and there was no word from Taren.

"I have little choice." Ian refilled their tankards with the last of the ale they'd brought from the mainland when they'd left weeks before. "We've heard nothing of him in town, and although I sense his presence and know he's well, I cannot sense where he is."

"And what of this Odhrán?" Barra sipped his drink and eyed Ian with obvious skepticism. "Will he demand something of us in return for his hostage?"

Ian had considered this question before but still had no answer for it. He wasn't sure Taren truly was a hostage. That Odhrán had sent one of his men to them—a mage and an Ea, no less—seemed a gesture of good faith. Then again, if Taren was not a hostage, why had it taken Odhrán so long to bring him back? And if Odhrán, like Garan, was Ea, which master did he serve? Vurin or the Council?

Too many questions. Too few answers. Ian unclenched his jaw and took a long swig of his ale.

THE FOG the past two days was denser than usual, obscuring all but a few yards beyond the *Phantom*. None of them saw the launch approach until she was nearly on their bow.

"It's Taren!" one of the men shouted.

"Thank you for your loving sustenance," Ian murmured to the goddess in the ancient tongue. He made his way across the deck, arriving at the place where his men had dropped ropes in time to see Taren climb onto the ship, followed by a graceful young man with long blond hair. A beautiful young man, and yet Ian's eyes were for Taren alone. *His* Taren, back safely

and no worse for wear. His skin shone with the look of a man who had recently transformed, and his eyes were bright with pleasure. His hair, which had been knotted at the back of his neck as Taren preferred, had begun to loosen, allowing strands of silky brown to fly free and frame his face.

“Ia—Captain.” Ian heard Taren’s quick breath as their eyes met. “It’s good to be back.”

“It’s good to have you back,” Ian replied, knowing that if he said more, he might lose control of his emotions and take Taren into his arms in front of his crew. Not that they’d be surprised, since they all knew Taren and Ian were as good as handfasted, but Ian had always done his best not to show Taren any preferential treatment.

“Captain Ian Dunaidh,” Taren said, motioning to his left, “this is Odhrán, captain of the *Chimera*. I owe him my thanks and my life. He healed my wounds when I was separated from the *Phantom*.”

Odhrán? This boy was the pirate he’d heard stories of since he was young?

Odhrán took a step forward and offered Ian his hand in greeting. “I’ve heard much about you,” he said in a voice that, in spite of its youth, resonated with cool confidence.

“And I you,” Ian murmured as he took Odhrán’s hand. Ian sensed something more in that touch. Odhrán was neither human nor Ea. “Then it’s true. The hybrids are not a myth.”

Odhrán said, “I am the only one I know of.”

Ian had heard other Ea call beings like Odhrán half-breeds and monsters. He’d come to understand that the Ea feared beings like Odhrán not as much for their power, but because the Ea feared humankind. Growing up amongst humans, Ian had never known the same hatred of men. He’d found love and acceptance among humans and had never considered mating between human and Ea an abomination.

But what did Odhrán want with Taren? Ian bristled to imagine it, though he managed to maintain his control. He’d not react without speaking to Taren first. He had no fear of Odhrán, but he also didn’t trust him. *Wouldn’t* trust him with Taren’s safety without knowing more about his intentions.

“We will speak later,” Ian said. He would find out what he could from Taren and decide what to do about Odhrán afterward. He wouldn’t be able to contain himself if he didn’t speak to Taren in private and reassure himself that Taren was truly safe. In the meantime, he’d have Renda learn what he could about Taren’s “savior.” “My quartermaster, Renda, is at your disposal.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Odhrán controlled his expression, but Ian thought he saw a glimmer of amusement there.

Ian ignored this and turned to Taren, saying, “You’re with me.” He spun on his heels and, without another word, headed down the steps to the captain’s quarters.

TAREN NODDED to Odhrán, then followed Ian down the steps in silence. He knew the expression he’d seen on Ian’s face; he was angry. In their brief months together before they’d left the mainland, Taren had rarely seen that expression directed at him. He took a deep breath as he stepped inside the cabin. Ian closed the door behind them and Taren steeled himself.

Ian turned, but instead of a tirade, he pinned Taren against the door and kissed him—a joyous, soul-warming kiss that pulled at Taren’s heart and welcomed him home to Ian’s powerful embrace. The tension in Taren’s shoulders abated as he relaxed into Ian’s arms, tasted Ian, inhaled him, and drank in his presence. Ian, too, relaxed as Taren responded with elation to the press of their bodies together.

“Goddess.” Ian buried his face in Taren’s hair. “I feared I’d never see you again. When I awoke to find Renda tending to me and you gone, I—”

Taren pulled away and pressed two fingers to Ian’s lips. “I’m sorry. I was so foolish to think that you hadn’t thought about attacking them from below.”

“It’s my fault. I should have just told you about the magic. But when you didn’t return, I feared you’d been imprisoned.”

“From what I saw of the *Phantom*, I feared I might have lost you.”

“The last volley snapped the mizzen.” Ian sighed and shook his head. “If the wind hadn’t shifted, there’d have been nothing left of the ship to repair.”

“I heard the blast.” Taren shuddered. “I remember the wind shifting, but then something hit me. Part of the mizzen, perhaps?”

“No.” Ian narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “I saw you jump to port. The mizzen fell starboard. Are you sure *he* didn’t attack you?”

“Odhrán? Why would he want to harm me? He was the one who healed me. He saw me drifting, bleeding.”

Ian furrowed his brow. “What does he want from you?” Taren felt jealousy roll off Ian like waves pounding the surf.

“Want? From me? Nothing, best I can tell. In fact, he gave me something.” Taren reached under his shirt and withdrew the stone. It warmed to his touch.

“He... *gave* it to you?” Ian blinked and parted his lips.

“Gave it back to me.” Taren gazed down at the stone and rubbed his thumb over its smooth surface.

“Back?”

“Aye. Treande gave the stone to him for safekeeping.”

“Treande?” Ian rubbed a hand over his chin. “But Treande died centuries ago.”

“Odhrán is far older than he appears. Perhaps a thousand years old.”

Ian shook his head and walked over to his desk. “I don’t believe it,” he said. “Ea live a few hundred years at best. Mages longer. But a thousand years?”

Taren felt that familiar ache of loss return as he thought of Treande and how long he’d survived after Owyn’s death. “But you know he’s not Ea. And to see him transform.... He’s far larger, more powerful. I’ve only seen a little of his magic, but I daresay his magic is stronger even than Vurin’s.” Taren shook his head. “And yet our people cast him out.”

“If he’s that powerful, it’s no surprise they feared him. The Council would have done the same if he’d been born on Ea’nu.”

“And what of the *Phantom*?” Taren asked, not eager to revisit his own experiences with the Council.

Ian frowned. “The repairs will take weeks. Months, perhaps.”

“Months?” The realization of how vulnerable they were here struck Taren with particular force. “But there is talk of strangers in Gate Town, asking about the ship.”

“I know. We’ve heard this too. If we could safely put in to port, the repairs might go faster. But hidden as we are, the men cannot easily buy supplies in town without rousing suspicion. We’ve had to work the timbers for the mast ourselves lest someone catch wind of our location.”

“But what if the Council, or whoever attacked us, returns to finish the job? What then? If Odhrán’s men could locate the ship....”

“I’ve sent word to Vurin. The *Sea Witch* is nearby.” Ian chuckled. “It seems Rider was concerned for your safety.”

The news that Rider and his crew were nearby eased Taren’s mind. “I’m glad to hear it. I’m sure Odhrán will defend us as well, if it comes to that.”

“We’ve no need for his assistance,” Ian said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Once again sensing Ian’s jealousy peak, Taren drew Ian against him and ran his fingers through Ian’s hair. “He’s a friend, nothing more.” He kissed Ian’s cheek, nose, and mouth. “You have nothing to fear. Did you not tell me yourself we are soulbound?”

“Am I that obvious?” Ian’s shoulders slumped and Taren could almost see the tension seep out of him. Taren knew how much he still struggled with his more primal instincts, and truth be told, a part of him enjoyed Ian’s attentions. Ian’s possessiveness was like a balm to him. Until he’d met Rider, he’d never felt wanted. Until he’d met Ian, he’d never felt needed. Loved. Cherished.

“I don’t mind,” Taren said, “much as I wish you would believe there is none other for me.”

“My jealousy has done nothing but anger you. But there is more than jealousy at work here. I do not trust Odhrán.”

“Ian—”

“Please,” Ian said in a gentle voice as he pulled away from Taren’s embrace. “Allow me to say this before you judge me too harshly.” Taren nodded, and Ian continued, “I do trust in your cunning. You’re stronger than you know. But if Odhrán is so powerful—if our own people knew this and cast him out, perhaps there was a reason for it. I’d be naïve not to reassure myself of his intentions. It isn’t only your safety for which I feel responsible. I must also protect my men. Our ship.”

Taren nodded. He knew in his heart that Odhrán meant them no harm, but he understood why Ian would need more proof of Odhrán's good intentions. He put his hand to Ian's chest, then met Ian's troubled gaze. "I know. You're right to be cautious. I ask only that you give him a chance to prove himself worthy of your trust."

"I will try."

Taren sensed Ian's hesitation but knew he'd pressed Ian as much as he could for now. Later he would try to reassure Ian once again. "Allow me to show you how much I have missed you. How much I have wanted you. How much I prayed for your well-being."

Ian cocked his head to one side and chuckled.

"What do you find so amusing?" Taren asked as he struggled not to respond to Ian's lopsided grin.

"Only that you've changed so much since we first met. Back then you fought my advances. Now...."

"Do you wish me to fight you, then?" Taren bit his lower lip, knowing full well what Ian's answer would be.

"Hardly."

This time it was Taren who pushed Ian against the door and gave him a bruising kiss. Ian moaned as Taren plundered his mouth, seeking his tongue with his own, running it over Ian's teeth, then nipping his lips. When he finally released Ian's mouth, Ian's eyes were wide. "Didn't expect that?" he asked as Ian stared at him.

"I... well... no."

Taren had never seen Ian so surprised, but he decided he liked Ian that way. Vulnerable, off-kilter. The seed of a memory sprouted in the back of Taren's mind—an ancient memory of Owyn and Treande. Of Treande's boldness and Owyn's happy submission. A dance.

For a moment neither of them moved. Taren wondered if Ian, too, recalled something of their past. For his part, Taren hesitated. The familiar sense of comfort warred with his need to look to Ian as his guide, his better.

Perhaps sensing this, Ian whispered, "You have no master, Taren."

Taren reached for Ian's cheek and brushed his fingers over the hollow. Ian's gaze was full of love. Hunger too. Ian needed him as he needed Ian. Like the air they now breathed or the water that sustained them. In spite of

this, Ian stood still. Waiting for Taren. That Ian understood his need made Taren long for his touch even more.

The fading light of sunset painted the cabin in orange as Taren inhaled Ian's scent. Since he'd come to live with Ian and his people, he'd realized there was far more to courtship than touch. Even in his human form, Taren's senses had grown more heightened, and he'd learned that the Ea's animal nature was present even in this form. When he closed his eyes and inhaled Ian's presence, he felt the powerful call of the ocean and the salty spray on his skin. The Ea was there, beneath the man. Ever present. Powerfully enthralling. Urging him to abandon his human limits and experience the joys of mating.

With this realization, Taren surrendered to his Ea nature. All thought of man or beast fled as he found the smooth skin of Ian's neck, then sucked and bit the tender flesh until Ian groaned in satisfaction. But if he thought Ian would accede to his demands so easily, he was mistaken. Ian grabbed his wrists and forced them behind his back, then turned them both so that he pinned Taren against the wall. The force of this caused several of the books on the nearby bookshelf to shudder and fall.

Ian. No one but you!

Taren struggled against Ian's hold. Ian held fast for a minute before Taren was able to parry and regain his dominance. Taren understood that Ian had allowed him this—Ian was still far stronger than he—but Taren eagerly asserted control and pulled off Ian's jacket. Slowly, Taren untied the ruffled collar of Ian's shirt, then pulled it up and claimed one of Ian's nipples. The folds of the linen fabric felt smooth against his face. He took the cloth between his fingers and rubbed it over Ian's skin as he licked the sensitive bud. Ian shivered and keened, bucking to meet Taren's mouth, pressing his chest to Taren's lips in a silent plea for more.

"Taren... Goddess... I've wanted.... It's been too long." Ian's stuttered words were like fluttered kisses over Taren's skin, arousing him, pushing him further from his human mind to a place where all he knew was Ian's body, Ian's need, and his own lust.

"Venrusa," Taren murmured in a voice foreign to his own ears. *Beloved. Soulbound.* "Venrusa Ian. Sa venrusa." *Beloved Ian. My beloved.*

"Venrusa Taren." Ian's gasped response held wonder and surprise. Then, as if the words had also stirred something in his memory, he added,

“Sa venrusa vienta.” *My beloved forever.*

Taren pulled Ian’s shirt over his head, guided him to their bed, and pushed him down on it. He straddled Ian’s thighs and ghosted his lips over Ian’s smooth chest, pausing to lick the spaces between Ian’s taut muscles and trace the peaks and valleys. Ian met his mouth and grasped him by the hips to bring him closer still.

I remember this. Had the encounter with Treande awakened more of his memories? Ever since he’d left the *Sea Witch* to live with Ian on the mainland, he’d felt more and more of a connection to his prior life. The memory of his time with Owyn was more than just something his mind knew; his body knew it as well. Treande’s words echoed once again in his thoughts: “... *he never left me. Throughout my life, he was with me.*”

He leaned over and found a hard nipple, laving and nipping at it to Ian’s soft moans. Ian’s scent enticed Taren. Months before, it had reminded Taren of the ocean and of the power of the human man Ian was. Now, with his deepening awakening and the memories he’d regained, Taren could smell the Ea as well as the man. The primal call grew stronger each time he and Ian lay together.

Taren surprised himself by taking Ian’s hands and pinning them against the mattress, using his weight to force them to remain there, even when Ian struggled, his gaze full of lust. Ian growled, his words drowned in his physical response.

Taren sucked on Ian’s nipples and rubbed his fully-clothed body against Ian’s. He released Ian’s wrists and undid the fastenings of Ian’s trousers, then backed off the bed and pulled them down so that Ian was gloriously naked. He didn’t expect Ian to take the opportunity to rise from the bed and force him against the bulkhead.

“Not so quickly.”

Had he heard Ian’s thoughts? There was no time to consider the question as Ian plundered his mouth. Taren surrendered to the pressure of Ian’s body pinning him against the wood, felt Ian card his fingers through his hair and scrape his nails against his scalp. Ian slid one hand from Taren’s shoulder to grasp his cock through the fabric of his britches. He squeezed tight, and Taren’s breath stuttered.

Taren sensed the challenge in Ian’s dominant move and answered in kind, shoving back so that they turned as one and Ian took his place in

submission between Taren's body and the wall. Taren laughed and pressed his cock against Ian's. They tussled, much as they did in their Ea forms beneath the waves, causing a few more books to fall. By the time they'd finished their playful skirmish, Taren was as happily naked as Ian, and they fell backward, both of them laughing, onto the bed.

"What'll it be?" Taren asked as he managed to best Ian by sitting atop him.

"I yield." Ian's hair was a tangled mess, his lips swollen from their kisses, and he appeared perfectly pleased with his state of disarray. "Have your way with me."

Taren took the small bottle of fragrant oil from where they'd knocked it onto the sheets, then poured a generous amount in his hands. He warmed the oil in his palms, all the while holding Ian's gaze, letting him wait for his answer until Ian could stand it no longer and said, "Damn you. Be done with it. Take me!"

Taren grinned, knowing he had Ian where he wanted him. So he did exactly what Ian did not expect: he rubbed the oil over Ian's cock as he stretched and oiled his opening. Watching Ian watch him. Enjoying Ian's surprise. Moaning wantonly as he pulled himself and stroked Ian, then settled onto Ian's cock, allowing the painful pleasure to overtake him. Dominance and submission, the familiar cadence of their long ago relationship.

"Taren." Ian spoke in a low, sweet voice. "Goddess, what you do to me!" He dug his fingers into Taren's hips, increasing the force of their union so that Taren panted and gasped for breath. Ian clasped Taren's cock, rubbing his large fingers over the tip to Taren's keening cries.

As he climaxed, Taren couldn't help but think that neither had won their battle for supremacy. *No*, Taren thought as Ian, too, succumbed to the pleasure of their union. The pleasure in this battle was the draw....

TAREN DOZED in the crook of Ian's arm. Ian, however, couldn't sleep. The thought of Odhrán's ship nearby and the *Phantom* so vulnerable only compounded his deep-seated distrust of Odhrán. True, Odhrán had returned Taren safely to him, and for that he was grateful to the goddess. But Ian was

sure Odhrán knew far more about the stone than he'd revealed to Taren, and the fact that Taren now wore the stone around his neck frightened him.

Ian had sensed enough of Taren's dreams to understand what he'd seen when Taren had first arrived at Callaecia. Owyn's death. *His* death. Taren said little about how Owyn had died except that Owyn had died by Treande's hand.

"That's impossible," he'd told Taren. Treande had loved Owyn, of this he was sure.

"I do not wish to speak of it," Taren said when Ian pressed him. Taren's hands trembled as he said this. Taren believed Treande had harmed Owyn.

When Ian asked Vurin about Taren's response, Vurin said only, "I can only tell you what I sensed when he saw the vision of Owyn's death. There was no anger or hatred in his heart, only pain and grief."

Ian gently extricated himself from Taren's grasp, making sure not to wake him as he got out of bed and dressed. He glanced back at Taren before he left the cabin and thanked the goddess again for bringing him safely back.

"CAPTAIN DUNAIDH. This is a surprise." Odhrán waved away the two men who flanked Ian and gestured Ian inside his cabin. He wore a simple white tunic with silver threads woven into the fabric, his long blond hair cascading over his shoulders.

"Is it?" Ian found it difficult not to stare. Odhrán looked almost ethereal, with his delicate features and eyes the color of the ocean. The hollows of his cheeks were graceful, his skin pale like the moon. He had full, feminine lips that begged to be ravished, and a lithe body only partially hidden beneath his linen garments. Ian's more primal nature warred within, his jealousy burning nearly as hot as his attraction. It was easy to fight his attraction, however. His connection to Taren was stronger than his baser instincts. The jealousy he fought less successfully, even though he knew he must not let it govern his thoughts. He needed to assess the situation as a man if he was going to protect Taren from harm.

Odhrán smiled. "I hadn't expected you to come see me quite so quickly."

Ian walked past Odhrán into the cabin. Instead of the traditional wood furniture he'd grown accustomed to seeing in most of the sailing vessels he'd been aboard, the cabin was strewn with pillows covered in bright silks, some embroidered in gold, others painted with depictions of birds, trees, and strange animals. Several strangely shaped lamps hung from the rafters, wrought from pink metal that shimmered as the flames danced inside. There was no bed Ian could see. No bedroll either. Ian wondered where Odhrán slept.

When Ian turned to face Odhrán, he found Odhrán smiling at him with amusement. "I've surprised you, have I?"

Ian shrugged and schooled his expression.

"I lived for some time in the Eastern Lands after I was expelled from Callaecia." Odhrán sat on a round pouf by a brightly painted table with carved latticework, then picked up a glass carafe filled with a gold liquid. "These trappings are more to my liking.

"Please," he added as he poured two small glasses of the spirits, "join me."

Ian considered refusing the offer but instead sat across from Odhrán. Odhrán could easily have harmed him or his crew had he wished to—the *Phantom's* enchantments clearly had no effect on Odhrán, since he and Taren had been able to board her with ease.

Odhrán set the filled glasses in the middle of the table, and Ian picked one up. That Odhrán hadn't handed Ian his glass made it clear Odhrán knew of Ian's distrust. And although Ian knew he'd have been long dead if Odhrán wanted him gone, he waited until Odhrán had taken the other glass and drank from it before drinking his own.

"Fireblood wine," Odhrán confirmed as Ian reveled in the delicious heat from the alcohol as it danced on his tongue. "Quite rare. And, as it happens, quite old. I took some of the king's own when I left Xiat years ago."

"Taren tells me you are a thousand years old." Ian didn't need to confirm this fact. His questions—those that mattered—he would ask in due time. For now he would take his measure of Odhrán.

"Aye. Best I can tell."

"Is it true what they say about the capital city? That it's depraved? Decadent?" Ian asked.

“I haven’t been back in hundreds of years,” Odhrán replied with a casual wave of his hand, “although it was much that way when I lived there. But how is it a man like you—captain of his own ship—has never been?”

“You really haven’t been beyond the Gateway Islands recently, have you?” This surprised Ian, even though Taren had told him so.

“No.” Odhrán pursed his lips and appeared to study Ian with interest. “Why should I?”

“The safe haven Treande established on Ea’nu years ago has changed with time. Ea are not free to come and go of their own accord. My ship patrolled the waters around the island. We were never permitted past the neighboring Luathan Islands.”

“How unfortunate for you.”

Odhrán’s apparent lack of concern irritated Ian. If what Taren had told him was true and Odhrán had known Treande, surely he’d care that the society Treande had established had disintegrated. “Unfortunate for all our kind,” he said, hoping to elicit a reaction.

“I am not *your* kind, Captain.” Odhrán appeared entirely disinterested. “But by all means, feel free to enlighten me to your people’s plight.”

Ian fought the urge to clench his jaw; he wouldn’t reveal to Odhrán how infuriating he found him. In spite of Odhrán’s protestations to the contrary, Ian doubted Odhrán cared nothing for the Ea. He’d cared about Treande, and he clearly cared about Taren.

First things first.

“Twenty years ago, our—*my*—people nearly destroyed each other in a civil war fought between those who wished the island to remain apart from humanity and those who believed the Ea belonged elsewhere,” Ian explained.

“Hence the need for the stone.” Odhrán chuckled and rested his delicate bare feet on a pillow. Ian noticed the tiny gold ring on the narrowest of Odhrán’s toes and guessed that it held some significance, since Odhrán wore no other jewelry.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Ian picked up his wine and sipped it slowly. He should have realized Odhrán would understand the importance of the stone. Looking at Odhrán, he found it too easy to forget how old he really was. He would need to tread carefully.

“Oh, Captain, I believe you *do* know what I mean. Your leader, Vurin, wishes to use the stone to force the Council’s hand.”

Ian set the glass back on the table. “No one knows what powers the stone possesses.”

“But they know full well it’s a weapon of extraordinary power,” Odhrán said as he refilled their glasses and met Ian’s gaze unflinchingly.

Ian took another sip of the wine and waited a moment for it to warm his throat before he swallowed. He wouldn’t engage Odhrán on something as important to his people’s safety. He wouldn’t risk revealing anything that might endanger them should Odhrán choose to take sides in the conflict.

“Taren tells me the Ea cast you out when you were young,” he said after a pause. Best to change the topic. “Why?”

Odhrán inhaled softly and looked away for a moment. If Ian hadn’t known better, he might have believed Odhrán was still pained by the memory a millennium later. “I was a half-breed. Or so they called me. I was unworthy to be called Ea. Or so they said.” Odhrán lifted his legs from the pillows, stretched them much like a cat might, then crossed them underneath his body. In another situation, Ian might have believed the movements to be childlike, even submissive. But Ian sensed this was just the opposite: Odhrán was infinitely confident in his position, and he wanted Ian to understand this.

“The truth is that the Ea feared me, Captain. Feared my uniqueness. My power.” He spoke the words matter-of-factly, but Ian sensed an undercurrent of fierce pride in them.

“What power?”

“Beyond that of an Ea?” The corners of Odhrán’s mouth turned upward. Was he amused that Ian had asked? Odhrán probably knew the question was a calculated one. “But then, the Ea have lost much of their power, haven’t they? From what Taren tells me, few mages remain, and those who do are relatively weak.”

“Aye. That’s true.” He had no reason to lie about this. Odhrán was clearly more powerful than any of their mages. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

Odhrán pursed his lips. “Why ask what you already know?”

Ian laughed softly. “I’m quite sure I don’t know all of it,” he said. “Besides, I want to hear it from you.” Taren had told him what he knew of

Odhrán's abilities, though Ian sensed Taren had downplayed some of the more problematic of them. He didn't blame Taren for his trusting nature; he loved him more for it. But he would learn as much as he could about Odhrán.

Odhrán offered Ian a coy smile. "Of course." He leaned back on the pillows once more and rearranged his limbs in a manner that Ian could only describe as seductive. Ian's first instinct was that Odhrán's overtly sexual stance was a conscious tool to put him off his guard, and yet there was something instinctive about Odhrán's movements as well.

"I am able to transform into various shapes," Odhrán said. His expression was unreadable; Ian saw neither pain nor pride in it. "In what you might call my Ea form, I can hear others' thoughts, and they, mine."

"What else?" Ian pressed, Odhrán having told him nothing more than Taren had already explained.

"I am what you might call a mage," Odhrán said. "And in my Ea form, as you would call it, my powers are magnified."

This, too, Ian had gleaned from Taren. "So your abilities are different from ours?" he pressed.

Again Odhrán smiled. "Come, come, Captain. You wouldn't have me divulge all of my secrets, would you? Certainly you have a few of your own to keep."

He knew there was more to Odhrán than he'd revealed, but he didn't pursue the topic further. Much as he cared about what threat Odhrán might pose to his people, he had not come here only to assess Odhrán's abilities. He'd come here for something far more important to him. He was pretty sure Odhrán knew this, as well.

"What do you want from Taren?"

"Ah," Odhrán said with a look of sly satisfaction on his angelic features. "Shall we speak of your burning jealousy? Or shall we discuss your fear that I might somehow harm him?"

Ian fought to maintain his composure. Something about how Odhrán appeared to take this all so lightly stoked his simmering anger and coaxed it to surface. Ian knew what this was. His animal nature always warred with his intellect when it came to keeping Taren safe, and regardless of whether he believed Odhrán was a threat, the mere fact that Odhrán had the power to harm Taren was enough to stoke the embers of his fear.

“Will you not answer the question?” Ian demanded, knowing he sounded angry but no longer caring. He’d met other Ea who had raised his hackles as Odhrán did, though none quite so completely.

“I’d be happy to answer it.” Odhrán tilted his head to one side—a flirtatious gesture that only set Ian more on edge. “Yes, I want something from him. Or perhaps ‘wanted’ is a better way to put it. I have what I want.”

Ian clenched his jaw and forced himself to breathe. He found Odhrán and the roundabout, lackadaisical way he responded to questions infuriating. “Tell me.”

“I have my freedom,” Odhrán said, his expression now deadly serious. “For more than seven hundred years, I have been tethered to these islands. I am no longer.”

“The rune stone. Of course.” Ian felt a muscle jump in his cheek as he spoke the words. “You’ve tethered that abominable thing to Taren.”

“Abominable? An interesting way to look at it. But you know I am not the one who tethered it to him. That happened long ago, in another lifetime.”

Ian laughed and shook his head. “How simple it is to blame a goddess you don’t even believe in. Or, better yet, someone who’s been dead for hundreds of years.”

“You really do love him, don’t you? Good. He will need your good counsel *and* your heart.”

Ian stood abruptly. He’d had about as much of Odhrán’s condescension as he could tolerate. “You will leave tomorrow,” he said, his voice hard. “You will not speak to Taren again.”

“At last we get to the crux of the matter. And it will do no good for me to say that I only desire his friendship, will it? Because you, like your human counterparts, think only of desire.”

“Will you leave, then?” Ian snapped.

Odhrán nodded, his placid expression unchanging despite Ian’s tone. “Of course, Captain. You have my word. I have no interest in the affairs of the Ea or their goddess. But should Taren choose to come to me, he will find a home with my people.”

“Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t thank me, Captain,” Odhrán said. “By sending me away, you also send away the best hope of keeping your beloved safe from

harm.”

“I’m perfectly capable of keeping him safe.” Ian tried to ignore the sick feeling in his gut that told him Odhrán was probably correct about this. Odhrán, powerful as he was, would be a formidable enemy. But what use was a protector whom he didn’t trust? No, he would keep Taren safe. The goddess expected this of him alone.

“No doubt.” Odhrán smiled once more and inclined his head, signaling the end of their discussion.

Ian bowed stiffly, then turned and left the room. A half an hour later, he slipped back into his bed and gathered Taren in his embrace. He had done what needed to be done. And yet he knew he’d let his emotions get the better of him. He’d let *Odhrán* get the better of him. Because no matter what he told himself about his reasons for wanting Odhrán gone, he knew Odhrán had been right. As he finally fell asleep as the first light of dawn breached the darkness, Odhrán’s words lingered in his thoughts.

TWENTY-THREE

TAREN AWOKE rested the next morning. How long had it been since his sleep hadn't been filled with dreams? He touched the rune stone around his neck to reassure himself that it was real. As always, it warmed to his touch.

Ian was still asleep when Taren dressed and went up on deck. Renda was supervising repairs of the mizzenmast. Several men struggled to hoist a large timber on one of the halyards. Taren leaned against a railing and watched. That was when he noticed the *Chimera* was gone. He frowned and walked over to Renda.

"Where's the *Chimera*?" he demanded.

Renda raised an eyebrow. "How should I know? They set sail at dawn." He smiled, pulled something from his pocket, then added, "He left you a note."

"Thank you." Taren took the note and read it quickly.

*Taren,
We'll meet again soon. Should you need me, I won't be
far.
-Odhrán*

Taren was quite sure why Odhrán had left so quickly. *Ian, when will you learn you have nothing to fear?* He drew a long breath, then turned and headed down to their cabin.

IAN WAS washing his face in the bowl near the bed when the door to the cabin opened and closed. Taren. He couldn't express his joy and profound relief to have Taren safely back at his side. Perhaps they'd swim for a bit after he'd checked on repairs to the ship.

He turned and smiled at Taren. "I can't tell you how happy—"

"Odhrán's gone." Taren spoke the words in something like a growl. He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips.

"Aye." *Good riddance to him.* "And what of it?" Ian picked up his shirt and drew it over his head.

"Tell me you weren't the reason he left." Taren's frown deepened.

"He left of his own accord," Ian replied evenly as he sat and pulled one of his boots on. He knew it wasn't quite true, though he reasoned that if Odhrán hadn't truly wanted to leave, it would have taken more than just a suggestion to make him do so.

"No doubt. But you went to see him, didn't you?"

Ian narrowed his eyes and donned his other boot. "I don't trust him," he said without looking up. Couldn't Taren see that Odhrán was dangerous, or at least that his motives in coming to Taren's aid were suspect? If Odhrán was so powerful, how easy would it be to disguise his true nature to Taren?

"I'm not a child, Ian. You say I'm not a slave. You tell me to speak my mind. And yet you don't trust me to make my own decisions." Taren balled his fists and glared at him.

"Of course you're no slave." Certainly Taren understood this after everything they'd been through together. Perhaps Taren was a bit naïve, overly trusting. Ian had only meant to keep Taren safe. Where was the wrong in that? "I trust y—"

"If you trusted me," Taren snapped, "you'd have spoken to me before you told him to go."

Ian hadn't expected the extent of Taren's ire, or at least he hadn't expected Taren to care as much about Odhrán. The thought irked him, and his jealousy grew. "You know nothing of his inclinations," he heard himself say, even as he fought the urge to embrace Taren and reassure him. *Nothing of how he used you!*

Taren parted his lips and shook his head. "Inclinations? Is that what you believe of him... of *me*? That I *want* him?" The black stone swung on

its chain as Taren walked over to the windows, then turned back to face Ian.

The stone. Odhrán had wanted to rid himself of it. Or was there some greater plan he'd accomplished by relieving himself of the damnable thing? None of them, not even Vurin, understood what the stone was capable of. Ian remembered how Taren had fainted when he'd seen a painting of the stone on the portrait in Ian's family home. If it had such a powerful effect on Taren then, what would possessing it do to Taren now? What if, rather than just guarding it, Taren *used* its power?

"No," Ian said absentmindedly. "Of course not." He saw the hurt and anger in Taren's eyes and looked away. No, of course he trusted Taren. But he'd done the right thing by telling Odhrán to leave. He'd sworn to protect Taren, hadn't he?

"Don't lie to me, Ian."

Ian swallowed back his retort. *Leave it be. Nothing good can come of this.* He hadn't meant to anger Taren. He knew he should apologize, explain that he loved Taren and that he feared for him. But instead he heard himself say, "Odhrán used you."

"He gave me the stone." Taren's expression was hard, unforgiving. He crossed his arms firmly over his chest and raised his chin in obvious defiance. The slight breeze from the open windows lifted a few errant hairs that had tumbled onto his face.

"Did you ever consider he might have had his reasons for giving it to you?" Ian asked, unable to contain himself. He wanted Taren to understand. "He doesn't want to be tethered to it anymore. He gave it to you because it suited his purposes."

"I don't give a damn what his purposes were," Taren nearly shouted. "Why should I care if he wished to be free of it? I promised Vurin I'd recover it. We promised Vurin we'd look for it. Together."

Stop this. Tell him none of that matters. Tell him you love him. "Taren, I—"

"You don't trust that my heart is yours alone. You treat me like a child." Taren shook with anger as he said this.

"Please, Taren, let me—"

"If I'm to be your slave," Taren continued, "then say so, and I will submit to your will. But if you wish more than a dog to kneel at your feet, treat me like the man you say I am."

Ian once again tried to speak, but Taren turned on his heel and stormed out of the cabin. A sharp gust of wind caught the door and slammed it hard against the frame, causing one of the books on a nearby shelf to fall.

Ian shook his head and paced the cabin several times before heading up on deck. He saw Taren's graceful dive from the bowsprit, saw him transform as his hands met the water and disappear beneath the waves. *Taren.*

He turned and headed aft, stalking down to where the men were working to replace some of the damaged lines. Renda looked up and held his gaze for a moment, then joined him near one of the rails. "You're bound and determined to push him away, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You know exactly what I just said," Renda answered with a frown. "You're so afraid of losing him that you'd push him away so you don't have to suffer with your guilt."

"My guilt?" What did Renda know about it?

"Your guilt." Renda cocked his head to one side and his frown deepened. "The guilt you still feel after failing him on Ea'nu."

"This isn't about the prison," Ian replied.

"Isn't it?" Renda chuckled, and as he often did when he spoke his mind too plainly, Ian fought the urge to throttle him for it. "I don't doubt you're jealous of this mysterious pirate," Renda added. "But you use that jealousy to push the boy away." He glanced at the water where Taren had disappeared. "Seems you're doing fine work of it too."

Ian's first instinct was to deny it, but he held his tongue and leaned on the rail. "Is it truly enough that he's forgiven me?" He rubbed his jaw and gazed up at the foremast that still bore some of the scars of battle: a missing top castle and a cracked yard.

Renda shrugged. "He's already moved on from that time. It's you who still insists on reliving it. You see yourself in his stead and you remember the pain you carried with you for years after your imprisonment." Renda laid a hand on Ian's shoulder. "But he is *not* you, old friend."

"I fear I'll lose him." Ian steeled himself against his fear as he said this. "Whether because he decides I'm unworthy of his affections, or the goddess wills it."

“From what I know of him, I doubt he will ever find you unworthy.” When Ian tried to protest, Renda shook his head and chuckled as he said, “Goddess knows you’ve done what you could to push him away, and he’s stayed at your side.”

“He’s loyal to a fault.”

“Perhaps. But in spite of your sour demeanor”—Renda chuckled and squeezed Ian’s shoulder—“you are capable of inspiring loyalty. Worthy of it, though you may doubt your worth.”

Renda had avoided speaking of the goddess’s plan. Even if he was correct in his assessment of Taren’s heart, they both knew the goddess had separated him and Taren before.

“Perhaps your time with him is short,” Renda conceded as he turned back to watch the men continue their repairs. “All the more reason to stop your idiocy and show him your heart.”

“Do you have to put things in such a way that I must struggle not to toss you overboard?” Ian said. He would never do such a thing, but this had become a bit of a habit for them both, and Renda understood the affection behind his empty threat.

“Would you listen to me if I put it otherwise?” Renda countered with a smirk and a breezy wave of his hand.

Ian shook his head and headed back to his cabin. He’d spoken his piece. He’d give Taren time alone. Then he’d beg Taren’s forgiveness.

TWENTY-FOUR

TAREN DOVE into the water, transforming as he broke the surface. He imagined the remains of his anger washing off him as he swam with all his strength away from the harbor.

Damn him! Would Ian not trust him? Taren hadn't wanted any of this. How simple things had been aboard the *Sea Witch*. He knew he could never return to that life—that he would die without Ian by his side. How could Ian in one breath tell him he was free to make his own choices and the next treat him like a foolish child?

He wanted to shout at Ian that he'd seen Odhrán's mind. That he understood him. Felt his pain. Knew his suffering. Felt his kind heart. But he knew what Odhrán had shared with him had been for him alone.

At last he settled onto the sea floor and drew his tail to his chest. The rune stone pressed painfully into his skin. He pushed the chain around so the stone fell upon his back, brushing the necklace his mother had left for him.

Mother... what would you think of me now? Would you think me weak?

He closed his eyes and fingered the stones and shells, exploring the ridges and peaks, picturing the pieces tossed on the waves and coming to rest on a beach. He imagined a villager in a faraway land stooping to rifle through the jetsam, recovering the most colorful bits and stringing them in necklaces to sell at a marketplace. Ian had said the workmanship was Ea. Did their brethren still inhabit the waters of the Eastern Lands?

He smiled at the memory of himself as a child. He gripped the necklace tighter and imagined the green of his mother's eyes. Like Ian's and so many of the other Ea's, those eyes called to mind the ocean when the sunlight penetrated the surface. Taren had met only a few Ea with eyes like

his. Vurin had once explained that millennia before, the priestly caste were the only Ea who had brown eyes, but that over time, the priests intermarried with the common folk and the color had nearly vanished with the temples.

He let the gentle current rock him until he fell asleep.

HE WOKE to the crashing sound of cannon blasts and the smell of fire. Smoke burned his eyes as he tried to shout, but the only sound that escaped his lips was a wail.

“Duri!” His father’s voice rose over the sound of shouts from above. We’re aboard a ship, thought Taren as he struggled to look around him. It was difficult to see because of the smoke, and the blankets blocked his view.

“Over here!” His mother lifted him from the basket and wrapped blankets around him.

“Is Taren...?”

“He’s fine. Aren’t you, little one?” She brushed his hair and tried to calm him, speaking softly to him until his cries abated.

“Take him and head for land,” his father said.

“What?” His mother’s eyes grew wide and her face paled. “But Vurin said we mustn’t transfor—”

“Vurin said to keep Taren safe at all costs.” Taren heard the desperation in his father’s voice. “There’s no hope of making it to the Gateways, let alone the Eastern Lands. The sails are on fire and one of the masts has been too badly damaged.”

There was another volley from the cannons and the ship shuddered. Goddess! Taren could only guess the island Ea were their attackers.

“Duri, you must leave now.” His father leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, then kissed his mother. “I’ll find you when I can. Take the gold with you. You may need it to keep yourselves safe.”

“I can’t—” his mother protested.

“You must. You know what the old woman said. We must protect him with our lives.”

“Larin, please. If we must go, let us go together. I couldn’t bear to lose you!” He saw his mother’s tear-streaked face and began to cry again. Her

pain became his own, as if he was tethered to her heart. Don't leave me alone. Please don't leave me.

"Love," his father said, taking his mother's face in his hands. "Duri. There's less chance you'll be seen if you leave without me. Besides, a captain cannot leave his ship in the midst of battle. If the goddess wishes it, we'll be reunited."

His mother nodded, then kissed his father one last time. Another crash sounded from above decks, and the ship began to list to one side.

"Hurry now." His father smiled. "Know that I love you and that I'll find you both if I can."

TAREN AWOKE some time later, shivering as his mother dried him and wrapped him in blankets, then smiled down at him. In the moonlight, he could barely make out her features, but she looked pale. He tried to touch her face to reassure her, but she was too far away, his hand too small to reach her. Overhead, laundry hung from ropes. Taren remembered nothing of swimming, but he guessed she had jumped from the burning ship and swum to land.

"I'll come back for you as soon as I can, my brave Taren," she said as she reached up to her neck and unknotted something from her throat. The necklace she had left with Borstan. She wrapped it in one of the blankets near his feet, then picked him up and began to run. She stumbled and nearly dropped him, but she didn't stop until the sounds of the town—Raice Harbor?—had faded into the night.

Taren struggled to see as she clutched him to her breast and rapped on what he guessed was a wooden door.

"Please," she begged as the door creaked open. "Please help me."

"I don't have nothin' for beggars," said a familiar voice. Taren couldn't see him, but he knew it was Borstan.

"I don't want money," his mother said as she leaned on the side of the shack.

"What d'ye want, then?"

"My son..."

Taren felt her body shake with the effort to speak. He remembered what Borstan had told him when he and Ian had confronted him: “She was sickly. Hurt. I dunno.” For the first time, he understood that she must have been injured after she’d transformed—that she couldn’t have healed her wounds unless she transformed again.

She didn’t transform again because she wanted to get me to safety.

“I have money,” she told Borstan. She set Taren down gently on the grass, and he saw her unbuckle a belt from her waist. Attached to it was a drawstring bag. “Here.” She shoved the money at Borstan, who opened it and stared at it, openmouthed. “There’s plenty of gold to feed him.”

“Feed him?” Borstan stared at her in obvious shock.

“You must keep him safe.”

“Woman, I don’t want no boy—”

“Please.” She was in tears now, barely holding herself upright. “Taren’s special. He’ll be smart and a hard worker, just like his father.”

“I don’t need no—”

“I’ll come back for him. But you must keep him safe. Don’t tell anyone about me. I promise I’ll be back. Just take care of him until I do. Please, I beg you!”

“All right,” Borstan said. Taren thought he saw his former master’s eyes light up at the realization that the gold was now his. “But this...?” He palmed one of the coins as if he didn’t believe what he saw.

“Keep it,” she said. “It means nothing to me. But swear you’ll protect him from harm. Swear you’ll tell no one.”

“I swear it.” Borstan shoved the gold into his pocket.

Taren’s mother bent down, catching herself with one hand as she nearly fell. “Taren,” she said, her face so close that he could see the beads of sweat on her brow and hear her shallow breaths. “The goddess has a plan for you. Be well, my brave Taren, and know that you’re loved.” She kissed him on the forehead and he began to cry.

THE DREAM faded and, with it, the feeling of dread that threatened to suffocate him. *My father was a sea captain*, he thought as he struggled to master his emotions. Pride mingled with his overwhelming sense of loss.

His parents had loved each other. They'd wanted him in their lives. *They gave their lives for me. And for what? That I might sulk about my fate?*

He'd run away from Ian like a child. Yes, Ian had been wrong not to trust his judgment. But Ian was right to fear Odhrán's power. Even if Ian trusted him, should he trust the safety of his entire crew to Taren's faith in Odhrán's good intentions?

He realized he still clasped his mother's necklace in his hand. *The necklace!* His mother had left it with him all those years ago. Perhaps she'd wanted him to have something to remember her by. But what if she'd left it with him for more than just a sentimental purpose? Odhrán had recognized the stones and shells as found only in the Eastern Lands. If Taren's mother had wanted to leave him with a reminder of her, would she have left him with something so unique or foreign?

The Eastern Lands. His parents had been sailing for the Eastern Lands when their ship had been attacked. Vurin had to have known this. *He knew, but he said nothing.* Why?

Because he wanted you to learn this for yourself. Vurin had understood that Taren must make his own decisions. He'd understood that until Taren did so, he would not move on from his servitude. If Vurin had told him to sail to the Eastern Lands, he'd have done so without protest. Vurin had given him a choice.

TWENTY-FIVE

TAREN SAT atop the foremast, naked after swimming, his eyes closed, the wind painting his cheeks with ribbons of cool air. He'd been up here for hours, unwilling to return to the cabin to face Ian. His anger felt much like the wind on his face, fleeting. His heart knew that his love for Ian was lasting, that forgiveness would cleanse the traces of hurt left behind. Time, like the wind, was powerful that way.

His mind strayed, and he imagined the wind blowing in circles around him, easing the tension in his body, calming his mind. He liked the way the breeze felt on his cheeks, on the back of his neck, his shoulders, his arms and legs. He opened his eyes, and as he did, he became aware that the wind had done exactly what he'd imagined it would.

He remembered praying to the goddess that the wind would change as the *Phantom* fought the brigantine near the Gateway Islands. He remembered Seria and the Ea prison and how the storm that raged outside had mirrored the turmoil in his heart. Vurin's words—"*There are also stories of Ea priests who could control the elements.*"—echoed in his thoughts.

Was Vurin right?

The breeze abated. He closed his eyes and waited until he felt it blow over his face once again. He focused his thoughts as Vurin had taught him when they'd explored his healing abilities. He thought of nothing but the wind. The sweet scent it carried from the water. The warm air it stirred. The way the gulls rode its currents and eddies. When his mind filled with thoughts of the wind alone, he imagined it changing direction. Imagined himself pushing it, pulling it, coaxing it, cajoling it to follow his whim, his desire.

For a moment nothing happened. And then he felt a thin band of warm air brush the back of his neck. Tender, like the ephemeral touch of a lover, it danced on his skin.

His heart began to beat faster, and with it, the wind grew stronger, picking up the ends of his long hair and brushing his upper back with the strands. Was this what Vurin had suspected? He longed to ask him, but he knew it might be months before he had the opportunity.

Why ask him what you know in your heart to be true? a voice in his mind said. A whisper of Treande? Or his own thoughts? Or were they all that different?

He came back to himself to the sound of the creaking of the foreyard. He didn't need to see Ian to sense his presence. Ian offered him a tight smile, then sat beside him.

"Are you all right?" Ian asked, his forehead creased with obvious concern.

Taren guessed his face appeared flushed from his excitement. For a moment he considered telling Ian what he'd just discovered, but then thought better of it. He didn't want to trouble Ian—he knew how much Ian already feared for his safety. He wasn't ready to contemplate the meaning of this newfound ability and whether Vurin had been correct in guessing that he was meant to wield the rune stone.

"I'm fine," Taren said, hoping to reassure Ian. "Just enjoying the breeze and the smell of the water."

"I loved to spend time up here years ago, when the *Phantom* was in port," Ian said wistfully. "During the war, she had a twin sister, the *Vela*. When the officers weren't looking, some of the men would string ropes between the two ships and we'd climb on them. Dive from them and transform." He chuckled, then added, "I think the captains knew well what we were doing, but they allowed us the childish play, understanding the toll the war took on us."

In spite of himself, Taren smiled to imagine a young Ian acting foolish, carefree. He was just about to speak when Ian wrapped his arms around his shoulders and drew him against his chest.

"I'm sorry." Ian's voice was once again serious. "I was wrong to treat you like a child. You've asked me to trust you, and I've been my usual stubborn self. I shouldn't have told Odhrán to leave. The only excuse I can

make is that I'm a selfish bastard—I fear I'll lose you, and I don't know what I'd do if that happened."

Taren sighed and relaxed into Ian's embrace. "If you were to lose me," he said, "you would survive and do what the goddess demands." He inhaled slowly, knowing he must tell Ian the truth. Ian deserved to hear it. "I know the grief of losing you."

"The visions?"

"Aye."

Ian held Taren tighter, brushed the hair from his cheek, and kissed it sweetly. "I know you saw Owyn's death—that you believe you are responsible for it."

"I... Treande killed Owyn."

"I don't believe that," Ian said. "There's something you haven't told me. I'm sure of it. This has something to do with the stone, doesn't it?"

Taren nodded. "The rune stone can exist in two forms. Solid"—he glanced down at the stone hanging around his neck—"or as a physical part of the wielder."

"Physical?" Taren heard a note of distress in Ian's voice.

"The stone and the wielder become one," Taren continued as he repressed a shudder. "And if the wielder dies, the stone dies with him. There's only one way to free the stone. The dagger..."

Ian kissed Taren once more. "Treande did what he had to do. I don't doubt Owyn knew that as well."

Taren couldn't argue with that. In his vision, it had been Owyn who'd insisted Treande retrieve the stone, even though he knew it would cost him his life. "Treande paid dearly to claim that stone for our people. He lived nearly two hundred years after Owyn's death."

Ian drew a stuttered breath. "This is what you wouldn't tell me before." He gently turned Taren's head so that Taren couldn't help but meet his gaze. "This is the pain you haven't shared with me."

Taren nodded and clenched his jaw, hoping to dispel the powerful wave of emotion that threatened to cleave his heart in two. "I feared you would worry more. Later, I feared you might refuse to look for the stone."

"I can do nothing about the past," Ian said in a tender voice. "Nor can you. Forget about the stone. Vurin sent us to find it. Well, we've found it."

He can have it.”

“But if Odhrán is right.... With the stone, we might be able to keep our people safe.”

“No.” The cold tone of Ian’s voice made Taren shiver. “I won’t have you risk your life when you don’t even know what powers it imparts. Surely Vurin’s a powerful enough mage that he can master the stone.”

Taren shook his head, then pulled free of Ian’s embrace and stood, one hand on the mast. “You say you want to trust me. That you were wrong to act impulsively.”

“I was. I—”

Taren didn’t let Ian finish. He’d speak his piece and suffer the consequences if need be. “Then you must trust me *now*. Please, Ian. There’s a reason for all of this. There’s a reason I found you again. You know it as well as I.”

Ian nodded.

“I am the wielder.” Only now did he accept the truth.

“Taren....”

“Please,” Taren pleaded. “Just listen.”

Ian nodded again and Taren saw how he struggled not to speak. His heart warmed at the knowledge that Ian loved him enough that he feared for his safety, but also respected him enough to allow him to choose his path.

“The stone is our people’s salvation. But there is only one wielder. One Ea who can unlock its secrets.” He took Ian’s hand in his own and kissed it. “I have no intention of leaving this life—my life with you—sooner than I must. I want my life to be a simple one. I want to remain at your side. I want your protection. I want to feel safe.”

Taren took a deep breath, then said in a voice he hoped would convey his resolve, “But I cannot continue to allow Vurin, or you, or anyone else to show me where I must go. You’ve told me I’m not a slave. But I haven’t truly believed it myself. I haven’t *wanted* to believe it. Because if I did believe it, that meant I’d need to make my own choices.”

Ian smiled at him. Taren saw the pride in his eyes and knew what that pride had cost him. Ian had always wanted him to understand the value of his freedom, even though Ian knew Taren’s freedom meant he could not always keep Taren safe. In that moment Taren loved Ian more than ever.

“The goddess has shown me the way,” Taren said after a moment’s hesitation. “The stone is part of her plan. I’m sure of it.”

“Go on.” Ian pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. “I will try not to judge based on my heart’s desire alone.” He smiled, but Taren saw sadness in his eyes.

This is as difficult for him as it is for me. The thought comforted Taren. He knew Ian truly wished him to lead rather than follow. He needed to trust Ian as well. “I had a vision. The necklace my mother left me... I was able to touch her memories and understand.”

“What did you see?”

“The night she and my father died,” Taren said as he struggled to rein in his emotion. “They were aboard a ship bound for the Eastern Lands.”

“The Eastern Lands?”

“Aye.” Taren nodded. “My father was a ship’s captain. On the night they left to sail for the Eastern Lands, they were ambushed by one of the Council’s ships in the waters near Raice Harbor. Their ship was badly damaged, but my father stayed with his men, hoping to join my mother later.” He shook his head, pressed his lips together, and blinked away his tears. “My mother took me and swam to land, but she was mortally wounded as she swam. She transformed into her human form. She could have transformed again and saved herself, but she knew she’d risk my life as well if she did. That was the night she entrusted me to Borstan.”

Ian brushed Taren’s tears away with his thumb, then kissed him sweetly on the lips. “I’m so sorry you had to witness such a thing.”

“You mustn’t be. It truly is a gift to have known them,” Taren said.

“Aye.” Ian kissed Taren again. “But why the Eastern Lands? Did your vision reveal the reason?”

“No,” Taren admitted. “But I think I know the reason.” He glanced down, afraid to meet Ian’s gaze.

“I trust you, Taren. Tell me what we must do. I promise I will follow you this time.” When he looked up again, Taren saw that Ian’s smile was genuine, the encouragement in his eyes obvious. “You are meant to do this. I know it in my soul.”

“I think there are others of our kind there. Before we left for the Gateways, Vurin showed me something. A cave near the water at Callaecia, with carvings of Ea swimming through buildings. As though they lived

beneath the water. I think those carvings are a record. Meant to remind us of our past. I think there are others of our kind, Ian. Merfolk who live beneath the waters of the Eastern Lands. I think Vurin wants us to find them, to reunite with them. Perhaps he believes that with their help we can make peace with the islanders.”

“And what of the stone?” Ian asked.

Taren exhaled slowly. He wouldn’t tell Ian what he now knew: that sooner or later he, like Owyn centuries ago, would need to join with the rune stone. That the goddess would demand it of him. “I don’t know. Not yet. The goddess will reveal her plan for it. And for us.”

TWENTY-SIX

IAN FOLLOWED Taren as they climbed the ladder from the launch to the *Sea Witch*. Rider waited with Bastian at his side. It surprised Ian how good it felt to see the *Witch* and her crew put in to the harbor where the *Phantom* was anchored. Even hidden from humans as they were, thanks to Renda's enchantments, he knew the *Phantom* and her crew were vulnerable. He was sure the attack by the humans had been the work of the Council. If the Council's mages were powerful enough, they'd eventually find his damaged ship. The *Witch* and her crew provided his men with a modicum of protection. And although he would hardly admit it, Ian was happy to see Rider again.

"Welcome aboard," Rider said, his face set in a grin.

"Jonat." Ian clasped Rider's arm. "Thank you for coming here." Out of the corner of his eye, Ian saw Taren smile at Bastian. "May we speak in private?" he asked. He'd give Bastian and Taren some time together while he and Rider discussed plans.

"Of course."

Ian nodded to Bastian, then Taren. He repressed a smile at the surprise on Taren's face. Taren no doubt realized Ian was making good on his promise to trust him. Ian wondered if he'd feel as confident should they meet up with Odhrán again. And if what Taren said was true—that Odhrán was nearly a thousand years old and more powerful than any Ea—it was far safer to be wary.

Once inside Rider's cabin, Ian took a seat across the table from Rider as Rider poured them both some whiskey. Ian lifted his glass. "To old friends."

“Friends,” Rider responded with a nod, and they both drank. “But this isn’t just a friendly call, is it?”

“I wish it were.”

“I guessed as much. When Vurin asked us to sail to the Gateways, I knew he must be concerned for your safety.” Rider leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin.

“We discussed it before setting sail. I told him we didn’t need a nursemaid.” Ian shook his head. “I guessed he’d asked you to follow when we heard you were in the area.”

“But you still don’t need a nursemaid.” Rider’s laughter rumbled through the cabin.

In spite of himself, Ian smiled. “You know me too well.”

“You want my ship.”

“The *Phantom* will need several more months of repairs before she’s seaworthy,” Ian explained. “By then, it will be too dangerous to make the crossing. I’ll not risk my men to the winter storms.”

Rider narrowed his eyes and frowned. “You believe the Council will attack again.”

Ian sighed. Of course Rider would have guessed who was behind the attack on the *Phantom*. “What do you know about the Council’s doings?” he asked.

“Not much more than you, I venture. But before we set sail, I received word from a merchant I know on Lurat that several Derryth ships were spotted in the waters near Ea’nu.”

To a passing ship, Ea’nu would not be visible—there would be no reason for any ship to be sailing in that area unless they knew of the island’s existence or were rendezvousing with another ship. An Ea ship. The Council wouldn’t allow humans on the island, of this Ian was sure. But if the Council wished to join forces with the humans....

“What else did you learn?” he asked.

“Only that Seria was spotted on Lurat not long before. No one saw him leave, but there were several unfamiliar ships in port. Fast ships.”

“Brigantines,” Ian said under his breath. “No doubt he swam to the island for the sole purpose of meeting them.”

“Aye.”

Ian stood up and ran a hand through his hair. Seria was playing a dangerous game. Was it possible the Council didn't know about the humans' involvement? "Derryth ships, no doubt."

"It seems someone may have alerted the king that your people possess something of value," Rider said. "The mainland settlement may be at risk."

"Vurin's enchantments are powerful. Now that you've warned him, he'll be able to protect them." Ian didn't add that he feared the Council had hidden some of its most powerful mages away. Until now, he'd planned on bringing Renda with him, but Vurin might well need Renda's help back at Callaecia. He'd send Renda and his men back to the mainland with the *Phantom* once repairs were completed.

"How can we assist you?" Rider asked after he'd set his tankard down on the table.

"It will be dangerous. More so now that Seria seems to have allied with Derryth's king. I would understand if you—"

Rider's rumbled laughter interrupted Ian's words. "You know full well I have no fear of Derryth's navy," he said. "Nor of your Ea Council. Although," he added with a smirk, "I might exact a higher payment from Vurin for it."

"I always said you were a mad fool," Ian said, affection belying his words. He knew Rider didn't need Vurin's gold but longed for the excitement of the voyage. Ian felt the same. How he longed to be upon the open seas once more!

"Where do we sail, then? Derryth? Ea'nu?"

"The Eastern Lands."

Rider's eyes widened, causing the wrinkles around his eyes to smooth. "Better still," he said. "It's been some time since I've made the crossing." As boys, they'd dreamed of sailing to the Eastern Lands together.

"I'll bring a few of my best men to assist your crew. Barra and your navigator can chart us the safest course." When Rider raised a knowing eyebrow, Ian nodded and said, "Aye. Not the easiest course but the one that will garner us the least attention. We will sail south around the islands, then turn northward and set our course. There are a few islands along the way where we might hide, if need be."

"The winds from the north are far less favorable."

"Are you saying your crew can't handle the challenge?" Ian asked.

The edges of Rider's mouth turned upward in a crooked grin. "I'm saying it's far more exciting a passage."

"Good. Then we'll leave as soon as we can provision the ship. I'll send word to Vurin. It may be many months before we can sail back to Callaecia, with the winter close at hand."

"Then I will have enough time to show you some of the pleasures of the Eastern Lands," Rider said. "It is more beautiful than we ever imagined."

"I will look forward to it, once our business there is done."

"Not going to tell me your business, then?" Rider said as he clapped his hand on Ian's back.

"If we're successful," Ian said, "you will know of it. I promise."

"There is one more thing I wish to speak of." Rider pursed his lips and his expression grew pensive.

"I'm listening."

"I wish to speak of Taren."

Ian nodded, though his outward calm was a sham—the mention of Taren and the reminder of Taren's contract with Rider always made him feel unsettled. He could control many things as captain of the *Phantom*, but this was something in which he had little say. "Speak, then. I've already told you he is not yours to keep."

"Nor yours," Rider pointed out with the shadow of a grin. "But regardless what we believe, Taren believes it is his duty to fulfill his contract to me."

"Aye." Ian wouldn't quibble with Rider, especially since the man had just consented to help them make the crossing to the Eastern Lands.

"I have decided to release him from his contract," Rider said.

"You—?"

"Aye." Rider sighed and rubbed his beard. "Much as I wish him to remain here, he is, as you like to remind me, a free man. The only thing that keeps him bound to me is his deep sense of loyalty." He walked over to the nearby table and picked up a piece of parchment, which he handed to Ian. "After we reach the Eastern Lands," Rider said, "I want you to give this to him."

Ian opened the parchment and quickly read its contents. “I... I don’t know what to say.” He rolled the parchment up again and shoved it into his breast pocket.

“There is nothing to say. I’m not doing this for you.” Rider turned to the open aft windows and gazed out at the harbor.

“Regardless. I thank you.”

Rider waved his hand dismissively but did not turn back to Ian. “Go and gather your men,” he said in a gruff voice that Ian guessed was meant to disguise his obvious emotion. No matter that they knew each other too well for that—Rider was not a man to show his vulnerable heart. “We’ll plan our route tonight and sail with the sun tomorrow.”

“Will you dine with us tonight?” Ian asked.

“And be subjected to your tedious conversation?” Rider laughed, though Ian also knew this for the jest it was.

“Then I’ll return with my men this evening.”

“Off with you, then.” Rider still hadn’t turned around. Ian thought he heard a sigh as he closed the cabin door behind him.

TWENTY-SEVEN

One week later

AS THE first bands of light announcing the dawn cut through the blackness of night, Taren stood by Bastian as he steered the *Sea Witch*. He'd been unable to sleep and had worried he'd wake Ian from his slumber as he tossed and turned. He'd dreamed about fire and of eyes that glowed in the darkness and followed him until he had nowhere else to hide. The unusual dream—not a vision, but perhaps a portent?—disturbed him. Something was wrong, and the sensation had only grown stronger throughout the night.

“Have you noticed anything strange?” Taren stifled a yawn as he felt for the rune stone beneath his shirt. He hadn't even thought to ask Ian where they might safely keep it. Much as it had caused him so much grief in his visions, he felt—no, he *knew*—there was no other place for it than around his neck. Why had it felt warmer still against his skin since he dreamed last night? “Any ships on the horizon?”

“You worry far too much.” Bastian's hair caught the wind as he gazed out at the first hint of sunrise. They'd left the most dangerous part of the trip behind—the passage around the southern tip of the Gateway Islands—and had turned northward toward the Eastern Lands. “The ocean is large. The sentries have seen nothing.”

Red, fuchsia, and yellow streaks beckoned like fingers of light, leading the way east. Taren knew he should be excited to finally be making the crossing to the Eastern Lands, but instead he'd been dogged by a feeling of foreboding he could not shake.

“I'm sure it's nothing that can't be cured with a bit more sleep,” Taren said. Perhaps the encounter with his former self in the caves had affected

him more than he cared to admit. Ever since Odhrán had left, Taren had felt out of sorts. Anxious. Uneasy. The visions hadn't returned since he'd recovered the stone, though he felt quite sure he wasn't rid of them. Still, being aboard the *Sea Witch* once again comforted him. Bastian seemed to understand this, for he smiled knowingly as he adjusted their course once again as the wind shifted. Taren felt the pull of the ship against the sails and the slight vibration of the hull as the *Witch* picked up speed.

"It's good to have you back aboard," Bastian said. "When you left, I feared it would never be the same. I was right, you know."

"There are times I wish I were back as well. It was simpler then. I knew my place."

"Are you happy with him?"

Taren nodded. "Aye. Much as there are days I'm tempted to throttle him." Taren chuckled softly. "More often, though, I feel my heart is incomplete without him."

"Love is a powerful balm," Bastian agreed. Taren knew he was thinking of Rider. "Ian says you still insist on returning to us when the year is up. But you know Rider would release you from your indenture if you only asked."

Taren didn't want to admit that he feared the alternative. Treande's question—*What do you want?*—still echoed in his mind. Taren understood what answering that question might mean. He'd answer it in time, but since he'd returned from recovering the stone, he'd tried not to think too much about it. He'd been too tired and too overwhelmed. A few weeks at sea would help him sort things through—the wind and the water were his safe harbor.

"Mind you," Bastian was saying when Taren forced his attention back to the present, "I'd be happy to welcome you back, even if you no longer shared our b—"

Bastian's words were cut short by the sound of an explosion. A *cannon!* Before either of them could react, the gut-wrenching sound of splitting wood and the shudder of the ship told Taren the *Sea Witch* had taken a hit to her stern.

"Taren!" Bastian shouted as he struggled to steer the ship. Without a rudder to balance the pressure of the wind on the sails, the *Sea Witch* began

to turn into the wind and lose speed. "Have the men arm themselves. If they've taken out the rudder, they'll be trying to board us soon enough."

"Aye!" Taren ran toward the locker where the weapons were stored, all the while shouting for the other deckhands to rouse the rest of the crew. He'd nearly reached the locker when the ship veered sharply to port with a gust of wind, knocking him onto the deck. He hit his shin hard against one of the metal winches as he fell, then slid farther toward the rails. He struggled to grab on to something but found nothing within reach.

"Catch the rope!" he heard Ian shout over the commotion on deck. Sure enough, Taren noticed the rope Ian had thrown to him and wrapped one end around his wrist. Ian pulled him up to standing. Tight-lipped, Taren nodded his thanks and tried to calm his racing heart. Falling overboard would not have hurt him, but he couldn't imagine watching another battle, helpless to do anything to assist.

As he and Ian handed out weapons, some of the men at the stern struggled to adjust the aft sails. Bastian would try to steer the ship with the wind alone. It might work until they rigged something more permanent to replace the missing rudder, but the *Sea Witch* would hardly be nimble in battle. "Humans," Ian said as he glanced aft. "Another brigantine. But there are Ea aboard as well."

"Seria." This explained the strange sensations Taren had experienced the night before. "He used a mage to hide their location." Taren shivered to contemplate what Seria and the Council might do to them both if they were captured. Surely they cared nothing for the *Witch's* human crew. Once again he saw himself back at the Ea prison, felt Seria's touch and the searing, burning pain that accompanied it as it worked its way into his body, squeezing his heart, causing his breath to hitch. He remembered how he'd screamed until his throat felt raw and his voice sounded rough.

"Taren?"

Ian's voice brought Taren back to his senses. He wiped his forehead, which had beaded with perspiration. He fought the urge to vomit by taking deep breaths. "Yes?"

Ian reached for Taren's hand and clasped it tight. "I will not let them take you again," he said with such fervor that Taren believed him in spite of his fear. Ian wore an expression full of hatred and self-recrimination. Taren understood Ian's regret at not having killed Seria when he'd had the chance.

He also knew it took all of Ian's self-control not to suggest that Taren dive overboard and save himself. Ian knew well enough that Taren would never abandon his former shipmates to save his own skin.

"But how did they find us?" Taren wondered aloud as he regained his composure once again. Was it possible for a mage to be powerful enough to locate a single ship on the open sea?

"I don't know." Ian clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes. "But if we survive this, I will find out."

If they survived. Death would be preferable to what awaited them on Ea'nu if they were captured.

Ian offered Taren a loaded pistol, which he refused. He'd never used the weapon before, and even if he managed to shoot straight, he doubted he'd be able to load it quickly enough to do him any good. "I'll take a sword," he told Ian, who nodded and picked one up, weighed it in his hand, put it back, then did the same with a second sword. He nodded, then handed it to Taren, who slipped it in his belt alongside the silver dagger he always wore. The words "Be safe" remained unspoken, but Taren heard them nonetheless.

By now, without a rudder to aim the ship, the *Sea Witch* had lost most of her speed and the brigantine had pulled along her port side, where the water was calmer. Ian handed the last of the weapons to the men, then shoved the pistol into his belt just as the first of the attacking ship's crew began to board. He and Taren ran to join the other men who were fending off the wave of humans who swung on the ropes and landed on the *Witch's* deck.

Taren heard shouts from the foredeck. "Stay with Bastian," Ian said. "See what you can do to help."

"Aye."

Ian took off at a run for the foredeck.

Taren immediately set to helping defend the crew working the sails. Bastian shouted commands over the battle cries and the clanking of metal against metal. Above where they stood, several men had climbed the mast to free the ropes that had become entangled before Bastian was able to bring the ship about.

One of the brigantine's men lunged for Taren, who met the man's sword with a powerful blow from his own weapon. The vibration from the

metal caused Taren's wrist to ache, but he ignored this and set himself to parry again.

The sound of gunshots rent the air. One of the *Witch's* crew fell from a crossbeam and hit the deck. Taren pushed his opponent back, hoping to knock him down and see to the man with the pistol, but his opponent would not be dissuaded. He swung his weapon and Taren moved out of its trajectory, though not quite fast enough: the point of the sword cut through the fabric of his shirt and he felt the sting of the wound. A shallow wound, but one he might have avoided had he not lost his focus. "*You must never anticipate the next fight,*" Rider had once told him, "*or you may not live to see it.*" Until recently, Taren hadn't understood just how much Rider had taught him.

Taren's opponent jabbed at him. This time Taren was ready. He aimed his sword forward and turned the blade to shield himself from the attack. The wind caressed the back of his neck, then traveled past him and blew hard enough at his opponent's face to make the man blink. Taren grasped his sword with both hands and charged. As the blade met its mark and entered the enemy fighter's chest, Taren felt a slight resistance. Later, he'd remember this feeling well, and it would haunt him. He'd never taken a life before, yet he could almost sense the man's soul leaving his body.

Goddess rest his soul, he prayed silently.

Another shot rang out, this time missing its mark but burning a hole in one of the sails. Taren guessed it would take the shooter less than a minute to reload. He shouted and ran at the man who had fired the shot, dove for his legs, and pulled them out from underneath him. The pistol clattered to the deck and Taren kicked it hard enough to send it over the side of the ship, then turned and kicked the startled man in the gut.

He joined Bastian a moment later and helped some of the men pull the ropes tighter to sheet in the sails and increase their speed. "You've gotten stronger," Bastian said, clearly pleased to see him.

"And your sailing is better than I remember." He nodded toward where the enemy vessel was struggling to raft alongside the *Sea Witch*. "Where is Rider?"

"Forward, helping your captain keep the launches from tying up." Drops of sweat ran down Bastian's furrowed brow, and his long hair stuck

to his face. He had a wild look about him, but his eyes were keenly focused on the sails, his cheek turned so that he could feel the direction of the wind.

Indeed, Taren saw Ian and Rider, along with Barra and Aine, as they held off the launches. Already one of the small boats had lost its hold on the *Sea Witch*'s deck and was quickly being left behind.

"We're fine here," Bastian told him. "See what you can do to help them. There are plenty of men aft."

"But Rider—"

"Worries far too much for my safety. I'll be fine. I promise," Bastian said. "Go now. We'll be fine here—there are more than enough men to keep me safe."

Taren glanced around, hesitated once again, then set off for the foredeck.

TWENTY-EIGHT

TAREN BEAT back yet another attack and thanked the goddess for his increased strength. Had it been six months before, he doubted he'd have been able to hold off a man so large for more than a few minutes.

It had taken him longer than he'd expected to fight his way to the foredeck, but he'd made it without further injury. To his right, Ian and Barra were fighting off Seria and two Ea men. He caught only a glimpse of Rider farther forward as he tangled with three humans a dozen feet from the bowsprit.

Seria's expression hinted at the pleasure Taren knew he must feel to be so close to capturing two of the sharpest thorns in the Council's side. He pushed aside the memory of his time in the Ea prison. He was stronger than a memory. He would fight without fear, and if need be, he'd die before he allowed them to take him again. All around them, Rider's men fought the brigantine's crew, but Taren could hear none of the melee, so focused was he on the fate of those close to him and on his wish to protect them.

Bastian managed to stabilize the *Witch's* course as a half dozen of her crew guarded his position while he barked commands to the men manning the aft sails. That the *Witch* was no longer dead in the water was a testament to Bastian's skill, but the *Witch* still wouldn't be able to outsail her attacker. Now that the *Witch* was no longer in irons, the brigantine's captain was forced to maneuver his ship so she wouldn't strike the *Witch's* side, but she had no difficulty maintaining her proximity.

Taren watched in horror as a second brigantine joined the first a few minutes later, forcing Bastian closer and closer to the first ship. At last, too far upwind to use the sails to steer, the *Witch* slowed and drifted.

Even as he fought, Taren imagined the wind snaking tendrils around him, caressing his body. As if heeding his thoughts, he felt the wind at his neck tickle the hairs there. Another strong gust buffeted the deck of the ship, strong enough that his attacker was forced to brush his hair from his eyes in order to better see Taren. Taren took the opportunity to thrust his weapon at his attacker's chest. His aim was true. The man fell to the deck, mortally wounded.

Goddess rest his soul, Taren prayed once more for the man whose life he'd taken. He took no time to join another fight, however, as he tried to make his way to Ian and Barra. Another man now fought by Seria's side, and to their right, Rider fought several men. Seeing this, Taren barely avoided a swing from his opponent. As his fear for Ian, Rider, and the others grew, the wind whipped about them. Taren smelled rain on the air, but hadn't it been clear before the attack? The distant rumble of thunder caused the wood beneath his feet to vibrate.

Taren couldn't deny it any longer. *He* had caused the storm. And though it frightened him to realize that he had little idea how to control this power, it also pleased him that the weather might make the fight more challenging for the enemy. With this thought, the sky grew darker and heavy droplets began to fall.

He wiped the water from his eyes and tried to focus on blowing the enemy's ship off her course, but his opponent swung again and he barely moved in time to block the strike. Movement off the starboard side caught his eye. *Another ship?* This vessel was far larger than the brigantines. The crew of the *Sea Witch* might be numerous enough to defeat the smaller cadres the brigantines carried, but another square rigger?

Behind Seria, Rider had managed to subdue one of his opponents but was still struggling to overcome the other two. Taren had no time to waste. He needed to help Rider and Ian. He used the distraction of the new ship to his advantage and kicked his opponent, then swung his sword and sliced through the muscles of his sword arm. The man's weapon fell, and before he could react, Taren punched him hard enough to send him sprawling on the ground.

Taren ran to where Ian had been fighting and found him immobilized by two Ea, a third with his weapon touching Ian's chest, over his heart. Seria, clearly pleased, watched a dumbfounded Barra, who stood, weapon

at the ready, pointed at Seria. Taren didn't notice the two men behind him until they knocked the sword from his hand and pinned his arms behind his back.

"Kill him," Ian spat.

Seria laughed. "He won't kill me. Will you, Barra?" Barra's hand trembled and, with it, his blade. "No. You won't." Seria pressed Barra's blade downward.

A muscle in Barra's cheek jumped as he looked directly at Ian and said, "I'm sorry, Captain." He dropped his sword, which landed with a thud on the wooden deck.

Taren met Barra's gaze for a moment. Barra's face reddened and he looked even more forlorn. "I'm sorry, Taren," he mumbled. "I never wanted to hurt you. But I...."

Upon hearing these words, Taren parted his lips in shock. "You? It was you, in the water? In the battle with the humans?" He'd seen what he thought was a tail, and then—

"I couldn't find you on deck," Ian's face contorted with rage as he fought to free himself from the men holding him. "It wasn't the mizzen that hit Taren. *You* went after him. You bastard! You tried to kill him! Did you ask to search for him in town so you could finish the job?"

Barra stared down at the deck, clearly terrified to meet Ian's eyes.

"You see, Dunaidh," Seria said, his expression serious once more, "there are some of our people who are still loyal to the Council. Unlike you."

Taren didn't need to see Ian's face to feel Ian's anger and grief; he felt them as well. The wind blew harder and the rain stung his face. *No. Not Barra.* Barra had tried to kill him. Barra had helped the *Witch's* navigator plot their course. He'd probably given their heading to Seria and the humans. Barra had betrayed them all. *Barra wanted to kill me?*

"Ian Dunaidh," Seria said in a voice both self-important and self-satisfied, "you have been tried in absentia and convicted of the crime of high treason against Ea'nu. By the Council's authority, you will die for your crimes against our people."

Did Seria mean to execute Ian here while all his men watched? No doubt the gesture would go far to instill fear in Ian's men as well as Seria's—human and Ea.

“No!” Taren shouted as he struggled against the men who held him.

Seria laughed, then withdrew his pistol and aimed it at Ian. “What will you do about it, boy?” he asked. “If you lay a hand on me, my men will run him through.”

Taren heard the sounds of a scuffle from the aft deck. Several of Seria’s men ran toward them. “There’s another ship, sir!” one of them shouted.

A cannon blast shook the *Sea Witch*, and shouts and screams carried on the wind. Taren guessed one of the attacking ships had been hit, but he didn’t dare take his eyes off Ian and Seria.

In the midst of all the chaos, Seria smiled calmly and pulled the trigger. Taren saw the spark and smelled the pungent odor of gunpowder as he lunged for Seria, but the weapon discharged before he could knock it out of Seria’s hand. Someone fell to the deck, shirt stained with blood.

“Ian!” Taren ran to the injured man. But it was not Ian on the deck, his chest covered in blood. It was Rider.

Out of the corner of his eye, Taren saw Seria and his men jump into the water as a dozen men from the just-arrived ship—the *Chimera*, Taren realized—charged forward. Barra hesitated, then ran after Seria and the others.

IAN KNEELED and pressed his shaking hands to the wound on Rider’s chest as he struggled to calm his racing heart. *Goddess! No.* Human as Rider was, even a ship’s surgeon could do nothing. Ian felt Rider’s heart slow beneath his palm, saw the color flee from his cheeks, saw the light begin to fade from his eyes.

Ian had been ready to die when Seria aimed his pistol. From such a close distance, Ian knew there’d be no transformation to save him. He’d regretted only that he’d been unable to protect Taren, that he’d failed the goddess and his people. He’d given up too easily. Rider had won their freedom. *But at what cost?*

Taren was at his side a moment later, taking his place, his hands glowing as he struggled to heal Rider’s wound. The look of horror that twisted Taren’s face as he fought to concentrate told Ian that Taren, too,

knew there was little to be done. In spite of this, Ian's heart swelled to see Taren's calm resolve as he worked to save Rider.

"Damn fool," Ian muttered under his breath. "Taking the bullet in my stead." *How will I ever repay my debt to you, old friend?*

Ian studied Taren's youthful face, then looked at Rider's and remembered when they, too, had been as young. Together, he and Rider had shared so many dreams. In Rider's arms, Ian had felt happy. Accepted. After living so long without being able to share his true nature with anyone but his parents, Ian thrilled to know that a human knew his secret. Even now, Ian remembered how they'd swam together in a secluded cove not far from Raice Harbor—Ian in his Ea form, Rider holding on to his waist as Ian sped through the water and dove while Rider held his breath. Later, they'd made love in the shade of the trees and talked about their future together aboard a great sailing ship. They'd had so many dreams... dreams of sailing to the Eastern Lands, of exploring the islands farther beyond, where few humans or Ea had ever traveled.

Beautiful dreams I will cherish always, Jonat.

Ian clenched his jaw and struggled to master his emotions. The danger was ever present. Seria and the others would regroup and return to finish what they'd started. He would need to be strong and rally Rider's crew. They would need his help to survive another battle with the Council's ships.

"Let me through!" Bastian pushed the men surrounding Rider aside and dropped to his knees. "No," he whispered. "Gods, no!"

Rider's eyes fluttered open. "Leave it be, boy," he told Taren. "No magic will heal this wound."

Taren hesitated, but Ian nodded and Taren withdrew. Ian wrapped his arms around Taren's body not because he knew Taren needed to feel his presence, but because *he* needed to feel Taren.

"No. You must heal him." Bastian's face was tear-streaked, his eyes wide.

"Time to let go, love," Rider said in a low voice. "We've had our run of good luck."

"No." Bastian's shoulders shook and his voice quavered. He laid his head on Rider's chest, heedless of the blood.

"Take care of them both for me," Rider told Ian.

“Aye.” Ian’s tears fell as the last of his resolve crumbled beneath the weight of his grief. He’d had few friends in his life. The price of command, no doubt. But Rider had been there for him time and again. Infuriating, frustrating, kind, and caring, Rider had become someone Ian depended upon and loved like a brother.

“Kiss me, love,” Rider said as his gaze flickered back to Bastian’s. “And take good care of my ship.”

Bastian leaned over Rider as Rider’s eyes closed once more. The wind had died, replaced now by a steady rain. Taren’s tears mingled with droplets of water as Bastian wept on Rider’s now still chest.

Taren leaned against Ian, who wrapped an arm around his shoulders from behind.

Goddess, protect his soul.

TWENTY-NINE

BUT FOR the sound of the rain as it hit the deck, the *Sea Witch* was eerily silent. Taren looked down at his hands. The water had begun to wash them clean, but Taren could still smell the bite of gunpowder and the tang of Rider's blood there. He rubbed his face with his arm and struggled not to lose control of his emotions.

"The ship's secure, sir," Fiall said as he made his way through the crowd that had gathered. He gasped and covered his mouth when he saw Rider's body, then shook his head. "No. He's not...."

Taren wiped his hands on his britches, stood up, and put a hand on Fiall's tense shoulder. At the edge of the crowd stood Odhrán, flanked by James and another human crewmember. Odhrán inclined his head as he removed his hat and set it over his heart in a gesture of respect.

Bastian's sobs grew softer, though his body still shook with anguish. After a few more minutes, he stood silently and looked around him. His eyes were glassy and unfocused, as if he couldn't see all the people who surrounded him. The men parted to allow him to pass. Taren followed, unsure what to do.

When he reached the bowsprit, Bastian raised his hands skyward as if to beseech the heavens for understanding. Taren made to comfort Bastian, but Ian, who had followed as well, held him back. "Let him grieve in his own way."

Taren nodded. He could hardly bear the thought that it could have been Ian who died. Shot from such a close distance, Ian wouldn't have survived long enough to transform. Taren closed his eyes and willed away the memory of Owyn's death, a memory that seemed to entwine with Taren's

deep pain over the loss of Rider, the man who had rescued Taren from a life of slavery and guided him to manhood.

Bastian cried out, causing Taren to open his eyes again. The rain fell in thick droplets onto Bastian's outstretched arms. The droplets hissed as they touched Bastian's body, causing white steam to rise from his skin and clothing. Confused and fascinated, Taren continued to stare. Bastian's figure was outlined in a haze of reddish light. Taren blinked to clear his vision, but the image did not change.

"What...?" Taren whispered as he wiped his face.

The first of the flames leapt from Bastian's arms as Taren moved to comfort him. In spite of this—for Taren was sure he was imagining what he saw—Taren reached out to touch Bastian. In response, Ian pulled Taren back with such force that he nearly fell. Taren was just about to protest when he saw he'd not imagined it: Bastian was on fire.

"Bastian!" Taren shouted.

"Taren?" Bastian's voice sounded strange, gravelly. He stared at his arms in obvious shock, moving them as though he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "What...?"

"Bastian!" Taren struggled against Ian's iron grip. "Ian, let me g—"

"Look again," Ian said, his voice calm in Taren's ear.

Taren stopped fighting and did as Ian bid him. But what he saw, he struggled to understand. Flames licked Bastian's body, but he was unmarred. Even his clothes, though bloodstained and ragged, were intact.

"I don't understand," Bastian said. "What is this magic? What is happening to me?" Bastian's eyes, usually a bright green, were now a swirling mix of yellow, orange, and red, like a sunset, with black irises that appeared more like a reptile's than a human's. But it wasn't just his eyes that had changed. The freckles on his cheeks seemed to vanish and reform in a pattern that reminded Taren of stepping stones, each fitted tightly together. "Taren?" he said again, as if hoping that Taren might be able to explain what had happened to him. "I can't stop it. I don't understand. Please, Taren. It hurts! Gods, it hurts!"

The flames now rose nearly as high as the topsails, and unlike Bastian or his clothing, the canvas began to burn. Bastian's body, too, had begun to change. From his back, small appendages appeared and grew into wings with thick feathers that matched the brilliance of Bastian's red hair. His

arms and legs grew thicker and his torso lengthened until he stood tall enough to reach the top of the foremast. His face had lengthened, his nose becoming a snout. Nearly five times the size of a man, Bastian no longer appeared human. One of the railings cracked beneath the weight of his tail, and the ship shook as he spread his long wings and took to the air.

Throughout all this, Taren barely heard the shouts and cries of the men aboard the *Witch* who scurried about, clearly terrified of the creature Bastian had become. "Ian, he needs my help," Taren moaned as he fought Ian once more. The smoke burned his eyes and nose. His gut clenched and he tightened his grip on Ian's forearms.

"You cannot help him. You see what the flames have done to the ship." Ian pressed his cheek to Taren's. Behind Ian, Odhrán shouted commands to the crew to lower the remaining sails and protect them from the spreading flames.

The dragon let out a howling roar that made Taren shiver. Could everyone hear the pain in that sound as well as he? Bastian rose higher above the ships and roared again, this time shooting flames at one of the enemy ships as he screamed. The ship's upper sails caught fire. A moment later, the second enemy ship was fully ablaze. The rain, which still continued to fall, did nothing to dampen the flames. Men and Ea jumped into the water, their shouts barely audible over the dragon's shrieks.

Bastian turned back to the *Sea Witch* and began to descend.

"What's the status of the rudder?" Ian shouted over the din.

"It's gone, sir," Fiall said without emotion. "And with the foresails gone...." Taren knew they were dead in the water without the sails or the rudder.

Why? Why would you harm the ship you love so much, Bastian? Taren knew the answer: the thoughts and memories that had been Bastian's were gone. The dragon knew nothing of the *Sea Witch* or the men aboard it, nothing of the acceptance and friendship he'd found aboard her or of the grief those men now felt. The dragon only knew that Rider was dead. Perhaps he even believed the crew had brought about his beloved Rider's death. Taren sensed nothing of Bastian in the dragon now; he only sensed rage.

"Get the crew into the launches," Ian ordered.

"Aye, sir!" Fiall ran toward the wheel, shouting commands as he went.

“James,” Odhrán said, “get the men back to the *Chimera*. The enchantments should protect her for a short time. Pick up as many of the men as you can. Tell the Ea to find any men who may have ended up in the water.”

“And you, sir?” James asked, his concern apparent.

“I’ll be fine here. We’ll rejoin the ship once we’ve managed to....” Odhrán caught Taren’s eye and clenched his jaw.

“Once you’ve managed to what?” Taren demanded. “Kill him?”

“Taren,” Odhrán replied, “he’s not in his right mind. You yourself can sense this. He believes we are his enemy, that we killed his lover.”

“But there must be something we can do to help him.” Even as he spoke these words, Taren knew it was hopeless.

“We can’t help him now. We must save ourselves. Water does nothing against the magic of his flames. Even with its enchantments, my ship will not last long against it. Even if the Ea can swim away, I won’t allow the humans in my crew to perish.”

“You don’t think Bastian would—” Taren began, but his answer came all too soon as Bastian breathed fire and set the mainsails ablaze. Taren ignored Ian and Odhrán’s shouts of warning as he ran toward Bastian.

“Bastian!” Taren shouted. Bastian swooped low over the *Sea Witch* and the sails on the mizzen caught fire. A moment later Bastian turned and headed toward the *Chimera*.

From where he stood, Taren saw the men climbing up ropes to safety aboard the ship. “Bastian, no!”

“Get back!” Odhrán ran past Taren and looked out over the water. Taren watched in astonishment as the water rose to meet Odhrán’s outstretched hand. Odhrán swung his arm toward the burning sails and the water followed the arc of his movement, hitting the canvas. He repeated the movement until the flames spluttered momentarily, but they roared back to life an instant later, burning even hotter than before.

Distracted from his target, Bastian turned back to the *Sea Witch*. His entire body was now aflame.

“Get off the ship!” Odhrán shouted. “I’ll meet you aboard the *Chimera*.”

“No. He’s in pain. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. If I can only—” Taren’s words were cut short as several of the yardarms fell to the deck with

a sound like thunder. “Bastian! Goddess, Bastian! Stop!”

Bastian screamed again and unleashed yet another barrage of fire, this time directly at them. Before either Taren or Ian could react, Odhrán waved his arms, which were covered in blue light. Water rose in an arc from the waves and froze as a solid wall between them and the flames. Instead of the heat of the fire, warm water rained down on them as the ice melted, shielding them.

They hardly had time to react when Bastian lunged at them again, this time diving at the place where they stood. Taren watched in horror as Odhrán made a tight circle with his hand and the water rose in a long, thin line, then coalesced into something that looked very much like a spear. He launched it at Bastian’s pale underbelly. He did not miss.

Tears streamed down Taren’s face as the dragon fell from the sky and landed on the edge of the ship, destroying what was left of the railing and taking part of the hull along with it before plunging into the waves. Plumes of steam and smoke rose into the air, followed by a wall of water. Taren ran to what was left of the ship’s edge in time to see Bastian sink beneath the surface. Dead. Taren sensed this as keenly as he sensed Ian’s steady presence behind him.

“Bastian.” Taren’s voice broke as he spoke the name. *No! Not both of them.*

Water poured into the gaping hole in the side of the ship and she listed to port. Taren looked for something to hold on to but found Ian’s hand instead. Ian had wrapped a rope around his waist to keep from sliding off the ship. They’d just managed to right themselves and rejoin Odhrán on the foredeck when Odhrán leaned against the railing, shoulders slumped, then collapsed onto the deck, boneless.

“Odhrán!” Taren cried.

“He’s alive,” Ian said as he bent down to touch Odhrán. “I see no wounds. But perhaps the fight with the dragon overtaxed him. Come. We should get him back to his ship. Perhaps he has a healer who can help him.”

Taren nodded dumbly. They would do this. Care for Odhrán, tend to the wounded. Account for the dead. Only then would he grieve.

THIRTY

WITH IAN at his side, Taren watched from the deck of the *Chimera* as the *Sea Witch* sank beneath the waves, still smoking. They'd left Rider's body on board—he'd have wanted to be buried with his beloved *Witch*. Watching the ship disappear was almost as terrible as watching Rider die. Or Bastian. Taren swallowed back his grief once more, telling himself that the ship had served them well but was not a living thing like the men who had died this night. Still, he knew he'd mourn that loss.

They brought Odhrán to his quarters to sleep. Garan had tended to him. "He is strong, but the encounter with the dragon has taken much of his strength. A few hours' sleep will revive him."

"A few hours?" Taren asked. He noticed the look of concern on Ian's face and knew Ian still feared Odhrán's power, in spite of all Odhrán had done for them. He understood Ian's mistrust, especially after Barra's betrayal.

"He rarely sleeps," Garan explained. "He has no need to. Since he is uninjured, a few hours will suffice." He smiled reassuringly, then added, "I thank you for bringing him to me. He will be more comfortable here. Much as he cares little for his comfort, those of us who care for him *do*."

Ian's eyes widened almost imperceptibly, but Taren noticed. Garan's obvious affection for Odhrán had not been lost on Ian. Perhaps, in time, Ian would come to trust Odhrán as Taren did.

While Odhrán rested, James took charge of the *Chimera*. He'd sent some of the Ea crew to search the waters for survivors of the *Sea Witch*. Seria was still missing, as were Barra and nearly half a dozen of Rider's crew, by Taren's best reckoning.

Barra. Ian hadn't spoken of him since Rider's death. So much had happened that Taren guessed it would be some time before the extent of Barra's treachery would be revealed. Taren knew Ian would not diminish the sacrifice others of his crew had made this day by openly grieving Barra's loss. But Ian would grieve Barra just as surely as he would the men of the *Sea Witch* who'd died fighting a fight they knew nothing about. By their best count, nine of Rider's men had perished in the battle.

"Rider's gone," Taren said softly, as if by repeating this he might believe it was true.

Ian put his arm around Taren's shoulders and sighed. "We both loved him," he said in a low voice.

"And Bastian..." Taren wiped his eyes and forced back his tears. "A dragon? But how?" Had Bastian even known of his dual nature? The look of fear in Bastian's eyes as the flames licked his body made Taren wonder. It had all happened too quickly for understanding.

"I don't know. I suppose it's no stranger than you not knowing your true nature."

Taren nodded. "I would have liked to understand." He'd heard the men talking about the dragon and knew they, too, wanted to know more. For those left of the *Sea Witch*'s crew, this seemed particularly difficult, as they had known Bastian and worked beside him for years.

"I will miss him," Taren added in an undertone. The words seemed too simple to express the depth of his grief, but he could think of no others to do it justice.

"I'm sorry he is gone, as well."

"He couldn't live without Rider." Taren voiced the thought he'd had since Bastian had fallen into the sea. He hadn't understood it until that moment, but he knew the feeling well.

Odhrán saved Treande when he lost Owyn. Why couldn't I save Bastian?

"You couldn't have stopped it," Ian said, as though he'd read Taren's thoughts. "You did everything you could."

Taren leaned against Ian's solid shoulder and sighed. "What will we do now?"

"Return to the *Phantom*, I suppose." Ian shook his head. "We'll repair the *Phantom* and sail for the Eastern Lands in the spring, when the storms

abate. If Vurin wishes it, we'll return first to Callecia."

Taren's eyes welled with tears once again. He didn't fight it this time but let them fall over his cheeks.

Ian drew him closer into his embrace.

"I'm sorry," Taren said when his tears refused to abate.

Ian kissed Taren's cheek. "There is no weakness in tears," he said softly.

Taren buried his face in the crook of Ian's neck.

"We should rest," Ian said after a few more minutes passed in silence. "Tomorrow we'll need to plan our next move, and we'll need our wits about us."

Taren nodded, and they walked, hand in hand, to the cabins below.

TAREN RUBBED the sleep from his eyes as he walked to the bow of the *Chimera* a few hours later. Much to his surprise, he saw Odhrán there. His long blond hair trailed down his back in a neat braid, and he wore a textured silk tunic with tiny silver beads at the wrists and hem. Dressed as he was, he reminded Taren of the young Odhrán from the vision. The cuts and gashes that had marked his face during the battle were gone, his face once again perfect. Ethereal.

"Odhrán? I thought you were still asleep." Odhrán nodded in acknowledgment but said nothing as they stood side by side, watching the sun rise at the edge of the water.

"I'm glad to see you're well," Taren said tentatively.

Odhrán pressed his lips together in a tight smile. His eyes, however, betrayed both sadness and exhaustion. "I haven't needed to sleep in years," he said. "But... earlier...."

"With... Bastian?" Why was it so difficult for him to speak the name?

Odhrán nodded. "He could have destroyed me.... He could have destroyed us all if he'd wanted to."

Odhrán's words took Taren by surprise. If Bastian had indeed been that powerful.... "He wanted to die." The realization left Taren cold inside. Why hadn't he convinced Bastian to live? What could he have done differently?

“Aye.” Odhrán shook his head. “There was nothing you could have done, Taren. No words you could have spoken would have changed his mind. Nor is this the first time I’ve had to fight like this.”

“You... when? How?”

“Someday, perhaps,” Odhrán said with a wistful expression, “I will tell you that tale.”

Taren drew a slow breath and gazed out at the bands of red and purple that had appeared on the horizon. A new day.

“We’ve retrieved several launches from the water. A handful of Seria’s human associates. I’ve locked them in the hold.” Odhrán’s eyes focused beyond the sunset, as if he saw something else there. Something Taren could not see. “I’ll speak with Ian later about what we should do with them.”

Taren knew Odhrán owed Ian nothing, that the *Chimera* was Odhrán’s command. “Thank you,” he said. “It will take him time to fully trust you. But it is his fear for me and the rest of his men that drives his distrust.”

“He is right to be wary.” Odhrán forced a smile. “He’s a good man, your captain.”

“Aye.” Taren knew Ian’s solid presence was the only thing keeping his heart from cracking under the strain of his loss. Even now, he sensed the intense grief the surviving crew of the *Sea Witch* felt in the wake of the loss of their captain and quartermaster, and it only served to intensify his own. He wondered if Odhrán had become inured to loss, having watched both human and Ea die. Taren guessed that over time, the pain had become too great for him to bear, and he’d learned to keep his distance, even from those closest to him.

Shouting from the stern interrupted his thoughts. “Captain!” one of the men called. “You must see this!”

Odhrán ran to join the men, who were gathered at the railing, gazing out over the water. Taren followed close behind, and as the men moved out of the way, he caught a glimpse of what they’d all been staring at: several hundred yards off the port side, a whirlpool bubbled and spit. The center of the vortex glowed orange-red, as if fire burned at the heart of it.

“What is it?” Taren gasped.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Odhrán turned to James. “Raise the anchor,” he ordered.

The strange phenomenon did not seem to stir the water beyond its edge, but whatever it was, Taren knew Odhrán wouldn't risk his ship to find out.

"Put some distance between us and whatever it is," Odhrán told James, who shouted for some of the men to raise the sails.

"Aye, sir!"

Odhrán began to undress.

"Where are you going?" Taren asked.

"I'm going to take a look. I'll rejoin the ship—"

"I'll go with you." For once, Taren didn't regret speaking out of turn. He needed to do something. To feel needed. Useful.

"We'll *both* go with you."

Taren turned and stared at Ian. How long had he been standing behind them?

"You...? But—" Taren understood how much effort it had taken for Ian not to insist he stay aboard the *Chimera*.

Odhrán met Ian's gaze and nodded. The ship vibrated beneath their feet as she moved slowly away from the whirlpool. "You're strong enough, Taren. Stronger than you know." Ian clenched his jaw, then exhaled. "It's time I stop treating you like a child."

"I...", Taren began, unsure of how to react to Ian's change of heart. "Thank you."

"You have nothing to thank me for." Ian chuckled, though Taren sensed the tension beneath the gesture.

Odhrán raised an eyebrow. "I daresay it's Ian who should be thankful you haven't strangled him yet."

Ian smiled broadly. He nodded his agreement, and they quickly shed their clothes before diving off the starboard side of the ship, Taren first, Ian and Odhrán following. Taren saw Ian's shock as Odhrán transformed, although Ian hid it well.

The water grew warmer the closer they swam to the reddish light. Taren had expected the current to be powerful this close, but the seas were calm in spite of the wall of swirling water.

Magic. Taren sensed both Odhrán and Ian's apprehension and knew they'd also guessed as much. He didn't add that the magic felt strangely

familiar. *Do you think the Council...?* he wondered aloud.

"No. The Council has no magic this powerful," Ian said.

"Nor do any of the Ea," Odhrán added.

Taren instinctively felt for the stone around his neck. Why did he find it reassuring to touch it now, when just days before he'd feared it? As always, the stone warmed in his hand. How many times had he fingered it since he'd claimed it from the island cave? It called to him. It beckoned him to join with it.

Odhrán glanced his way, and Taren realized he must have read his thoughts. *"Magic often responds to other magic,"* Odhrán said. Taren knew he wouldn't press the issue of what to do with the stone. Still, he took comfort that Odhrán understood his conflicted thoughts.

They reached the edge of the disturbance and Odhrán raised a hand to touch it. Taren held his breath, then glanced to Ian. Ian nodded reassuringly. Odhrán swam through the swirling waters with a swift kick of his tail, then disappeared behind the wall of swirling water.

Odhrán! Taren cried.

"I am fine," Odhrán told them. *"It's much like a storm, calm at its center. At first I thought the whirlpool was a bulwark, meant to protect, but it's something else."*

Taren reached out to touch the vortex. Warm water wrapped itself around his fingers. Power danced over his skin—surprisingly pleasant—as he reached into the column and found it easy to breach. He recognized the sensation. Magic again.

Ian clasped his hand and nodded. Together they passed through the barrier to find Odhrán waiting for them. The water was warmer in the interior, but not so warm that it felt uncomfortable. Like a loving embrace: comforting, even reassuring. How strange that he thought of it that way! And yet it reminded him of the sweetness of his mother's arms from his vision.

With Odhrán leading the way, they swam toward the reddish glow at the center of the whirlpool. It took only a few minutes since the water wasn't all that deep. Taren sensed they'd nearly reached the bottom, but he couldn't see the ocean floor. He stopped short when he saw what appeared

to be a solid sphere, several times larger than Odhrán, which spun around like a planet on its axis.

What is it? Taren asked.

"I don't know." Odhrán maneuvered himself so his larger body shielded Ian and Taren from the heat radiating from the surface of the strange object. The temperature of the water was now so hot, it was barely tolerable. Odhrán might be able to withstand it, but Taren doubted he or Ian could for long.

"I can make this a bit more comfortable," Odhrán said. He breathed deeply and ice crystals begin to form on his skin. They covered Odhrán's arms, his tail, and ended at his shoulders. They reminded Taren of tiny diamonds. They glittered and multiplied, then melted in the heat, cooling the water around them. When one layer vanished, another sprouted where it had been.

"Thank you." Ian's voice held surprise and wonder, even a bit of admiration.

Odhrán nodded curtly. Taren sensed Odhrán's discomfort with Ian's gratitude. Ian probably did too, since in this form, Odhrán's thoughts were open to him as well. Later Taren would try to explain the depth of Odhrán's grief over his treatment by the Ea. But now was not the time, and he would only speak of it with Odhrán's consent.

They swam a few more yards, then hovered above the swirling, glowing core. This close, Taren saw that the sphere wasn't solid at all but a pattern of energy that spun so quickly it retained a cohesive shape. The sphere was occupied. At its center, tiny against the backdrop of the swirling light, was the dark form of a child of four or five years. The boy—for Taren sensed he *was* indeed a boy—clutched his knees against his chest as his hair moved about him, lifted by an invisible wind. Taren struggled to make out the child's features—the brightness made it impossible to see clearly.

Ignoring Ian and Odhrán's warnings, Taren reached out and touched the sphere. The magic felt so familiar. Comforting, even. How he sensed this, he didn't know. He knew that Treande had been a mage. Odhrán, when he'd pretended to be Brynn, had once asked him if he was a mage. Vurin believed him to be one. Then, he'd dismissed the thought. Yet each time he encountered magic, the sensation was familiar. Was it possible that the old priestess had been right?

I'm fine, he said, hoping to reassure his companions. *He won't hurt me.* He wasn't sure how he knew this, but he *was* sure of it.

The boy inside the orb stirred at Taren's touch. He released his knees and cocked his head to one side, studying them with apparent curiosity, just as they studied him. After a moment he got to his feet and stretched his arms above his head, as if waking from a deep sleep. As he reached above him, a pair of wings burst from his body, covered in a riot of colorful scales that reminded Taren of the multihued plumage of exotic birds he'd seen when the *Sea Witch* had put in to port.

A dragon!

"Not merely a dragon," Odhrán said, unable to contain his shock. *"Anuki. The ancient race. Man-beast."*

"Our heavenly counterparts," Ian said with wonder.

"I thought they were long extinct."

Taren's heart raced. Was it possible?

"The legends tell of death and rebirth," Ian explained. *"I heard them too, when I was a child. Anuki die with their loved ones and are reborn to live again."*

To love again, Taren said.

"Aye."

The dragon child shuddered, causing the scales on his wings to ruffle like the feathers they called to mind. Ian moved to pull Taren away, but Taren shook his head. *No. He won't hurt me.*

The boy approached and pressed his palm to the inside surface of the sphere. He gazed directly at Taren with eyes the color of the sky at sunset, a swirling mix of yellow, orange, and red. He was crying, each tear that coursed down his freckled cheeks like a tiny ruby lit from within, each disappearing into the swirling orange-and-red fog that filled the sphere.

Taren lifted his hand to the orb and touched it with shaking fingers. *Bastian!*

SHIRA ANTHONY was a professional opera singer in her last incarnation, performing roles in such operas as *Tosca*, *Pagliacci*, and *La Traviata*, among others. She's given up TV for evenings spent with her laptop, and she never goes anywhere without a pile of unread M/M romance on her Kindle.

Shira is married with two children and two insane dogs, and when she's not writing, she is usually in a courtroom trying to make the world safer for children. When she's not working, she can be found aboard a 35' catamaran at the Carolina coast with her favorite sexy captain at the wheel.

Shira's Blue Notes Series of classical music themed gay romances was named one of Scattered Thoughts and Rogue Word's "Best Series of 2012," and *The Melody Thief* was named one of the "Best Novels in a Series of 2012." *The Melody Thief* also received an honorable mention, "One Perfect Score" at the 2012 Rainbow Awards.

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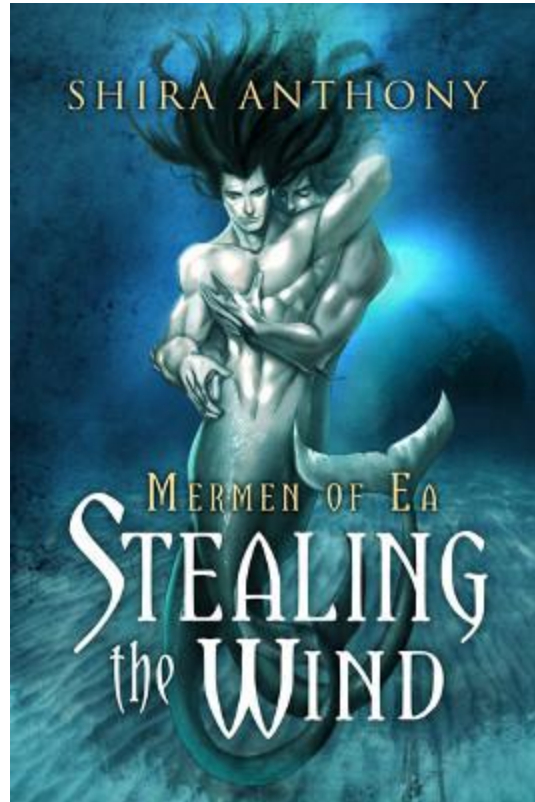
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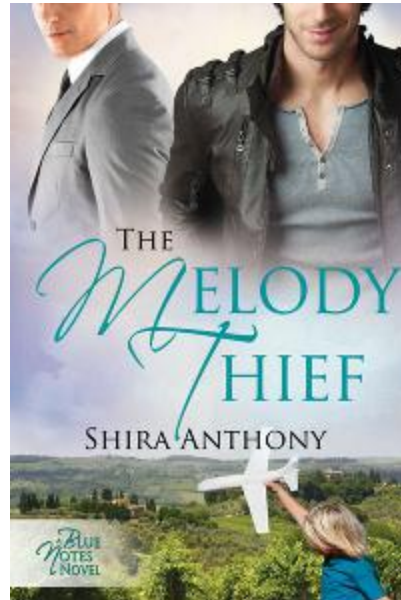
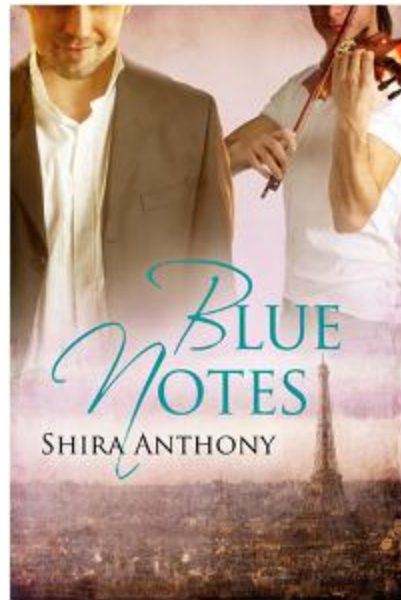
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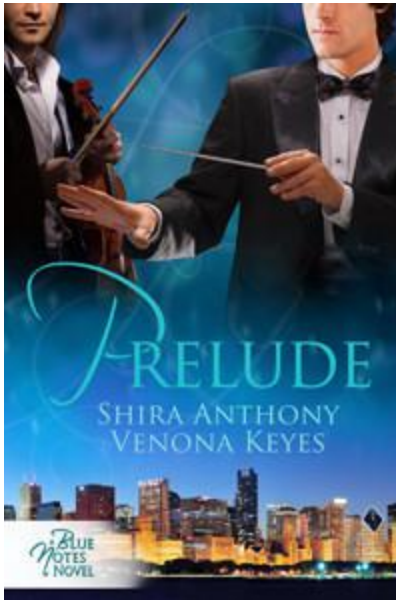
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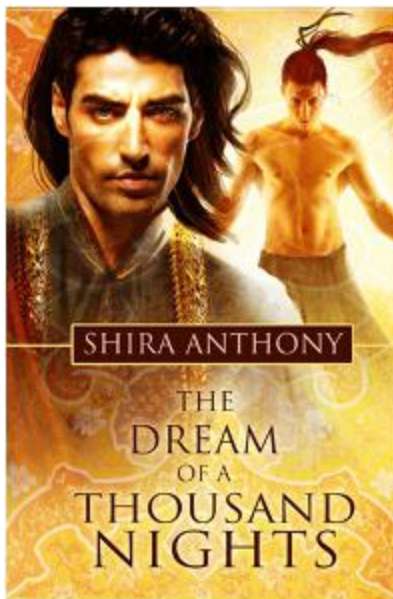
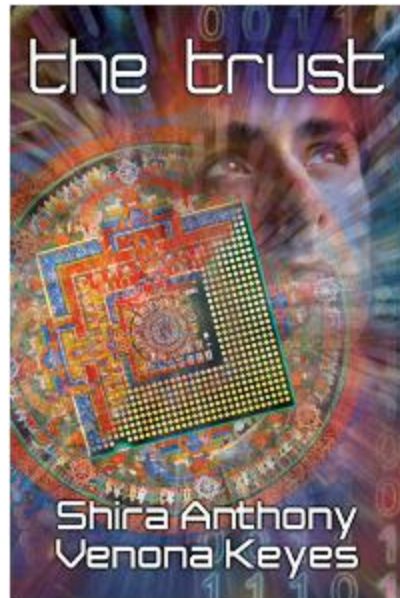
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