

THE *Merman*
AND THE
BARBARIAN
Pirate



KAY BERRISFORD

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THE *Merman* AND THE BARBARIAN *Pirate*

KAY BERRISFORD

Raef, a lonely merman, spends his days watching the dashing Lord Haverford from afar and dreaming of love. When Haverford is robbed by a pirate, Raef vows to reclaim the stolen goods, hoping his victory will buy him the happiness he yearns for with Haverford.

But Jon Kemp does not match what Raef knows about pirates, and the simple quest Raef anticipated turns out to be an epic journey. For while Jon might be a nobler man than Raef believed, he's still a pirate. Love and loyalty are not on Jon's agenda, and he certainly has no plans to love someone not entirely human...

BOOK DETAILS

The Merman and the Barbarian Pirate

By Kay Berrisford

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Prologue

"The little mermaid fell in love the instant she laid her eyes on the handsome prince, who strolled along the seashore."

"But how does she know she loves him, Mama?" asked Raef, and he twitched his little fishtail with happiness.

The spark of first love was his favorite part of the traditional merfolk tales his mother would share at bedtime. Still, his question *had* to be asked. All the lovers seemed to fall head over tail for each other within the flutter of a heartbeat.

"Because the prince was beautiful, darling. He wore a crown encrusted with diamonds, and his fine face told of a magnificent soul." She leaned forward and brushed his golden hair—the same shade as hers—from where it had floated across his eyes. "And the mermaid was very pretty, naturally, so when she revealed herself to him, he adored her, too."

"I see." Raef nodded, trying to appear wise beyond his tender years. He supposed that made sense. It must be how things happened in the world of humans, who breathed thin air and walked on dry lands, far above the oceans. Such realms seemed distant and exotic compared to this nest in a tiny cave where Raef had passed his formative days. The home was part of a labyrinth of halls, chambers, and tunnels carved into the slopes of the submerged volcano around which their mertribe dwelled.

One thing Raef knew for sure: merfolk were an attractive race to look at. His mother's features were delicately carved, her complexion pale, and her eyes large and blue. She wore anthracite jewels on her earlobes and one on a chain about her throat. Though she was so skinny these days, the weight of the gems seemed to tug her forward like a wilting sea-grass. "So did they get their happy-ever-after?" he asked.

"Not yet." She pulled some of the bedding woven from thick seaweeds up around Raef's bare shoulders. Two lines creased between her brows, informing Raef the story was going to get serious. "Just as the prince was about to leap into the ocean and the outstretched arms of his chosen one, a bunch of foul-faced kluggites leaped from a hidden cavern and carried him away."

Raef shuddered. Kluggites—known in the world of humans as pirates. They were always the villains in the stories he adored, ugly as lumpy fish, hungry for treasure, and rotten to the core. He swallowed a lump from his throat. "Did they eat the poor prince?"

"Oh, no. They sent a message to the prince's father, the king, demanding a hundred chests of pure gold in exchange for his safe return. Sadly, the king was a gnarled old miser who had many sons and loved his fortune more than any of them. He refused to pay, and the pirates sailed off with the prince still a prisoner in their ship's fetid belly. He might've withered there, if it hadn't been for—"

"The little mermaid!" Raef jerked bolt upright, excited. He'd not heard this exact narrative before, but all mer tales shared similar plots. He sensed this was when the heroine would dive to the rescue. "What did she do?"

"Ah, she was very brave, my love." His mama eased him back down into the folds of the nest and tickled the frilly gills behind his ears. He giggled and squirmed. "She followed the ship, and squeezed through the tiniest porthole and inside the stinking hull. Then she hid 'til sunset. Do you know why?"

"Of course I do." Raef proudly recited something he'd recently learned. "If on land at sunrise or sundown, merfolk can harbor the power of the changing orbs to shift into human form. To return to their mer bodies, they must be back in the sea at the same enchanted moments." Raef looked forward to trying this when he was older, although he'd been told it could be painful and must be timed carefully.

"Well remembered," said his mother, and Raef grinned. "So at sunset, the little mermaid shifted. Once her gills had vanished and her tail had split to become long, graceful legs, she tiptoed through the ship and rescued her

prince. Of course, by this late hour, the vile kluggites were intoxicated with rum and most of them had passed out. Together, she and the prince tied them all up with rope so they couldn't escape. Then the mermaid and her love sailed the ship back to the nearest port, where cheers greeted them. The kluggites had been menacing the coast for years. They had stolen much gold and silver from the noble lords and ladies who lived near, so the mermaid and the prince were hailed as saviors."

"Hurrah!" Raef pumped his fist, setting the waters in the cave undulating.

"Even the old king was pleased, because the kluggites had sunk several of his ships. He gave the little mermaid a gift of some clothes spun from pure silver thread. Humans are a strange breed and like to veil even the loveliest bodies with cloth."

Raef frowned. Merfolk enjoyed wearing colored stones and jewelry, but he didn't comprehend clothes. He'd only once stuck his head above the surface of the ocean—where the air felt too light and made him giddy—and hadn't seen any humans yet, let alone this strange custom. He wouldn't let the weirdness spoil the story. "So they lived in happiness forevermore?"

"Ah, the course of true love never flows quite so easily." She sighed wistfully, the gentle sound mingling with the chatty pips and clicks of some dolphins swimming nearby. "You see, even clad in her new finery, the little mermaid couldn't stay in her human form for long. We need the water, Raef—it's vital to our blood. The magic that sustains our shift into human forms only lasts a little while. We must go back to the sea regularly, breathe the salt waters in our gills, or we will wither and fade like old, dried seaweed. But now, the prince was a hero, and the king begged him to come back to court, tempting him with many titles and riches. And the court was far, far away from the sea."

Raef bit his lip. It was late, and weariness crept through him, making him desperate for his happy ending. "Did he leave the little mermaid?"

"For a while, he did. But he pined for her 'til he could perform his courtly duties no more. He gave up all ambition at court and returned to the sea. He built a beautiful castle on the edge of the beach, so he and his love could always be together."

"Was the castle built of gold?" asked Raef.

"Pure gold, my love. It glittered in the sunshine, which shone on them every day."

"I'm glad," said Raef, but his joy at the happy ending proved short-lived. While his mother offered a tremulous smile, he sensed pain beneath it, and that made him sad too.

She lay down beside him in their nest and pulled him tight against her breast, stroking his back. He didn't like to ask why she was melancholy, but he guessed. When Mama was sad, she usually was remembering his father, who Raef had never known. He'd died before Raef was born, the victim of an unfortunate encounter with a giant squid.

"Mama," he said quietly. He wound his baby fishtail, which was still translucent, about her grown-up silvery one, hoping to offer some comfort. "Why don't you go seek a handsome prince to make you happy?"

"Because I gave my heart to a fellow mer," she whispered, her caresses growing fretful. "And I'll never give it twice. But you... you must seek your heart's desire, Raef. You must find the one who makes you happy and be with them always... for me."

"All right," murmured Raef, determination swelling. He fantasized of such an adventure every day. "I will go seek my handsome prince as soon as I can, I swear it."

"Oh, darling!" Raef was surprised to hear his mother giggle. "You mean your beautiful princess?"

"No," said Raef, bewildered. "I want to rescue a handsome prince like the little mermaid did in the story. I *know* it's a handsome prince I want. I'm sure princesses can be feisty and fun, but they're not for me."

"Whatever makes you happy, my sweet," she whispered, and they snuggled closer together. Only the distant, sonorous moans of the whales broke the quiet of a calm night beneath the sea. It took Raef a little longer than usual to submit to the tug of slumber. When he did, his dreams were

clear as rock crystal: he fought evil pirates for the hand of his prince,
striving to win true love.



One

Seventeen years later

The human wading across the pool toward Raef was naked. Moonlight silvered his long limbs and the firm muscles of his torso, while ripples of water kissed his taut belly and the lickable lines of his hips. Raef desired this tall, dark vision of loveliness to come ravish him, tail and all. He'd hold the man tightly and never let him go.

This man was perfect. He was Raef's love—Raef's prince. At least, he was this afternoon. Raef hadn't thought of a name for the fellow yet and wished he could conjure that handsome face more distinctly. While he'd no experience of the act humans performed to reach the highest peaks of euphoria, which he must shift into human form to achieve, his body ached for that intimacy. He ran his tongue around his lips, craving to receive his fantasy man's kiss, yearning to feel those strong arms around him, the press of flesh against flesh...

"Raef!"

The shout tore Raef from his happy daydream. He opened his eyes with a startled bat of his lashes, and reality splashed back. Far from basking under the open stars with a beauty of his choosing, he was in his least favorite place: his tribe's meeting hall, which was a vast chamber of black rock that filled the main crater of the underwater volcano. And one of his least favorite fellow mermen was calling him.

"Last item on the agenda for the day—I summon Raef!" The deep voice of Galyna, chieftain of the mer elders, reverberated around the space into which the whole tribe had crammed for their once-a-moon-cycle meeting. Galyna raised his great trident, in which his power as tribe leader was

vested, and his beard trembled like froth whipped in the breeze. "My third cousin's nephew, Raef. Where is he?"

Dozens of silvery-tailed, pearly-fleshed merfolk spun about looking for Raef. Their luscious hair swirled in a spectrum of reds, golds, and browns. Raef lurked under the shadows of the crater's walls, wishing he could scuttle into the nearest crevice like a lobster. He'd never spoken at a tribe gathering, let alone been summoned before the elders. He wasn't interested in the many rules and regulations Galyna had imposed on the tribe in recent years, other than in pretending they weren't for him.

"Say something," hissed Ali, Raef's brunet friend, who floated beside him. Ali twitched the feathered tips of his tailfins, a sure sign he was stressed. "Go forward, or you'll get into trouble."

If Galyna was summoning Raef, he feared he was already in trouble. While he waved his hand and called falteringly, "I'm here," he couldn't fathom why. He'd not done anything rash lately. At least, nothing anybody knew about. His tail felt heavy as granite as he propelled himself through the parting merfolk, over the hot gaseous springs that bubbled at the center of the round hall. If Raef could've sweated underwater, he would have. On the far side, Galyna sat in a throne encrusted with shells. He was flanked by the rest of the elders; an array of brawny mer warriors who carried pikes. Some wore jeweled rings in their nipples. As Raef swam closer, Galyna's bushy brows knitted so tightly they formed a single white bar of hair.

"Ah, there you are," said Galyna. "Since you left the schoolroom, you've hardly made a ripple in these waters. You have not volunteered to become a warrior, nor have you consulted any of the elders about seeking a position of power in the tribe. What have you been doing this past year?"

To tell the full truth was impossible. Raef had passed too many an hour hankering after the kind of life that Galyna condemned. He adored paddling on the ocean's surface and watching the sailing ships navigating near the treacherous reefs that surrounded the territories of the mer. He'd not even told Ali about the time he'd watched a great vessel moor near the harbor of one of nearby islands, which were known collectively as the Isles of Scilly. He'd followed the sailors onto land and waited 'til the sun dipped beyond the horizon, so he could shift into his fully human form. Crouching naked

and bare-footed beneath the windows of a dockside alehouse, he'd ogled the fellows while they made merry and sang. He'd even envied the barmaids, who had sat upon on their knees.

He couldn't confess that, so half the story would have to suffice. Plucking up courage, he found his voice. "I-I spend my days seeking sunken human artifacts for Ali to sell on his stall in the bazaar. Last week, I found the most fabulous chest of patterned china, and only half of it was brok—"

"Enough!" Galyna shook his head. "You lie to me, boy. You've been spotted day after day chasing humans in their boats, disappearing for hours. There can only be one explanation. Your poor late mother was a very bad influence on you. After years of education, after everything I've told you—you, my boy, still hanker after the old ways of the mer. The unwise ways."

"I don't," said Raef. "Not exactly. I'm very careful not to be seen."

"Ah, but if you saw the right human maid, you would reveal yourself to her, wouldn't you?"

"I swear I would not." Raef's cheeks heated. It wasn't a lie; he'd no interest in pretty women. However, he would reveal himself to the right man.

Galyna tugged his beard crossly. "Mer should never mix with humans. Yes, we can assume their form, but that is strictly for breeding purposes, mer on mer. Up close, humans are never as beautiful as us mer, and neither are they to be trusted. Too many of our kind have swam off to chase love, never to be seen again. And remember my poor sister Lucinda, who fell for a kluggite and followed her foolish heart? No sooner had the rogue taken her aboard his vessel, the Navy captured them, and dragged them back to England. She was hanged beside him on Plymouth Hoe."

Raef shuddered, though Lucinda's tragedy couldn't overwrite the traditional stories he treasured. He'd made a promise to his poor mother, who'd given up on life far too young, that he'd seek love—preferably with a handsome noble who owned a castle wrought of pure gold. Since Galyna came to power, such happy narratives had been banned, which was horribly unfair. It wasn't as if Raef wanted to throw in his lot with an ugly kluggite.

"When I rose to be chieftain of this tribe," continued Galyna, "I vowed to preserve our race, and specifically this tribe, by curbing the reckless tendencies among our young. You, Raef, are foolhardy. You will throw yourself at a human sooner or later and get yourself killed. Therefore, I have decided you should marry my ward, Henna. A wife and half a dozen mouths to feed should stop you wandering."

"No! I can't!" Raef's cry was born of horror. He'd expected some penalty—perhaps to be forced to train as a warrior, as he'd demonstrated a little skill in combat at school. Marriage he dreaded far more, though catching sight of Henna—waiting, head bowed, behind the throne with her dark hair floating across her pale face—he regretted the violence of his tone. Poor Henna. She was a shy girl who crafted exquisite necklaces made from rock and colored quartz. She deserved somebody who'd adore her.

"What do you mean by this defiance?" Galyna surged forward from his throne, raising his trident as if to strike Raef down with a thunderbolt.

"I'm sorry." Raef trembled, not least because Galyna could wield the magical power of that trident if he chose. "Henna is a very lovely maid, but I don't believe she loves me, and—"

"Love?" bellowed Galyna. "Marriage in this tribe is no longer anything to do with your outmoded ideas of love. They bring nothing but grief. Now go." Galyna sank back down into his seat, as if despairing of Raef. "Get out of my sight, boy. You will apologize to Henna, and we will begin the preparations for your wedding forthwith."

Arguing would be fruitless. Raef turned and swam, slicing straight up and out of the simmering crater, not daring look anyone in the eye. He rushed onward almost blindly, nearly colliding with a group of hunting seals. One of them bellowed, and he was too upset to apologize. He burst through the surface into the summer sunshine. Fresh air struck his skin, and after the pressure of deep water, its lightness momentarily disoriented him. He shook himself, sending droplets sprinkling from his long hair as the horrible truth seeped through him.

Raef supposed Galyna meant well, but because so many mer swam away to pursue love with humans—and especially because of his sister, who'd

met her sad end—the chieftain had banned all contact with land-dwellers. Raef knew that couldn't be right. Galyna's rules were an overreaction. After all, not all humans were kluggites. Merfolk were passionate and instinctual beings, and it wasn't surprising they were drawn to humans. That was the form that mer assumed to procreate... and to seek the bodily union between males that Raef craved.

Even worse, Galyna had condemned romantic love altogether. He expected mermen and maids to pair up on his command. If Raef obeyed him, he'd never find his heart's desire, so only one solution presented itself to him. If he wanted to keep his promise to his mother, he must leave his home.

He blinked toward horizon, clearing the water from his eyes and lashes. A couple of rocky outcrops defied the ocean's rolling surface, and he discerned the hazy shore of the island in the distance. No ships for him to chase today, and it would take a long swim to reach any mainland coast.

"Out there somewhere," he whispered, "there is a man I can love and who will love me in return. Whether he is human or mer, I must seek him."

He was about to squeeze his eyes shut and pray to the gods of the oceans to bless his voyage, when Ali emerged a yard off, arms flailing and splashing water everywhere. "There you are," panted Ali. He came to the surface less often than Raef, and so was unused to breathing through the mouth instead of his gills. "What on earth are you going to do about your wedding?"

"You know the truth of me and my love of men," murmured Raef. A salty wind cleaved through them, stinging his cheeks and whipping up his hair. "You're the only one who does. But not only is lying with other men uncommon in this tribe, I'm forbidden to choose my love at all, mer or human. I have to go."

A dark shadow seemed to flit across Ali's boyish countenance, a depth of sorrow that startled Raef. It vanished soon enough. Ali nodded his acceptance.

"Don't do anything silly, Raef." He quirked a rueful smile, indicating he knew his friend's nature—impetuous even by mer standards—all too well.

"Be careful around land folk, and don't get stranded too far from the sea. Even a mer as strong as you can't remain long in human form without suffering. Remember, there's only one of Galyna's laws you actually need to heed, because it's the most sensible one—don't get tangled with kluggites. And I wouldn't recommend falling for anyone at first sight. Watch them a little first."

"I'll never get embroiled with kluggites." Raef's stomach roiled at the prospect. He couldn't think of anything more distant from the fair nobleman he sought than a gruesome pirate. "But otherwise, I must seek my destiny."

"Yes, I know," replied Ali. "You don't belong here. You're too... free. I'm not sure you'd belong in any single boring place, even without all these new laws. I'll never forget you, though."

"You're so kind." Raef flung his arms around Ali's neck and buried his face in Ali's narrow shoulder. He snatched a last moment of comfort before he made his plans to flee. The gentle waves lapped them, a sweet liquid caress, and Ali hugged him harder.

"Farewell," whispered Raef, as emotion clogged his throat. He was sad to leave Ali and hoped they'd meet again in happier climes. "I must go very soon, while the weather remains fair. But I'll miss you. Live well, my friend."



Three days later, Raef crawled up a shingle beach, bruised from head to tailfins by the battering of wind and waves. His hands and elbows tore as they grazed over the shingle, and he'd not the energy left to flinch. His hair was plastered over his face and eyes. He didn't give a damn where he was, so long as he could rest a while.

He'd started his journey with what seemed like a solid plan: to swim northeast to seek the southern coast of the great land of England, where he'd heard many fine nobles dwelled. The weather had proven treacherous. A few hours into his journey, the sky had transformed from azure blue to a brooding gray. The wind had lashed up a tempest that had sent him diving

deep, losing track of sun, moon, and stars, as well as any chance to navigate. He'd struggled on with little respite, swept by powerful currents and snatching spells of sleep in murky, submerged caverns, which never felt safe. When finally he'd surfaced, he'd been so drained of strength that the swell had tossed him like driftwood onto this stony strip between two jagged headlands.

After a few minutes, Raef gathered the wherewithal to swipe his sodden hair from his brow and lift his head. He licked his cracked lips, scanned the vista before him, and wondered if he'd landed in one of his wildest dreams.

Beyond the beach, a track meandered up a grassy slope dotted with a few lone trees and some white animals that walked on four legs. A castle—a *real* castle!—stood at the top of the incline, fronted with sweeping steps and topped with crenellations and turrets. A dozen large windows stared down at him, opaque as fish eyes. Nobody appeared to be about, but hearth light glowed from one of a cluster of fishermen's cottages that skirted the shingle. A short distance to his left, a wooden jetty extended out into the waves with a single rowing boat moored alongside. A couple more small ships had been pulled up on the beach, their masts creaking in the wind.

Raef pushed himself up, supporting himself on his palms and straining for a better view. He'd succeeded. This must be England. Caution nagged, vying with his excitement. He should get away from this exposed spot and find a submerged sandbank to recuperate on, but he couldn't rip his gaze from the castle. It was wrought from white stone rather than gold, but was larger and grander than he'd imagined any building could be. He longed to look inside. He was tempted to remain out of the water 'til sundown, to shift into human form and go exploring... but no. That *would* be reckless. Apart from that trip into the harbor of one of the Scilly Isles, this was his first real sortie into the realm of land dwellers.

With an effort, Raef rolled back into the bubbling surf, though he didn't swim far. After splashing a few yards, he pulled himself up onto a clump of uneven rock padded with seaweed. He could peep at the castle from a concealed position to the rear while he lay on his belly and recovered.

He relaxed, his body molding into the damp blanket of seaweed, and the clouds above thinned into white wisps. The writhing ocean around him

calmed. A late afternoon sun warmed his back, his fins, and the flopping length of his tail, which dangled above lazily-lapping waves. The bay remained quiet, though from time to time he was able to enjoy his favorite activity—watching humans. One or two figures strolled on the lawns in front of the castle, and a fishing boat crewed by five men sailed into harbor. The womenfolk from the cottages hurried out to help drag the boat up the beach, grinding across the shingle. Together, they hauled in their daily catch, setting the gulls wheeling and screaming as the bay filled with the brackish scent of dead fish.

All of this fascinated Raef, though he felt no urge to interact with these people. They seemed pleasant enough, and one of the seamen was a straight-backed young fellow with a shock of red hair and a noisy laugh. While Raef admired him, he wasn't the handsome prince Raef came here for. Presently, the sky deepened to the color of a roasted lobster, and Raef realized he must climb back into the waters soon. Already his blood rushed, anticipating the magical energy that would gather at his core and rid him of his tail in favor of legs if he remained out of the sea much longer.

He verged on slipping back into the sea, when he spied more movement in the vicinity of the castle. A tall man strode down the path toward the beach. His fine, emerald-green coat and confident strut suggested he was of aristocratic birth. Raef's breaths quickened. Was *he* a prince? He didn't wear a crown, so Raef suspected not. Perhaps he was a young lord or duke.

Irresistibly drawn, Raef levered himself as high onto the rocks as he dared, dragging his tail over his seaweed bed, which was now dried and scratchy. To Raef's dismay, the noble was not alone. A blond servant boy followed behind, cradling a large wicker hamper and running to keep up. The noble strode down the wooden jetty, a mere stone's toss away from Raef. He climbed into a small boat moored alongside the jetty and reclined against the prow, waiting for his servant to join him.

Raef's heart fluttered toward frenzy. The noble's features were even and perfect, his strong chin raised at a proud angle. He was beautiful—another blow to Galyna's claims that humans were less good-looking than merfolk. The chieftain was wrong. And unless everything Raef had learned from birth was equally incorrect, such a faultless face revealed a good soul.

"Hurry up, Stephen," called the nobleman, his deep voice smooth as a gliding eel.

"I'm sorry, my lord Haverford. I'm here."

So Raef observed a lord indeed. The servant boy, Stephen, clambered into the boat, placed down the hamper, and proceeded to cast off. Haverford lounged in the hull, while Stephen, a much slighter figure, sculled through the surf. The breeze agitated Haverford's sandy hair, teasing strands from a ribbon used to style it. He didn't glance once at Stephen, instead gazing thoughtfully out to sea, and Raef let his hopes elevate.

Haverford looked like a romantic sort of fellow. Could he be the one Raef would set his heart on? He gasped with pleasure at the prospect... and his breath jammed in his lungs. The crown of the sun's head was dipping over the horizon; the moon shone bright above the craggy line of the cliffs. He was seized by a fiery pain, which wracked him from head to toe before focusing its agony on his lower portions.

Raef was free of the water at sunset, which meant the shift between his merman and human forms was happening. As his tail ripped in two and his gills healed over, he flopped prostrate on the rock. A searing heat consumed him. He pounded his fists and wanted to scream. Instead, he bit his lip so hard he tasted blood and surrendered to a paroxysm of shivers. His emerging human body felt helpless as a newborn babe's.

After a short while trembling and panting, Raef wiped tears from his cheeks and sat up, gazing across the bay. Haverford and Stephen had disappeared. Stephen must have rowed around the headland.

With a groan of disappointment, Raef dragged himself to his feet, steadying himself with a hand on the highest part of the crag. His human legs, though sturdy enough, looked pale under the glare of the rising moon. The nest of golden curls above his prick, so soft and vulnerable, glistened. This body still felt new and strange to him, having only occupied it half a dozen times. After rolling his shoulders, he flexed his powerful back and arm muscles and raked his fingers through his cascading hair. Though feeling stronger by the moment, he shivered.

Shifting had been a mistake. Now he'd have to find somewhere dry to shelter and keep his human body warm 'til he could get his tail and gills back at sunrise. Thank goodness it was a balmy night, for he'd no notion how to build a fire. He still didn't feel brave enough to venture onto land to find some of those strange clothes.

Or should I go after Lord Haverford and throw myself on his mercy?

The idea set his blood rushing, but he mustn't be hasty. Ali had warned him not to fall for anybody at first glance. He'd heed that advice for now. Beyond those irresistible looks, he knew nothing about Haverford, or whether there were already lovers in his life, male or female. Raef would have to bide his time.

As the long summer drifted by, Raef kept a watch on Lord Haverford. In the mornings, he explored the nearby coastline. Each afternoon, he returned to the bay to wait for Haverford, who regularly came down to the jetty and voyaged to an otherwise inaccessible cave around the headland. Haverford would take wine and enjoy a picnic, then often, he'd disappear inside. Raef saw Stephen with Haverford again, as well as other servants, male and female. From time to time, Haverford sculled himself out there alone. These occasions set Raef imagining what rapturous acts of coupling they could indulge in together. He wished to surrender himself to Haverford, body and soul.

His longing burgeoned in unison with his loneliness, a gnawing pain that grew and grew. It swelled inside his chest, 'til one bright day, he could endure it no more. He'd gifted his heart to Haverford, and there was only one way forward. He must reveal himself the next time Haverford came to his cave—to fulfil his promise to his mother and let his lifelong dream come true.

So he swam out to the middle of the cove in front of the castle and he waited.



Two

Pink evening light was rippling the waters, when Raef spotted a ship coming around the promontory to the south of the bay. He shaded his eyes and squinted into the glare, bobbing low among the waves. The prow cut between the foaming white horses, its gray sails billowing in the breeze. The ship's figurehead depicted one of Raef's kind: a female mermaid with hair as golden as his, though her wooden breasts and face were painted bright blue.

The sailors on board knew the waters well, for they were giving the treacherous hidden rocks a wide berth. One of them leaned over the railings, shading his eyes from the glare of the sun. He shouted instructions to his companions, who hurried among the masts and rigging. Even from a hundred yards afar, Raef could tell he was a tall man with long, windswept hair and a smudge of dark stubble across his chin.

Raef plunged under the water and headed in the direction of the ship. He splashed between the waves at such a furious pace he set a flock of feeding gulls flapping and squawking. *Why, why, why? Why tonight?* He hoped the vessel wouldn't moor nearby and spoil his plans. Oh, how he ached for Haverford.

When Raef surfaced, relief skittered through him. The vessel wasn't heading for the castle jetty after all. It navigated the mouth of the bay and into strong currents that would sweep it around the northern headland.

Good. It must be a merchant vessel passing by, not important enough to disturb a lord. Hearing a chorus of honks, Raef glanced up. A dozen geese swept overhead in a V formation, the leader dropping back to allow another to take the brunt of the wind on its beak. Not even a squad of fire-breathing dragons could have captured Raef's attentions for long. Haverford's castle still transfixed him. It had never looked more stunning than it did now,

white stone silhouetted against a mottled pink sky. He swept his dripping hair from his eyes, cast aside his irritation, and pulled himself up onto his favorite rocky outcrop to continue his vigil.

By the hour Haverford emerged, the sun had set and Raef had shifted into his human form. Haverford descended the steps of the castle and paced down the track, bound for the sea. Raef's heart fluttered more frantically than the birds heading to roost. No servant followed. Raef's beautiful lord was alone. Raef was naked and defenseless, and he set his determination like iron. This was his moment.

After Haverford cast off, Raef slipped into the water and followed the boat at distance, doing a breast stroke and kicking with his human legs. He craved to be the salty spray that brushed Haverford's firm lips and licked the line of that chiseled jaw. Adoration swelled at his core.

Haverford's soul, Raef had reason to believe, was indeed as beautiful as his face. During lazy summer days when Raef couldn't be bothered to explore too far afield, he had observed Haverford walking his lawns with an elderly lady or driving her about in a gig. Paddling through the surf, Raef smiled at the memory of such sweetness.

Haverford soon reached the small beach near the mouth of the cave and waded ashore, dragging the boat up onto the shingle. To access the cave, which was tucked beneath a precariously perched stone ruin, he had to clamber over some rocks, and tiptoe along a ledge while clinging to the cliff face. Raef enjoyed observing this activity, peeping from behind a seaweed-clad outcrop. Foam splattered Haverford's stockings and tight knee breeches, making the fabric stick to his shapely rear.

With a leap, Haverford alighted on the natural shelf in front of the cave, stretched his arms, and gazed into the dusk. Raef's heart started to hammer. Now was his chance, but what would Raef say to his lord? It had been a long while since he'd conversed with another, save one-sided chats with porpoises. He'd planned various speeches in his head, but they suddenly seemed inadequate. None of the accounts of mermaids revealing themselves to their princes detailed exactly how the business should be executed. Should he give himself silently, falling at Haverford's feet? Would that be best, or would Haverford think him a fool?

Moonlight gilded Haverford's profile, placid as a mask. Raef's misgivings faded. Fate had brought them together, conjured this moment under the starlight, where two solitary souls could meet, then their bodies entwine. It was perfect. Raef firmed his palms on the rock and prepared to rise up and reveal himself.

Before Raef had shown more than the top half of his head, Haverford swiveled on the spot, crying out in alarm. Raef crouched back down, terrified. They were not alone after all. Three men had emerged from the blackness of the cave, all of them rough-looking and armed with glinting blades. Raef recognized the fellow among them who stepped to the fore. He towered a head's worth of height above the followers, and was built sturdier even than Haverford. It was the man who'd leaned over the prow of the boat, his sleek hair swept back in a headscarf, and he was no merchant or fisherman. This scoundrel brandished a cutlass, and a gold hoop gleamed at one ear. His sleeves were rolled up as high as his bulging biceps, revealing tattoos covering his thick arms.

A kluggite.

Sweet heavens, will he kill my lord?

"What the devil?" shouted Lord Haverford.

"Poetic indeed," said the tall kluggite in a lilting brogue. "The fiend calls upon his own for deliverance." He laughed, echoed by the titters of his companions. One of them had a face as bloated as a jellyfish, and the other, a skinny wretch, sported a scar that sliced across his face. "Hand over that ruby ring to pay a little of your dues, and I might neglect to slash your throat."

"You wouldn't dare, you fiend. I'll fillet you alive." Lord Haverford clasped the bejeweled hilt of a dagger at his belt, and Raef whispered a prayer to whichever deity of the oceans would listen. In merfolk stories, kluggites were often slow and stupid and easily outwitted. Surely his lord was skilled enough to best these ruffians, to cut all three down as if they were less than one? How glorious that would be.

The tall kluggite flicked his gaze to Haverford's hand poised on the weapon and arched a fine brow. "Haverford, do you not know who I am?"

Does the name Jon Kemp mean nothing to you?"

"The dreaded Pirate Kemp!" Haverford dropped to his knees, yanked the sheathed dagger free, and cast it across the rocky floor. He hurled down the ruby ring, which he wore on his little finger. "Take it and be gone, you villain."

The skinny kluggite snatched up the offerings, and Raef balled his fists. Kemp set a ruggedly handsome face as flint and towered over Haverford. He wasn't anything like the thick-set, brutish kluggites that Raef had pictured, which baffled Raef and scared him, too.

"Much obliged," said Kemp, as calm as if they'd closed a transaction over a basket of mussels. "But understand that this is but an opening volley. I know the truth of your lies and your black heart. You will pay your debts and more."

With that, he turned and leaped across the surf and onto some slippery rocks, vaulting as nimbly as a diving dolphin. His associates backed off more warily, the skinny one possessing the audacity to jab the stolen dagger in Haverford's direction. Only when all three had clambered out of sight—doubtless returning to some vessel moored near the rocks—did Haverford scramble to his feet, shaking his fist after.

"You barbarian," he hollered. "You coward, Kemp! I'll have my ruby back, then stand on my balcony and watch you hanged from one of the trees on my lawn. You won't best me!"

His eyes smoldered with hatred, his face flushed crimson. The wind lashed his styled hair beyond the point of ruin, the ribbon flying off and straight out to sea. Terrified, Raef ducked well out of sight. When he peeped again, Haverford had traversed the cliff face and was pushing the boat back into the breakers.

At the prospect of even another day of dreaming and loneliness, Raef felt like sobbing. He craved strong arms about him, to offer comfort ... yet he dared not go after his lord tonight. Haverford had been so angry, and who could blame him? The kluggite had said Haverford had a black heart and debts to pay. It was proof of the pirate's stupidity. A lord with riches like Haverford wouldn't be in debt to anyone.

What was it Haverford had called Kemp? Oh, yes: a barbarian. Raef had never heard the word before, but it had a rough and pointed ring to it that suited.

He smoothed his damp hair and dragged himself to his feet, so he could look across the bay. Haverford had moored his boat back at the jetty and was stalking into the gloaming. He had gone without even noticing Raef was there. After working up the courage to reveal himself to Haverford, Raef had missed him. There was nothing he could do except wait in solitude 'til another chance came along... or was there? As his emotions bubbled and fermented, a plan took shape, which excited and frightened him in equal measures.

The theft offered Raef a chance to *earn* Lord Haverford's attention, rather than to trust in fate and hope he'd be accepted. He'd go after the kluggites and seek Haverford's revenge. It would be a risk, but he'd resolved to act tonight, so he would, albeit in a different fashion to that he'd intended. He knew every feature of this coast. He'd find their ship, steal back that ruby ring, and return it to Haverford. Then he'd climb up the ivy that plastered the façade of Haverford's castle and find the lord sleeping in a bower. He mightn't possess the courage to wake Haverford with a kiss, as he would've in his fantasies, but he'd gift Haverford back his jewel. If he chose his actions and words carefully, it could be the start of the great romance he sought.

Or he might be captured and killed by the kluggites.

Raef flexed his cold toes in lieu of his tailfins, fighting the clutches of fear. Kemp had come across as... sharper of wit than he'd imagined a kluggite to be. He must tread carefully, that was certain. To win Haverford's admiration, it would be worth it. He was no highly trained warrior, but he could fight a little, throw a punch and sling a stone in anger, and kluggites were always defeated in the end. Besides, it wasn't as if he was going to join the brutes and end up hanged beside them on Plymouth Hoe. Fool for love he might be, but he wasn't *that* stupid.

He dived into the waves, a flawless entry that caused scarce a ripple, and then pulled for the tip of the headland. From there, he'd let the current sweep him around to find the barbarian pirate and his ship.



Beyond the north headland was a little river that wound up a deep inlet between shaded woodlands. Raef had never swum this way after dark. He hadn't ventured too far into the fresh water even during the day, when the curlews dipped their long beaks to fish among the shallows. It took courage, as well as strength, to forge onward at night. The trees were tall and ancient, and many reached gnarled branches down toward the river, as if they wished scoop him up in claw-like hands.

This evening, silvered by moon and stars, the shapes of the forest assumed the aspects of towering phantoms, though all was relatively quiet. The sole watchers over this dark creek were the trees and a hooting fowl, which was a great relief. He could turn back and seek the pirate farther up the coast.

Then he spotted light ahead, the merest wisp of it. He kicked his wearied legs—how he wished for his tail, so much better suited to this journey—and swam toward the spark, up a narrow rivulet that grew stagnant and reeked. He soon discerned the shape of the ship, its deck rail wedged between mud banks that formed a natural dock. The light glimmered from a porthole in the high wooden bulwarks to the rear, and though he couldn't see the mermaid figurehead, he knew it was the ship he'd spotted earlier. The name was written on the side, painted in a slanted red script and outlined in gold. Raef squinted, and it took a little while for him to make it out. The second half of the title was strange, unlike anything he'd carved on a tablet back in the mer schoolroom—*Alice O'Shanty*.

Stealthy and swift despite his growing exhaustion, Raef made for the stern. He located a rope, shimmied up the oaken walls, and found himself standing on a deserted deck between two stout cannon. Water streamed from his naked form and pooled upon the boards. From beneath, he heard a creak and a loud snore, echoed by a sonorous breathing, then a grotesque *burp*. The revolting crew slumbered below, but mayhap not everyone was sleeping. Before him, beneath the poop deck, was a cabin. The door was ajar, and the light—surely a single candle—glowed from within.

With that light still burning, he must be extra vigilant. He crept across the deck before peering through the crack in the door.

Kemp slept on a low bunk, stripped save for a pair of tight-fitting leather breeches, and with his hair hanging loose. On his bare chest was a book, on top of which he rested his large hand. In the lambent light, the contours of his musculature glistened as if oiled.

Raef stared, entranced, by this fine specimen of manhood. Surely this was no loutish kluggite ... or these pirates were very different from those he'd learned about. Kemp was *not* ugly as a lumpy fish. He was fascinating, and Raef wished to examine him much closer, to study each ridge and contour, not to mention those tattoos on his arms. The art there was fine. He noted a treasure chest, a sheaf of corn, a leaping fish, a string of pearls. Each image was artistically entwined with the others, like the swirling patterns carved into stone by the ancient Celts... and what was Raef thinking? Even if Kemp wasn't as Raef imagined he ought to be, he was still a thief, who wore Haverford's ruby ring, glinting on the little finger of the hand that lay at his side.

Fixing on the jewelry, Raef clenched his jaw. Time to be brave.

Three paces traversed the surprisingly neat little cabin and closed the gap between them. He crouched at Kemp's side and examined the slender band. It appeared to have been designed for a smaller wearer than either Kemp or Haverford, the stone delicately cut. With a feather light touch, he started to pry it off.

Raef daren't breathe. His nerves whirled and jangled. He struggled to keep his attention on his task, gently drawing the ring forth. Kemp had long ebony lashes, which flickered. Raef froze, but Kemp didn't stir, instead smoothing lips that, on a less masculine face, would've seemed too broad and lush, like a maid's. Belonging to this raw-boned pirate, they conjured perfection. Beneath that stubble, his features were like a roughly-hewn coastline. When he sighed in his sleep, Raef sighed in unison. A moment later, he pulled the ring free and clenched it in his fist.

He straightened, shaking from head to toe and not knowing how he'd succeeded. Kemp murmured wordlessly, caressing the worn cover of his

book. Raef yearned to taste his fine mouth... and Raef's toes curled at his own fickleness. How could he entertain such notions, with poor wronged Haverford waiting to be wooed? Clearly, he'd been starved of contact too long, but Kemp might rise up and slaughter him any second. He'd best get out of here, and was edging back toward the door when the sparkle of more treasure caught his eye.

Haverford's bejeweled dagger, which lay on a low table spread with a compass, charts, and a quill pen.

Raef chewed his lip. He should take that, too. It would please Haverford. After slipping the ring on his little finger, he stretched for the dagger—the same instant Kemp sprang from the bed, eyes wide, and grabbed him. Kemp slammed him against the cabin wall, thwacking back Raef's hand that gripped the weapon 'til he cried out and dropped it.

"Stealing trinkets is one thing, but I can't let you creep around with knives, my boy." Kemp growled, and his pristine teeth glistened. Up close, he appeared even larger than he'd seemed standing beside Haverford. Raef stood a good height in human form, but Kemp, this bare-chested barbarian, towered over him and stooped to fit beneath the beams of the cabin.

"Fisherman hooked your tongue?" demanded Kemp, shaking Raef roughly. "Or just your clothes?"

Pinned to the wood, flesh upon flesh, Raef couldn't think, let alone speak. Reflected candlelight danced in Kemp's eyes, otherwise so dark they could have swallowed midnight. Raef had never been so scared.

Kemp joggled Raef harder, clonking his head back against the wall with a painful crack. "Speak, damn you. Can't Haverford do his own dirty work?"

That jolted Raef's tongue. "You're the dirty thief, and you're an idiot, too, if you think my lord would—"

"Ah, so you do work for Haverford." Kemp stepped back, grasped Raef at arm's length, and raked a curious gaze over Raef's nude form. Though Raef had never thought twice about being naked, this examination made him squirm. Heat rushed to his cheeks. "Doesn't the bastard provide livery for his minions?"

"Livery? I-I don't understand." Raef blinked, bewildered. Feeling evermore exposed, he moved his hands to shield his groin.

"Neither do I, my boy." Kemp shook his head. "Tell me the truth now. Did you intend to kill me?"

"No. I just wanted to retrieve what you stole."

"Very well." Kemp released his grip about Raef's biceps. Raef fleetingly considered throwing a punch. When Kemp grabbed the fallen knife and tucked it in a thick leather belt, Raef decided he couldn't risk it. Kemp snatched Raef's hand and yanked the ring free before striding to the door and flinging it open. "George, Peffy, you can come in now." To Raef's horror, the two revolting men he'd seen earlier, who must have heard the fray, dashed in. They froze, gawking at Raef.

"What the flaming limpets?" The one with the face like a jellyfish spoke, his accent stronger and coarser than Kemp's. His mismatched eyes bulged. Raef felt glad he'd never sought human company before Haverford's. Why did they stare at his body so? He was just like them, so far as he knew, though their scrutiny made him self-conscious. Could there be something strange or wrong about him?

"Don't get on the high ropes, Peffy," said Kemp. "It seems Haverford is too much of a nip-farthing to buy his henchmen clothes. How he gets away with it, the devil knows. Now, you." He turned back to Raef. "Do you have a name, boy?"

"R-Raef." His cheeks burned with embarrassment, setting the rest of his body quivering all the harder.

Kemp placed his hands on his hips. "All right, lad. Seeing as you found our secret harbor, we must set sail now, on the night tide. Obviously, you cannot go back to your master tonight, so we'll set you ashore farther up the coast, probably at your lord's town of Lilhaven. 'Til then, you can enjoy our hospitality."

Raef's heart, already racing, lurched. Gods, he *had* to try to get out of there. He knew the rules of shifting well enough now—remaining too long in human form sickened all merfolk, with the exception of maids with babes

in their bellies. They were able to remain in their human form for the duration of their pregnancy if they chose, usually nested in semiaquatic caves. Eventually, any others would die, shriveled up like old seaweed. Those with little experience of shifting, like Raef, would sicken fastest. When dawn came, he needed to dive back into the sea and transform into his merman shape.

"You must let me go right away," he demanded, striving to keep the tremor from his voice. "I cannot raise a warning yet. I'm so tired after my swim that I will never make it back to the castle before dawn."

"You probably speak truth there." Kemp rubbed his lantern jaw then shrugged. "Take him below anyway, boys."

"Aye, aye, Captain Kemp," chorused George and Peffy as one.

"And clap him in irons," added Kemp. "We can take no risks with such prizes at stake for us."

"Irons?" Raef's heart jolted. "No, please don't chain me. I can't. I don't want that!"

His cries went as unheeded as his plea for freedom had, and George and Peffy hauled him from the cabin. Captain Kemp regarded him with an apparent thoughtfulness, obsidian eyes twinkling, before sitting back down on his bed, swinging up his legs, and reclining to read his book once more.

A breeze nudged the door shut, eclipsing Kemp from Raef's view. Raef struggled and kicked, but George and Peffy manhandled him down a ladder and into the black hole of the deck below, sending his terrors ratcheting up a notch. While Peffy restrained him, twisting his arms behind him, George struck a light. This revealed a murky chamber: the ceiling even lower than the cabin above. When Peffy pushed him forward, Raef had to stoop. A bunch of hammocks hung from the beams, several bulging with the dozing forms of inmates. One of them lifted his sallow face to leer in Raef's direction. Barrels, pales, and jumbles of net and rope were jam-packed in every corner.

"Ere." George grabbed a blanket from one of the empty hammocks and threw it at Raef. It landed on his bare feet. "Wrap yourself in that, pretty

boy. It's chilly down below."

What, *farther* down below? So they were going to force him deeper into this wooden netherworld. Peffy let him pick up the threadbare blanket; Raef stared at it in despair. George then shoved him toward another ladder and pressed him to descend into the bowels of the ship. Here, the pirates thrust him into a compartment too small to lie flat. Raef hunched into a ball, hoping to be allowed to just sit there. It wasn't to be. Peffy fastened manacles about his wrists and shackles about his feet, the heavy chains clunking between. He draped the coarse blanket about Raef's shoulders, clanged the barred door closed, and departed with his cohort up the ladder. A trap door slammed shut.

Raef shuddered and gasped into the blackness, inhaling the tang of tar and dead fish. How did it all go so wrong, so fast? Had he been a fool? Maybe if his mother hadn't died when he was still so young, he'd have understood life better. He'd not fitted into Galyna's realm, so he'd pursued beauty and love in the human world... and his actions had brought him lower than ever before.

The rusted chains rubbed against his skin. While the blanket offered scant warmth, it scratched and stung like a sea anemone. Damp floorboards chafed his bare bottom, and rats squeaked and scuffled hard by. It would have been easy to surrender to tears. Raef refused them, swallowing back his first sob.

He wasn't dead. The kluggites hadn't killed him, nor shown any inclination to do so, though Kemp had slammed him against a wall and ordered this horrible punishment. Still, something about Kemp troubled Raef. Something he didn't comprehend. Now that he'd gazed upon Kemp's sleeping form and admired it, Raef didn't hate him as he ought.

But no matter. If he thought Kemp in any way appealing, it must be tiredness speaking, or his eyes deluding him. Kluggites were villains, and Kemp was the enemy, a barbarian. Come the morning, Raef would find a way to escape. He had to. And if he saw a chance, he'd snatch that ruby and take it back to Lord Haverford.

"My beautiful lord," murmured Raef, conjuring Haverford in his mind's eye. He consoled himself with a sigh, which was lost beneath the creak of the capstan. The anchor was being raised. In a short while, a rocking motion from the boat offered succor also. Muffled shouts and a prolonged clattering above further indicated Kemp and his crew had set sail.

So be it. In his merman form, Raef could travel back to Haverford and the castle from anywhere. If he wasn't in the sea in order to shift back at dawn, he'd have to wait 'til sunset. The prospect was an arduous one, but he would endure.



Three

When Raef awoke, daylight seeped between the cracks. His neck hurt from sleeping in an awkward position, and as his memories seeped back, a nervous frisson seized him. He'd slumbered too long and would most likely have to spend the day on this cursed vessel, which pitched and swayed. Who knew what torments he'd have to face before dusk and his next chance to shift?

He was still clearing the mists of sleep from his vision when the trapdoor opened and somebody descended the ladder. Fine boots delineated elegant calf muscles and leather clung to well-shaped thighs and a neat backside.

Captain Kemp turned to face Raef, ducking to avoid hitting the ceiling. Raef swallowed a dry lump from his throat and scowled.

"How you doing, boy?" asked Kemp, who'd swept his hair back in a red scarf.

"How do you think?" Raef tried to sound snappy rather than scared. He spotted the ruby ring glinting on Kemp's smallest finger. "Please let me out, you ... you barbarian thief!"

"Learned that insult from your master, did you?" Kemp snorted, releasing the door of the cage. "All right. I'll let you out and give you a decent breakfast to boot. But you must promise you'll not try to escape, which isn't a difficult vow to make. We're out of sight of the shore, and the only place we'll make anchor before Lilhaven is a bleak clump of rock with cliffs no man could climb. Good swimmer you might be, but jumping overboard here would be madness."

Not for me. Not once I've got my tail and gills back.

Raef licked his dry lips and managed the untruth. "I promise I won't try."

"Good lad." Kemp released the shackles from his wrists and ankles and pulled him to his feet. Raef's head swam and his limbs felt feeble. The boat oscillated, pitched on an upsurge, and sent Raef tumbling into Kemp's embrace. He breathed his scent: salty, herby, and oh-so-male. How could a pirate smell so... appetizing?

"Get up too fast, eh?" said Kemp. "You must be hungry."

Raef extracted and gathered himself, mustering another scowl. "Yes, I'm starving." And maintaining strength while in human form was always hard work for a merman, but he would hardly tell Kemp that and reveal his true identity to a kluggite. He'd heard many a haunting tale of pirates entrapping merfolk. Kemp would have him back in those chains for sure.

He followed Kemp up onto the deck above, savoring the fresher air. He soon found himself sitting on a three-legged stool, the blanket tied about his middle, and eating a plate of bread, butter, and the morning's catch of mackerel. This cheered him more than he felt it ought. As a merman, he ate chiefly raw fish and seaweed. The way these humans heated food brought out wonderful, subtle flavors. Over the past few weeks, he'd tried some scraps left near the fishermen's cottages, which was as far as he'd dared creep inland. He'd had nothing as good as these cooked delicacies.

Kemp rummaged about in a corner and then presented him with a pair of ragged trousers and a loose shirt, which he draped across his lap while he used his crust to mop his platter. Opposite him, Kemp leaned against a wooden post with his arms folded. He regarded Raef intently as ever, 'til Raef felt as a herring must when under the beady eye of a gull.

"You can make yourself useful 'til we let you go," said Kemp. "The *Alice O'Shanty* is short of crew and we could do with a cabin boy. Ever scrubbed a deck?"

"Never scrubbed anything in my life," answered Raef, maybe a little too quickly. He sucked the traces of butter from his fingers.

"By Salamon, what *did* you do for Haverford?" Kemp offered a throaty snicker. "I'm taking it you weren't schooled as an assassin."

"A what?"

A shout from deck came to Raef's rescue. Kemp went off to see what the commotion was, though not before broadsiding Raef with a final questioning glare and a barked instruction. "Get dressed, lad. You'll catch your death."

Catch his death? Raef hadn't a notion what that meant either. It sounded like a threat. Either way, he figured he'd do what Kemp requested. He was fed up of being stared at. Seeing as humans tended to wear clothes, maybe if he got dressed they'd stop gawping. It would be easier to slip away then, too. He stepped into the trousers, which reached just below his knees, then spent some time fiddling with the strings that served for a belt. Unable to secure them, he gave up and wrestled his way into the shirt. This had cords too, dangling from the open flaps at the collar. Before he could fathom what they were for, Peffy's bulky frame came clunking down the ladder.

Peffy grinned. He had several gaps in his mouth and his remaining teeth were brown, nothing like Kemp's pearly gnashers. "Ready to get scrubbing?" he asked.

Raef nodded and followed, bunching his trousers at the waist to keep them falling. His shirt hung open. When they reached the deck, the breeze hit him and set the fabric flapping. It felt twice as drafty as having no clothes at all. The morning was duller than yesterday, the clouds a milky white, and as Kemp had warned him, there was no sight of the shore. He'd certainly have to wait 'til sundown for a safe chance to make a break for it. Swimming around the headland the previous night had stretched his human body to its limit. If he dived in before he was able to shift back to his swifter, stronger mer form, the pirates would most likely drag him back to the ship. Or he'd drown before he found land.

Peffy pointed to a mop, a bucket, and a yellowish stone. "Use the holystone first. I want every inch of this deck lathed, not a speck of dust or tar remaining. Then swab it down with the mop."

Still gripping his gaping trousers with one hand, Raef picked up the stone and looked at it.

"What's with you, boy?" demanded Peffy. "You act like you've *lived* under a stone all your life. Are you a pixie of the wilds or just the village

noodle?" As Raef opened his mouth to protest, Peffy snatched the stone then began to rub the planks with it. "Like this. Now get on with it. Every inch, I say, and no slacking."

Peffy handed the stone to Raef, who obeyed. Once on his knees, he didn't need to worry so much about keeping his trousers from descending. Still, they slipped to expose the top of his arse to the wind and the salt spray, which stung buttocks sore from a night on splintered boards. He felt stronger now he'd breakfasted, though he didn't enjoy the work. Scouring was monotonous and made his wrist, back, and elbows ache. So he cheered himself by musing on the delight he'd bring to Lord Haverford if he presented him with the ruby ring. Seeing as he had all day—and because the pirates were treating him more decently than he'd expected—his scheme of theft seemed worth pondering again.

Could he get that ruby away from Kemp?

As Raef worked, Peffy and George and few other odd-looking fellows occupied themselves with the business of sailing the ship. George astonished Raef with his nimbleness about the rigging, climbing nigh swift as a kestrel to unfurl the topsail. Overall, the men were coarse, swearing and belching as much as they laughed, but they weren't unpleasant. Chiefly, they ignored Raef. Some of them spread out nets and then cast them over the side to do some fishing. The main interest of the morning came when George, high upon the foremast, spotted some unmapped rocks.

At George's hail, Kemp emerged from his cabin and marked the location on a chart. After that, the captain remained on the poop deck, fiddling with an angular wooden device and examining the broad expanse of the ocean through a long, brass eyeglass. He spotted a couple of other sails over the next hour or so, but dismissed both. "Just some wretched fishermen," he observed of the first, and on the second occasion, "It's those beleaguered Jack Tars. Ah, if only it were one of Haverford's merchantmen. I'd sink 'em in a jiffy."

Raef hadn't known Haverford owned ships, but while Kemp's threat raised his heckles, nothing else piratical was discussed. The brisk wind set the *Alice O'Shanty* darting through the waters in a southerly direction, which suited Raef. Having now had a chance to judge the narrow variety

and relative scarcity of seabirds, he estimated they were definitely too far out for a human to swim back to land, but weren't moving farther away. Rather, they must be running parallel with the rocky shore he'd made his home of late. Once free and be-tailed, his swim back to Haverford's castle wouldn't be too arduous.

But he *was* getting weary, and the pain in his elbow grew sharp. He'd not half the stamina he possessed in his merman form. Needing a rest, Raef sat back on his haunches and rubbed his neck, which was damp with sweat and spray. Then he started. Kemp leaned over the railing on the poop deck, regarding him with one brow raised. Raef fixed on the ruby ring Kemp wore and hitched his lip.

"Thief," he muttered. "Barbarian." Defying his sore muscles, he returned to his task. When Kems climbed down and approached him, he started to regret the insult. He recalled yet more nasty tales of kluggites who flayed their crew for the smallest misdemeanor. As Kemp's boots drew level with his sightline, his veins ran cold. Had he earned himself a whipping that would cut him and scar?

Kemp touched his shoulder, and he flinched as if licked by the cat o' nine tails. The deck slanted as the *Alice O'Shanty* rode a giant among the day's comparatively docile waves, and then Kemp crouched in front of him. Kemp's hair glistened, wetted by the spray. He wore a broad-tailed jacket that might've been splendid were its cuffs not frayed. "At ease, lad," he said gruffly.

Raef obeyed with a sigh and couldn't muster the courage to glower again.

"I don't intend to keep this ring," explained Kemp, stroking the gem with his thumb. "I wear it on this ship, because I know my crew. They're good lads, but they've fingers that'll filch in their sleep. Hell, any of us can dose a lock in a jiffy. It's not wise to leave such temptation in their way."

"So what do you intend to do with it?" asked Raef, still trying to interpret half of what Kemp just said. "Sell it?"

"I'm going to give it to somebody who deserves it much more than your Lord Haverford. In fact, you might say that Haverford stole it from *them*."

Haverford stealing? Raef dismissed that notion as more kluggite nonsense. There was no evidence otherwise. But who was this lucky soul Kemp intended to give it to? A woman? Or maybe Captain Kemp loved men? The ship rocked again, Raef's heart lurched, and he dismissed an inexplicable pang of jealousy. Kemp must never present this ruby ring to a beloved. It was for Raef to give back to his lord and...

Kemp grabbed Raef's hand and lifted it. Raef barely contained a squeak. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to work you out." Kemp turned Raef's hand over in his. "You've skin smooth as a fine lady's."

"Hardly." Raef scrunched his nose. His flesh was usually flawless, save the impermanent wrinkles left by the water, but he'd acquired a good dozen splinters on this horrid ship. He snatched his hand away, only to have Kemp reach out to take the laces of his shirt and start weaving them through the little holes down the front that had vexed him.

"And you've not a clue how to dress yourself. What are you, Raef? One of Haverford's fancy boys? Is that why you won't tell me? But no, that can't be right. You'd be more aware of your..."

Kemp broke off, frowning as he continued fastening Raef's clothing. His calloused fingers skimmed Raef's throat, then chest, 'til Raef's mind was awlirl.

What did Kemp think him not aware of? His charms? Raef hoped he was attractive, with his large green eyes, smallish nose, and well-developed biceps and chest, not to mention his lovely, golden hair. However, humans possessed codes of communication with regards to these things that he couldn't even start to understand. After all, even those humans who'd nice bodies—as Kemp did—chiefly hid them. And gods, though Kemp was engaged in dressing him, covering him up, Kemp's nearness somehow made him feel more naked than ever before in his life.

"Can you tie your own breeches?" asked Kemp.

Kneeling, breathless, Raef shook his head, then regretted it. Surely he could've given the task a go, and that would avoid ... *Aaaaaah!* Kemp

skirted fingers over the taut flesh of Raef's belly, tugging up the waistband and fastening the drawstrings in a knot. Raef stared at Kemp's weather-bronzed face, stretching his eyes so wide he felt the lick of the wind on them. He breathed in Kemp's musk, and unsettling warmth pooled in his groin, followed by a pleasant tightening. He'd known these sensations before, when he'd watched Lord Haverford and touched himself, and... *Oh, help me!* That union of bodies he sought with Lord Haverford. That nebulously-envisaged surrender of self. Maybe, just maybe, he craved it from Kemp, too.

Kemp rose, squeezing his shoulder. "Now finish your job well, lad, and there'll be a tot of rum in your tea with lunch."

He stalked toward the ship's wheel and gripped its great wooden spokes. Raef mentally shook himself. If a kluggite was being kind, there must be some shady reason behind it. Captain Kemp was a barbarian. However, he seemed to appreciate Raef's looks, good or otherwise. Of that, Raef felt increasingly sure. Why else would he keep staring so?

Grinding the stone over a patch of tar, Raef assembled a tentative plan. To steal back the ruby, he must ingratiate himself to Kemp. Kemp's crew all appeared to be good chums, so he should propose friendship. The notion of offering Kemp a kiss skittered through his mind. He dismissed it. He must not give his affections or body to a pirate. Nevertheless, he could pretend to be a little enamored by Kemp and his piratical ways in order to earn some trust. In a moment of distraction, he might then retrieve the ring.

The scheme was dangerous, but if he got Kemp alone and timed his actions well, it could work. Besides, he had no better idea, other than slinking away empty-handed at dusk. A wave broke over the starboard rail, soaking his back. The breeze seemed to be stiffening, the crests of the ocean rising, and the *Alice O' Shanty* leaped and danced like a porpoise. From the helm, Kemp shouted instructions, sending George flying up into the sails to trim them. Raef scrubbed all the more furiously as he fortified himself for his task. Thank heavens Kemp wasn't as physically odious as the rest of the crew.

Taking back the ruby was still the best opportunity he'd been gifted all summer to earn Lord Haverford's attention. He could do it. He could

befriend Kemp. He just needed to be... charming.



Four

When Captain Kemp called him over for supper toward the end of the afternoon, Raef was exhausted.

He'd done what had been demanded of him, scouring every inch of the deck with the stone, and then swabbing it with seawater 'til the smoothed wood glistened. After lunch, Kemp had sat him down to teach him to tie knots so he could help repair the nets. He'd mastered the art quickly and well, though it had been a struggle to keep his mind on the task. Kemp had leaned close and manipulated his fingers to help tie intricate fisherman's eyes and sheepshanks. His stomach had fluttered as if a shoal of minnows was trapped within.

He told himself over and over that this attraction to Kemp wasn't a problem. It couldn't be love. He had already fallen in love with another, and he wouldn't give his heart twice. Anyhow, it was good Kemp didn't repel him, and now sunset approached, his real work lay ahead. He just hoped he had the energy, as he'd spent the final hours learning to climb in the rigging and balance along the yardarm. This had strained every joint and sinew in his fragile human frame.

The pirates, captain, and all but one of a crew of nine now dined on the high poop deck, sitting on upturned barrels. To one side of the ship, they enjoyed expansive views of the powdery skies, and on the other lay the inhospitable rock with the sheer cliff sides by which they'd anchored for the night. Raef dragged himself up the ladder from the main deck, forced his spine to straighten, and staggered to the perch reserved for him.

"Looks like we worked our new cabin boy too hard," said Kemp, before slowly licking his knife.

"I'm all right," said Raef, sitting down. He hated feeling weak. He wasn't used it. An older fellow with bushy side-whiskers, Victor, who'd prepared the food in the galley, passed a platter to Raef. He took it gratefully, and Peffy handed him a bottle of something or other.

"You'll feel better after a dose of that." Peffy beamed. "You'll never be able to last long at sea if you can't take your liquor. 'Tis as bad as not being able to stomach a jolly gale."

Oh, the irony. If only these silly pirates knew the truth of him, of the storms and swells he could endure and the depths he could plunge without air. He wasn't scared of this rocky island, either. The reefs around the home of his tribe were twice as sharp. But this crew would never learn any of it. They mustn't. He managed to smile back—he'd been polite all afternoon to lull the company into a false sense of security—and took a glug of the drink.

He froze, spat the liquor out, and shoved the bottle back at Peffy. "It burns," he said, wiping the remnants from his chin. "Are you trying to poison me?"

Peffy laughed so hard he clutched his sides, and the rest of the crew joined him. Victor pulled out a grubby handkerchief and wiped his rheumy eyes. Raef bristled, though when Kemp chuckled and patted his knee, he felt easily appeased. Too easily?

"It's fortified Jamaican rum," explained Kemp. "One of the stoutest bevies on the high seas. Maybe it's a little early for you to enjoy the Caribbean contraband, but there's no gnat's piss on my ship."

Raef managed a self-depreciating smirk and then ate as keenly as he could. He just couldn't fathom these folk. They were coarse and unruly, but they behaved more like high-spirited revelers than killers. Indeed, he'd never known anyone to laugh as much as they did. Merfolk certainly didn't, at least, not in recent years; Galyna made sure they took life and its duties seriously. He'd barely seen Lord Haverford crack that handsome façade either.

The company's mirth, however, could not alleviate his weariness. By the time George rose to dance a jig, he was panicking. Judging by the skies, it

was still about an hour 'til sundown. He must get his strength up, but the sight of George hopping around sapped him further. He rose slowly, trying not to appear abrupt or impolite. "May I take a rest down below?"

Kemp heaved his broad shoulders in a shrug. "You're at leisure 'til I say otherwise."

Raef descended to the lower deck and clambered into the only hammock that had been left unfurled during the day. It hung in a dark corner above a rat trap stuffed with green cheese. The biggest risk now was falling asleep and missing his chance for escape, so he forced his eyelids wide. When he felt them lulling closed, he dug his nails into the back of his hand 'til they stung. He inhaled the cheese's rancid stench, which overwhelmed even the salt and the tar.

These pirates were so confusing. And as for Kemp, his calloused touch was the sweetest Raef had known since his mother passed. That vicious attack on Lord Haverford seemed like a dream. But it was real. It had happened only yesterday, and he hated Kemp for it. Well, he disliked Kemp very much. Soon, vengeance would be his, and triumph would belong to Lord Haverford and to the cause of righteousness.

He lay there, willing fortitude into his limbs, 'til he heard a tread across the deck above. Kemp. He had a bolder step than any of the others and was going back to his cabin... alone. Raef slid onto his feet. He must go talk with Kemp now or miss his chance.

Up on deck, Peffy and George were sharing that bottle of horrid liquor and enjoying a game of dice. "Raef! Come shake with us," called George, and Peffy displayed his few brown teeth in a grin. Their jolliness made his head hurt. Only Kemp could give him the ruby ring, so he didn't have to be nice to them. He couldn't bring himself to snub them either. They acted like they wanted him to like them, which warmed his heart, even if it would most likely turn out to be some ruse.

"Maybe later," he called back and summoned a smile.

On reaching the door of the captain's cabin, he stopped and clutched the frame. Kemp had stripped his shirt again and reclined on his bunk reading his book. Evening light slanted through the porthole, rippling on golden

flesh and gleaming off his hooped earring. When Kemp noticed him, Raef snapped his mouth shut. He mustn't gape, even at a veritable sun-kissed god, yet his veins began to hum, his loins to harden. What was wrong with him? He wanted the kluggite. He ached to touch Kemp's body, to grind his aching flesh against Kemp's. Maybe offering a kiss wouldn't be *such* a bad scheme? He'd do it to help win Kemp's trust, of course, though he couldn't suppress his curiosity or keenness to savor those generous lips.

Kemp sat up, swinging his feet to the floor. "What brings you snooping here, eh?"

"W-we need to talk." What was it about Kemp that made Raef stammer? He couldn't gauge it.

"That's a sound plan." Kemp placed the book on the table and came closer. "I can't work you out at all, my lad. You've still not told me what it is you do for Lord Haverford. You're clearly neither a servant nor a so-called gentleman, and you're no Navy man, that's for sure. So what are you?"

"It doesn't matter." Flustered by the unanswerable question, Raef fell to his knees.

Kemp jumped, clutching the handle of a cutlass at his side. Raef prayed Kemp wouldn't strike, and gazed up at him, imploring. "I want to apologize for being unfriendly earlier. You, er, you've been good to me, at least good for a pirate, and..."

Raef's attention slammed onto the formidable package at the front of Kemp's breeches, and a ravenous hunger overtook him. He moistened his dry lips. Now he understood exactly why those young mer threw themselves at lords and princes. These cravings swamped even those he'd harbored for Haverford. He was so desperate to see what lay beneath Kemp's clothing, he'd all but lay down his life for a peek.

"And?" Kemp eased his grip about the pommel.

Raef's voice sounded weak and distant. "I, uh, wondered if you and I could get to know each other a bit better."

"Did you indeed? And why exactly are you kneeling before me?"

"Um, because..." With shaking hands, Raef reached for the silver buckle on Kemp's belt. He didn't know what he was doing, but some uncontrollable urge within him shouted this was right. Perhaps it was because he was unused to folk being dressed, because he *needed* Kemp naked.

"Poseidon's teeth." Kemp seized his wrists and pushed him away so hard he tumbled backward. "I don't think you really want this."

Raef couldn't answer; desire quaked through him, though the rational shouts in the back of his mind grew louder. Stripping Kemp's breeches was more than friendship required.

Kemp eased his glower, then took Raef's hands and drew him up before leading him over to the bunk. He sat Raef down and settled close by. Their thighs almost brushed. "Is this what Lord Haverford makes you do for him? Is that how you've earned your crust?"

On gathering what he could of his fractured wits, Raef neither understood nor liked the melancholy in Kemp's tone. After all, if Lord Haverford allowed him to give pleasure and be cherished, that would be a glorious thing. He shook his head, and a silky lock drooped across his brow. "No, he doesn't make me. Nobody has ever made me do anything like that, in all my twenty-one years. Nobody has ever even asked." He puffed his hair from where it tickled his nose, and the final confession slipped out before he could stop it. "I wish someone would."

Kemp emitted a noise caught between a sigh and groan, and a roguish glimmer lit his eyes. That shoal of fish in Raef's belly took flight once more, manic, as if a predator were in their midst.

"Well, my callow colt, we'd better start at the beginning." Kemp leaned in, obliterating the gap between them, and pressed his lush lips to Raef's.

Raef's heartbeat seemed to stop, then it surged forward like rolling thunder. All he could feel was the gentle brush of Kemp's mouth against his, kindling a wondrous and flourishing heat. Kemp lingered there a moment, offering a kiss of snowflake-light caresses. Then Raef felt Kemp's tongue, hard and wet and tracing the seam of his lips.

Raef parted them, inviting Kemp inside. Kemp thrust forward, plundering toward Raef's depths, and pushed his hand up Raef's thigh toward his aching-hard loins. He hoped Kemp knew exactly what to do about *that*, though for now, the kiss incited rapture enough. Coarse beard scraped Raef's smooth chin, grazing the skin, but he didn't care. He hugged Kemp tight, gratefully enveloped in Kemp's embrace. He scrubbed his tongue against Kemp's, tasting spice, rum, and something uniquely, wonderfully *him*.

Oh, this surrender was willing, so willing. Kemp's enormous hard rod pressed up against him, bulging beneath those breeches. It frightened and thrilled him, and he bucked himself against it, buttocks clenching. Ah! He loved the idea of Kemp thrusting that sword of flesh into him, though he mustn't let matters get that far. He'd regret giving himself entirely to anyone save Haverford, he was sure, and this man was still a cold-blooded pirate. Though Kemp felt extremely hot-blooded right now.

When Kemp broke away, Raef couldn't help mewling with disappointment. "Don't stop. I need more kisses."

"I can feel you do, lad, and believe me, so do I, but—" Letting Raef go, Kemp rose and paced the cabin, raking his flyaway hair.

"But what?" begged Raef. His body ached for Kemp, though he reminded himself Kemp wasn't his love. Kemp was the pirate he must trick and rob in order to please and be with the man he worshipped.

"I don't know." Kemp pumped a fist in frustration. "It shouldn't matter, if we just wish to take our mutual pleasures. But I find I must know the truth. Where do you come from, Raef? What nature of man are you?"

Raef found he couldn't lie. "I-I'm a jewel thief."

Kemp stopped pacing and narrowed his eyes to slits, and Raef squirmed. "I've met a good few sneaks in my time, lad," said Kemp, "and none of them were anything like you. If you don't work for Haverford, then who are your people? From where do you hail?"

"My folks are from some rocky islands beyond the tip of Cornwall." That wasn't far from the truth, either. "But I left home. I wandered."

"I see." Kemp strode back and forth again, as if he were a trapped beast. "And pray, how many jewels have you ever thieved, if you can't afford clothes? Indeed, if you know so little about how to wear them?"

"It's warmer to the south." Raef strove to calm his skittering pulse, to take control of his thoughts and the situation. "I won't answer your questions unless you answer mine. What kind of pirate are you? I, um, haven't seen much treasure on this ship."

"Ah, but as your Lord Haverford knows, my reputation is legendary. I live for the joy of plunder and have swagged more than any other pirate who sails these isles. See?" Kemp smoothed his hand down his bare arm, over the labyrinthine interweaving of tattoos—the treasure chest, the sheaf of corn, as well as bejeweled trinkets, and many others. "I carve mementos of my finest prizes into my skin, though I also take great pleasure in... redistributing wealth. And I'm always looking for something new and exciting to snatch from our bloated aristocracy."

"What are you after at the moment?" asked Raef, his intrigue distracting him from his plan. Redistributing wealth? What did that mean? Mayhap Kemp sold on his plunder or gave it to lovers or pirate friends.

"Right now, I'm after a map that will lead me to a great stolen fortune," answered Kemp, stroking his chin. "I need to speak to a wench called Cecilia, who might know where it's hidden. That's what we'll next sling our hook for, near Lilhaven. Once I've finished my business there, you can go free."

Cecilia. Was she the lucky soul Kemp wanted to give the ring to? Kemp drew close again, squaring those broad shoulders, and Raef shrank back 'til he was pressed against the cabin wall at the back of the bunk. He wondered if this "wench" was a lover of Kemp's.

Please want me, not her!

He'd no time for this lunacy. The sun had dipped, the rays no longer reaching the porthole. Shadows swallowed the room's corners, and soon Kemp would need to light his candle. Raef must act. He had to get out of here, to be in the ocean as the sun set. Yet he wanted to be pinned down and ravished by this brute of a pirate, who admitted to a love of plunder.

"Now it's your turn again." Kemp licked kiss-swollen lips and Raef mimicked him, dabbing Kemp's flavor and cherishing it. "How many jewels, truly, have you snaffled?"

"None, as of yet, which is why ..." Raef fixed on the band Kemp wore. "Which is why I wanted that ruby so badly. I know there's no chance of claiming it now, but will you please let me wear it for a while?"

Kemp narrowed his eyes, obviously toying with the idea. He shrugged. "I don't see why not. Wear it, admire it, though I'll be having it back, mind." He screwed the ring off and gave it to Raef, who slid it on. "I'll brew some coffee, then we must talk some more. After that, if you're still keen, you and I might resume our plea—"

With an effort that wrenched through him, Raef jumped up and shoved Kemp from his path. Seizing the advantage of surprise, he sprinted through the door and across the deck. Peffy and George looked up at his sudden appearance, and from behind him, Kemp cursed, thundering footsteps closing in fast. Raef hadn't a moment to waste. He made for the sea side of the ship and launched himself over the rail, smacking gracelessly into the ocean.

He sank, then surfaced. Only then, as he flailed with his human limbs to keep afloat, did he look to the west. A fuzzy orange orb glowed back at him, partially eclipsed by wispy cloud. He'd jumped too early. It would still be a good few minutes before he could shift.

Damn, damn, damn.

He had to get away from this damn ship, the looming hull of which veered dangerously close.

"Man overboard! Get the nets," hollered Kemp. Raef launched into a front crawl, though his arms felt heavy as lead, his legs ineffective compared to his tail. After a few strokes, he mistimed a breath, and a wave splashed in his face. He swallowed a mouthful of brine, choked and gasped. Before he could refill his lungs, the waters closed above him again, sucking him down. He flailed, pulling upward, but as soon as he broke into the world above, a wave smashed him under.

For the first time in his life, the sea became his enemy. He managed to struggle up again, paddling a moment and panting raggedly, before the next roller pummeled him. His chest burned, and still the sun lingered, for he felt no tingle of magic, just the cold. He prayed to the gods of the oceans.

Help me, save me, deliver me. Give me my tail and my gills back and let me breathe underwater.

The waters were swallowing him, suffocating him. His lungs were blistering and felt like they might explode. Raef thrashed weakly, but light faded as his life breath drained from him. Had it been worth it ... for Lord Haverford ... for the barbarian pirate's kiss? Or would he make it? His fingers and toes began to prickle. Was this it? Could this be the shift?

Strong arms wrapped around him, and an irrepressible force propelled him up. He burst through the surface, coughing and retching, and the next few moments passed in a haze. A tangle of netting and rope lifting him, the bite of the wind, the sway of the ship, then more grabbing hands. He found himself lying on his side, on the deck boards he'd scrubbed smooth, spewing out water and kicking his human legs.

"That's it, lad," said Kemp, rubbing between Raef's shoulder blades. "You're all right."

He wasn't all right. Through the blur of his wet lashes, Raef caught a glimpse of the darkening sky, a smudgy moon nudging upward between the clouds. Kemp had grabbed him at sunset and hauled him from the water before the shift could take hold. Now he was stuck in human form for at least another night without a notion what he should do. Or what Kemp and his crew would do to him, after acting so rashly.

"The boy's mad," blurted Peffy, kneeling beside him. "No man could reach safety from here."

"You're right," said Kemp gruffly. "I prayed otherwise, but he's not fit to govern himself. We're going to have to lock him up again, and when we reach port, we must find him a doctor."

"An asylum would be best," said George, scratching the scar that slashed his face. "This one's bound for Bedlam."

Still gathering his breath, Raef hadn't the wherewithal to argue against them. He wondered what variety of grim place this Bedlam was. If he couldn't shift back to his true form soon, his strength would wane more and more. Kemp placed a blanket over him, then drew him into a sitting position, so he sagged against Kemp's chest. Kemp dried him with a soft rubbing motion, warming and kind... but how could it be? Though he melted beneath Kemp's touch, Kemp wanted to chain him up.

Without releasing Raef from the tight embrace, Kemp lifted Raef's trembling hand and removed the ring. "Y-you villain," stammered Raef.

"Hush now." Kemp patted Raef. He dragged him to his feet and across the deck, supporting much of his weight. Raef's knees had the structural integrity of soggy seaweed. A glance in George and Peffy's direction revealed expressions filled with a doleful sympathy, which Raef silently cursed, though they bewildered him, too.

Kemp hoisted him onto one shoulder, and the world turned skewwhiff. As he carried him down one ladder, then another, into the fetid gut of the ship, Raef's frustration swelled a hundred fold. He'd still not the power to fight back. Kemp dumped him in his prison from the previous night, stripped his wet rags, wrapped him in a dry sack, and then clapped him back in the chains.

When Kemp left, he felt bereft and curled into as tight a ball as his restraints allowed. He should hate, hate, hate this pirate, more than ever now. Yet his desire even to get the jewel back and wreak vengeance seemed diminished by his growing fear for himself. Might he die down here? Or would Kemp strand him ashore to wither away in some horrible jail?

He'd been a fool yet again, botching his plan... but oh gods, that kiss. These kluggites dizzied him, especially Kemp, who was far from cloddish and ugly. The brush of his lips and tongue and the crush of his hard body had rocked Raef's little world. Then Kemp had pushed him away and now cast him down here again. So cruel.

But it was no good. Raef battled a murmur in his soul that suggested he was as mad as this ship's crew thought him. *Why doesn't the barbarian pirate want me?*



Five

Raef struggled to get any sleep. He felt much worse than before he'd taken his swim to nowhere. Little pains wracked his body, and however much he wriggled on his bare arse, he couldn't get comfortable. Moisture dripped from his hair and rolled down his back under the loosely draped sacking. After he finally drifted off, his dreams transformed the trickling motion into the scraping of shark's teeth, a slithering sea slug, and then the barbed talons of a witch of the deeps. He feared she'd gouge his eyes and shred the skin from his face.

When he snatched himself awake, stricken with horror, he couldn't extract his mind from this restless fog. He shivered, though he didn't seem to be cold anymore, and his head burned as if a furnace was lit within it. He'd never been forced to stay this long in human form before. Neither had he ever felt so ill.

After what could have been hours or minutes—he was too lost to know—somebody opened the cell door. He didn't seem to be able to lift his head, but he could tell it was Kemp. He could smell him. Raef's thoughts were so befuddled he didn't recall that word, the long one beginning with “b”, which Haverford had used to describe Kemp. Still, he knew he should be angry with him. It was Kemp's fault he was in this mess, yet his presence offered a grain of comfort, and Raef snatched at it, yearning for him to draw closer.

Touch me, please.

"Raef?" Kemp cupped his face, grasping a candle in a holder, which set him squinting. After placing down the lamp, Kemp pressed the back of his hand to Raef's brow. "Sweet Jesus, lad, you must've caught a chill in the sea. You're running a fever."

"N-no. I need... the s-sea. Is it d-dawn yet?" Raef's words came out as feeble mumblings. He was so desperate he'd have confessed all, shouted to the heavens he was a merman, if he'd thought it would get him back into the ocean at the right moment. Kemp didn't seem to understand, or at least chose not to. Kemp released him from the chains, then lifted him over one shoulder and carried him back to the captain's cabin.

"Blimey," said Kemp as he ducked under the lintel. "It feels like you've lost half your body weight in just hours."

Raef could well believe it. *So this is how it ends. I'm fading away. I'm evaporating. Soon, I'll be reduced to a dry husk of bones, skin... nothingness.*

Kemp laid him down upon the bunk, its thin mattress a luxury after the cramped and comfortless cell. "I should never have left you there," he muttered, seemingly talking to himself as much as Raef, which Raef found frustrating. Raef wasn't mad and neither was he a child, but he'd been reduced to less than either in Kemp's eyes. How pathetic.

"I'm sorry," continued Kemp, drawing a blanket about him. "But it seemed the safest place for you."

Raef tried to speak, but ended up sighing and closing his eyes. He'd stopped shivering, and a frightening stillness drenched his body. He labored to drag air into his chest.

"It's all right," said Kemp, smoothing Raef's forehead. "I've had sick fellows in a worse state than you aboard this ship. You'll pull through."

Raef wanted to scream, *You know nothing*. He still couldn't help but glean succor from Kemp's caresses. He didn't want Kemp to stop. Hell, if Kemp did so, he feared he'd die there and then. When the touch was withdrawn, he moaned, desolate. But his heart beat on, and Kemp slipped one of those strong hands beneath his head, lifting it. With an effort, he fluttered his eyes open.

"Here," said Kemp, raising him higher. "Drink."

Kemp held a goblet, pressing it toward him. He worried that if it contained that Jamaican liquor from earlier, he'd be embarrassingly sick or the muck would finish him off. He'd no energy to protest, and when the rim of the cup touched his parched lips, he parted them and sipped. The substance turned out to be a curious mixture of bitter and sweet, dry and fruity all at once. It coated his throat like honey and made him feel a bit better, so he drank more. He'd been too unwell to notice before, but he was desperately thirsty.

"Good lad," said Kemp, and at last Raef managed to focus on his face. Kemp leaned over him, hair mussed and less sleek than usual, and his bronzed face paler. The lines at the edges of Kemp's eyes had deepened with worry. Raef guessed he was maybe thirty years of age, but he looked older, craggier... and more beautiful than ever.

Kemp cared about him. Kemp might be a brute who believed him insane, but he cared if Raef lived or died. The notion cheered him, though yet again, it confused him also. Why should a pirate give a damn, especially one who kept locking him away? Whatever medicine or magic Kemp had prompted him to sup, Raef felt its healing power course through him. He managed to curve his mouth into a smile. "Th-thank you."

"It's an elixir the old captain of this ship used to make." Kemp hooked a strand of hair behind his ear and smiled back. "Port wine mixed with herbs from land and sea."

The latter probably explained the concoction's success. Merfolk used many medicinal plants and were learned in all that could be reaped from the ocean. However, though a weed might temporarily lessen Raef's suffering, he doubted it would stop his decline for more than a short while. He wanted to enjoy Kemp's ministrations and then sleep a full day, but if he did, he feared he might never awake.

"How long is dawn?" he asked.

Kemp furrowed his brow, stroking Raef's cheek. "About an hour, I should say."

Hope sparked. Raef wasn't chained any more. He could escape. An hour seemed like an eternity under fear of imminent death, but he could make it

to sunrise. He *must* make it, and now he felt a bit better, his curiosity kicked back. Last night, Kemp had spoken of a woman called Cecilia, who he intended to visit in pursuit of a treasure map. Kemp had said Raef could go free once he'd seen her, and Raef wondered if Haverford's ring was bound for her, as a gift. This could be useful information, especially as stealing the jewel from Kemp now seemed an unlikely prospect.

"Cecilia," he murmured. "Who is she?"

Kemp leaned back and withdrew his touch, which had Raef regretting his enquiry. "Ah, now that *is* a question. I first encountered Cecilia about three months past, the first time we made port near Lilhaven. 'Twas fate. She was fighting off a hooded man bent on murder with her bare fists and a pot of acid poison. Now there's a hearty wench, I thought."

"Heavens! Who was trying to kill her?"

"Another potent question," replied Kemp. "It wasn't only Cecilia who'd been set upon. That night, a gang of hooded horsemen set upon the town, carrying flaming torches and seeking out young women. One was badly injured, another snatched and never seen again. We chanced to arrive in time to help Cecilia, not that she wasn't doing plummy without us. She's a swan with a sharp peck."

"Who were the attackers?" asked Raef. This behavior sounded like that of pirates, though now he'd met Kemp, none of his assumptions seemed to fit.

"Ah, that's something only Cecilia could tell me, and I don't think *you* want to know." Kemp tapped his nose. "You should try and get some sleep."

Raef bit back his frustration, reminding himself this story was unimportant. He ought to have no desire to hear more of this Cecilia, who fascinated Kemp so. He also fought an urge to beg Kemp to lie down beside him, to spoon that sturdy body about his. If he commanded Kemp's attention too long, he'd never get a chance to escape, so he remained silent as Kemp tucked a second warm blanket over him. Then Kemp slung the ends of a hammock over a beam, secured the ropes, and vaulted into the makeshift bed.

Raef exhaled slowly, and prayed Kemp might sleep or at least topple off his guard. Though he dared not try for the ruby ring again, Kemp had replaced Haverford's bejeweled dagger on the table. If he could grab that and shift like quicksilver, he'd still have a gift to deliver to his lord.

He watched, pulse lurching and fitful, as the first gray hints of dawn seeped through the porthole. He had to time his escape perfectly. If he was to dive in the sea prematurely again, he'd drown in his human body, or Kemp would fish him out more stricken than ever. The boat tilted and lurched on roughening waves, and from Kemp's bunk wafted the sound of heavy, but contented, breathing.

Soon, almost too soon, an orange sheen licked the rim of the porthole. Time to go. Summoning his last iota of strength, Raef tossed off the blankets and launched up. He grabbed the knife, willed himself not to collapse, and burst out onto deck.

He heard a thud, as Kemp jumped from the hammock. "Raef. No!"

Raef was already at the rail, then sitting on it, naked, with his legs swinging free and the knife clamped in his fist. He squinted back toward the sun, which showed nearly a quarter of its face already. Had he left it too late? The waves splashed against the side of the boat, metallic in hue and uninviting. He had to leave Kemp, despite all those baffling feelings Raef was developing for him. Leave Kemp ... or perish.

Raef hurled himself forward the same instant Kemp grabbed for him. Kemp's fingertips brushed his shoulder, but he flew free, downward, into an abyss that surged up to engulf him.

The dark surface closed above his head. Raef floundered, limbs thrashing weakly. *Shift, please shift.* He urged the magic to fill him, but his lungs grew tight, his mind a haze ... and then the pain hit. The sweet burn of release swept through him. A sublime agony shocked to his core, then came the fiery stabbing as his legs fused together. Behind his ears, his gills split open. They drew in the only elixir he truly needed—that unknown magic in the waters that sustained all creatures beneath the waves. Strength exploded inside him. Life swelled. Raef swished his powerful tail and pulled for the surface, bursting through to drink of the salt-spiced air, a luxury on which

he no longer need rely. He tossed up his chin and laughed, then clamped the knife between his teeth—thank the gods he'd not dropped it—so he could run his fingers through his sodden tresses.

He was back, a merman, and never had he felt mightier.

A quick glance back toward the *Alice O'Shanty*, now fifteen yards afar, diluted his joy. A bedraggled figure climbed up a rope dangled down the ship's side. Kemp. He had dived in after him again. George and Peffy leaned over the railings, reeling Kemp in. When they'd gathered him over, all three drooped like broken reeds. They believed Raef had drowned.

Raef kept low among the crests and hissed, torn. He discovered he didn't like to think of them being sad, their humor tempered. Yet why would they mourn him? However stunning Kemp's kiss had been, however gentle his touch, Raef had been his captive. If he revealed his true form, Kemp would most likely want to net him and clap him in irons yet again. Although the ship would never catch him, he would not bless Kemp with the opportunity for a chase.

Raef swam due east, toward the now fully-fledged sun, chasing the white horses as he plowed against the currents. How he'd missed this vigorous body, his sinewy tail. He wanted to race with the eels and leap and dive with the dolphins, though he'd no time to frolic. He'd a long journey ahead and must feed and rest, too. For tonight, he would become human again, and at last, reveal himself to Lord Haverford.



"I suppose I must find clothes," muttered Raef to himself at dusk. In human form, he trotted up the shingle, toes wriggling as the sharper stones bit his soles.

He'd spent the last few hours waiting, but Haverford had not come to his cave. Raef couldn't blame him, after that terrifying encounter with Kemp. Nonetheless, Raef hadn't the patience to wait 'til the morrow. His close encounter with death had made him bold. Now he'd placed some distance between himself and Kemp, he'd renewed his dislike for kluggites. The

emotion was somewhat short of the loathing he sought, but it fired his need to see Haverford. Once Raef laid eyes on Haverford again, he'd think of Kemp no more.

Raef picked his way up the side of beach, keeping as far as he could from the cluster of fishermen's cottages. One of the boats was still out, and he discerned the silhouette of a bonneted woman at the window, watching and waiting for her husband to return. He felt sorry for her, understanding how longing ailed one. But tonight, maybe his wait would be over. Despite the jagged shingle, he upped his pace. Savoring the feel of Haverford's knife handle in his palm, he hardly cared if his feet were cut and bled.

The steps up from the beach were nothing more than a few pieces of flat stone jutting out from a wall, and they were slippery with slime. Raef negotiated them with care, and found himself at the start of the path up to the castle. Light blazed in the large windows, and smoke spiraled upward in dark plumes from the chimneys behind the crenellations. A flag flew from the highest turret, twitching in the breeze. The same wind lashed his damp skin, making him shudder. Clothes became imperative, though he daren't take anything from the fishermen's dwellings with that fishwife on watch.

He started up the track, entranced by the vast complex before him. As he got closer, he spotted many smaller buildings surrounding the castle that he'd never noticed from the sea. The path soon widened, joining up with a driveway that wound down from the north. He had to tread carefully to avoid the grooves left by the wheels of carts. A small flock of those white fluffy animals blocked his way up ahead, worrying him. Would they bite? It seemed not. As he grew close, they bleated, then scattered like herring would. The driveway took him over a ditch and then through an unmanned gateway, flagged with posts topped by sculptures of roaring dragons.

He was almost at the castle, as far as he'd ever been from the shore. Too near this human dwelling place for comfort, although his curiosity flared. A crow cawed and flapped overhead, and Raef hurried from the path to edge along the side of an orchard. A man and woman were standing out on the castle's veranda, and more shadowy figures could be seen through the windows, moving as if dancing. There was music too, soaring strains from instruments quite alien to his ears. The tingle of laughter was familiar

enough, and he battled a jolt of envy. Haverford had company in his house tonight, plenty of it. Would he ever get a chance to see his lord alone?

Raef tiptoed between fragrant herbs and sleeping flowers 'til he reached the first of the outbuildings—a large suite of rooms that stretched around three sides of a square, fronted by an archway topped with a tower. Though unlit, save a lantern at one window, Raef discerned snorts and scuffles. He spotted a long-nosed beast swaying its head through the gap above a half-door.

Ah, horses. He'd learned about these in the schoolroom, and had seen men riding them near the castle as well as Haverford driving one in his gig. This was a stable. The horses were a bit large for him to wish to get too close. He'd seek his clothing elsewhere.

The next outhouse was smaller and displayed no lights. The first door was shut fast, but the second was left unlocked, so he swung it forward and stepped into the gloom. A sharp scent hit him, mingled with something sweet and fragrant. His eyes began to adjust, and he could barely contain a cry of delight. He'd found a room full of clean clothes.

The finest outfit he'd ever seen gleamed in the faint illumination that seeped in from outside. A broad-shouldered jacket with a scarlet waistcoat was stretched on a wooden stand, embroidered in floral patterns with thread that glimmered gold. The buttons shone too, and Raef rushed over to touch and fondle, ghosting his fingers over tightly-fitting knee breeches made of kid-soft leather. This must be one of his lord's outfits, and he thirsted to wear it. Would it look well on him, or would he look a mere wretch compared to Haverford? He decided to leave it. Such finery would render him conspicuous.

He dried himself before locating a modest pair of trousers and a shirt, which he adored the clean smell of, and a pair of brown shoes, the first he'd ever worn. He had to blow out the light to dress, but Kemp's lessons meant that the laces presented Raef with little trouble. Soon, he was ready. He tucked the knife in his waistband, and then ... what to do? Perhaps he should attempt to enter the house, locate Haverford's bedchamber, and wait. He desperately wanted his first encounter with Haverford to be just the two of them.

Upon opening the door a crack, Raef started. Haverford paced down the side of the castle and headed past him toward the stables. The remembrance of that light in the stables worried him, but perhaps his lord was taking the air or visiting the horses rather than another human. This was Raef's chance. He had to take it.

As soon as Haverford disappeared, he crept after, fast as he dared. The shoes felt strange and tight. While they cushioned his feet from the mud and gravel, it was harder to tread softly. He cringed, walking on the sides, which proved painful. Pressing his back to the wall, he edged under the archway into the stable block.

When he heard voices, his heart plummeted. Haverford had gone to an occupied part of the building, and Raef could make out his silhouette through the window as he conversed with a man within. So near, yet still they couldn't be alone together. But maybe the other fellow would leave soon. If this individual was a servant, Haverford could be ordering him on some errand or to saddle up a horse for a night ride. If Haverford remained there unaccompanied, Raef would go to him.

Spying a door that led to a dark area near the lit one, Raef stole toward it and slipped inside. It was an empty compartment, the floor piled with hay. To Raef's joy and fright, he was divided from Haverford by only one more empty stall. Beyond that, above the top of a wooden partition, he could see Haverford's profile glittering in the candlelight. And he could hear him.

"Stephen," drawled Haverford. "I'm getting bored with your groveling. Where the deuce is your sister?"

"I'm sorry, my lord," replied Stephen, "but mother's not well tonight, and Eliza had to stay in and nurse her. But I'll do anything you like in her stead."

Stephen sounded ... scared. Was Raef's love being cruel to this man? He snuck into the next stall, so only a single screen divided him from Stephen and Haverford.

Finding a chink in the wood, he pressed his eye to it. Stephen—up close, a slim lad with pale skin and sunken cheeks—had dropped to his knees. He struggled to undo the flap at the front of Haverford's silk breeches, to uncover Haverford's fine body, as Raef had craved to uncover Kemp's. Raef

held his breath, but wanted to cry out, scream in outrage. He had competition for Haverford's affections. Haverford wanted Stephen after all. And Stephen's sister, too!

Jealousy stabbed like a trident in Raef's gut. He tried to reason with it. After all, Haverford didn't know he existed yet. All was not lost. Haverford had never looked nobler, the curl of his hair perfect, his ribbon straight, and his chiseled jaw squared. He clenched a fist in Stephen's shock of blond hair.

"Get on with it," he growled. "This had better be good, or—" He gestured with his head to where a black-tongued whip hung on the wall.

Raef gulped, glued to the hole in the timber, his brains in as much tumult as his heart. He felt like his eyes were bulging as he discerned the outline of Haverford's prick, straining against the fabric, swelling beneath Stephen's fumbling. Stephen was so lucky, so privileged, yet his hands trembled. Haverford yanked at his hair. "Hurry up, boy."

Maybe Stephen liked Haverford to be rough and craved the gentle lick of that whip. After all, Raef himself dreamed of Haverford commanding and possessing him, body and soul.

But it was no good. Now the initial onslaught of envy had passed, Raef couldn't subdue the doubts that dogged him. The scene before him left a brackish taste in his mouth, a world away from the honeyed swirl in his belly evoked by Kemp's nearness, let alone Kemp's passionate kiss. Haverford still looked like the perfect romantic hero, Raef's handsome prince... but maybe, just maybe, Lord Haverford was less beautiful within than his fair face suggested.

The sound of clopping hooves caused everyone to startle. "Damnation." Lord Haverford shoved away Stephen, who caught himself on one hand, then echoed Haverford's angry grunt with one of pain. "Get out of here, you little shit." Haverford kicked in his direction, narrowly missing him as he scrambled backward, pulling his wrist in tight and cradling it. "See to these riders, and then fetch your doxy of a sister, to the blazes with your mother! I'll have you both later, or I'll have you spread-eagled and thrashed so thoroughly you'll not sit down 'til Michaelmas."

Stephen dragged himself up and obeyed, still nursing his arm. He'd blanched a shade paler than before. Haverford laced himself in crossly before he strutted to the door. "Ah, Simpson. There you are. What news, man, what news?"

"No sight of the Pirate Kemp," said Simpson, a stolid man of middle years who sported a three-cornered hat and carried a musket, which Raef knew to be a fearsome firearm. "But my chaps in the yeomanry cavalry are on their way here now, and a hundred royal dragoons will be arriving at Lilhaven at nightfall tomorrow. From there, we'll be positioning them in every port, inlet, and bay up the coast for fifty miles. The next time that blackguard makes land, he'll be done for."

Raef felt sick. Haverford rubbed his hands and emitted a full-blooded chuckle. "Excellent. I'll travel up to Lilhaven to greet the troops myself. This is going to be fantastic sport. I'd like to be there at the start, then I'll enjoy it all the more when I see him hanged."

No. You can't! Raef bit his tongue to stop himself protesting. He understood that these men must stop the kluggites from thieving, but Kemp didn't deserve to die.

"Whatever happens," promised Simpson, "we'll make sure you're in at the kill, my lord."

"Oh, I will be, you can trust in that." Haverford slapped Simpson's back. "Now, my dear Sheriff, this is hardly the place for us to discuss such niceties as executing pirates. Let us retreat to the billiards room and take a cup of Madeira, eh? Drink to our future laurels."

"And to one soon-to-be-dead bandit and his crew," added Simpson. Haverford snuffed the candle, then strode from the stable, Simpson following at his heel like a pup.

Raef fell away from his spyhole and dropped his face to his hands. His lord was beautiful still, but his heart no longer blossomed with affection. Doubt riddled him, and he felt no envy of the benighted Stephen. Raef had wished to feel the force of Haverford's strong body... but not in the cold fashion Stephen had suffered it. He was so confused again. He'd still got Haverford's knife, and surely presenting that would please him. Haverford

might treat Raef differently to Stephen, if he understood the nature of Raef's devotion.

Or perhaps not.

And what about the pirates? If the *Alice O'Shanty* was to make port at Lilhaven to find this Cecilia woman, Kemp would sail straight into danger. Raef couldn't abide the thought of anybody inflicting painful deaths on the *Alice O'Shanty's* crew. They didn't deserve *that*. They'd been rough, but also kind.

His hot breath congealed beneath his fingers and perspiration prickled on his brow. Nothing had turned out as it was supposed to. It might be best to leave this place forever, to swim away and forget them all. To return to his life of dreaming among the fishes and tracing patterns on the cliffs as the long hours rolled by. Yet could he ever forget Haverford's proud beauty?

Or Kemp's shattering kiss?

The dagger at his belt felt heavy, tugging down his waistband so the night air brushed his hip. He could find Haverford, present the weapon, and try to sway him from wanting Stephen and his sister, tonight or ever again. Alternatively, he could set out for Lilhaven and save that rogue Kemp from unthinkable horrors.

Raef stared into the hay, and only one man's face filled his mind's eye. Once his choice was made, he realized it'd been no choice at all.

"Captain Jon Kemp," he murmured. "What have you done to me?"



Six

Soon after Haverford and Simpson left, a second set of riders arrived in a cacophony of whoops and horn blasts, giving Stephen much work to do. Raef panicked that the stable lad would bring one of the horses into the stall where he hid, but there was no chance to slip away unseen.

The newcomers talked much about the pirate. "The *Alice O'Shanty* is faster than Mercury," said one fellow, who was dismounting in the yard. Catching the ship's name, Raef hurried to crouch beneath the window and listen. "She's a winged chariot, and that Kemp's the devil himself. We'll never catch 'im."

"Aye, we will," came a gruff reply, "now Haverford's set his black heart on it. What that man wants, he gets."

The men walked away toward the house, beyond Raef's earshot. He sank down, head spinning. Kemp had accused Haverford of having a black heart when he'd robbed the lord. Was Haverford really as dreadful as Raef was starting to suspect?

He found it hard to take in, after dreaming of Haverford for so many nights and seeing him entertaining that elderly lady. But he didn't want anybody to hunt down Kemp. The idea made his guts curdle, though there was little he could do 'til he got back into the sea at dawn. If he swam all day, he might make Lilhaven by nightfall, around the same time that the royal dragoons and Haverford's yeomanry cavalry were due to arrive. He must find the *Alice O'Shanty* or locate this Cecilia woman in order to warn Kemp in time.

Stephen stumbled back into the adjoining compartment. By the time Raef had his eye to the crack in the wood, Stephen had fallen sound asleep. Raef felt a twinge of sorrow for him. Stephen hadn't remembered to get his sister,

and Raef fretted that Haverford would be mean to him. He pulled a face. He was falling rapidly out of love with Lord Haverford.

The notion saddened him. After the tide had washed him to the shore near Haverford's castle, their union had seemed fateful, like the mer stories of old. But goodness, the reality proved so complex that his head hurt. Stephen's gentle snores, however, made him soporific, so he buried himself beneath the straw and dozed for a while. He tried not to sleep too deeply, jolting himself every few minutes. The scratchy hay made his eyes itchy and collaborated with his omnipresent fear of discovery, making the task of wakefulness relatively easy. It was an effort not to sneeze.

After what felt like a decent rest, Raef extracted himself and went to the window. Moonlight dusted the yard, and all was silent, save the faint yapping of a hound. He yawned and stretched. Time to get back to the beach.

He tiptoed out into the yard, only to be blinded by a swinging lantern, held aloft on a pole by a tall figure coming under the arch. Raef froze. He'd timed his exit poorly. Lord Haverford was returning to spend more time with Stephen.

"Eh, eh. What have we here?" Haverford's voice sounded slurred. He plunged forward and grabbed Raef's shirt, shoving the lantern so close to Raef it scorched. "Who are you? Friend of Stephen's?"

Grasping at the lifeline, Raef nodded, wishing he could see Haverford's expression. The brightness dazzled him. Haverford didn't sound angry, though his breath reeked of liquor, coarse as that revolting substance they'd given Raef on the *Alice O'Shanty*.

"God damn it." Haverford moved the lantern aside in order to shove his face nearer. His eyes were rimmed in red, and he bore his teeth. Up close, these turned out to be less than lustrous, mottled in brown with receding gums. "You're *prettier* than his harlot of a sister." His beam grew shark-like. "That spider-shanked boy might've just saved himself from a smart hiding. What's your name?"

"Raef, my lord."

Haverford relinquished his grip and traced the line of Raef's jaw with his leather-clad thumb. "That's a rum moniker. I like it. I like *you*, young Raef."

This was Lord Haverford, *his* Lord Haverford. Proximity hadn't diminished the perfection of Haverford's features. Haverford ran his tongue around slender lips, and Raef's breath caught. Was Haverford about to kiss him? Once, the prospect would've made him weak with pleasure. Now, his innards churned. Bile rose up in his throat.

"I have an idea," drawled Haverford, pressing him back 'til he was braced against the stable wall. "Tomorrow, I'd like to take you on a little voyage. There's a spot that I bring only the most bang-up young coves and bits of muslin to." What *was* Haverford talking about? He was just as incomprehensible as those pirates. "It's a cave. I think you'd enjoy it there. The views are splendid, and we can get to know each other properly. "

No!

The scream from Raef's heart nigh unhinged him, overwhelming his ability to speak. It was too late. Haverford's hard lips were upon Raef, sloppy and wet and tasting foul. He jabbed at Raef's mouth with his tongue, forcing entry. Raef struggled not to gag. Haverford snaked his free arm around Raef's shoulders and ground the hard bulge in his breeches against Raef's belly, dangerously close to the dagger tucked in his waistband.

Haverford's dagger.

Oh, gods.

Haverford broke away and jumped back, leaving Raef panting and fretting. "What's this? Since when did ragamuffins come to my property armed?"

Amid his panic, Raef decided it would be best to be as close to honest as he dared. He pulled out the knife and presented it, sheath first, to Lord Haverford. "The dagger is yours, I believe, my lord. I, er, found it on the beach, and knew nothing so fine could belong to anybody else. I was going to return it to you."

Haverford snatched the weapon and scrutinized it. "It is mine. And you found it on the beach, did you?"

"Y-yes," replied Raef. Haverford loomed over him, mean and threatening. "Honestly, that's how it happened. That's why I came here."

"I thought you said you were a friend of Stephen's." Haverford clenched his fist so tight the knuckles cracked beneath his gloves. "Are you trying to bamboozle me?"

Raef gulped. "No?"

"What going on?" Stephen appeared at the stable door, rubbing his eyes. "Oh, my lord, I—"

"Do you know this fellow?" demanded Haverford.

"Um, I don't think so, my lord." Stephen blinked, stepping into the stream of the lantern light to gain a better view of Raef. Haverford edged aside to let Stephen see, and Raef charged forward and shoved Stephen from his path. He ran under the arch and made for the gate with all the swiftness he could muster.

"Stop that fellow. Confound it! He's with that scaly pirate, for sure."

Haverford's bellows clanged in Raef's ears. A dewy breeze whisked against his cheeks, the fresh smell of wet grass filling his nostrils. He charged through the early morning gloom, putting all his hopes into his human legs' ability to carry him. Fortunately, he felt much stronger than the last time he'd shifted. He charged down the driveway, setting the white animals bleating and scattering, and coneys dashing for their burrows. A bell began to chime. Folk would make chase for sure.

From behind him, morning light streaked in dappled shafts and carved cracks in the brooding sky. If he could just make it to the water, fortune would be on his side.

Reaching the seashore, Raef kicked off his shoes and plunged into the breakers. He gasped as they slapped his shins, his thighs, and then his groin. The cold sliced much more cruelly into his human form than his merman one, but he'd no chance to cringe or hesitate. Shouts shattered the peace,

setting the crows screeching in their treetop bowers. Raef inhaled deeply, then dived forward, swimming as far as he dared before surfacing for air.

When he did, the swell of the whitecaps shielded him from the beach. He kicked his way out of his trousers, which he knotted about his arm in the nick of time. He dipped back under, as the sun breached the eastern horizon, and the shift into his merman form took hold.



Raef's swim up to Lilhaven took nigh as much time as the sun's passage across the sky. When he paused among the waves to gaze upon the U-shaped cluster of houses in the cove, they were bathed in evening light. The royal dragoons would soon be in town, Haverford and his yeomanry cavalry too, and Kemp might already be there. There was no sign of the *Alice O'Shanty* in the harbor, though that did not surprise Raef. Kemp would've found somewhere safe and secret to moor her. As Raef well knew, there were plenty of hidden creeks.

Having already checked the coast in the north, Raef opted to swim south to trace the *Alice O'Shanty*. If Kemp and the crew were still on board, he could warn them before they marched into danger.

He explored several coves familiar to him, including one of his favorite dreaming spots, where the crumbling cliffs formed patterns that resembled animals, fish, and faces. Eventually, he spied the main mast and crow's nest of the *Alice O'Shanty* peeping from between the rocks of a narrow inlet, the ship's position close to invisible from the sea, let alone the shore. He sought out the deep-water channel the ship had navigated, and soon drew within spitting distance of the barnacles that clung to her hull.

The creek seemed tranquil, and so was the ship. Raef gripped a rope dangling over her port side and hauled himself up, a feat that set his biceps straining. Peeping over the rail, he experienced a surge of apprehension that mingled equally with disappointment. The deck was empty, save Victor, who was slumped at the bottom of the mainmast. The old man slept with his mouth agape like some sea beast basking for shrimp. No sign of Kemp; the rest of the crew must've already traveled to the village. Raef would have to

change into his human shape to pursue them. He'd be in great danger entering the port with Haverford at large and thinking him a thief.

But he'd do it, and he laughed ruefully at the fickleness of his resolution. Two days ago he'd have done anything for Haverford, and now a contrary determination grew by the minute. He'd swim down to Lilhaven and risk his neck to save Kemp.



Once he was back in his human body, Raef scrambled up the beach and climbed up onto the Lilhaven jetty. Though the evening pressed on, the quayside still bustled. Fortunately, there was as yet no sign of uniformed men. The royal dragoons and yeomanry cavalry had still not arrived. A series of blazing beacons lit the wharf where several boatloads of fisherman were bringing in their catches. A gaggle of older women gutted the fish while girls in colorful headscarves peddled whelks, clams, and mussels. A freshly-caught lobster waved its antennae at Raef from a wicker cage.

It wrenched Raef's heart, but he could hardly stoop to free it. He attracted more attention than he liked as it was for being a stranger, and because of his sodden clothes. They were the ones he'd been in when he'd taken the plunge to escape Haverford. He'd dragged them with him through the ocean all day.

"Been for a dip, boy?" asked one bearded fisherman, whose companions laughed as they reeled in their nets. Raef tried not to scowl. He didn't want to make enemies. Neither did he fancy asking these fellows about the whereabouts of Cecilia, let alone enquire if they'd seen any pirates or dragoons.

Besides, something about this place struck him as strange. While the seas reaped riches, the people's clothes were ragged, and the houses were in need of repair and more than a lick of whitewash. Kemp had said Lilhaven was Lord Haverford's town, but Haverford clearly didn't care much for its upkeep.

Raef's experience was fast obliterating the merfolk mantra that fair faces always told of fine souls. His beautiful noble was mean, as well as cruel. Growing ever more pleased he'd chosen to take Kemp's part, Raef hurried past an alehouse, The Bosun's Locker, a crumbling shack alive with revelers. Inside, a fiddler struck up a merry tune and a woman sang in a tremulous contralto. The music enticed him more than the languid strains he'd heard at Haverford's immaculate castle, but he wasn't brave enough to enter. He worried he should—after all, if he'd traveled inland sooner, he might've also learned the truth of Haverford sooner—but everything was still so new and strange.

Farther on, he spied a girl carrying a bucket toward a narrow set of steps, which wound up the cliffs to a higher row of cottages. She'd be his safest target. He ran over, nearly slipping on a thread of wrackweed. "Excuse me, miss."

She turned around, four steps up the flight. She was a tiny, elfin individual with large eyes that twinkled.

"Do you know where Cecilia lives?" he asked.

She tucked a tendril of sandy hair beneath her cap and pressed her small mouth into a line. Maybe she didn't know Cecilia. Then again, this village couldn't number more than a few hundred souls.

At length, she answered, clipped and defensive. "Friend of hers, are you?"

Recalling Kemp's account of the attack on Cecilia and the other women, Raef understood her guardedness. "I'm more of a friend of a friend," he explained. "I need to get a message to a man who might be visiting her today. It's very urgent."

"And what might this friend's name be?"

He breathed his answer. "Jon Kemp."

Her expression softened into a rueful smile. "Very well. See those cottages at the end of the quay?" She pointed to a row of low dwellings back beyond the tavern, lining the base of the cliffs. They were only just

visible in the murk behind the beacons. "Cecilia lives in the house at the very end. Will you send her my love, please? She's a sweetheart, and ... Oh!" Descending the steps to his level, she retrieved a piece of rag, scooped a few whelks from her bucket, and pressed them upon him. "You give her these. Say they're from Sarah, and be quick, mind. They're tastiest when they're fresh."

"Thank you, I will." She hurried back up the steps, leaving Raef cradling the rag and its soggy contents in his hands. He was hungry, and the prospect of food made his stomach grumble. He forwent the temptation to steal yet again and started along the wharf toward the cottage.

It was quiet at the far side of the village. Raef's nerves buzzed, especially when he spotted a light flickering from the single window of the building at the end. The cottage was perched with its rear wall flush to the cliff and a ten foot drop to the beach on its right. Raef paused, readying to rap his knuckles on the peeling green door. The sound of conversation had him scuttling back and ducking beneath the window. Crouching and listening seemed to have become a habit of late.

"Have you unburied the letter your mother left you?" said a voice, deep and gravelly and unmistakably Kemp. Raef's heart lurched. He couldn't make out Cecilia's whispered answer, so he put down the whelks and peeped inside. A meager fire burned in a hearth, over which dangled a kettle on a hook. In front, a large tabby cat sprawled on a threadbare rug, though the walls were far from bare. Numerous shelves were lined with jars stuffed with nuts, berries, and liquids, and pinned along the fronts were hundreds of dried leaves.

Cecilia, Raef guessed, was a healer. There must be poisons among this horde too, including the acid she'd thrown in her mystery attacker's face. There was but one room in the whole dwelling, for Cecilia's cot bed was pressed to the only blank wall. Her darned stockings were draped over the frame, by which stood Cecilia herself.

She was a willowy girl with long, ginger hair and an air of aristocratic grace that belied her tattered skirts. Kemp, who stooped to fit his height beneath the rafters, grasped both her hands in his. Raef spotted the ruby ring, which glinted from a chain about her neck.

"So the letter reveals the map is probably somewhere in his house," said Kemp. "It's not much to go on, but it's enough. I will break in and get it for you." Kemp fixated on her, and Raef had rarely seen him so grave. It was all so un-piratical. "I solemnly vow it to you. For your trouble is my trouble. 'Tis all our tr—"

Raef felt like stuffing his fingers in his ears. He didn't want to hear more. It looked like Kemp was in love with Cecilia. Maybe that was why Kemp pushed him away. Now Raef had allowed himself to fall in love with this pirate, his heart would end up broken. Damn Kemp, and damn his own stupidity.

Or *had* he fallen in love? Raef slumped down. Why *should* the notion of these two being lovers unsettle him? He mustn't grow too fond. He was drawn to Kemp, who made his body ache with need. But if Raef was falling too hard for the pirate, he should fight it. After all, his adoration for Haverford had proven false. Indeed, everything he'd believed about the world had been turned on its head. He'd promised his mother he'd seek love, but he was unsure what that was anymore, or at the least, how to find it. Perhaps he'd never know.

Misery clenched like a cold fist in Raef's chest. He felt deflated and limp as the whelks, which lay beside him in the rag. He was as alone as he'd ever been since he'd left his tribe and had lost even the drive to warn Kemp about Haverford. Kemp would have survived such close calls without warnings before. He didn't need Raef. Nobody needed Raef. But the thought of a solitary night in this cursed human body and wet clothes—then wading back into the sea alone—was more than he could stand.

He puffed out his cheeks and braced himself. He'd knock. Just as soon as he felt brave enough. Maybe Cecilia and her cat would be kind enough to let him warm himself by the fire. He'd encountered cats when stalking around the fisherman's cottages and had enjoyed how they rubbed their furry faces against his cold legs.

An outbreak of shouts and screams from the direction of the alehouse set Raef jolting. He jolted. Between the glowing beacons, he made out the outlines of men on horses with high hats. Others on foot were dressed in

scarlet jackets that shone in the torchlight. Haverford's yeomanry cavalry and the royal dragoons had arrived all at once.

Kemp would see and hear them from the window just as clearly as he did. He'd no need to warn Kemp now, and despite the lure of that hearth, he was having second thoughts about wiling his way inside. Raef had best get out of here before Kemp came out of the cottage, found him lurking, and chained him up again for being a lunatic. And Kemp *would* be out soon, unless he was too busy wooing Cecilia to notice.

He dragged himself up and walked as far as the next cottage, seeking the nearest flight of steps to take him down onto the beach. He'd jump, but he didn't want to risk breaking an ankle. Beside the pain, he feared it might jeopardize his ability to shift between forms in the morning, and all he wanted now was to flee and hide. Being so close to Kemp, yet so far, constituted torture.

Is he kissing Cecilia like he kissed me? Is he giving her what I sought, the thrust of that sword of flesh, receiving her willing surrender? Oh gods, to feel his touch again, the brush of his—

A gunshot shattered through the night, echoed by more screams. The door of the alehouse flew open, and a group of the red-coated dragoons poured out, lugging two men between them. Raef widened his eyes; even from a distance, he recognized those faces. They weren't the sort anybody would forget: George and Peffy.

"Are these the two?" hollered one the dragoons. "Are these the ruffians that robbed Lord Haverford?"

"His Lordship will be here soon enough to tell us," answered another, though the voice was close to drowned by the general tumult, which included many shouts of disapprobation.

"Where were you when our womenfolk were being murdered?" called one man. "You're worse than the smugglers or the picaroons."

"Pirate Kemp would make a better governor than the tyrant we've got," cried a female. "He might lower the bleedin' rents, if nothing else." As it struck Raef that Haverford must be the tyrant she spoke of, there came

another bang and a flash. A dragoon had fired a musket into the air, and the woman protestor wailed.

After edging along the quay 'til the wall was low enough, Raef sprang down onto the beach. He felt bad for George and Peffy, but if they were stupid enough to be caught making merry in an alehouse, what could he do? The same went for the villagers, whom the dragoons now pushed about and jostled. He couldn't help them; he was just one merman, though he felt sad all the jaunty songs had ceased. The people's fate was in Haverford's hands. The notion made him shudder as he crept across the beach in quest of an empty boat with a dry corner to curl up in.

From the tail of his eye, he saw the door of Cecilia's cottage swing open. Kemp finally ran out, but he didn't escape across the beach like Raef. He sprinted toward the dragoons.

Don't go that way. Haverford will kill you!

Without pausing for consideration, Raef legged it back up the beach, vaulting onto a fishing boat and then up on the jetty. He crouched behind a lobster pot, about ten paces short of the dragoons and their prisoners. He had to stop Kemp ... but it was too late.

"Ahoy there!" Kemp strode toward the armed men, brandishing a cutlass as if he intended to cut them all down in a single swipe. "If you want the fearsome Pirate Kemp, you'll be needing me, not that brace of land lubbers. Never seen 'em before in my life."

Struggling in the clutch of several dragoons, George opened his mouth to protest. Kemp twitched the cutlass in his direction, and he snapped his gob shut again. For a few rushing heartbeats, silence gripped the port. Then Kemp charged for the dragoons, blade flashing, and the dragoons set upon him like a swarm of scarlet bees.

Raef balled his fists at his sides. He'd no experience of real fights but couldn't stand by and watch Kemp injured or killed. That would destroy him. A workman who'd gone to harry the dragoons had left his tools lying on the quay, including a wooden mallet just beyond Raef's reach. Temptation reared. If he could jump up and strike quickly, he might aid Kemp's cause without being taken.

Kemp had been subsumed beneath a wall of dragoons. Raef inched toward the weapon, grasped it, and then approached the affray from behind, weaving between the pots on the balls of his feet. He straightened slowly, gripping the mallet in an unsteady hand... and somebody seized the scruff of his still-damp shirt and spun him around. On being violently shaken, Raef dropped the mallet, which landed with a thud. He stared into the buttery visage of Simpson. The man Haverford had called sheriff. The yeomanry cavalry pressed in, one of them raising a baton in a meaty paw.

Oh, gods!

Humans mightn't be fleet as fishes, but amid the ruckus, this lot proved stealthier than he'd given them credit for.

"What've we got here," snarled Simpson. "Going to help your pock-faced pirate friend, were you, my seedy fellow?"

Pock-faced? Was Simpson blind? And what was wrong with *his* face? Up close, Raef could see red blisters covering Simpson's left cheek and chin.

"He must be one of Kemp's men," said a yeoman, who shoved his weasel-like visage so near Raef saw the hairs sprouting from his nostrils.

Fear paralyzed Raef; he couldn't breathe. And before he could muster any kind of answer, the baton smashed into the back his skull, pain split through him, and everything went black.



Seven

Consciousness returned to Raef with an unkind promptness. He was grabbed from all angles, shaken and hustled. Hostile shouts blended with the screeches of a gull, and he feared his brains would explode. Blood trickled from a wound on his head, his neck ached, and his stomach... *Ugh*. It pitched and churned like a stormy ocean. When he finally pried his eyes open, he found himself ensconced in the none-too-gentle grasp of a couple of yeomen, one of whom had him by the hair. It took effort not to be sick all over the quayside.

Lord Haverford had arrived, mounted on a white horse and sporting an enormous feathered hat. He looked magnificent and terrible, his handsome countenance bent into an ever-changing mask of malice. A few paces away from Raef, he towered over his other prisoner—Kemp.

Kemp was flanked by a couple of hefty dragoons. He had been disarmed, though he stood tall and unflustered. "Well, well, well," he said. "It's the great nip-farthing himself. Have you come to pay back all you've thieved from the folks of Lilhaven? Or are you here to confess that you sent your yeomen to commit murder?"

Murder? The new accusation shocked Raef, but he was starting to believe Haverford capable of anything dastardly.

"Silence, scum." Haverford spat in Kemp's direction, but fell short. Kemp laughed with a defiant air.

"M'lord," shouted one of Raef's captors, joggling Raef 'til his brains seemed to rattle. "We got another of the rogues. He were running to help."

Haverford slid his gaze onto Raef, his viciousness shadowed by a glimmer of surprise. "Good God, *that* young scallywag? Yes, he's one of the pirate's band for sure."

Kemp blinked hard at Raef, as if trying to clear his vision. For the first time, he looked ruffled. Despite his spinning head, Raef managed an apologetic cringe. It exacerbated the ongoing pain of being held up partially by the hair.

"I've never seen this man before either," protested Kemp. He'd have sounded convincing if his voice hadn't cracked.

"Codswallop!" bellowed Haverford. "This little blighter thieved from my stable this morning. Threatened me with my own knife, which *you* stole." He shouted over Kemp's ongoing protests. "Right, men. Put Kemp in the lockup here for the night, and my yeomanry cavalry will take him to my castle for tomorrow afternoon, when I will assemble a special assizes." He sneered at Kemp. "But don't you worry, my sentence is already decided. You'll be subjected to the cruelest form of execution the law allows."

Kemp merely quirked his brows. Raef's heart clenched, though he clung to hope. Maybe Kemp would get away. He couldn't see George and Peffy anywhere, so Kemp's dramatic intervention had allowed their escape, at least. Above all, he prayed he and Kemp would be imprisoned together. He'd confess... well, explain everything he could to Kemp, save his real identity. If he had Kemp at his side, it might make the experience more bearable, whether they were thrown in this lockup or the county jail.

"As for this little devil!" Haverford bared teeth at Raef as if he wanted to chew him to bits. "As Lord Lieutenant of the County, I reserve the right to deal with him personally. Take him to my carriage."

"No!" Raef's protest went unheeded, except perhaps by Kemp, who called his name. But they had already been swept out of each other's sight. A horrible sense of desolation seized Raef.

The yeomen frog-marched him along the quayside. In the gloom beyond the beacons, he discerned a four-wheeled carriage, with a driving seat at the front occupied by a liveried servant, and two footmen on the platform at the rear. One of the footmen held up a lantern, looking down his long nose at Raef and scoffing. Raef's head throbbed too much to glare back, and none of his thoughts seemed coherent, save one.

Will I ever see Jon Kemp again?

A yeoman flung him into the back of the carriage and instructed him to sit on the floor. Even for Raef's slim frame, it was a tight squeeze, and he found himself wedged in the foot well. He could hardly move, but still his captor bound his hands and feet with bristly hemp. By now, Raef's fears had numbed; he simply trembled and panted, letting it all happen to him, praying he'd descended into some bad dream. When the yeoman stepped aside, however, he saw through the open door that he'd still an audience to this nightmare. A group of onlookers gathered, with a face he recognized among them.

It was Sarah, the girl who'd given him the whelks for Cecilia. He read what she mouthed, though he couldn't hear a word. *"He'll come for you."*

Then the carriage door slammed, and Raef was lost in the darkness for long enough to wonder whether he'd imagined Sarah's message. Besides, how could she know that *he*—Kemp, Raef assumed—would escape, let alone come after Raef? Why would Kemp rescue Raef anyway? Raef wasn't even one of his men. Indeed, Kemp thought Raef a lunatic, probably all the more so for running into a fight, as a fool would, and getting caught for little reason.

When the carriage door opened again, Haverford climbed in. Raef didn't lift his gaze from the buckled shoes and stocking-clad ankles that came to a rest close by. Haverford touched Raef's sore head, then gripped Raef's hair, twisting hard enough to sting.

"Well, my rum lad." Haverford bore his teeth, more shark-like than ever. He slid his hand over Raef's face, smearing the blood. Upon finding the front of Raef's throat, he squeezed it. He meandered up again to force his thumb into Raef's mouth. The bitter leather of his gloves made Raef want to gag.

"Are you his cabin boy?" asked Haverford, shoving his thumb deeper. Now Raef wanted to bite, but he daren't. "No, don't answer that. I don't want to know. I want to pretend I'm the first to play a little backgammon between those lily-white buttocks of yours. I would like to understand, however, how you managed not to drown this morning. It was choppy out in the bay, to say the least."

He withdrew his probing thumb, then clipped Raef's ear so sharply it rang. "Answer me."

"I-I'm a good swimmer," said Raef, because the truth was all he had. "A very good swimmer."

"I see. Well, swimming won't help you now, my demure little he-doxy, because you're done for." Raef had worked that out. Though he still couldn't comprehend half the strange words the cursed lord uttered, he suspected horrors were in store. "And how delightful," drawled Haverford, "it will be to *do* you."

Raef anticipated a nightmarish journey through the night, with Haverford's hands crawling all over him, and so much worse. While Haverford prodded and kicked him, the carriage clattered and lurched up a steep and winding track. The combination of fear and the jerky motion set Raef's stomach pitching again, and he wondered if he might vomit on Haverford's shoes. Nonetheless, Haverford soon tired of tormenting him. Indeed, on daring to glance upward, Raef noticed Haverford yawning. A short distance beyond the peak, they stopped outside a grand house—at least, it looked impressive from the few glimpses Raef grabbed as he was hauled from the carriage by one of the footmen. His feet were untied, and he discerned sweeping columns framing the house's entrance, topped with a majestic portico veiled in the shroud of night. Overall, though, the mansion seemed smaller than Haverford's.

Haverford had not been expected, and the house was shut up for the night. The servants and their master, an elderly gentleman named Sir Edward Humphrey, scurried in their nightgowns to accommodate the lord and his entourage.

Greetings were exchanged amid the Grecian splendor of the entrance hall. "Lord Haverford," croaked Sir Edward, who wore a drooping white cap. "This is a surprise. Excuse an old gent's kerfuffle, and join me for some elderberry wine, eh?"

"With pleasure," said Haverford, "though I have a small problem to contain." He jerked his thumb in the direction of Raef. "I've a prisoner in transit. One of those pirate rogues."

"Oh." Sir Edward raised an eyeglass and peered Raef's way. "How unsavory. Yes, I'd heard about your trouble with the dreaded Pirate Kemp. Surely, this boy isn't him?"

"No, just some shuffler off his ship," said Haverford. "We've got Kemp secure in the Lilhaven lockup. His recent attack on me was simply the last straw. He's stolen over fifty pounds worth of goods and crops from my landholdings over this past month. Fifty pounds! I feared to put my ships to sea because of the wretch."

"Strange," said Sir Edward. "He's not taken a farthing's worth from me and my tenants, but I suppose it would only have been a matter of time."

"Indeed it would have, I'm sure," barked Haverford, seemingly rankled by this revelation. "Now, I'm weary after a long day defending my grateful public, and would like a spot of supper and a decent rest without fearing for my safety. Do you happen to own an old chest, Sir Edward? A thick and strong one, preferably—though not necessarily—with a chink for air. I've a fancy that'll do the trick."

"No, please!" cried Raef, who'd had enough of being stuffed in poky, dark holes.

His plea was echoed by a shudder from Sir Edward, which Haverford's hawk-like gaze did not miss.

"Would you like the blackguard to slash your throat in your sleep?" hissed Haverford in a tenor that suggested he might like to perform the deed himself. Sir Edward didn't dare argue and did have a chest, which his servants promptly retrieved and dragged across the checkered tiles of the floor.

When one of the yeomen who'd accompanied Haverford started to press Raef toward it, he kicked and struggled. Up close, the chest looked like a bloated coffin, the bowed sides braced by iron strips. Haverford stepped forward to press him inside, mauling Raef's hair once more. "Sweet dreams," he said and slammed the lid shut.

After overcoming his initial panic that he'd run out of air—there were, fortunately, a few cracks in the ancient wood—Raef tried to set his mind

blank. When that failed, he pretended he was somewhere else. He imagined he was in Kemp's bunk, but the fantasy seemed distant and kept breaking. He couldn't muster the concentration to picture Kemp's face. He was more cramped and uncomfortable than he'd been in the bowels of the ship, and worse, he suspected Haverford had barely started the punishments promised to him. Raef's flesh crawled at the memory of Haverford's pawing, and only the mercy of utter exhaustion pressed him into slumber.

When he awoke, jerking up and bashing his head against the lid, he felt groggy and bilious, and his heart galloped. Nothing was a dream. Everything was real, and the chest's constant movement and the sound of grinding wheels suggested he'd been loaded onto the carriage again. They were most likely traveling back to Haverford's castle.

The journey was broken briefly. One of the yeomen plucked Raef from the chest, and they allowed him to relieve himself, a tricky task with his wrists bound. While the footmen served Haverford claret and cold beef, they bound Raef's ankles again, and presented him with water and a crust of stale bread to gnaw on. Raef rested on his knees and stared down at the crust. He fingered it with his tied and dirty hands.

"I'd eat it, my lad," said Haverford. "You can expect something a lot meatier in your mouth later, but you'll still need all the strength you can get."

Raef chewed the tasteless husk, keeping his gaze low, but pinned on Haverford, who quaffed the wine. He swallowed with effort and then hissed through his teeth. This creature he'd once adored had ignited something new in him. Not only had Raef realized he didn't love Haverford, he *hated* him. Where he'd once seen beauty, he now discerned a sharp beaky nose, a haughty brow, and a mouth that twisted continually from one unpleasant shape to another. He even loathed Haverford's gait. Haverford shuffled about with his chest puffed, like an overinflated sea slug.

Deep in his gut, a flame kindled and leaped, still small and weak, but burning fiercer by the moment. In his misery, he understood he'd never hated before, much as he'd never really loved. His irritation with Kemp on the night the pirates robbed this demon paled compared to the loathing for Haverford he nurtured now.

Soon, Raef was packed back in the chest, and the coach rumbled onward. He tried to focus on his hatred, to stoke and cultivate it, but fear's stranglehold remained potent, and his head still hurt.

After an interminable amount of time, the coach ground to a halt again. He felt the chest swaying as folk lifted and carried it, and then after a short voyage, they placed it down again. Raef fortified himself. When the chest was opened, he'd take his next opportunity to spit in Haverford's eye.

Haverford's sneering visage was indeed the first thing he saw when the lid was swung up, and Haverford lugged him out. Raef's mouth was so dry he couldn't yet fulfill his ambition to spit. By the time he swayed unsteadily on his feet, his environs dragged a shocked cry from him instead.

He was in a tiled room, about seven paces square. The severed head of a boar stared down at him from a plinth, its pink tongue lolling from its slack mouth. On all four grimy walls hung pheasants and grouse, many still dripping the blood of which the room stank, and encircled with buzzing flies. Some of the meat hooks were empty, their barbed points blackened with dried gore. An array of whips, knives, and cleavers completed this hall of horrors—so he assumed, another of the outhouses at Haverford's castle. How Raef wished for the sharp-smelling hay of the stable or the fresh odors of the laundry.

Haverford whispered in his ear, putrid breaths flaming against his cold sweat. "Like what you see, my pretty dove? What would you like to feel first? The lick of the whip or the bite of the hook?"

Unable to find words, Raef merely shook his head.

"You will feel them all, don't you worry, as you'll feel every inch of me." Haverford stroked the grotesque bulge at his crotch. Raef faintly hoped he might vomit on Haverford's buckskin breeches. "But sadly, I've other duties to tend to first, so I'll leave you to look forward to the entertainments."

Haverford maneuvered him so his back was to the wall, and then stretched his bound wrists upward and hoisted them over one of the hooks. This forced Raef to rise onto tiptoes and pulled his arms agonizingly taut above his head. Angry shouts rattled around Raef's fear-addled brain.

Fight back. Kick him. Bite him. Do whatever it takes.

He wriggled, trying to force life into his traumatized frame. Nothing he did could undermine Haverford, who fiddled with the hemp and attached it firmly to the hook. However hard Raef strained, the rope remained firm and he stayed dangling.

Haverford stepped back, surveying him with a warped grin. "Enjoy your day, Raef." He licked his lips, and Raef shrank back against the wall, wishing the tiles would swallow him. "Oh, look at you. Strung up and displayed for me. I'm going to enjoy plucking you, stuffing you, and making you squirm."

To underline his point, he slapped Raef's cheek before plying a bruising kiss. Then he turned, opened the door, slammed it behind, and was gone.

Raef clenched his jaw and jerked at his bonds. Once again, he wouldn't weep, though hot tears pushed in his eyes. Several times of late, he'd believed his lot couldn't get worse. Yet again, it had.

"Hate," he murmured. A fly crawled up his leg. "I must hate him, fight him."

A large part of him wanted to despair. As he glanced between the whips, the dead fowl, and that drooling boar, an icy horror trickled down his spine. Piled in one corner were clubs, batons, and knives, and propped in another was an iron frame with springs and spikes, which looked very much like a man-size version of the mousetrap he'd seen on Kemp's ship.

Oh, gods, Kemp. Part of him still wanted to believe Kemp would come for him, carry him off to sail into a hurricane of kisses and glory. But he was through with that nonsense. A lot of good falling in so-called love had done him.

He sniffed and tried to wipe his face with his shoulder. If he was going to survive this, he'd have to fight his way out by himself. For the first time in his life, he'd act without pinning his hopes and dreams on the approval and affection of others. To hell with Haverford, with Galyna and the elders, and with all he'd gleaned from his poor mother's tales. To hell even with Kemp. Nobody was going to help him, so he'd have to save himself.

The first important task was to get his hands free. Scrambling with his toes to get the best tenure on the floor he could, he tugged at the ropes. The effort scraped his already-grazed wrists, but this was his only hope. Despite his headache and other injuries, he didn't feel as weak as he had on the *Alice O'Shanty*. The more often he shifted into human form, the greater his stamina in that shape became. Though he couldn't and didn't want to be human forever, this was cheering progress in itself.

Eventually, he untangled the ropes from the meat hook and collapsed to the floor, gasping and trying to sit up. Every sinew ached for respite, but he couldn't rest. He dragged himself to the pile of gruesome torture instruments, pressed the ropes that bound his arms to a rusty blade, and started to saw.

He worked swiftly, treating each fraying thread as a triumph. Once he got his wrists loose, he found a sharper knife to release his ankles, then went to the door, which was locked. He shoved it with his shoulder, but the oak felt solid as granite. The room's high windows were too narrow to wriggle through.

He ruffled his hair. So be it. He'd have to do this the hard way—pick a weapon, and pray that when Haverford entered again, he would be alone, and Raef could strike hard enough to incapacitate him.

Could I kill him?

Raef picked up a serrated knife, its handle wrapped with string. He imagined stabbing it into Haverford's side. Would the flank be hard or yielding? Would the ribs resist? The notion of cleaving flesh—even Haverford's hated flesh—chilled him to the marrow of his bones. He didn't think he'd have the nerve to execute the plan. So he picked up a wooden baton instead, and huddled beside the door.

Around midafternoon, he heard the clop of many hooves, and then pattered footfalls on the gravel. Conversations rumbled beyond his hearing, followed by the now-familiar grind of carriage wheels. Silence followed this outburst of activity. Raef couldn't help fearing the worst. Perhaps Haverford had sent all the servants away so he could torment Raef without worry of interference.

He tried to reassure himself this might all be for the best. He'd have a stronger chance of escape after a one-on-one battle. Still, he quivered with fear as well as hunger, and the baton slipped several times from his unsteady hand. Each time, he snatched the weapon up and pricked his ears.

Any... moment... now...

When finally he heard the lock clicking, he jumped. He'd not discerned Haverford's heavy footsteps approaching, which seemed odd. He rose, gripping the club, and flattened his back to the wall behind the door. He'd but one chance at this, a single opportunity to survive.

The door opened a crack, then a little farther. Raef raised the baton, readying to strike. He spied the toe of a boot, rounded and scuffed.

Not a smartly shined buckled shoe, as Haverford wore.

He swung the baton back, but doubt stayed his hand long enough to take in the boldly handsome face of his would-be victim. "Kemp!"

Kemp stooped forward to catch him as Raef dropped the baton and crumpled to his knees. Kemp sunk down with him, enfolding Raef in his arms. He held Raef so tightly that Raef couldn't tell if the thudding pulse against his chest was his, Kemp's, or a mingling of both. Raef buried his face in Kemp's shoulder and balled his fists in Kemp's jacket. Though he'd vowed to get through this without help, and that he loved nobody, he'd never been so pleased to see anyone in his life.

After a few moments of savoring Kemp's embrace, he lifted his cheek from his shoulder and savored the sight of him. Kemp was as real as he was gorgeous, his plush lips pressed tight with concern.

"Are you all right?" asked Kemp, touching Raef's forehead, which was smeared with dried blood. "The gardener told me Haverford had hung you in the game larder, and I feared the worst. Did he hurt you badly?"

Raef shook his head, suppressing a wince when it throbbed. "No, I'm fine, but... How did you get here?"

"Ssssh. No time to explain everything now." Kemp pressed grimy fingers to Raef's lips. "You owe me a few explanations too, mad boy. But to be

brief—Haverford has been called away, presumably because I escaped from the village lockup." Kemp winked. "I told you my men could open any door. We arrived back at the *Alice O'Shanty* before first light and sailed upon the tide. We've got to get moving fast now, though, because with those lobsters flooding the coast, nowhere is safe."

Kemp got up, leaving Raef trying to work out what lobsters were doing out of the sea. He stuck his head out of the door, glanced side to side, then grabbed Raef and pulled him up. "You see, I didn't just come here for you," he said. "I've got to rob the castle before Haverford gets back."

Rob the castle? Raef's nerves pitched and he snatched his hand from Kemp's grasp.

Kemp noticed Raef's grazes from the ropes. "Sorry. Was I hurting you?"

"No." Actually, quite a bit. "That's not the point. Why are you robbing Haverford's house? I thought you'd want to get out of here."

"Oh, no." Kemp's grin puzzled Raef nearly as much as it melted him. "You see, hidden in this castle is a treasure map. I need to get my paws on it, then the game is afoot."

Doubtless this was the map Kemp had been asking Cecilia about. How intriguing.

Raef let Kemp tug him outside, where a strong wind buffeted them. Fortunately, the game larder's entrance was up an alley between outbuildings, so they were under cover for now. Smoothing back his hair, Kemp edged forward to check all was clear by the house.

"It'd better be fine treasure indeed to be worth this risk," whispered Raef.

"Oh, it is." Kemp glanced back and his beam brightened. "We're not after mere gold and silver. We're after proof that this castle—and the whole coastline within thirty miles of here—doesn't belong to Lord Haverford at all."

"Who does it belong to, then?" Raef's head spun nearly as wildly as when he'd been struck.

Kemp smoothed his lips, eyes twinkling. "It's all Cecilia's, and I'm going to make sure she gets it back."



Eight

Cecilia. Everything was Cecilia's.

The notion left a bitter taste in Raef's mouth. He gulped it down, refusing it. Though shaken by his ordeal, his prospects were looking up now that Kemp was here. The idea of going into the castle beguiled him more than it ought. He'd been drawn to this place as long as he'd been drawn to Haverford. Unlike that devil, it lured him still.

"What happens next?" he asked. "How are we going to get inside?"

"Shhhhh." Kemp yanked Raef around a corner, then through a door into the laundry Raef had found the other day. It was empty, though a woman was humming a melody in an adjoining room that formed half of the same outbuilding. They crouched behind a tub containing an enormous, ribbed washboard.

"One of maids is in the buttery," murmured Kemp. "It's best she doesn't see us, though silence can be bought from servants who've no love for their master, and I'll wager this crew has none. The gardener who told me your whereabouts lacked affection there, for sure."

How mistaken Raef had been about Haverford, though his heart no longer ailed as it had. He wondered why. Maybe it was because his ill-fated love had been transformed so completely to hate... or perhaps it was because Kemp was at his side. Kemp and the contents of the laundry certainly proved diverting, particularly Haverford's beautiful suit of clothes set on a frame. Kemp was scanning the room, but he must've read a hungry glint in Raef's eyes. "You like the togs," he said, "nab them."

"What?"

Kemp jumped from their hiding place, removed the jacket and gorgeous embroidered waistcoat, and tossed them in Raef's direction. "If you don't want to stick out like a sore thumb," whispered Kemp, "you'd better cover them with something more modest."

After a moment of hesitation, Raef discarded the jacket and put the waistcoat on, tucking the fabric in his trousers to make it fit. He briefly admired the embroidered flowers, which rambled in strips down the facing, before covering the garment with a modest brown smock from the wash tub. Stealing was wrong, but hell, after what he'd learned about Haverford, it didn't feel that way. Thieving from somebody he disliked turned out to be fun. As was being with Kemp.

"That's what I'm looking for." Kemp pointed to a trapdoor in the floor. "Haverford's had tunnels cut for his slaveys to use between the outhouses and the kitchens beneath the castle. So he doesn't have to look at the poor buggers." Dropping to his knees, he threw the trap open, heralding a blast of musty air. Raef scurried to his side. A flight of steep steps led downward. "One way will lead me to the castle, and the other will lead you to an exit near the ice house. From there you can—"

"No. I want to come with you." The strength of Raef's feelings took him by surprise. He should wish to get away, to lick his wounds and rest. Instead, he was dying to see the castle, and he didn't want to leave Kemp. Not yet, with so much left unsaid. He'd not even thanked Kemp properly. "After all, I am a jewel thief."

Kemp snorted. "Yes, a jewel thief who's never gone out-a-prigging." Raef supposed he meant thieving. "You'd best get out of here, go back to whence you came. Though—" Kemp regarded him sidelong, thoughtful, and Raef felt like he'd burst with hope and anxiety, "—I do want to ask you a few little questions. Now, come on. Let's get down there, before that mopsqueezer comes in to sluice her frillies."

Kemp checked all was clear, and they descended the stairs into the tunnel, where the walls were alive with trickling water and sprawling green lichen. On pulling down the door above them, Kemp shut out much of the light. A grill in the ceiling admitted a hazy shaft, the best illumination the

dour day could offer. The passage was high enough to stand straight, and Kemp rounded on Raef.

"All right, you cut the line and tell me the truth now," said Kemp. "How did you survive your dip in the sea yesterday?"

"I'm a strong swimmer." That answer sounded less convincing than ever. He should've concocted a better lie, some cobblers about being picked up by a boat.

"You were sick as a horse. It's impossible, lad." Kemp drew close. Raef edged backward, mind scrabbling wildly. He wished he could see Kemp's expression and read him better, but it was too dark. "Unless," continued Kemp, "you are what I think you are."

Oh, gods. Could he suspect what I really am?

He gathered himself fast. Maybe Kemp thought he was part of another pirate crew, or an escaped prisoner, or something along those lines. "I-I'm nothing special."

"I've been at sea twenty years. I might not have *seen* your kind before, but I've heard the legends." Every muscle in Raef's body locked tight. Kemp edged back, and the dim light revealed no malice, just a heated interest. "I also want to know why you tried to help me earlier."

"I-I can answer the latter," stammered Raef. "I wanted to help you and your men, because you were good to me. And I felt bad, leaving you as I did. But I... erm..."

Kemp's gaze remained as patient as it was probing, that masculine musk overwhelming. Raef teetered on the verge of surrendering the truth, but he had to think things through. Stall for time before he made another mistake. "I'll tell you the truth of how I survived the swim," he said, "if you let me come into the castle with you. I won't do anything silly, I swear it. I'll leave the thieving to you."

He wasn't a mad boy, though he was beginning to suspect he was a less-than-sane merman. He'd worry about that later.

Kemp shrugged, but then like the sun bursting through storm clouds, he grinned. "Very well. Do exactly what I say." Raef nodded, enthusiastic. "Come on."

They stole down the passage, silent as gliding swans. Raef's heart beat a riot. If Kemp already suspected the truth of him, and still treated him well, maybe Kemp wouldn't entrap him after all. Perhaps they could be true friends without secrets.

Or might they be even more to each other?

He bit his lip hard enough to sting. He mustn't read Kemp's actions in helping him as anything to do with love. He was wiser now. Well, slightly. It would be best to keep his passions in check, and he *really* didn't want to be hasty this time. It couldn't be so hard.

After walking about twenty yards, Kemp edged open a door and led him into a domed lobby, its white tiling reminiscent of the game larder. Raef shuddered.

"That must be the way up into the castle." Kemp pointed to a spiraling staircase at the far end. They'd climbed the first few steps when they heard a door open a short distance above. Kemp's urgent turnabout spoke louder than words. *Retreat. Fast.* They tore back down and through the only portal in the lobby save the way they'd come, closing it behind, but not letting it slam. Inside, barrels were stacked to the vaulted roof, and the air was thick with the tang of fermented fruit. They headed for one of the murkiest corners and squatted behind a large vat.

Slowly, the door swayed open, and a butler stepped in, his livery black with yellow stripes. Kemp grasped Raef's knee, and Raef's flesh prickled. He was scared... but not as much as he ought to be. Having Kemp's large hand on him kindled that unwonted tightness in his trousers, that burgeoning warmth. He must forget it.

Holding a candle aloft, the butler turned to a rack containing a range of dusty bottles, then proceeded to examine them for what seemed like an age. At length, the dry stench of the alcohol made Raef want to sneeze, and he pressed his fingers to his nose, fighting it. Nearby, some animal scuffled

and squeaked. The noise was slight, but the butler turned. The light from the candle licked across the room. Raef held his breath.

"Damned rats," murmured the butler. He selected a bottle and left, shutting the door before turning a key in the lock. Raef's stomach flipped. He and Kemp were imprisoned under a mantle of undiluted blackness.

"Bad master, bad servants," seethed Kemp. "The wine cellar should *always* be kept locked and then we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Sorry," mumbled Raef, because somehow he felt he ought.

"Not your fault, matey." Kemp lifted his hand from Raef's thigh. Raef fought a pang and quietly cursed himself. He should have taken the tunnel in the other direction. He'd have been free now, waiting back by the sea for the dusk to take its grip. All alone.

A rustling and a clonk indicated Kemp was groping around in the dark. "Ow!" He grunted. "Bloody barrel."

"What are we going to do?" asked Raef.

"I'm going to find the damned door," replied Kemp, a disembodied voice to Raef's left. "And pick the damned lock without the use of my peepers. I suggest you make yourself useful by finding a bottle of damned wine and negotiating your way into it for us. A tippie should put some hairs on your chest, and I'm damned well thirsty."

Humor colored Kemp's rough tones and made Raef keen to please. He pulled a face; he wasn't sure how he'd find a bottle, let alone open it. Light slithered in from somewhere, because his eyes were starting to adjust. He crawled in the direction in which he hoped to find the rack of bottles. He could make out the shape of the larger barrels and only bashed his sore forehead once.

He ran his hand along a row of dusty corks, fingers snagging in cobwebs. "Found the wine."

"Good," said Kemp. "Because I'm betting there's enough springs, rivets, and screws in this lousy bastard to keep me going all night, I can't see it, and time is of the essence. So you bash into the liquor. I'll get picking."

"All right," said Raef. If Kemp could get them out of here, the least he could do was navigate his way into some wine to whet Kemp's whistle. However, the silence set questions niggling. Raef figured he'd better get his in first, before Kemp started an interrogation and he couldn't hold anything back. "Um, Kemp," he ventured, picking a bottle. "I wondered if you could tell me more about Cecilia and this map."

Kemp was quiet for a moment, then a thin, scraping sound resumed, as he returned to his task of lock breaking. "Have you noticed the ruin tucked at the top of the northern headland of this bay?" he asked.

"Yes, of course." Raef recalled each feature as if they were on the back of his hand.

"Then you know the setting for my tale. The ruin was once a chapel, where it all started on a wild October night, twenty-eight years ago."

The wind battered the walls of the tiny chapel, mixing with the pummel of the waves and the grind of the undertow to raise a deafening roar.

Cara struggled to hear the voice of the old priest above the tumult. "Wilt thou have this Man," he croaked, "to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou ..."

All but snatches of the rest were drowned as the mightiest gust yet assaulted the ancient structure. A slate trailed down the roof above, scraping like a dragon's claw. With an effort, Cara blotted out the din as she fought her escalating dread. She fixed on the man she loved—his body hunched, his eyes sunken in hollows, and his face wasted to that of a lantern-jawed phantom. She could trace the contours of his skull through his skin.

Lord Henry Haverford had coughed and wheezed his way through his part of the ceremony. He now leaned against one of the bewildered servants, who'd been brought here to act as witnesses. When Cara managed her answer—"I do"—he curved his frayed lips into a semblance of a smile. She loved him, never more so than now. A hot tear trickled down her cheek, a weak offering compared to the rain that hammered the roof. She wiped it away, mortified when her lord's dull eyes grew watery, too. Tremulous, she smiled back.

When the priest bid her lord give over the wedding band, Henry Haverford leaned toward her. His clammy forehead touched Cara's, and he slid a ring bearing the most magnificent ruby onto her hand. Her heart clenched with a mingling of pain and affection.

Earlier that day, before the valets had carried Henry from his bed to his secret nuptials, he had told her that he should have given her this ring long ago. That she should have been wed in a cathedral, garlanded with lace and flowers. Though he'd had many mistresses, it was only she he'd ever loved.

But Henry Haverford was a self-avowed coward. He'd told her he'd not possessed the courage to tell his family, nor face his other women to let them know the truth—that he adored a girl of unknown birth, lower than a fisherman's daughter. But now death snapped at his heels like a hound at a fox's tail, he would do right by Cara. When the darkness claimed him, his estate, his fortune, and his fleet of East Indies trading vessels, would all pass to her.

And to the unborn child in her belly.

All Cara wanted was for Henry to live, for him to embrace her and make her feel safe like he used to. She wanted the man she fell in love with back, the virile, young fellow who'd enchanted her the first morning they'd met on the beach. He who'd wooed her with gifts and kisses. She understood his fears, why he'd been loath to tell the cruel and judgemental folks in society about her. In her eyes, he'd borne this illness that had aged him before his time with fortitude. Despite his claims, she'd never think him a coward. He deserved to live, to be well, and to hold the baby she'd recently learned that she carried.

As she felt the cold band nuzzle her finger, her love's rasping breaths told her this would never be. She kissed his chapped lips, sweet and chaste, defying the frigid pool of dread in her breast. She hugged her lord gently, feeling his spine beneath his cloak, his once-broad shoulders reduced to knots and bone. He was a weak man, in spirit and in body, but she loved him still. She'd love him always. But they must finish the ceremony lest he expire on the spot.

"I'm sorry," mumbled Henry as he signed his name in the parish registry book with a chicken-scratch hand. "I'm not the man you deserve."

"Ssssh, my love." Carefully, she scribed her name besides. "All is perfect, and if your God is willing, we will know many happy years tog—"

Behind them, the door burst open. Rain and leaves swirled in, and with them came a woman in black. Her face was covered with a sodden veil, and a pair of large men flanked her. Their hat feathers were soaked and drooping, and they clasped the pommels of their swords.

"Good evening, Henry," said the woman, her shrill tones distinctive. She was Edith Parchington, the most formidable of Henry's other mistresses and also rumored to be with child by him. Those two burly fellows were her brothers, both jack-o-dandies, but talented swordsmen.

"Lord deliver us!" Henry's already-pale face turned a ghostly hue. He seized up the parish registry book and pressed it on Cara, along with a piece of paper drawn from the folds of his cloak. "You have all you need. Go, now."

"But—"

Henry touched her lips, as Edith's brothers strode up the short aisle. "Obey your husband this once, my dear," he said. "We'll meet again in h—" He broke off, his words hitching on a cough. He shoved Cara toward the tiny door into the vestry, then snatched for his handkerchief.

"Go," he pleaded, and he collapsed to his knees, choking violently into the cloth. One of Edith's brothers stooped to grab him. The other turned toward Cara and the cowering priest and drew a sword.

In a daze of disbelief, Cara turned and fled. Tucking the book beneath her cape, she barreled through the vestry and out into the pelting rain, stumbling between gravestones and the long grasses, her mind racing as she worked everything out.

These men would do anything to stop her marriage and make their sister Edith the rich widow in her place. They'd strike her dead on the spot so that Edith could have everything. So that Edith's child could have everything her

child should. Glancing back confirmed that one of Edith's brothers made chase, so she forged on, upping her pace. Beneath the clamor of the storm, she detected her pursuer's panted breaths, like some fire-puffing monster drawing closer.

Even with her pregnancy still in its early weeks, she'd never outrun him. Her legs were not strong enough, her stamina failing. She'd have to shake him off some other way than speed and distance, if she could. A crack of lightning split the sky, echoed by a shout of thunder, and she snatched the moment to orientate herself. She was blundering inland, back from the prow of the headland, and that would be no good. Swiping the dripping hair from her eyes, she made for another track, passing through some thick gorse. She was not sure if Edith's brother saw her, but suspected he did.

She traced a muddy path that wound along the cliff top. Several times, she tripped on her petticoats, wheeling her free arm to regain her balance, lest she tumble to the rocks below. The sea had been her salvation many times, but it was no good to her tonight. When the waves hit the cliffs, the spray leaped so high it lashed her along with the rain.

Soon the path started to wind down the side of an inlet. Another flash of lightning offered a glimpse of a rocky crevice, a few yards above the crumbling path. Trembling and soaked, ready to drop, she clambered up the short slope and squeezed inside the cave. She hugged the book, and finally allowed tears born of horror to flow. Had Edith's brother seen her come this way? Was she safe? And had the documents that bequeathed Haverford's fortune to her and the baby been ruined by the rain?

"Were they ruined?" asked Raef, nearly as breathless as Cara must have been. He'd been so absorbed he'd clenched his fist motionless about the cork for a good few minutes.

"Wait a moment, this bit's tricky," mumbled Kemp, and Raef endured a long wait, his ears tortured by a low, grating sound. "Ah, there we are. Nearly there... Now, where were we? Oh, yes, so had Cara—plus the evidence that she was the old Lord Haverford's true wife—made it to safety? Well..." The lock emitted a delicate *tick*. Raef half wanted to throttle Kemp for leaving him in suspense. "Yes, she was safe. All was well for her that night."

Raef hadn't released how tightly wound he'd become 'til his shoulders sagged. In a new bid to gain entry to the wine bottle, he bit the cork between his teeth.

"Though Edith and her brothers murdered the priest and all witnesses to the wedding, then burned down the chapel to boot."

Pop. With only a slight twist, Raef jerked the cork free, and wine slopped down his chin. "What? That's terrible."

"It was," continued Kemp. "They blamed the incident on pirates, and three good men hanged for it. Well, three good pirates. The Parchingtons produced a charred parish register, a forgery, which they claimed showed Henry Haverford wed Edith that night. Haverford couldn't deny it, for he disappeared to his chamber and then died a week later, apparently from his illness. Though with the Parchingtons behind everything, who knows? And while Cara survived, she was too scared to make her claim. She concealed the real register in another cave—an even safer and more secret one than that she escaped to. And you must've worked out who Cara's child is."

"Yes, that's obvious." Raef licked the smooth and smoky wine from his lips. "Cara was Cecilia's mother, and the wicked Edith must be the mother of the current Lord Haverford. Henry Haverford was the father of both. You need to find the map, because it tells you the location of the cave where the documents are hidden. They prove everything that is Lord Haverford's was bequeathed by Henry to Cecilia. It's really hers."

"Quite right. And... ah, here we are." Another click was followed by the groan of hinges, and a luminous strip appeared at the edge of the door. "We're out. Let's toast our success."

Raef passed the bottle to Kemp, who drank, and then Raef did, downing a great glug. The story was as exhilarating as it was shocking, and he liked the idea of helping good to overcome evil. Kemp's motive in finding the map seemed pure and heroic, though Raef couldn't help pondering if there was more to it than Kemp let on. If Cecilia became Lady Haverford, she would be a rich lady. Her husband, should she take one, would be a wealthy gent. Maybe this was just another treasure hunt for Kemp, and he'd set his

sights on Cecilia herself as part of his prize. She could already be privy to the plan.

Kemp married. Raef didn't want to think about that. He slapped his lips and thrust the wine back to Kemp without a word. Maybe he was growing accustomed to alcohol, because the kick set his veins on fire, and not in a bad way. But he wouldn't let himself grow accustomed to it. He mustn't get too used to Kemp's company and ways, however much he liked them. After this venture was over, mayhap he'd still best swim away.

"How do we know what this map looks like?" he asked. Kemp finished drinking and checked all was clear in the lobby outside the wine cellar.

"We don't," murmured Kemp. They sidled out. "Apart from that it's dedicated, *To Cecilia*. You see, poor Cara's story didn't have a happy ending. Edith's brothers hunted her down shortly after Cecilia's birth, and stole back her wedding ring and the map, which she'd drawn for her daughter to use one day. Cara vanished, and baby Cecilia only survived because a friend, a poor fisherwoman, smuggled her away and raised her as her own. But there's one good bit of news."

"What's that?" Raef felt sad for Cecilia, losing both her parents so young. He well knew how hard that was.

"The map must be in code or something, or Haverford would've found and destroyed the documents by now, and I don't believe he has. After all, why does he still send a squad of masked men round the local villages each summer, to murder women of around his age? He fears his rival is out there, ready to snatch away everything—his house, his estates, his ships. And while the parish register recording Cara's wedding exists, the threat remains."

Raef's jaw dropped. Part of him still wanted to believe Haverford couldn't be so base, but recalling the red mark on Simpson's face, everything made sense. Haverford had sent out his yeomanry cavalry to do work that would be beneath even pirates. "I-I think Simpson attacked Cecilia," murmured Raef. "His face is scarred."

"I wouldn't be surprised," replied Kemp. "That devil got away as we ran to help her."

"So Cecilia knew they were really after her?"

"Yes, but fortunately they don't know her face. So far, she's slipped through their net, but she grieves bitterly that so many others have paid. Now, we better be quiet. Come on."

Raef staggered at the depths of Haverford's depravity. Kemp stretched behind to take his hand. Shaking himself, he declined it and followed. Kemp offered help because they must keep close for protection. Because—despite being a pirate—Kemp was good. But it wouldn't do to savor the touch of the man who could be Cecilia's future husband as much as Raef would, so he'd rather not 'til he knew for sure either way.

The staircase wound past the door the servant had entered through, and carried on up one of the castle's turrets. They paused at the second story, and through a slit window, Raef glimpsed the ocean. A strong gale had turned the waters white, and clouds tinted like bruises churned and jostled in the sky. Kemp pressed his ear to a door, pushed it forward half an inch, then stopped dead. A housemaid scurried past, carrying a towering pile of linen.

When she'd gone, they stole into a corridor. The walls were painted with fluttering birds, and the door they'd emerged from blended nigh seamlessly into the decor. Several grand exits lined the corridor, each topped with a portico. Kemp made a beeline for the stateliest of all, a double door at the far end, crowned with a crest. Following, Raef tiptoed past a row of marble statues, males and females, all naked and as unashamed of it as Raef used to be.

A horn blasted outside the castle, and Kemp shot to the window. He peeped over the shoulder of a goddess. "Haverford's back and he's brought every swab in the yeomanry cavalry with him." Before Raef could fret too much, Kemp grabbed him, and they were both on the other side of the double doors, which Kemp closed behind them. The chamber was vast, the crowning glory a four-poster bed adorned with striped fabrics and gold brocade. Large windows opened onto a gracious balcony.

Haverford's boudoir. Raef had dreamed of this place many nights, but could scarce absorb its luxuries through fear they were about to be

discovered. He tried to be calm. "What do we do?"

"We carry on with our plan. We search for the map." Kemp yanked the covers from the bed with a powerful flourish. He turned to Raef and raked his ebony hair. "Now the lion's back in his den, it'll be more fun than ever."



Nine

Kemp was experienced in the business of turning a room upside down as quietly as possible. In the time Raef took to peep from behind the curtains at Haverford and his party—a dozen yeomen with swords and those high, black hats—Kemp had removed numerous little drawers from a writing desk. He tipped the papers onto a deerskin rug, to which the wretched deer's head was still attached. Seconds later, he was rifling through a walnut cabinet beside the bed. He even examined the chamber pot for hidden compartments, just in case.

Raef pulled a face. *Rather you than me.*

"Make yourself useful," hissed Kemp. "Can you read?"

Raef nodded. The merfolk elders had been sticklers for that kind of education, even if he'd had to learn about the world of humans from stories and hearsay.

"Have a look through the papers from the desk. Remember, we're looking for something dedicated, *For Cecilia*. When you're done, try through there." He pointed to a narrow door. "It's most likely the beast's dressing room."

A beast. That description fitted Haverford. Kemp ransacked a bookcase, and Raef dropped to his knees on the rug, swallowing bile. "I wonder how Lord Haverford became so evil."

"Probably learned it from his mother and uncles," muttered Kemp. "Though he's shown his mother little gratitude, so the gossips say. He hardly spoke to her for years 'til this summer. Then as soon as he'd persuaded her to hand over the priceless wedding ring that had been meant for Cara, he cast her off again."

The ruby band. Raef was relieved he'd not delivered it back to Haverford. It belonged to Cecilia for sure. Then another revelation struck. He'd *seen* the treacherous Edith.

"I watched Haverford take his mother for rides by the sea." Raef licked his fingertips and continued shuffling the papers. They chiefly concerned London houses and trade deals with Bombay. "I believed he must be very kind, lavishing such attention on a poor elderly relative. It was one of the reasons I ... I thought I was in love with him."

"Oh Raef, I'm sorry." Kemp tossed the cushions off a daybed, then chuckled. "But you do make me laugh."

Raef winced, ripping apart his third bundle of letters. "Haven't you ever been in love? Or at least, believed you were?" Raef couldn't help asking, particularly given his suspicions concerning Kemp and Cecilia. Although their union would have financial benefits, maybe passion smoldered there, too.

"It's not something I think much about." A whirlwind of perpetual and almost noiseless motion, Kemp was looking behind some of the smaller paintings on the wall, including a likeness of Haverford, which he set askew. "I've had a lot of lovers, and I've been fond of each and every one of them. I'm happy, and they're happy. It's best not to labor these things." He paused and shot Raef a conspiratorial wink. "You should try it."

Try what? Try being Kemp's lover? Raef would like that, but...

A board squeaked in the corridor beyond the bedroom. Kemp grabbed a female bust with snakes for hair and hurried to the door, holding it aloft. But the footfall stopped short, and the potential interloper entered an adjoining room.

"Hurry," breathed Kemp. "Search the dressing room."

No more time to muse about love, lovers, or Cecilia. Raef hastened to the door and opened it. The dressing room was darkish, the windows covered with crimson curtains, which afforded everything a blood-red glow. All the furniture—each table, chair, and cabinet—had been wrought from moldering deer's antlers. *Ugh*. If this was Haverford's notion of attractive

décor, they would never have got along. Even if Haverford hadn't been a monster.

He explored the chamber as dispassionately as he could. A draft wafted a set of drapes hung opposite the windows, suggesting a further compartment was concealed behind. Raef swished them aside and froze.

He was face-to-face with Lord Haverford, who stood tall in a pillared niche. Raef's veins froze to ice. If his throat hadn't been so constricted, he'd have screamed. Apart from ... no, this wasn't Lord Haverford. The figure resembled his corpse, the skin made of wax, the eyes glassy and lifeless. It was a fake man; some kind of doll.

Only the vainest freak alive would keep a full-size replica of themselves in their dressing room. Raef stared, entranced. The mannequin was beautiful, from its styled locks to its Hessian boots. His initial terror having passed, Raef momentarily forgot the morbidity of the chamber and even the press of danger. If only Haverford were still like this doll to him, a blank canvas for his dreams. Dreams that'd been obliterated. And now Raef had... well, he had a companion for the time being, though Kemp's lighthearted dismissal of love set him heaving a downhearted sigh. Even if Kemp wanted Raef as one of his many bed partners, Raef could already have a rival in Cecilia. He didn't think he could endure sharing in such a way. His fantasies about devotion between he and Haverford that could be shared with no other had proved a sham. Yet, he'd gleaned much comfort from them.

He brushed the satin of the fake Haverford's cuffs and noted an oddly-shaped bulge at the doll's crotch. It looked like a tube had been tucked in there. Or maybe a scroll or map. Hope flared. Kneeling down, he reached for the buttons at the front of the doll's buckskin breeches and slipped the first two free. It was enough. He reached inside the fabric and grasped a roll of paper.

Just as the doll lifted its waxy hand and wiggled its fingers.

"Aaagh!" Raef cut his scream off fast. Kemp was already through the dressing room door and behind him. He didn't rip his gaze from the doll. The thing.

"What the blazing eels?" hissed Kemp.

"It moved." Raef gasped, then barely contained another cry when the doll shifted its eyes, left to right.

"It's an automaton." Kemp grabbed Raef by the scruff of his smock, jerking him up. "A clockwork doll. You juggled its workings and set it off." Raef had heard about the clocks that humans used to record time, not being so in accord with the seasons and sun as the merfolk, and relief flurried. The fake Haverford was still deadly creepy. "This sort of thing is all the rage in London, but we've no damned time for toys." Kemp snatched the paper from Raef's hand. "What's this?"

"I-it was hidden," stammered Raef. "In the doll's, uh, breeches."

Kemp shot Raef a quizzical glance and uncurled the paper. They grunted as one with frustration. It wasn't a map; it was a sketch of a man's face, a gruesome set of features devoid of jawline or hair. Still, it afforded Raef a double take. Those narrow eyes and that hooked nose looked strangely familiar, as did that mouth and those flinty brows.

"I know this face," he murmured, though he couldn't place it.

"You do?" Kemp pointed to the corner of the picture. Inscribed in a neat copperplate hand, were the words, *For Cecilia*. "Look."

Kemp slapped Raef's back so hard that Raef staggered. "I take it all back. You're a natural at this burglary business."

Raef beamed. Now Kemp was with him, this was fun again. "But how can we find anything from a drawing of a—"

There came a gasp, then a cry, from the adjoining room. Somebody had entered. "My lord's bedchamber has been defiled," shouted a woman. "Fetch the yeomanry, quick!"

"So the revels begin." Kemp bolted the dressing room door, jammed one of the antler chairs under the handle, then threw curtains aside and flung the window up. Somebody banged on the closed door, which rattled precariously.

"Thieves! Come quickly, they're in here."

Raef felt sick. They were too high up to jump. "Out of the window," Kemp instructed, grabbing Raef and manhandling him onto the sill, where he crouched, the wind whipping his hair. "See the drainpipe?" Raef did; a lead column less than a yard afar, just beyond his reach. The bedroom balcony was beyond, but too far away. "Use that and the ivy, if needs be. You were good in the rigging, lad, so you'll be fine."

It was a fifteen-foot drop onto a stone terrace. Already the shouts of "Robbers!" and "Get 'em!" resounded from the far side of the house. Any moment now, the lock would give, and the antlers would fracture. The strip of beach seemed distant, the stormy waves foreboding. Even if he could escape that far, it had to be about half an hour 'til sunset. It was hard to tell from such a menacing sky. Nothing seemed real apart from Kemp's closeness, his hot breaths and gentle clasp on Raef's arm, which infused him with thrills.

"We'll make it," said Kemp, urging him forward, "together."

After inhaling sharply, Raef stretched, and leaped for the drainpipe. Air smashed his face, and he grabbed and hugged the pipe, then shimmied down it. One hand gripped beneath the other so quickly he didn't see them move. Kemp jumped too, and was descending above him the same instant Raef heard a splintering crack. The dressing room door had been vanquished, their pursuers entering.

Raef jumped the last four feet, landing with a slap on the terrace and stumbling forward. Kemp dropped at least six feet, alighting with a graceful knee bend. Not ten paces to their left, some French windows burst open. Kemp grabbed Raef's hand—no resistance from Raef this time—and they ran, down the steps, sweeping across the lawn amid swirling orange leaves. Drizzle stung their faces, and the wind fought against them. Behind them, yeomen tore out of the house, and servants joined them.

"It's that blasted pirate and his boy. Shoot the blackguards." The bellow belonged to Haverford, though Raef dared not glance back any more. He'd made this dash before and succeeded in escaping. He'd had the murk of the early morning to aid him then, and this time he had Kemp. They clasped

their sweaty palms together, their pulses galloping as one. When he stumbled, Kemp gripped him tighter, jerking him forward as soon as he'd righted himself.

"No time for detours, lad." Kemp's bronzed skin glowed with the exhilaration of the chase. They'd nearly reached the edge of the lawn when a bang blasted and shot peppered the air to the left of them. Somebody had fired a blunderbuss. The shock of the close escape tightened Raef's lungs as they jumped down onto the shale, heading for the sea. Not that they had any other choice. One of the fishermen emerged from a cottage and charged toward Raef and Kemp, a harpoon raised.

They outpaced the range of the fellow with the blunderbuss, leaping over rocks and pools. Finding cover behind a high rock, they leaned back against it. The high waves curled and crashed down before them. Kemp stuffed the sketch in a small glass vial, which he corked.

"I was going to make for our harbor via land," he panted, kicking off his shoes. Raef did the same and tore off the smock. "But we'd have led them straight to the ship. I'm in your hands now."

"What?" Retreating waters raked the pebbles back with a grinding roar.

Kemp clasped Raef's shoulders. "No man could make the swim you did yesterday. Only a merman could do that." *He knows. It's not even a suspicion, he knows!* "Strong I may be, but I can't swim around the northern headland without help on a day as choppy as this, so—"

"There they are." The man with the blunderbuss stood parallel with them, the muzzle raised, not fifteen yards across the beach. He pulled back the trigger and fired just as Raef plunged into the agitated waters, Kemp at his side. The shots scattered above their heads and pitted surf that swirled and simmered like a cauldron. Raef and Kemp half-crawled, half-swam through the shallows, battling through tangles of weed. A great wave swamped over them, and they let the undertow drag them out.

"Just swim," said Raef, fighting to keep his head up and hardly knowing what to think or feel. Kemp knew what he was, and it didn't appear to be a problem. "I-I won't get my tail 'til the sun sets," he admitted. Another wave thumped them, and he gulped a mouthful of brine.

"We'll have to look after each other, then," called Kemp when he emerged. They both fell quiet and concentrated on negotiating the waters, which humped and elongated, one moment pulling them out towards the headland, the next battering them back. They were already out of their depths, unable to touch the bottom. Meanwhile, on the shingle beach, Haverford's men were pushing out one of the fishing boats.

Raef did his best to stay near Kemp, whose long locks were plastered flat. Right now, Kemp was the one making better progress, carving the frothy crests with muscular strokes. Raef paddled wildly, swallowing water, but struggling on. However robust Kemp was, if they kept plowing out to sea, they'd both drown. But if Raef could just fight the ocean long enough to get his tail, he'd have the strength to speed against the tides and save them both. The prospect made his heart sing.

Somebody needed him. *Kemp* needed him. Though his battle sapped his human frame, he gritted his teeth and vowed to endure. The sun dropped low, a sulfurous glint among fast-moving brown vapors, but not yet low enough.

The prow of the headland rose above them, the ruins of the chapel nestled near the edge. With luck and the current on their side, they managed to skirt around the point. They were far enough from the rocks to avoid being pulverized, yet too close for Haverford's vessel to tack near. Between the waves' crests, Raef caught glimpses of the bobbing ship, the occupants shouting and jostling each other to the verge of tipping it. The man with the gun shielded his eyes against the drizzle. The elements aided Kemp and Raef in that respect, if few others. The waves heaved ever greater, rising over and between them without rest. Kemp was tiring too, spitting, swallowing, and choking. High above, the gulls screeched and wheeled upon the storm.

"Here!" Raef launched toward Kemp, offering a hand. Kemp grabbed it, his skin turned pale beneath his tan. The flow took them north, then swirling west and out to sea. The same tides bore the fishing boat, in which somebody had managed to raise the sail, though surely the men in the ship would give up soon. After all, the likelihood was Raef and Kemp would drown. Raef's enthusiasm to help Kemp couldn't keep him going much longer ... and gods, a towering whitecap headed their way.

"Ra—"

Kemp's cry was cut off as the wall of water pummeled into them, tossing Raef sideways like a piece of flotsam and tearing him and Kemp apart. Swept beneath, Raef's terror spiraled. He thrashed to find the surface, then was pounded under and sucked deep. He flailed, suffocating, half-dead already. He'd been so busy surviving that he'd lost all awareness of the setting sun, but it was going to be too late unless ... *Yes!* The magic began to tingle and build. He stopped kicking, the bubbles draining from him, willing the transformation, believing and yearning. He even cherished the pain as his gills split open and his legs fused and reformed, which kept his consciousness from waning.

This isn't for me. It's ... for ... him.

Energy shattered through Raef. He sucked the stuff of life through his gills and beat his tail, thrusting upward, and burst into the gloaming. "Kemp. Kemp!" He whirled about, flicking his soaked hair, confirming Haverford's ship was in trouble. Waves crawled over it like some hungry creature's tentacles. The crew struggled to trim the sail and regain control before the sea claimed them. Raef experienced a slight twinge of sorrow for the servants who'd followed Haverford blindly, then dived low, eyes wide. Where was Kemp, and was he too late?

After some frantic searching, he discerned a nebulous shape in the dark waters, sinking fast. He caught Kemp in his arms and pulled upward.

When Raef regained the surface, Kemp's head lolled sideways against Raef's shoulder, and his limbs hung limp. His hair clung to his face, brushing those lips Raef had so much enjoyed, which were parted and tinted blue. Kemp's sodden shirt had molded to the contours of his chest, motionless save for the rocking of the waves. Though it was hard to tell amid the elements, Raef discerned no hint of warm breath.

"No!" The strength of Raef's shout shocked him, bringing in its aftermath the agony of loss. He hardly knew the man he cradled. They'd been through an adventure together, and they'd kindled a friendship, but it was no good. Raef was a mad boy, an insane merman, and he'd mourn Kemp as if they *had* been lovers. He shook Kemp violently. "You mustn't drown. You can't."

The swell buffeted them. Holding tight, fingers digging into Kemp's solid, but currently useless, muscle, Raef succeeded in keeping Kemp's mouth and nose clear of the surge. Hot tears pricked his eyes. He shook Kemp once more, despair rising. Then those long lashes flickered. Kemp tipped sideways and started to choke. The strength of Raef's relief weakened him, and he nearly lost his burden to the deep.

But he wouldn't. He steeled his nerve and fought to keep them afloat and safe amid the tempest, blessing his tail and his mer form. He never wanted to leave them again. It felt good to be the strong one for a change and give something back.

After coughing up more water, Kemp managed to look up. "Raef," he croaked. "I damn knew it. My little merman."

"Ssssh. I must get you to your ship."

Kemp mustered the ability to wrap his arms about Raef's shoulders, clinging on, which made Raef's task easier. His cheek brushed Kemp's brow and Kemp's hair tickled his chest. Enjoying the closeness more than he ought, Raef scanned the horizons. Haverford's vessel was still afloat; it seemed like the lord he hated was going to make it back to the jetty. Right now, he cared little either way. All that mattered was Jon Kemp.

A feathery moon peeped above the cliffs. He fixed on the shape of the north headland and the darkness where the inlet wound into the forest. If that was where the *Alice O'Shanty* was harbored, they'd not too far to travel, but he'd go as speedily as he could, because Kemp already shivered. Prolonging any human's stay in cold waters would be dangerous.

Quiet and determined, he made for the shore, bearing Kemp in his arms.



Ten

Raef found the *Alice O'Shanty* near the mouth of the wooded creek, anchored mid-channel and ready for a quick getaway. He hailed her, as did Kemp in a weaker tone. When a couple of figures appeared at the rail, Kemp lifted an arm from about Raef's neck and waved.

"I'll be buggered," exclaimed George, scrambling down the ship's side so he could help. "How's the mad boy managing to swim like that?"

He hadn't seen Raef's tail yet, nor the gills concealed beneath his flowing hair. Though Raef was elated he'd delivered Kemp to safety, his nerves began to thrum. How might the crew react to him—indeed, how might Kemp react—when they no longer needed his help? After all, Kemp hadn't seen him properly in his mer form. As he glided near the hull, he recalled his grim imprisonment on the other side of the balks. He wanted to trust Kemp after all they'd just been through together. But he wouldn't be hasty.

George clung to a rope and reached out. Kemp took the proffered hand, Raef relinquished him, and George aided his progress up the side of the boat. A couple of other crew members leaned over and hauled Kemp in. George headed back down, stretching toward Raef. "Come on, lad."

Raef removed Haverford's sopping waistcoat and tossed it up onto the deck, where Peffy grabbed it. No good having it ruined further. He edged away, placing some snaking lines of foam between himself and the hull. "I'm all right in here."

"You might be the world's best swimmer," said George. "But surely you need a rest. 'Tis the first real squall of autumn tonight."

Raef paddled back another foot, grateful to be negotiating the calmer waters of the creek. He couldn't face the wild seas again tonight. Even with

his tail, the hard graft was making him weary. He still didn't want to take George's hand.

"Raef, we won't hurt you. Come aboard." Kemp was leaning over the railing, a blanket draped over his shoulders. His voice remained shakier than usual.

"No," called Raef. "I need to rest, and you must set sail."

"He's right about that," said Peffy, touching Kemp's arm. "If the lobsters find this creek, we'll all be nabbed and dangled." Raef worked out the lobsters must be the dragoons, or the world was turning stranger than he imagined. He hated to think what nabbed and dangled meant, but it sounded unpleasant. "We've got to take this tide."

George climbed back onboard, and Kemp drew his crew into a huddle. Raef guessed what was happening. Kemp was telling them about him. Revealing what he was. Sure enough, moving almost in unison, the crew turned and boggled. Raef sank so the waters lapped his chin, a wet blanket to hide beneath. At least one of Kemp's pirate crew must be contemplating trapping him. A pirate captain would be bound to stick up for his followers, and Kemp might even be considering caging Raef, too.

He didn't think Kemp would do that, but he still knew so little about the man, and he couldn't endure the notion of a final farewell. He was about to dive and swim as far as he could when Kemp called him back. "Listen, lad, you're cracked and you're plucky as a wildcat. You'd fit in perfectly here. Join us?"

"I-I don't know." He wouldn't be rushed into anything.

"But, Raef, we need you." *Eh, how?* "You said you recognized the face in that sketch."

He'd forgotten about that. An excuse for more adventure, and heavens, it was nice to be wanted. Indecision seized Raef. He thrashed his tail. Kemp grasped the railings, eager, his wet hair swirling like smoke. An owl hooted, the sea droned in a nearby cave, and somebody on the ship said, "We've no time for ditherers. We've got to get going."

"Think about it," called Kemp. "We're to shufti down the coast for a bit, but we can meet you at Deadman's Creek in two days, about twenty miles south of Lilhaven. You know the spot? The rocks are patterned black and red."

Raef knew the place. "I'll think about it," he said, glad for the reprieve and that the severing of relations needn't be final. The shallows called to him, yet he couldn't contain one last question. He paddled back near the boat, and Kemp stooped so far over Raef feared he'd topple.

"Raef?"

"One thing," said Raef, bracing himself for a blow. He still didn't quite understand why Kemp was taking such risks for Cecilia and found he *had* to know. "Why are you so desperate to help Cecilia?"

"Because she's a damned fine lady. She's a healer, she's got a heart of gold, and she'd make a better mistress of these lands than that devil who scourges them now." Kemp hesitated, frowned, and the mainmast creaked. "And besides, this chase is fine sport, is it not?"

"I suppose," said Raef, mulling the response over. It didn't satisfy him. Kemp hadn't given him the answer he was after. So he must go in for the kill. "Are you... by any chance... intending to marry her?"

"Beilby's balls, no!" Kemp chuckled so heartily the rail shook, then he coughed and turned serious. "I'll never marry, and even if I was dying of love for Cecilia, I don't think she'd have me. Besides, while I've enjoyed a good few wenches in my time, and I hope those wenches have enjoyed me, I chiefly take my blow-throughs with men. Though I might just extend my repertoire to mermen one day soon. Is *that* the answer you seek?"

"Yes." Raef's blush defied the evening's chill. He flicked his tail and swam away. Kemp's laughter rang in his ears, and Kemp's image was ingrained in front of his eyes. When he finally curled up on a sandbank to sleep, he cherished the memories, though he chastised himself for it.

Just because Kemp wasn't in love with Cecilia, or intending to marry her, didn't mean he could fulfill Raef's heart's desire. Because—gods help him—despite everything Raef had learned, he couldn't prevent himself craving his

one true love. He still lived for the singular goal of finding him. The most valuable lesson he'd learned these past few days was that the search was going to be long and hard. He should consider all his options carefully before returning to the *Alice O'Shanty*.

"I must start my quest anew," he murmured sorrowfully. "I will never find my beloved on that ship."

But he couldn't kid himself. Wild seahorses wouldn't stop him going back to Kemp, if just for a little while.



He approached the *Alice O'Shanty* two days later, at that quiet hour before the fowl stirred and when the seals and their pups lay slumbering on the shale. The ship was exactly where Kemp had promised it would be—anchored at Deadman's Creek, where the rocks were stained in seams of anthracite and a rusty red.

Raef could see how this place earned its name. The rocks scattered around the mouth of the inlet jutted from the waters like blunt and broken teeth. Only a pirate would dare tuck their ship in such a treacherous natural harbor, and the *Alice O'Shanty* nestled there comfortably. As Raef strove against a receding tide, he took a moment to drink in the sight of the vessel, with her sails stripped and her decks still muffled in night's shadows. The blue figurehead smiled back at him, the emerging light catching the pink of her lips and unveiled nipples.

He'd come. He was here, though a whisper in the back of his mind insisted, *Swim away. No good can come of consorting with pirates, even good pirates.*

What was the truth of good and evil? Raef didn't know anymore. As he cut toward the ship, his misgivings multiplied. He'd scarce escaped with his life from his recent involvement with these folk and humans in general. This wasn't wise.

"Ahoy there, Raef."

At the familiar hail, Raef's heart did a flip. The figurehead was no longer alone. Kemp leaned a short distance behind her, as when Raef first laid eyes on him. His hands were clasped before him, his stance relaxed. Joy shimmered from Raef's core, and Raef's smile curved, unbidden.

"You came." Kemp seemed equally delighted, his tone hushed, which pleased Raef, too. He didn't want to see the rest of the crew, not yet. Raef swam 'til he could reach out and touch the blade of the prow should he choose. "Would you like to come aboard?" asked Kemp.

"If I do, I'll shift into human form very soon." Once Raef was on the ship, before and after the change, he'd be more or less at Kemp's mercy. Wary, he moistened his lips. "If I come, will you swear not to lock me up again?"

"Yes, I'll swear." Kemp placed his hand on the streams of Alice's golden hair. "Few folk place faith in the promises of a pirate, but I'll swear on *Alice* herself. If I let you down, she's yours to command." He winked. "And I'll make it a better promise than that one you made me not to escape."

Raef wanted to trust Kemp, though vowed to remain cautious. He gripped the rope and let Kemp haul him up, fishtail and all. Kemp lifted him over the railing, and he flopped down onto the deck.

Kemp stepped back, giving him space. Raef leaned on his palms, curled his tail in, and swished it awkwardly. An acute consciousness of his lower body swept through him—the crimped line at his slender waist where his human torso ended and his tail begun, with the shapely swell beneath. Scales covered his lower portion, silver petals layered one on top of another, and which shone all colors of the rainbow under sunlight. Now, they seemed gray and dull. The feathered tips of his tailfins quivered.

Out of the water, he felt graceless, like a beached whale. Did Kemp think him ugly like this?

Kemp stared, staggering back to clutch the spokes of the ship's wheel. "In all the seven seas of this world," he breathed, "nothing compares to you. You are beautiful."

Raef's throat felt tight, but he managed a shy smile. From the east, the sun's first beams struck scarlet across the ocean, and shards of agony seized

and split him. For the next few moments, everything went hazy. When his right mind returned, he remained lying on the deck, his head and shoulders in Kemp's lap. He was human and he was freezing. He clenched chattering teeth and wriggled his toes, trying to warm them, though his embarrassment soon scorched. He was naked in from of this pirate again. His golden locks pooled near Kemp's groin.

"That was quite a show," said Kemp, smoothing Raef's hair and picking out a shred of weed. "What other magic can you mer perform?"

Raef frowned, trying to concentrate on the question rather than let his mind disintegrate at Kemp's touch. "Not much. Beyond, uh, the ability to shift, we mer have magical talismans—objects that can call upon greater elemental powers when one asks them to. But they're very rare." Galyna's trident was the only such talisman possessed by Raef's tribe, though there were others out there. "I've seen pictures and I learned about them and their different uses in the schoolroom. I don't have any other magic personally, I'm afraid."

"You're quite magical enough. My last cabin boy couldn't do what you just did."

Cabin boy? Raef squirmed uneasily, prompting Kemp to stop stroking him. He pushed himself into a sitting position, and flexed his knees and ankles. "I-I didn't sign up to join your crew. I'm just here to look at that sketch again." Was he? Raef hardly knew.

"I understand," replied Kemp, getting up. "But the berth remains open, lad, and I think you'd fit in well. We're all good friends on the *Alice O'Shanty*."

Raef would like to be Kemp's good friend, but daren't show himself as too eager. He'd not had too many friends, and even with Ali, he'd kept many of his secrets tight. Anyhow, it was impossible to consider Kemp in the same category as Ali. Ali had never given him piercing looks that made his flesh tingle.

Kemp leaned back against the mainmast. The rising light gilded his ebony hair, the tips of those long lashes, and a rush of affection nigh overwhelmed Raef. Gods, he'd missed this man. He'd dreamed of Kemp the

past two nights. Loneliness had tortured his days even worse than the long summer weeks he'd pined after Haverford. Having had such good company simply made being on his own all the more painful. Unsettled to the point of confusion, he met Kemp's kind offer with a glare. "Maybe I'll stay for a bit."

"Splendid," said Kemp. "When you're ready, I suggest we find you some clothes and discuss everything over a hearty breakfast. Does that suit?"

Raef's stomach rumbled at the prospect, and he couldn't maintain his glower. When Kemp offered him a hand, he took it, letting Kemp draw him to his feet. "Yes, thank you," he said coolly. "I'd like that very much."

Kemp conjured breakfast in his cabin on a tiny galley stove, producing coffee ground fresh from the bean and herring sizzled in butter. The loaf of bread tasted delicious. Raef dressed himself in some knee breeches and a loose shirt, then sat on the edge of the bunk and chewed pensively, exploring each unfamiliar flavor. Kemp retrieved Haverford's waistcoat from where it had been hanging out on deck.

"It's a little stiff from the salt," admitted Kemp, holding up the garment, "but it'll still look fine on you, if you want it."

"Yes, please." Kemp laid the waistcoat over a chair and settled down to eat next to Raef. A narrow channel of air flowed between their thighs and heated fast. Raef tensed further.

This was... awkward.

He felt like he'd known Kemp for a lifetime, and Kemp regarded him fondly. In reality, they were little more than strangers. While Kemp ate the herring using fingers and neat bites, Raef gathered his thoughts.

"Captain, I beg your pardon," he said, "but I don't understand you at all. I mean, you don't keep anything you steal, so you're not a very *bad* pirate." Kemp arched his brows. Raef wished he would stop running his tongue over his lips, catching the juices and melting butter. Memories of that kiss flooded back, and it was a struggle to articulate the rest of the enquiry. "I mean, you're not a very good pirate. No, um, I mean, from what I've seen you're good at being good, and excellent at thieving, but bad at being

vicious and mean. Which is what pirates should be excellent at, 'til you get caught and hanged. Not that I'd want that for you, of course. You know, us mer call you kluggites, because an ugly name fits such a coarse breed of men. But I can't think of you as a kluggite anymore, and ... Why are you laughing at me?"

"I'm sorry." Kemp schooled his features back to serenity. "But I invited you here to ask *you* a hundred questions, and as usual, you've got in first. So let me tell you a story, Raef. *My* story."

Raef's noncommittal hum belied his enthusiasm. "That might be interesting."

"We'll start at the beginning then. I was born in a castle on the bleak Northumberland coast, scion of a good family. I was the third son and bound to become a scholar and clergyman." Kemp chortled dryly. "Suffice to say, I didn't live up to my parents' expectations."

Raef kept eating and drinking, but stopped tasting, so absorbed that he hardly flinched at the first sharp hit of the coffee. He'd been a fool yet again for believing Kemp was bad at being a pirate. Now he discovered how this pirate had learned his dastardly art. Kemp had been a restless and naughty child, so at the age of twelve, his parents had revised their plans and he'd been dispatched to join the king's Navy. The boy had yearned for adventure. What he'd received was a life of gnat's-piss grog, biscuits peppered with weevils, and drudgery. So on some distant island, where the sun had beat down on his neck fiercer than any flogger, young Jon Kemp the Jack Tar had jumped ship.

On his first night of his precarious freedom, he'd drank so much rum he'd awoken the next morning in a chicken house—next to a man with golden teeth, a bushy gray beard, and breaths that reeked of liquor the strength of gunpowder. Kemp's feather-covered bedfellow had been Hamish MacLowd, a notorious outlaw of the Spanish Main. MacLowd had been in need of a cabin boy aboard his ship: the *Alice O'Shanty*.

"But I didn't stay cabin boy for long," said Kemp, his eyes misting as if he reran the gamut of every bygone escapade. "When I attained the age of twenty, old MacLowd was dead, the *Alice O'Shanty* was mine alongside a

fleet of six captured ships, and I'd raided every seaport from Reykjavik to Caracas. The ship was so laden with gold, jewels, and uncountable wealth, *Alice's* tailfins scarce cleared the water. I took to burying my treasure, because I'd nothing else to do with it. When I wasn't planting my fortunes, I swived as many lovers as I supped cold dinners." Raef felt a twinge of dismay. Kemp was a pirate, a very good *bad* pirate, so it seemed. "Then everything changed."

Kemp paused to sip his coffee. "Go on," said Raef eagerly.

"We'd hooked near Cape Finisterre, a dangerous shore not unlike this one. I'd heard about a miser who secreted a chest of gold beneath his bed. So we climbed the cliffs and set upon the cottage, but alas, our information as to the whereabouts of this nip-farthing had been sham. Instead, we stumbled on a poor widower and his nine children."

Raef leaned forward, biting a fingernail. He prayed Kemp hadn't committed murder in cold blood. It seemed uncharacteristic of the man who'd shattered everything he'd once believed about pirates.

"They'd not a penny under their leaking roof," continued Kemp. "They were starving, and the wails of the youngest infant pierced my ears *and* my heart, which had felt naught save hollow beats for years. In a fit of what I regarded then as a weakling's foolishness, I gave the widower as much gold as I'd hoped to filch, reveled in their gratitude, and sailed away. On deck, I breathed the salt air like a newborn babe suckling his mother's milk, and then it struck me. I was happy. I'd not felt this free since I was a cabin boy. I live for adventure, for novelty, for *life*, and there's none of that to be found in hoarding. From that day forth, the only souvenirs I keep of my plunder are those you've seen." He rolled up his sleeve and drew his fingers across his tattoos.

As per usual, Raef admired Kemp's steel musculature more than the fineness of the art. "Are you still happy now?" asked Raef, his anxieties mounting without quite knowing why.

Kemp shrugged, rubbing his arm. "I'm no hero, but no law binds me and I live the life I choose with men who choose to live it with me. I seek out cases like Cecilia's, where there are larks to be had making fools of the

rich." He scrutinized Raef 'til Raef could no longer bear it and studied his empty platter instead.

"You, however," said Kemp, "are more intriguing than any treasure I've snaffled or split. Your kind hold yourself elusive, and I hadn't a notion you could take on human form. Then again, I did wonder how old Captain MacLowd took Alice as his lover. Most fish lay eggs, don't they?"

"Not all do, but—" Kemp's words regarding MacLowd sank in, and Raef looked up, all else forgotten. "The old captain loved a mermaid?"

"She left him in the end for another human," said Kemp. "She married a fellow from the Emerald Isle, hence her surname, O'Shanty." That made sense, as mer never had more than one name. "But MacLowd took it all in his stride, and named this ship after her anyway. It's not hard to believe he lost his heart to her. You merfolk are... extraordinary."

Kemp was cool as morning dew, while Raef's breaths quickened, sweat prickling on his palms and under his collar. He couldn't believe Kemp was no hero, not after Kemp saved him. But that barely mattered. A new idea was taking hold, one that shocked and thrilled him in equal measures. He'd not come back here expecting love. However, he could learn much from Kemp about his human form—and his urges toward other males—if he could just be a little bit more *like* Kemp.

Could Raef share some pleasures with Kemp without falling in love? Could he move on to quest for the real thing after enjoying himself a little? With Kemp close, he found he wanted to try. Gods, he *needed* to try.

"So now it's your turn," said Kemp, placing his coffee mug down on the boards. "What's your story?"

"I ... uh ... there's not much to say, really. I left my tribe because I didn't fit in, and I've not spent much time in my human form prior to this last week." After dipping to avoid eye contact, Raef fixed on Kemp's luscious mouth again. Bad idea. His fluster rose toward panic and a feral hunger reared within. "I... don't quite know what I'm doing here, and I've not even a clear idea what human friends get up to, let alone lovers. But I think..." He gave an anxious cough. "I'd like another kiss."

Kemp's smile proved as devastating as it was welcoming. All Raef's reservations liquefied, inundated by physical desire. He flung his arms about Kemp's shoulders, Kemp enveloped him, and their lips met.

Tongues clashed and curled about each other with the zeal of flashing cutlasses. Raef worked the kiss as hard as Kemp did. He savored the rasp of Kemp's stubble, the skim of teeth against sensitive flesh. Arousal zinged through his body, blood flooding to his hardening loins. Kissing with an enthusiasm that budded and bloomed, Raef rubbed his body against Kemp's, needing to be closer. When they broke the kiss, both gasping for air, Raef climbed onto Kemp's lap so he straddled him.

"Oh God, Raef." Kemp moaned into Raef's mouth, foreheads touching. Raef's mind had turned numb. His bodily urges drove him, and his prick ached, hard and full. He scrubbed himself against Kemp's stomach, rucking up the fabric of the shirt. Then he groped for Kemp's member. He *had* to feel it. As he traced the thick length through Kemp's breeches, an insatiable itch built in his loins. If he didn't scratch it, he'd expire. Kemp cupped his buttocks and squeezed, pitching his arousal onto a whole new level. He wanted Kemp inside him, but that prospect terrified him. He needed to surrender, to be possessed... but no, he mustn't. He mightn't be able to save himself from giving away too much.

Before anxiety could slacken his pace, he buried his fingers in Kemp's sleek hair and littered Kemp's jaw and neck with more kisses. He stooped to lick Kemp's throat, the curls of hair at Kemp's open collar, and those tattoos. The taste of sweat and salt was more delicious than even in his dreams. He silently cursed that either of them wore these silly clothes. He wanted nothing between them; to explore Kemp's everything. Kemp reached for the laces at the front of Raef's breeches, fingers brushing Raef's cock, and the last of Raef's wits fell apart. He stopped kissing Kemp, threw back his head, and emitted a wanton cry.

"You want this?" asked Kemp.

All he could do was nod, fixing deep in Kemp's gaze. Kemp grasped Raef's cock and started to pump, sparking a divine friction, a spiraling flight of ecstasy.

The intense shocks of pleasure jolted Raef's tongue. "Yes. Yes!"

He screwed his eyes tight, vanquished by the sensation. He daren't look at Kemp anymore, because he'd want to—need to—shout of love. While he wouldn't do that, he was flying with the skylarks, riding a breakneck wave, all thanks to Kemp. And then there was more than a hand about him. Somehow, some way, Kemp had freed his own iron-hard member, rubbing it against Raef's, and the heat soared. Explosive currents raced through him. His balls turned to stones. Raef rocked against Kemp, pleasures he believed unassailable bettering by the moment. Then he shattered and burst, a storm swell dashed on the cliffs, annihilated by a tide of exaltation. Kemp's cock convulsed beside Raef's, and a satisfied moan shuddered from Kemp's core. They flopped forward against each other, entwined and panting.

Yes! Raef's senses staggered. *Yes, I think I love you.*

A fleeting heartbeat later, he was relieved he'd kept his lips buttoned. He felt thrilled, sated, at home with his face buried in the crook of Kemp's neck; glad of what Kemp had just gifted him, and that Kemp had gathered pleasure, too.

But love?

No. He mustn't crave that here. But heavens, fighting the instinct to fall head over tail for Kemp was turning out to be bloody difficult.



Eleven

Raef lifted his head from Kemp's shoulder, gathering his breath. "That was..."

"Wonderful," murmured Kemp. He rubbed beneath Raef's ear, the patch of flesh where his sensitive gills appeared when he was in his mer form. Raef never knew that spot could feel so good when devoid of his fishier parts. "And this time I don't believe you're trying to rob me, though I won't think any less of you if you are."

Raef thumped Kemp softly on the chest, and Kemp's laughter vibrated through them both. Raef chuckled, too. He was sweaty and sticky with his clothes a mess, still straddling Kemp's lap. And heavens, he remained hard. So did Kemp. Soon, Raef would like to do what they'd just done all over again. He supposed it was all less special for Kemp. "I was wondering," he said, "how many lovers have you had?"

"I lost count years ago." Kemp's gaze began to wander. "And, uh, I'm sure you will one day soon."

"Maybe I will," Raef replied, as nonchalant as he dared. He slid from Kemp's lap and perched on the far end of the bunk. Kemp wiped himself off, then passed a cloth for Raef to use. Raef cleaned and adjusted his clothing while Kemp scratched his bristly chin, hunching his shoulders unevenly. He looked as unsettled as Raef suddenly felt.

Raef couldn't comprehend why. Kemp did this sort of thing all the time. Raef was the one who stupidly wished the pleasures they'd just shared had something to do with love. Seeing as love wasn't a subject pirate captains thought about, he wasn't going to play the codfish yelling about it. Anyhow, the crew had risen and now got busy on deck. Footfalls pounded, and shouts concerning "top-gallant yards," and "foresails," broke the peace.

The morning tide pitched the ship, and there came a sharp knock on the wall. "Captain, are we to sea?" called George.

Kemp didn't reply. When George's steps pattered away, Kemp drew a rusty bolt across his cabin door. He regarded himself in a hand-held looking glass and ran a comb through his hair. Then he planted both palms on his table of charts and began to mumble inaudibly. After picking up the leather book Raef had seen him reading that first night, he slammed it back down with such force that the surface shook.

What was up with him? Mustering all his courage, Raef went over and placed his hand on Kemp's arm. "Did I do something wrong?"

Kemp pivoted about, grabbed him, and he was back on the bunk before he knew what was happening. A hot, heavy, and extremely hard pirate pinned him flat.

"I told you, I'm no hero." Kemp's hoarse words were edged with razors. "Rarely have I wanted anyone so much. If you were to let me—"

He broke off, groaning and levering himself upward, a mercy that allowed Raef to breathe. The blacks of Kemp's eyes were huge, predatory. Pain etched his countenance, tempered by the tenderness he'd laid upon Raef many times before, with both gaze and touch.

He wants ... to take me. To plunder my body ... to give me everything I've ever dreamed of. All I need is to say I want it.

"I came here to look at the sketch." Raef forced out the words, wriggling and fighting the instinct to submit to Kemp with everything he had. Nothing had changed between them. He was just one of many to Kemp, and that was fine. He was starting to understand his limits, too. He'd enjoyed frisking with Kemp, but didn't want to surrender his body completely to anybody less than his one true love, who would return his devotion... so why wasn't Kemp moving away? A muscle twitched along the line of Kemp's jaw. The sinews in his neck and thick arms quivered. He looked beautiful and terrible.

Raef bit his lip to prevent himself shouting his heart's desire. *Oh, gods, just take me now.*

Kemp groaned and swished that lush hair back. He rolled off Raef, leaving him striving not to shake.

"Forgive me." Kemp squeezed the bridge of his nose and turned away. "Yes, you need to look at the sketch." He went to the table and took out his frustration on the papers, hurling the unwanted ones to the floor. After locating the paper they'd retrieved from the fake Lord Haverford, he waved it at Raef without looking at him. "I hope you do know this man. Though remember, in twenty-eight years, he might have changed. You're too young to have known him when it was actually drawn. Lord knows, so am I."

Somebody thumped the other side of the wall again. "Captain, the tide's good," called Peffy. "Do we make a shufti or don't we?"

"Hold onto your periwigs," muttered Kemp. He picked up Haverford's waistcoat from the back of the chair, tossed it to Raef, then unbolted the door and left.

Raef put on the waistcoat and sunk into the chair. He was unable to focus on the portrait. He couldn't fathom the meaning of what had just happened, other than that Kemp desired him, which was pleasing. But no long-term good could come of being coveted by a man who gave everything away, or who he'd have to share. He'd already let things go too far. He stared at the book Kemp had thrown down, frowning so hard his brow throbbed. He wished for distraction, and curiosity spiked, so he picked up the book and opened it. Fingermarks smudged the yellow pages, which contained verses written in flowery language too complicated for him to get his head around.

One word kept leaping out at him, however.

Love.

Eh?

Kemp had a book of love poems.

Raef wrinkled his nose. This wasn't logical at all. After all, Kemp didn't think about love and certainly not that singular devotion to the exclusion of all others that Raef ultimately sought. As he flicked, the book fell open on a

well-thumbed page. A collection of lines jumped out, beside which somebody had penciled an X.

*If it be sinne to love a sweet-fac'd boy,
Whose amber locks trust up in golden tramels
Dangle adowne his lovely cheekes with joy,
When pearle and flowers his faire haire enamels;
If it be sinne to love a lovely lad,
Oh then sinne I, for whom my soul is sad.*

Raef read the last couplet over several times. It reminded him of traditional mer love songs, which Galyna had banned, along with so much else Raef enjoyed. It pierced his soul. He licked lips that still tasted of their kiss and resolved when the time was right, he must ask Kemp why X marked this particular spot. When Kemp said he didn't think about love... could he be lying?

Out on deck, Kemp barked, "Take the wheel, Peffy." Raef quickly shoved the book aside, forced a scowl, and examined the sketch. He was pondering it when Kemp came back in.

"Any luck?" asked Kemp, windswept, his shirt hanging open to the waist.

"I'm not sure."

Kemp leaned close over Raef, who forced himself to concentrate on the sketch, especially those jutting brows, and that mouth with its pouting ledge of a lower lip.

"I *do* know this face," said Raef, "but I can't remember where I've seen it, which is odd. It's not like I've met many humans, and this certainly isn't one of the merfolk." He dredged his brains. Maybe it was one of the fishermen or a worker on Haverford's estate. "You're right about time taking its toll. Whoever it is, I'm sure their face has changed since this picture was sketched. They weren't like this when I saw them, or—" Raef struck the table. "Of course."

"You remember?"

"The face is on the cliff," said Raef, and Kemp blinked, puzzled. "I know every inch of this shoreline, where the rocks are striped, where they're clean as cut crystal, where there are patterns. And that's where I've seen this face. In a cove south of Lilhaven where not even you could dock safely. But the rocks have crumbled, so now where there was almost a smile there's a grimace." Raef pulled a face, mimicking the gruesome expression. "So this is a map after all. The cave must be there."

Kemp clapped his shoulder and laughed. "You're brilliant. You really should join us. In fact, I won't take no for an answer." Kemp squeezed harder, possessive, and Raef couldn't bring himself to argue. "We've got to head up the Bristol Channel tonight, to pick up a couple of lads we dropped ashore there, but we'll sail straight to this cove after that. You'll stay with us 'til then?"

Raef offered the faintest nod. Before he could gather his thoughts—let alone push the topic of conversation toward poetry—Kemp was back on deck, flinging instructions at his crew. "Unfurl the jib. No time for dawdling. We've got to catch that wind, fly south, then turnabout fast. The treasure's in our grasp."

"So where will we sling our hook once we've retrieved the boys?" asked George.

"Back at our hidey-hole near Lilhaven," replied Kemp. "Raef and I will take the cliff path, then do a little climbing. He's a talented treasure hunter."

Raef sidled to the cabin doorway, hesitating as every crewmember save Kemp, who'd retaken the wheel, drilled him with silent questions. Some looked irritated, mayhap because he'd been selected for this mission, but George hailed him from the rigging near the foremast. Raef waved shyly back. He ought to tell Kemp that he didn't think climbing would be the best way to get to the cove, but decided to save it for later.

When Kemp looked over his shoulder, he offered a ravishing smile. "Ah, Raef. We'll make anchor at dusk, so we've a day at sea, then the night and all the morrow. Just enough time to make *you* the perfect pirate."

Raef nodded, not wanting to displease. His unease veered back double-fold. If Kemp wanted him to be a pirate, Kemp would be disappointed.

Pirates might not be the evil kluggites Raef had thought them, but that didn't mean he wished to join their ranks.

Nevertheless, jumping around the deck learning to handle a pistol and a cutlass was fun, as was his swift education in breaking out of jails. Raef proved particularly good at lock-picking. He used a shard of broken shell to get a feel for the internal mechanism of a rusty old padlock they'd attached to the ship's rail. When the lock opened and fell to the scrubbed boards with a clatter, the crew applauded and cheered.

"I could've done with this skill to get me out of Haverford's game larder," he told Kemp. He winced at the unhappy memory. For most of the day, however, he allowed himself to follow Kemp's lead and enjoy himself. The ocean remained calm, and the clouds cast liquid shadows that flitted over the decks and shaded them from the sun's dazzle, while Kemp taught him to throw his fists and duck a punch.

"Never be scared to kick a chap in the bollocks." Kemp planted himself in front of Raef, arms folded and shoulders squared. "A low blow is as good as any when you're up against it. Now you take a swing and I'll show you." He winked. "Don't worry. I'll be gentle."

"Will you, indeed?" Raef drew back as if to feign a punch, grabbed Kemp, and jammed a knee upward between his legs. Raef pulled back at the last instant before impact, just as Kemp blanched. It was Raef's turn to wink. "I've already worked that one out."

"You *are* a natural." An easy smile played at the corners of Kemp's mouth. "Now get out of this one, matey."

Kemp whirled Raef about, pulled Raef flat to his body. Before Raef could squeak, Kemp had him slammed to the deck face-first, pinning every part of him with a colossal pressure. "And what would you do now, pretty boy?"

Kemp's breaths scorched Raef's throat and sent blood shooting straight to his groin. He squirmed, scrubbing the curves of his arse against Kemp's loins. Kemp growled. Raef perceived him harden and nearly screamed, *Plunder me! Rip my clothes off with your teeth!* Instead, sensing Kemp's

bruising grip about his wrists lessening, he jammed his elbow back, rolled free, and jumped up.

"Oooomph." Kemp was on his knees, rubbing his stomach, one brow arched. "You certainly know how to take advantage of a fellow. I said you were a natural pirate." Raef's proud smile faltered. Kemp climbed to his feet. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Raef. "I-I just think you might be wrong about me, that's all."

"How so?" Kemp brushed his clothes with those large, sinewy hands. He looked breathless and sweaty and so gorgeous that Raef's mouth went dry as summer sand.

There was much Raef needed to say, but he couldn't. He didn't want to spoil this precious time together, because being with Kemp *did* feel natural to him. None of these human activities were. They could be occasional diversions for him, but not his continual way of life. Moreover, he didn't understand why Kemp was taking such pleasure shaping him in a pirate's image. Kemp couldn't want to keep him for long. Kemp never kept anything for long.

"It's not important," said Raef. Kemp's enquiring gaze captured his, launching his mind into tumult. He grabbed words from the ether. "Um, may I call you Jon?"

Kemp quirked a roguish grin. "I don't see why not. Are you sure there's nothing else bothering you?"

"Quite sure," murmured Raef. A sharp whistle tore between them. George yelled, "Land ahoy," and Raef was pleased to let an outbreak of activity take the heat of Kemp's attentions for a while.

They anchored up an estuary near a rocky point. The feat was rendered all the more dangerous by the clouds, which had thickened and sunk down to form a white sheet across the channel. After Kemp had navigated the vessel to safety, laughter broke the tension and echoed through the ship. The crew was preparing to row ashore to a tavern called the Dog and Partridge. This was where they'd arranged to meet Victor and his son, the

two who'd gone to visit relatives. Raef hovered near the lee railing, keeping a low profile. He was keen to get back into the water and shift.

The last thing he wanted was to watch Kemp making merry and cavorting with another man. He still felt silly for asking if he could call him Jon. None of the crew seemed to do so, and he wasn't sure if he could bring himself to use the name. Would he come across too keen? Too desperate? Then again, Kemp... Jon... was the one who'd asked him stay, though he daren't hope it meant anything beyond a pirate's whim or fancy. At least, not 'til Jon said so, and even then, he wouldn't trust his word. He must focus on friendship and make the best of things.

The men were piling over the windward side of the ship, clambering down ropes into the little boat. Fog swirled across the decks between Raef and the others. He tried to feel thankful that a barrier rose between them rather than disappointed nobody had asked him to join them. He wasn't one of them. He didn't fit in, and...

"Raef!" Jon emerged from the cabin and strolled toward him, a looming silhouette wreathed in the mists. "Are you coming, lad?"

"No," Raef answered quickly. "I'd rather stay here."

"Oh. Would you like any of us to remain and keep you company?"

You.

Raef swallowed back that answer, especially now Jon was close enough to reach out and touch. Or to embrace. "Really, there's no need."

"Well, if you're sure. I'll stay if you like?"

Jon's gruff suggestion sent tremors through Raef's veins. He turned, clutching the rail, ready to jump over. Darkness must come soon, and if he stayed here with Jon, he'd give his body. He wouldn't be able to save himself. Then, tomorrow or the day after, when Jon went carousing with the others and sought new and more exciting lovers, it would destroy him. One of the many things he'd learned about himself of late was that he was a jealous being; he couldn't seem to help that.

"Please go with them," he said. "Honestly, I'd rather you did. I'm used to being alone."

Jon called back for the men to wait and then leaned beside him, forming a steeple with his hands. They stared into the whiteout. Their elbows brushed, igniting sparks that set Raef trembling.

"Have you seen much of the world?" asked Jon.

Raef shook his head. "Not much beyond my home and this small part of the English coast. I used to think Haverford's castle the most beautiful place anywhere."

"Ah, you've not seen the beaches of Jamaica." Jon drew his hand through the vapors before them like a magician intent on transforming the haze into a paradise. "Spotless sands, gently swaying palm trees, the sweet scents of the tropical fruits. But such evil lies nearby. They call Port Royal the wickedest city in the New World, and I can vouch for the truth of it. Appearances are very deceptive."

"Yes," murmured Raef. "I know." He paused, battling to keep his emotions in check. "I suppose the most beautiful place is always that which one calls home."

And Raef had no place to call home, except... Jon drifted an arm about him, and his blood jolted. He leaned into Jon, instincts driving him, relishing the intimacy.

"For me," said Jon softly, "this ship is home. It always will be."

Raef shut his eyes, and for the briefest moment, he was home too. Not because he was on the *Alice O'Shanty*—though he'd passed a wonderful day aboard her, he could've been in vile Port Royal for all he cared—but because he was safe beside a man he adored. He didn't want to fall in love with Jon, he was fighting the tug of his heart with everything he'd got... yet to step away from Jon, even to dive into the sea and change, would have felt like ripping an arm off.

"Beyond that," whispered Jon, "I'm free to live as I chose." He coughed awkwardly. "Are you sure you won't come ashore? It'll be fun."

Raef's hopes shattered like breaking glass. Each time he allowed himself to hope that Jon could feel a tiny part of the attachment he did, Jon would strip his illusions down to the stark truth. Jon Kemp was a pirate, who lived well, ate and drank, and made merry and thieved. He didn't love. Raef let out a shaky sigh, shifting so Jon had to strain to keep hold of him. "Quite sure," he said. "You'd better go."

Jon didn't obey. He turned Raef about and pulled him into an embrace, and for a wonderful and terrifying moment, Raef thought he might refuse to leave. He crushed Raef tighter, setting explosive currents racing through Raef... and through them both. When Raef looked up, Jon winced and then conjured a smile, thin and slightly pained.

"Fare ye well, Raef." Jon released Raef and edged back, walking stiffly, and Raef noted the bulge in his tight breeches.

Ah yes. Jon felt a little of what Raef did—the physical aspects of it. All Jon wanted was Raef's body. Or did he? A dark flame leaped in Jon's gaze, which appeared to return Raef's longings with interest. As if leaving would cleave a wound across Jon's heart, like it would for Raef. Jon dragged his fingers wearily across his face, obliterating all. He turned and shouted, "Coming, lads," and was gone.

Raef went too, clambering down the bulwarks on the opposite side of the boat and into the chilly embrace of the sea. As he awaited the shift, he wanted to weep. He snarled instead. If Jon just wanted to be his friend, he should stop making him feel like he was the most precious thing in world, then reminding him ehe wasn't.

"Damn pirates," he grumbled, and surrendered willingly to the horror and magic of the change.



When Raef returned to the ship before dawn, Jon was leaning over the prow again. Jon greeted him as lightly as if they parted after a game of dice and hauled him on board. "Today," declared Kemp, "I'm going to have you looking like a seasoned buccaneer."

Raef tried to relax and to enjoy the activities as he had yesterday, but it was in vain. By the time George shouted that the coast near Lilhaven was in sight, Raef had a thick leather belt wrapped around his stolen waistcoat. He'd a pistol tucked in a halter at one side, a cutlass at the other, and a bicorn hat perched jauntily on his head. Gold rings looped his fingers. Jon had tied his hair back with a ribbon and found him a pair of knee-high boots, which Raef felt particularly unhappy in. They'd be difficult to kick off in the water, when he wanted to return to his merman form. When he walked to the mizzenmast, the boot's leather rubbed.

Jon leaned back against one of the cannon and raked an appreciative gaze from Raef's head to his toes. "We can pierce you later for one of these, if you'd like," said Jon, fingering his earring. "But you're perfect already."

"You look a prince among vagabonds," added Peffy, who hauled in a net yielding a crop of silver fish. Raef took one glimpse at the poor creatures, silver tails thrashing and writhing as they gasped their last, and his spirits plummeted through the deck. He couldn't be Jon's friend, let alone his lover, if being so horribly human was required of him. Though he'd had a night's respite, he was sick and tired of these damned legs. He threw down his hat, then dragged off the boots, hopping wildly.

"What's wrong?" asked Jon.

"Everything." Raef hurled the boots at Jon's feet, then ripped the ribbon from his hair, so his golden locks tumbled free. "I'm not a pirate. I'll never be a pirate. Gods, I scarce understand the odd things you say. I'm a merman, and sooner or later, I'll need to get back into the sea." He sighed miserably and flinched when Jon touched him. "I *have* to go back to the sea."

"Oh," said Jon, his teeth gritted. "If you're not happy, Raef, nobody will stop you leaving. You're quite at liberty."

Am I? After the fun we've had together? After that look you gave me last night? And after you put your arm around me and took me to the shores of paradise?

Diving back into the ocean was a lonelier prospect than ever. Raef half wished he'd let Jon ravish him, to hell with the consequences. At least it would have been a memory to cherish. Raef sensed the tension rolling from

Jon, as tangible as his own. Then Jon backed away, leaving him more wretched than ever. He wound the ribbon about his fingers, hating the crew's silence, the mocking shrieks of the gulls, and even the hisses and sighs of the sea. Nevertheless, now he'd expressed his woes, he felt able to broach one of the two topics he'd avoided since yesterday.

"Jon." He stared at the deck. It was first time he'd plucked the courage to use this name. "I can help you better with this treasure hunt as a merman. The sides of the cove where the face is are crumbly, prone to landslips, and best approached from the water. There are treacherous reefs, and you might get a small boat around on a calm day like this, but—"

"It would be easier for you to swim, eh?"

"I think so." Raef puffed a wisp of hair from his nose and dared look up. Jon mustered a smile, but it had lost its luster.

"Then you take the lead on this one. Once a merman, ever a merman, eh?" Jon rubbed Raef's arm, radiating warmth that nearly had Raef pleading, *Forget everything I said. Lock me in that cell again if you please, just don't let me go.*

He bit his tongue. He'd done the right thing. Once a merman, ever a merman—and once a pirate, ever a pirate. Jon acted like he wanted to keep him. But Raef would wager his tail that he would be cast aside soon.



Twelve

When the stars twinkled overhead, Raef carved a path between the reefs toward the patterned cliff face. Jon followed behind. He sculled a small craft through docile waters, where the larger waves merged with the smaller ones to flatten out and tamely splash the hull. If it had been rough, Raef would've had to come alone, which might have been more comfortable.

He and Jon had spoken little since he'd thrown off his hat and boots. Jon had holed himself up in his cabin, studying his books and charts. Raef hadn't pestered. He'd found a quiet corner below the deck to hide and wait for sundown, though George had popped in for a chinwag.

"The captain's sweet on you," George had let slip. "We don't get to call him Jon. And he could've swived a diamond of the first order last night." Raef assumed George meant a handsome fellow. "But he brushed the cove off like he were a scurvy dog."

It pleased Raef that Jon hadn't fallen straight into the arms of another. He also liked that George had come to chat, as a friend would. George possessed a merry smile and nice, blue eyes, which Raef chastised himself for not noticing before, when all he'd seen was George's scar. Raef had changed much lately. He was a wiser soul, or so he hoped.

Thus he would act wisely. Now he was back in his mer form, he concentrated on the relief that filled him, along with his strength and a sense of power. He adored the new experiences and feelings that having legs—and human loins—had brought him, but this was his body and the real him. He couldn't escape that fact and didn't want to. If Jon wanted a human for a lover, then Raef wasn't right for him, apart from the matter that Jon downed different lovers as regularly as rum. So maybe Jon *should* have had a roll in the hay with that lad in the alehouse.

Resisting any niggle of sorrow, Raef concentrated on his task. He led the way under a natural rock archway and into the hidden cove.

The cliffs glowered nearly full circle around them, and his nerves tingled. Though he'd been to this spot many times before, he worried that he could have been mistaken about the face. He shoved his hair from his brow, squinting in the light afforded by a lamp on Jon's boat, and picked out the shape of an eagle. Then he discerned a stone shark, its snout a jagged ledge on which a seagull had nested, and to the left, the face. Raef traced the brows, crumbling and shaggy, slanting cracks in the place of eyes, and the hook of the nose, blunted by the battering waves. The lower lip, not far from the waterline, had disintegrated almost completely. Lashing tides had carved a gaping and mournful hollow.

"It's here." Raef splashed his arms and whooped.

"Yes, that looks like it. Can you see a cave?" Jon was breathless from rowing. Though the inlet was sheltered, he still had to work to keep his boat from being driven into the cliff by the swell.

Raef whirled about, flicking his wet locks. "Nothing obvious. I can't work out how Cara did the sketch, either. She must have come in a boat like you, or have swum out to sit on one of the reefs." Neither explanation seemed likely, yet she must have got here somehow. This place was easy for a merman or maid to access, but not for any human. "Maybe the water levels have changed since then."

"And the tide is high tonight," added Jon, his shirt clinging to his bunching muscles as he stroked the oars. Raef drew a swift, admiring breath before turning his back. He had to stop ogling Jon; it would only make him miserable.

"I'll look underwater," he said, and without waiting for Jon's response, he dived.

The waters were murky, and Raef swam carefully, feeling his way. Merman he might be, but in conditions like this, he could still collide with a rock and knock himself out. He soon found the edge of the cliff and traced it down, plunging to the boulders at its base. No cave there, unless it had been buried by a landslide, and he didn't fancy hauling rubble away tonight.

Planting his palms on the rock face, he inched sideways, tracing over crinkled limpet shells and spongy patches of seaweed. Then there was nothingness. The wall had fallen away.

Raef edged forward, groping before him. He'd found a cave, but it was pitch black. Reaching above, he found a low rock ceiling and forged on, though it seemed increasingly pointless. No human could have entered this place, having to remain submerged for so long. He couldn't see a hand in front of his nose, let alone seek treasure.

He verged upon turning about when a faint light glinted off the bubbles of his breath. He blinked. Had he imagined it or... no, he could definitely see a hazy glow. Moments later, he burst up through the surface into a cavern. From a small gap far above, moonlight streaked in. It illuminated a glistening pool and a shelf of rock, on which sat a large wood chest.

The thrill of discovery coursed from his head to his tailfins. He adored doing piratical deeds, even if he'd never be a pirate. With his heavy tail flopped behind him, he pulled himself up onto the ledge and hauled himself along to the chest. The padlock was rusted and broke easily. He yanked it off and threw open the lid.

The wedding registry was inside. Fortunately, the seams of the oak had been caulked, and the chest had protected the manuscript well, because the covers felt dry. Picking up the heavy tome and opening it, Raef noted brown stains on some of the pages, but the entries remained legible. He flicked through to the last item. The names written there prompted a smile of satisfaction.

Henry Haverford and Cara X.

X marked the spot again, which struck Raef as strange. Humans, so he'd learned, tended to have a second name. The drips from the cave's roof pattered to an ever-more-frantic rhythm as he pondered. Then something sparkling caught his attention. Having replaced the book, Raef reached into the chest and picked the object up. He rubbed his eyes in case they deceived him.

He held a spiraling conch shell wrought of solid gold and encrusted with tiny pearls and diamonds. The craftsmanship was so distinctive it could

never have been created by human hands. The delicate golden mouthpiece fixed to its spire left Raef with few doubts. This was a magic talisman of the mer. Only a blessed merman or maid would be gifted such an object, which would summon aid to the owner in times of trouble. It had never belonged to a member of his tribe, at least not as far as he knew, though he bet Galyna would love to take possession of it. Such a prize would bolster any chieftain's power. But how did Cara get it? Unless ...

A suspicion that had lurked, formless, in the dark corners of his mind rushed to the fore. Cara had most likely found this cave, and marked her surname X, because she'd been a mermaid.

The revelation washed over him, leaving a gloomy residue. He sighed. Lucinda and her doomed pirate love, Alice and Captain MacLowd, and now Cara and Henry Haverford. Galyna had been right about one thing—relationships between humans and merfolk rarely ended well. Now Raef wondered what to do with the conch. He'd have to study it long and hard to know what kind of magic it possessed, and he found he didn't want to share it with Jon 'til he was sure what he'd got.

He tucked the golden shell under a rock and then swam back down the tunnel, springing through the surface beside Jon's boat. "I've found the book."

"You beauty." The vessel tipped as Jon leaned over the side, cupped Raef's face, and kissed him. Raef scarcely knew what'd hit him; his instincts shouted to part his lips and invite Jon inside, so he did. Lips brushed and sparked, and their tongues entwined. The boat, the moon, and the stars disappeared, time stopped, and Raef's heart flew. This was heaven, the taste and feel of Jon, their scents mingling with the tang of the ocean. The gentle waves lapped him, urging them closer. When Jon broke the kiss, they both laughed as if they'd not a care in the universe.

"I knew you'd find it. You're a brilliant treasure hunter." Jon unscrewed the top of a silver flask and passed it over the side. "Here, toast yourself with that and tell me everything."

Raef took a slug of the sweet liqueur, drowned the taste of Jon, and fortified himself. That kiss had been a mistake. A wonderful mistake that

he'd remember for years to come and that he couldn't bring himself to regret. It still felt like every part of him was floating, inside and out, and he could scarcely feel his tail as he flicked it. He handed back the drink, hooked his fingers over the side of Jon's vessel, and forced himself to focus.

"The cave is below the waterline," said Raef, "the chest is in the cave, and the book is in the chest. I could fetch them, but the lock is broken and I fear the book would be ruined. However, there might be another way." He explained about the gap in the cave roof and how a man might be lowered down to fetch the book.

"You think of everything, don't you?" Jon took a swig from his bottle, and then his expression stilled and grew serious. "You must stay with us, Raef. Mer or man, you're a splendid fellow, and you'd fit in well, you know you would."

"But I'll never be a pirate," said Raef, jutting his chin a little. "You said it yourself. I'll always be a merman."

"You can be both, and that makes you all the more valuable." Jon's tone heated, and Raef's pulse sped up. "We're a great team. I can see that you're even more useful to us with your tail, and God, Raef, even more beautiful. And while you're human, you can have as many pretty waistcoats with shiny buttons as you please. On the *Alice O'Shanty*, we share everything."

That dark fire smoldered once more in Jon's gaze; scorched by the flames, Raef backed away from the boat. He thought about the golden conch he'd hidden in the cave. He didn't intend to share that, at least not yet, though that wasn't the chief reason he couldn't stay. It was time to have it out.

"Jon, do you believe in love at all?"

"What do you mean?" Jon dabbed his mouth and frowned.

"I mean that you read books of love poems. I saw them in your cabin. Now you're asking me to stay, and yet—"

"Oh," said Jon, and Raef didn't like the jaded note to his voice. "They're just silly verses, forsooth, that I read to pass the time. I'm a pirate, and I

thought you understood. You and I can have a bloody splendid time together, but—"

Raef sliced a silencing hand up through the water, bringing with it an explosion of spray. "It's all right, I do understand, but I can't stay. I don't want to spend my life alone, but I don't think your ship is the right place for me either."

"Then what is the right place? If you like, I'll help you find it." Jon offered Raef the bottle again. Moonshine silvered his features, smoothing his rougher edges and rendering him breathtakingly handsome. Raef couldn't deny the truth any longer. The feelings that surged within him eclipsed his pale longings for Haverford like the sun eclipsing a candle. He was in love with Jon, damn the barbarian, and what he wanted, Jon could never give. Jon offered friendship and adventure, valuable gifts. He couldn't offer Raef the devotion he sought.

Raef sank so the waters lapped his chin. "I don't know where I want to be," he said. "But please tell me one thing, truthfully now. Is there any treasure you wouldn't tire of? That you wouldn't want to one day give away?"

A nerve shook the crimson of Jon's lower lip, and an unreadable emotion flashed in his eyes. For a moment, Raef feared he'd angered him, but his anguish receded beneath a rueful smile. The ocean sighed on Jon's behalf. "I understand you," said Jon, and he shook his head.

"I just wondered, that's all. It's not a problem." Raef curled his tail up, toying with his feathered tailfins. He'd made the right decision. No way could he go with the *Alice O'Shanty* to see Jon take other lovers. "You need to go back to the boat, get rope and a winch or something. I'll wait in the cave for a man to come down to me and fetch the registry book. Is that a good plan?"

Jon's focus had glazed over, and now he jolted as if waking from a deep sleep. "It's an excellent plan." He mustered an enthusiastic beam that grated on Raef. "We'll see you there at first light."

Jon sculled away across the glassy waters and moored by the *Alice O'Shanty*. Little lights on the ship glowed in welcome, and the crew were

on hand to greet him and help him aboard. Watching from the mouth of the cove, Raef rested his cheek against the side of the rocky arch. He urged himself to feel nothing, to think only of the sea and stars. But the universe was vast and empty without Jon beside him, and his heart felt as cold as the stone he touched.

Fixating on the ship, he hoped he'd never feel like this about anybody again. It hurt far too much.



Raef's dreams saw him sucked into a whirlpool. Though he remained in his mer form, he felt himself drown. He didn't care, because the whirlpool was Jon's kiss, and Jon claimed more than his mouth. Jon possessed all of him, body and soul, bringing an onslaught of hot liquid and fire that filled him up with a new zest for life. He teetered on the brink of that explosive ecstasy Jon had wrought for him by hand, yet apprehension diluted his bliss. Jon was caressing him, devouring him, but he could no longer see Jon's face. Jon's touch became brittle, far too delicate for the beast of a man Jon was. Suddenly the friction wasn't enough, as if Raef was being stroked by a ghost.

If he let himself be vanquished by this phantom, he'd be sucked to the void—and, with a whoosh, it happened. Raef plummeted through a black abyss and landed in Lord Haverford's game larder, shaking and sobbing, knowing he'd never escape from his shackles this time. Haverford was coming for him, and the hook and meat cleaver wouldn't spare him...

"Raef! There you are, my pretty lad."

The cheery shout tore Raef from his nightmare. It took him a moment to recall his location. He was lying in the cave, curled up in his mer form in the shallows near the treasure chest. The voice wasn't Jon's, but Peffy's. He leaned over the mouth of the cave, a good five yards above, and his round face shut out half the sunlight. Raef gathered himself quickly, swiping his hair from his brow.

"I don't know how on earth Cara found this hole," shouted Peffy. "We knew it was here somewhere, and we've still been searching since before dawn. She was a wily maid, that one."

A wily mermaid, you mean.

Raef kept mute. Cara must have pushed the chest through the submerged tunnel in her mer form after giving birth to Cecilia, though it would still have taken one hell of an effort. She had been desperate to hide the thing well.

When Peffy turned away to hail Jon, Raef scooped the golden conch from the bottom of the pool and hid it in a crevice beneath the water line. He'd fallen asleep with it in his hand, having dredged his memory for everything he knew about such objects. In the end, he'd concluded it was a summoning shell. Such a powerful talisman could be used by any mer only once in a lifetime, in times of trouble. Among its various powers was the ability to conjure the tribe elders of the merman or maid who blew it, thus summoning an army of mer. Another use was to call lone and wandering mer together to one spot.

Presently, Jon appeared, leaning over the opening. "Morning, Raef. I'm roped up and coming down. Ready?"

"Ready," said Raef, trying to return Jon's eagerness, and he shuffled up onto the rock. Jon was already being lowered, fists clenched about a rope that was harnessed around his waist. This afforded Raef a splendid view of his arse and thighs, hugged by leather breeches.

Temptation swept through Raef to tell him about the summoning shell, so he closed his eyes and dismissed the notion. The object would fascinate Jon, though ultimately he'd try to use it for some reason or give it away. Raef wanted to deploy it, though not to summon an army of his tribe. If Galyna found him, he'd drag him back home in disgrace for disobeying tribe orders. While a small part of him wondered if he should give up and let that happen, he wouldn't. It would be nice to see Ali, but he'd end up where he'd started: being commanded to marry poor Henna. At best, Galyna would give him a stark dressing-down, and Raef was through with being treated like that.

Jon was nearly upon him. Raef fought another temptation—to grab and grope those sturdy legs in some pretense of aid.

Jon alighted and stared at him. "How do you do, Raef?"

Raef had expected Jon to be entranced by the treasure chest rather than him. The undiluted attention unsettled him. "Very well, thank you," he said, twitching his tail. "Let me show you the chest."

They examined the contents together. Raef showed Jon a slip of paper stamped with a red wax seal, which he'd discovered folded in the registry book. "It's a codicil to Lord Henry Haverford's will," said Jon, scanning it swiftly. "Henry must have slipped it to Cara with the book. It proves he wished his whole fortune to pass to Cara and her child. This is good. But it still might not be enough to clinch the deal."

"What do you mean?"

Jon folded the paper, knitting his brows in thought. "I mean that we're only halfway to getting Cecilia's property back for her. If it's her word against Haverford's, the documents will never even be seen by the high-and-mighties that matter. We need some powerful allies."

Raef hissed, worried. "Who would ally with a penniless girl against a lord?"

"You'd be surprised. For a start, we'll send the codicil to Sir Edward Humphrey." Jon tucked the paper inside his jacket, and Raef recalled the elderly gent who'd protested when Haverford shut him in a chest. "Humphrey's a rum cull, but he's kind to his tenants and as honest as a rich nob can be. He'll sympathize with Cecilia's plight and act in the interests of honor and the truth. Meanwhile, I think we should pay a visit to Edith."

Raef's tail stiffened with shock. "Confront a possible murderess? Are you mad?"

"Probably." Jon winked. "But getting her to confess to the forgery of the marriage register might seal everything."

"Why on earth would she do that?" And Raef was supposed to be the insane one. This scheme was cracked, though Jon was chuckling, obviously

pleased with himself.

"I reckon Edith might be open to bribery, seeing as her son is so difficult to love when you get to know him." Raef rolled his eyes self-depreciatingly. He couldn't deny *that*. "Even if it doesn't work, it'll be hilarious sport watching her face when we confront her with the truth. Anyhow, I've escaped Newgate Jail and the Bastille in my time, let alone Lilhaven lockup. We can escape the clutches of an elderly lady, don't you think?"

"We?" The wind ruffled the foliage around the mouth of the cave, and a draft swirled between them. "You don't need me. You've got your crew."

"You and I started this quest together, so let's finish it." Jon squeezed Raef's arm, and Raef barely resisted rolling his eyes again. Jon was just saying that to be kind. He wished Jon wouldn't. "You'll need legs, though."

And with legs come those parts that'll get hugely overexcited at being close to you again.

"Will you meet me at Cecilia's cottage back in Lilhaven tonight?" asked Jon. "I'll leave some dry clothes under a pile of rocks on the beach for you. X will mark the spot."

"Maybe," replied Raef, not missing the irony. The X in the book of love poems, so it seemed, marked nothing.

Jon grinned at him, seemingly satisfied. He lifted the book, tucked it under one arm, then rose to grip the rope and tug it. "Peffy! Victor!" he called. "Haul me up."

The rope elevated him toward the light. Watching him rise, Raef sensed Jon knew as well as he that he'd be there to see this adventure through. To laugh in the face of danger together one more time. He wouldn't miss it for all the riches in the world. But maybe Jon also believed that he would hang around after that, following him like a lovesick pup. There Jon was wrong, because Raef had learned much in this past week. He could endure and he could survive, and now he had a summoning shell. If he whispered the right plea to the conch beforehand, one blow could call other lone mer in the hope of forming a new tribe, mayhap a new family.

Raef hoped he had become wiser. And when this adventure was over, the wise choice would be to use the conch for that end.



Thirteen

A pregnant stillness hung over the village of Lilhaven that night. The lights of The Bosun's Locker glowed dimly, and no music wafted from inside. Raef suspected a patrol of dragoons were anticipated at any moment, though a faint hum of voices raised an aura of expectation, which seemed sharpest at the village's farthest flung edge. The door of Cecilia's cottage hung open, and the company spilled onto the narrow quayside.

Raef, human and clothed again, pulled himself up from the cobbles onto the wharf. He approached the cottage, the golden conch safe in his pocket. Outside, a gaggle of women were examining a fishnet and loudly discussing a hole in it. One of them was on her knees, removing some stone weights from the pockets. The women eyed him as he approached. Raef suspected they were on watch, positioned to distract any passing dragoon from the truth—there were outlaws in the end house, including Jon.

The women didn't challenge him, so he surmised they had been briefed to expect somebody of his description. Among them was Sarah, the girl who had given him the whelks that he'd ended up dumping on the doorstep. When he drew close, she offered a bashful smile. Recalling the night of his capture, he wondered how she'd known Jon would come for him.

He greeted her, equally shy. "Miss, may I ask you something? How did you guess that... he..." Raef inclined his head in the direction of the cottage. "That *he* would rescue me. You hardly knew me." Let alone that he meant anything to Jon.

"You must hardly know Jon Kemp," she answered. "He's the best of men. He saved our lives the very first time he came here, and he always helps us. When my father was dying in July, relieving his pain was beyond even Cecilia's talents. But Captain Kemp sailed to Spain and back to fetch some herbs to ease my poor pa, and we didn't even ask. So when you were

captured trying to help him, I knew he'd save you just as soon as he'd saved himself. He's an honorable man, apart from maybe—"

"Make yourself useful and hold this, boy," snapped an elderly matron. She pressed a corner of the net onto Raef so she could untangle some broken threads. Raef did as he was bid, though kept all his attention on Sarah, searching her elfin face.

"Apart from what?" he pursued. His mind was boggling. The dreaded Pirate Kemp. Honorable? Having got to know Jon, nothing Sarah had just told him about Jon came as a surprise. However, it did run contrary to how Jon liked to represent himself, as humiliating the rich for larks. Helping the sick didn't sound like jolly sport. It sounded like kindness for kindness's sake.

"Oh, it's silly," muttered Sarah, her mouth tightening. "When he heard Cecilia's story, he vowed to help her. I know it's just because it's the right thing to do, and Cecilia would make a splendid mistress. She's generous and sweet, and she lives to help others, but... but..."

"You think Jon Kemp might love her?" Raef narrowed his eyes. He didn't believe Jon was in love with anyone. Either way, it wouldn't matter to Sarah unless she was in love with Jon, too.

"Oh lord, I don't think so, but I'm such a bundlehead." She pressed her face in the net, which did a poor job of hiding her blush. "It's just he's so handsome, and Cecilia's the dearest creature in the world to me. All I have." Her clipped tones faded to a husk. "I don't want to lose her. Even if I don't lose her to Jon, she might forget me when she grows rich and lives in a grand castle."

Suspicion glimmered and flourished. He'd been an idiot yet again. Sarah was in love with Cecilia. She sounded so desolate that Raef patted her rope-burned hand. "If Cecilia is your true friend, I'm sure you won't lose her. And Jon isn't a rival for her affections, I promise you." He could, at least, be fairly certain about that. "I don't think he's interested in loving anyone. He's a free spirit. Free as the winds."

"And a good man," she mumbled, dabbing her eyes. "Oh, I'm a fool, aren't I?"

Raef bunched his piece of net in one hand and hugged her. The older woman at his elbow cursed his negligence, but it was nice to offer comfort, to think of somebody else's woes for a change. He wished he had more friends, a true family.

After relinquishing her, he fought his way into the cottage, which wasn't an easy task. The tiny room was so packed that he couldn't get much beyond the front step. Standing on tiptoes, he glimpsed Jon and Cecilia sitting on a bench by the hearth.

Raef studied Cecilia anew. Her mother had been a mermaid, which meant she was half-mer, though she had most likely spent her whole life in human form. Half-mer could survive like that, but they could also shift to become a full merman or maid. He expected she'd not the faintest notion of her powers. She was certainly attractive, with her aristocratic features, though he now recognized her aquiline nose as reminiscent of Haverford's, as it would be.

She shared a father with Haverford, a privilege he didn't envy her, though she couldn't distract him from Jon for long. Cecilia was smiling up at Jon, along with every man, woman, and child crammed into the room. They hung on his every word as if he was a god. The cat had curled on his lap, furry face lifted in adoration as he tickled under its chin.

"So," he said, "Captain MacLowd told the man, 'Why, split my jib-boom if I wouldn't sooner be a loblolly boy or a Frenchman than a Methodist.'"

Raef didn't understand what Jon was blathering about, though Jon had his audience in tears of laughter, clutching their sides. It was a touching scene, though Raef feared even the cunning pretense of a net-repairing party wouldn't distract a passing dragoon from this rabble's mirth. Jon had a habit of making people adore him.

"Against their bloody will," muttered Raef, then pulled a face. He was getting into the habit of using a pirate's swear words.

"Raef!" cried Jon, and the cat too jumped from his lap and bolted from the room via the window. "Ah, here he is. The lad we've been waiting for."

Raef found himself being pushed through the company toward the hearth, a dozen hands slapping his back. Jon's expression exuded such fondness, his knees went weak. Maybe he was deceiving himself, but Jon really did seem to look at him differently to everyone else in the room. As if nobody else was there.

As if he was still naked.

Heat suffused Raef's cheeks, and he hoped it could be blamed on the warmth from the fireplace. Jon leaned in to embrace him, and he tensed. He couldn't enjoy this. He mustn't. Jon pulled away, holding Raef at arm's length and arching a brow.

"I'm fine," said Raef, before Jon could bombard him with any questions.

Jon nodded, apparently convinced, but still fixating on him as if he were the only fellow in the world. Jon probably did that to all the boys. Hell, he doubtless made Cecilia feel this way too.

"We'll get going, then," said Jon, breaking an awkward moment. "We're going to pay old Edith a visit and lure her with a pot of gold."

A jingling drew Raef's attention to a small girl, who gleefully buried her hands in a pot of shiny coins. Under the cot beside her, two even tinier children were using some of the gold discs for a game of tiddlywinks. Jon had uncovered some of his old buried treasure or had been off pirating without him. He fought an unwonted stab of irritation at the notion of Jon doing *anything* when he wasn't there. Jon squeezed him and let him go.

"Cecilia," said Jon, "are you ready?"

What? She's coming?

Despite his every resolution, Raef's spirits plummeted. He didn't want company other than Jon and bet Sarah wouldn't like the idea any more than he did. He grabbed Jon's arm, tugging him back around. "If Cecilia's coming, Sarah should come too."

"That's an excellent idea." Jon grinned, and Raef blinked. That had been easy. "Shame it's so dark, or we could make a picnic of it."

"We could anyway," called Cecilia, pulling on a ragged shawl. "Sarah's bound to have clams or winkles."

She regarded Raef with a curious, but friendly, air. Jon must have told her a bit about him, though he doubted Jon had shared the whole truth, tail and the rest. This meant she would be unprepared should he decide to share what he'd learned about her. He'd have to break it gently, if he decided to reveal the secret at all, and he was ambivalent as to what was best.

Cecilia held a couple of pins between her lips, using another to fix up her ginger hair. Raef edged nearer, inclining his head. "Excuse me, miss. But have you ever been in the ocean at sunrise or sunset?"

"I, mmmph ... hold on." She removed the pins. "I don't think so. That's a strange question."

"Very strange indeed." Jon's growl in Raef's ear set the hairs on the back of his neck on end. "I wonder, Raef, what made you ask it?"

He'd not realized Jon had been close enough to hear. Then again, there were so many people in the cottage they were squashed like herrings in a barrel. "No particular reason," murmured Raef, stooping to pick up a pin Cecilia had dropped. "Miss Cecilia is very pretty, that's all."

"Hmm." Jon sounded unconvinced. He didn't pursue the matter, but Raef was suddenly glad they'd have company on the trip. If it was just the two of them, he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep secrets from Jon, and secrets were good. They reinstated distance, and he'd have to get used to that.

A short while later, Raef wound up a steep cliff path, leading a sweet-tempered donkey. The animal was laden with one saddlebag full of gold and another with the registry book tucked inside. Sarah and Cecilia followed behind, sharing a bucket of clams and whispering to each other in an intimate fashion that made him melancholy. Their closeness also summoned his old companion envy, though he tried not to dwell on anything, save the strain on his legs from the uphill climb. He looked to the clouded sky, where one or two stars emerged as twinkling pinpricks in the rumpled blanket of the heavens. Then he looked to Jon, who strode ahead of them with a lantern, picking out their path through the gorse. Jon didn't speak to him, and he was glad of it.

They passed along the cliff top for about half an hour before taking a narrow lane that wove inland between tumbledown farmsteads and overgrown meadows. Raef had never been so far from the sea, and the sights and sounds terrified and fascinated him. Though he'd taken instantly to the donkey, which was as friendly as a dolphin, the prospect of encountering the wilder land creatures filled him with dread. An eerie moaning—the cry of a stag, so Sarah told him—had him trembling to his toes. He imagined a horned creature the size of a whale. Despite the dangers entailed in meeting Edith, Raef hoped the trek would soon be over.

By the time Jon pointed out the dark hulk of a building on the far side of the valley, the witching hour was upon them. "That's where the dowager Lady Haverford lives," said Jon. "Indeed, it's the old Haverford Castle. It's in such a dilapidated state, only the gatehouse is habitable."

"I thought the castle by the sea was old." Raef leveled at Jon's side with the donkey, relieved to find an easy topic of conversation.

"It's sparkling and new compared to this pile," replied Jon. "Henry Haverford built the new hall thirty years ago, using the profits from his East Indies trading vessels, so he could entertain his society friends. You want a meandering ruin with real secret passages, hidden traps, and probably a ghost or two, this is it. I doubt Edith much likes it, mind."

As they trod nearer, Raef felt inclined to share Edith's dislike. The sole lights glimmered from the windows of a squat gatehouse, and the ancient keep loomed beyond, a crumbling shell. The entrance was blocked by a heavy gate. Jon rapped his knuckles on a smaller door cut within it and they waited.

And waited. Nobody came.

Raef patted the donkey's striped nose, and the beast nuzzled his hand; he'd found a new friend. Sarah and Cecilia exchanged anxious mutters while Jon knocked again.

At length, a sliding panel in the door opened, and a fellow shoved his mean-looking visage through. "Be gone with you, beggars," he hissed. "Lady Haverford gives all her charity at church."

"That's a lie. The old bitch never goes to church." Sarah, just out of the man's earshot, sniggered behind her hand.

"Neither do you, my pretty heathen," whispered Cecilia, elbowing her friend lightly in the ribs.

Jon, meanwhile, stopped the panel being slammed in his face by waving a gold coin.

"We're not here for your mistress's charity," he said. "We seek an audience with her. If you'd like to take Lady Haverford this token of my good intentions, there'll be plenty more where that comes from for both of you."

The man scuttled away. Presently the door swung open, setting bats flittering above their heads. Sarah and the donkey remained under the drab archway, under the watch of a second servant: an older fellow with bloodhound eyes. Jon retrieved the book. He, Raef, and Cecilia followed the first retainer up a stairway so narrow no grown adults could pass upon it. At the top, the servant stooped through the lowest door yet. "'Ere they are, Madam," he said, motioning to Raef and the others with a jerk of his head. "In you go."

Edith Haverford sat in a wingback chair beside a hearth no less meager than Cecilia's and on boards strewn with mouse droppings. As Raef entered, ducking beneath the cobwebbed lintel, the old woman fixed him with a heavy-lidded gaze.

"What do you want?" she snapped. "Disturbing an elderly lady at such an hour is criminal."

"I *am* a criminal," said Jon, seizing Edith's attention from Raef, which was a relief. Jon offered a low and mocking bow, then held out the book, which Edith ignored. With a spindly, lace-clad hand, she pointed to his earring. Her frosty demeanor softened.

"Are you a pirate, by any chance?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed," he replied.

Was that a smile curving on Edith's wizened lips? And could her beady eyes be tinged with hunger? Raef choked back a laugh. He couldn't question the old girl's taste, however unpleasant she was. Clearly, she fancied Jon.

"Well, well, well. This is interesting," said Edith. "I don't suppose you've come here to ravish me, and there's not much to steal." She adjusted a blanket draped over her lap, and her gaze rested at last on the book. "What is that?"

"The parish registry book from St. Brigit's chapel on the cliff," said Jon as plainly as if they were discussing the weather.

Edith blanched and clasped the shawl at her throat while Cecilia jumped forward, anger iridescent in her eyes. "We're here to see justice done. It's time somebody paid for the disappearance of my mother."

After Edith had got over the initial shock—and had cursed Cecilia to the devil—she listened surprisingly calmly to their terms. She toyed with the strands of white hair that tufted her chin and glared periodically at the book, which was propped in a corner. She also glared at Cecilia, who stood rigid a few paces afar. Cecilia had transformed from the good-natured creature of their journey. She met the old woman's malice with a dignified haughtiness that Raef couldn't help admiring as he waited with his rear to the fire.

"So," said Edith, "you want me to admit my brothers' committed forgery and disinherit my son." She gestured around her chamber, which contained only her chair, a chunky dresser, a threadbare rug, and a fire poker in a pot. "And give up all *this* in exchange for gold doubloons worth a thousand pounds."

"You are getting off damned lightly," said Jon, who paced the room, hands clasped behind his back. "All the blame can be laid with your brothers, who are dead, so no harm can come to them. You will be richer than you are now, and we will bring your son down one way or another. If you don't help us, we'll bring you down with him."

"There's no need to threaten me." Edith fingered a piece of paper in her lap, which Jon had prepared for her, a confession that attested how her brothers counterfeited the marriage register. "I will sign and seal this scrap in exchange for the gold, but I have a few conditions of my own to add."

"How dare you." Cecilia surged toward Edith, her shadow sweeping over the old woman like a dark, avenging angel. "I bet you killed my mother *and* father. You're lucky I haven't throttled you with my bare hands."

"Be silent, child," hissed Edith, clutching the front of her nightgown, but otherwise unruffled. "Your papa was ill, and I know nothing of what became of your slatternly mama."

"You lie." Cecilia's fists were clenched, trembling with fury. Raef couldn't help wanting her to unleash her wrath.

Edith raised the unsigned confession and twisted it as if to tear. "Strike me, and you're on your own, my darlings. Oh, you might get your case heard at the Old Bailey eventually. But while my son lives to challenge you, and I to gainsay you, the whole estate will end up swallowed in legal costs."

"She's right." Jon placed a calming hand on Cecilia's arm and whispered something Raef couldn't catch. Cecilia pursed her lips furiously, but remained silent. Jon rounded on Edith. "Go on," he said gruffly. "Tell us what you want."

"I am a lonely old woman. I miss my beauty, my youth... and the company of handsome men." Raef looked nervously at Jon, who frowned intensely. "Oh, don't worry," croaked Edith. "I don't expect favors from you. That would lack taste. Nevertheless, you are a handsome bunch of young things, and the least you can do is provide me with entertainment. You." She jabbed a finger at Cecilia, who jerked up her chin in disgust. "You're a bitch, but you're pretty, just like your harridan mama. And you."

She pointed at Jon, but Cecilia briefly drowned her out, broadsiding her with a tirade of abuse. "You old trot. You witch. You fustilugs!"

Edith raised her crackling voice. "I want you to kiss the girl, pirate, and kiss her well. I can't ask you to kiss me, but I can live vicariously, even if it is through a woman I loathe. And now, you." She poked a digit toward Raef, for whom Edith's previous demand had already triggered a gut-roiling nausea. "I want to keep *you* as my houseboy, beautiful one."

Words failed Raef. He shook his head, mouth gaping, and Jon rushed to his side. "That's quite unacceptable—"

"If you wish me to sign this confession," said Edith, patting the paper, "those are my terms."

Raef joined Cecilia in staring daggers at Edith, who offered an unpleasant smile. "We'd better discuss this," muttered Jon. "We'll give you our answer presently."

Squeezed together on the staircase outside the chamber, they formed a huddle. They enfolded their arms about one another's shoulders, bodies pressing close. It took all Raef's powers of restraint not to glower at Jon and Cecilia as angrily as he had at Edith. None of this was their fault, especially not the requested kiss, the prospect of which was screwing him up inside.

"I won't leave you here, Raef," said Jon, his tone irrefutable.

That part of the deal hardly seemed to matter. "I can promise Edith I'll stay, then run anyway," said Raef. "I'm pretty sure I can escape an old woman and her retainers."

Jon winced, uneasy. "I suppose you *are* rather good at lying and escaping, but—"

"What about this kiss?" interrupted Cecilia. "I don't mind as such. I mean, who would?" Here she colored in a pretty fashion that set Raef's teeth on edge. "But there is somebody else I care for, from whom I'll have to beg forgiveness for it. And I hate to do anything for the woman who killed my mother, because I know she did, even if she denies it. I *feel* it, and I'd rather strike her dead on the spot."

"We might get around to that," said Jon, his frustration palpable. "But if the kiss forces her to sign willingly, it is the easiest way." He flicked his dark gaze from Cecilia back to Raef. "We won't leave you here, though, my boy. I don't trust Edith any farther than I could toss a Scottish chieftain."

"I suppose we'd better try to appease her with the kiss, then." Cecilia sighed, sounding like she'd rather bathe in a cesspool.

Her reluctance made little difference to Raef. At that moment, he would have chosen to spend a decade as Edith's houseboy rather than watch Jon share the magic of those kisses with another. Jon looked at him in

anticipation of some response, but Raef raised his gaze to the ceiling. It seemed to press down on him like a collapsing cave.

Jon was right. This was the easiest way. Seeing as Raef had given up on the idea of a future with Jon, the kiss shouldn't matter anyway. He shrugged. "Let's get it over with."

"Well?" demanded Edith on their return. "Do I get my requests?"

"Cecilia and I will oblige," said Jon, his voice shaking, "but Raef cannot stay with you. I won't leave a man behind."

Edith threw up her hands in a gesture of despair. "You're not much of a barbarian, are you?"

Raef butted in; he couldn't help himself. "Excuse me, but what *is* a barbarian?"

"A real man." Edith snorted, nostrils flaring. "A proper pirate—one who lies, cheats, kills, and rips the threads off his favored prey and slams his tongue down their throat before they can scream. Now kiss the girl, you fop, before I throw this damned paper to the fire. Show me some passion!"

"Then shut up, you hag!" Cecilia edged toward Jon, who gripped her shoulders and pulled her close. Cecilia, visibly melting a little, thrust out her breasts so they firmed against Jon's chest. They stared into each other's eyes, and Raef yearned to look away, to run for the hills. Like a man lying on the rack and shouting, "*Stretch me*," he surrendered himself to the torture. He was entranced, but unable to keep the pain and horror from his face.

Jon looked at Raef and softened his frown a moment before turning back to Cecilia. Jon was going to do it. Of course he was. He'd kissed innumerable men and women before, and none of them meant more than a brief snatch of pleasure. This action was nothing more than a means to an end ... so why was Jon as rigid as those statues outside Lord Haverford's bedchamber? Jon's face was transformed into a marble effigy of anguish.

"This is all wrong." Jon released Cecilia and took a purposeful stride back. "I can thief and fib, crack all the commandments at once, but Cecilia

should be kissing another and ... so should I."

Eh? But it's just a kiss. A kiss that would've torn me up inside, but I'm a fool for love, and it means little to you, surely?

In the hearth beside them, black embers tumbled and hissed. Cecilia dabbed her lips nervously, and Edith bared pink gums in a snarl. A single step closed the gap between Jon and Raef, so they stood face-to-face on the rug in front of the fire. Jon fired his midnight gaze with a hitherto-unseen possessiveness that speared to Raef's core and shattered Raef's wits into a thousand pieces.

"If you wish to see me kiss somebody and mean it," declared the Pirate Kemp, "it's got to be Raef."



Fourteen

Jon took hold of Raef, and Raef's world reeled full circle. This was a dream; it had happened too fast to be real. Edith, Cecilia, and the room faded as Raef touched Jon's cheek, drawing him near. Raef was ready to devour and be devoured.

"Oh, for Beelzebub's sake!" Edith tossed the unsigned confession into the fire, tearing Raef back to the present. She reached for the poker by her chair, jerked it back as she would a lever, and the floor slanted away beneath Raef, sucking him and Jon down with it. Raef dropped into a dark pit below. He landed on his front with his face jammed in Jon's groin, his legs entangled with the rug.

Jon roared in pain. Winded, Raef lifted his head to gasp. Edith loomed over the trap they had fallen through. The pistol she'd whipped from beneath her nightgown was aimed with a sharpshooter's steadiness. "Come a step nearer with that knife," she said, addressing Cecilia, "and I'll shoot you through the heart like I did your mama. Now come close this trap for me. That's a dear."

When Cecilia leaned over to obey, her expression was as livid as her reddened face. She mouthed the words, "*I'll get her*," and pulled the door up. The darkness slammed down hard.

The rushing of blood filled Raef's ears. He could scarcely hear himself panting, let alone get his mind around what had happened or what Jon had just declared. He feared he'd hallucinated.

"Are you hurt?" asked Jon, sounding strained.

"Maybe a bit bruised." Raef pushed himself up onto his hands and knees and puffed his hair from his nose. "Nothing too bad. You?"

"No broken bones, but by the devil, I've been a cod-brained fool." Jon's angry growl rumbled around their dark prison.

"You weren't to blame," said Raef, resting back on his haunches and rubbing sore ribs. "We couldn't know exactly where this pit was and—"

"I don't mean about that." The violence of Jon's assertion had Raef catching his breath. Jon bumped into him, and then pulled him close. "I was anticipating she might pull something like this, and we'll be out of here in a jiffy. But I've been such a damned fool about *you*."

"About me?"

Jon was so close. All Raef's senses—save his sight—overflowed with him. Jon's forehead was pressed to Raef's, their noses rubbed, the tips of their fluttering lashes interwove. He tasted Jon's heady musk, and then Jon's avowals scorched his ears. "These past few days, I've been in hell. I never thought... Oh, God, why couldn't I hear what my gut's been telling me?" Jon's lips brushed Raef's as he spoke. "I'm so sorry. During our time together, I've not wanted to merit my growing feelings. It's all been so new... so baffling. *You've* been as baffling as the desires you've raised in me. But just now, when I tried to kiss Cecilia... It shouldn't have mattered or meant a thing, but I could see your zeal, your pain, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't hurt you further without telling you the truth. You are the one, Raef. You've bewitched me."

"I-I don't understand you." Actually, Raef did. All too well. But while his heart soared and sang, he still dared not believe.

"My belly sickened at the thought of touching another fellow in the alehouse the other night," muttered Jon. "And I missed you embarrassingly when you were gone. I felt like sobbing my heart out and couldn't even lose myself in poetry. My books weren't frivolous distractions anymore; they cut me to the quick. You see, I think I must love you, my jealous little merman." He affirmed the vow with a brief-but-smoldering kiss, communicating a soul-consuming passion better than any speech. "Have I hope?"

"Eh?" Raef's head was still spinning.

"Have I any hope you'll return my ardor, after I've been such a numbskull, wanting to keep you squirreled with my cargo? I should never have tried to make you become a pirate. I was so befuddled, but now everything becomes clear. I want you, man and mer, tail and all. Beilby's balls, I'd scupper the *Alice* for you, my purest pure."

At a time like this, it would help if Jon spoke plainly. Still, Raef gathered the gist, and the truth was sinking in. He'd drawn a declaration of love from a pirate who claimed never to think about it. "Yes." Raef laughed. "You've more than hope. I'm bloody yours!"

Jon renewed the kiss, and Raef allowed the affection to consume him. He surfed a torrent of joy as he allowed himself to place faith in everything he'd seen. Those looks Jon had given him, which had bewildered him—and Jon too, so it transpired—had shouted of love. Jon admitted this also, with actions that summoned bliss. Jon licked tenderly at the corner of Raef's mouth, then bit greedily on his bottom lip, gentleness and roughness blending in a gift only his pirate could give.

This was what he wanted. What he'd always craved. This man. This pirate. Best of all, Jon wanted him back.

He remained faintly aware they were in mortal peril, that the most dangerous parts of this adventure still lay ahead. Another more sinister voice reminded him Kemp could be changeable as the winds, and that finding a path together still might not be easy. But as they worked the kiss with their whole bodies, Raef's spirit flew higher than the stars. The delicate thread that had formed between them hardened to iron in accord with their needy loins.

"Take me!" Raef broke away and combed his fingers with a flourish down the length of Jon's hair. He wanted this man to get inside him.

"Believe me, I want nothing more." Jon's stubble rasped against Raef's cheek as he crushed Raef tighter. "But we've got to get out of here." A heavy grating sounded from above. "I hate to think what's going on up there. Cecilia might need help."

"I understand." He was still jubilant from the impact of Jon's confession, bolstered by Jon's relentless embrace. But their mission was failing. Cecilia,

Sarah, and the donkey could be in more trouble than they were, and they must relinquish each other for now. Jon pressed lips to Raef's brow and then edged backward. Raef shivered, bereft without him.

"I'll have a go at the trap door," said Jon. "You feel around the walls and floor and see if we've any other options."

Raef did as he was bid, crawling off through layers of grime that he'd been oblivious to when wrapped in Jon's arms. At some point, his faculties would regroup, and he'd think sensibly again. He might even be scared, but not yet. Nothing could wipe the grin from Raef's face, not even an insect rushing over his hand.

"We can make it together," said Jon as they worked. "You can swim with the ship, or we'll find an island in the tropics with shallow waters where we can both wallow all day."

That prospect made Raef glow inside. His discoveries—or rather, his lack of them—dampened his mood a tad. The floor and walls of this chamber were constructed of vast stone blocks. As Jon learned, the vaulted ceiling was too low for them to stand upright and solid as the sides, save the trap door cut in it. To add to their woes, no light leaked in at all, and they were still blind as when the portal had closed above them. After much searching, cursing, and fiddling, Jon managed to trace the edges of the trap using his knife.

"I'm going to pry this open," whispered Jon, as Raef felt the way back toward him. "When it falls down, I'll have my dagger drawn, and you need to be ready to use my pistol."

Raef collided headfirst with Jon, who straightened him up, then passed him the gun. "It's primed, loaded, and half-cocked," said Jon, manipulating Raef's hand so he was holding the weapon correctly. Raef wracked his memory for everything Jon had taught him about shooting. "You need to be ready to release the trigger. If Edith or one of her manservants is guarding it, it'll be a matter of kill or be killed. You think you can do that?"

Raef quashed a horrifying image of Jon crumpling dead beside him, brains blown out. He wasn't a killer, but he'd do anything to defend Jon, so they could find those balmy waters and swim together.

"Yes, I can do it," he said. Moving the pistol safe behind him, he traced Jon's mouth with his fingertips. He savored what he couldn't see, while the now-familiar anticipation of excitement vied with his mounting nerves. "Good luck."

"You too." Jon kissed his hand, then let him go. "Now, careful with that flintlock, lad. I don't want to be popped with my own iron." Jon laughed recklessly, and Raef could've sworn the twinkle in his eyes pierced the gloom.

"Here we go," breathed Jon.

Raef aimed the pistol upward, praying he was pointing in the right direction. A click sounded, then... silence. Not a streak of candlelight broke the darkness. "Bugger," said Jon.

"Can't you open it?"

"It's open, wide open." Jon knocked against what sounded like another layer of hard wood. "Edith's men have moved something solid on top of it, probably that dresser. We need to tip it over and if we're lucky, we'll pulverize the old crone beneath."

They tried, using hands and shoulders, straining and sweating as one, and all to no avail. The solid oak dresser stayed put, scarce rewarding them with a creak. At length, they collapsed onto the rug, flat on their backs and side by side. Though their fingers brushed, Raef panted and ached in a far less pleasant fashion than before.

"They've loaded that dresser with rocks," muttered Jon. "It weighs a bloody ton."

Raef nearly asked, *What do we do now?* but bit his tongue. If Jon had a plan, he'd hear it soon enough. Besides, as much as he trusted Jon, escape need not be down to Jon alone.

He felt into the pocket of his breeches, locating the golden conch. Clenching it in his palm, he brought it out and rested it on his breast. He didn't want to use it to form a new tribe anymore. It would be ideal if he could be the one to save the day and prove they were a true partnership,

lovers and comrades. He could blow the conch and summon his tribe in the hope of rescue, but as he pondered this, despondency crept through him. Even borne on a tide of magic, their rescuers could never get this far inland. Misery began to break him down, and he couldn't even bring himself to tell Jon about it. What was the point?

"We might die in here," he said softly, tucking the conch back where it had been. "Or, if Edith's fellows unblock the trap, they might kill us before we know what's upon us."

Jon took Raef's hand and squeezed it. "I don't like to admit defeat... but, yes, that might happen." He turned his head, so his moist breaths filled Raef's ear. "Though we'll fight to the damned last, backs against the wall if we must."

"I know we will," said Raef, a lump forming in his throat. Maybe they'd starve here, withering together in the darkness. Perhaps he'd never see Jon again. The horrors pummeling him made his resolution all the clearer. "Jon, I don't want to die without... um..."

Raef wasn't sure how to finish his sentence and didn't need to. Jon rolled on top of him, pinning him, and they joined their lips once more. The kiss deepened, and their rising passions pitched them on a journey, which this time could have no return.

"Oh God, Raef." Jon sucked Raef's earlobe, nibbling down his throat, finding more and more patches of sensitive flesh that Raef didn't know existed. Jon sent powerful waves of pleasure crashing through him, all his blood rushing to his prick as they stripped each other's shirts. Seams ripped and brass buttons flew. They rolled and grappled, wrestling and embracing, elevating Raef beyond the brink of desperation.

"I need you!" He exalted, forgetting everything in the universe, save Jon. "I need you so much."

"The feeling's mutual." Jon let loose a possessive snarl. Raef shuddered with pleasure and a rising sense of apprehension, which proved equally delicious. "I could never give you away. I'd slaughter an army if a single soul wished to touch you. Dear Lord, this *must* be goddamn love."

Raef's joys burgeoned in tandem with his carnal needs, choking a shout of adoration so all he could do was whimper. While he loved fighting at Jon's side and adventuring as equals, now he needed this pirate to be ruthless with him, to take the lead. And so Jon did. Raef discovered he was trapped, his wrists clamped above his head. He was unable to move other than to buck and writhe, moaning and encouraging.

"Have I ever told you," muttered Jon, "how beautiful your body is? Your arms. Gnnng." Here, he found and kissed the solid curve of Raef's biceps. "You're a sturdy lad."

"It's... uh... all the swimming. Oh!" Raef wriggled with delight on the rug. Jon worked his lips down Raef's sensitive underarm, across his torso, and then Jon captured a nipple with his teeth and bit lightly. Raef emitted a high-pitched squeak, his toes curling; it felt wonderful. Jon lapped and sucked both nubs 'til they hardened like pebbles. He traveled lower, deeper, crawling down Raef's body, and littering kisses that seared to Raef's heart.

Jon's breaths blazed over Raef's tightly-sucked-in belly. Then he hooked his fingers in Raef's waistband and tore down his breeches. This was a relief because the conch shell had been digging in, but Raef forgot that fast. Warmth, heat, and sheer paradise engulfed his naked member. Jon had taken Raef in his mouth.

Raef clonked his head back and panted. Now he knew the meaning of happiness, squirming and simmering, rucking up the rug beneath him. Jon licked his length, locating yet more tender places that Raef had little knowledge of. When Jon began to pump, sandstorms whirled in Raef's gut, and lights prickled beneath his tightly-squeezed eyes. Though Raef craved to see Jon, it mattered little now. Touch and feel said everything. This was perfect... so *nearly* perfect. But to hurtle through the barrier of ecstasy that now veered on his horizons, he needed Jon even closer.

Want you... inside me. Want you there now.

All he could manage was another whimper, but it struck its target. Jon slipped those soft lips off him and tugged his breeches down farther, large hands roaming all over his arse and thighs, coarse and reassuring.

"Wait there." Jon pulled away, leaving Raef sweating in anticipation. He balled his fists in the mat while Jon rustled, searching for something or other in the discarded clothing. Then Jon hitched Raef's knees up, nudging him so his arse was borne before him, making him feel exposed, scared, and cherished all at once. The rounded head of Jon's member nudged at his cleft.

"Still sure you want this?" muttered Jon.

"Please... yes."

A drum thumped in Raef's chest, his mouth dry, his body a fast-flowing channel of need. He trembled to feel the power of this beautiful man, to have Jon vanquish his every last doubt. Jon drew away and pressed what felt like a greased fingertip to his entrance. He tensed and then tried to relax, anything to get his love inside him, beyond caring if it hurt. He craved Jon too much.

"Yes, yes. Want this," demanded Raef.

"I know." Jon's grunt sounded impatient. His attentions were anything but. Slowly, he stroked Raef, whose every sinew tautened, tight springs of need coiling in his balls. Everything Jon did to him... how... why... it was all so good.

When Jon pressed the digit inside, gently opening him, Raef's thoughts unraveled. The incredible sensations unhinged him further. Jon stretched and burned him, and the torment proved exquisite. "More," he murmured. "Want."

"Oh, I'm going to give it to you, lad."

Still Jon seemed too far away, even though he was leaning over him, fingers inside him and... oh! Jon tapped a patch within Raef's channel, and stars flashed in the darkness. Sublime currents rushed through him, then intensified as Jon brushed the sweet spot again and again. Raef feared he'd reach his climax from these ministrations alone, and half wanted to, though it wasn't yet time. This was going to get even better, he knew it.

After melting Raef into a puddle of pleasure—save Raef's cock, which remained rock hard—Jon withdrew his fingers, and replaced them with the head of his shaft. Raef tensed, trepidation springing once more. He felt the brush of Jon's mouth against his eyelids, his nose, and his lips. Then Jon jerked his hips forward and nudged into Raef's tight opening.

Raef gasped, and Jon smothered him with more kisses; the burn within him seemed ten times as intense as before, almost too much. But this was it. What he'd craved. He moaned into Jon's mouth, returning the caresses of Jon's tongue. He felt his passage adjust and give, and he pressed his arse forward, impaling himself deeper.

More, please.

"Raef," rasped Jon. "So amazing. So tight."

Jon began to move, and the darkness began to spin. Pain mingled with pleasure as Raef was stretched, filled, his body saturated with a myriad of euphoric feelings. Each was beyond intense, and all of them were welcome. His skittering heart was inundated with a sense of oneness while their kisses flamed. Jon plunged deeper, striking that receptive nub inside Raef and spreading molten lava between their bodies, incinerating and all-consuming. Jon found Raef's length with his fist and slid to the pace of his thrusts.

Yes... yes!

A flood submerged Raef, arising from both their cores. They'd melded, like ripples on the water, and as Jon's waves crashed into him, Raef surged back toward him like an undertow. "Raef," murmured Jon, and it seemed his voice resounded inside Raef's head. "Never... never been like this before."

Raef wished it could go on forever, but his peak rushed upon him, an unstoppable high tide that smashed him into a scattering spray of bliss. Jon climaxed deep inside him with three powerful jolts, and then collapsed upon him, damp as dew and heavy as an anchor, while Raef floated off onto clouds of utopia.

He laughed and sighed and inhaled the strong scent of Jon's love. He'd a pirate inside him, spooned around him, and he trusted Jon with his heart.



Raef had no recollection of falling asleep; recent events had seemed like a dream anyway. But he must have slumbered, because he woke up alone, missing Jon already, and feeling like he'd slept for quite a while. Opening his eyes to pitch-blackness alarmed him for a moment. Then a scuffling noise—Jon's dagger scratching at mortar—orientated him.

They were in such trouble, yet he couldn't suppress the joyful chorus in his heart. He was wrapped in the rug, as warm and comfortable as it was possible to be in such a cheerless pit. Though Jon was too far away.

"Good morning," he said softly.

"Raef." Jon was beside him in an instant, and Raef scrambled to unravel the carpet so he could snuggle inside, too. "Good day, my lover. How are you?"

"Sore." Raef answered honestly, though he smiled as he spoke. Before Jon could respond, he pressed his fingers to Jon's lips. "Sore in a good way. You certainly make love like a barbarian. Whoever they were. I'm not sure Edith answered my question properly."

"In truth, I believe they were as honorable a bunch as any," replied Jon, stretching his long body out and drawing Raef into his arms. "It was a name given to the tribes who acted outside the laws of Rome." Raef knew who the Romans were. The mer possessed some fine statues, which were found on sunken Roman ships. "I believe one bunch of barbarians sacked the great city of Rome itself. But those Romans were a greedy bunch. They probably deserved it."

"Interesting," murmured Raef. "I think you really are a barbarian, after all." Jon was rough and kind, also. He broke the law, but had instincts that leaned always toward the cause of righteousness. Raef brightened and laughed. "I think I like it."

"I'm glad." Jon traced Raef's face, his touch solicitous, yet betraying his frustration. "I'm getting sick of this bloody darkness. I haven't forgotten how beautiful you are, but I damned well miss looking at you."

Raef chuckled again, not least because Jon was tickling down the length of his nose. "You sound like one of those silly verses you like to read."

"Oh yes, those." Jon chortled self-depreciatingly. "You saw through me before I did. I've pored over those for years, and denied they were anything beyond gimcracks. I suppose they really didn't mean a jot 'til I met you. After that, reading them made me feel like I was being flogged at the tumbler. And now we're in the darkness, I can finally see the truth."

Jon found Raef's mouth, and Raef couldn't resist drawing Jon's fingers inside. He ran his tongue around the digits in a fashion that drew a ravenous groan from Jon, who replaced fingertips with a kiss. Inside, Raef was still laughing, wondering how he could be in so much danger—mayhap living his last day on earth—and reveling in a happiness that outweighed most of his fears.

"I admire you for so much more than your beauty," rasped Jon. He nipped Raef's lower lip, sending tremors of delight through him. "Treasure hunting has never been so much fun as it is with you. I still say it, Raef—you're a natural pirate. No... I don't mean that. I don't want you to be a pirate. That was the mistake I was making before. You're you. And you're a natural *merman* pirate."

"I like that idea." Raef rubbed against the bristles on Jon's chin. He'd never want to be a human pirate, but the notion of becoming a merman pirate with Jon to guide him was thrilling. He could get used to it happily, learn and grow with the identity. Making life together work really didn't seem such a challenge, now Jon had confessed his devotion. Though whether they'd have any time together at all was a matter currently hanging in the balance. Raef's worries started to hold sway. "Have you any idea how long we've been here?"

"Only a few hours," said Jon, drawing his knuckles down Raef's cheek. "Though it must be morning by now, and as much as I'd love to lie here all day, we'd best get organized. Edith could have summoned the dragoons by

now—or worse, the yeomanry cavalry, who'll take us back to Haverford's castle, I'd wager."

They groped about to find their clothes, bumping heads and elbows. Raef's mirth diminished further as the reality of their situation clawed beneath his skin. Jon had spent all night trying to loosen a single stone in the wall and had made no progress at all.

"The walls of this gatehouse could be four feet thick," admitted Jon. "If Edith has entombed us here alive, we'll have to keep at it. I've a feeling, however, we'll get a visit soon, and there'll be no good in going out shooting this time. Without the element of surprise, we'll be killed like rats in a trap."

Raef was about to ask what on earth they *were* going to do when it struck him. "So we'll have to go quietly. Surrender to the lobsters or yeomanry cavalry, and wait for an opportunity to escape." He fiddled to fasten the two buttons that remained on his stolen waistcoat.

"Quite right, lad." Jon managed to catch Raef's back with an encouraging slap. "We're thinking as one now. But there's something else."

"What?"

"If either of us gets an opportunity, we must leave the other behind and escape. It might be the only chance to survive. Once one man is free, he can come back and save the other. If the other's still alive."

Raef's pulse lurched even as footfalls tapped on the floor above. "You want me to leave you behind?"

"I want you to act like a good bad pirate," said Jon, sliding his hands up Raef's body 'til he clasped Raef's shoulders. "If the chance comes, you must leave me."

"I suppose so." Raef hated himself for saying it. There had to be some better plan. Now he'd got his breeches on again, his thoughts flew back to the golden conch in his pocket. While it was no use to them here, if they were taken nearer the sea, it could prove their salvation.

And if Galyna found him and took him home, he might never see Jon again.

He must tell Jon about his secret weapon, though he'd something more pressing to ask first. "Jon, would you really leave me?"

Jon clutched him tighter, and Raef discerned a dull grinding sound. Was it Jon grating his teeth?

"It'd be damned hard," said Jon after a moment. "I'd rather gouge my own eyes out, to be honest. God, Raef, what have you done to me?"

Raef smiled, mirthless and unseen, recalling how he'd once asked himself that same question about Jon. Love didn't always make life easier.

The grinding noise came again, this time much louder. "They're moving the dresser," said Jon. "Get behind me."

"No," said Raef, resisting as Jon tried to push him back. He silently cursed that he'd not got around to telling Jon about the conch. "I want to be at your side."

Jon had no time to argue. They knelt, shoulder to shoulder, as a strip of light flashed above them and their enemies veered into view.



Fifteen

A squad of six yeomen stripped them of their weapons and marched them outside the gatehouse. Raef found himself shoulder-to-shoulder with Jon once more, standing as prisoners.

He pretended to stare dazedly at the leaves and nuts that dropped from a nearby tree while Sheriff Simpson clapped Jon in chains. In truth, he'd pushed every sense onto high alert. He kept an eye on Jon particularly, in case of any signal. Raef was frightened, but he'd be damned if he'd let these scoundrels destroy the happiness he'd only just found.

"Haverford's going to take great pleasure in seeing your neck stretched from the highest tree on his lands," leered Simpson. He disappeared behind Jon to lock the shackles. The top of his three-cornered hat peeped above Jon's shoulder.

"Much like you took pleasure in attacking defenseless villagers on his behalf," growled Jon.

"Hold your tongue." Simpson paced around Jon, angry, but couldn't prevent the blistered half of his face from speaking of his guilt.

"And you," said Jon, hammering his dark gaze into Edith. She had come out to watch the show she had orchestrated, sitting in a wicker chair placed beneath the tree. The ruby ring was back on Edith's finger, making Raef want to spit. "You started this dastardly business. You *will* pay your dues."

"I said, 'silence'." Simpson slapped Jon with a glove. Jon retaliated with a malevolent grin, which filled Raef with hope. They could best Simpson and these fools with their muskets and prancing ponies. Indeed, it seemed Sarah and Cecilia could have already escaped. There was no sign of them. On the other hand, the girls might be locked inside or have been taken

away. If it came to it, Raef would rescue them, too. He could do it. After all, he'd saved Jon before.

He breathed deeply, tasting ash and moldering apples. But as a mustachioed yeoman passed Simpson more irons, his determination wavered. Maybe this *was* the end. Once he and Jon were both in shackles, their outlook would be bleak. He could glean encouragement, but no good advice from Jon's sharp, sidelong glances.

Simpson dragged Raef's arms behind him. Edith banged the end of her walking stick into the mud. "No. My son can have the dreaded Pirate Kemp, but I want to keep that one."

Raef felt queasy. Jon narrowed his eyes and offered the merest nod. This was a chance, and Raef must take it.

"But, my lady!" Simpson turned to Edith, holding the chains forth in supplication. "This is most irregular. As soon as he got your message, His Lordship commanded—"

Edith jumped up with a vigor that suggested the stick was more for threatening her prey than support. She jabbed it at Simpson. "Don't you defy me, little man. What the lady wants, the lady gets. My son would be incandescent if he learned you went against my wishes."

Raef suspected this might be a lie, but Edith's threat hit its target. Simpson affected a bow. "As you wish, my lady." He did nothing to oppose Edith's two men when they came and took hold of Raef, leading him away from Jon. They forced Raef onto his knees in the mulch beneath the tree, where the spiky nutcases dug into his shins.

"Good." Edith addressed her servants so quietly, the yeomen wouldn't hear, wrinkling her lips into a wizened pout. "If you let this one escape like you did those wretched girls with the book, I'll order my son's men back to have you flogged in his place."

Raef's expectations soared and sunk all at once. Cecilia and Sarah *had* got away and might be working at some rescue plan, though current events compelled his attention. Simpson linked Jon's chains through the saddle of his horse and led Jon away, urging the mare into a trot. Flanked by the other

riders, Jon kept pace using the longest steps his chains allowed, shuffling in the mud. He afforded Raef a last glance over his shoulder, cracking features otherwise set like flint in order to wink.

The party started up a high-hedged lane, rounded a corner, and was gone. Raef's heart thumped so hard, he feared it might burst. He gathered himself fast. Cool as the breeze that licked his skin, he looked up at Edith. She'd settled down in her wicker chair, as complacent as if she were about to start her embroidery rather than watch a man tortured.

Righteous anger tingled down his spine. A week ago, he might have despaired, but not anymore. Jon had called him a merman pirate. This was the moment he'd step forward and assume his new mantle. Hell, he'd little choice but to believe he could succeed. Nobody defied the merman pirate when he'd set his sights on what he desired.

"Fetch some rope," snapped Edith, to the younger, mean-looking man. "We'll string him up by the wrists and flay him raw. I want to see the pretty boy dance."

While the fellow hurried off to obey, Raef buried his face in his hands, affecting sobs. Between his fingers, he assessed the scene. Edith was cackling at him, calling him "Dandyprat" and "Lily-livered." The stout servant with the bloodhound eyes leaned against the tree trunk, a pistol tucked in a halter. He was bigger than Raef, though Raef had muscle where he possessed flab. Raef would be quicker too, but must remember everything Jon had taught him, as well as follow his natural instincts. Lull the foe into a false sense of security and take advantage.

He emitted a wail so pathetic, the servant guarding him chuckled.

"Please," he begged, shuffling closer and clasping his hands in entreaty. "Don't hurt me. I'll do anything!"

"Stay where you are, you plaguey dog."

Raef moaned piteously. The servant offered a languorous kick. Raef dodged it, then sprang up, throwing himself at the fellow, who had the pistol drawn by the time Raef seized the servant's arm and thwacked it against the tree trunk. He slammed his knee into the man's groin, wrenching

the gun free as the servant bellowed in anguish. Hearing a shout, he turned. The mean-faced man was dashing out of the gatehouse, carrying the rope and a large musket.

Raef lifted the pistol and aimed, gritting his teeth as Edith veered into his firing line, waving her stick. The old biddy was fearless. Maybe she was counting on him losing his nerve. Wasn't going to happen. He cocked the pistol, readying to squeeze the trigger.

"Raef. Duck!"

At the unexpected female shout, Raef obeyed on reflex. He threw himself to the ground as a blast sounded. A shot whizzed over him, striking the man running from the gatehouse, who crumpled the same moment the burly servant Raef had seized the gun from crashed into Raef from behind. The impact pummeled him into the ground and crushed the wind from his lungs. He managed to keep hold of the pistol—just—stretching it in front of him. The servant grabbed for it, and Raef struck his assailant's jaw with his elbow. Another shot was fired somewhere to the left of him, and a blood-curdling scream rent the air.

Raef couldn't see what had happened; he was too busy holding onto his weapon while the servant thumped his arm. He tasted the sharp scent of gunpowder, and then Sarah ran into his sightline, brandishing a gun nigh as long as she was tall. The servant on top of Raef kept whacking him, but Raef gripped the barrel harder.

Sarah must have been responsible for downing either Edith or the mean-faced servant. She now funneled powder and shot back into her weapon's muzzle, preparing for another go. "Get off him," she snarled, finishing the task and lifting her rifle. The servant squashing Raef froze before clambering up, his hands raised. His expression was thunderous.

Sarah nodded to Raef. "Are you hurt?"

Raef shook his head, placing one hand on his knee and rising, too winded to speak. His many inquiries were further quashed when their surviving enemy whipped out a knife and lunged toward Sarah.

"You mousy bitch," snarled the servant. "I'll get—"

Before Sarah had reacted, Raef fired the pistol into the servant's chest, staggered back with the recoil, and then turned away. He didn't want to see what he'd just done.

"Raef?" Sarah threw down the rifle and touched him. He cast aside the pistol and hugged her tight, burying his face in her headscarf.

"He's dead," whispered Sarah. "Thank you."

"It's the least I can do."

Raef's insides had gone numb. When he dared look up, he kept his gaze averted from the man he'd killed. Less than ten paces afar, Cecilia stood over the lifeless bodies of Edith and the other servant. She'd a rifle propped on her shoulder and her hair blew loose.

"One debt repaid," she said hoarsely, more grief-stricken than triumphant. She knelt and took the ring from Edith's finger, a single tear trickling beside her aristocratic nose. "Now let's go find your man, Raef, and finish this affair."



Raef, Sarah, and Cecilia buried the three bodies in a shallow pit in nearby woodlands. They covered it with soil and the autumn leaves, which tumbled about them in a myriad of gold and red shades. Raef muttered a prayer to the gods of the oceans, though guilt didn't eat him as he feared. He'd had little choice but to kill to save Sarah. He wasn't proud of what he'd done, yet he couldn't bring himself to be ashamed, either.

They knelt on soft mulch beside the grave, heads bowed and exhausted from the effort. "I suppose I'll have to answer for Edith's murder," said Cecilia.

"No," said Raef. "I'll take the blame. There are no witnesses left, and it'll be easy enough to say it was pirates." Hopefully, by the time news of the killings came out, he and Jon would be making a dash for some westward horizon. "Once you've become Lady Haverford, nobody must question your

word. And you've got to claim what is yours, otherwise all this will be for nothing."

"He's right," said Sarah. "It's your destiny, love. Your mother would have wanted it. I won't let you throw everything away."

"I would for you." Cecilia offered Sarah a frail, but adoring, smile that made Raef fleetingly happy, though his thoughts flew to Jon. Was he all right?

"Last night," whispered Cecilia, "when I saw that man touch you, Sarah... Oh heavens, it was awful." She shaded her eyes, anguished, but Sarah hushed her.

"It's all right, sweetheart." Sarah pulled Cecilia close, and they buried their faces in each other's shoulders.

Raef speculated whether Cecilia had told Sarah about her agreeing to let Jon kiss her. These two seemed so close; he suspected she had. The traumatic events of the night seemed to have fortified their bond of trust, just like they had his and Jon's.

"It's all over now," murmured Sarah, smoothing Cecilia's hair before releasing her. "The bitch is dead, though... we'd better get moving."

"We had," affirmed Raef, jumping up. He didn't like to spoil the girls' moment, but the life of *his* love was at stake here.

They started up the lane in pursuit of the yeomanry cavalry, and Raef learned the details of the women's escape. The younger of Edith's manservants had taken a fancy to Sarah, who had pretended to be willing to please in order to drop a sleeping potion in the man's wine. Cecilia had brought the concoction from the supplies in the cottage. "Just in case," she explained. "I like to be prepared for the worst."

Both servants had supped from the bottle, and once they were snoring, Sarah had freed Cecilia. They'd found the registry book propped beside a heap of chopped wood and ready to be thrown on the fire. They had next attempted to break into the secure part of the gatehouse, where Raef and Jon were imprisoned and Edith slept. Upon failing that task, the women had

taken the donkey to a safe spot—which pleased Raef—and ran off to steal some weapons from a nearby battery, where Sarah's soldier brother had once served. They'd drugged the men on duty and returned quick as they could, in time to help Raef. Now, both women refused his offer to carry their guns. They strode out ahead, while he bore the pistol and a knife in his belt and lugged the great book, which Cecilia had retrieved from a temporary hiding place.

"In some respects, I'm enjoying myself too much." Sarah tugged the scarf from her hair and swung her heavy rifle to a jaunty rhythm. "This beats selling winkles out of a bucket."

"You two should become pirates for sure," said Raef. "With your witchery with herbs, you'd be more valuable to Jon's crew than I." He almost laughed, but as the day wore on, his unease mounted. On reaching the cliff top, they had a fine view of the path winding around the headlands in front of them, and there was no sign of Jon and his escort. It was unlikely that Raef's party would catch the yeomanry cavalry before the latter reached Haverford's castle. Anyway, even if Raef ran fast as the wind, he and the girls had little chance of winning any fight in the open.

"We're going to have to trick them," said Cecilia, hooking a hand on her hip and licking wind-chapped lips.

"Yes, but how?" asked Raef.

When no good answer was forthcoming, he scanned the horizon for ships. Though he wasn't convinced even the *Alice O'Shanty* could help. It would be impossible to get a message to the crew. Worse of all, his human legs were getting weary, and the golden conch appeared to weigh twice what it ought in his pocket, where he'd tucked it deep, glad the yeomen hadn't found it. It seemed to whisper to him, beneath the moans of the sea and the murmur of the wind.

Haverford's castle is by the ocean. You're going to have to use me. Give him up—give everything up—to save him.

He closed his fist about the conch, but couldn't shut out the truth. At the present, his best plan was to summon his tribe. He briefly considered telling Cecilia about the shell, and also her mother's true identity, but decided to

save it. She had enough to deal with; they all did. And besides, the girls did not even know he was a merman, and that would be a revelation enough.

A cloud of black seabirds twisted through the skies, forming ever-shifting shapes and spirals, and Raef wracked his brains. He must change too, be as mutable as those fowl. Create new plans, on the spot if he must, just like Jon would. He'd been to Haverford's castle before. What had he learned that would help him? He knew about the passage and staircase from the servants' quarters, which was hardly a secret, but that sort of information might prove helpful.

In the late afternoon, they deserted the path to approach the castle under the shelter of woodlands, picking carefully through the bracken to avoid any mantraps. As the trees started to thin out, Cecilia motioned they must be quiet. She pointed toward the lawns in front of the castle, visible through the foliage. Here, a servant was climbing a ladder to fix a rope over the bough of a high tree. Beneath this, a carpenter erected a wooden platform, sawing what looked like a trap—the door that would open beneath Jon's feet, leaving him dangling and suffocating on the gallows.

Raef and the girls crouched down among the ferns. "They're going to hang him," whispered Cecilia. Raef had gathered that, and his insides were crawling. "We need to rescue him fast. Have you any notion where they might be keeping him?"

"Let me think." Raef snatched an unsteady breath. Keeping calm was getting harder and harder. The game larder was a possible prison, though wherever Jon was, it would be heavily defended. The three of them still didn't have much of a chance alone; they needed allies, or at the very least, more information. And they required it fast.

Words that Jon had spoken last time they'd broken into the castle flashed into his mind. *Silence can be bought from servants who've no love for their master, and I'll wager this crew has none.*

Raef stiffened his sinews. He knew of at least one servant who had little love for Haverford.

"We need to get to the stables," he said. "There's a lad called Stephen who works there. He might just help us."



"Damn right, I'll help you," snarled Stephen. He'd just got over the initial shock of Raef hauling him into an empty stall and being confronted with two women wielding guns and a book large enough to commit murder with. "You don't have to pay me. I hate the bastard, and what's more, I know how he's really passing this afternoon. He's told everyone that he's gone to his quarters to meditate on the pirate's sentence. That's codswallop. He's taken my sister Eliza up with him, and I loath to think what's going on. At least he'll let her off the hook this evening. That's when he's going to announce his judgment—a hanging for sure."

"Bastard," muttered Cecilia. "He's the one who needs to be hanged. He's Lord Lieutenant of the county, not judge, jury, and executioner." Raef admired her grit, and hoped one day soon she'd be a Lady Lieutenant of the County, if such things were permitted of females in human society. If they weren't, they damned well ought to be, though he couldn't fret about that injustice right now. Jon, so Stephen said, was under constant guard somewhere inside the house. On top of that, the four of them were in grave danger of being found and questioned.

"Where do you think Haverford will watch the... the..." Raef couldn't bring himself to say 'hanging.' "Where will he watch the proceedings from?"

"Probably his balcony," replied Stephen. Raef recalled Haverford's threat that first night he'd seen Jon in the cave, to stand up there and gloat when the pirate was executed. "The yeomanry will stand watch and Haverford can pronounce his judgment and lord it over everyone from above."

Raef bit his lip as an idea struck. "But if Haverford, say, proclaimed a pardon instead," he asked, "they'd have to let Jon go?"

"Yes," replied Sarah. "The Lord Lieutenant is the most powerful man in the county. Nobody would dare defy him... but I can't see anyone persuading him to do that."

"Nobody will need to," said Raef gravely. "Because by the time he pronounces the pardon, he'll be dead."

That revelation seized the others' full attention. The four of them bunched into a tight knot while Raef explained about the automaton. Raef intended to make the full-size model of Haverford appear on the balcony in Haverford's stead.

"I'll creep into his quarters via the servant's staircase," said Raef. "I won't be able to fire the pistol, because everyone would come running, but if I can take Haverford by surprise, I can knock him out with the butt or stab him or something. Then I'll make the announcement from within. My voice is not such a different timbre to his."

"We'll have to get away fast after that," said Cecilia, twisting a coil of hair about her finger, cautious but optimistic.

"It might work," said Stephen, who chewed nervously on a piece of straw. "If the model is as good as you say it is. He keeps it tight, because *I* didn't know about it. If he'd brought it at out a dinner party or ball to show his friends, I'm sure the gossip would've reached the stables."

"That's a plan, then," said Raef, and he picked up the book. "Stephen, will this manuscript be safe if we hide it somewhere in the stable?"

"I suppose so." Stephen bit clean through his strand of straw and screwed his slim features into a glare.

"What is it?" asked Raef.

"I don't see why you should get to kill him," said Stephen. "He's wronged me more, and Eliza too. I should do it."

"Raef's a pirate," said Sarah. "He's experienced at this sort of thing. We've seen him in action, and he's amazing."

Raef stared down at the grimy hay, feeling anything but amazing. He let the girls win the argument on his behalf. Merman pirate he might be, and keen to carry out the mission, but that did nothing to alleviate the iron clench of fear in his gut. Jon's life hung in the balance. Without him, Raef's

future stretched out, endless, empty, and desolate. If Jon died, so would Raef's soul. But would this madcap plan really work?

Once the girls had persuaded Stephen, he accompanied Raef down the passage and up the spiral staircase as far as the door that opened near to Haverford's bedroom. "I'll wait here then," he said, only mildly begrudging. "I'll do my best to delay anybody who approaches, but I can't make any promises it'll work." He snorted. "Then again, it won't be the first time that I've been asked to keep watch while that nob swives my sister."

"This will be the last time, I promise." Raef patted Stephen's back and managed a smile, belying the panic that blazed within him. He must strike the killer blow again, but this time, he'd have no friends to back him up. Despite all he'd learned of Haverford's evil, he feared it would still be harder to kill him than some henchman he'd only just met. He wondered if it would be better just to incapacitate the lord somehow. Though that would risk Haverford crying out, or getting away before Raef's plan was complete. So much could go wrong, it made his head hurt.

He could do this. He must.

Opening the door a crack, he looked from side to side, nodded a farewell to Stephen, and hurried to the entrance of Haverford's chamber. The double door beneath the crest was closed. He knelt down, and pressed his ear to it.

He could hear the buzz of voices, but they seemed to be coming from the lower story. Not a whisper sounded from the bedchamber, or the creak of a mattress, or the ruffle of a bed sheet.

He cocked the pistol, opened the portal a sliver. The room had been tidied back to perfection since he'd ransacked it with Jon, but was devoid of all life. He shuffled in on his knees, then tiptoed to the dressing room and repeated the process of carefully opening the door. The smaller chamber turned out to be empty, too. He edged past the horn furniture and swished the red curtain aside, revealing the waxy face of the automaton Haverford. The real one remained missing.

"Damn, damn, damn." Raef tucked his gun away then raked his hair, attempting to reassure himself his plan wasn't in tatters. Wherever Haverford was, he would have to return to the bedroom in order to make his

proclamation from the balcony. If Raef moved the model Haverford near the large windows, it would be ready to push outside. He could then wait behind the bedroom door and assault his victim on arrival.

Hearing a shout from outside, Raef hurried to the window. Haverford swaggered up the lawn from the jetty, wearing an enormous feathered hat.

Raef swallowed hard. Stephen had been wrong, or at least mistaken. He could see a figure huddled in Haverford's rowing boat: Stephen's sister, Eliza, he supposed. Haverford had taken the girl not to his bedroom, but to the cave.

In the west, the sun brooded low on the horizon. It would nearly be time for Haverford to come up and announce his judgment. *If* he came up at all. "Please," breathed Raef. "Please come up to your bower, so I can kill you."

Haverford wasn't in any hurry. Sheriff Simpson rushed out to greet him as he paced up the lawn. The two men exchanged words, and the sheriff waddled toward the house, huffing and puffing on his stout legs.

"Bring the prisoner out," shouted Simpson. "Lord Haverford is about to proclaim the verdict."

Raef's heart jumped to his mouth. Haverford couldn't. He mustn't. Not down there. Raef sunk to his knees, gripping the window, his knuckles whitening.

Beneath him, Jon was led out from the house, his hands tied, and accompanied by a dozen of the yeomen. They marched down the steps and headed for the scaffold, where the executioner pulled on a black hood. Jon strode boldly as ever, his back ramrod straight. He stared straight toward the noose, save a single glance at the ocean. Haverford wiped his neck with a large, white handkerchief and waited on the veranda below.

Haverford wasn't going to come up to the balcony. If that had ever been the plan, the blackguard had changed it.

"And so must I," murmured Raef.

He reached into his pocket and brought out the conch shell. The castle was near enough to the ocean to give it a try. Moreover, sunset couldn't be

too far off, and if the army of mer arrived at that magical moment, maybe they *would* be able to walk on land.

Whatever came to pass, Galyna would take Raef back home, and he'd be furious, a terrifying prospect. Yet Raef had no choice. To save his love, he'd have to give him up.

Below, Haverford cleared his throat noisily. The rest of the company fell hushed. Unaccompanied, Jon alighted the steps of the scaffold. He held his chin high, as if trusting even at this late moment that his luck—or his love—would come through.

"I won't let you down," whispered Raef. He cupped the shell in his hand. "Send me an army. Deliver Jon Kemp from danger."

He lifted the spire to his lips and blew.



Sixteen

The conch emitted a thin, reedy note, and Raef held it 'til all the puff drained from his lungs. He hid the shell beneath the curtain, and gripped the sill once more.

Outside, proceedings were gathering pace. The yeomen had lined up, six on either side of the platform. In the distance at the jetty, Eliza had climbed out of the boat and was running toward the fisherman's cottages, hitching her gown back on her shoulders. Raef was glad of that. If a sea-borne army swept up to the castle, he didn't want innocent folk swamped. Though at this moment, no such apocalyptic force was forthcoming, and worry raked him. Maybe the summoning hadn't worked. None of his knowledge of magic talismans came from experience. Had he used the wrong kind of words in his plea? Was there some secret password he didn't know? On the other hand, the summoning might just take a bit of time... of which Raef was rapidly running out.

Haverford remained on the veranda, strutting like a seagull. "This man is guilty by his own admission of theft, smuggling, piracy, and every variety of dastardly crime," he announced. "My love for my country is too great to wish the time of the courts wasted in trying him like a decent citizen. Thus, as Lord Lieutenant, I hereby judge Jon Kemp guilty, and sentence him to be hanged by the neck 'til he be dead."

Haverford's announcement was far from unexpected, but it gouged into Raef like the pincers of a crab. One of the yeomen beat a drum to a somber rhythm. The executioner lifted the noose over Jon's head. Raef grabbed for his pistol, hauling up the window frame, even as a loud cry reached his ears. It was Cecilia, who'd emerged with Sarah and Stephen from the stables. All three stopped dead. There was little they could do except fire their weapons and hope. With any luck, they would intervene. Raef would kill Haverford

and every last yeoman to help Jon... if, with the range of this pistol and his novice aim, he could hit any of them at all.

The drum roll intensified, a fierce battering. The executioner strode toward the lever that would release the trap beneath Jon's feet and see him swing. Raef squeezed the trigger and aimed for the back of Haverford's be-hatted head. A bullet fired at the Lord Lieutenant would at least delay proceedings, even if he missed. The drum roll accelerated, surging like thunder.

And then it was no longer the drum he heard. It was the ocean.

He unleashed his shot, which blasted through the feathers of Haverford's hat the same instant a wall of white water came rushing into the bay. Cresting the great wave were seahorses, on which rode a brigade of muscular mer warriors armed with pikes, and one who bore a trident. Galyna.

An army of the mer had come: the elders of Raef's tribe. Fright swamped his relief as the ocean defied the laws of nature. It dashed over the shale and swept up the green sward toward the castle like a spring bore across mudflats. The yeomen scattered with yelps of panic. The hangman proved more stolid. He reached for the lever that would open the scaffold's trap, even as Cecilia sprinted toward him and threw herself at him bodily. With the trap still in place, Sarah sliced a knife through the tethers about Jon's wrists. Jon lifted the noose from his neck to save himself.

Then the wave hit, swamping the platform, buckling the mighty tree as if it were a blade of grass, and obliterating Raef's friends. The waters smashed into the castle, spray splashing to the highest turret. Raef threw off his boots and belt and dived from the window. He let the rebound of the current take him, fighting with all his strength to keep his head above the surface and get to the tree.

Near him, a group of mer elders rode the rapids. They searched, stony-faced, for the culprit responsible for calling them. The bearded and angry visage of Galyna set Raef shuddering amid his struggle. Already, the mer were retreating. The façade of the castle had been the high tide of their charge, and the sea barreled backward as swiftly as it had advanced,

splitting and dispersing the army. A familiar hat—Haverford's—was tossed in the surf, the stalks of the blasted feathers drooping. Raef panicked for his friends alone, as he was carried passed the gallows tree, striving to keep afloat.

When the waters receded behind him, they revealed the scaffold smashed to smithereens. The noose hung empty. Raef's hopes sparked, and he splashed and flailed. Stephen clung to one of the sturdier boughs, a bedraggled and skinny figure, and the executioner was lain face-down among the splinters of the platform. Raef couldn't see Jon or the girls, and then a racing whitecap washed over him, sucking him under. All he could do was kick and kick 'til he burst through the surface, choking all but his lungs out.

The fast-retreating waters had swept him back beyond the beach and out into the bay. His only hope now was that the sun would set soon, and he could find his friends before they drowned. He'd lost track even of Galyna between the heaving peaks. "Jon!" he yelled, as he wriggled out of his trousers. "Where are you?"

"Here, Raef, here!"

Raef wheeled around, frantic. He couldn't see Jon, but the shout had sounded near. If anybody was powerful enough to battle the flow, it was Jon. A roller pitched him upward, and he caught a glimpse of Jon, just a short distance from him. Jon flailed much as he did as the swirling streams carried them toward the headland beneath the chapel.

"Cecilia and Sarah were washed over that way," shouted Jon. The next time Raef caught a glimpse of him he was nearly within reach. Jon gestured wildly toward some rocks. "We've got to help—mph!"

Jon was walloped under, and Raef dived toward where he had been, through waters thick with seaweed. When he next broke through the surface, Jon was beside him. They grabbed for each other, fingers clasping. The touch brought Raef a joy that heightened to euphoria, as the sun kissed the western horizon, and his magical transition began.

The next wave pushed them deep, and he pulled Jon to him, embracing his lover as the change took hold. He thrashed his legs even as they fused,

not letting the pain snatch his consciousness for a moment. Soon, breathless but buoyant, he'd risen to the surface, and they'd not even broken their clinch.

Jon gasped raggedly, the final rays of an orange sunset slanting over his features. He was haggard, wearied, but no less handsome for it. "The girls. We... have to..."

Glancing over Jon's shoulder, Raef grinned. Cecilia and Sarah were bobbing a few crests afar and they appeared fine. Cecilia, indeed, was holding Sarah afloat much as Raef did Jon. She looked flabbergasted.

"I-I've got a tail," she stammered.

"It's all right," said Raef, edging a little closer. "I've got one too, and I've got to admit, I'm not at all surprised by yours."

"Indeed? My little merman keeps a lot of secrets." Jon lifted a brow, curious. With his face just inches from Raef's, he couldn't have missed Raef's blush. "I'm guessing this timely rescue by the ocean has a lot to do with you as well."

"I did intend to tell you everything about me." Raef felt sheepish, though the warmth of Jon's smile overpowered even the chill of the water. He started to relax. "But we never had time, and—"

"Raef!"

Oh, gods.

At Galyna's cry, he paddled about, taking Jon with him. Amid the calming ocean, Galyna and small number of the mer elders were arrayed before them, mounted on their seahorses, which were clad with reins of silver thread and hung with bells of gold. Galyna's frothy beard danced in the breeze. Everything else about him seemed heavy as lead, most of all his expression. His white brows knitted into a formidable scowl.

"You've got a lot of explaining to do, boy. You've broken every rule I've ever made! I also demand to know where you got a summoning shell." Galyna jabbed his trident in Cecilia's direction. "And who is *this* stray maid?"

"It's a long story." Raef shrank back, feeling like a disappointing child being scolded. "I'll explain everything. Just let me get my friends back to land." Jon's teeth had started chattering, and remaining in the sea much longer would be dangerous for Sarah, too.

"Very well." Galyna exaggerated his already-daunting glower, showing the permission was begrudging. "We can take no humans where you'll be going, my boy. You have as long as it takes me to regroup my army, but don't attempt to leave the bay. I'll be watching you."

When Raef started swimming toward the shore, Jon clenched his jaw and shot the elders a glare that equaled Galyna's. "Just because you summoned them, Raef, you don't have to go with them. You belong with me now."

"I owe them," said Raef sadly. "I found a sacred mer summoning shell in the chest with the manuscripts. That's why I suspected Cara was a mermaid, and thus Cecilia half-mer." He glanced to where Cecilia followed with Sarah. Cecilia still seemed bewildered, although instincts ingrained from birth had her swimming like she'd been in the sea all her life. "But now my people have located me, they'll expect me to go back and answer for what I've done. You see, I defied the chieftain's orders. I was supposed to marry his ward."

Jon drew swift breath. "My, my. You have more secrets than Captain MacLowd gathered in all his eighty years." His chest vibrated with a deep and throaty laugh. "Anything else I should know about?"

"Just the truth. I never loved her, and she never loved me. It was to be an arranged marriage, but it's not the only reason I fled. You see, Galyna had banned all young mer from having any contact with humans... and from falling in love."

"Even more reason you don't have to go with them." Jon gripped Raef's chin and forced Raef to look at him. His passion blazed so ardently, Raef might forget to beat his tail. "Sometimes, you have to break faith to defend what matters, be dishonorable to fight for honor. Seeing as you're a merman pirate, it'll be easy. And besides, I'm *never* going let you get away. Your tribe lives beyond the tip of Cornwall, right?"

"Yes," admitted Raef. "Our home is a short swim northeast of the Isles of Scilly, but there's sandbanks and eddies and an underwater mountain that causes a whirlpool when strong currents sweep over it. It's the perfect natural defense. No boat dare go near without fear of wrecking."

"I would," said Jon, "for you."

Ebony flames danced in Jon's gaze, and this time, Raef let the heat engulf him. Jon wrapped his body about Raef's and hitched his knees about Raef's silver-scaled middle. When he kissed Raef, the greatest storm of all ages couldn't have ripped them asunder. Their tongues swirled in a spring of affection, legs and fishtail entwining. Raef was sucked down into a tempest of love, and he didn't want to taste anything but the dreaded Pirate Kemp ever again.

When they surfaced, Jon winked. Wet lashes kissed his cheekbones and caught the shimmer of the moon as it climbed above the cliffs. Raef wanted lap up the sight of him forever and a day. When Jon glanced toward the beach, he puffed his cheeks and shook his head.

"I think we'd better hide out in the cave," said Jon. "I'm not sure going back there is a good idea."

Looking to the shore, Raef had to agree. They were far from out of trouble. A crowd had gathered on the jetty, and several men bore a stout rope that they'd cast out into the water in the hope of reaching survivors. On the shale, a group of fisherman was righting one of the boats, which had been knocked over by the flood. A lantern twinkling in one of the cottages suggested that the main thrust of the wave had missed the families there, a small relief.

He peeped over to Cecilia and Sarah, who drifted uncertainly between the headland and the shore. "Follow me," he called, inclining his head toward the cave. "Take care the tide doesn't take you the wrong way. There are hidden reefs and they're dangerous."

They reached the cave in safety, and Jon clambered up onto the ledge. His shivers became so violent they worried Raef more than the presence of the elders, who had followed at a distance and now hovered as dark silhouettes on the near horizon. Cecilia deposited Sarah beside Jon, and it

became clear that the humans could not be left here for long. Sarah's sodden clothes clung to her twiggy frame, and Jon's speech was thwarted by his rattling teeth.

Raef took control. "Cecilia, do you think you can swim around the headland and look for Jon's ship? If they're about, the crew will send a boat and blankets."

"The l-lazy b-bottleheads should be nearby," confirmed Jon.

Cecilia vowed she'd do her best. "But I still don't know how on earth I got a tail," she said, agitating the waters as she thrashed her new appendage.

"Your mother, Cara, was a mermaid, which makes you half-mer," explained Raef. "Don't worry. You don't have to stay like that forever."

Cecilia raked her sodden hair from her face, blinking as if she still wasn't sure anything was real. When she flicked her tailfins up through the surface, she accidentally sprayed them all. Sarah was shivering and exhausted, but managed a giggle. "Y-you're beautiful, Cecilia, my l-love. B-but I think we might have d-drowned and reemerged in some strange other realm."

"No," said Raef, before Cecilia could respond. He squeezed her arm. "This is real, and you've got to get going, or these two will certainly die."

She frowned, solemn as the grave. "Right. What will you do?"

"There's no chance Galyna will let me leave the bay, but I want to see what's happening at the beach. No human should spot me now the sun's set, and I'm good at keeping a low profile."

"The p-perfect merman pirate," stuttered Jon. Raef flashed him a grin before he slid under the waters and away. Everything felt like it might end up perfectly. But that could never be; not now Galyna awaited just a short swim from the cave, reassembling a mer army under the cover of darkness.

Approaching the beach, Raef took care to avoid a small vessel that had set sail to seek the flood's victims. He discerned from the fishermen's shouts that they'd dredged only bodies.

"Lord Haverford is drowned," came one cry. "We've found him."

A bleak note tolled through Raef. He couldn't mourn this vile man he'd once revered; of all these folk, Haverford deserved death the most, though the notion Raef had been instrumental in any man's death ailed him. He'd never make a good *bad* pirate, and he was glad Jon would never ask that of him. Avoiding the ship, he cut a path toward the jetty, where the group with the rope had left, in order to cast off another boat. A skinny figure stood there alone, arms hooked tightly about himself and gazing out to sea. Recognizing Stephen, Raef swam over.

"Psssst." Raef clung to the edge of the timbers and waved.

"Good lord." Stephen ran up and crouched down in front of him. "Y-you're all right. How on earth did you manage it? And hadn't you better g-get out?"

"I'm fine. No time to explain." Fortunately, the dark waters now shrouded his tail, and in the panic of the tidal rush, Stephen clearly hadn't seen the other mer. "Look, is your sister saved?"

"Eliza's fine. She was in the cottage. But w-what about S-Sarah and Cecilia?"

Stephen was as shivery as the others, which piqued Raef's concern. "They're saved too. They're hiding in a cave with Jon Kemp. But you've got to get back and get warm."

Stephen nodded, rubbing his thin fingers together. "Y-you're probably right. But you need to tell Cecilia to come, because s-something strange has happened, even stranger than that freak wave. Just after I got down from the tree, a group of royal dragoons arrived, led by Sir Edward Humphrey and a lawyer. They're looking for a Miss Cecilia Haverford. They say the estate belongs to her, and was never Lord Haverford's at all. H-how can that be?"

Raef allowed a satisfied smile to spread slowly. Sir Edward must have received the codicil to Henry Haverford's will and taken Cecilia's part, as Jon had hoped. Despite the weight of Raef's woes, he relished his moment of triumph. Cecilia could now claim her property without the late Haverford and his scheming mother to challenge her. Raef pressed his hand over Stephen's. "Go quickly and give Sir Edward the book you hid in the stable. Tell him it's more evidence, and that Miss Cecilia will meet him at his

house around lunchtime tomorrow. Then go find a hearth and warm yourself. You promise me you will do all that?"

"Yes, I promise, but—"

Raef didn't wait to hear any more. He plopped beneath the surface and glided off, no doubt leaving Stephen thinking him mad.

Raef swam back to the cave and shared the news with Jon and Sarah. They were huddling close, with Sarah wrapped in Jon's tattooed arms. Raef prayed their shared heat would be enough to protect them, if the night chill bit hard. Humans were so delicate, even sturdy pirates. He whispered to Jon where the conch was hidden, then paddled back so he wouldn't splash him and Sarah with too much cold water.

"In the morning," said Raef, "Cecilia must go claim the rest of her birthright."

"And you must return and explain yourself to the tribe."

At Galyna's booming voice, Raef's anger spiked. Why must Galyna override and interrupt him? He turned about. The chieftain loomed above him, white horse rearing with its nostrils flaring and gold bells tingling. The mer army were lined up behind. Raef fixed Galyna with a glare.

"I'll come," he spat, though a light that bobbed in the north—the boat making its way from the *Alice O'Shanty*—undermined his doggedness with grief. Jon would take Sarah and Cecilia back to the ship, where he and Jon could have found a way to be happy. Instead, he'd be taken far away.

"No, he will not come." Jon's roar belied his bedraggled state. Love and pride pushed Raef to the brink of tears. "Raef belongs with me, and don't you dare gainsay me, old man. I'm the dreaded Pirate Kemp, and I'll hunt you down and see you hanging by your cockles from my yardarm."

"And h-hurrah to t-that," echoed Sarah. Raef drank in a last, adoring look at Jon, standing in the mouth of the cave, fists clenched and defying all trembles. Their protests wouldn't be enough.

Galyna raised the trident. A fireball cracked up into the sky, and with a blast like a thousand cannon firing, a wave surged up beneath them. Upon

the wings of magic, it bore Raef many miles to the south, with Jon's final shout still ringing in his ears.

"Raef. Don't give up. I'll come for you!"



Seventeen

When the rushing wave stopped, Raef was home beneath the sea. A dozen mer folk stopped their daily business and stared at the elders' abrupt return.

The journey had ended on a sandy underwater plateau in the middle of the bazaar, the mer's market place. Here, only a short distance beneath the surface, the fruits of the ocean were bartered beneath awnings woven from seaweed, which wafted in the flow. The familiar sight offered Raef little comfort. The stalls were sparser than he recalled, piled with broken pots and wan-looking flounder. Where there had been a hundred sellers, he counted only ten, outnumbered by the creeping crabs. His only relief came on spotting Ali, who rushed out from behind his stall, tailfins fluttering.

Raef wanted to greet Ali with a hug, to ask questions and explore. There was no time. Galyna grabbed him by the upper arm and dragged him straight to the volcano. Strong currents swept them down the side, 'til the light faded to an eternal gloaming, and the eels and porpoises gave way to deep-water fishes with translucent bodies and pulsing, orange veins.

At the very roots of the volcano, Galyna cast Raef into a cavern; a small nook, like that Raef had shared with his mother, with a nest of bedding and smooth, rock walls. So deep under the waters, it felt lonely and grim. Galyna addressed the guard, a gargantuan mer with a warty face and slack jaw, which had probably condemned him to this life in the depths.

"It is a while until the next moontide meeting." Galyna's deep voice resonated slowly through the waters. It sounded strange and sinister to Raef's ears after conversing in the open air for so long. Galyna also blocked the exit to his cell with his bulk, thus cutting off any last chance of fleeing. "Make sure he's well-fed and comfortable, but watch him well, lest the

foolish boy do himself more harm. He has been consorting with humans—one of them a kluggite!"

"Jon Kemp's not a kluggite," shouted Raef. "He's a pirate and he's a good man, though I didn't understand any of that when I arrived in the world up above. If you hadn't banned us all from mixing with humans, maybe I—"

The door of the cell closed with a dulled clang, and he sagged back against the stone. Nobody was listening to him. He let his sorrow and anger claim him.

Seething in the darkness, he missed Jon so much that he'd have given his right tailfin to be trapped in Edith's old gatehouse again, in peril, but with his love at his side. Each time he pictured Jon's face, or recalled Jon's touch, his longing all but destroyed him. One moment, he'd feel as hollow as if his innards had been scooped out, the next a furnace of red-hot coals sizzled within. Either way, Raef suffered in a blistering agony, as if he had burning tinder thrust beneath each scale.

But he'd be bloody well damned if he'd sit about moping 'til Galyna showed the mercy of bringing him before the court. He had to at least try and get out of here before Jon tried to sail the *Alice O'Shanty* through the treacherous seas above the volcano and came to grief.



The first two days were the hardest. The cave had only a tiny slit of a window in the door, which allowed scant illumination, and contained nothing he could use to pick the lock. The weeds used to weave his nest were useless, too limp even when plaited together, and all the while, he battled his gloomiest doubts. Maybe Jon didn't love him after all. Perhaps Jon wouldn't come. But in his heart, he believed in the man he adored. Faith made him all the more determined.

On the third day of his captivity, the door swung open. Raef surged forward and balled his fists, in case he could overpower his visitor. Instead, the slight, dark-haired mer who bobbed into the gray ripples of light had him crying out in delight.

"Ali!"

"Raef—it's so good to see you." Ali glided forward into Raef's outstretched arms. They held each other tight. "I've been begging for days to come and see you. I think they finally let me come just to shut me up. I can't believe Galyna locked you up... Well, actually, I can, given events of late."

"Tell me more." Raef pulled away, bracing Ali's slender shoulders. "What's been going on?"

"Nothing good." Ali sighed. "When you ran away, you were like the trickle that started the flood. Dozens more young mer have fled, all seeking the love Galyna's laws have denied them, and he's furious. I think that's why he's making such an example of you, now he's got you back. He can't punish everyone, but he can lock one mer up easily enough. I hate to think what he's going to say about you at the next meeting."

Raef pulled a face. "I hate to think, too. Look, I have to get out of here. And you're coming with me."

"No." Ali locked his doleful gaze onto Raef's and shook his head. "I'm not like you. This is my home. I like working in the bazaar, and I want to spend all my days here. If I ever find love... it will be here, in our home. Anyhow, somebody has to stay and fight to put things right again."

"I'm so sorry." Raef looked to the rock floor and worried his lower lip. He didn't want to get Ali in trouble by forcing his friend to aid his escape. On the other hand, he could best challenge Galyna with Jon at his side, and he still had to prevent Jon doing anything rash in order to save him. He leaned in, lips brushing Ali's floaty hair. "I need to break the lock," he whispered. "And all I've got for food and bedding is sloppy seaweed. Do you think you can smuggle me in something better?"



That night, the guard brought him a meal of tasty oysters—a gift from Ali, he was sure. He smashed the shells and waited for a quiet moment,

when the guard's sonorous snores drifted to his hearing. Then he used a sliver to pick apart the lock on the door.

A moan from the rusty hinges betrayed him, though by the time his watcher had jolted fully awake, Raef was tearing upward in a flux of bubbles. The guard yanked a rope, which set alarms tolling. Raef knew his cause was lost. He still made it halfway up the volcano before recapture, far enough to confirm that many of the houses hewn into the rock were empty. As Ali had warned him, he hadn't been the only mer who had swum away from their home at a quiet moment.

When the day of the tribal meeting finally came, an escort of eight accompanied Raef for the swim upward, all brandishing pikes. He glanced into a schoolroom as he passed, spotting only four young mer scratching at their slates. His blood, already simmering, boiled. He suspected the chieftain wouldn't listen to him today, but it grew blatant that more than his liberty was at stake. Galyna's laws had destroyed what had once been a joyful place.

Raef was taken to a small niche at the side of the crater, positioned below the platform of the elders. Galyna sat in his throne, his back straight as his trident's pole, but looking tired and haggard. The place was about half as crowded with mer as it had been before Raef left. Everyone seemed grave. Even the seams of quartz in the volcanic walls appeared to have lost their luster.

Galyna's plangent bellow shook the waters. "Raef! You disobeyed my order to marry my ward." He pointed at Henna, who waited among a crowd of onlookers floating opposite the platform, near Ali. She'd scraped her brown hair back into a tight bun, making her look as drawn and weary as the rest of the company.

Raef caught her eye, and wished he could apologize for the trouble. When she mouthed, "Sorry," he wanted to hug her.

"Moreover," continued Galyna, "you used a sacred summoning shell without permission of the elders, though neither of these crimes are your greatest. You have been consorting with a human, who declared himself brazenly to be the dreaded Pirate Kemp. A kluggite!"

"Don't call him that!" Raef whooshed upward out of the niche, thumping his tail in a fury that'd built and built as Galyna listed his so-called crimes.

"That is what he is," said Galyna. "An ugly fiend who will harm mer or get them killed. Do you not recall what happened to my sister Lucinda? You're lucky to be alive. Mer should mate only with other mer, in carefully-arranged partnerships—"

"That's codswallop! I'm sorry for your sister's misfortune—we all are—but we must be free to choose who we love!" A hiss of approbation rose from the audience, louder than the bubbling springs. "You'll listen to me, and if you don't hear to me now, you will one day soon. Because I'll escape. You can clap a thousand chains on me, and I won't give up. I'll get away. I've escaped from darker dungeons than yours, and I will again. Then I'll come back with a whole fleet of pirates and make you see the truth. You can't stop us interacting with humans. We young mer would be a lot safer if we could get out there and see the world for ourselves, rather than relying on old stories... most of which are rubbish, by the way. Pirates can be much more beautiful than lords, inside *and* out."

"Enough," yelled Galyna. He gestured to the guards, who seized Raef, dragging him backward across the hall. "I'm trying to protect this tribe, and you're undoing all my good work. I think you need more time to reflect upon your sins. *Much* more time."

Raef thrashed wildly, making it as hard for the guards as possible. "Nobody's happy anymore, and all these rules, these laws we're taught about good and bad, it's all nonsense. Maybe the true evil lurks at the heart of our home." He wrenched an arm free to shake his fist at Galyna, who was bellowing back at him, the foam at his mouth blending with his beard. Raef yelled even louder. "'You won't let us be with who we choose, male or female, mer or human, so we have to flee. You're destroying our tribe!"

Henna and a few of the others, including Ali, raised nervous cheers. Still, Raef knew he couldn't win. Not alone. Galyna brandished the trident as if preparing to blast a thunderbolt at Raef. The guards hauled Raef out of the crater, so they floated by the edge of the volcano.

Raef looked up through the waters to the surface, catching a glimpse of the nebulous, white orb of the sun. When would he feel its balmy heat again? He was bracing himself to be hauled back to the depths—who knew for how long—when a long, dark shape slid across the glassy sheen above, casting its shadow over the volcano.

His heart skipped a beat. A ship was cutting the narrow channel between the sandbanks of the bazaar and the underwater mountain. Only one man was brave—and mad—enough to take that risk.

"Jon," whispered Raef.

"Look!" One of Raef's escorts pointed, everyone stared, and then a huge net breached the surface, cast from the side of the boat. It plunged toward them. Raef jerked his body and swished his tail. His guards let him go, each mer scattering and swimming for their life.

The weighted net scraped down the side of the mountain. It gathered up the mermen and maids that spilled from the courthouse in panic, as well as Raef, who dived straight into it. He landed on top of Henna, his tail tangled with that of the furious Galyna, whose trident had got knotted between the strings.

The net burst up into the bright rays of the autumn sunlight. Moments later, Raef and dozen trembling mer were swinging in the air, suspended over the side of the *Alice O'Shanty* as she carved a route between obstacles that could spell certain death.

Jon leaned over the rail, his smile gleaming and long hair flying, laughing down at his catch. "Ahoy there, Raef." Jon waved. Raef, despite having one tailfin painfully snarled, waved back. "I see I've a lucky haul."

"Your luck runs out here," shouted Galyna, tugging at his trident in vain. "I'll raise such a wave that your ship will keel over."

"No, you won't," snarled Raef. He untangled an arm and grabbed for the trident, grappling with Galyna. No way would he let the chieftain wreak havoc.

"No, I don't think you will," called Jon, cheery as ever, as his ship bumped and plowed onward. "The moment you raise that trident, oh, chief of the mer, Lady Cecilia Haverford's fleet will rain down cannon balls on your home."

Eh?

Raef looked from left to right, a motion Galyna mimicked. Sure enough, four large sailing vessels were lined up beyond the sandbanks to the west. More than a dozen guns protruded from the portholes and decks, which were crowded with sailors. Cecilia and Sarah appeared at the *Alice O'Shanty's* rail near Jon, dressed in matching bicorn hats and white sashes. The golden conch gleamed from a chain about Cecilia's neck. She'd reclaimed it and plenty more beside.

"These merchantmen were part of my inheritance," called Cecilia. "They were in port at Bristol preparing for their next voyage to the East Indies, so I made a change to the schedule."

Despite his struggle, Raef's heart swelled. Cecilia had many important things to do in taking on her estate and responsibilities. She'd put everything on hold to help Jon rescue him. Not only had he found a lover, he'd earned true friends.

"I'll have the waters swallow you all." Galyna growled, though he was making little progress in freeing his weapon. Raef held fast, straining with every fiber to keep Galyna from seizing control. He'd break the trident in two if he had to. "And I'll have that benighted conch the maid is wearing."

Damn. Raef wished Galyna hadn't noticed that again. He already owned one magic talisman—the trident Raef battled him for, which was more than enough.

"It would be easier just to promise Raef can go free," said Jon. "Then everybody's happy."

"Please! Do it." Henna wriggled between Galyna and Raef, making as much of an obstacle of herself as possible with one wrist snared in the net. "Let Raef go. He acted for the best. I never wanted to marry so young, and I think that pirate fancies him."

With Henna thwarting Galyna's ability to tug, Raef wrenched the trident free. He flopped backward with his tail still tangled. Catching sight of Jon, he well understood how Henna had reached her conclusion. He hoped Galyna could see it too—true love uniting man and mer. Jon had clambered over the side of the vessel, arm outstretched, fixed on Raef and only Raef, his dark eyes brimming with ardor. Raef tossed him the trident, which he caught.

"I have your wand, chief, but I don't want your weapons," said Jon. "I just want Raef, and we'll fight to the last man or woman among us to get him back."

Galyna glowered at Jon, then at Raef. His mighty shoulders sagged, resigned, though his gaze remained stony. "Then take him. Just give me my trident and go. I never want to see either of you again."

A cheer exploded from the deck of the *Alice O'Shanty*, and George whooped from the rigging. Cecilia and Sarah engulfed each other in a hug, affording Raef a glint of the ruby ring Sarah wore on her middle finger. He beamed; at last the jewel had found a worthy home where it fitted well. As gulls' screeches mingled with the hurrahs, Jon used the sharp prongs of the trident to slice through the cords of the net. It plummeted back into the ocean with a splat, taking the captured mer with it. The net spread and sunk, and Raef freed his tail, then pulled for surface before Galyna changed his mind.

"Raef!" Jon remained dangling over the ship's side. Raef swam up to the hull and kissed it, though it wasn't the *Alice O'Shanty* he wanted to pour all the blessings in the world upon.

"Thank you for coming." He beamed, shading his eyes against the sun's glare, which he'd become unaccustomed to. "I knew you would."

"And I knew you'd escape your chains by the time we got here," said Jon. He cast the trident back into the sea, where it bobbed as jetsam.

Raef laughed softly. Once Galyna found the weapon, he might come after them, but Raef hardly cared. He certainly wasn't afraid. The *Alice O'Shanty* was tacking her path back toward the rest of their fleet, and the brisk wind in her sails could carry them over the horizon, lost from their pursuers' sight

before Galyna regrouped. Anyhow, he couldn't help wondering if Galyna had more pressing issues among the unhappy populace than chasing yet another errant mer, even one who defied him so outrageously.

Right now, paddling to keep near the ship, Raef's main concern was the distance between him and Jon.

"I can't wait 'til sunset," he called. "I need to hold you now."

"I can't wait that long either." Jon flashed a delicious grin. Before Raef could voice any joy or approbation, Jon plunged into the waters.

"Jon!" Raef arrowed forward and grabbed Jon, enfolding his pirate in his arms, and they sunk deep. Their lips sealed. The kiss endured, even as their descent slowed. The water caressed and cradled them, and Raef splayed his hands across Jon's muscular back. He treasured every part of Jon, so caught up in his love—and the affection Jon lavished on him—that it was effort to remember to swish his tail and push them back up into the open.

When he did, Jon snatched some air, and they began their kiss all over again. Jon ran his fingers over the sweep of Raef's curving tail, breaking away to mutter, "You're irresistible like this." Raef shimmered with pleasure, then stiffened in surprise.

"What is it?" asked Jon, rubbing his nose against Raef's.

"Nothing, it's just—" Jon moved to kiss Raef's neck, nuzzling the sensitive rims about Raef's gills, and Raef felt his cheeks color. "I didn't know it was possible in this form ... but gods, my whole tail feels hard ... and I'm on fire. I'm so pleased to see you."

"I'm pleased to see you, too." Jon hugged him tight, and the bulge in Jon's breeches answered more forcefully than his words. From the stern of the *Alice O'Shanty*, the company whistled and shouted. Raef cherished them nearly as much as he did Jon's kisses. He mustn't linger too long, or they'd never catch up with the ship. Still, he couldn't wait to be alone with Jon, to find those warm shores with shallow waters, and let their bodies blend as one. To see his love in ecstasy and be watched himself and adored. And to discover how much heavenly pleasure could be gathered from both his mer and human forms.

Raef sighed up toward the vast blue skies, then grinned back at Jon—paddling in the briny ocean for him—and understood he was home. Whether they adventured to the vilest pits of Port Royal, or beyond the stars and back again, he'd never let anything part him from the barbarian Pirate Kemp.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kay loves writing fantasy adventures and contemporary paranormal tales, usually set in her native England. When she isn't buried in books, she's stewarding at a medieval house, or shouting at the world to get involved in awesome events celebrating all things historical. She loves angst-filled romances, in which the heroes suffer a bit (sometimes a lot!) but they always get their happy ever afters.

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More of her work can be found at Loose-Id:

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