



SHIRA ANTHONY

MERMEN OF EA
RUNNING
with the **WIND**

Readers love the Mermen of Ea series by SHIRA ANTHONY

Stealing the Wind

“Shira has created a fascinating alternate world, rich in culture, political turmoil, and intrigue. This epic adventure is quite an undertaking... and I applaud her versatility. It’s high fantasy at its best...”

—Rainbow Book Reviews

“This was a majestic read and I’d recommend it to fantasy lovers.”

—Live Your Life, Buy the Book

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

—Joyfully Jay

Into the Wind

“This, the second in the Mermen of Ea series, is even better than the first... This is high fantasy at its best and I was so wrapped up in it whilst reading...”

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—Hearts on Fire

By SHIRA ANTHONY

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The Melody Thief
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Symphony in Blue
Encore
Blue Notes
Dissonance

MERMAN OF EA

Stealing the Wind
Into the Wind
Running with the Wind

With EM Lynley

A DELECTABLE NOVEL

Lighting the Way Home

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MERMEN OF EA
RUNNING
with the WIND

SHIRA ANTHONY





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Running with the Wind

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FOR TALI. For all you do for me. For your indomitable spirit. For your clever wit and insightful criticism. For your amazing voice. For your support. But most of all, for your friendship.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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

Taren and Ian have rekindled their centuries-old love. But civil war has broken out, and they must once again risk their lives to stop the fighting and reunite their people. Taren must wield the legendary rune stone, a powerful Ea weapon that took the life of Ian's previous incarnation years before. Taren senses the goddess has a plan for him to lead his people with the help of the stone, but he hasn't yet learned what it is.

MERMEN (EA)

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

Ian Dunaidh: Ian Dunaidh is captain of the Ea ship the *Phantom*. Ian's parents, mainland Ea, were executed as traitors by the island Ea during the first war. To avenge his parents, Ian became a spy, rising through the ranks of the Ea Navy. Ian is the reincarnation of the Ea priest Owyn. Owyn was the wielder of the powerful rune stone and

died protecting it. Ian knows Taren is destined to lead their people, but he worries Taren may not survive what the goddess has in store for him. In spite of his fears, Ian is resolved to remain at Taren's side and face whatever comes.

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

Vurin: Leader of the mainland Ea and governor of Callaecia, the mainland Ea settlement, Vurin is a powerful mage whose gift is empathy. Vurin was present at Taren's birth and handfasted Taren's parents. He believes the goddess intends Taren to lead their people to the Eastern Lands, site of a long-lost Ea colony.

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

Seria: Once the Ea Council's eyes and ears aboard the *Phantom*, Seria has risen through the ranks of the Ea Navy to become one of their most powerful political figures. Seria manipulates the Council to take action as he sees fit. He hopes to someday lead the Council and the island Ea to victory over their mainland brethren. Seria believes the goddess has punished the Ea for failing to prevent the mainlanders from leaving the island and that she will only be appeased by Taren and Ian's deaths.

Barra: Ian's former bedmate and sailing master of the *Phantom*, Barra betrayed Ian by revealing the location of the *Sea Witch* to Seria, which resulted in the death of Rider, Ian's childhood friend and captain of the human vessel the *Sea Witch*.

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

HUMANS

Jonat Rider: Captain of the human ship the *Sea Witch*, Rider kidnapped Taren from the inn at Raice Harbor. Rider offered Taren his freedom for three years of servitude. Rider was Ian Dunaidh's former childhood friend and lover. He was killed in a battle with Seria and the island Ea when he stepped in front of Seria's gun and saved Ian's

life.

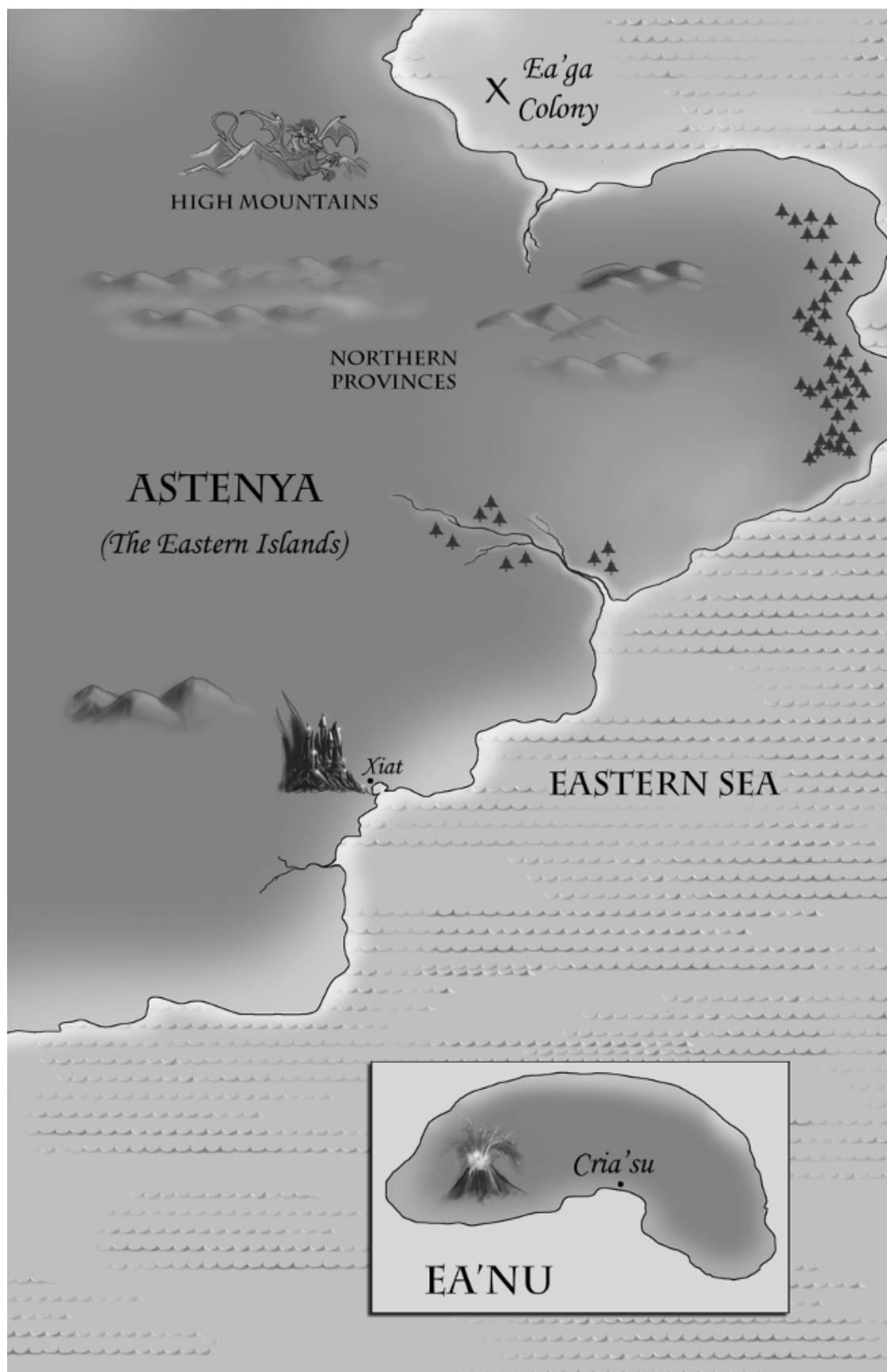
Fiall: The *Sea Witch*'s young cabin boy, whom Taren rescued during a storm.

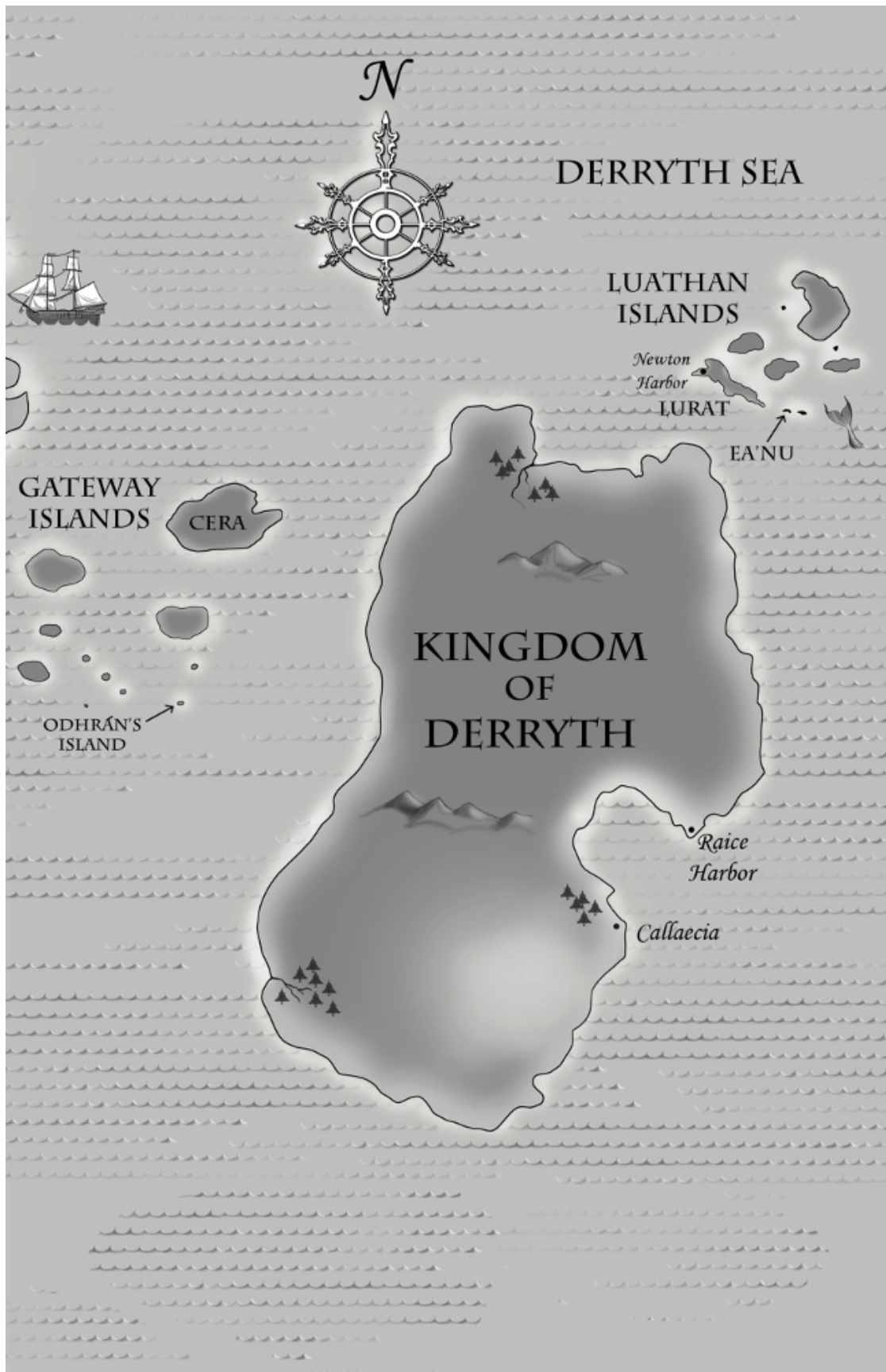
James: Odhrán's trusted quartermaster, James was born and raised in Odhrán's underground hideaway. For decades James has masqueraded as Odhrán to perpetuate the myth of Odhrán's bloody reputation.

NONHUMANS

Odhrán: A pirate with a bloody reputation who made his home in the Gateway Islands. Nearly a thousand years old, Odhrán is an immortal hybrid human/Ea with the ability to transform into any human form he wishes. Odhrán once protected the rune stone, which was entrusted to him by his good friend Treande, the prior incarnation of Taren Laxley. When he was a young man, Odhrán was kept as an unwilling pleasure slave by the King of Astenya, the distant ancestor of the current Astenyan king.

Bastian: Rider's lover and former quartermaster of the *Sea Witch*, Bastian came to be part of Rider's crew as Taren did, first as a slave, then as a free man who chose to stay aboard and serve. Out of his mind after Rider's death, Bastian transformed into a dragon and destroyed the *Sea Witch*. Bastian appears to have believed himself to be human. Odhrán killed Bastian in his dragon form in order to save the crew of the *Sea Witch*, but Bastian was reborn as a winged child.





ONE

IAN LEANED over the railing as the morning sunlight warmed his shoulders. A few feet away, Taren wrapped a blanket around the shivering boy, who sat with his knees hugged to his chest. He tenderly ruffled the boy's fiery red hair. The boy leaned into Taren's touch and made a satisfied sound much like the purr of a cat.

Not a boy, Ian reminded himself. *Bastian*. An Anuki. The heavenly brethren of the Ea. A dragon shifter reborn from the ashes. True, this freckle-faced dragon child looked nothing like the full-fledged beast who'd nearly killed them the day before, but they knew little of the Anuki. Had it only been a day since Seria's men had attacked them and they'd lost Rider to Seria's bullet?

Ian met Taren's gaze and his grief eased slightly. Taren smiled back, his warm brown eyes hooded with exhaustion and grief, his shoulder-length hair having dried in a tumble of waves. From where he sat on the deck, Bastian watched Odhrán, keenly interested. The sphere they'd discovered not long after the destruction of the *Sea Witch*—an egg, Ian now knew—had dissolved beneath the water. Bastian had been choking and spluttering when Odhrán had carried him aboard. Since then, Bastian had done little but watch Odhrán with rapt attention.

Like a baby bird watches its mother. Ian frowned at his folly. How easy it was to forget this pathetic creature had destroyed the *Sea Witch* and nearly killed them all. If Odhrán hadn't killed the dragon Bastian had become, they'd all have died. And yet Bastian had been reborn.

Bastian glanced up at Taren, blinked several times, then shifted his gaze back to Odhrán, who spoke in hushed tones to one of his crew. The long blond braid down Odhrán's back dripped onto the deck and left the back of his woolen jacket sodden. Despite the bright blue of his eyes and

his youthful features, Odhrán appeared as exhausted as Ian felt.

“A moment of your time?” Ian said after the crewmember trotted off toward the stairs, leaving the four of them alone on the foredeck.

Odhrán nodded and followed Ian amidships, far enough away that Bastian wouldn’t hear.

“Do you think this is wise?” Ian asked with a quick glance back at Taren and Bastian.

“What would you have me do? Leave him to drown?” Odhrán, too, appeared weary. Ian knew he still regretted having killed the fully transformed Bastian.

“*He couldn’t live without Rider.*” Taren’s words echoed in Ian’s mind. Rider—Ian’s oldest friend—had taken a bullet in Ian’s stead. There’d been no time to grieve.

“No.” Ian sighed. “Rider would have wanted us to care for him.” Taren would never have forgiven him for suggesting they leave Bastian to drown, and they’d lost too much to even consider it.

Odhrán nodded curtly and turned his gaze eastward. Now calm in the wake of the storm, the water sparkled with sunlight. Nothing remained of the *Sea Witch* but a few bits of broken timbers floating restlessly on the waves. Later, all of the men now aboard the *Chimera* would gather on the deck to remember the *Witch*’s captain, but for just a moment, Ian could almost imagine Rider at the wheel of his beloved ship.

I’ll miss you, old friend. More than you’ll ever know.

Ian shrugged off his dark thoughts and walked back to Taren. “You should get some sleep.” He squeezed Taren’s shoulder. “Odhrán and I will not let Bastian out of our sight.”

Taren pressed his lips together and nodded. How tired Taren must be that he didn’t even argue!

“I’ll join you in a bit.” Ian pressed his lips to Taren’s warm cheek.

Taren retrieved the blanket that had fallen off Bastian’s shoulders and wrapped it around him again. Naked as Bastian was beneath, Ian caught a glimpse of the wings they’d seen when they’d discovered him on the ocean floor. No longer scaled as they’d been when they’d first pulled Bastian from the water, Bastian’s wings were now covered with feathers and shimmered red, yellow, orange, and fuchsia, iridescent in the sunlight.

“I’ll be back later,” Taren told Bastian with a barely repressed yawn. “I promise.”

Bastian's eyes revealed little understanding. Had he forgotten everything of his former life? Perhaps he was still too overwhelmed from the shock of the past day's events to fully comprehend his situation. He'd not uttered a word since they'd brought him aboard.

Taren kissed Ian—a fleeting kiss, but one Ian needed to reassure himself that all had not changed—before heading belowdecks to rest.

Ian met Odhrán at the bow. “He’s like a fledgling,” Ian said, inclining his head in Bastian’s direction, “watching you like a bird might his mother.”

Odhrán’s brow knitted. He’d clearly noticed it as well. “I’ve asked Garan to reinforce the enchantments on the ship’s masts and sails. There’s nothing more to be done.”

“Aye. But if Bastian threatens the ship—”

“Then I’ll be forced to subdue him. Not a prospect I relish, although in his current state, he appears far less powerful than before.” Odhrán studied Bastian once again. “For now, at least, he’s content to be in our company.”

“What do you know of the Anuki?”

“They’re much like the Ea in their ability to shift to human form. I met one centuries ago, but he was nothing like this. Not a child. But what happened with Bastian...”

“Reborn from the ashes.” Ian’s heart ached once again for the loss of Rider.

“My time with one of their kind was brief.” Odhrán stared past Ian as if remembering.

Ian didn’t press the issue. Later, perhaps, he’d ask Odhrán about that encounter. “And his memories of his life with Rider?”

Odhrán shook his head. “I don’t know. I suppose only time will tell.”

Ian clenched his jaw. The realization that Bastian might not remember anything of his love for Rider made Ian’s grief that much greater.

“You wish to speak to me about Taren,” Odhrán said.

“Aye.” Ian still dreaded the conversation. “I had hoped that now that you’ve seen my thoughts, you might be more inclined to discuss his future. That you might trust my motivations.”

Ian chuckled and shook his head. Much as Odhrán could read Ian’s thoughts now, Ian had been able to hear Odhrán’s thoughts when Odhrán had transformed. Then Ian had sensed nothing other than Odhrán’s concern for Taren’s well-being and his hope for the same deep friendship with Taren

that he'd shared with Treande centuries before.

"What do you find so amusing?" Odhrán asked irritably.

"Your belief that either of us have any say in Taren's future." Ian drew a long breath and ran a hand through his hair. "If there's anything I've learned throughout this ordeal, it's that much as I might *wish* to direct his actions, Taren will do what he feels is right. I underestimated his strength and his conviction. I won't do that again."

"Aye. In that way he is much like Treande was." The hint of a smile played on Odhrán's lips, and he relaxed visibly. "It seems I underestimated you too, Captain."

Ian shrugged. "It's a lesson I've been slow to learn." He saw nothing lost in the admission. "I'm fortunate he has a forgiving heart."

"What do you know of Taren's abilities?"

"Other than his gift of sight, I know very little." Ian suspected Taren's gifts stretched far beyond his ability to sense the past, although he'd tried to push those thoughts aside.

"But you've sensed his command of the wind."

"Aye." Ian's gut clenched as it often did when he thought of Taren's powers. He drew a long breath and imagined his fear floating away on the waves.

Odhrán glanced over at Bastian, then back at Ian once more. "Taren was meant to recover the stone and wield it."

Odhrán spoke the truth Ian already knew in his heart. Still, the words left him cold. "And what of it?" he demanded, more out of fear and exhaustion than out of anger.

"If we're to reach the Eastern Lands ahead of the storms, we may need his help."

"The Eastern Lands? You intend to sail there?" Ian had all but expected Odhrán would deposit them on the mainland and return to his island stronghold.

"I have no need to return now." Odhrán offered Ian a smile, and Ian realized he'd underestimated Odhrán yet again. "Taren believes the answers you seek are in the lands where the dragons once ruled. I'm inclined to agree. Besides, it's high time I returned to face my past."

BY THE time Ian headed belowdecks a short time later, Bastian was

curled up asleep in a pile of blankets not far from Odhrán's side, his head tucked beneath a wing like a bird. "I will keep watch," Odhrán said stiffly. "Should he speak or need Taren's attentions," he added as he shifted from one foot to the other and rubbed the back of his neck, "I'll have one of my men wake you both."

Ian undressed and slipped naked between the blankets. Taren rolled over and wrapped his arms around Ian, murmuring in his sleep. It was not Owyn's name Taren spoke, as he had on many an occasion, but *Ian's*. Ian sighed and kissed Taren's forehead.

"We will do this together, love," he whispered. "You and I."

Two

IN SPITE of Taren's fears that the crossing would be fraught with peril, whether from Seria and the island Ea or from the storms that notoriously lingered over the Eastern Sea, the next week passed with nothing but sunshine and clear skies.

Taren arose early on the eighth morning of their crossing. He watched Ian sleep on their makeshift bed in the ship's hold until Ian blinked sleepy eyes at him. Ian reached up and cupped the back of Taren's neck, then pulled him down to claim a kiss. Taren's body vibrated with need, even though they'd made love the night before. Ian wrapped himself around Taren, reminding him of the way the ocean cradled him when he swam.

"*Venrusa* Ian," Taren whispered, the ancient word—*beloved*—leaving his lips before he'd realized it.

"*Venrusa* Taren." Ian's smile made Taren's soul fill with the echoes of ancient heartsong. "*Se venrusa.*" *My beloved.*

"I told Odhrán I'd help on the watch," Taren said, sighing. He disentangled himself from Ian, straddling his thighs, knowing he must leave but still hesitating.

"There will be time later." Ian sat up and took Taren's face in his hands.

Taren kissed Ian again, savoring the taste of Ian's mouth and inhaling his scent—bright like the clear turquoise waters of the Lurat Islands. *Time.* Taren prayed that was something they still had. But with every day they spent at sea, headed for the Eastern Lands, he felt less in control of his life and less sure that he and Ian had time left to enjoy

together. The future was inevitable, their destiny sure, even if they did not yet understand what either held for them.

“I love you,” Taren said, his lips bereft as the kiss ended. “Always.”

THE *CHIMERA*’S crew was well seasoned and needed little help to sail her, but they welcomed the newcomers’ assistance. For Rider’s crew, the opportunity to do something other than dwell on the loss of their captain or the strange condition of their quartermaster went far toward improving morale.

Odhrán had the helm when Taren made his way on deck. As always, Bastian slept at his feet in a nest of blankets. Odhrán bent down and pulled a wool coverlet over Bastian’s shoulders, then paused to gaze at Bastian for a moment.

“He’s fortunate to have someone to tend to him,” Taren said.

“I’m not his mother,” Odhrán replied testily as he took the wheel once more. “But he needs looking after.”

“That he does,” Taren agreed as he fought to repress a grin. “As do you.”

Odhrán ignored this comment, choosing instead to take that moment to shout a command to one of his crew. Taren knew Odhrán’s discomfort only masked his growing fondness for Bastian.

Bastian stirred and stretched, then made a soft cooing sound. He ruffled his feathers and pressed his head against Odhrán’s leg. Odhrán patted his head and looked out over the water.

Taren headed for the foredeck to speak with Kirst, the *Chimera*’s rigger. He’d barely been there a minute when Bastian charged toward him, laughing, eyes bright with pleasure. Dressed in the tunic Odhrán had given him with its colorful embroidery, Bastian ran, his hair whipping about his face and shimmering like fire in the sunlight.

“Bastian!” Taren opened his arms and Bastian flew into his embrace, pressing his head against Taren’s chest with abandon. Although he had still not spoken, Bastian had taken to following Taren as he worked on the ropes or helped with other tasks. When he was not at Taren’s side, Bastian passed his time with Odhrán, who begrudgingly allowed him to sleep at his feet while he manned the *Chimera*’s wheel.

“Did you sleep well?” Taren asked as Bastian pulled him toward the

mizzenmast.

Bastian nodded enthusiastically and glanced at Odhrán, who frowned back at them.

“Will you help me today?” Taren asked Bastian as he pulled on one of the ropes to check its tension.

Bastian nodded and ran toward one of the cleats so quickly he nearly knocked over Laire, one of the *Chimera*’s human crewmembers, in his haste.

Laire glared at Bastian and swore under his breath as he grabbed Bastian by the arm. “Careful, boy. The captain may tolerate you, but you’d best be minding yourself or you’ll be tossed overboard.”

Taren stormed over as Bastian’s eyes grew wide with fear and he began to shake. Laire released Bastian, causing him to stumble and fall onto the hard deck. Bastian pulled his knees to his chest and hugged them as tears spilled over his cheeks.

“What do you think you’re doing? He meant you no harm,” Taren snapped as he grabbed Laire by the collar. Fiall, the former cabin boy for the *Sea Witch*, offered Bastian a hand up.

“Laire!” Odhrán’s angry voice carried across the deck in spite of the strong wind. Taren let Laire go as Odhrán arrived with his quartermaster, James. Odhrán narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips together, his expression dark with rage.

“Captain!” Laire’s voice cracked. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“He’s a child.” Odhrán stood nearly a head shorter than Laire, but he was no less threatening because of his small stature. Taren shuddered as the temperature around them dropped precipitously. Laire began to shiver and his lips took on a bluish cast.

“Odhrán.” Taren put a gentling hand on Odhrán’s shoulder. He feared what Odhrán might do in his anger—Odhrán had shown him the memory of how he’d killed Luka when Luka had betrayed him.

Odhrán relaxed, then stepped back from Laire. “Put him in the brig,” he told James, who had no doubt come to see if he could be of assistance.

“Aye, sir.” James pointed toward the cargo hold door.

“Sir,” Laire said in a trembling voice, “I’m very sor—”

“We’ll speak later.” Odhrán waited until James had escorted Laire to the foredeck, then turned to Bastian. “Are you well?” he asked as Bastian wiped tears from his eyes.

Bastian nodded, then chewed on his lower lip and looked away.

Smitten. Taren repressed a smile at this thought and hoped he hadn't thought it so clearly that Odhrán had heard it.

"I'll get him tidied up," Fiall said, taking Bastian's hand in his and leading him to the stairs. Bastian stopped and turned around to smile at Odhrán, then disappeared belowdecks.

A moment passed in silence before Odhrán turned to Taren. "Thank you," he said in a near whisper.

Taren swallowed hard, knowing Odhrán, too, was thinking of Luka. Taren understood Odhrán's deep fear of losing control of his powers. He had never heard of a mage as powerful, not even Vurin.

"My crew were afraid of me once." Odhrán sighed. "And for good reason."

"You wouldn't have hurt Laire." Taren said this with conviction.

Odhrán did not respond directly, instead saying, "Laire is a good man. Loyal and hardworking. His family has been in my employ for centuries now. But I will not tolerate such behavior from my men, regardless of their fear."

"What will you do to him?"

"Let him consider his actions for a few days in the hold," Odhrán answered. "While I doubt he will bother the boy again, it will serve as a reminder to the others aboard that Bastian is here at my invitation. And I'm well aware that there *are* others who would be pleased to see him go."

"Aye." Taren had heard the whispers and seen fear in the faces of some of the men aboard the ship. He walked over to the railing and looked out at the water. He fingered the rune stone without really thinking, and the wind caressed his face.

"You're troubled."

Taren smiled sadly. "I should be grateful," he said. "I thought we'd lost both Rider and Bastian. To discover that Bastian lived...."

"You loved him as a brother." Odhrán leaned an elbow on the railing and pursed his lips. "You grieve the man you knew."

"Aye." Taren ran a hand over his mouth. His fingers smelled like the salt that had settled on the ropes. Familiar and comforting. How he longed to transform and swim! He loved to sail, but there was nothing he loved more than the feel of the water against his skin and the way his Ea body cut through the current as he swam.

“Swim with me.”

Odhrán’s words took Taren by surprise. “What?”

“The boy won’t eat the salt fish and dry tack,” Odhrán said, his eyes glinting mischief. “I’ll need to catch him some breakfast anyhow.”

“But I can’t swim fast enough to—”

“You needn’t worry about that. I can get us back to the ship.” The edges of Odhrán’s mouth curved faintly upward.

“I...” Taren hesitated. “I probably—”

“Should.” Ian’s voice came from behind him.

Taren turned and stared. The love in Ian’s gaze took his breath away. *What have I done to deserve him?*

“You should transform,” Ian said. “Swim. Both of you. I’ll help James with the ship, and I’ll keep watch over Bastian.”

“But—”

“There is nothing as good for a grieving soul than returning to the water.” Ian brushed Taren’s lips, then turned to Odhrán and added, “I trust you to keep him safe.”

“Aye,” Odhrán said. “That I promise. We’ll be back before nightfall, Captain.”

THREE

THE WATER felt cooler here than near the Gateway Islands, but Taren didn't hesitate to dive into the waves. Each transformation felt like a revelation—an affirmation, if he needed it, that the past year had not been a dream. Every time he swam in this form, the tension in his soul fled with the onslaught of the heightened sensations of his Ea body.

He and Odhrán dove downward. Deeper and deeper, Taren followed Odhrán. Deeper than Taren had ever been before.

“Your body can tolerate the depth,” Odhrán said. *“We will ascend a bit more slowly, though, just to be safe.”*

How deep have you ventured?

“I’ve explored the deepest trenches,” Odhrán replied. *“Where the darkness is so complete, it was as if I was blind.”*

You tried to die.

“Aye.” Taren heard something like a sigh in Odhrán's mind. *“After I escaped the palace. After I...”*

Odhrán obviously did not wish to dwell on Luka and the revenge he now keenly regretted. *What's it like to swim so deep?*

“It's as though you're a swaddled baby,” Odhrán explained. *“The water surrounds you and presses inward. There is something comforting in the sensation. And the blackness... it gave me time to think.”*

A shadow passed over them—an enormous turtle, judging by its shape. It paused and seemed to consider them. Odhrán pressed his lips together in something of a grin, then closed his eyes and reached out.

What...?

“Patience,” Odhrán said.

The turtle swam closer, as if considering whether they were friend or

foe. Odhrán smiled, and Taren noticed the water around him had grown cloudy. *Not the water. Something else.* Odhrán had transformed, but this time, he'd transformed into a turtle much like the animal that had now come so close, Taren could have touched it.

I didn't know you could transform into something other than a human shape.

"Only under the water," Odhrán said as he circled the turtle in a strange but graceful dance.

"Would you like to go deeper?" Odhrán asked a few minutes later, once again in his Ea form.

I... Yes.

"You're fearful, though," Odhrán pointed out.

Aye. But I trust you. And I'm curious.

"Good." Odhrán extended his hand. "We won't go too deep this time. Just enough so that you'll get a sense of it."

Taren took Odhrán's hand and they swam deeper still. The water grew colder as the sun disappeared above them, but Odhrán kept swimming. Taren sensed they had leveled off, although he no longer saw much in the inky darkness.

"There are animals that live here who cannot see." Odhrán guided Taren's hand so it brushed what felt like rock. "If you wait, you will feel them move."

Sure enough, something brushed the top of his hand a moment later. A shrimp, judging by the delicate legs that walked up his arm. He smiled and inhaled the water. He could almost taste the ethereal creature and hear the faint scraping of its body as it moved.

The sound of the water relaxed him, and he floated on the cool current. The familiar popping sounds grew louder as he closed his eyes and let his mind rest.

HE SWAM without an objective or destination. He'd watched the sun set over the island from just under the water's surface. Odhrán's grief warmed his weakened heart. Someone cared that he might not return. Someone loved him as a brother, trusted him with his deepest fears and his pain.

I will never forget you, he said, knowing Odhrán would hear.

“Nor I you” came the unspoken answer, full of pain, but resigned.

He waits for me. Treande didn’t speak the words for Odhrán but for himself. The call was powerful now, the end inevitable. He had outlived two generations of his people. He had given them all he had to give.

He followed the gently sloping line of the sand downward until the water beneath him grew darker and colder. He shivered, his ancient body so thin it provided him little protection.

“Come to me.”

He’d expected to hear the voice, but it surprised him nonetheless. The familiar voice that had begun to fade in his memory. The voice he’d treasured. His eyes burned with tears of loss, but this time joy infused them as well.

It’s been too long, beloved Owyn. I have drifted without your loving touch.

Downward, farther downward he swam. But where he’d expected nothing but darkness, something grew brighter with each movement of his tail. From far away, it looked as though a piece of the sun had fallen into the water.

The pain in his limbs abated as Treande drew closer to the light. And as he grew closer, he saw that the light was not circular like the sun but shaped like one of his own kind with flames as a tail. Flames like fins.

Owyn! he shouted as he saw his beloved’s face. Owyn glowing like love. Owyn smiling at him and opening his arms to embrace him.

He didn’t deserve Owyn’s love. He’d survived his grief only because he had no choice. He’d done what he must, but he’d never sought to do more.

“You have done more than I could ever ask,” said another voice, soft like the ocean but vibrating with power beyond his comprehension. “You deserve to rest in his loving arms, to be born again. To love again.”

I will never love another, he replied to silvery laughter that echoed with great kindness and understanding.

“Perhaps not.” Her voice seemed to echo on the water, then die away.

“Treande. Come to me.”

He swam faster now. The image of Owyn grew clearer. But it would fade away like all the other visions he’d had. He’d gotten used to it. He’d long since learned to cherish the brief apparitions—flashes of his fading memories. Better that he see Owyn briefly than never see him again.

But the image did not grow fainter.

"I'm no memory, beloved Treande."

What are you, then? He feared asking, because he feared that he'd die alone. Better to die with the hope that Owyn awaited him beyond the veil of death than to perish alone, as he'd lived most of his life.

"I've watched you," Owyn said, his voice tinged with sadness. "I've felt your pain and even your joy, however brief. Your strength amazes me."

You were always far stronger.

"You're wrong, love. I was strong enough, but you have endured. You have set in motion a future for our people—the goddess's plan—so that they may at last know peace."

This close, Owyn appeared nearly solid. He beckoned Treande once again into his arms. Treande launched himself into Owyn's embrace, knowing he would swim right through the vision.

But Owyn felt solid, and his arms as he wrapped them around Treande's trembling body felt familiar and real. It's not possible.

"Aye, but it is," Owyn said, then caught Treande's lips with his own. "Look at yourself. You'll see you've changed."

Treande frowned, then did as Owyn told him. His thin fingers appeared strong, his tail flashed with silver where it had faded with time. He felt the skin of his face and found it, too, had changed. Young again where he'd been frail. Dying.

I'm....

"You're no longer bound to your body," Owyn confirmed, then caught Treande's lips once again.

Heaven?

Owyn shook his head. "Another plane of existence. The spirit world. The home our goddess has created for us. Our home now, beloved."

I've missed you more than—

Owyn silenced him with his fingers against his lips. "There will be time to speak of all these things," he said. "But for now, I wish to hold you until I can hold you no longer."

Yes. Please.

Owyn pressed his mouth against the sensitive skin of Treande's neck and sighed.

Owyn!

TAREN CAME back to himself and gasped. The blackness seemed everywhere. The light had disappeared. *It was never there*, he told himself. He began to panic, fearing the darkness, but a strong hand on his wrist calmed him.

Odhrán.

“*You had a vision*,” Odhrán said.

Yes.

“*What did you see?*”

Taren steeled himself against a wave of emotions. *I saw my death.*

TAREN SLIPPED his arms around Ian’s waist as they stood at the bow in the darkness. The sky shone with stars that glowed brighter as the moon slipped below the horizon.

“Sometimes I wonder if you’ll ever stop surprising me.” Taren pressed his head against Ian’s back. “I never thought you’d trust Odhrán to swim with me.”

“Sometimes I surprise myself.” Ian placed his hands over Taren’s. “I like him.” He spoke the words as if he wasn’t sure of them himself, as if the thought had just come to him.

“Odhrán?”

“Aye.” Ian shook his head. “Damnable thing, too. I tried my best to despise him. But I can’t.”

Taren smiled his first true smile since Rider’s death. Even so, the pain of loss still seared his heart. Rider had given him so much. His freedom. The man he loved. And for that last gift, he’d sacrificed his life. Ian and Odhrán were Taren’s future, but he’d never forget his past.

After Rider’s death, Ian had given him the letter Rider had left for him with instructions that he should have it in the event of Rider’s passing. But it hadn’t been a letter: it had been Taren’s freedom.

“He planned on giving it to you himself,” Ian had told him a few days after the battle. “Both he and Bastian wanted this for you. They knew where you wanted to be, and they knew you wouldn’t go back on your promise to return to the *Sea Witch*.”

Taren cherished that paper, the only tangible reminder of his time aboard the *Witch* at Rider and Bastian's side. He treasured it as much as he treasured the necklace of shells and stones his mother had left for him.

Now, after his foray into the deep, as Odhrán had called it, Taren felt shaky, unsure of himself and his plans. True, the memory of Owyn had not been a sad one, but it had recalled the memory of Rider's death, his mother's sacrifice, and the overwhelming pain Treande had experienced after losing Owyn.

"Speak," Ian urged gently. "I sense there's much on your mind. Let me help you with some of the burden."

Taren nodded, then buried his head in the warmth of Ian's broad chest. He inhaled the familiar scent of him and sighed. "So many people have given their lives for this," he said. "So much depends upon what I will do."

"Aye." Ian kissed the top of his head.

"What if I'm wrong? What if we aren't meant to live beneath the water?"

"What do you believe?" Ian said. "What does your heart tell you?"

"That the goddess will show me the way."

"Then you will see it through," Ian said, his words a balm to Taren. "And I will be at your side when you lead our people home."

"Yes." Taren thought once more of his dream. Or had it been a premonition?

"The goddess will reward your service," Ian said as if he'd read Taren's mind.

"I'm not afraid to die." Taren feared only losing Ian.

"You will not die." Ian drew Taren closer still. "We will have this life together. This time will *not* be the same."

"Aye." In this, Taren knew he lacked Ian's faith. He met Ian's commanding gaze and knew that if he could, he would give this to Ian.

For the first time, he prayed that their goddess would keep them *both* safe.

FOUR

DURING THEIR second week at sea, the wind picked up markedly, this time blowing from the north. Nights felt cooler. Warm within Ian's arms, Taren didn't mind the chill. This was nothing like the cold he'd survived when he'd been a slave in the drafty dormitories of the inn at Raice Harbor. Taren saw it as a respite from the hot, humid weather they'd experienced in the Gateways.

"The northern winds herald the coming of the winter storms," Odhrán had said weeks before as the last of the Gateways disappeared on the horizon. "A warning to sailors not to tarry."

When he wasn't assisting Odhrán and his crew, Taren often contemplated the rune stone. At first he'd hesitated to do anything but handle it and feel it warm to his touch, but after a while, he began to allow the stone to dictate the direction of his power. He'd expected the stone would strengthen his ability to manipulate the wind, but instead he quickly realized it brought his powers into more precise focus. Soon he began to practice using the stone, filling a single sail, causing the ship's flags to flutter in one direction, then another. Each time, the stone responded to his thoughts as if it were his to command, just like the wind.

Taren did not mention this to Ian. He knew how Ian feared the stone and believed it dangerous, but Taren sensed nothing menacing about it. Quite the contrary, he felt as though the stone brought him closer to something beautiful and serene. Something inevitable.

As he'd often done aboard the *Sea Witch*, today Taren climbed the masts to help Odhrán's rigger check that none of the ropes were frayed or tangled. Bastian sat cross-legged at the bottom of the mizzenmast, gazing up at Taren as he worked.

“You used to love to climb the ropes with me,” Taren said in a wistful voice. “Remember?”

Bastian stood and cocked his head to one side, studying him. Taren had just gotten back to his work on a particularly stubborn knot when he heard shouts from the crew below. He looked down to see Bastian spread his wings, each feather-like scale shimmering. As they caught the bright sunlight, Bastian’s wings resembled the stained glass panels in an old church.

Taren watched, mesmerized by the riot of color. Bastian’s wings had grown larger since he’d first seen them under the water. Bastian rose gracefully on the wind and circled the ship like a fiery angel, his red hair blowing about his cherubic face as he alighted a few feet from Taren on the topgallant stay.

Men shouted from the deck. Ian, who’d been assisting Odhrán’s sailing master with some of the charts, ran over to the mizzen and stared upward, joining a half-dozen other men with their eyes focused above. “Taren!” Ian shouted. “Are you all right?”

Taren glanced at Bastian, who had settled against the mizzenmast, his mouth curving up at the edges in the first smile Taren had seen from him since they’d rescued him from the water. Other than his wings, which he’d now folded against his shoulder blades, Taren saw no sign of the fully fledged dragon who’d nearly destroyed all their ships just a week before.

“I’m fine,” he called down to Ian. “I... I think he’s just curious.” The men still feared Bastian, but he sensed nothing but Bastian’s calm, focused interest in his work.

Ian hesitated, no doubt fearing for his safety. But instead of climbing the mast or shouting at him to descend the ropes, Ian simply nodded, then told the men to get back to their work. Several of them muttered to each other, and although Taren could not hear what they said, they were probably far less convinced of Bastian’s good intentions.

Odhrán, who’d watched most of this from his place behind the wheel, motioned for James to see to the men. A moment later the men dispersed and went back to their work, glancing up from time to time to reassure themselves that Bastian would not again turn into a dragon and burn the ship down.

Taren shared none of their fear. He’d speak to Odhrán later about what might be done to reassure the men, although he doubted it would do

much. He'd seen how they avoided Bastian in the mess, some even taking their meals on deck so they'd not run into him. This knowledge cut Taren deeply. Whatever those men believed, Bastian had been out of his mind with grief when he'd attacked the *Sea Witch*, and if he ever regained his memories of that horrible day, he'd be deeply pained to know that he'd destroyed her.

"You can't blame them for their fear," Ian said later as they dined in Odhrán's cabin.

"If it weren't for him," Taren felt compelled to point out, "we might have all perished. He destroyed the enemy ships. None of our men died as a result of his actions, when he could have easily killed us all."

"True. But it's unlikely most will see it that way," James put in as he passed a loaf of bread to Ian, who broke off a piece and set the remainder on the table. "He destroyed his own ship. Until they have reason to trust him, they'll shun him or worse."

Taren glanced down at the floor where Bastian lay curled in a ball with his wings wrapped around him, the remains of his dinner—several fish heads and bones—scattered around him. Taren knew some of the men saw Bastian as a half-breed creature, unable to communicate. Little better than a dog. In time, perhaps the men might come to trust Bastian again.

FIVE

THE FIRST thing Taren noticed when the *Chimera* dropped anchor in Xiat's harbor was the stifling heat. High cliffs surrounded the enormous harbor in a nearly complete circle, the only entry a narrow opening barely large enough to accommodate a great sailing ship. Within the stone walls that enclosed the harbor, ships were safe from the raging storms of winter, but the cool breeze off the ocean barely touched his cheeks.

Taren had questioned Odhrán's decision to drop anchor here, where they would be hard-pressed to make a quick escape should Seria and his men follow them, but Odhrán insisted Xiat was a safe harbor to any ship that entered. "The king's duty," he explained, "is to ensure the safety of all vessels entering this port. Astenya—what you call the Eastern Lands—has prospered because of its trade with other kingdoms."

"Before the war," Ian added, no doubt hoping to reassure Taren, "the Ea traded with the Astenyans. We never had a need to hide our true nature, since the humans here are far more accepting of magical creatures than those in Derryth."

"We've no need to announce our differences, but we have no reason to hide them either," Odhrán said.

Ian chuckled. "Besides, there's no keeping Bastian contained."

While some of the crew worked to secure the ship, others took the launches into town and purchased provisions to restock her dwindling stores. Ian helped James oversee the men while Taren and the other riggers inspected the sails and tidied the ropes.

The sun had begun to descend as the men finished the last of the work on the ship. After they'd brought the last of the food and provisions aboard, Ian, Taren, Odhrán, and Bastian took a launch into town to join some of the

men at a local tavern.

THE TAVERN at the harbor's edge bustled with activity, although the midday meal had already ended. In Taren's experience, inns such as this one never truly quieted, since ships pulling into port at all hours often necessitated meals at odd times of the day. But other than the clientele—ships' crews or local merchants—nothing else felt familiar.

The building itself was strangely open to the elements, with no glass in the windows to block the feeble breeze from the water. Even the floorboards were spaced to allow the air to circulate from underneath. The smells of roasting meat and bread baking in the clay ovens outside wafted in and caused Taren's stomach to rumble its approval.

As they settled onto benches in front of a long table, Odhrán explained that rain rarely fell in the coastal areas of Astenya and that the warm temperatures remained constant. "The Northern Territories rarely see the sun," he said. "Few people live there, since most of the crops are grown in the center of the country."

"You think the colony we're here to find is in the north, then?" Ian asked.

"Aye. But the land is mostly high mountains, and it's a far larger area than you might imagine. Much of it is still uncharted." Odhrán tapped the chair next to him, but Bastian just smiled and sat on the floor.

Taren grinned. "Bastian always was quite stubborn."

Many of the crew had already settled at the long tables, drinking and eating. Taren found it difficult to speak over the din of clanking glasses, men laughing, and the calls of street vendors from outside.

"Oi! Bastian!" Fiall called from across the room where he was seated next to Aine, Ian's cabin boy. The two boys had been happy to find each other aboard the *Chimera*, since most of the men were considerably older. *Ea and human. As it should be.* Odhrán had much to teach Taren's people. When they returned to Callaecia, Taren resolved to speak to Vurin about encouraging alliances such as those Odhrán had forged.

Bastian waved at Fiall, then looked to Odhrán with bright eyes and a grin that lit his freckled face.

"Of course you can join them," Odhrán said, smiling reassuringly.

Bastian laughed and bounded over to where Fiall and Aine sat,

weaving in and around tables and people. A few of the customers weren't particularly pleased to be jostled, although most appeared to take Bastian's enthusiasm in stride and went on with their business.

"I am *not* his mother," Odhrán said, glaring at Ian.

Ian waved one of the servers over, then smirked. "I didn't say it."

"You didn't have to." Odhrán leaned back on the bench and pulled his long braid over his shoulder. "You know full well I can read your mind. You wanted me to hear that."

Taren rubbed his hand over his mouth in an effort not to laugh. Goddess, it felt good to laugh again!

"Fireblood wine," Odhrán said, ignoring them both. Taren's former owner, Borstan, had told Taren stories of how fireblood grapes refused to be cultivated and grew nowhere but the High Mountains of the Eastern Lands.

The server's eyes grew wide. "We have some in the cellar, sir," he said, "but it's quite expensive—"

Odhrán dropped two large gold coins on the table, causing several nearby patrons to turn and look.

"Two tankards for us barbarians," Ian said and winked at Taren. "And some bread and stew."

"Right away." The server glanced nervously at the gold coins, then trotted off.

"Subtle." Ian's smile belied his admonition.

"We aren't here to blend in." Odhrán pushed a stray wisp of hair from his eyes.

Taren grinned outright this time. There'd been a time when he'd despaired that Ian and Odhrán would be able to tolerate each other. "To success!" he said as they raised their glasses a few minutes later.

"To Rider," Ian said, his smile wistful.

"To Rider." Taren steeled himself against the ever-present sense of loss.

"To Rider," Odhrán echoed.

They ate in silence. The stew tasted wonderful—not a surprise given that they'd eaten nothing but salt fish and dried tack for weeks. Not that Taren had ever been particular about food. He'd spent too many nights trying to sleep on an empty belly to complain. Still, the faint hint of cinnamon danced on his tongue as he ate his fill, and the aroma of yara meat mingled with the spices and tickled his nostrils.

“Yara are strange creatures,” Odhrán said. “One I’ve seen nowhere else. Large, like a cow, but with long fur that appears almost blue in the sunlight. They howl like dogs at the full moon. I’m told the Derryth navy tried to bring several pairs back to their king, but the animals did not survive long. In the warm valleys of Astenya, they flourish. Derryth is far too cold for them.”

Before Taren could ask Odhrán more about the High Mountains, which they’d seen from the harbor, James walked through the tavern doors and over to Odhrán. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said, frowning. “I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding with one of the merchants. Something about five thousand pounds of potatoes?”

Odhrán sighed and shook his head. “I told him five hundred. What on earth am I supposed to do with that many potatoes?”

“I told him that, but he insists on speaking with you.”

“Of course.” Odhrán looked at Taren and Ian, then said, “Gentlemen, if you’ll keep my wine warm, I’ll return in a few minutes.”

Odhrán left a moment later.

Taren sighed contentedly.

“What was that for?” Ian set his hand on Taren’s thigh. As always, Ian’s touch caused Taren’s heart to race.

“I don’t know...,” Taren began. “No, that’s wrong. I *do* know.”

“You’re conflicted.”

Taren nodded. “I have no right to be so happy. Not after losing Rider. And Goddess, I miss him so.”

“But you’re happy?”

“Aye.” Taren tried to school his expression but knew he’d failed miserably. He felt the smile on his cheeks, the joy in his heart momentarily too great to contain. He had Ian once again by his side, and the strangely familiar reassurance of Odhrán’s friendship had only grown since the *Chimera* had come to their rescue. Seeing Ian and Odhrán together, their uneasy truce blossoming into friendship, gave Taren great pleasure.

Ian squeezed Taren’s thigh and smiled back at him. “He would have wanted you to be happy.”

Taren was just about to tell Ian he was right when the sound of shattering pottery interrupted his thoughts and someone across the room shouted, “Watch where yer going, boy!”

“He’s no boy, that one,” another of the patrons chimed in. “Boys

don't have no wings!" Several of the other patrons laughed and a half dozen of the *Chimera's* crew stood up and flanked Bastian.

Bastian sat on the floor, knees pulled against his chest, wings covering his face. He shivered and peered out between the feathers, clearly terrified. Taren and Ian got to their feet and started to move toward Bastian when Laire stepped between Bastian and the two men.

"Leave him alone," Laire growled. "He means you no harm."

Fiall offered Bastian his hand and pulled him out of the way. "You frightened him," Aine said, face flushed and fists balled at his sides as he faced Bastian's antagonist.

"*Him?*" a second man said with a derisive laugh. "That's no boy. It's a *thing*."

Aine didn't hesitate. He punched the second man hard on the jaw, sending him to the ground.

"Aine!" Ian shouted over the growing shouts and taunts. "No!"

Another man, far larger than the first two, reached for the collar of Aine's shirt and shook him. Fiall stepped forward just as the first man moved to punch Aine. The punch landed on Fiall's cheek, causing him to howl in pain.

Several of Odhrán's men joined the fray, as well as their counterparts from the *Phantom* and the *Sea Witch*. Laire pulled Aine out of his attacker's grasp, but by then one of the nearby tables had come crashing to the ground, along with plates of food and tankards filled with ale.

Bastian, who'd been cowering behind Laire, now hopped onto one of the tables and watched, openmouthed. He tucked his wings against his back, and although he still shook, by the look on his face, he was no longer afraid but excited by the action unfolding in front of him. Taren and Ian ducked blows as they made their way to the center of the melee.

Someone in the back of the room tossed a chair, which landed with a sharp cracking sound on a nearby table where two men sat calmly eating their dinner in spite of the ruckus. Travelers, by the looks of their thick cloaks and the hint of an evening's beard on their jaws. But when the man who'd first shouted at Bastian reached for him on his table perch, the taller of the travelers rose to his feet, his expression dark, his brow furrowed.

"Leave him be!" Taren shouted as he lunged to stop the newcomer from hurting Bastian. To Taren's surprise, the traveler stepped between Bastian and his attacker and held the attacker at bay, bending his arm behind his back.

“He’s far too small for you to be menacing,” the traveler told Bastian’s attacker. Blue-eyed and tall, with curly auburn hair, the traveler would have been quite handsome but for the fury that twisted his features.

“Vens!” Bastian’s would-be attacker shouted.

One of the men who’d been fighting Aine drew a dagger from his belt. “Let ’im go!” Vens growled as he waved the weapon in the traveler’s face. “Unless you want that pretty face of yers sliced to bits.”

Taren didn’t hesitate. He kicked the knife from Vens’s hand and sent it skittering across the floor. It fell between two open boards and onto the grass below. Vens lunged at him, but Taren moved faster, punching him hard on the chin. Vens teetered, then fell. Taren briefly caught the surprised expression of a man who stood outside the tavern, peering in—another sailor who had perhaps decided now was not the time to dine.

“Nicely done.” The traveler released his grip on the first man and kneed him in the groin. Taren nodded and grinned as the man joined his friend on the floor, howling.

“Are you all right, sir?” the traveler’s companion asked, his face slightly pale, his eyes wide.

“Nothing to worry about, Realo,” the traveler said. “Just a little friendly fisticuffs to get the blood pumping.”

“But sir—”

Someone grabbed Realo by the neck. The traveler shook his head, then went to dislodge Realo.

“Watch out!” Taren shouted too late, as another man punched the traveler hard enough to send him reeling backward. He tripped over someone’s foot and landed on his ass on the floor.

Taren made quick work of this new attacker, then offered his hand to the traveler. “Are you injured?” Taren asked.

The traveler rubbed his cheek and laughed as Realo freed himself. “I’m fine. Really. No need to worry about me.” He looked at Aine and Fiall, who were barely holding their own against three far larger men. On the other side of the room, Ian fought his way toward them. “Looks like your crewmates might need a bit of assistance, though.”

Taren pushed through the brawling men, dodging a fist, a flying plate, and a tankard. He’d just made it over to Aine and Fiall—Bastian had apparently flown from one table to another nearby—when he heard someone shout over the din, “That’s quite enough.”

Odhrán's voice rang through the room, although he did not raise his voice.

Magic. Taren felt the familiar tingle upon his skin. Odhrán's magic was unlike anything else he'd ever experienced—sensual and thrumming with power.

Odhrán raised his hand. Aine, Fiall, and the others stopped and looked around in surprise as their antagonists ceased what they were doing and began to withdraw. They appeared confused, as if they couldn't fathom why they had fought to begin with. Out of the corner of his eye, Taren saw Ian repress a smile. No doubt he, too, had felt the flare of Odhrán's power.

The traveler dusted himself off and added, "It seems I'm a bit out of practice, though."

"Taren?" Odhrán asked.

"I'm well." Taren touched his jaw with tentative fingers and winced. "Nothing broken."

Bastian jumped off the table and ran between Taren and Odhrán. Odhrán stroked his head.

"Belong to you, does he?" the traveler said, laughing softly.

Odhrán frowned and eyed the man warily. "He belongs to no one."

The traveler smiled. "Figure of speech. I meant no insult. But he clearly prefers to be in your company." When Odhrán did not respond, the man held out his hand and said, "I'm Eiran. You're not from around here, are you?"

"Taren," Taren said when he realized Odhrán would not shake Eiran's hand. "And no. We're from Raice Harbor, in Derryth."

"Ian Dunaidh," Ian put in. "And this is—"

"I am Odhrán." Odhrán pursed his lips as if studying Eiran. "Thank you for protecting Bastian."

"My pleasure." Eiran winked at Bastian, who gazed back at him cautiously, then smiled. "Good to meet you too, Bastian. Your wings are beautiful."

Bastian's cheeks pinked at Eiran's words.

"I've seen winged animals, of course, but never a winged child," Eiran continued.

Taren fought the urge to ask Eiran what animals other than birds had wings, but he knew this wasn't the time. His old master, Borstan, had told him stories of strange creatures in the Eastern Lands, but he couldn't recall

any winged animals.

“Captain Odhrán?” Fiall said in a voice that quavered as he spoke, as though he feared Odhrán would be displeased that he hadn’t done more to prevent the fight.

“Hmm?”

“I’ll take Bastian back to the ship. Get him some clean clothes?”

Odhrán nodded.

“Come with me, Bastian,” Fiall said as he offered his hand.

Bastian looked to Odhrán, who nodded and said, “I’ll be back soon. Best you get some dinner and rest a bit.”

Bastian hesitated a moment longer, then took Fiall’s outstretched hand. Taren watched them leave, his thoughts filled with more memories than he cared to remember.

“Aine!” Ian snapped, bringing Taren back to the present. Bloody-nosed but grinning like a cat, Aine looked quickly away as Ian shot him a withering stare. “Clean this mess up.”

“Aye, sir!” Aine wiped his nose on his sleeve. A moment later he and some of the other crew began to help the servers straighten the tables and chairs.

Taren saw Odhrán hand a small silk purse to one of the servers and whisper something in his ear. The man nodded briskly, then hurried off into one of the back rooms. Payment, no doubt, for the damage their crew had done to the inn.

“Are you from the new ship that pulled into port?” Eiran asked.

Taren had almost forgotten he’d been standing there. “Aye,” he answered.

Eiran’s expression brightened. “Might my companion and I buy you three a drink?”

“I think we’d best call it a night,” Ian said wryly. “But perhaps another time.”

“Of course.” Eiran nodded.

“Thank you,” Taren added as they turned to leave. “I hope we’ll meet again.”

“I’m sure we will.”

ODHRÁN PERCHED high atop the wall surrounding the city. Carved in part into the rock formation that had stood here for millions of years, the wall was a mosaic of old and new. The top was smoothed, though whether by the elements or with the hands of the men who had toiled to build the fortifications, Odhrán never knew. Centuries before, the wall had been poorly tended. Now, newly cut bricks filled the spaces where the ancient ones had crumbled. Here and there, paintings covered the smooth stone surfaces, some depicting dragons, sea monsters, and other exotic creatures, others the ocean with ships tossed about by the waves.

Old and new together, much as he himself. The boy he'd been, naïve and full of hope; the man he now was, weary and without direction.

For an instant time stood still and Odhrán saw the city as it had been nearly a millennium ago: its white stone buildings pitted and crumbling, its streets littered with cast-off pleasure slaves whose masters could no longer afford to feed them. He closed his eyes and tried to silence their pitiful cries for alms. He'd given them what he could—gold coins he'd taken from Luka's palatial home—but it would only silence the growls of their empty bellies. He could never do enough to return their stolen lives. He'd taken back his own life, but he'd never been able to fill the holes that remained in his heart. How could a heart so damaged grieve for its former glory?

Maudlin, sentimental fool! You aren't the same man you were then. You're stronger.

The words echoed hollow.

"*I think you're lonely.*" Even now, he couldn't deny that Taren had been right all those weeks ago. When Taren had come seeking the stone, Odhrán had hoped he'd remember his past as Treande. Their long walks

upon the shore when they'd first met, the days spent swimming side by side, had been a balm to the fragile heart he hid. He'd never wanted more than friendship from Treande, even if Treande had been able to offer it. But when Treande had returned to his people, determined to live out his life and honor the memory of his beloved Owyn, Odhrán had silently grieved his absence.

"We both must find our peace, dear friend," Treande had said as they'd bid their farewells. "You are always welcome with my people. But even if I were to beg you to come back with me to Ea'nu, I know you would refuse."

Odhrán had seen the sparkle of pain in Treande's eyes. He knew that pain well. Yet he'd let Treande leave. When Treande returned three hundred years later, he was frail. Near death. Ready to die.

"I know I ask much," Treande told him as he showed him the rune stone, "but I believe you were meant to guard this for me. For our people."

"*Your* people," he gently corrected as he helped Treande to the water's edge.

"*Our* people."

He'd helped Treande to create the enchantments as best he could, knowing that once Treande had completed his task, they would part forever. And he wished... he dreamed....

"Enough." He spoke the word as if trying to chase the memory. He forced himself to see Xiat as it now was: a powerful city. Vibrant. Alive. Nothing like the shell he remembered.

Today he'd walked the streets after dark and marveled at the transformation. Well-tended dwellings crowded the city, and the cobblestones were even beneath the wheels of carts drawn by nuris, the horselike creatures he remembered. Long-haired and thickly muscled, the beasts snorted in complaint and strained against their bridles. The smells of hay and sweat danced around the animals, familiar and reassuring. Music echoed in the distance and children chased each other through the streets, following their weary parents back to their homes. The scent of roasting meat caught the slight breeze. Odhrán realized he'd not eaten anything for dinner, since he'd been too preoccupied making sure Bastian ate his fill.

He stopped at one of the food vendors' carts. Even after sundown, those merchants who sold the delicious lusatis he remembered were still open for late diners. He paid for several of the small pastries filled with

vegetables, grains, and the sweet seasonings the Astenyans preferred, then ate them as he walked through the streets toward the wharf. The spices tickled his palate, their tangy brightness filling his senses as the food filled his belly.

Along the way he paused to admire the men and women who lounged on cushions in the open entryways of the brothels. Well-fed, beautiful, and richly adorned in silks, they looked nothing like the slaves he'd once seen. They smiled coyly at him, perhaps hoping he would pay them a visit. He smiled back but did not approach them, although he stopped to listen as one of them sang a ballad, accompanied on a stringed instrument he'd never seen before. He felt no pain or anger here. No misery or hatred. Unlike the boys he'd known during his time in the city, these men had chosen their profession much as the silversmith or the farrier.

When he returned to the *Chimera* before sunrise, the crew on watch nodded as he descended the steps to the cabins. He smiled back at them as he always did, although this time he heard Taren's words: *You care for them like children. You love them and see to their needs. But you long for more.*

He opened the door to his cabin slowly, careful to make no sound to awaken Bastian, who was fast asleep in his nest of blankets and pillows. Bastian's crimson hair fell over his freckled cheeks and nose. With each breath, the shimmering strands stirred, then settled on his skin once more. Feathers lay scattered on the floor and pillows. Taren had speculated that Anuki molted in the heat like chickens in summer. Bastian, who as always had appeared to understand what people said but who had yet to utter a single word, had laughed and tossed a handful of feathers into the air.

A child, and yet not a child. Odhrán sat down cross-legged beside the sleeping Bastian and gently stroked his head. Bastian made a soft purring sound and pressed his shoulder against Odhrán's thigh.

Odhrán's chest tightened. He forced himself to breathe as a wave of emotion washed over him, surprising him with its ferocity. He'd scoffed at Ian only weeks before, chastising him for his overprotective nature. Yet he'd overreacted with Laire. He'd done so because he cared for Bastian. Feared for him.

He closed his eyes and remembered that only weeks before, he'd thought he'd killed Bastian. He'd sensed Taren's despair. For nearly a thousand years, Odhrán had only killed when his own life or the lives of his men had been at risk. Yet in that moment, when he'd watched the fully

fledged Bastian tumble from the sky, pierced through the heart, Odhrán had grieved along with Taren. *Because* of Taren. Knowing that Taren would forever associate him with the death of his beloved Bastian.

And now? He smiled as he opened his eyes and stroked Bastian's head once more. Was it possible that he could forgive himself as Taren had clearly forgiven him? *We've all been given a second chance.*

Bastian gazed sleepily up at him, then laid his head in Odhrán's lap. "Sleep, child," Odhrán said, gently petting Bastian's head.

Bastian yawned and closed his eyes again. Odhrán watched him for the longest time, allowing the emotions to wash over him without trying to understand them. Knowing it was useless to try.

ODHRÁN CLIMBED the stairs early the next morning, having seen to it that Bastian had fresh fish for his breakfast. As always, Bastian followed him eagerly.

"Captain Odhrán, sir!" a bright-eyed Aine said.

"Morning, Aine," he answered cheerfully.

Aine blinked his surprise, then apparently remembered he'd meant to tell Odhrán something, because he said quickly, "Sir, there's a man here to see you. Says you know him. He wears the uniform of the king's men."

Odhrán nodded and walked past Aine to where several of his crew were laughing at something their visitor had just said. "Gentlemen," Odhrán said. "If I'd known the entertainment started early, I'd have come sooner."

Dressed in the blue and gold of the Astenyan Royal Guard, Eiran smiled his greeting. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Captain," he said. "I was just telling these fine men about my first time serving aboard a sailing vessel." He shook his head and added, "I figured if I read everything there was to read on the subject of sails, I'd know more than the other boys aboard. I was wrong. I found myself hanging upside down from one of the ropes instead of hoisting the sails."

"Good to see you, Eiran." Odhrán nodded as the two crew members left them alone. Bastian, who'd been hiding behind Odhrán, now poked his head out and smiled. "I didn't realize you were in the king's employ."

"I was returning from a short trip when we met last night." He smiled, then added, "Good morning, young Bastian. No harm from last night's excitement, I hope?"

Bastian shook his head and blushed crimson.

“My thanks again for rescuing him,” Odhrán said.

“My pleasure, Captain.” Eiran ran a hand through his hair and shrugged.

“So what brings you aboard? How may I help you?”

“I hope,” Eiran said, “that I may be able to help you.”

“Indeed.”

“I hear you wish to speak to the king,” Eiran explained. “I have orders to take you to him.”

“I see. I hope last night is not the reason for his invitation.”

Eiran laughed softly. “Hardly. Although I doubt it escaped his attention. No, the king makes it his practice to know the ships that pull into this port. Yours is new to him. He wishes to welcome you himself and learn your business in Xiat.”

“We would be honored.”

TAREN, IAN, and Odhrán set out an hour later. Odhrán had not intended to bring Bastian with him, but Bastian refused to be left behind, flying about the launch until Odhrán relented and called him to join them. Eiran seemed unconcerned and even pleased that Bastian would be included in their audience.

As they walked, Bastian danced around them, laughing as he took in the sights and sounds of the city. Odhrán had little experience with children, although he’d watched those raised in his underground sanctuary. He’d had little to do with them until they were old enough to serve aboard the *Chimera*, more out of his own discomfort than lack of curiosity. Bastian’s accelerated growth, however, fascinated Odhrán. He marveled at how quickly Bastian had mastered the ropes, and he wondered how much of Bastian’s skill came from some memory of his past life.

Bastian had already outgrown the clothes Odhrán had given him when he’d first come aboard; the makeshift tunic that had once fitted him like a flour sack now strained at the seams. Odhrán recalled the first time he’d given Bastian a tunic. Bastian had become so excited that he’d unfolded his wings, tearing the delicate fabric. After that, Odhrán himself had cut and sewn openings on a replacement. He’d soon learned that stroking Bastian’s wings calmed Bastian. Each morning after Bastian woke,

Odhrán had taken to brushing Bastian's hair and smoothing the feathers of his wings before helping him into one of the tunics he'd adapted. He found the practice nearly as calming as Bastian apparently did.

They followed Eiran through the cobblestone streets and past the marketplace Odhrán had visited the night before. Taren's eyes widened at the tapestry of brightly colored fabrics that shaded the vendors from the heat of the midday sun. Bastian clapped his hands in obvious delight as an old man twirled what looked like a wooden toy that rose high into the air and fluttered like a bird, then landed in Bastian's hand. Taren winked at Odhrán, then gave the vendor a silver coin as Bastian laughed brightly and sent the bird soaring again.

A man standing at the booth next to them turned and briefly met Odhrán's gaze. His face seemed vaguely familiar, but before Odhrán could place where he'd seen the man before, Eiran asked, "Has he been with you long?"

Bastian demonstrated the bird to them, then spun around much like the toy.

"Not long." Odhrán would not say more. He still didn't trust Eiran—didn't trust anyone but Ian and Taren—to keep Bastian safe. And although he knew he couldn't hide Bastian, who seemed intent on exploring by foot and on wing, he wouldn't give anyone reason to covet the boy.

"There are stories of dragons in our folklore," Eiran said. "Some say they walked among us as men long before our history was written."

Odhrán heard Taren's thought: "*We cannot hide him forever. People will be curious.*" Taren met his gaze and inclined his head almost imperceptibly. Odhrán had considered trying to disguise Bastian's true nature, although he doubted they could have managed it given that Bastian's wings would not remain hidden.

They reached the edge of the city a short time later. Here, the high walls met the soaring stone cliffs from which they'd been hewn. Odhrán drew a deep breath as the castle came clearly into view. Carved into the cliffs, the castle looked as it had when he'd lived there nearly a millennium before. Large circular doors rolled open to reveal smaller ones, much like a spyglass. Tall pillars flanked each opening, each carved with a swirling pattern reminiscent of waves churning in a tempest. Two enormous spires rose from the edge of the cliffs—the only part of the castle's façade that had not had its origin in the rocks. They shimmered like black glass in the

sunlight. Odhrán had seen similar volcanic rocks wash up on the shore of the island where he made his home, but he'd never seen any as large. When he'd lived in the castle, he'd heard stories about the spires—that they were magical and had simply appeared on the cliff face several millennia ago.

“Beautiful.” Taren stared up at the castle.

“We call them the Dragon’s Teeth. I’ve never seen anything else quite like them,” Eiran said, his pride obvious. “No one knows how they came to be, but there are wonderful stories about their origin.”

Something soft touched Odhrán’s shoulder—one of Bastian’s wings. Bastian, bright eyes focused on the spires, appeared enthralled. His soft squeaks and grunts became a gentle cooing sound, and he lifted his hands as if trying to touch them. Odhrán was unprepared for the rustle of Bastian’s wings as he spread them wide and jumped into the air.

“Bastian!” Odhrán shouted. “There will be time later to—”

Bastian’s shriek of delight echoed off the castle as he rose skyward and circled one of the spires and finally landed on its point. From there he gazed down at them, his multicolored wings fluttering in the breeze.

Eiran gazed wistfully upward. “I’ve often dreamed of climbing the spires. How unfortunate that I was born without wings.” He turned to Odhrán and asked, “Shall we wait for him?”

“I’m sure he’ll follow,” Odhrán replied as he repressed a smile. He too had once dreamed of climbing the spires. And although he had learned to use his ice magic to create what appeared to be wings on his arms, he had only ever been able to use them as a shield to protect himself and others against magic. Perhaps someday he might learn to mimic the form of a bird and follow Bastian as he flew.

Sure enough, as they reached the stairs leading up to the entrance, Bastian abandoned his perch, returned to the ground, and clasped Odhrán’s hand. Breathless and windblown, he nearly pulled Odhrán past the guards and inside.

The dark entryway quickly gave way to a brightly illuminated corridor with walls nearly as tall as the castle itself. The sunlight filtered through the clear stones that covered the ceiling and broke into rays of every color imaginable, dancing on the murals painted on the walls and creating the impression of movement. The air felt thick with the weight of history, as if they wandered inside a well-loved book of myth, a story waiting to be discovered with every step.

When they reached the middle of the hallway, Eiran stopped and pointed to a large fresco that began at their feet and rose nearly to the ceiling. Two enormous dragons blew purple and red fire at each other as the wind carried the flames up to the clouds. Rain fell on the mountain, and steam rose where the water met the glowing rocks. Below, the waves buffeted the cliff face and sent spray skyward, where it vaporized and glowed white in a thick fog.

“Legend tells of two powerful dragons who fought over a half-human, half-dragonkind woman,” Eiran said in a voice that conveyed both wonder and awe. “Neither dragon survived, but as they were immolated, two pillars of rock remained where they once stood.”

“The woman commanded the wind to bring the pillars here,” Odhrán said. “Crixat. The mother of Astenya. Her body is said to be entombed in the bowels of this castle.”

“Indeed.” Eiran looked at Odhrán with surprise. “Then this isn’t your first time in the castle—?”

Bastian cut Eiran’s words short with a shriek. He soared into the air shouting, “Raxit! My... Raxit! You come back!”

Taren turned to Odhrán and laughed. “He can speak.”

Ian grinned outright, mirroring Odhrán’s own excitement.

“Raxit!” Bastian shouted again as he circled back and forth above their heads. “Come back!”

“Bastian,” Odhrán called.

Bastian looked down at Odhrán, then dived toward him and landed with a soft patter on the stone floor. He gazed eagerly at Odhrán as he folded his wings.

“You can speak?” Odhrán smiled as he touched Bastian’s shoulder.

Bastian nodded. “Raxit. Want Raxit come back.”

“Who is Raxit?” Odhrán asked.

Bastian pointed to one of the dragons in the painting.

“Raxit the Brave.” Eiran appeared at least as surprised as the others. “One of the dragons of the legend of the pillars.” He turned back to Bastian and asked, “Do you know of him?”

Bastian nodded again.

“How do you—?”

“I think we’d best be going.” Odhrán glanced at Taren and Ian. They were both protective of Bastian and would have concerns about Bastian sharing any more information about his people. “No doubt the king grows

impatient.”

Eiran blushed charmingly. “Of course. My apologies. I’m a bit of a bookworm, so the thought that someone might know more about the legends I read about as a child.... Please.” He motioned toward a door at the end of the hallway, where several guards stood at attention.

“Sir,” one of the guards said, opening the door to allow them through.

The door opened onto a large room that Odhrán immediately recognized. The throne room where, nearly a thousand years before, Luka had given him to the king. No courtiers or pleasure slaves waited in the room, only two more guards who acknowledged Eiran’s presence with a bow. “I’ll let the king know you’re here,” he said as he motioned them inside.

“Strange fellow,” Ian said after Eiran had disappeared through another doorway.

“I shouldn’t have allowed Bastian to come with us,” Odhrán said, shaking his head. He’d made a mistake by allowing Eiran to learn so much about Bastian. Hadn’t he himself learned that a magical creature was vulnerable to exploitation? He wouldn’t allow anyone to harm Bastian as he’d been harmed. “It’s far too dang—”

“Wanted to come,” Bastian announced defiantly.

Taren grinned broadly. Odhrán felt the flicker of a smile threaten but schooled his expression.

“That’s the Bastian I remember,” Taren said. “Never one to keep his opinions to himself.”

Bastian stood a bit straighter and shook his wings, then took Taren’s hand and rubbed his cheek against Taren’s shoulder. *A child who is not a child.* Bastian met Odhrán’s gaze and chewed on his lower lip, then looked down and back again. Odhrán’s chest tightened as it had the night before. He’d made a mistake bringing Bastian with them. If what he suspected about Bastian’s reaction to the painting in the great hall was true, the king might want to use Bastian as a bargaining chip.

I will not allow it. He clenched his jaw and gazed at the empty chair on the dais. Who was this king of Astenya? Odhrán would not allow any harm to come to Bastian at the king’s hands.

Two guards entered the room and stood on either side of the throne. For the first time, Odhrán noticed how different it was from the throne he remembered from his youth. Simple black lacquer. Nothing like the

intricately carved gilt of the one from his memory. Still, the wood beneath had been lovingly crafted so that the pieces making up the chair's back entwined like ivy, meeting each other, then joining with new vines until they reached the top.

Odhrán moved next to Bastian, met Taren's eyes, and offered him what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"You are no longer that boy," Taren said. The rest of Taren's thoughts he could not hear as clearly, but he understood the sentiment just as well: *you are among friends.*

The man who entered the room after the guards wore a simple blue robe with gold embroidery at the hem. But for the circlet of hammered gold set with blazing red stones he wore over his auburn hair and the robed advisor at his side, Odhrán would not have recognized him as a king. Although the man stood tall and walked confidently, Odhrán sensed nothing of the haughty contempt of his ancestor in this man's heart.

Odhrán smiled and bowed. Ian, Taren, and Bastian did the same.

"Welcome," Eiran, king of Astenya, said with a devilish grin. "I am glad you came."

SEVEN

IAN'S EYES widened and Taren stared in shock. "Y-you," Taren stammered, "you're—"

"Someone who likes a good bar brawl?" the king answered, his pleasure clear.

Odhrán schooled his features and silently chastised himself for not having seen through Eiran's deception. He'd been unable to read Eiran's thoughts as he could most humans, and he did not appreciate being taken by surprise. If he'd missed something that important, what guarantee did they have that Eiran truly meant them no harm?

"Why did you pretend to be someone other than who you are?" Ian demanded.

The king shrugged. "I am Eiran. And although I have been born to this"—he gestured around the room—"I am no different from the man you met last night."

"But a king—" Taren began.

"Should be above his people? Apart from them?" The king smiled his understanding. "Not this king. And fortunately, my guards forgive me my folly." He motioned to the man who had entered with him, whom Odhrán recognized as the man who had been dining with Eiran at the tavern. "This is Morim Realo, my paxman. I believe you met him last night."

Morim inclined his head. "Pleased to meet you."

"Morim is the one concession I make to my position," the king said, as if this was an ongoing point of contention. Morim raised an eyebrow. "He would never say it," Eiran added in a low whisper clearly meant for all to hear, "but I think he enjoys the trouble I make for him. Without me, he'd be cooped up in the castle."

"What His Majesty means to say," Morim put in with an affectionate

shake of his head, “is that he provides me with far more entertainment than the royal guards ever did. And but for a few broken bones, I can’t help but agree that keeping him out of trouble is far more interesting an occupation.”

Odhrán made it a point to keep an eye on the guards positioned at either side of the chamber doors. Taren and Ian also scanned the room, no doubt also wary. Bastian, on the other hand, had made his way over to a painting on one of the walls and was tracing his fingers over yet another dragon depicted there. He cooed and squeaked his delight, then fluttered his wings. Eiran watched, fascinated, his delight obvious. Odhrán coughed, drawing Eiran’s attention back to him.

“I apologize,” Eiran said good-naturedly. “Please know I would do nothing to harm him. I am curious, though.”

Odhrán did not respond.

“He’s Anuki, is he not?” Eiran asked.

Odhrán frowned and said, “What do you know of the Anuki?”

“Other than what I’ve read about them?” Eiran asked, then shook his head. “Not much. When our kingdom was first founded, they were plentiful. Now they are rarely seen, and only by those who travel beyond the High Mountains. Stories tell of Anuki who live their lives amongst humans and appear entirely human.”

During this conversation, Bastian wandered back over to them and stood at Odhrán’s side. No doubt he understood all of this, because he smiled and nodded.

“But you haven’t come here seeking answers about the Anuki, have you?” Eiran asked when Odhrán again kept his silence.

“No,” Taren said. “We’ve come here to find out more about another mystery.”

“Indeed.” Eiran’s expression brightened. “I had hoped you’d come here for more than just trade.”

“Hoped?” Ian put in.

“Astanya is home to many mysteries,” Eiran said with obvious pride. “And I’ve spent much of my life trying to learn about them.”

Odhrán clenched his jaw. They’d discussed this, he, Taren, and Ian. Taren feared that any delay would risk harm to the Ea. In the end, they’d agreed that Taren would not hide their true purpose in coming to Astanya. Revealing their birthright was a calculated risk, but Odhrán trusted Taren’s judgment.

“What do you know of merfolk?” Taren asked.

Eiran smiled. “You mean other than you? I understand if you do not wish to tell me. I have no wish to force you to tell me something you are sworn to keep secret.”

“I am Ea,” Taren confirmed.

“And I as well,” Ian added as he stepped closer to Taren’s side. Ian was too protective of Taren not to fear for Taren’s safety. At first, Ian’s need to protect Taren had worn on Odhrán’s patience. Recently, Odhrán had come to see it for what it was: devotion.

Eiran appeared delighted at this revelation. “Stories of the Ea abound in our culture,” he said eagerly. “The Anuki creation legends also feature the Ea. ‘The goddess spread her arms and cleaved the moon in four pieces,’” he recited, his tone reverential. “One piece remained in the heavens, but the others fell to earth: Ea, Anuki, and man. Anuki spread his wings and claimed the sky as his dominion. Ea grew a tail and reigned over the oceans. Man became sovereign of the land, because he had neither a tail nor wings.”

Throughout all of this, Bastian listened, clearly enthralled. “Ea,” he repeated after Eiran had finished the story, as if he were pondering the meaning of the word. Then he exclaimed, “Anuki!” He spread his wings and grinned broadly, then cocked his head to one side much like a bird.

“Indeed you are,” Eiran said.

“And your ship, Captain Odhrán?” Eiran’s eyes twinkled with excitement. “To my knowledge, your ship has never been seen in these parts. And though the *Chimera* is built from Wythene wood, a wood grown only in Astenya, there is no record of such a vessel built by our people.”

“She was built in the Northern Provinces,” Odhrán confirmed. “Many centuries ago.”

Eiran leaned forward in his chair. “How exciting, that you have returned with her at last.” When Odhrán did not respond, Eiran said, “I must apologize, gentlemen. You asked me about the Ea, didn’t you?”

With a quick glance in Ian’s direction, Taren asked, “What do you know of a colony of Ea here in Astenya?”

“There are stories of such a colony in the waters of the Northern Territories,” Eiran said. “But my people were never able to locate it.”

No doubt enchantments protected the colony. Odhrán was quite sure that if they could discover its location, Taren would find a way to enter.

“Will you tell us where your people believe it to be?” Taren asked. “If you have a map, perhaps you can show—”

“I can do better than that,” Eiran said enthusiastically. “I’ll take you there.”

Taren’s eyes grew wide, his excitement obvious. “You.... Thank you.” Then, perhaps thinking better about such an offer, he seemed to hesitate. “But surely you have too many duties here to—”

“Not at all. There’s nothing I must do that can’t await my return. We can leave as soon as tomorrow. Morim will make the arrangements.” Eiran gestured to Morim.

Morim narrowed his eyes.

“We’ll only be gone a few nights, Morim,” Eiran said. “I will do my best to review the requests I’ve neglected before we leave.”

The corner of Morim’s mouth edged upward, and he nodded.

“There is one request I’d like to make of you,” Eiran said as Morim left the room.

“Of course,” Taren answered.

“I would like a word with Captain Odhrán in private.”

Odhrán straightened and took a slow breath. “Of course,” he said, waving off Ian and Taren’s obvious concern. “Thank you for your kind offer.”

“Then it’s settled. We will leave tomorrow morning.” Eiran smiled.

Morim, who had returned after a brief absence, motioned to the doorway. “Gentlemen,” he said, “if you’ll wait in the anteroom, I’ll make sure you have some refreshment.”

Ian and Taren followed Morim. Bastian, however, moved closer to Odhrán.

“I’ll be fine.” Odhrán ruffled Bastian’s hair. “I will join you and the others shortly.”

Bastian peered up at him with a questioning look, then chewed on his lower lip.

“Go on.” Odhrán offered Bastian a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “I’ll be with you soon.”

Bastian blinked quickly, then nodded and followed the others out of the room.

EIGHT

FOR ONE brief moment after Ian, Bastian, and Taren left, Odhrán felt a twinge of fear to be left alone, as if he were once again the naïve young man he'd been when he'd first laid eyes on this room. He could still imagine himself tethered to the wall, unable to do anything but his captors' bidding.

"You don't trust me."

Odhrán considered the statement. "I haven't yet decided if you're worthy of my trust." Something about this man troubled him. From the first time they'd met, Odhrán hadn't been able to read his thoughts.

Eiran sighed and nodded his understanding. "Perhaps I can redeem both myself and my people in your estimation. Please, have a seat."

"I prefer to stand."

"Of course."

For the first time, Odhrán realized how young this king must be. A few years older than Taren?

"I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you to remain," Eiran said, taking a seat not on the throne but in one of the simple chairs reserved for visitors. The gesture was not lost on Odhrán, although he did not acknowledge it.

"Yes." Odhrán knew his short response would not put the king at ease, and judging by the softening of his features, so did the king.

"I never expected to be king," Eiran said, then pressed his lips together. "My older brother was crown prince. On his twenty-fifth birthday, he was to have ascended to the throne. But he was killed by marauders as he returned from a hunt in the Northern Territories a month before. As you can imagine, the kingdom was in an uproar. The regent was an old man. He

oversaw my training, but he was too late to change me much.”

Eiran walked over to the shelves of books that lined walls once covered with the finest tapestries and silks. He ran his long fingers across some of the spines, then stopped and pulled out an impossibly old book. Little remained of its gilt binding but the plain threads that held the crumbling pages together.

“I’ve always loved books.” With a reverent expression, Eiran set his hand upon the cover. “So while my brother trained to wield a sword and command an army, I spent my days here, reading.

“Some of these books tell stories. Myths like the stories of the pillars. Others are our history. Reminders.” He looked directly at Odhrán as he said this. “Some make us proud. Others, we’d like to forget.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Odhrán said, knowing full well he was being exactly that, and not caring, “but I really must be getting back to the others.”

“Right.” Eiran’s cheeks flushed pink. “I do tend to run on sometimes.”

Odhrán’s silence no doubt underscored this point.

“Well,” Eiran said with a self-deprecating laugh, “there really was a purpose to my taking you aside.” He carried the book over to a table near Odhrán, then opened it to a page with a small portrait painted in vibrant colors. The portrait of a young man with pale hair that fell over his shoulders in a cascade. He was naked but for a wisp of silk draped over his abdomen, a collar of hammered gold at his neck, and matching bracelets at his wrists and ankles attached to delicate gold chains. Underneath were written the words *The King’s Pleasure Slave*.

The smallest of gasps escaped Odhrán’s lips before he regained his composure. This painting was of him.

Eiran glanced at Odhrán, his lips pressed together, his expression pensive. Where Odhrán had expected triumph, he saw something else. Regret? Sorrow? “I am sorry,” Eiran said after a moment. “I didn’t know a better way to show this to you.”

“And what of it?” Why did he care if this king had found something of his past?

“My ancestor was known to keep many slaves.” Eiran furrowed his brow. “Some were taken as spoils of war, others simply pressed into service because the king wished it. None served willingly.

“I.... When I first saw you,” Eiran continued, his tone measured, as if he feared he might harm Odhrán with his words, “I believed this to be one of your ancestors. But....” Eiran hesitated.

“You believe you’ve learned something different?” Odhrán prompted.

“When you mentioned Crixat... that her body is buried here... only someone who has lived in this castle would know such a thing. It’s a castle secret meant to keep away those who might seek to disturb her eternal rest.”

Odhrán hadn’t considered this. In the time he’d spent here, he’d assumed the legends were well known throughout Astenya. Not that it mattered that this man knew the truth.

Then why does it disturb you that he may know it?

“Captain,” Eiran said. “If I am correct... if that portrait is of you... I —”

“You what?” Odhrán interjected. “You wish to claim me as your property?”

Eiran blanched. “I—no! I wish to offer you an apology. To make amends.”

Odhrán shook his head in disbelief, then sat at last. How strange that so many years later, he still felt the weight of this place and the memories it recalled. He felt tired. No, he felt *weary*, as if the burden he’d shouldered for nearly a millennium had somehow grown heavier. He let out a long, slow breath. “That was a long time ago.”

He once again took his measure of Eiran. He saw the look of cautious concern in his blue eyes and the obvious intelligence there. He saw kindness as well. Of course it was naïve for Eiran to believe he could make amends for his ancestor’s wrongs, but Odhrán appreciated the gesture nonetheless. For the second time since he’d returned, Odhrán felt hopeful that he might be able to coexist with humans other than those who’d been born and raised on his island.

Eiran met his gaze, then got to his knees before Odhrán. “I realize it’s far too late. Still, if there’s anything I can do.... Ask, and I will do whatever is in my power to make sure it comes to pass.”

Odhrán struggled to speak, taken aback by Eiran’s display of submission. Although he still could not read Eiran’s thoughts, he sensed the king’s gesture was genuine. Still, he was not so naïve as to believe the king’s good heart was the sole reason for this apology.

“I don’t wish recompense,” Odhrán said at last. “I wanted only my

freedom.” He wouldn’t add he’d craved revenge as well. He still regretted killing Luka, although Luka had deserved to be punished for betraying his trust.

Eiran nodded and got to his feet.

Odhrán glanced back at the painting. “What do you want from me?” he said, touching the paper.

“I told you, I only want—”

“I don’t doubt your sincerity,” Odhrán said evenly. “But grand apologies aside, you are still the king. If you wish to earn my trust, then I must know the complete truth, not just the truth you prefer to share.”

Eiran took a long breath and smiled. “Fair enough.” His expression hardened almost imperceptibly, his focus once again keen. He stood straighter, appeared more the monarch now than the scholarly young man of a moment before. “I suppose I deserve that. And while I truly intended to convey my apologies for your treatment, there is something I want from you and your companions.

“For centuries my people have had little or no contact with the Northern Provinces. Centuries of war have only served to create a chasm between Astenya and the northern tribes. My brother’s death at the hands of marauders only dug a deeper trench. My people no longer trade with the people who inhabit the provinces. Yet they have much to offer us.”

“You hope that if you can reestablish contact with the Ea colony there, your kingdom will benefit,” Odhrán said.

“Yes. These books”—Eiran gestured to the shelves behind him—“tell of fertile lands, great schools of fish, and minerals that might be used to power our cities. If your friends are successful in contacting the lost colony, perhaps our peoples will both prosper for it.”

“They are not my people.”

“You’re not Ea, are you?” Eiran eyed Odhrán, clearly fascinated. “I know my curiosity often gets the best of me. If you don’t wish to answer, I understand,” he quickly added.

Odhrán considered Eiran’s question. He was tired of hiding. He had nothing to fear from this human, and perhaps something to gain. If not for himself, then for Taren, Ian, and the others. *Why not?*

“I’m a hybrid,” he explained. “Neither human nor Ea. One of a kind.”

“I understand.”

Odhrán’s shoulders tensed as anger flickered and bloomed red-hot in

his chest. “What do you understand?” Odhrán demanded. What did this human understand of him and his life? What did Eiran know of the pain he’d suffered at the hands of Eiran’s ancestor?

Eiran flinched and paled.

“Empathy? How ironic that your ancestor had none to speak of.”

“I would like to believe that part of my hereditary line died with him,” Eiran replied.

Odhrán hoped so, although he wasn’t sure why Eiran cared.

“I sense great sadness in you,” Eiran said in a gentle tone. “Loneliness too, although when you are with your companions, I also sense love. If there is something I can do....”

Love? Not love. Friendship, perhaps, but not love. Love was a myth. Something to believe in. Odhrán had chosen to believe in more tangible things.

Undeterred when Odhrán did not answer, Eiran asked, “Is there truly nothing I can do for you, then?”

Odhrán narrowed his eyes before answering, “I may ask for your help in the future. But for now, all I ask is that you keep my companions safe.”

TAREN PACED the chamber where they’d waited for nearly an hour for Odhrán to return. Taren knew a part of Odhrán none of the others did—in spite of Odhrán’s apparent nonchalance, the memories of this place still haunted him.

“He’ll be all right,” Ian said and smoothed Bastian’s feathers. “He’s as tough as they come, old buzzard.”

Bastian giggled. It had become a bit of a running joke for Ian to call Odhrán old. Odhrán, for his part, seemed to enjoy the gentle teasing. Taren wondered vaguely just how old Bastian was.

Ian met Taren’s gaze over Bastian’s head. The corners of Ian’s mouth edged upward and the tiny lines around his eyes deepened. When he smiled like that, Taren could almost forget why they’d come here. But the goddess would not let him forget. Something loomed in their futures much like the storms he’d always been able to sense, and he knew time was short. The goddess would give him just enough of that precious time, but no more than he needed.

The doors opened, interrupting Taren's thoughts. Odhrán looked none the worse for wear, although judging by Bastian's reaction—he launched himself into Odhrán's embrace and pressed his head against Odhrán's chest—one might have thought Odhrán had been gone for years.

Odhrán laughed and, to Taren's astonishment, wrapped his arms around Bastian. He'd never heard Odhrán laugh before. He'd rarely seen him smile.

Perhaps noticing Taren's expression, Odhrán schooled his features. "We'd best be going," he said, then patted Bastian on the back and released him. Bastian gazed at him with his usual starry-eyed expression.

"What did he want with you?" Taren had never been afraid to speak, and knowing Odhrán as he did, he'd not hesitate now.

"He wished to make amends."

Taren parted his lips, about to speak, then thought better of it. Odhrán's past was his alone to tell.

"*You may tell him, if you wish,*" Odhrán said silently, no doubt having read Taren's thoughts.

"Do you trust him?" Ian asked after a moment.

Odhrán nodded. "I trust him enough for our purposes."

"Then I shall do the same," Ian replied.

Taren stared at Ian in surprise. Ian smiled back at him. What a strange turn of events, that Ian had come to trust Odhrán with their lives. Taren managed to school his emotions long enough that Odhrán likely didn't see the beginnings of the grin that threatened to erupt. Ian did, though, and made his pleasure known by taking Taren's hand and squeezing it.

Goddess, let me remember this. Why was it when he felt the most joy that he feared the future so much?

NINE

TAREN, IAN, Odhrán, Bastian, Fiall, and Aine set off at sunrise for the castle. Although he hadn't expected the king to join the expedition, Taren wasn't surprised to see Eiran at the castle gates, dressed once more as the traveler, with Morim at his side. Taren recognized Morim's expression—a mixture of resignation and concern—since he'd often seen it on Ian's face.

"Remind you of someone?" Ian said knowingly.

"I think I knew someone like that once," Taren answered. "But he's long gone."

"Don't miss him much, eh?"

"I much prefer you. Although," Taren added, winking, "he was quite handsome."

Ian shook his head and sighed theatrically. "Alas, I may have to do away with him should we meet. Can't have anyone else vying for your heart."

"Many may vie," Taren said, his voice a husky whisper meant only for Ian, "but only one rake owns my heart."

"Good to see you again, gentlemen," Eiran said, motioning them through the gates. "I've had my men prepare our transport."

"Horses?" Aine asked. "I've always wanted to ride a horse."

"No horses, I'm afraid," Eiran replied as he led them through another gate and into a large courtyard. "Much as Morim humors me, the roads to the Northern Provinces have become too dangerous to travel. After my brother's death at the hands of marauders, there was talk of subduing the provinces."

"Did you send the army to exact your vengeance?" Fiall asked, his question garnering a frown from Odhrán.

Eiran chuckled. "I don't mind answering. Truly." He smiled at Fiall,

then continued, "I did not send the army."

"Why not?" Fiall pressed, clearly emboldened by Eiran's answer.

"More than a millennium ago, Astenya once knew a war that lasted two hundred years. My ancestor believed it in the continent's best interests to subdue those who inhabited the Central Provinces and enlarge the kingdom."

"Two *hundred* years?" Fiall's eyes grew wide. Taren thought of the Ea and prayed silently to the goddess that the strife between his own people would not continue as long.

"Yes." Eiran nodded, his expression for once somber. "So many of our people died fighting the men and creatures who made their homes there that our fields lay fallow. Many of those who survived perished in the famine that followed the Great War. The king himself had died during the war, as did his son and grandson who followed him on the throne. With no man of royal blood left, the king's granddaughter, Veristine, took the throne. She vowed our people would no longer attempt to claim the provinces for the kingdom. Since then, Astenya has forsworn war. We will protect our people when necessary, but we will not engage our enemies unless they threaten our borders."

"But if we aren't traveling by way of the roads," Aine put in, "won't it take us days to reach the northern shores?"

"By water it would." Eiran grinned. They arrived at the large doorway on the far side of the courtyard. The guards there parted. "But since my brother's death, we've developed a faster, safer means to travel." Eiran gestured to the doorway.

Dumbfounded, Taren stared at the strange-looking ship sitting in the middle of the flagstone courtyard. Built of wood with a long keel, the vessel rested on several blocks of stone much as the ships Taren had seen in dry dock at Raice Harbor. It resembled a sailing vessel with its tapered hull of bent timbers, except where the water might cover the wood were windows much like the captain's cabin windows at the *Chimera's* stern. The effect reminded Taren of the windows of the churches built to the humans' gods, but the glass panes were transparent. Several masts sat atop the vessel. At each side, port and starboard, masts jutted out from the hull, and colorful sails fluttered downward, reminding Taren of wings. Taren followed the lines from the sails upward to the mainsail up top. They were meant to be raised so that they joined in the center.

A memory stirred. Ian had shared a dream with him months before, in

Callaecia. *The sails were like the wings of a bird, colorful, hanging down from double masts. Like a noblewoman's fan.* Taren turned to Ian, who stood at his side, his face pale, eyes wide. For the first time in weeks, an icy cold crept through Taren's body and settled around his heart. This was the ship Ian had seen in his dream.

"She's beautiful." Ian put his hand on Taren's shoulder. "But you said we wouldn't be sailing north."

Eiran's grin reminded Taren of his own, when he'd first climbed the masts of the *Sea Witch* and felt the wind upon his face. "I said we wouldn't be traveling upon the water. This ship"—he ran his hand reverently over the glossy wood of the boat's bow—"is not meant to sail the waters. The *Intrepid* sails the skies."

"The skies?" Fiall's face lit up.

"Please come aboard," Eiran said, "and I'll show you how she sails."

TEN

AINE AND Fiall charged aboard the *Intrepid* after Eiran, their youthful excitement getting the best of them. Taren, who followed Odhrán and Bastian aboard, repressed a grin to see Ian's expression of resignation at this obvious breach of etiquette. Ian had never been one to insist on protocol except when aboard the *Phantom*.

The inside of the *Intrepid* appeared much like the deck of a sailing vessel. The highly polished wood planks of the interior floor shone like those on the *Chimera*. Though the *Intrepid* was too small to accommodate the crew cabins of a larger ship, at her stern Taren noticed a door that opened onto a cabin much like the cabin he and Ian shared aboard the *Phantom*, with a bed, bookshelves, and a table large enough for map reading.

"We rarely fly her more than a day's trip from Xiat," Eiran confirmed. "Still, the royal builders insisted I be given a cabin."

"How does she fly?" Ian asked as five of the guards boarded the ship and secured the door behind them.

"Steam," Odhrán put in before Eiran had a chance to answer.

Eiran nodded, clearly pleased that Odhrán understood. "Yes."

"The technology existed when I lived here centuries ago," Odhrán told Ian. "But the king's ancestor was not particularly interested in making use of it." He turned to Eiran and asked, "Have you mastered the means to burn dragonstone, then?"

Eiran's eyes grew wide. "How did you—?"

"To keep something so large aloft, you'd need both the lightest building materials as well as a source of fuel that would not weigh the vessel down," Odhrán explained. He touched the side of the ship and

smiled. “Wythene wood. The lightest wood available, yet stronger than teak. It also does not easily burn.”

“Fly, fly! We fly!” Bastian shouted as one of the guards depressed several of the larger levers near the captain’s wheel and the ship’s engines roared to life. Unlike before, when Taren had strained to understand Bastian, the words now sounded clear and distinguishable. He’d grown too, appearing perhaps eight years old. How long, Taren wondered, would it be before Bastian grew up? At this rate, months, perhaps.

The ship shuddered, then slowly rose. Unlike a bird, it moved straight upward as though pulled by invisible strings. In spite of himself, Taren reached for the closest railing as his heart pounded with both excitement and trepidation.

“With machines such as this,” Ian said, “wars would be far more quickly won.”

“True,” Eiran replied as he turned the wheel and the ship heeled to starboard. “But Astenya will never wage war. We are sworn to a path of peace. We will defend our land, but we will not be the aggressors.”

“A noble sentiment,” Odhrán said. “But you will eventually die. What would prevent your progeny from using ships such as this to take what they desire?”

“A bargain,” Eiran answered, nonplussed, “to ensure the future. One made long before I became king, but that will bind all my successors as well.”

“What kind of bargain?” Taren asked.

Eiran smiled and shook his head. “Perhaps someday I’ll tell you. For now, you must take my word for it that no Astenyan king will be the aggressor in a war.”

“Look, Odhrán!” Bastian called out as the ship soared over the towering Dragon’s Teeth. “Raxit. Raxit gave.”

“Raxit the Brave gave Astenya the Dragon’s Teeth?” Eiran asked.

“Yes.” Bastian’s grin threatened to swallow his face. “My Raxit.”

“Did you know him?” Odhrán tilted his head to one side, appearing intrigued where before he’d foreclosed the same conversation.

“Yes,” Bastian said brightly. “Raxit is father. *My* father.”

ODHRÁN WATCHED Bastian as he sat, nose pressed against the glass of

the windows, looking out over the countryside as they flew onward. Aine and Fiall dozed against each other's shoulders while Taren and Ian stood by the narrow window at the bowsprit, Ian with his arm laced around Taren's waist. What was it about the comfortable contact between them that made Odhrán's heart feel both pain and warmth?

"You were the one who found him, weren't you?" Eiran's words brought Odhrán's focus back.

"You're far too curious," Odhrán countered, repressing a sigh. Nearly five hundred years of self-imposed solitude, surrounded only by those who tolerated his need for distance, and in the past few months, he'd managed to entangle himself in several complicated lives. Taren, Ian, Bastian, and now Eiran. They'd prodded him from his happy seclusion. *No. You let them do so.*

Eiran chuckled. "So I've been told. Most of my life, in fact."

"Not a trait prized in a king, then?"

"My father found it most irritating." Eiran adjusted the ship's wheel and inhaled a long breath. "After he died and my uncle took his place as regent, I used it as an excuse to retreat into my beloved books." He shrugged and shook his head. "In the end, I couldn't avoid my destiny."

"Destiny is an excuse for indecision," Odhrán replied.

"But you don't really believe that, do you?" Eiran countered with a canny grin.

"And what would you know about it?" Odhrán had begun to question his lack of faith. So much of his life recently had been a string of coincidences that he sometimes wondered if Taren's goddess really did exist. First Taren's near-drowning not far from the island he'd called home for hundreds of years, then the realization that Taren was his old friend Treande reincarnated. The trip to Astenya, Bastian's transformation, and the painting Eiran had recognized as him.

Eiran's bright expression didn't waver. "Call it what you will, then." He banked the ship to port and grinned. "Serendipity? Luck? Regardless of its name, I'm pleased to have met you."

Eiran's words warmed Odhrán, but he hid his emotional response. Bad enough that he'd come to be so attached to Taren and Bastian. The last thing he needed was more complications in his life—complications who would age and die, leaving him once again alone.

ELEVEN

THEY LANDED just before sundown on a flat plain, which Eiran explained was several hours away from the water by foot. “It’s too dangerous to put the ship down closer,” Eiran said. The guards began to unload tents and supplies from the belly of the vessel. “The hills are quite steep and covered with rocks. We’ll camp here and set out in the morning for the shore.”

In spite of his disappointment at having to wait to explore the water, Taren reminded himself that whatever they might discover would still be there in the morning. They did not know what they might find or whether the Ea would be friendly.

The expedition ate their evening meal in the light of a small fire. No one spoke much about the colony and what they might discover in the morning. Instead, Eiran regaled the group with Astenyan myths. Bastian listened, enraptured, as Eiran described the last expedition to the High Mountains in search of dragonkind. As Eiran described the explorers’ ascent on Ral’eel Mountain—in a driving blizzard—Bastian fluttered his wings much like a cat might flick its tail while watching a mouse.

“Have you ever been to the High Mountains?” Fiall asked, also clearly enthralled with the stories.

Eiran shook his head. “My brother often spoke of mounting an expedition there, but after he was killed, my advisors thought it best to keep me close. This is about as far as they’ll allow me to travel, I’m afraid.”

“But you’re the king,” Fiall protested. “Your word is law, isn’t it?”

Taren had never considered the fact that a king’s word was not absolute, or that he might be something of a prisoner in his own land.

Eiran shook his head. “On some topics,” he replied lightly, “my word is law. On others... I must defer to my advisors.” He smiled at Morim, who

inclined his head. No doubt the two men had clashed on this particular topic before. Taren's respect for Morim grew at the realization.

They retired to their tents sometime later, though Taren knew he would not sleep well, his anticipation too great to allow him to relax, in spite of his exhaustion.

IAN AWOKE after several hours spent in semisleep, only to find Taren was no longer in the tent. His immediate alarm vanished as he reached out and sensed Taren's familiar presence nearby. He pulled on his clothing and stretched as he exited the tent, then quietly left the camp. He found Taren a few minutes later, staring out at the cliffs.

Taren offered Ian a knowing smile. Overhead, the moon illuminated the sky and cast shadows over the rocks. The tantalizing scent of saltwater wafted on the gentle breeze and called to him. Ian hadn't transformed in more than a week, and his body ached to swim. "Couldn't sleep either?" he asked.

Taren shook his head and rubbed his face with his hand. Ian sat behind Taren, wreathed his arms around Taren's chest, then kissed the back of his neck.

"When you do that, I can almost forget we're here to find the lost colony of Ea." Taren leaned against Ian and sighed.

"Why are you worried?"

Taren shook his head and shrugged. "What if we find the colony and they want nothing to do with us?"

"Then you'll convince them they need us." Ian turned Taren's face and brushed Taren's cheek with his thumb.

"And what if they're hostile?" Taren asked.

Ian exhaled slowly before leaning in to claim Taren's lips. The kiss lasted only a heartbeat, but Taren relaxed as he pulled away. "Then we will survive. You know the goddess wills this."

"You believe she's guiding us?" Taren asked.

Ian nodded. "I've dreamed of this."

"The flying ship with sails like a bird's wings. I thought of that the first time I saw the *Intrepid*."

"Aye." Ian had once doubted the goddess's existence. Worse, he'd cursed her for allowing his parents to perish. "Even I am not so stubborn as

to believe that all of this is simply coincidence.” He tilted his head to one side and watched as Taren touched the necklace of stones he wore. Ian tried not to focus on the silver chain beneath it—the chain that held the rune stone.

“I once imagined an Ea gathering shells and stones like those on the necklace my mother gave me,” Taren said in a wistful voice. “I could almost see my father picking out a gift for my mother on one of his voyages to the Gateway Islands or Xiat.”

“They would be proud of you,” Ian said. He wondered vaguely what his own parents would have thought to see him now. He half wished he had the gift of sight, as Taren did, so that he might see his parents once again.

“Sometimes I feel as though I’d have done nothing if I hadn’t been pushed to do it.” Pain shimmered in Taren’s voice. “Treande knew what he wanted. He believed in the goddess and in her path for him.”

“From what you’ve told me,” Ian said, then pressed a soft kiss to Taren’s cheek, “he needed a bit of prodding before he rose to the task. The best leaders are sometimes the most reticent. People who crave power rarely have the best interests of others at heart.”

Taren sighed and leaned in to embrace Ian. “Owyn said the same.”

“He did?” In their time together, Taren had spoken very little of Owyn, whether because of the pain his memory evoked or because he feared Ian might not want to learn more about his alter ego, Ian wasn’t sure.

“Yes.”

“Tell me about him? If it’s not too much to ask, of course.” Ian hoped his gentle tone might reassure Taren.

Taren pulled away and stared at Ian in obvious surprise. “You... you want me to tell you?” When Ian nodded, Taren added, “I thought... I worried that you might not wish to know about him.”

“There was a time when I admit I was a bit jealous of him,” Ian said, sighing. “He seemed to mean so much to you.”

“Only because he reminded me of you,” Taren said, his eyes wide and dark with emotion.

In that moment Ian couldn’t imagine loving anyone more. The truth in Taren’s gaze made Ian’s breath catch in his throat, and he found he couldn’t speak. Taren, perhaps sensing this, extended his hand.

“I still haven’t learned to completely control my gift,” Taren said. “But there are certain memories I can revisit.”

Ian glanced down at Taren's hand, hesitating only a moment before clasping it in his own. The world around them faded and the lively sound of the marketplace at Raice Harbor replaced the rustling of leaves on the trees.

"...IS MADE of the finest silver from the Luathan Islands," the vendor was saying. "You'll not find a more lovely—"

"It's not right," Ian heard himself—heard Owyn—say as he set the delicate bracelet back down on the silk. Would he never find the proper gift for Treande? He'd been to nearly every stall in the market, and the sun was woefully low in the sky.

"But—" the merchant protested.

"Thank you." Owyn smiled at the man and made his way toward the exit. Treande would not complain that Owyn had no gift to offer, but Owyn had hoped not to return to the village empty-handed. Rhea, one of the acolytes, liked to tease him for his lack of creativity. He would often reply that gift-giving was hardly an art, although silently he admired Treande for his ability to find the perfect gift to mark the milestones they shared. And yet he had failed to find a single gift on this, the most important of all days.

"You will never find a gift worthy of him," a child's voice said from over his shoulder.

"What?" Owyn turned to see a little girl sitting cross-legged on the flagstones, her face smooth and round, her eyes bright with intelligence.

"You cannot recreate that which the goddess has given," the girl said with a knowing grin. "You seek perfection. You seek something as beautiful as he. But you ask too much."

An oracle? But surely oracles didn't appear in human marketplaces as little girls.

"We appear where and how we must," the girl replied and flashed a smile that showed her two missing front teeth.

"What would you have me give him, then?" Owyn asked warily, knowing that oracles often confused a question rather than help solve it.

The oracle held out her hand, opening her fist to reveal the tiny pink shell of a sea snail. "Take it," the oracle said.

Owyn did as he was told, placing the shell in his own hand and examining it carefully. He'd seen hundreds of shells such as this one,

although to be fair, none as obviously perfect. No chips or discolorations marred its ridged surface, and the pointed tip of it was perfectly straight. Owyn laughed to himself, then said, "Perfect in every way."

The oracle nodded. "But it is not the one you love who is perfect," she said. "Though you may see him as such."

Owyn raised his eyebrows in question.

"No living thing is truly perfect, regardless of what we believe," the girl added. "But the heart... aye, the heart is perfect, as is your love for him."

The scene faded and the marketplace became a dimly lit room. From the sweet fragrance of the burning offerings, Ian must now be inside the temple. Someone opened the door to the room and backed inside as he spoke so Ian couldn't see his face. "...promise I'll eat plenty tonight," he said, then laughed and turned so that he faced Owyn.

The face was not Taren's but Treande's. "You missed the preparations for tonight's offering," Treande chided, the warm brown of his eyes and the expression of love on his face belying his words.

"As someone who is usually late," Owyn parried playfully as he took Treande into his embrace, "you can hardly complain."

"I was worried," Treande admitted.

Owyn claimed Treande's lips and inhaled the scent of him—bright like the ocean and comforting like the scented leaves burning on the altar. "You feared I would run from you?" Owyn asked.

Treande nodded. "I know I'm foolish, and that I—"

Owyn silenced Treande's words with his lips, then released them and said, "Aye. Foolish and wonderful. Everything I could wish for and more."

"Where did you disappear to? I went to the cottage, but you weren't there. I even asked some of the villagers if they'd seen you swimming."

"I went to Raice Harbor," Owyn said. "To find a gift worthy of you."

"A gift?" Treande pressed his lips together, his smile seeming to well up from his soul. "But you know I need no gift. I want nothing more than to be joined with you before the goddess. That is more than enough for me."

Ian's heart raced as he realized he was witnessing the day Owyn and Treande were handfasted. Then the gift...

Owyn released Treande and backed away, then kneeled at Treande's feet. "I wished to show you how much my love for you guides me in all I

do,” he said, his voice trembling with emotion. “I wanted a gift worthy of you.” He sighed and shook his head. “But there is no such gift. Nothing that can compare....”

He held out his hand and opened it to reveal the shell the oracle had given him. “I know it’s not much. That it’s unworthy—”

“It’s beautiful.” Treande lovingly took the shell between thumb and forefinger and studied it. “Perfect. A reminder of what I love most—you and the sea. Nothing could be more fitting for this day.” He helped Owyn to his feet with his free hand. “Don’t you see it?”

“Aye.” Owyn looked away, afraid for Treande to see that his eyes brimmed with tears.

Treande turned Owyn’s face and brushed a tear from his cheek. “Beloved Owyn. You have given me more than I could ever ask for.” He placed the shell in the pocket of his white tunic, then clasped Owyn’s hands in his. “Now come and let us pray to the goddess to bless our union before our people.”

Owyn nodded and smiled through his tears.

Ian came back to the real world with a gasp and realized he held Taren’s hands just as Owyn had held Treande’s. Taren’s eyes shimmered in the white light of the moon and Ian’s cheeks felt wet. “What happened to the shell?” he asked when he’d regained control of his fragile emotions.

“It was lost when they fled Callaecia,” Taren answered. “In their hurry to leave Derryth, Treande left it behind. Funny thing, though,” he added as he reached into his pocket and pulled something out. “I found this nearby.” He opened his palm to reveal a tiny pink shell, nearly identical to the one in the memory.

“Do you ever wish you could forget, like the Anuki?” Ian spoke the words tentatively, fearing Taren’s answer.

Taren shook his head without hesitation. “No. Not if it meant that I’d forget the happy memories along with the sad.” He drew a long breath and added, “The memory of Owyn’s death still pains my heart. I can’t deny that. But there’s so much more to Treande’s memories of Owyn.”

Ian took the shell and rolled it between his fingers. This far from the water, he’d not have expected to find any shell, let alone one so perfect. “Someday,” Ian said in an undertone, “we will celebrate our own handfasting.” He spoke the words with the conviction he lacked.

“Someday,” Taren repeated.

TWELVE

THE NEXT morning dawned cold and bright. Taren shivered as he exited the tent he shared with Ian, having slept soundly.

“This will help keep you warm,” Morim said and handed Taren a woolen jacket. “We brought enough for the others as well.”

“Thank you.” Taren pulled on the jacket and immediately felt warmer, in spite of the thin weave.

“Welat wool is quite warm,” Morim explained. “They’re raised in much the same way as your sheep, although they’re a bit more temperamental.”

“Temperamental?” Taren asked as he ran his hand over the soft sleeve of the jacket.

Morim grinned and nodded. “Welat herders are notoriously strong men and women. I know at least a few who’ve lost a finger or two to a welat’s sharp teeth.”

“Taren! Morim!” Eiran waved to them from the other side of the encampment, where the men cooked their breakfast. Ian, Bastian, and Odhrán already had plates in their hands.

“Fish?” Bastian asked as he looked down at his food.

“We will fish later,” Odhrán told him. “You might try it, though. It’s quite good.”

Bastian picked up a piece of the traditional Astenyian flatbread. He eyed it warily, then waved it about like one might a fan and inhaled the scent of it.

“Go ahead,” Taren told Bastian. “Odhrán’s right. It’s good. Even better with the jam Eiran brought.”

Bastian hesitated, then bit into the warm bread. He blinked in surprise, then grinned and shoved the entire piece into his mouth. “Good,”

he said between chews.

“Glad you like it,” Eiran said brightly.

“Almost as good as fish,” Bastian said.

“The ultimate compliment, coming from Bastian,” Ian put in as he tore a piece of the bread and dipped it into the birdfruit jam.

As always, Odhrán said little, although he sat near the others as he ate, watching Bastian as he often did. Taren sighed as he met Ian’s eyes. No doubt he, too, had sensed Odhrán’s reluctance to participate in conversation. Taren wished he could say or do something to open Odhrán’s heart to the possibilities of his newfound life beyond his island fortress. Then again, Bastian had already begun to chip away at Odhrán’s defenses. Taren smiled.

“Something amusing?” Ian asked.

“Only that even the strongest wards eventually yield to kindness.”

Ian frowned as if trying to understand the meaning of Taren’s words. Then, with a nod, he said, “Indeed.”

THEY SET out for the water an hour later, Eiran and his men leading the way. Taren and Odhrán attempted to assist Bastian as he struggled to don the heavy woolen jacket Eiran provided.

“Not cold,” Bastian protested as Odhrán did his best to tuck one of Bastian’s wings beneath the fabric, only to have it dislodge the garment again.

Taren tried to untangle the fabric, which had gathered at Bastian’s nape. He gasped to realize that Bastian’s skin was covered with downy feathers. “Did you see this?” he asked Odhrán.

“I didn’t notice them before,” Odhrán answered, clearly as surprised as Taren. “I’m sure they weren’t there last night.”

“If the legends are true,” Taren said, “his people come from this climate. Why shouldn’t he be able to shift his form to accommodate the cold, just as we adapt to the water?”

“Not cold,” Bastian repeated as he pulled his arm from the sleeve and tossed the jacket onto the ground.

“You’re not, are you?” Taren ruffled Bastian’s hair.

Bastian’s face lit and he happily trotted off down the trail, leaving Odhrán to retrieve the coat.

They crossed the hills and made their way toward the water on a narrow

trail. Mountains rose in the distance, the sun illuminating peaks that broke through a shroud of white clouds. “I’ve never seen such tall mountains,” Ian said.

“They are quite beautiful,” Odhrán said wistfully. “I spent some time in the foothills after I escaped the city. I met an old shipbuilder there.”

“The *Chimera*?” Taren asked.

“The *Chimera* was born in these parts.” Pride shone in Odhrán’s eyes.

“She’s a beauty,” Ian put in. “And she’ll probably endure as long as those peaks.”

The hint of a smile danced on Odhrán’s lips.

“Where’s Bastian?” Taren glanced around. He’d been following them a moment ago.

Odhrán knitted his brow and looked to where Bastian had been. Then he walked back to the top of the ridge they’d just passed over. The others followed. Odhrán paused at the bottom of the hill where they’d first seen the mountains. There Bastian sat staring skyward.

“Bastian?” Taren said.

Bastian turned around so quickly he nearly tumbled into the high grass at the side of the trail. His eyes were wide, his skin ruddy and pink. He seemed to consider them for a moment, then turned back to the mountains and pointed.

“Anu-raal,” Bastian whispered.

“Anu-raal?” Odhrán repeated.

Bastian nodded, eyes fixed on the mountains. “Anu-raal.” He smiled, then added, “Home.”

THIRTEEN

“ANU-RAAL,” EIRAN said with an air of reverence. “The ancient city in the clouds. Our legends tell that it is the birthplace of the Anuki. The place where Anuki himself came to rest his wings when the goddess created the ancient races from pieces of the moon.”

“Were you born there?” Taren asked Bastian. “In Anu-raal?”

Bastian nodded. “All born there,” he said.

No one said much when they reached the shore an hour later. Bastian’s pronouncement hadn’t been entirely unexpected, but the knowledge that this ancient land had given birth to the Anuki gave Taren hope that they would find the Ea settlement.

The sea stretched before them, vast and uninterrupted by land. No islands dotted the shoreline here as they did near Raice Harbor. Taren wondered where the water might lead.

“No sailor has ever survived the Northern Passage,” Eiran confirmed, as if he’d read Taren’s thoughts. “Although many have tried.”

“My father used to tell me stories of the Lands Beyond,” Ian said, his expression wistful. “An enormous chain of islands stretching like a string of pearls around the neck of the world.” He smiled.

“Lands where magic wielders rule,” Eiran added. “Where man is not welcome. Aye. I also heard those stories.”

“Why do you not take your flying ships to explore there?” Taren asked.

“Our ships cannot fly that far,” Eiran explained. “At least not yet.” No doubt Eiran would find a way to extend the range of his ships eventually if his determination was as powerful as his curiosity.

Odhrán pulled off his boots and waded into the water. Taren followed a moment later with Ian at his side.

“Do you feel it?” Odhrán asked them.

Ian nodded. “Magic.”

“Enchantments,” Taren echoed.

“I’ve never felt any as powerful.” Odhrán put his palm to the surface of the water. “Or as old.”

“Can you defeat them?” Ian asked.

“I can try.” Odhrán closed his eyes. Wisps of white and blue circled his body and traveled over his arms to his hands. The surface of the water rippled in reply, glowing briefly, then returned to its normal state.

Odhrán opened his arms as if calling to the heavens. Taren watched in awe as the clouds overhead grew brighter and bolts of blue lightning zinged upward from the water, fell back down again, and illuminated the waves.

The unique zest of power danced over Taren’s skin and seemed to gather in his chest, warming it, coaxing it.... *Not me. The stone.* Taren pulled the stone from beneath his shirt and set it on his open palm. No longer black, the stone glowed faintly blue, much like the color of Odhrán’s power.

“Taren?” Ian watched him, clearly concerned.

“I... I’m not sure,” Taren said. “But I think it wants something from me.”

Taren knew Ian feared the stone. So did he. But he sensed no danger now, only a steady call, much like the sound of a mother calling her children back home.

Home. The word Bastian had spoken a short time ago. The home of the Anuki. Was it possible this was also his people’s home? The place where the Ea had been born?

“Stop,” Taren said.

Odhrán and the others turned to stare at him.

“It won’t work,” Taren explained. “It’s not... not the right key.”

“Key?” Ian asked.

Taren nodded, unsure how he knew this. Yet he knew it as surely as his name. The truth resonated in his bones, in his flesh, in his soul. He clasped the rune stone in his right hand and raised it over the water as high as it would reach on its silver chain.

“Aye.” Taren glanced around him, wanting to reassure the others. On shore, Bastian and Eiran watched them with keen interest. Taren saw dawning understanding in Odhrán’s eyes and quiet concern in Ian’s. “The

rune stone,” he said. “It will unlock the enchantments.”

Taren looked at Ian, who nodded and said softly, “You do not need my permission. I trust you to lead us.”

Taren’s chest tightened at these words. He knew how difficult Ian found it not to try to protect him, to shield him from harm. There was something familiar to the sensation too. He could almost imagine Owyn watching him from afar, encouraging him to be strong for them, for their people. Treande, too, had hesitated to lead.

“The strongest leaders are those who must first believe in themselves,” Vurin had once told Taren.

Taren drew a slow breath, then closed his eyes.

The world around him vanished in a blur of silver and white, the sounds of the ocean replaced by a strange music that originated within his soul and resonated in his bones. The goddess’s music, sweet and haunting. It called to him to join with it. And he did.

He saw his soul launch upward in a blur of color. It danced around the clouds, then flew faster toward the heavens.

“*Come, little one!*” Taren didn’t hear the voice as much as he felt it in his soul. His mother’s voice, joined with another. Reassuring. Powerful. Primal.

“*The power is yours alone, beloved Taren. Use it wisely, and it will not fail you. But know that it will exact a price for what it provides.*”

A price? He struggled to understand. *Death?*

“*The stone is just,*” the voice said, “*the price fair.*”

Before he could ask what a fair price might be for such power, the heavens fell away and his soul hurtled back toward the earth. He called out to the voice, suddenly fearful that he might die when he hit the water.

“*I will not fail you,*” the voice reassured him.

His progress slowed. He saw himself standing knee-deep in the surf with Ian and Odhrán flanking him. He flew back into his body just as a blinding light exploded from his chest and stretched out over the surface of the water. The clouds that had blanketed the sun and sky disappeared to reveal the calm blue above.

Taren awoke from his trance as Ian clasped his free hand.

“Taren!” Ian called to him.

“I’m well,” he whispered as he gazed down. The water, which before had been an impenetrable black, was now clear as glass. Through the

surface he now saw the faint shadows of structures in the distance. “It’s there.” Taren allowed the stone to fall on its chain. “Ea’ga. Our ancestral home.”

FOURTEEN

“EA’GA.” IAN spoke the name with wonder. He squeezed Taren’s hand, a gesture that bespoke a myriad of emotions: wonder, pride, and love, first and foremost.

He had felt something powerful when Taren had connected with the rune stone, and for once, he didn’t fear for Taren’s safety as he’d tapped into its force. He’d felt beauty at its core. The goddess’s hand, perhaps?

From the shore, Eiran waved to them. Bastian ran and took to the air, spreading his wings and circling above them.

“Shall we?” Taren said, his face lit with new confidence.

“Aye.” Ian dove after Taren, watching him transform before doing the same. Beside him, he felt Odhrán’s transformation as the water stirred with the strokes of his powerful tail. Odhrán’s presence beneath the water was both powerful and frightening. How much effort would it take for Odhrán to crush any of them between his enormous hands? Yet Ian didn’t fear Odhrán as he once had.

“And for that,” Odhrán replied in his mind, “I am grateful.”

As am I.

They swam faster now, weaving in and around the coral that served as a barrier between the open sea and the colony, quieting the strong current. The huge structures they’d seen from the surface grew closer. The ocean floor beneath them dropped precipitously as they skimmed the surface of a reef that rose from the blackness below. Ian realized the dark shapes they’d seen were just the tops of enormous buildings that jutted up from the bottom and sides of the reef.

Ian reached out with his mind to sense the Ea he knew must inhabit

the colony. He'd expected to feel hundreds of souls. He felt nothing. He heard nothing but his companions' thoughts. Odhrán's surprise. Taren's despair.

Nothing.

"*Where are they?*" Taren's desperate words echoed in Ian's mind.

Ian didn't answer. Taren already knew. There were no Ea here. There had been none for more than a millennium.

FIFTEEN

TAREN FLOATED on the warm current, using his tail to navigate the vacant structures. The long-dead coral they'd been carved from shimmered as rays of light pierced the turquoise water, making them appear to undulate as if they were alive. He could feel the magic here, resonating long after the buildings had been abandoned.

Our people lived here millennia ago. If they had lived here during Odhrán's lifetime, Odhrán surely would have known of their existence. But Taren had read Odhrán's thoughts. He knew nothing about the colony.

Why did you lead us here? he asked the goddess. His only answer was the familiar popping sounds of the tiny creatures carried along the current and the soft swishing his companions made as they swam.

On a plateau that rose from the bottom of the water, the soaring columns of a building stood sentry, familiar and welcoming. Other than the columns, little remained of the structure, but Taren immediately recognized it as the goddess's temple, so similar was it to the temple of Treande's time on Callaecia. Sea creatures stubbornly clung to the pillars and the crumbling altar within. He swam between the pillars, imagining what the building must have looked like in its heyday. Nearly twice the size of the temple in Treande's memory, what remained of the building's interior was marred by deep gouges in the stone, as if it had been pelted with cannon fire or worse. How many Ea had dwelled in the colony that it had required such an enormous room where they might make their offerings to the goddess?

Taren sighed and ran his fingers along the flat rock on the floor of the building. When he'd seen the cave paintings of this colony months before in Callaecia, he'd wondered why the Ea had floors and ceilings in underwater buildings. Now he believed he understood their purpose—the Ea of the ancient colony had also found it difficult to completely leave behind their

human forms and had echoed the forms of human buildings even here. He wondered if it was possible that his people could ever completely abandon the land, even if they chose to live beneath the waves.

The altar was scarred not from age but from a fire whose magic reverberated beneath Taren's hand. Large, smooth panels of what must once have been the ceiling lay scattered about the floor, many carved with a swirling pattern that recalled the waves and currents that sustained his people. This was once a beautiful space, meant to be filled with joy and celebration.

Something inside Taren—Treande's spirit, perhaps—imagined Ea heartsong rising on the waves as the people sang the goddess's praises. He imagined himself at Ian's side, making offerings to the goddess just as Treande and Owyn had once served their people. In his vision, Taren's parents had spoken of the priests whose bloodline they shared. Were those priests—his ancestors—the men and women who had built this shrine? Was this colony the home city of the Ea? Perhaps someday he'd learn to control his gift so he might explore the history of his birthright and of his people.

Someday. But not now. They had too much yet to do. He hoped he might survive long enough to restore the history his people had lost. The history of this colony and perhaps the history of the dawn of the Ea.

Ian, too, appeared moved by the temple, although he said nothing. No doubt he sensed Taren's need for silence and his need to understand.

Taren left the temple with Ian at his side. They swam farther down, following the line of one of the tall structures. Buildings unlike any he'd seen before rose higher than the black spires of the castle at Xiat. Some were blackened and crumbling, much like the temple, but others remained intact, standing defiantly sentinel amidst the destruction.

What had at first appeared black through the water's surface now shone bright with the sun's light. Carved from ancient coral, the tallest of the remaining structures glowed in a riot of color. Pink and red combined with deeper hues of blue, causing tiny rainbows to appear when Taren looked up, reminding him of the fireworks he'd seen during celebrations at Raice Harbor.

Each level of the building had a solid foundation, the surface smooth to the touch. He swam into one of the levels and was surprised to find a maze-like web of corridors and rooms. Throughout the rooms, water circulated and light danced, so that only the most protected interior spaces

were dark.

"Sleeping spaces," Ian said, confirming Taren's guess. He ran a hand over a smooth indentation in the wall, large enough to accommodate several Ea, long enough for their tails.

He took Taren's hand, then pulled him into one of the berths and wrapped his powerful arms around Taren's waist. Taren laid his head against Ian's chest.

"I'm sorry," Ian said softly. *"I know how disappointed you must be."*

Taren allowed Ian to stroke his hair. *Aye. Although I'm not surprised the colony is abandoned. Part of me knew we'd find no one here.*

"I think I also knew we'd find the colony abandoned." Ian kissed Taren's head and sighed.

Taren pulled away from Ian, then reached for his face.

"Where are you going?" Ian asked.

I need to think. To understand.

"Take your time," Ian said. *"There's no hurry."*

Thank you.

IAN WATCHED Taren swim away. *What will you do, I wonder?* His heart ached for them all.

"He will find the way forward," Odhrán said in his mind. Ian had nearly forgotten Odhrán swam nearby. *"His faith is strong. You must be strong for him, as well."*

Aye. Ian swam out of the structure in time to see Taren disappear amidst the abandoned buildings. He would be strong for Taren. For all his people.

SIXTEEN

TAREN SWAM onward, past the largest buildings, until he reached the outskirts of the abandoned colony. How like the human cities of Derryth this underwater city was, with its neat rows of homes. Yet no doors separated the buildings from the water, and Taren saw no evidence of hinges where they might have hung.

What good were doors in a world where one communicated through thought? The twisting passages at the hearts of the buildings afforded their occupants a modicum of privacy. Sleeping rooms. Rooms where the Ea had shared their meals. Shelter from the storms as well, for even strong enchantments could not abide the powerful winds.

Like some of the larger structures at the city center, some buildings here were nothing more than rubble. Others, however, had withstood whatever force destroyed their neighbors. Taren snaked in and out of the simple dwellings, and as he did, he imagined he heard the echoes of voices from the past. Lively conversations, laughter. Ea returning from the hunt, dragging nets filled with fish and clams to share in the marketplace at the heart of the city. The sounds of babies crying and children playing, the youngest of them swimming happily beside their parents.

Taren knew Ea had always believed children could not transform at birth. And yet in his imagination, he saw them suckle their mothers' breasts, breathing in the water, their tiny tails wriggling where Taren had expected to see legs instead. The world that was supposed to have been. Their world.

Gone. All of it. Taren's hot tears mingled with the salt water, the irony not lost on him. The goddess had given them human tears in this form, as if she'd known they would experience pain even in the paradise she'd provided.

Why bring us here only to take away our dream? His dream,

although he felt sure that Ian, too, believed in it. Even Odhrán, for all his mistrust, seemed to have embraced Taren's vision of Ea reunited with their long-lost kin.

"*I'm faster than you, Velanie!*" said a voice in the distance. A young boy, judging by the slight quaver in his voice that hinted at his coming manhood.

The current changed direction, and Taren caught the scent of Ea in the distance. Had the colony moved farther offshore? Had they missed them?

Taren flicked his tail flukes hard and sped toward the voices. The sunlight disappeared behind a cloud, and Taren struggled to see in the sudden darkness. As he avoided another hollowed-out cavern, something darted nearly straight toward him: a young Ea girl, her silvery hair fanning out behind her as she moved. Taren turned just in time to avoid colliding with her.

"*Brea! Over here!*" she called.

The boy—Brea—laughed and followed. Taren moved toward him as he pivoted on his tail and swam toward Taren. Taren tried to move out of the way, but he was too slow. Velanie swam right through him.

Until that moment he'd believed them to be real. For the first time, Taren realized that he was seeing the past. He knew why it had taken him so long: he wanted them to be real. He wanted his fanciful notion of a future for his people to come to fruition. He'd believed it was his destiny to guide them to this place—to reunite his people with these people.

The vision faded, replaced by yet another.

The waves churned, but no storm caused the disturbance: Taren saw the keels of huge ships and felt the impact of cannon fire in the water. He told himself this was not real, that the battle was a vision, but try as he might, he could not banish the cold dread from his chest. He thought of Rider and Bastian, and of the men who had perished on both sides of their brief skirmish with the island Ea, and he shivered.

He swam toward the settlement and found it filled with Ea. Men, women, and children scattered as an explosion ripped through the marketplace. Majestic arches carved from coral and rock tumbled to the sea floor, disturbing the sand and creating a cloud that obscured all but the outlines of the settlement.

Dark shadows passed over the surface of the water, making it grow

darker still. People screamed and swam away from the center of the colony, dodging rocks and cannon fire from above.

“Reva!” one of the Ea shouted. “We cannot stay here any longer. You must give the word.”

“The enchantments—” Reva, the man Taren instinctively knew to be the leader of the colony, began.

“My magic will not hold forever against the humans’ guns. If it were just the ships, I might be able to protect our people. But this... this is too much, Reva. You must give the word. We must leave.”

Reva looked around. Ea huddled in the relative safety of a large cave, clutching their young. As he’d seen in his vision before, these children appeared fully transformed. Even the infants’ tails were fully formed.

Another volley from the ships on the surface shook the cavern and a clap of power shot through the water. Magic danced over the surface of the cannonball and broke through the protective barrier above. The mage held the rune stone out, and the lead projectile slowed and turned back toward the surface, missing the cave by a hair’s breadth.

“Where will we go?” a female Ea asked Reva.

“There are stories of a kingdom in the west where the humans have no magic. I’ve heard some of the land people speak of it. Perhaps there we can protect ourselves.” Reva looked to his mage, who nodded his assent.

Taren gasped as reality replaced the vision. Instead of the cavern, he floated a few inches above the white sand of the ocean floor.

“Taren?” Ian’s voice brought him back to himself.

Over here.

Ian darted out from the cavern Taren had seen before. More sea creatures covered the surface now than he remembered, but he had no doubt it was the same as in his vision, where the Ea had taken refuge from the humans’ attacks.

“I know that expression,” Ian said. “What did you see?”

Children. Playing. Taren could almost imagine them still, darting about, playing in the warm water. War, he added. With the humans.

“We’ve found no signs of any Ea.”

*Taren sighed and nodded. He let his shoulders drop, giving in at last to the deep sense of disappointment in the acknowledgment. None of them had sensed any Ea. *They fled many millennia ago*, he replied. *Our**

ancestors.

"Then the structures you saw in the carvings at Callaecia?" Ian asked, the sadness in his voice unmistakable.

Taren nodded. He knew Ian's grief. Ian had also hoped to find their brethren here. *There was a war... perhaps even the war Eiran spoke about. Those who survived left, seeking safety amidst humans who did not possess magic.*

"I'm sorry." Ian brushed Taren's face with his fingers, then leaned in to kiss him tenderly, twining his tail about Taren's. "I know you hoped you'd find them."

Taren smiled at Ian. *The goddess never promised us an easy path. Still, I'd hoped that if I could show our people she meant for us to live here, beneath the surface....*

"Do you believe otherwise now that you've been here?"

No. Taren didn't hesitate. In spite of the disappointment, this just *felt* right. *I saw them. Children. Babes in their mothers' arms. Ea—fully transformed, all of them.*

Ian's lips parted and his eyes grew wide. "Transformed? Babes?"

Taren nodded. *I didn't think it possible. But these were our people, Ian. I sensed that as keenly as I sense your presence now.* He looked back toward the ruined temple and sighed.

"You still believe the goddess led us here for a purpose," Ian said as he floated beside Taren.

But it will be harder to convince our people to leave. Why should they? And those on Ea'nu.... What would the Council say? What lengths would they go to bind them to the island? Seria and his men will die before they allow our people to leave. Perhaps Vurin might be able to persuade—

"You don't need Vurin to do this. You'll convince them." Ian drew Taren close once again, wrapping his arms around Taren until he sighed. "I know you will."

The words warmed Taren so—he almost believed them. *But—*

"You're no longer a slave, Taren. You're no longer just a rigger. You're no longer just my beloved. You're the leader you were meant to be. You just haven't realized it yet."

SEVENTEEN

THEY RETURNED to camp at nightfall. Even Eiran said little. Bastian, too, seemed dispirited. At one point he took to the air to chase a flock of migratory birds, scattering them briefly from their formation. But when none of his companions responded, he joined them on land.

Taren and the others ate their dinner around the fire a few hours later.

“What will you do now?” Eiran asked, voicing the question they all shared.

Taren shook his head. “I don’t know. Return to Callaecia and report what we’ve learned to Vurin, the leader of our people. And then... I just don’t know.” Taren watched the flames flicker in the darkness. Tiny embers took to the air, glowing red, then yellow, then disappearing.

That night Taren slept fitfully at Ian’s side, buffeted by dreams and visions, none of which he could remember when he awoke. At the back of his mind, the same question burned. He rose before the others and made his way to the water in the semidarkness.

What do you want from me?

The goddess did not answer, but as he walked, the wind rose and howled through the underbrush, echoing his unease.

He transformed as he dove into the surf and reached the ruins of the Ea colony a few minutes later. In the light of the waning moon, the structures took on an eerie bluish cast, making them seem to undulate with the current. In spite of this, Taren felt comfortable here as the disappointment of the day before melted into curious appreciation for his ancestors’ city.

He swam to the heart of the colony and what he now knew was the marketplace. Taren could almost hear the chatter of the inhabitants as they hawked their wares. When he looked again, he saw the vendors’ colorful

booths filled with items for sale: brightly painted glassware, silver jewelry, toys, and food. But for the water, the scene was no different from the marketplaces he'd seen on Lurat.

He swam over to a stall and the woman there greeted him brightly. "What can I get for you, T'eanat Taren?"

T'eanat. Although Taren had never heard the word before, he understood its meaning: priest.

I'm not—

"The goddess has blessed my family," the woman said. "Your prayers on my behalf have reached her ears." She touched her belly and nodded. "My bondmate and I will have a daughter when the warm waters return."

I am glad. Taren returned her smile as she handed him what he recognized as a rangfruit—a bulbous delicacy harvested from the deep waters at the base of the mountains. He took the fruit and held it up in thanksgiving, the gesture acknowledging the bounty of the land and the promise of new life. He bit off the bitter end, then allowed it to float away before biting into the fruit.

The flesh of the fruit tasted sweet and salty. Delicious and familiar, although he knew he'd never eaten one before. Had he known this as Treande? Yet Treande had never lived in these waters, and the fruit grew nowhere else.

The future? But only the goddess knew the future. He brushed the thought away and swam out of the marketplace toward the place where the goddess's temple had once stood.

Instead of the ruins he'd seen when he and Ian explored the colony, the temple now stood pristine and beautiful. The roof of the structure had been replaced, and similar carvings that called to mind the swirling waves decorated the ceiling. Fish in hues of silver, red, and blue danced between the ancient columns, their scales reflecting the early morning light. At the heart of the building, the altar bore the indications of newer use, striations of black that laced the surface.

Taren traced the markings and the sound of Ea heartsong filled his ears. He smelled the fragrant incense as it burned with the priests' blue fire and felt the warmth of the offering on his skin, tingling with power. *Flames under the water?*

"When the temple is rebuilt," Ian said from behind him, startling Taren, "we will be the first to be handfasted."

Ian? Taren turned, but Ian's powerful form vanished into the sparkling sunlight as the music faded.

When he turned once more, he saw buildings where before there had been none. One in particular caught his eye: a small home hewn from pink-and-red coral, its entry facing the temple. It reminded him of the cottage on the bluffs above Callaecia both in size and shape but for its flat roof and rounded windows. Taren knew this building, although it had yet to be constructed.

Our home. He could almost imagine Ian waiting for him inside. He swam downward, past the temple, until he reached the entryway. He reached out to touch the smooth outside wall and the building vanished.

Thank you, he said, knowing his goddess would hear. *For showing me a glimpse of the future. Please grant me the strength to see your will done.*

WHEN TAREN walked naked from the water an hour later, he wasn't alone. On the shore, a solitary figure peered out over the water as if searching for something beyond, in the direction of the mountains.

"Odhrán."

Odhrán nodded. "I heard you leave the camp," he said. "I thought I might follow."

"Were you worried for me?" Taren asked, knowing Odhrán would deny it.

"Hardly. But I grew tired of watching Bastian sleep."

Taren didn't argue, although he felt sure that Odhrán had been concerned for him. Instead he sat on the warm sand and allowed the cool breeze to dry his skin.

"You know the answer, don't you?" Odhrán said from behind him as the first hint of pink lit the horizon.

"The answer to what question?" Taren parried, knowing full well what Odhrán meant: What next? He must reveal the goddess's plan for his people.

Odhrán smiled knowingly. "You've known the answer all along," he pressed. "But you're afraid of what it means."

"Has anyone ever told you how exasperating you can be?" Taren sighed and shook his head. Odhrán was right.

Odhrán laughed and sat beside Taren. "More times than I can count.

James in particular is fond of telling me so. Not that I let it stop me.”

The tension in Taren’s shoulders eased a bit. He hadn’t quite gotten used to Odhrán’s newfound sense of humor. What an effect Bastian’s presence had had on Odhrán—on all of them. “And what is the answer you believe I already know?”

“That the answer is before your eyes. Here, in this place.”

Taren pressed his lips together and sighed. “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

Odhrán worked his bare feet into the sand and wiggled his toes. Like this, he appeared far more like a child than a being nearly a thousand years old.

Taren stood and dipped his toes in the water. “We were meant to live here,” he said without looking at Odhrán. “In this place. Beneath the water.”

“Aye.”

“But the Ea know nothing about how to live in their true forms,” Taren protested weakly.

“What must they learn?” Odhrán asked. “If you are correct—and I believe you are—and the Ea were not meant to live in their human forms, then they will learn quickly. They already hunt. They’ve farmed the land.”

“Farming beneath the water isn’t the same.”

“No, but they can learn. And in the meantime, Eiran and his people can assist them.” Odhrán got to his feet and joined Taren where the surf met the sand.

“Do you trust him?” Taren asked.

“Aye. I do. In spite of my own experiences here nearly a millennium ago, I believe Eiran is a good man. He will do what he can to help.”

“How do I convince my people to leave the island? If what Vurin says is true, Seria and the Council will fight us.” Taren reached down and picked up a tiny shell as it swirled about in the waves.

“Do you believe your goddess guides you?”

Taren glanced at Odhrán and nodded. “Yes. I do. I’ve felt her at every turn, showing me the way.”

“Then ask her for help. And listen when she speaks to you.”

“I thought you didn’t believe she existed.” Taren repressed a smile.

Odhrán shrugged and smoothed his long braid. “The only thing that matters is that *you* do.”

EIGHTEEN

THE NEXT day they said their farewells to Eiran and his men as they dined at the palace.

Eiran took Odhrán aside before the evening's festivities ended. "If you require assistance," he told Odhrán, "you need only ask."

"You owe me nothing," Odhrán replied. Eiran's generosity seemed genuine, but the thought that the king might be driven by pity irked him.

Eiran shook his head. "I know what you believe," he said, his voice kind, understanding. "And although I can't deny that I wish to make amends as best I can, the offer is given in friendship above all else. I would be more than happy to welcome Taren and his people to the Northern Territories. And I would consider it an honor if you were to decide you wish to spend some time in Xiat."

The king glanced over at Bastian, who was slowly swaying to the music that gently filled the dining hall. He smiled and added, "And should Bastian ever wish to explore the High Mountains, I would gladly provide you with a guide."

THE NEXT day, the *Chimera* fully provisioned, they set out for the Gateway Islands. As the coastline receded and they made their way out to sea, Odhrán looked up to see Bastian at Taren's side on the rigging. In the short time he'd been aboard, Bastian had taken to seafaring life with ease. Odhrán wondered if Bastian's body remembered his time as quartermaster aboard the *Sea Witch*. His speech was now nearly perfect, less than a week after he'd first spoken. Anuki apparently learned quickly, far faster than humans or Ea.

"How old is this ship?" Bastian asked that evening as they ate in

Odhrán's cabin. The question was one of a barrage Odhrán had already fielded that day.

"She was built nearly a millennium ago."

"How old are you?" Bastian asked, his eyes bright with curiosity.

Odhrán repressed a smile. "About a thousand years old."

"How old is Taren?"

"Taren is twenty," Odhrán replied.

Bastian chewed absentmindedly on a piece of bread. "And Ian?"

"Just shy of forty years old."

"How old is the king?" Bastian stood and waved the bread around in his excitement.

"Eiran? I'm not sure, but probably about twenty-five."

"Fiall is fourteen," Bastian said proudly. "And Aine says he'll turn thirteen at the next full moon. Ian said they will have a party."

"Is that so?"

"What is a party?" Bastian asked.

"A celebration where people enjoy themselves with song, drink, and food. Thirteen is the traditional Ea age of adulthood, so often there are parties to celebrate," Odhrán explained.

Bastian nodded and laughed. Then he hummed one of the songs the human crew often sang, and danced about the room, pirouetting to avoid several pillows that tumbled off the pile as he bumped into it. After a few minutes, he stopped and frowned as if he'd just come to understand something. "How old am I?" he asked.

One question Odhrán could not answer. "I'm afraid I don't know. At least as old as Taren, but probably much older. Perhaps older than I."

"Oh." Bastian appeared disappointed when Odhrán had expected him to react with surprise.

"You were hoping to have a party, were you?"

Bastian shifted his weight from one foot to the other and gazed down at the cabin floor. "Aye."

"Perhaps we can persuade Ian and Aine to allow you to celebrate your birthday as well," Odhrán offered, sure neither Ian nor Aine would object.

"Can we?" Bastian said, his expression brightening once more as he

took his place on the pillows next to Odhrán. “I would like to dance.”

“Would you?”

“Aye.” Bastian grinned broadly. “Do you know how to dance?”

“I haven’t danced in centuries,” Odhrán admitted. “Best to ask Taren or the others instead.”

“I want to dance with you.” Bastian avoided Odhrán’s gaze.

Odhrán ruffled Bastian’s hair.

Bastian narrowed his eyes, perhaps understanding that Odhrán would not so easily agree. A moment later he asked, “Where did I come from?”

Another difficult question. Odhrán, Taren, and Ian had discussed what they might tell Bastian should he ask about his past, but they hadn’t decided how best to approach the topic.

“We can only offer him the truth,” Taren had said in the end. “But how much of it, I truly don’t know.”

Now, faced with the question, Odhrán decided he would do as Taren had suggested. “I’m not sure,” Odhrán told Bastian, who had by this time curled up at his feet, his head on Odhrán’s knee. “We found you under the water. I brought you aboard.”

“Do my parents still live?”

Odhrán shook his head. “I do not know. But Anuki are said to be immortal, so perhaps they are still alive somewhere.”

“Who is Rider?” Bastian asked. “I’ve heard his name spoken, but I’ve met no one aboard who answers to the name.”

Odhrán exhaled slowly. *The truth. Nothing more. Not yet.* “Jonat Rider was captain of the *Sea Witch* and Ian’s good friend. A human.”

“Was? Then he is... dead?”

Odhrán nodded.

“I heard some of the men say things,” Bastian continued in an undertone, as if he feared speaking the words. “Horrible things, about how a dragon nearly killed them all. They say the dragon destroyed a ship.”

“Aye.” He shouldn’t worry that speaking the truth might hurt Bastian. Bastian was no child—Bastian was perhaps even older than he. And yet Bastian was vulnerable in this form. Childish in many ways.

“The dragon....” Bastian looked up at Odhrán, his eyes filled with

tears. “That dragon was me, wasn’t it?”

Odhrán pressed his lips together and nodded. He wouldn’t lie to Bastian, much as he wished to soften the blow.

“Did I kill Rider?” Bastian asked as tears streamed over his freckled cheeks.

“No,” Odhrán said with such force that Bastian flinched in reply.

“But I destroyed his ship,” Bastian pointed out.

“Yes.”

Bastian cried as Odhrán stroked his head and murmured words of comfort, finally succumbing to sleep as his tears ebbed.

NINETEEN

THE NEXT few weeks passed slowly. The *Chimera* made port in the Gateway Islands without much difficulty, anchoring off the shore of Odhrán's island hideaway long enough to provision and to let those crew members who wished to disembark do so. In the end, there were few—Caleb, an Ea whose wife was expecting their first child, and Lorin, a human who had contracted a fever during the voyage and whom Odhrán ordered to rest up. From there, the *Chimera* sailed to the main island of Cera, where they rendezvoused with the crew of the *Phantom*.

Throughout the journey and even upon their arrival at the Gateways, Bastian appeared withdrawn and said very little to anyone, even Taren.

"What else could you have told him?" Taren asked when Odhrán expressed his concern. "You wouldn't have wanted to lie to him."

"I should have handled it better," Odhrán replied.

"You did the best you could," Ian pointed out. "I doubt any of us could have done better."

Now, as Ian's men laughed and embraced the crewmates they'd left behind to finish repairs to the *Phantom*, Bastian watched from atop the *Phantom*'s main mast, knees pulled against his chest.

"I'll speak to him," Taren assured Odhrán. Bastian would come to terms with his past, given time. Odhrán, on the other hand, appeared distracted and unsure of what to do. Worse, he'd taken to pacing the deck and ordering his men about tasks that could have waited until their departure.

Taren nodded at Ian as he climbed the main. Bastian eyed him warily. Of course he'd suspect Taren's motives—he was far too perceptive not to.

"I'm not here to force you to meet them," Taren said with what he

hoped was a reassuring smile. "I just thought you might like some company."

Bastian didn't look at him but ruffled his wings and settled once again on his wooden perch. "I didn't want to disturb their reunion."

"That's very thoughtful of you," Taren responded, "though I don't believe they'd mind making your acquaintance. Odhrán told me you asked about Rider," he added when Bastian said nothing else.

Bastian nodded.

"Do you fear the men will reject you because of the *Sea Witch*?"

"Why shouldn't they?" Bastian demanded with a glare for Taren.

"I won't deny that some may," Taren admitted. "Although none of these men witnessed the battle in which she was lost."

"A battle in which *I destroyed her*." Bastian clenched his jaw and looked away again. In that moment, Taren sensed the man inside the child's body.

"Aye."

"I deserve their hatred," Bastian said.

"And if they don't hate you, will you continue to hate yourself in their stead?"

Bastian's frown deepened and he tilted his head to one side, as if considering this. "I don't...."

Taren waited a moment, eyebrows raised, then smiled. "All I ask is that you consider whether you're deserving of disdain." He squeezed Bastian's shoulder, then made his way back to the deck.

THE KNOCK on the cabin door brought Ian back to himself. He'd been staring at the maps without really seeing them. Each time he saw a map, his gut clenched.

Barra. Would that I might understand...

"Come," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"Ian, I.... Captain?"

Ian didn't expect to see Bastian peering through the door, especially when Taren was on watch for the evening. "Bastian. Please come in."

Bastian's cheek's pinked with embarrassment. "Thank you, sir."

"I'm not your captain," Ian replied. "For now, you can continue to call me Ian. At least until Captain Odhrán approves a transfer, if that's what you wish."

Bastian blinked, then nodded. "Captain... I mean Ian... I'm happy to serve wherever I'm needed," he said, straightening, his head held high.

"What can I do for you?" Ian gestured to one of the chairs.

"Thank you." Bastian sat and appeared to collect himself. "I—I—" he stammered, his face once again flushing pink, "I want to know about Rider."

Ian drew a long breath. "I thought you might wish to ask me about him," he said. Even now, months after Rider's death, Ian still found it difficult to speak about him. The pain had only slightly eased, and his guilt....

"Odhrán said he was a good friend of yours."

An understatement, but Ian saw no reason to explain in more detail. "Yes, he was."

"What... how...?"

"How did he die?" Ian prompted. Bastian nodded. Ian steeled himself against a wave of grief before answering, "He died to save my life. You had nothing to do with his death."

Bastian rubbed a hand over his mouth, a far more adult gesture than to be expected of the thirteen-year-old Bastian now appeared to be. He'd grown yet again, his chubby face now leaner, his shoulders broader than before. "How... why did I destroy the *Sea Witch*?" he asked, tensing as if girding himself against the answer.

"I can only tell you what I saw," Ian answered carefully. "You and Rider—"

"We were in love."

"More than that," Ian said, hoping his surprise at Bastian's bold reply wasn't entirely obvious. "You were bondmates. Pledged to each other."

Tears filled Bastian's eyes. "Was he a good man?"

"Aye. And the finest captain I knew."

"I can't remember him." Tears now spilled over Bastian's cheeks. "I should be able to remember him. I want to remember."

Ian sighed and got to his feet. A moment later Bastian sobbed against his chest.

After seeing Bastian safely back to the *Chimera*, Ian held Taren in his arms as they lay in bed. Ian's relief at returning to the *Phantom* was tempered by thoughts of Bastian and Rider, and of the incredible loss Rider's death was to all of them.

“I don’t understand it,” he told Taren as Taren stroked his hair. “How could he forget a love so deep?”

Taren kissed his cheek. “I’ve wondered the same. Perhaps that is the way of the Anuki. At least Bastian has you to tell him about Rider.”

“And you,” Ian pointed out.

“Aye. Although perhaps my stories will need to wait until he ages a bit.” Taren replied.

“The way he’s changing, that might not be so long now.”

“He’s grown nearly an inch this week,” Taren agreed. “And what we don’t see outwardly.... He’s nearly a man.”

“And you,” Ian began, “would you wish to forget the past, if you could?”

“The dreams?”

“Yes.” Ian knew Taren must also be thinking of Owyn’s death on the steps of the temple.

“No.” Taren’s tone brooked no quarter. “I wouldn’t want to forget that, or anything else of our past.”

“I’m glad.” Ian rolled onto his side and leaned in to claim Taren’s lips. “And I’m glad to be back aboard with you.”

TWENTY

“WHAT WILL you do after we reach Derryth?” Bastian asked a few days after they’d left the Gateways. “Will you make your home with the Ea in the new colony?”

“Why would I want to do that?” Odhrán answered as he pulled a heavy wool jacket from his bed and began to put it on.

“You can transform like them,” Bastian said. He’d never seen Odhrán transform; Bastian had no doubt heard tell of his ability from some of the crew.

Bastian grinned at Odhrán. Far too charming a grin, full of the promise of youth. Had Bastian grown taller still? They’d had to buy him new clothes before they’d departed the Gateways, since he’d outgrown the clothing Odhrán provided. His hair, too, had grown since they’d left the Eastern Lands. It now brushed the tops of his shoulders and regularly fell into his eyes when he spoke animatedly.

Bastian took Odhrán’s hand as he’d often done, but this time Odhrán pulled away, suddenly conscious of how close Bastian stood to him. “You’ve always enjoyed my touch. Why do you avoid it now?” Bastian asked, his expression a mixture of sadness and confusion.

“I must be going,” Odhrán answered quickly. How could he possibly explain to Bastian that he no longer trusted himself with Bastian’s affection? “I told James I’d assist on the night watch.”

“May I help?” Bastian asked, clearly hopeful.

“There’s no need. You should rest.”

Bastian’s face fell. “Will you return tonight?”

“I doubt it. I’ll see you in the morning. Rest well.” Odhrán left the cabin without looking back.

The next morning Odhrán found Bastian asleep in his nest of pillows. Seeing Bastian curled up, his feathered wings covering his bare chest, reawakened the warring emotions within Odhrán. He'd become used to the small boy with his endless curiosity and sweet affection. And although he had no interest in Bastian save as his protector and teacher, whereas he might once have petted Bastian's head as he slept, Odhrán now hesitated.

Bastian's eyes fluttered open and he stretched his wings, dislodging a tiny book from atop the pillows. Odhrán stooped to retrieve it, then realized it was a book of erotic poetry he'd found at a small bookseller in Xiat. He'd never been embarrassed to read about the more intimate aspects of love, but he'd purchased it primarily because of his love for poetry and for the delicately painted illustrations.

"Where did you find this?" he demanded.

"On the shelf with the other books," Bastian answered sleepily. "I should have asked you if I could borrow—"

"You're far too young to be reading this." Odhrán placed the book in his inside jacket pocket.

"Young?" Bastian looked at him without understanding. "But you yourself said that I'm probably as old as you, perhaps older. Is there something wrong with the book?"

Odhrán cursed himself for having answered Bastian honestly about his age. "You're a child. You shouldn't—"

"I'm not a child," Bastian retorted, his face reddening as he spoke. "Even in human years, I'd be considered a man. Taren told me the other day I looked as though I was thirteen."

"You know nothing of what it means to be of age." Even as he spoke the words, Odhrán knew this was untrue.

"If I know nothing," Bastian replied between clenched teeth, "then you are to blame for not teaching me."

"I... what?"

Bastian climbed off the pile of pillows and rounded on Odhrán. "Are you afraid?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Odhrán answered.

"You *are* afraid. Although I have no idea what of." In his anger, Bastian opened his wings to their full span, hitting the nearby table and sending a spyglass and several more books onto the floor.

"You're young. Innocent. You know nothing of the world and its

dangers.” Odhrán realized with surprise that his shoulders had tensed as he spoke. He could still imagine Luka pinned to the wall by blades of ice, blood spreading from the wounds and turning his white tunic crimson. He could still hear Luka’s words. *You deserve far worse than being the king’s plaything. I should have fucked you on the square for everyone to watch, then let them take turns using you until you cried for mercy. Until you bled like the animal you are.*

He’d been innocent once. He’d believed Luka loved him. He wouldn’t let what had happened to him happen to Bastian. He’d protect Bastian, keep him safe from bastards who wanted him for their own perverse pleasure.

“What’s wrong with the poems?” Bastian asked earnestly.

“Nothing.” Of course there was nothing wrong about them. But Bastian knew nothing of the world. Nothing of men’s desires.

“Please, Luka,” he’d begged. “Don’t do this. I love you.”

“Love?” Luka’s harsh laughter still rang in his ears. “You really are pathetic.”

“Luka! No, please, Luka. If I wasn’t good enough, I’ll be better. Please don’t let them take me!”

“Odhrán?” Bastian was looking at him with obvious concern. How long had he been standing there wallowing in his memories?

“Regardless of what you think,” Odhrán said quickly, hoping to cover his lapse, “you’re too young.”

“Then I don’t deserve love?” Bastian demanded.

“That’s not what I meant,” Odhrán said. “What you’ve read in the book... that isn’t love. That is desire.”

“Desire?”

Odhrán shifted from one foot to the other, keenly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. He had once thought he understood the difference, but Luka’s betrayal had left him bereft and doubting himself. Even now, centuries later, he still doubted himself.

“Desire,” Odhrán began cautiously, “is born of the body. Love grows from the heart. They are intertwined, and yet separate.”

“Separate? As in a mother’s love for her child?” Bastian asked.

“Aye.”

“But the bond between Taren and Ian,” Bastian said. “That is desire?”

“That... that is more than desire. It is love bound with desire.” Why

could he not explain this as he should? *Perhaps because you don't understand it yourself.*

Bastian nodded and brightened. "I do not love you as a parent. I love you as Taren loves Ian. Love and desire. My body feels warm when you're near. My heart beats harder."

"No," Odhrán said too quickly. "You're a child. You do not feel desire —"

"Then when may I have love as Taren and Ian do?" Bastian's solemn expression told Odhrán he meant the question in earnest. "How long must I wait? How old must I be so that I may have that love?"

"I don't... that sort of love isn't something someone obtains just because of age." He was doing a terrible job of explaining it. *And this surprises you? You who swore never to love again?*

"I love you, Odhrán," Bastian said gently.

"You love me as a child might love a father." Odhrán spoke the words as much for himself as for Bastian.

"No." Bastian's cheeks flushed crimson. "I love you as Ian loves Taren."

"You don't love me. You appreciate what I've done to help you, you —"

"I love you," Bastian repeated. He walked boldly up to Odhrán and leaned in for a kiss.

Odhrán pulled away so quickly, he toppled the rest of the books from the shelf.

"Captain?" someone outside the cabin asked. "Is everything all right?"

"Perfectly all right," Odhrán replied. "No need to be concerned."

"What have I done wrong?" Bastian asked. "Should I not have spoken the truth?"

Odhrán shook his head. He'd never been faced with anything—with anyone—quite like Bastian. Bold, and yet naïve in the ways of men. Wanting something Odhrán couldn't give him. "No."

"Then why do you push me away?"

Odhrán pulled the book from his jacket and set it on the bookshelf. "This isn't about love," he said. "I understand that you're curious. And someday, perhaps, you'll find someone who can show you the ways of love between adults."

“Someone?” Bastian asked. “Why can’t that someone be you? Or is that what you fear? That I might tempt you?”

“No. Of course not.” He’d promised himself he wouldn’t lie, and yet he’d done just that.

Bastian picked up the book of poetry and, opening the book, read, “Fair as you are, with the smooth bend of your lips pressed to my desire, I can do nothing but fall. With every caress of your tongue, I sway with the heat of my hunger, unable to do more than obey. And as I fill your mouth with my—”

“Stop!” Odhrán shouted.

“Why must I?” Bastian set the book down and glared back at him, his face red with anger. “Because you wish me to remain the child you brought aboard? Because you can’t bear to look at me now that I’m no longer that docile brat?” Bastian’s eyes glowed deep green as they filled with tears. “Because you cannot bring yourself to love me in that way?”

Odhrán stared, openmouthed. “No. Not that. But...”

“But you no longer wish me to stay at your side?”

“I never said I—” Odhrán began.

“You’ll tolerate my presence here?” Bastian wiped his eyes and furrowed his brow.

Odhrán had never intended this to go so far. Of course he’d wanted Bastian to remain with him in his cabin aboard the *Chimera*. But if Bastian was going to stay with him, he’d need to live by Odhrán’s rules.

“I wish to learn about love and desire,” Bastian said.

Odhrán struggled to contain his annoyance as the temperature in the room began to drop. “You will wait until you are older. Until it is—”

“I’m not a child. I will do as I please. If you will not teach me, I will find another teacher.” Red and orange swirled around the deep green of Bastian’s eyes. Heat radiated from Bastian’s skin, counteracting the coldness of the room.

Odhrán narrowed his eyes. “You’ll obey.”

“Obey? I’m not a slave to you or any man,” Bastian said. “I can go where I want, whenever I want. Or do you think you have a right to keep me here?”

“I didn’t—”

“I won’t stay where I’m not wanted.” Bastian spun on his heels, sending feathers flying about the cabin.

Odhrán opened his mouth to speak, but Bastian was gone before he could even form the words. The next thing he saw was Bastian, wings spread, silhouetted against the sunrise.

Leaving? Odhrán's chest ached and his throat constricted. *He can't leave. I can't....* Odhrán's sense of dread faded as Bastian circled several times, then landed on the deck of the *Phantom*. Odhrán closed his eyes and repressed the memories of his time with Luka once again.

He's just a boy, regardless of how many years he's lived. Odhrán would not take advantage of his youth, even if it meant keeping his distance until Bastian had rid himself of his misplaced affections.

Up on deck a short time later, Odhrán ran a hand over his sodden braid and gazed out over the gray sky. In the two weeks since they'd left the Gateways, the sun had never shone and the squalls that dogged their passage kept the crews of the *Chimera* and the *Phantom* on edge.

Odhrán didn't fear the storms, nor was he troubled by them. His dark mood had little to do with the heavens and far more to do with his increasingly tension-filled relationship with Bastian. Odhrán had thought that after Bastian returned to the *Chimera*, life might return to normal. Instead, he seemed incapable of doing anything right in Bastian's eyes.

He'll be fine without me. And I without him.

TWENTY-ONE

“BASTIAN?” TAREN looked up from the wheel as Bastian alighted on the *Phantom*’s deck. Then, seeing Bastian’s tear-streaked face, he asked, “Is everything all right?”

“Fine.” Bastian tucked his wings and shivered.

Ian, who’d been making his way from his quarters to take over the watch from Taren, pulled off his jacket and draped it over Bastian’s shoulders.

“Thank you,” Bastian mumbled, clearly embarrassed.

“Does Odhrán know you’re here?” Taren asked as he yielded the wheel to Ian.

“Yes.” Bastian looked at his feet, then back up again. “I’ve come to ask if I can serve aboard the *Phantom*,” he said. “At least until we reach Derryth. I’ll do whatever you need me to. I’ve learned how to work the lines, and I know how to—”

“We’d be happy to have you serve aboard,” Ian said. “But won’t Odhrán object?”

“I am *not* a slave,” Bastian blurted angrily. “Am I not free to choose where I serve?”

Ian met Taren’s gaze, hoping to glean some understanding of what had prompted Bastian’s outburst. “Of course you’re free to choose,” he said.

“Let’s get you some breakfast and warm you up.” Taren put his arm around Bastian’s shoulders. He smiled back at Ian, then disappeared with Bastian at his heels.

“Trouble?” Renda asked as he joined Ian a few minutes later.

“I’m not sure. If I were to guess, I’d say Odhrán and Bastian had a bit

of a tiff, although what about is anyone's guess." Ian recalled his own adolescent rebellion.

"Indeed. A lovers' quarrel?"

"Lovers?" Ian shook his head. "Hardly. More like a recalcitrant child who won't mind his parent."

Renda raised his eyebrows. "Am I the only one who sees it, then?" he asked.

"And what do you see, old man?" Ian asked, happy to see a flash of irritation on Renda's face.

Renda shook his head and muttered, "Goddess only knows what I must tolerate for the sake of our people." He let out a long sigh. "Adolescent worship. Infatuation."

"You think—?"

"I *know*. I'm an empath as well as a healer, if you recall." Renda crossed his arms over his chest, and the corner of his mouth quirked upward.

"I had no idea Bastian thought of Odhrán that way," Ian said. But as he said this, he recalled the look of devotion on Bastian's face as Odhrán sailed them through some of the roughest storms. He'd watched as Bastian learned by imitating Odhrán's manner.

"Nor does Odhrán, apparently."

"Odhrán's far too old for—"

"For a boy who isn't a boy?" Renda replied.

"Should I send him back to the *Chimera*?"

"No." Renda smiled once again. "Bastian needs time to understand, as does Odhrán. Perhaps apart they will come to a mutual understanding."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Ian said.

"Me?" Renda nodded. "Better than thinking about what might await us on our return."

"You still believe Seria and the islanders will attack Callaecia."

"Aye. If Seria's in league with Derryth's king, he'll strike sooner rather than later, before we can cement our own alliances." Renda rubbed the back of his neck and gazed out over the waves. "Do you believe this king—Eiran—might be inclined to assist us?"

"Astinya's history of war still festers like a communal wound for his people," Ian said. "They cling to their neutrality."

"Penance?"

“I suppose. From what Taren saw at the ancient colony, their warmongering may have been the reason our people fled the Eastern Lands.” Ian thought of his parents and Taren’s, who had died in the Ea civil war. “I can’t blame Eiran’s people for fearing what might happen should they renounce their pacifist ways.”

“There are times when war is the only choice.”

“You believe that’s the case here.” Ian believed it as well, though he hoped he was mistaken.

“Aye.” The dark circles beneath Renda’s eyes appeared more pronounced, although whether from the weight of the conversation or the storm clouds above, Ian wasn’t sure. “Much as I wish otherwise, some of our kin will die before this ends.”

Ian shivered. The rain, which had abated overnight, began to fall once more.

TWENTY-TWO

THEY ARRIVED in Raice Harbor three days later, exhausted and irritable from the constant rain and wind. Even Taren, who loved storms, found no joy in the unforgiving gray skies and the icy winds. Sometimes, when his spirits were low, Taren climbed the mizzen and explored the power of the stone. He'd gotten quite good at shifting the winds to favor the sails, but he was unable to affect the poor weather that dogged them. Perhaps there was a limit to the reach of his powers, even with the stone's help, and a colossal storm was not something over which he exerted much influence.

Since neither Ian nor Odhrán was sure of his plans, they provisioned both ships in Raice Harbor before making their way to Callaecia. They'd deliver the rune stone to Vurin and then decide whether to remain in Derryth. In spite of Taren's conviction that the goddess wished the Ea to resettle the abandoned colony in the Eastern Lands, he too felt the weight of weeks spent at sea and the knowledge that the Ea they had hoped to find had left millennia before.

After the last of the launches made landfall in Callaecia, a bedraggled Taren pulled on a pair of dry socks, donned his soggy boots, and contemplated the steady drizzle from the doorway of the guesthouse.

"Vurin will wait," Ian told Taren as he wrapped his arms about Taren's shoulders.

"I can't," Taren replied as he turned and met Ian's lips. "I'll sleep better once I've said my piece." He hoped he would. The journey back to Derryth had taken a great deal out of him, and his dreams had been plagued with a mixture of memories and nightmares that had left him awake and breathless on more than a few occasions.

"I'll be here waiting." Ian cupped Taren's cheek tenderly.

Taren put his hand over Ian's. What would he do without Ian's

strength to keep him moving forward, knowing what might come?

“WELCOME BACK.” Vurin opened the door to his home and gestured Taren inside a few minutes later.

“Thank you.” Taren knew Vurin must sense his flagging spirits. “I’m only sorry the news isn’t better.”

Vurin embraced Taren warmly. “You have done far more than I asked of you. I couldn’t be more pleased.”

“Pleased that I recovered the stone?” Taren hardly felt like celebrating their success. They’d lost too much along the way.

“The stone is just one piece of our past, and a tool to help us secure the future,” Vurin acknowledged as they sat before a roaring fire in the small library at the rear of the house. “I want to understand what else you learned.”

“How did you...?” As he often did when Vurin sensed his emotions, Taren felt keenly uncomfortable.

“You’ve changed, Taren. You know what you must do.” Vurin smiled as he poured them drinks from a glass decanter and handed one to Taren. “Tell me. What did you learn on your voyages? What sense do you make of what you discovered in the Eastern Lands?”

“The ancient colony,” Taren began, knowing that Ian had given Vurin only the basic facts of their discovery. “I had hoped we’d find others of our kind there.”

“Ian said you believe the colony was abandoned thousands of years ago.”

“The Ea who fled the colony came here,” Taren said with conviction. “The carvings in the cave you showed me—many of the buildings are the same as those I saw in the Northern Territories.”

“I guessed as much,” Vurin said wistfully. “But that discovery doesn’t surprise you, does it?”

“No.”

“You’ve come to understand the goddess’s plan for us.” Vurin leaned back in his chair, his face radiant.

“You knew all along we belonged back there, didn’t you?” Taren countered. The realization that Vurin wasn’t surprised by any of this didn’t anger him, as it once might have.

“I didn’t know what you’d find at the colony, or whether you’d find it at all,” Vurin explained. “But the truth of where we were meant to live?” He nodded. “Aye. I’ve known that for some time now. It’s the reason I left the island and I encouraged others to follow me.” He took a sip of his wine and sighed. “Ea’nu is a prison to our people. Unless they look beyond its shores, they will never see the truth.”

“Then it’s true. You intend to return to Ea’nu.”

“I’ve always intended to return to the island,” Vurin replied.

“You wish to use the stone against the Council.” Taren pulled the rune stone from underneath his shirt and held it out, but Vurin shook his head.

“No. Surely you must know I never intended the stone for myself,” Vurin said. “Even if I could wield it, which I’m quite sure I could not, I would never use it against our people.”

Taren relaxed a bit to hear this. Not that he’d have been disappointed to give the stone up—it still frightened him, although he wasn’t sure why. “You said you believed I am its wielder.” He closed his fingers around the stone and felt it pulse against his skin.

“Yes,” Vurin agreed. “But far more than that. I believe you are the person for whom it was created.”

“Why would you believe it was created for me? The stone has been in existence for as long as our people can remember.”

“Aye. But it’s rarely been used,” Vurin pointed out. “Even in your visions, Owyn never used the stone to defend himself or our people. Don’t you find that odd?”

“I don’t know.” Taren remembered the vision of Owyn taking the stone into his body. “Why would Owyn have bonded with it if he was never meant to wield it?”

Vurin shrugged. “Perhaps to hide it from those who coveted it. Or perhaps the stone sometimes requires a host to maintain its earthly form. We may never know. What I do know is that the stone wasn’t created for Owyn or Treande.”

“But you’re the one who’s supposed to lead us,” Taren protested.

“My time as leader is coming to an end.” Vurin’s eyes bespoke kindness and understanding, but Taren saw truth in them. The truth he already knew. He tightened his jaw and shoved the stone back under his shirt.

“It’s time for you to lead, Taren,” Vurin said. “And time for you to

face your fear.”

TWENTY-THREE

IAN AWOKE when Taren slipped into the bed and wrapped his arms around his waist. He pressed against Taren's naked body and sighed. "How did it go with Vurin?"

"He doesn't want the stone."

"You sound disappointed," Ian said. He'd hoped Vurin would take the stone from Taren, although it didn't surprise him that he hadn't. Vurin's motives clearly ran deeper than just recovering the stone.

"Not disappointed," Taren replied. "Just...."

Ian turned to face Taren. "Sad."

Taren nodded. "I don't know why. I suppose I hoped that this would end the goddess's use for me."

"But you knew that wouldn't happen."

"Aye." Taren pressed his lips together, his eyes not quite focused on Ian. What was he thinking about? Ian wished he might share Taren's dreams so he'd better understand. But when he asked, Taren always refused.

"He told you something else," Ian prompted. He sensed this too—an inevitable truth he had already gleaned.

"Yes."

"You will make a fine leader." Ian smiled and hoped his own fear was not completely obvious. He would not stand in Taren's way. He would stand with Taren.

Taren chuckled. "How often I forget that you understand more about me than I do myself."

“Owyn, too, understood that Treande was meant to lead his people,” he said in an undertone. “The little I’ve felt about my past tells me this.”

“Knowing Treande feared it as I do gives me a strange sense of comfort.”

Ian drew Taren against him, wrapping his arms around Taren’s back and pressing his lips to Taren’s neck. “There’s one difference,” he whispered against Taren’s soft skin. “I will be at your side this time.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” Ian nipped gently at Taren’s earlobe, then drew it into his mouth to Taren’s stuttered breathing. He pushed Taren so that he lay flat on the bed, then straddled his thighs. He needed to see Taren’s face. He could always sense Taren’s emotions in his warm brown eyes.

Taren’s features brimmed with love as he surrendered to Ian’s ministrations. If Ian had learned anything since finding Taren, it was that he had little control over what that future would bring. He would live in this moment, knowing there might not be another. And if by chance they survived this, he would devote his life to loving Taren.

Ian leaned down and captured Taren’s lips, then pressed his tongue into the warmth of Taren’s mouth. So familiar, Taren’s taste and the scent, yet each time that Ian lost himself in Taren, he felt as though he learned something new. Even now, he sensed Taren’s fledgling self-confidence strengthen. Taren no longer ran from his past, nor did he fear he might lose himself in his connection to Treande.

Taren pulled Ian closer, deepening the kiss. He ghosted his fingers over Ian’s chest, causing Ian to gasp as he pinched one nipple, then the other. Taren sat up and followed his fingers with his tongue and teeth. Ian threw back his head and sighed as Taren nipped and licked over and over.

“You’re ruthless,” Ian hissed as pain and pleasure combined to rouse his more primal instincts. Much as he loved this, he longed to transform and let Taren have his way with him under the water. He wondered if Taren felt the same.

Taren grabbed him roughly and pulled their bodies together so their chests touched. Something caught between them and pressed into

Ian's breast. The rune stone. Ian tried to pull away, but his initial discomfort faded as the stone warmed, sending pulses of heat through his body.

"What...?" Ian shivered with pleasure. He met Taren's gaze. Taren appeared just as surprised as he.

Taren took the stone from under his shirt and turned it over a few times. Ian instinctively reached to touch it but stopped himself only inches away. "It's all right," Taren said. "I think it wants you to touch it."

Ian gingerly reached a single finger toward the stone.

"Owyn! Goddess, when you touch me like that..."

Ian blinked as he pulled his finger away, then glanced at Taren again. "Did you hear that?" he asked. He hadn't even touched the stone.

Taren nodded and said, "Touch it."

"Are you sure?"

"I... yes. I don't know how, but I know it won't harm you," Taren explained. "It... it seems to know you. And it seems to want to show you something of our past."

Ian heard the stone's call, although he'd hardly have touched it without Taren's permission. Taren held the stone out to Ian, who clasped his hand around both it and Taren's hand. The room faded, and Ian found himself underwater as he brushed his wrist against Taren's tail. No. Not Taren's skin. Treande's.

"Owyn! Goddess, when you touch me like that, my mind goes soft."

Owyn laughed and drew Treande closer, gently fixing the barbs of his wrists on Treande's slippery skin to keep him from gliding away.

"Useful things," Treande said on a moan. Owyn knew he wasn't thinking of using the barbs to defend against sharks.

Really? Owyn stroked his wrist over Treande's tail.

"That's not fair! You know my tail is ticklish."

Owyn worked his way down to Treande's tail flukes as Treande undulated, trying to escape his grasp. He released Treande just as a wave broke above them, sending them both spinning away from the shore

in a cloud of bubbles.

Before Owyn could recover, Treande grasped his waist, and Owyn heard silvery laughter in his mind. They tumbled deeper, away from the waves, swimming as one through the thick underwater plants until they reached the sandy bottom.

Treande nipped playfully at Owyn's tail, fighting for purchase on the slick surface and finally grasping the base, near Owyn's tail flukes.

"That was my idea," Owyn protested weakly.

Treande let Owyn slip through his arms as he ran his tongue over the smooth surface of Owyn's tail, then pivoted and wreathed his arms around Owyn's waist. He latched onto one of Owyn's nipples and teased it with teeth and tongue.

"Treande..."

Ian awoke from the vision with a start. "Should I be jealous?" he teased.

Taren nibbled on his lip and shrugged.

Ian leaned over Taren and licked his way up to his ear, took Taren's lobe between his teeth, and pulled. Taren shivered. "Much as I like seeing our past," Taren said, "I'd rather spend my time with you in our present."

Taren inhaled a sharp breath, and Ian felt him swallow hard.

"Taren?" Ian pulled away so he could see Taren's expression. Taren's eyes were filled with tears. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Taren smiled, but several tears traced their way over his cheeks.

Ian brushed the wetness away with his thumb and kissed Taren's cheeks and nose. "I know you better than that," he said gently, then smiled. "Tell me what's upsetting you."

"I'm tired." Taren shook his head. "I know it's wrong, but sometimes I wish none of this had happened. I often miss my life on the *Sea Witch*."

Ian nodded. "I understand. Things were a lot simpler for you then." He forced back the thought that Taren would have been better off not meeting him and the guilt of what had happened to Taren in the Ea

prison on his account.

Taren leaned in and kissed Ian, then said, "I wouldn't trade meeting you for the world."

"I know." Ian sighed. "I really do. I just wish—"

Taren claimed Ian's lips again, drawing Ian against him in a crushing embrace. "We can't change the past," he whispered. "But we can look to the future." He pushed Ian onto the bed and got up.

"Where are you g—?"

"Shhh," Taren said, grinning wickedly. He slowly untied the collar of his shirt and drew it over his head.

"Much better." Ian licked his lips and his groin pulsed with heat.

Taren undid his belt and pushed down his trousers and undergarments. He stepped free of them and quirked an eyebrow as if considering what he might do next.

"Get back here," Ian growled, knowing Taren would do what he wished and in his own time.

"I think not." Taren traced his fingers over his neck, then pressed them to his lips and sucked playfully on them.

"Goddess. You're torturing me!" Ian's cock ached, though he enjoyed Taren's teasing.

"Come here," Taren said, "and I might do just that."

Ian climbed out of bed and approached Taren warily. Taren didn't hesitate but pinned Ian's arms against the bulkhead and held him there while he licked one tan nipple, then the other. Ian whimpered as Taren pressed his thigh against him, pinning his hard cock. Blissful torture.

"Leave your hands where they are," Taren ordered, his expression now unreadable.

Ian complied, shuddering as Taren kneeled before him and took him in his mouth. Ian groaned and fought the urge to card his fingers through Taren's silky hair. Taren ran his tongue over Ian's slit, coaxing forth a pearly drop of liquid. He looked up at Ian and licked his cockhead again for good measure.

"Taren." Ian's hesitation and fear fled with the onslaught of Taren's ministrations. When Taren took his cock deep in his mouth, Ian pressed

farther inward and closed his eyes as Taren sucked on him. Teeth and tongue combined, bringing Ian crashing closer to his limit, but right before he thought he might lose control, Taren wrapped lithe fingers around the base and squeezed.

“Not so soon,” Taren warned after releasing Ian. “Much as the idea of teasing you until you beg me for release sounds appealing, I’ve got my heart set on feeling you inside of me.”

Ian moaned.

“Bed,” Taren announced as he pointed to the sheets. “Now, Captain, or I might just throw ye overboard and leave ye to the sharks!”

Ian laughed but did as he was told, settling onto the sheets and gazing up at Taren with a barely repressed smirk.

“What’s so funny?” Taren said. “Do ye think me jests?”

“Not at all. I’d far rather be ravished by you than tossed to the sharks.”

Taren appeared to consider this. “All right. Ye be smarter than me thought.” Taren climbed on top of him and reached for the bottle of oil, but instead of slicking Ian’s cock, he proceeded to rub the oil over Ian’s chest. The sweet fragrance of kelflowers filled the room, and the oil heated with Taren’s touch.

“I’d gladly be your captive,” Ian said, “especially if—” Words failed him as Taren found his cock and rubbed the oil over it with firm but insistent strokes.

“Lost yer tongue, have ye?” Taren said with a self-satisfied smirk. “Good. Ye talk too much, Captain.”

Ian knew better than to speak.

“Aye. That’s the way I like ye.” Taren pulled on Ian’s cock, and Ian growled in response.

Ian drew a stuttered breath and closed his eyes.

“Keep yer eyes open,” Taren ordered. Ian happily obeyed, watching Taren slick his fingers again and begin to work himself open to moans and pants.

“Beautiful.”

Taren pressed his free hand over Ian’s mouth. Ian licked Taren’s

fingers and Taren's cries grew louder. Ian ran his palm over the slicked surface of his chest, then took Taren's cock and worked it as Taren writhed, beads of sweat appearing on his smooth brow. Taren's skin had grown darker in the brilliant sun of the Eastern Lands, and it reminded Ian of the ocean at first light as it called to him with its shadows and shimmering surface.

"How long can you wait?" Ian asked as Taren's breaths grew shallower.

"Not long," Taren breathed as he removed his fingers and settled over Ian's hard length. "Not long at all."

Ian watched as Taren lowered himself over him, pressing until his muscles permitted Ian entry. Taren gazed at him, eyes slightly glassy, his breaths slowing as he relaxed around Ian. He wanted to take Taren and ravish him as he enjoyed being ravished. But he'd let Taren dictate their pace tonight.

Taren grasped the back of Ian's neck and pulled him roughly toward him. Knowing what Taren wanted, Ian moved in tandem with him, driving into him as Taren moved down, causing the bed to shake and Ian's pulse to soar. Ian ground his hips into Taren's, all control evaporating as Taren raked his fingers over Ian's chest, then pulled on a nipple and twisted it around. The sensation of Taren's fingers on him vibrated through Ian's body, bringing him that much closer to his climax.

Taren was right. They wouldn't last long. But Ian didn't mind—in fact, he loved when they gave in to their more animal urges. Ea had never hesitated to embrace their less human needs. Ea were and would always be dual natured, and the pleasure to be found in capitulating to their inner beast was something to be savored.

"I've always been your prisoner," Ian rumbled as their coupling reached a fever pitch. "I've always belonged to you. Heart, soul, body. Only yours."

"Only mine," Taren said as he arched his back and painted his seed over Ian's chest. "Only ever mine!"

Ian's climax made his vision blur, and his body warmed as he grabbed Taren and pulled him down, capturing the stone between them. The room vanished and waves crashed around him, buffeting him in the

surf, his skin sensitive to every bubble that rose from beneath him. He cried out, and in spite of his human form, Ea heartsong filled him like happiness.

“Taren. Goddess, how I love you,” he gasped as he closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of them. He knew he was greedy. He’d take every moment Taren had to offer without complaint. He’d survive if he had this time to remember.

TWENTY-FOUR

TAREN RAN down a narrow street, his bare feet slapping against the cobblestones. Flames rose all around him, consuming the buildings that lined the road and causing his vision to blur with his tears. Desperate, he pulled the rune stone from beneath his tattered clothing and held it out as he urged the wind to bring rain and quell the fire.

“Not this time,” a voice from somewhere nearby hissed. “This time you will perish, as will those you seek to protect.”

“Goddess,” Taren prayed as he focused his heart and soul on the talisman. “Please help me!”

The caterwauling wind protested his command, serving only to fan the flames. The rune stone seared his skin, but he clasped it tighter in his palm.

“You’re weak,” the voice said. “You will fail.”

“I won’t!” he cried as the flames grew closer still, licking his skin. “I can’t fail.”

“They’re already dead, Taren,” the voice chided.

He saw it now—a creature with eyes red as the flames. He heard it laugh as the flames enveloped him.

“Taren?” Ian’s voice, calling him back to reality.

Taren sat up in bed, shaking and gasping for breath. It was only a dream, he told himself. A dream he remembered all too well.

Ian gathered him in his arms as he continued to tremble.

“Thank you.” Taren relaxed in Ian’s warm embrace, his heart ceasing its racing.

“Did you have a vision?” Ian gently asked.

“No.” Taren drew a long breath. “A nightmare. Or perhaps an omen.”

“An omen?”

Taren nodded. “I had the same dream before the battle that claimed Rider’s life. Fire consuming me, and a horrible beast with eyes like rubies.”

“It won’t be the same this time,” Ian said unhesitatingly.

Taren closed his eyes and focused on the heat of Ian’s body against his own.

“Would that I could take your fears and give you some peace in return,” Ian said, holding Taren tighter still.

“I’d happily give them to you,” Taren said in an undertone. “But seeing as I can’t seem to shake free of them, I’ll take your comfort instead.”

IAN’S COMFORT. How Taren needed that now, as they walked into Vurin’s cottage and sat in front of the fire. Three weeks had passed since they’d returned to Callaecia, and each day spent happily in Ian’s arms reminded Taren that he must make a difficult choice.

“Please,” Vurin said, “come inside.”

The soft brush of Ian’s hand against his own calmed Taren’s anxious heart. “Thank you for coming.” Vurin handed them cups of warmed wine. “From your expressions, I gather you’ve a good idea of what we must discuss.”

Taren nodded and sipped his wine. The tension in his shoulders eased with each taste of the liquid.

Vurin took a long drink, then sighed. “I had hoped this might wait a bit longer... that we might be able to take our time and try to reach a truce with the Council, but news from the sentries is not good.”

“Sentries?” Taren asked.

“After Ian and Renda left Ea’nu,” Vurin explained, “we lost the ability to keep track of the Council’s doings. We have been sending our strongest swimmers to learn what they can from outside the magical fortifications.”

“What do you hear?” Ian asked, clearly impatient. Taren didn’t blame him—he too feared for the islanders.

“The volcano has come back to life.”

“The same volcano Treande is said to have calmed centuries ago?” Ian asked.

Vurin nodded. “Aye. Word has it that Seria is readying the ships for

battle.”

“Battle?” Taren gasped. “But the volcano—”

“They fear we’ll take advantage of their weakness,” Ian said darkly. “Seria has likely warned them of this. He’d never believe that we seek to help.”

“The Council would rather engage us than make preparations to see their people to safety?” Taren could hardly believe the Council’s folly.

“Without a spy on the island, we can’t know for sure. Still, they’ve always believed we sought their destruction at all costs. There’s no reason to think otherwise this time,” Vurin replied. “If we approach the island, they will see it as an act of war.”

Taren shot to his feet and rounded on Vurin. “So you’d have us do nothing, then?” He wouldn’t idly sit by and watch the islanders perish. The rune stone responded to his strong emotions, vibrating against his skin as if calling to him, urging him to act.

Vurin met Taren’s gaze and smiled.

“Why do you smile at me when I challenge you so openly?” Taren demanded, at the end of his patience. How could they so calmly discuss the fate of his people when so many lives were at stake?

“What would you have us do?” Vurin parried, his face still bright with pleasure.

“I would have us sail to Ea’nu,” Taren said defiantly. “Plead with the Council to allow us to help if we can. Tell them about the colony and about the goddess’s plan for us. Offer them a future.” Taren’s heart beat hard against his ribs. He would not allow them to sit back and do nothing. He’d

“You...,” Taren said, the realization striking him with particular force. “You *wanted* me to challenge you, didn’t you?” Vurin took a sip of his wine and smiled. “You knew I couldn’t abide doing nothing.”

“You will lead them, Taren,” Vurin said softly.

“I...?” Taren shook his head. “No. I can’t...”

“You can, and you will,” Vurin answered. “This is what you were born to do. You sense this. You *know* this.” Vurin stood and gently touched the place where the rune stone hung beneath Taren’s shirt. The stone warmed again, and a sensation not unlike the heat of the alcohol spread through Taren’s body. He hadn’t expected the wave of calm that followed, nor the undeniable truth in Vurin’s words.

His mother’s voice echoed in his mind. *The goddess has a plan for*

you. Be well, my brave Taren, and know that you're loved.

"I don't know if I'm strong enough," Taren whispered. He knew the truth, yet he still doubted the goddess.

Vurin sighed and smiled at Taren. "Have you considered that the goddess knows what she is doing by asking you to lead your people? I know you don't trust yourself, but do you place so little faith in her will?"

"I... no... I mean, yes. Of course I have faith in her." Taren hadn't considered this truth. Vurin was right. If he believed this to be the goddess's will, then he must learn to trust her choices.

"You're strong," Vurin said, the steel in his voice sending shivers down Taren's spine. "But you must stop fighting with yourself and believe. That stone is not our people's salvation," he added. "*You are.*"

"*You will lead them,*" Ian said and bowed his head. "And I will be at your side to serve you."

"YOU WISHED to speak with me?" Taren asked a few hours later as he stood facing Odhrán on the deck of the *Chimera*. He still felt unsteady on his feet after his meeting with Vurin, but he knew the wine was not to blame. He feared he would fail, and that failure might cost the lives of those he cared about.

"Are you all right?" Odhrán asked, no doubt sensing Taren's turbulent emotions.

"I'm fine," Taren said, regretting that he'd not learned to hide his thoughts from Odhrán. Of course Odhrán would sense his unease and know what had transpired with Vurin, but Taren didn't want to discuss it. He felt too raw, too on edge to put his thoughts into words. "We can speak of it another time."

Odhrán eyed him warily. "I don't understand why you continue to doubt yourself," he said. "You're clearly both powerful enough and strong enough of spirit that you can lead them."

Taren suffocated a sigh. What good would it do to argue the point with someone who had lived as long as Odhrán?

"I remember feeling the same," Odhrán said. "Although at the time, I had no inkling of my power."

"You felt insecure when you confronted Luka," Taren pointed out, then immediately regretted saying so when Odhrán's eyes darkened. "Even

knowing that you were stronger than you'd ever realized."

"It's a fair observation," Odhrán admitted. "I did know of my power then."

"Vurin says doubt is a human strength, as well as a weakness." Taren drew a long breath and let his gaze wander to the setting sun.

"You aren't human." The hint of a smile danced on Odhrán's lips.

This time Taren did not fight the sigh that longed to escape. "Sometimes I wonder if that isn't part of the problem," he said. "I still think as though I'm human. Perhaps if I thought as an Ea—"

"Your strength is in your uniqueness." All traces of levity fled from Odhrán's face. "Your brethren don't understand. They don't see the world as you do."

"Aye." But would the Ea follow him? He prayed they'd not see his belief in the future of their race as an outsider's folly.

"Treande understood his people's connection to the sea," Odhrán said. "But he, like most Ea, took his dual nature for granted. He did not see a different future. He *couldn't* see it."

"You don't believe it a coincidence that I was raised as a human."

"No. Nor do you." Odhrán ran delicate fingers over his long braid and smiled.

"I thought you didn't believe in the goddess," Taren gently teased.

"I never said I did. Call it what you will. Serendipity. Luck. Or the goddess's hand, if you prefer."

"Then your part in it?" Taren asked. "Simply luck?"

"It makes no difference. My part is over." Odhrán walked to the bowsprit, then leaned on it with both hands. He looked much like a siren, with his pale hair and beautiful face. More beautiful than the carvings that graced some of the ships Taren had seen.

"You're leaving."

Odhrán regarded Taren with a spark of surprise in his turquoise eyes. "I do so often underestimate you. I sometimes forget that your soul is nearly as old as mine."

Taren supposed Odhrán was right about this. He'd come to understand that he was *not* Treande. Still, when he allowed his heart to dictate, Taren often felt as though Treande was there at his side, guiding him.

"Well?"

Odhrán nodded. “We sail in a week. I’ve given the Ea crew time to decide if they wish to stay with their brethren. Vurin and the townspeople have offered to take them in.”

Taren heard both hurt and longing in Odhrán’s words. He did not, however, ask Odhrán if he might also stay. The pain of Odhrán’s betrayal at the hands of the Ea nearly a millennium ago still bled like a fresh wound. Odhrán’s place was not with the Ea, although Taren wasn’t sure where that place might be.

“And Bastian?” Taren ventured, knowing the question fraught but sensing Odhrán had purposely failed to bring up the topic of Bastian’s future.

Odhrán’s expression showed nothing but calm resolve, but Taren knew it for the sham it was. “He is free to do as he wishes.”

“Have you told him you want him to stay with you?”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort.” Odhrán appeared indignant, his chin raised defiantly, his face set in a frown.

“You fear he’ll say no.”

“You’re far too much like Treande for your own good,” Odhrán countered.

“But you won’t deny it, will you?” Taren waited a moment, doing his best to keep a straight face. “I only ask that you consider that he might *not* reject your offer.”

At that moment one of Odhrán’s crew trotted onto the foredeck. “Captain, James says we’re—” The man blanched, then said, “My apologies, sir. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“We’re finished,” Odhrán said, his words an obvious challenge to Taren.

Taren inclined his head. “For now. Aye.” *But don’t think I’ll let this rest so easily*, he thought, knowing full well Odhrán would hear. “Captain.”

“Thank you for coming,” Odhrán said. “Please give Captain Dunaidh my best.”

Taren shook his head and stifled a laugh. Ian was definitely *not* the most stubborn man he’d ever met.

TWENTY-FIVE

THE SOUND of explosions broke the silence of early dawn, rousing Ian from a deep sleep. He rushed out of the cottage, pulling on his pants as the cold morning air stung his bare skin. He'd expected the shots to have come from sea—they'd long assumed Seria might attack Callaecia—so he was surprised to see smoke rising from the ridge on the outskirts of the village.

The enchantments!

"What the hell was—?" Taren said as he joined Ian on the grass.

"They're here, just outside the wards," Ian said, his heart beating hard against his ribs, every muscle in his body suddenly tense. "Humans."

"Humans?" Taren's voice did not quaver, although Ian felt his fear. An ancient fear.

"Aye. The king's soldiers, if Seria had a hand in this. Several dozen, at least." Ian frowned, then turned to Taren. "Tell Odhrán, and let those aboard the *Phantom* know. We'll need Renda to assist Vurin on land. If the humans are trying to breach the enchantments, we'll need every bit of magic we can muster to hold them back."

"But even if Seria told the humans where to find us," Taren said breathlessly, "how can they break through the wards without a mage?"

"A good question." The only answer Ian could think of disturbed him more than he cared to admit. "But turnabout is fair play."

"A spy?" Taren exhaled a stuttered breath. "But who?"

"A friend. A fellow crew member. What does it matter?" Ian replied bitterly, thinking of Barra and how he'd nearly killed Taren. "Odhrán once mentioned he'd seen a familiar face in Astenya. For all we know, Seria's spies followed us there."

Taren gazed back at him with weary, cheerless eyes. "And if they destroy the enchantments? What then?"

Ian knew Taren was remembering the last time the humans had invaded their hidden colony and his counterpart, Owyn, had been killed. “This won’t be the same,” he said. “We’re stronger, and Vurin is prepared. Go to Odhrán. Tell him to ready his ship.”

Taren drew a long breath, then nodded and ran toward the water, shedding his clothes as he reached the beach. Ian willed his heart to slow its gallop as he made his way to the center of the village, where townspeople had already gathered to see what was happening. Vurin, his features set in a scowl, met Ian in the town square.

“What are your orders?” Ian asked Vurin.

Vurin met Ian’s questioning gaze and did not blink. “Ready the ships.”

“You mean to leave now? The people aren’t re—”

“Can’t you feel it?” Vurin asked. “News of the volcano erupting. The humans threatening our village. This is no coincidence. We can’t wait until spring. Now is the time if we are to save our people.”

Ian clenched his jaw but did not argue. He felt it too, although he was loath to admit it. He’d hoped he and Taren would have time to make a life here, rebuild the cottage they’d shared when they’d been priests centuries before.

We will survive this.

“I’ll maintain the enchantments while you evacuate the village,” Vurin said. “I’ll rejoin you later.”

“I’ll send Renda to assist you. With you both—”

“You’ll need him aboard the *Phantom*,” Vurin said. “If Seria told the humans about Callaecia, then we must assume there are ships waiting to attack. The goddess is impatient. You must make your way to Ea’nu before it’s too late.”

Ian nodded. “We’ll leave as soon as all the villagers are safely aboard the ships or take to the water,” he said. He had no great hope that Seria and the Council would be persuaded to leave the island, but he knew they must try. “Be safe,” he added. “And return to us as soon as you can.”

IAN CLIMBED aboard the *Phantom* a few minutes later, after reassuring himself that his crew had the evacuation of the townspeople well in hand. Those who could easily transform made their way to the ship by water. The

elderly and the human crew who had come ashore had already begun to board small launches and fishing boats.

“High time you made it, Captain,” Renda said. From his dripping hair and naked body, he’d arrived only moments before.

“Aine!” Ian shouted. The bleary-eyed boy was struggling to help some of the larger men turn the windless to raise the anchor. “Grab blankets and warm clothes for those who need them, then help Caren ready the starboard cannons.”

“Aye, sir!” Aine ran aft and disappeared down the stairs a moment later.

Ian looked to the stern to see Taren climb aboard. “Odhrán?” Ian asked.

“Readying his ship. He’ll keep any ships lying in wait busy until we get the rest of the villagers aboard,” Taren answered as he took the blanket Fiall offered him.

“Good. Take Fiall and see to the villagers. Aine will bring you dry clothing and blankets.” Ian glanced quickly to the *Chimera*, which had already begun to raise her sails. *Thank the goddess Odhrán chose not to spend the evening in town.* Looking upward, Ian saw Bastian had already climbed the main and was checking the sails.

“Aye-aye.” Taren tossed the blanket back to Fiall, and they disappeared a moment later in the sea of activity on the deck.

Ian took in the preparations, thankful that he’d had the foresight to keep a skeleton crew in place in anticipation of just such an event. They would need every advantage. The human ships awaited them beyond the safety of the cove. He thought of Vurin alone at the edge of the city and prayed he might make it to the water. *Don’t die, old man. Your people still need you.*

TWENTY-SIX

TAREN HELD his hand out to a young woman carrying a small child on her hip and helped her over the railing. She smiled at him, but her fear was obvious. In the distance, the sound of musket fire echoed across the open fields where the horses galloped, fearful of the noise.

Such a beautiful place. Taren's heart ached to know that he'd never see Callaecia again. He drew a long breath and offered the woman, Kari, a reassuring smile as he wrapped her and her child in warm blankets. "Fiall will show you to a place below where you can rest," he said.

"Will they come for us?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"We'll be underway before they break through the enchantments," Taren said. He didn't add that he expected they might encounter Derryth's navy once they'd left the barriers protecting the harbor behind.

"Come with me," Fiall said, offering the woman his arm.

Taren watched Fiall make his way aft, his steps confident, his shoulders squared. The loss of the *Sea Witch* and Rider's death had changed him from a boy to a man—him and Aine, who had become the closest of friends during the long weeks at sea. *Human and Ea*. What would happen to the bonds cemented between their races if the Ea reclaimed their ocean heritage?

"That's the last of 'em, sir!" one of the men shouted from the ropes as another of Ian's crew helped an elderly man aboard.

"See that they're made comfortable in the hold," Taren told the man, "then report to Renda."

Taren ran to where Ian worked the wheel to break the anchor. "I'll need my best rigger on the ropes," he told Taren. "Odhrán and his crew may find more than they can handle alone once we leave the harbor."

Taren nodded and, after pulling on a pair of pants one of the crew

tossed to him, made his way up the mizzen. The winds were light here in the harbor, protected as they were by the high cliffs. They'd need every hand to get the ship underway and her guns ready to respond.

"Anchors aweigh!" someone called.

The crew struggled to raise the main. "Renda!" Ian shouted.

Renda barked back, "We're working as fast as we can, Captain!"

Taren swung off the mizzen and landed on the main topgallant, working to free the sail, which had caught on one of the ropes. The sail billowed and caught the wind a moment later. Ian pointed the ship farther upwind, and the ship began to move. The crew raised the mizzen in quick succession, and the *Phantom* picked up speed.

Taren made his way to the foresail, where Bastian was already hard at work adjusting the ropes to take advantage of what little wind they had. Taren leaned against the foremast, closed his eyes, and imagined the wind filling the sails. Immediately the wind strengthened, causing his hair to blow about his face. The ship's speed increased and he opened his eyes once again.

On land, several explosions sounded, and some of the trees on the outskirts of the village burst into flame. A few-dozen soldiers charged down the hill toward the village, shouting and firing their weapons into the streets.

Vurin! Taren struggled to see if anyone had made it to shore, but the smoke billowing from the fires blocked his view. All he could do was pray *Vurin* had made it safely to the harbor.

Cannon fire exploded at them from starboard, and Ian turned the ship suddenly to avoid the volley. Taren grabbed hold of the ropes. Two Derryth Navy ships had already engaged the *Chimera*, and a third headed toward them. Taren sensed no *Ea* aboard.

"FIRE THE cannons!" Ian shouted, his command repeated like an echo, piercing the din of nearby explosions. A moment later, the *Phantom's* cannons fired in the direction of one of the Derryth vessels. Wood splintered as the shots slammed into the enemy's side and took out two of her cannons.

He glanced upward and saw Taren nod. The wind's fingers caressed Ian's cheek, ruffled his hair, then raced over the water. The ship closest to the

Phantom slowed markedly, the abrupt shift in the wind causing her sails to luff.

Odhrán, Ian thought, unsure his thoughts would carry, *keep them occupied*.

The *Chimera* tacked a moment later, making her way between the *Phantom* and the navy ships as she fired her guns. "You know what to do," Ian told Renda.

"Aye, sir!" Renda took off at a trot, grabbing several of the men as he ran and taking them to the side of the ship that faced away from their attackers. Renda waved at Ian, then tossed several ropes over the side.

"Fire!" Ian called out. Ian turned the ship hard to port. Two of the shots flew true, one damaging the enemy's mainsail, the other taking out part of the bowsprit. Beyond where *Odhrán* fought the two other ships, Ian spotted two more sails on the horizon. They needed to act quickly or they'd be too far outnumbered to avoid openly using their magic to turn the tide.

Ian glanced over his shoulder and saw Renda and the men climb over the side of the ship, then drop into the water, unseen by the Derryth ships. A moment later, another Ea joined the group: Vurin, judging by his long black hair.

Ian's heart soared. They would need Vurin's strength when they reached Ea'nu. Ian murmured a prayer of thanksgiving.

TAREN SCURRIED down the mast, watching with trepidation as Renda and the others dove into the water and transformed. The memory of his own failed attempt at sabotage was all too fresh in his mind, and he hurried toward Ian. "No enchantments?"

"I'm quite sure Seria provided them with enchantments." Ian turned the ship closer to the wind, slowing her. "But we're better prepared this time. Without a mage aboard to help them, the Derryth ships will not be able to defend against Renda and Vurin's magic. And combined with *Odhrán's* powers...."

"Then why send them after us?" Taren wondered aloud. "If the humans are so easily defeated...?"

Ian knitted his brow and gazed out at the Derryth ships. "This attack was meant to accomplish one thing alone."

"To force our hand," Taren replied. Understanding Seria's plan would not insulate them from the full force of the mages they'd find on Ea'nu.

More cannon fire rent the air. Taren pressed his palm against his chest, capturing the rune stone beneath. He imagined the wind shifting direction and filling the *Phantom's* sails. The ship picked up speed, gaining the weather beam as the enemy faltered and heeled, causing its cannons to point uselessly upward.

Ian grinned at Taren, then shouted, "Aim for her bow! Fire!"

The *Phantom's* cannons roared. The smell of gunpowder tickled Taren's nostrils and set his heart racing once again. Taren feared battle, but he couldn't deny it also thrilled him.

The *Phantom* sliced through the waves and passed the enemy ship to the sound of splintering wood as the cannon fire met its mark. The vessel listed to port, taking on water, her crew's shouts carrying on the wind.

Nearby, the *Chimera* traded volleys with the remaining two ships. Taren ran to the railing as Ian carefully steered the *Phantom* closer, watching in horror as a shot cut across the ropes holding her mizzen sails taut. The sails blew wildly about and the *Chimera* made a sharp turn in response, directly into the path of the attacking vessels.

"No!" Taren shouted. He reached under his shirt and clasped the stone tightly in his fist. Until now, he'd only sent the wind in one direction. But if he continued on this path, the *Chimera* would move faster, but the *Phantom* would reach her too slowly.

Taren imagined the wind's fingers caressing the *Chimera's* sails as well as the *Phantom's*. The stone burned hot in his palm, but he did not release his grip. His body shook with the effort of his magic, and he swayed on his feet. A hand on his shoulder steadied him.

"Bastian?" Taren had expected to see Ian beside him. Had Bastian always been this strong?

"Go on," Bastian urged. "Whatever you're doing, it's working."

Taren nodded and wiped the sweat from his brow. One of the enemy ships now spun about, clearly unable to steer. Renda and Vurin, no doubt.

One more to go! But just as he thought this, he heard shouts from behind him.

"More ships, sir!" Fiall called from his perch atop the foremast. Taren turned to see a half-dozen vessels off their starboard. Brigantines, unlike the ships they now fought. Faster and far more deadly, one such ship had nearly destroyed them near the Gateway Islands.

"Damn," Ian growled.

Taren shouted to Ian, "I can put distance between us, but I fear it'll be rough."

Ian hesitated just a moment, then yelled, "Get Vurin and the others back aboard! Fiall!"

"Aye, sir!" Fiall answered.

"Get all but a few men down from the ropes. Make sure the others are lashed to the masts," Ian said.

"Aye, sir!" Fiall began to shout to the other men, and all but three climbed quickly down the nets.

"You think we can outrun them?" Ian asked Taren.

"Aye," Taren replied. "Unless you believe they know where we're headed."

Ian shook his head. "Whatever fool Seria is for bringing the humans into this," he said, "he's not so insane as to reveal the island's location. No. If we can escape these ships, they will not know where to follow."

"I can do this."

Ian nodded. "As soon as the men are back aboard, do what you must."

"What can I do?" Bastian asked, flushing and breathless.

"Stay with Taren."

"But, sir. If I fly, I might—" Bastian began to protest.

"Stay with him," Ian snapped. "The last thing we want is to give Derryth a reason to pursue us further. Your wings will only draw their attention."

Bastian paled and clenched his fists at his sides, but nodded.

The last of the men now back aboard, Ian turned back to Taren and said, "The *Chimera* first."

Taren nodded. With her ropes damaged, she'd be the slower ship. He pulled the rune stone over his neck and held his hands out, calling the wind to heed him. He imagined their destination and closed his eyes, allowing his mind to follow the breeze east, toward the Luathan Islands, then on to Ea'nu. The world around him fell away as his mind soared on the wind, dancing off the *Chimera's* sails, filling them. He sensed the ship lifting from the water, jumping over the waves as Odhrán adjusted his course to take full advantage of the wind.

Taren called upon the wind to brush the clouds that had formed above them, coaxing the rain onto the ocean until it stung his cheeks. As much as the rain would slow the enemy, it also slowed the *Phantom's* progress. Still

out of cannon range, the Derryth ships began to fire as they continued to gain ground. Bolts of lightning hit the water between them, forcing the brigantines to slow. Taren imagined lightning striking one of the ship's masts, and heard the sharp crack of splitting wood as the mast crashed to the brigantine's deck.

The *Phantom* bucked with each cresting wave. Taren stumbled but found Bastian's steady presence at his side. Shouts from the men told Taren that Ian had adjusted their course to maximize speed but that the enemy ships still gained on them. He could not speed the *Chimera*, maintain the storm, and also move the winds around the *Phantom*.

Goddess, Taren thought, lend me your strength!

The ship shuddered as it fought the wind and waves. Another clap of thunder, closer this time, cut through the heavy clouds and hit the water between the *Phantom* and its human pursuers. One of the Derryth ships headed off the wind to avoid lightning that fell like spears launched from the heavens.

More! Taren coaxed the stone, combining the wind and the storm, causing the seas to rise in higher and higher swells. Bastian opened his wings, flapping them to steady himself and Taren as the ship heaved and pitched.

Power emanated from the bottom of the ocean upward, launching a wave taller than the *Phantom's* main mast. Bastian's eyes widened as the wave rose, then fell over two of the ships that chased them.

"Ian," Taren shouted, "head into the wind!"

Ian appeared to hesitate, then nodded. Taren's heart warmed to know he had Ian's trust. He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, then imagined the waves rising as the wind lifted the *Phantom* much as they had sailed the *Intrepid* back in Astenya.

Some of the crew shouted, then cheered as the ship sped upward, dancing over the crests of giant waves like a stone skipping. Throughout it all, Bastian held Taren, using his wings to steady them. Again and again the waves rose behind them, and the *Phantom* continued to ride the swells, its keel nearly flying from the waves.

"Taren." Taren heard the voice as if from afar, a familiar voice he tried to place, but his exhausted mind could think of nothing but maintaining the wind and the waves. "Taren." Ian's voice. "It's over. You can stop now."

Taren blinked, and the sounds of the world came crashing back. He saw the look of concern on Ian's face, felt Bastian's arms around his waist, and he nodded. The wind guttered and died and, with its last gasp, took the storm clouds with it into the stratosphere. The *Phantom* hit the water with a resounding thud that reverberated in Taren's bones. The ship shook violently, then eased into the waves as if it had never left the water.

Taren staggered back, taking Bastian with him onto the deck. They rolled, stopped a short time later by Ian's feet. Next to Taren stood another pair of feet, bare and dripping onto the deck. Taren gazed up to see Vurin standing next to Ian, wearing nothing but a blanket. The goddess had spared Vurin's life.

Ian and Vurin smiled back at him, both with a look of astonishment. "Are they gone?" Taren croaked, his mouth so dry he barely understood the words himself. Taren's belly growled loudly enough that Bastian giggled.

"Aye. You might say that." Ian helped both Bastian and Taren to their feet, and Taren carefully made his way to the railing. Behind them he saw nothing but open seas.

"The *Chimera*?" Taren mouthed.

"Look for yourself." Ian pointed starboard, where the *Chimera* sailed the same tack as they did, matching the *Phantom*'s speed with ease.

Taren's stomach rumbled again.

"Hungry?" The edges of Vurin's mouth quirked upward and his eyes twinkled mischievously.

Taren nodded, swayed again, and allowed Ian to pick him up and toss him over his shoulder.

"Food, then," Ian said brightly. "And some dry clothes for the old man."

Vurin laughed and shook his head in response.

Ian turned back to the helm and shouted to Renda, "Keep her steady."

"Aye, Captain." Renda grinned back at him, the look of relief on his face obvious.

"And you," Ian said, turning to Bastian.

"Sir?"

"Thank you," Ian said, his voice once again serious. "You did well, boy."

"Aye, sir!" Bastian stood straighter and smiled.

TWENTY-SEVEN

BASTIAN SAT at the bowsprit at sunset, the spray painting his hair as the *Phantom* cut easily through the waves. Taren, who had finished his work on the ropes, watched Bastian for some time. Bastian's gaze seemed fixed on the *Chimera*.

"You must speak with him," Taren said as he joined Bastian on the deck, his legs, like Bastian's, dangling over the edge of the ship. "Tell him how you feel."

Bastian glared at Taren. His features were neither a child's nor a man's, his expression reflecting both vexation and the deep pain of his unrequited passion. Both would pass, Taren knew. But Bastian, thrust back into a youth's mind and body, knew nothing of the sort. Taren needed none of Odhrán's mind-reading ability to understand the confusion Bastian's feelings created in him.

"He sees me as a child," Bastian said in a voice that resonated with hurt.

"He cares for—"

"Who can blame him?" Bastian frowned and gazed over the water. "I *am* a child. I did nothing to help today. I let others fight."

"What? No. You did well in the rigging. You helped Ian and the crew. You helped me as well." Taren released a slow breath. "You kept me from falling overboard so I could do what I needed. You were strong."

Bastian remained silent, although Taren thought he saw him relax, if only a bit.

"Speak to Odhrán," Taren pressed gently. He reached over to ruffle Bastian's hair but stopped himself. *If he's no child, then you shouldn't treat him as one.* "Ian would understand if you chose to go back to the *Chimera*, much as we appreciate your service."

Bastian rubbed his face with his hands and sighed. “Perhaps I was too hard on him,” he said in an undertone. “He has been very kind to me. I’m just not sure he’ll listen.”

Taren offered Bastian a reassuring smile. “He’ll listen.” He wouldn’t offer more hope than that—at the best of times, Odhrán could be willful and full of self-loathing. But perhaps Odhrán could put aside his fears and find a measure of happiness. *Not a thing easily done. For any of us.*

ODHRÁN LEANED over the maps he’d spread over his desk. The only channel deep enough for them to approach Ea’nu led to the harbor town, where the Ea Council and its navy had their headquarters. They could anchor off the southern shore, but the large reef there would make their landing, even with the tiny launches, more treacherous. The small boats would limit the number of islanders they might retrieve.

All well and good if we have time. But there was no telling how much time the volcano would grant them. A day, a week, a month, perhaps more.

Ian was right. They would have to make their stand and fight, if need be. And although Ian hoped the Council might be persuaded that their mission was a peaceful one, Odhrán thought that outcome extraordinarily unlikely.

Odhrán shook his head and looked up from the maps. He’d agreed to help the Ea once again. *Treande, you once told me I had a soft heart beneath a mollusk’s hard shell.* He could almost hear Treande’s reply. “You’ve proven me correct once more, old friend.” The familiar ache of loss that accompanied the memory of Treande seemed more muted now than a year ago. Odhrán didn’t dwell upon the reasons for that change. It did him no good, and thoughts of the people who had created the change within him only led him to worry.

A knock on the cabin door took him by surprise. “Come,” he said.

“Captain.” Bastian peered inside. “Am I interrupting?” His gaze flitted about the room, alighting anywhere but where he might meet Odhrán’s eyes.

“Not at all.” Odhrán hoped he hid his disappointment well. Since he’d come aboard the *Chimera*, Bastian had never called him anything but Odhrán, and the formal title pained him. He’d missed Bastian more than he cared to admit. “Please come inside.”

Bastian's cheeks appeared ruddy from the wind, and he wore one of the shirts the townspeople of Callaecia had sewn for him. Odhrán and Bastian had not spoken for weeks—not since Bastian had left the *Chimera*—but Taren had done his best to make sure Odhrán knew Bastian was safe and well cared for.

Ever curious, Bastian strode over to the desk. His gaze traveled to the smaller of the maps—the one Odhrán had been considering only moments before. “What is this place?” he asked.

“That is Ea’nu.”

“I heard the men speak of a volcano,” Bastian said, his eyes bright and focused on the map. He traced the outline of the island with lithe fingers, clearly fascinated.

“Vurin believes the volcano will erupt again, as it did centuries before.” Odhrán furrowed his brow. “But no one knows for sure if the volcano is truly a threat to the island’s inhabitants. None of Vurin’s spies were able to get close enough.”

Bastian peered thoughtfully at the tiny drawing of the volcano and the swirling smoke that rose from it in red and black ink. “Vila,” Bastian said after a moment.

“Vila?”

“Another volcano. I’m not sure, but I think it’s near where I was born. I remember a story someone once told me—my mother, maybe—about the volcano the Anuki were born from.” Bastian pursed his lips.

“I always thought that was a myth,” Odhrán said. He wondered how much more Bastian might remember of his childhood.

“I don’t think so.” Bastian nibbled his lower lip, then said, “I think Anuki put their eggs there after they mate. Like birds sit on them, you know... to keep them warm?”

“Interesting.” This didn’t surprise Odhrán. That Bastian could have survived under the water, although he was not a water creature, spoke to the Anuki’s resilience.

“Tell me about my people,” Bastian blurted.

Odhrán, taken aback by Bastian’s outburst, stammered, “I—I don’t know much.”

“Please,” Bastian said, his cheeks stained pink, “tell me what you know.”

“You must already know the Anuki are the heavenly brethren to the Ea,” he began. “They can take human form, of course.”

Bastian nodded, his eyes bright with curiosity.

"Anuki may make human love bonds," Odhrán continued. "But they, unlike humans, are said to be immortal." He thought of Rider as he added, "Legend has it they cannot survive the death of a bondmate."

"They... die?" Bastian said. "But you said Anuki are immortal."

"Aye." Odhrán tried to push aside the image of Bastian shot through the heart with an icy blade as he tumbled from the sky to his death. *You did what you had to do.* He inhaled slowly as he let the memory fade, then explained, "Anuki die to be reborn again."

"With no memories of what went before?"

"If you're asking whether all Anuki forget," Odhrán replied, "I do not know, although it's a good guess."

Bastian's lips parted and a glimmer of understanding flashed through his green eyes. "Then I.... After Rider was killed...."

"You were reborn as a child."

"How did I die?" Bastian asked.

Odhrán could not bring himself to answer. "Perhaps another time," he said. He'd expected Bastian to protest, but Bastian did not.

"I'd like to go to the High Mountains someday, though not to find a mate." Bastian blushed.

Odhrán schooled his features and pretended to straighten the maps. "So what brings you here?" he asked, keenly uncomfortable and furious with himself for it. He was too old for this! *And Bastian is far too young for your misdirected desires.*

"I... I wanted to apologize," Bastian said. "I know you meant well. That you want what is best for me."

Odhrán nodded quickly. "Thank you."

"I want to help," Bastian said.

"Help?"

"Yes. There must be something I can do other than train with Taren on the ropes." Bastian tensed his jaw and stood straighter. Had he grown yet again? He was several inches taller than Odhrán already, but he seemed even lankier than before. With his youthful face, he still appeared more boy than man.

"There's no need," Odhrán said, waving his hand. Realizing he'd sounded harsher than he intended, he smiled at Bastian.

Bastian glanced away. "I understand that I'm not experienced."

Bastian's shoulders drooped.

"You needn't be concerned about the ship," Odhrán offered in an attempt to reassure Bastian. "We have things under control."

"That's not what I—"

"You'd be best served learning from Taren," Odhrán continued. "When you're ready, I've no doubt you can be of assistance." Bastian had thrived under Taren's tutelage. He'd be better off on the *Phantom*.

"You mean to say, when I am grown," Bastian said. Although Odhrán could not read his mind as he could the Ea, judging by the faint coloring of his cheeks and the tension in his body, Bastian fought to control his temper.

"Yes," Odhrán said, swallowing a sigh, "I suppose that's what I meant." This conversation was not at all going as he'd intended.

"I am not a child in need of coddling."

"No, of course not," Odhrán agreed. He reached out tentatively, meaning to touch Bastian's arm, but Bastian stepped away. "But you have much to learn."

"I see." Bastian paused, appeared to gather his thoughts, then said, "And what if I am capable of more than you'd give me credit for?"

Odhrán considered this. Bastian was no ordinary young man, to be sure. But he was impulsive and naïve, a volatile combination. "In time," Odhrán said, "I've no doubt you will be a fine sailor should you wish to remain aboard the *Phantom*."

Bastian's green eyes flickered momentarily red and orange, and Odhrán sensed something like hurt beneath his steely gaze. "No doubt," Bastian repeated tersely.

The silence grew longer and more awkward. At last Bastian said, "Very well." The resignation in his voice nearly caused Odhrán to wince. He'd offended Bastian yet again. "I'm sure Taren is waiting to teach me something." He stressed the word "teach" ever so slightly, and a muscle in his cheek twitched as he spoke. He bowed, then turned to leave without another word.

Odhrán knew the fault was his. Bastian's words, "I am not a child in need of coddling," rang through his thoughts like a slightly out-of-tune viol. Bastian was no longer the child who needed his protection but a man who—

No. Odhrán would not permit himself such thoughts. He would not become the kind of man he sought to protect Bastian from—one who would take advantage of Bastian's youth to satisfy his carnal desires.

Odhrán stalked to the aft windows, threw them open, and flooded the

cabin with sunlight. In the distance, he saw a winged figure silhouetted against the clouds. He sighed and shook his head. At least with Taren and Ian, Bastian would be safe.

He was just about to turn back to his desk when he realized Bastian had flown over and passed the *Phantom*. Startled, he ran to the window and leaned out to be sure his eyes hadn't deceived him. There was no doubt. Already Bastian had flown a good way beyond.

"Bastian!" Where the devil was he going? "Bastian! Come back!"

Odhrán wiped his mouth with his hand and told himself there was nothing to fear. Bastian would return soon enough, once his anger abated. Then, perhaps, he could tell Bastian that he truly hadn't meant to anger him. Perhaps he might finally tell Bastian the truth.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“WHAT THE devil was he thinking, taking off on his own?” Odhrán hissed as he stormed over to the railing and looked out for the hundredth time.

Taren, who’d swum over to the *Chimera* to help repair some of the damaged ropes, swallowed his own fear for Bastian before saying with the most confidence he could muster, “He’ll return safely. I’m sure of it.”

But now, nearly three days since Bastian had left, there’d been no sign of him. Taren had never seen Odhrán in such a foul temper, or so obviously worried. Odhrán glared at Taren, then headed belowdecks.

“He’s grown attached to that boy,” James told Taren a few minutes later as they inspected the ropes. “The crew knows it too, and they forgive him. They know he’s fearful for Bastian’s safety. Probably feeling guilty too, seein’ as he believes he chased the boy away.”

“Then it’s true,” Taren said. “Odhrán and Bastian fought?”

“Aye. Though when I asked the captain about it, he told me in no uncertain terms that I best not be bringin’ it up with him again.” James ran a hand through his hair, appearing more like an impish boy than the seasoned officer he was. “Had me a son a lot like that boy,” he added. “Has his own ship now. Left the island wantin’ to be on his own. He’ll be back, though. Same as Bastian.”

And if, as Renda and Ian suspected, Bastian had gone ahead to Ea’nu, they’d know sooner rather than later.

“Why are you here?” Odhrán demanded when Taren knocked on his cabin door a few minutes later.

Taren repressed a sigh. “Fine way to greet an old friend.”

Odhrán’s expression softened. “I’m sorry,” he said under his breath. “I’ve been quite a one, haven’t I?”

“You might say that.” Taren sat in front of Odhrán, happily sinking

into the pile of pillows. His muscles ached from the repairs and from climbing the masts, but he hadn't felt this good in weeks.

"He told me he loved me," Odhrán said after a moment's silence. "No doubt my lack of a proper response is what sent him to the *Phantom* all those weeks ago."

"I guessed as much." Taren had seen it in Bastian's face the night he'd shown up on the *Phantom* asking to become part of her crew.

"He's still young."

"He is most likely older than you," Taren pointed out.

"What difference does that make? He's naïve in the ways of men, and he's—"

"What about you?" Taren asked. Odhrán was far too disciplined to permit his mixed feelings about Bastian to rule his actions. There was more to this than Odhrán would admit. Something far deeper.

"I care for him. Like a son. To think otherwise is—" Odhrán paused and shook his head, then leaned back into the pillows. "—dangerous."

"Dangerous. So that's it, then?"

"I don't follow you," Odhrán said without meeting Taren's gaze.

"But you do." When Odhrán's eyes widened almost imperceptibly, Taren added, "Or would you prefer I pretend I don't understand?"

Odhrán shook his head and sighed. Taren knew Odhrán sensed a bit of Treande's spirit in him. *Forthrightness is something Treande and I have in common.* "You love Bastian," Taren said aloud.

"Of course I—"

"Not as a son." Taren raised his eyebrows and waited.

"It doesn't matter," Odhrán said. "I will not use him—"

"As *you* were used?" Taren finished, sure now that he'd guessed correctly. Odhrán's fear grew out of an ancient wound, one that had yet to fully heal.

Odhrán's shoulders tensed and he shot to his feet. "I won't let that happen to him."

"Of course you won't." Taren walked over to Odhrán, who stared down at the maps on the table as if they held the answers to all his questions. "You'll push him away so that he won't have to suffer."

Odhrán looked up and frowned, his angelic face pained. "I... no."

"He will not suffer as you did," Taren said so vehemently that he surprised himself. "He has people who will defend him. People like you

who will teach him the meaning of lo—”

Above decks, the crew’s shouts rang out over the sounds of the waves lapping against the bulkhead. “Captain! Come quickly!”

Taren followed Odhrán as he ran out of the cabin and up the stairs.

“Report!” Odhrán snapped when they reached the deck.

James pointed out over the ocean. “Sir, look.”

Taren’s heart leapt into his throat when he saw Bastian, his wings beating against the breeze as he descended toward the deck. Much as he wished Odhrán would give Bastian more credit for his strength and cunning, Taren had worried about him as well.

Bastian landed, sure-footed, with a graceful skip, then folded his great wings behind his back. His cheeks pink from the wind and his hair tousled, Bastian reminded Taren of a cherub, although he saw a hint of stubborn pride in Bastian’s eyes. *Meant for Odhrán, no doubt*, Taren thought with a barely repressed grin.

Bastian bowed his head once again, then met Odhrán’s gaze. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice full of chagrin. “I angered you.” Bastian’s eyes glittered with unshed tears. A muscle in his cheek twitched. For the first time, he seemed to notice Taren, because he smiled and nodded.

Odhrán appeared truly at a loss, standing so still Taren might have thought him a statue were it not for the slow breaths that caused his chest to rise and fall.

“Where did you go?” Taren asked when Odhrán said nothing.

“To the island.” Bastian glanced at Odhrán, then quickly looked away.

“Ea’nu?” Taren asked.

Bastian nodded.

“But how did you find it?” Odhrán asked.

Bastian shifted from one foot to the other, then rubbed the back of his neck. “The maps,” he said quickly and in a low voice, as if he feared he might be punished for it.

“My maps?”

Bastian flushed to the roots of his red hair. “I didn’t mean to pry. I swear, I—”

“You read the maps?” Odhrán didn’t appear angry.

“I... I... yes.” Bastian offered Odhrán a shy smile, then straightened and said determinedly, “I told you. I want to help. I thought perhaps if I showed you that I’m not completely useless, you might actually believe

me.”

“I never said you were useless,” Odhrán said, “only that you needed to learn.” Taren thought he saw something like regret in Odhrán’s eyes.

“What did you learn?” Taren asked, anxious to hear more.

Bastian brightened, clearly pleased that Taren believed he might have important information. “The volcano,” he began somewhat breathlessly, “it’s worse than Vurin feared. Some of the houses burned to the ground, and many of the Ea are living near the waterfront. Soldiers walk the streets, as if they fear some of the people might take to the water.” He shook his head. “Several Ea ships—three that I counted—patrol the waters around the island.”

“Do you think they’re waiting for us?” Taren asked no one in particular.

“Seems likely,” Odhrán said, his expression darkening. “But whether they’ll attack unprovoked or listen to what we have to say is anyone’s guess.”

Taren repressed a shiver. He’d long dreaded meeting Seria again, and the thought of what Seria and the Council’s mages might do frightened him. How could they fight without hurting—or worse, killing—those they wished to save?

“I’m glad you made it back safely,” Taren said, shooting a quick glance at Odhrán, who appeared even paler than usual. “I should give Ian and the others this news. Bastian, perhaps I’ll see you aboard the *Phantom* later?” He winked at Odhrán, then made his way to the side of the ship. He’d leave Odhrán and Bastian to their own devices.

TWENTY-NINE

“I FEARED you wouldn’t return,” Odhrán said after he closed the door to the cabin.

Bastian hesitated as he blinked back tears, then ran into Odhrán’s arms. “I missed you,” he said, his breath stuttering as he clung to Odhrán. “I thought you’d be furious with me after what I did.”

Odhrán sighed and shook his head. “Not furious. But I did fear for your safety.”

“If I promise not to misbehave—” Bastian snuffled. “—will you let me stay?”

“You could have stayed regardless.” Odhrán forced back the emotions that welled up within. “I never expected you’d challenge me so. I did not handle it well.”

“I won’t bother you again. I promise.” Bastian pulled away and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. For the first time, Odhrán realized Bastian’s clothes were nothing but tatters and that he shivered with cold.

“Let’s get you some new clothes,” Odhrán said. He knew what Bastian meant by bothering him, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell Bastian he enjoyed his company. He had no right to tether Bastian to him, much as he wanted him to remain. Bastian needed to make his way in the world and perhaps rejoin those of his own kind. He would care for Bastian as he had in the past, and when Bastian had fully matured, he’d encourage Bastian to make his own way.

Bastian pressed his lips together, furrowed his brow, and took the tunic and trousers Odhrán offered him. Odhrán turned away as Bastian dressed, then padded over to the bowl of water by the door to wash his face and hands. The ship’s cook brought dinner a short time later, and Bastian and Odhrán ate on the cabin floor as they had many times before.

“I am grateful to you.” Bastian studied a piece of bread. “You’ve given me so much.” He pulled a piece of crust from the bread, then popped it in his mouth, never looking up at Odhrán.

“You needn’t thank me.” Gods, when had it become so difficult to talk to Bastian? Before all of this, their conversation had been so comfortable. And although Bastian had guided it with his incessant questions, Odhrán had loved answering, even if sometimes he had no answer to give.

They finished their meal in silence, and Odhrán rose to take his place on watch. “I’ll be back in the morning,” he said, half relieved to be leaving Bastian and half regretting that he must. “Get some rest. You’ve traveled far, and you need to regain your strength.”

BASTIAN NODDED and watched Odhrán leave, then collapsed onto the pillows. Odhrán was right—he was exhausted. He felt relieved to be back aboard the *Chimera*, but frustration and emptiness dogged him like a seabird after a fishing boat. Something had changed between him and Odhrán, but he was powerless to do anything to bring back the warmth.

Why? What did I do wrong? He’d wanted nothing more than Odhrán’s affection. Odhrán’s love. His hunger for it permeated every bone in his body.

He’d learned enough to understand that the Anuki lived and died for love. He closed his eyes and imagined Rider, the man who had been his lover. The man he’d... loved. He remembered nothing of it. Nothing of the emotions he must have felt. Nothing, not even a scrap of memory. All he knew about Rider was what other people had told him.

He’d had too much time to think as he’d flown. Days with nothing but sun above him and water beneath him had taxed his partially human body. He’d wondered when he would finally—fully—transform. But more, he’d wondered why he felt compelled to seek Odhrán’s love. He wasn’t sure if it was his body that craved love, or if it was Odhrán who called to him with the promise of it. Hours spent with his own thoughts had given him no answer.

When he racked his mind, bright spots of memory shone. Ancient memories. Ancient faces. His father. His mother. The warmth of the nest where he’d been born. How could he remember those things and nothing

else of his past? Taren had told him that when he'd transformed after Rider's death, he'd appeared not to know his true nature. He feared he would forget this, and that he'd forget Odhrán, who'd cared for him when he could barely care for himself. He feared he'd once again forget Taren and Ian, who had welcomed him in spite of what he'd done when he'd been out of his mind with grief.

Tears slid silently over his cheeks as he nested in the pillows. He would be good. He would keep his distance from Odhrán. He would be strong and he'd help protect the people he'd nearly killed. He owed them that much. He owed them much more.

ODHRÁN RETURNED to the cabin at sunrise to find Bastian curled in a ball amidst the pillows. *The chick in his nest.* He swallowed hard and resisted the temptation to take Bastian's head into his lap as he'd done so many times before.

Sweet Bastian. Would that I knew the right words to tell you.

He pulled off his jacket and tossed it aside, then sat with his back against the wall and closed his eyes. He did not need to sleep, but he wanted to sleep. He needed the peaceful veil sleep offered him. He needed to clear his mind. He needed to forget his traitorous heart.

THIRTY

THEY ARRIVED at the edge of the Luathan islands a day later. From there, they cautiously made their way toward Ea'nu, sailing around several of the neighboring islands so they would not be discovered until they reached the entrance to the harbor. From what Bastian had told them, they knew that the Ea Navy expected them and was prepared to defend the colony.

"There's nothing we can do if the islanders refuse to come with us," Odhrán told Taren, Ian, and Renda as they discussed their plans that evening. "With the warships in the harbor, the best we can hope for is that some of the Ea will take to the water and—"

"We need to persuade the island Council," Taren said, meeting Ian's eyes.

"The Council?" Renda's gaze darkened. "If Seria truly controls them, what hope is there of changing their minds?"

"I'll speak to the Council," Taren said. "Try to convince them to allow us to evacuate the islanders."

Out of the corner of his eye, Odhrán saw Ian draw a long breath. He'd kept his silence, evidently waiting to hear what the others said. Ian struggled to see the broader picture when Taren was its focus, and he admired Ian for his obvious self-control. *We've all changed.*

Renda shook his head. "The Council listens only to Seria. They've only heard his lies. What would you say to them that could convince them otherwise?"

Taren pulled the rune stone from underneath his shirt and held it in front of him. "I'm the wielder. If I show them that I can control the stone's power—"

"It's far too dangerous," Odhrán put in. "They'll take the stone from you

if given the chance. How can we be sure none of them can wield it as well?"

"What alternatives do you offer?" Taren demanded. "Let the islanders perish? Fight Seria's ships again?"

"We may well still have to fight them." Vurin sighed and rubbed his chin. "Even if the Council were to listen, Seria's likely not to heed them. If what we've heard from our spies is true, he controls them as effectively as if he were sovereign."

Taren tensed his jaw and met Vurin's gaze unflinchingly. "Not so long ago, you told me it was time for me to lead."

"Leaders are not required to sacrifice themselves on fool's errands," Odhrán snapped.

"Leaders must take risks," Taren countered, the steel in his voice taking Odhrán by surprise. "How can we convince them we mean to help if we're unwilling to show them good faith?"

"Good faith does not mean sacrificing yourself," Renda put in. "Surely there are better ways than to hand yourself over to Seria."

"I have no intention of handing myself over to him."

"Seria is unlikely to listen to reason," Vurin agreed. "Still, there are others on the Council who may be willing to consider our offer of assistance. Zera, for one, can be quite reasonable. And if we make enough of a show of our good intentions, others may join her opposition."

"Exactly." Taren's eyes blazed with courage.

"I can't allow you to sacrifice yourself," Odhrán said. "To go alone into that vipers' nest—"

"He won't be alone," Ian said. His eyes were for Taren and no other. "I'll be there to defend him."

"You...", Taren began. "You don't oppose this?"

Ian's smile appeared forced. He often doubted himself, although his heart was true. "No. But I won't lie and tell you I don't fear for your safety. If there were some way to negotiate your safe return...."

"We will send a messenger," Vurin said. "The risk is less."

Odhrán nodded. "I'm inclined to agree. Although they might allow the messenger safe passage back to the ship to entice you to come ashore, then arrest you nonetheless."

"There's no need to send a messenger," Taren responded.

He's perhaps more stubborn than Treande was. "But—" Odhrán began.

“It makes no difference. I will go regardless of whether the messenger returns.” Taren released a long breath, then shook his head. “One side must be the first to trust, or we’ll accomplish nothing. I won’t see our people perish.”

Ian took Taren’s hand in his own, then turned to the others and said, “I have faith in Taren’s judgment. If he believes he must do this, I will go with him.”

“Ian.” Taren returned Ian’s tentative smile.

“I’ll hear no more dissent,” Ian said. “We agreed that Taren would lead our people.”

In the end, Taren agreed not to reveal himself as the wielder of the rune stone, although no one truly believed they would extricate the islanders from the Council’s clutches without the stone’s power.

“Much as I wish I could protect all those I care for,” Odhrán said gently, “I’ve realized there’s something to be said for letting them find their own way from time to time.”

Bastian’s expression softened. “Someday, perhaps, you’ll allow yourself the same leeway.”

THE UNEASE that had beset Ian since they’d defeated the Derryth ships nearly a week before had only grown stronger. Ian tried to tell himself he felt anxious because they might have to meet their Ea brethren in battle, but the truth was something more troubling. The coming conflict would forever change his life and Taren’s, should they survive. Taren often reassured him that the goddess would help them sway the hearts of their people and that she wanted them to succeed in their mission to lead the islanders to safety. Still, Ian noticed that Taren never reassured him that either of them would survive whatever trials the goddess had planned for them. He would gladly die for Taren, but he didn’t know if he could go on should Taren die and leave him alone.

“Too much thought will be the death of you,” Renda said as he met Ian at the wheel.

For once Ian didn’t take the bait. He was in no mood for the usual verbal sparring from his quartermaster. “Is the *Chimera* ready?” he asked, glancing to port. Odhrán had set the *Chimera*’s sails for a close haul.

Renda’s dark eyes glittered in the sunlight. Renda never feared battle,

although Ian wasn't sure he enjoyed it either. "Aye. They know what to do."

Ian nodded and looked up to where Taren stood on the foresail, gazing out at the horizon. He'd insisted he wanted to remain on the ropes, in spite of Ian's protests. "I can better sense the wind up there," Taren told him. "And better manipulate it, should you need my help."

"Should the Ea Navy engage us," Ian had told the crew the night before, "we must do everything in our power to avoid harming them. This is not a battle to be won by force. Their defeat is our own."

He'd seen the nervous looks of the crew. Aine and Fiall, the youngest aboard, appeared pale and wary, although they did their best to hide their fear. Many aboard the Ea ships protecting the harbor would be even younger—boys who knew nothing of the stakes of this fight. Seria and the Council would find it far easier to convince those young men of the justness of their cause.

And far easier to kill them in battle. The thought plagued him. They'd already lost so many of their kind. Would they lose more to save the rest?

Ea'nu came into view as the sun shone high in the sky. Ian's heart soared at the sight of the island. It had never truly been his home, but he had spent some happy times there.

"Ships, sir!" one of the men on lookout shouted. The crew, which had been quiet with anticipation, now sprang into action.

"Raise the flag!" Ian yelled over the sound of luffing sails. He turned the ship off the wind to slow her.

White-faced and somber, Aine began to hoist the two-toned flag. Ian had no doubts that the men aboard the Ea ships would know its meaning—that they wished to speak to the Council—but he wasn't the least bit surprised when one of the ships protecting the island launched a round of cannon volleys. They landed far short of the *Phantom*—a warning for them to stay away.

"Hold her steady!" Ian turned the wheel and the *Phantom* caught the wind again. Slowly and surely she made her way toward the threatening ships, dodging the occasional shot as they narrowed the distance between them.

A gust of wind tickled the back of Ian's neck, its touch familiar and reassuring. Taren had grown far stronger since he'd recovered the rune stone. The sound of the ship's hull against the waves changed subtly as the wind danced around them and caused them to pick up speed. At the same time, the other ships slowed. Ian's skin prickled as the island ships

responded with their own power. Even with Taren's gifts, Ian had known they would face the islanders' magic.

"They have mages," Renda said, confirming Ian's suspicions. "At least six of them."

"None of them have magic as powerful as Odhrán," Ian pointed out.

Vurin, who'd been gazing out at the ships, said, "Aye, but Seria has learned his lesson. They're working together this time."

"He knew we'd come," Ian said. With so many mages arrayed against them, they'd be hard-pressed to combat the Ea, even with Odhrán's help.

"Zealots are dangerous enemies," Vurin replied with a black look.

Another burst of cannon fire brought Ian's focus back to the scene at the mouth of the harbor. They would not be able to pass unless they drew the ships away. "Hold your fire," Ian ordered, the command repeated down the line to where the gunners manned the cannons. How much longer could they wait to fight back?

The enormous wave that struck them hard on the port side took them by surprise. The *Phantom* shuddered and rolled to starboard. Water flew upward, then crashed onto the deck with such force that several of the boards cracked. Ian struggled to maintain their course as one wave after another battered the ship. Finally he gave up and turned in to each one to avoid the brunt of it. The ship bucked and pitched, nearly causing several of the men to fall overboard.

"Magic," Vurin confirmed.

Ian felt the familiar vibrations in the air and the tingle of it upon his skin. They'd been prepared for something like this, and he'd ordered all but the Ea to lash themselves to the ship. As quickly as the waves struck the bow, Ian's maneuvers did little to prevent them from being tossed about.

"Ian," Renda warned, "we can't keep this up. Even with the fortifications, the hull can only withstand so much."

"Tell the gunners to keep the ships occupied." Ian turned the ship suddenly. An explosion off the starboard side shook the ship with such force that Ian waited for the inevitable sounds of shattering wood. He breathed a sigh of relief when none came.

Renda grinned back at him, his hands outstretched, the air before him shimmering with power. "Keep going!" he shouted back at Ian, who nodded and turned the ship once again toward the Ea Navy.

Just a wee bit closer....

The wind shifted again. Ian followed it and the ship heeled to port. The first of the Ea ships passed near their bow, and he shouted, “We don’t want to fight!”

Some of the men wore expressions of surprise, but they quickly turned back to their tasks as uniformed officers shouted orders.

Ian turned the ship about, causing several of the sails to snap in angry protest. He felt more than saw Taren and the other men on the ropes fight to maintain their precarious perches. He could almost hear Taren say, “Don’t worry. I won’t fall into the water this time!” They needed to buy time for Odhrán to breach the island’s wards or they would not pass. He wouldn’t dare hope the Ea would lower the enchantments of their own accord.

“Renda! Tell Odhrán we’re ready for him.”

Renda nodded, then drew a long breath and closed his eyes. Another of the Ea ships fired, and Ian turned once again. The cannonballs fell just short of their mark, but the ship heeled her worst yet as another of the waves struck her amidships.

Your turn! The *Chimera* came into view, and Ian headed upwind to slow the *Phantom* once again.

THIRTY-ONE

“NOW!” ODHRÁN shouted as he turned the wheel and overtook the *Phantom*. James took the helm as Odhrán ran to the foredeck. Bastian watched from his perch atop the mizzen, his heart racing, his hands suddenly cold as he felt Odhrán’s power combine with Renda’s to strengthen the wards around the ships and weaken the Ea enchantments preventing their passage. Bastian wondered if he’d ever been in battle, then decided he must have been, at some point, if he was as old as Odhrán believed. And surely he’d been in battle at Rider’s side. Regardless, he still feared for the men he’d come to think of as his brothers.

He’d once asked James if Odhrán was as powerful as Taren, to which James had replied that power was a relative thing. “Each man is different. Each gift serves a different purpose.” Bastian remembered thinking that although James had no powers like Odhrán or the Ea, his strength lay in his calm and loyal support.

The *Chimera* shook. The same waves that the *Phantom* had borne the brunt of before now slammed into the side of the *Chimera* with their full strength. Nearly knocked off his feet, Bastian grabbed ahold of a rope. One of the men slid across the deck toward the convulsing waves. A human, incapable of transforming. “Nestor!” Bastian shouted as he fell to his knees and allowed the angle of the ship to propel him across the slippery deck. “Take my hand!”

Nestor looked at him with terror, thrusting his hand outward to meet Bastian’s. The rope was too short, the gap between them too wide. Bastian allowed it to slip through his fingers until nothing remained but the bitter end. His palm burned with the heat of the friction, but he gritted his teeth and ignored it.

The ship listed farther to port, causing Nestor to slide closer to the railing. Bastian shouted, “Nestor!” and thrust his hand out as far as it would stretch. The muscles of Bastian’s chest burned as they pulled against his ribs, but his fingertips met the other man’s. With a groan and a shout, Nestor grabbed Bastian’s hand below the wrist. Bastian’s joints popped in protest, but Nestor hung on, pulling until he managed to get a hold on Bastian’s wrist to steady himself.

Sharp as the point of a sword, pain lanced through Bastian’s body as his shoulder dislocated. He cried out, then bit his tongue to stifle the sound. Steadily, he pulled up on the rope until Nestor’s purchase was firm. The ship righted itself, and they tumbled toward the center, panting.

“Th-thank you,” Nestor stuttered, his face covered in sweat. “Are you all right?”

His pain too great to respond, Bastian nodded and forced a smile. He thought about what Taren had told him, that Ea could transform and heal their bodies, and he wondered vaguely if the same were true for Anuki.

Could he transform? He’d seen the paintings of the great Anuki in Astenya. He’d seen images of Raxit and the others in his mind. He shuddered as he held his damaged shoulder against his body, trying to focus on anything but the searing pain.

Damn! He couldn’t remember *how* to transform. He only knew how to fly with his pathetic child’s wings! What good was that against the power of the island mages? He felt helpless. Small. Insignificant.

He looked up and saw Odhrán, arms outstretched, making the water rise and fall, working against the mages, countering their magic to allow the *Phantom* to make her way toward the island. He saw the tension in Odhrán’s shoulders, the intense focus of his gaze, and he longed to do something other than watch.

Enough! I won’t let them all die because I did nothing! He balled his fists and railed at his weakness. He would at least *try*! He gritted his teeth, put aside the pain, and took a deep breath. Then, without hesitation, he spread his wings and flew toward the Ea ships.

AROUND THE *Chimera*, the seas churned and the waves rose like fingers from the water. One of the waves broke over the ship's bow, cracking the railing with an earsplitting racket. The wind hadn't caused the sudden swells, although Odhrán had felt Taren's magic, stronger now with the rune stone in his possession. Something different but just as deadly.

A line of waterspouts began to form a few hundred feet off the *Chimera's* stern. Dipping down from the darkening clouds above, each funnel met the water and caused the already seething seas to boil. Closing his eyes to better sense the source of the magic, Odhrán pressed outward, forcing away the islanders' attack, protecting the most vulnerable parts of his ship.

Once again, Odhrán struggled against the islanders' magic. Their mages weren't nearly as powerful as he, but combined, their power pushed him to his limits. He felt both Vurin and Renda join with Taren's power as the winds around the ship howled and whipped the sails about. If the waterspouts came in contact with the *Chimera*, the ship would be destroyed.

"Captain!" James shouted over the screeching wind. "Look!"

Odhrán came just in time to see the sails of the nearest Ea ship catch fire. A moment later something dark fell from the sky and landed on the deck of the *Chimera* to the sound of shouts from men at the stern. *More distractions*. But even as he thought this, he sensed a familiar presence and his gut clenched in fear.

"Bastian!" he shouted as he ran.

The ship shuddered as James compensated to avoid one of the waterspouts. A barrel of ale lashed to the deck broke free and tumbled over the side, taking another length of rail with it.

The men moved aside to let Odhrán through. There on the deck, Bastian lay flat on his back, staring up at him. Odhrán swallowed his fear and leaned down to wipe the blood from the corner of Bastian's mouth.

Bastian hissed in pain and pulled away.

"How badly are you hurt?" Odhrán asked.

"I'm fine." Bastian struggled to his feet, his face set in a scowl. Odhrán offered him a hand when he winced and teetered, but Bastian just

gritted his teeth and steadied himself.

Even now, the cyclones toyed with the edge of the protective barrier Odhrán had placed around the ship. He focused once more on reinforcing it, then returned his attention to Bastian.

“Let me help.” The wind blew Bastian’s red hair so it danced like flames. He looked like a fiery cherub with his sweet face and his eyes that now glowed as if they were ablaze.

“You can barely stay aloft in this. How do you imagine you might help? More likely you’ll be killed by—”

“I can’t be killed.” Bastian stood straighter and stared down Odhrán as though willing him to accede.

“You can be hurt. Injured.” Odhrán touched Bastian’s face again. “At least let me heal you.”

“It will heal.” Bastian flushed, but he stood his ground.

Odhrán was just about to tell Bastian to have Garan heal his wounds when the ship heeled sharply as James changed their heading and Bastian tumbled toward Odhrán. Odhrán reached out to steady Bastian, but Bastian opened his wings and righted himself before reaching the railing.

“I can manage myself,” Bastian snapped. With each flash of lightning, Odhrán saw the pain etched on Bastian’s youthful face.

“Captain, sir!” one of the men called from behind him.

Odhrán turned and saw another line of spiraling clouds form off the *Phantom*’s port side. He could barely fend off the attack on his own ship, let alone an attack on both.

“The storms are too powerful,” Odhrán began as he looked back at Bastian. “You—” But before he could finish, Bastian had once again taken to the air.

Under normal circumstances, Odhrán would have followed Bastian by water. But he could not do so now, when he needed to focus all his attention on the enemy’s attack. *Damn him!* In his human form, Bastian seemed fragile, unable to withstand the wind and the rain.

Odhrán pushed away thoughts of Bastian injured or worse and watched as he tried to make his way toward the waterspouts threatening the *Phantom*. Time and again, the wind and the water pushed Bastian backward, causing him to lose altitude, tossing him closer and closer to

the simmering waves. Odhrán believed in neither the Ea's goddess nor the human's gods, but he mumbled a prayer to all of them. *Please keep him safe.*

Lightning flashed overhead, followed by a clap of thunder that caused the *Chimera* to vibrate. Bastian valiantly fought to keep aloft, his small human frame jolted about like a leaf dislodged from the branch of a tree. Up and down and side to side he moved, making little headway but all the while falling nearer to the water.

"Bastian! Come back!" Odhrán shouted, unable to contain himself any longer. "You can't help them!" He was about to turn his magic toward Bastian and smooth his way back to the ship when Bastian plunged headlong into the water, beaten down by the whipping wind of the closest vortex. "No!"

Bastian spluttered and endeavored to keep his head above the high waves. Even if he knew how to swim—and Odhrán had seen no evidence of this—he'd not last long in his weakened state. *Bastian!*

Odhrán threw off his jacket and shirt, then pulled off his pants and ran naked to the place where the railing had once been. He'd always been more powerful in the water. Perhaps he might rescue Bastian and still help to maintain the enchantments that now protected both his ship and the *Phantom* from the islanders' magic.

He dove, transforming a moment later and heading for the place he'd last seen Bastian. But instead of seeing Bastian's small form, he saw a huge fireball erupt from under the waves. He covered his eyes to shield them from the glare. The water undulated with pulsing red, yellow, and orange light, warming and blazing.

All around him, power built. Odhrán's eyes quickly adapted to the bright light, and he saw a huge, bubbling mass of water and froth explode upward, sending water flying in all directions.

What the devil...?

Below him, the ocean floor appeared bathed in a whirlpool of light and color that grew in intensity, swirling and widening around the fireball, which still burned like a small sun. Round and round the water moved, growing warmer still, its speed increasing until Odhrán had to retreat toward the ship to keep from getting caught up in the maelstrom.

He watched in shock as the fireball coalesced into something more solid. The amorphous rounded edges sharpened, creating angles, shaping smooth planes from which appendages grew. The shape was not human. Instead of the winged boy who had disappeared beneath the waves, an enormous figure now took his place—a dragon, its tail nearly the length of the *Chimera* herself. Huge wings protruded from the beast's back, beating the water until the creature rose into the air. Trails of fire emanated from the dragon's skin and created small clouds as the water became steam.

Bastian. Odhrán fought to focus on his magic even as Bastian flew easily into the sky, his huge body no longer pushed and pulled by the storm. This was not the beast he had defeated to save the *Chimera* months before. This dragon was larger still, fully formed, like those in the murals they'd seen in the Eastern Lands. A sentient beast, not the wild, desperate animal that had all but begged to die at Odhrán's hands.

A flash of silver lightning illuminated the dark clouds, and the thunderclap that followed rattled Odhrán's bones. He was no longer sure if Taren had created the thunder or if the clash of Taren's power against the mages aboard the Ea ships was the cause. The storm had begun to rage out of control. He sensed the mages' panic and Taren's desperation. He heard the terrified screams of his own men and Ian's, and felt the terror of the men aboard the Ea ships as they cowered in fear.

Odhrán allowed himself to sink deeper, buffeted by the current, falling into his mind as he focused all his strength on calming the seas. If he could balance the perilous waves, counteract them, perhaps the ships might not be torn apart. He fought to quiet his mind, to release his dread. But he knew, even with all his strength, the best he could hope for was only a temporary solution. The storm would not abate until it had exhausted itself, and by then, they might all be dead.

THIRTY-TWO

GODDESS, IAN prayed, *lend us your grace!* This wasn't what the goddess wanted, was it? The maelstrom would kill them all.

Next to him, Taren stood with arms wide, the rune stone clutched tightly in his hand, his body covered in a silver haze that cast an eerie glow against the dark clouds.

Ian felt helpless to do anything but watch. He tried to lend Taren his strength but sensed his power dissipate as it left his body. What good was his ability to protect if he could not keep Taren from harm?

The wind beat against him, its sting like a slap against his skin. He felt the power of the storm grow, sensed the chaos of it, and knew Taren and the mages had lost control. Like a boulder gathering speed as it careened down a steep slope, the storm's power continued to build. The *Phantom* moaned her displeasure, the masts creaking under the strain. Already several of the sails—the ones the crew had not been able to drop in time—were in tatters. Ian only hoped enough remained intact that if they survived this, they would be able to maneuver.

Ian turned to face Taren. At least he could use his body to protect Taren from the brunt of the wind. He rested his hands on Taren's shoulders. Ian's body warmed with the touch and something strange and wonderful passed between them. His arms vibrated with power that traveled through his hands and into Taren's body. The winds grew in response.

I'm helping him?

"*So it seems,*" Taren said silently. For a moment Ian wondered if he had lost his mind. Never before had they shared their thoughts in their human forms. Taren laughed. "*Then we both must be insane.*"

As their powers intertwined, Ian caught the glare of something bright

soaring from the water. Blazing like a sun, it flew up toward the black clouds and waterspouts. As it moved farther from the *Phantom*, its light became more tolerable, and Ian realized it had taken the shape of an enormous bird. *No. Not a bird.* His heart raced as he recognized it for the creature it was: a dragon.

Bastian. Different than Ian recalled, but fully transformed. Ian had wondered if they might ever see the creature again, but there it was, wending its way skyward, where it turned to face the storm head on, breathing fire. Flames burst from the dragon's jaw like a giant arrow aimed at the heart of the tempest. Where the heat of the dragon's fire met the clouds, the whirlwinds appeared to melt. A moment later, cool drops of rain landed on Ian's skin. The drops grew in number until the gentle rain became a downpour, drenching them all. But with the rain, the winds began to die.

Ian watched, stunned, as the seas calmed. The two remaining Ea ships settled in irons, their sails luffing uselessly. The clouds dissipated and the rain eased. Soon the emerging sun illuminated the ship, causing a thick haze of steam to rise from the deck.

Taren, who had before appeared entranced, now blinked and stared at Ian with a questioning gaze. Taren wiped his brow, then teetered, leaning on Ian's strong arm.

"You've worn yourself out," Ian said, his gruff voice belying his concern.

Taren nodded and took a few breaths, seeming to steady himself. "I'll be all right," he said. "Although," he added, a blush on his cheeks, "I'm ravenous once again." Already Taren appeared to be regaining his strength. The stone, which had glowed red-hot only a moment before, had grown dark. Taren shivered and allowed Ian to support him.

An exhausted-looking Renda pressed his hand to Taren's forehead. "Nothing a good meal and a night's sleep won't fix," he said with a reassuring smile Ian knew was directed at him.

Ian breathed a sigh of relief, then nodded. "See to it he gets some food," he told Aine. Aine continued to stare at them in shock. "Aine!" Ian snapped when Aine did not respond.

"Aye-aye, sir!" Aine said, clearly startled. "Food."

"Did I see what I thought I saw?" Taren asked a few moments later as he chewed on a piece of bread.

Ian nodded. "Aye. Bastian transformed completely. Without his help,

we'd have all perished.” Ian looked over the bowsprit but saw no trace of the dragon.

THIRTY-THREE

BACK ABOARD the *Chimera*, Odhrán scanned the horizon for Bastian. Nothing. He'd felt power unlike anything he'd experienced before. Now, he felt nothing.

"I must find him," Odhrán said.

James held dry clothing out to him and was imploring him to dress. "You're shivering," James said, his voice stern and unyielding. "You're cold and you're tired. You did as much as you can."

"Bastian is—"

"He will return," James said emphatically. "And nothing you do will bring him back sooner."

Odhrán's irritation faded with the steadying presence of his quartermaster. James was correct, of course. He could do nothing in his present state, dripping wet from his transformation. He clenched his jaw and took the clothing. "Thank you," he said.

James inclined his head and the shadow of a smile danced across his face.

Odhrán took a moment to clear his mind of his concern for Bastian. There were greater concerns than a single person. His duty to protect his men and his allies aboard the *Phantom* would have to come first. He picked up a spyglass and surveyed the waters around them.

Aboard the Ea ships, men stood and gazed at the place where the storm had once raged, their eyes wide. No one aboard made a move to attack. From the jumble of thoughts he heard, Odhrán knew they would allow the *Chimera* and the *Phantom* passage to the harbor. They thought of Ian, the captain many of them had admired and to whom many were still stubbornly loyal. These thoughts mingled with others, and Odhrán heard the

names Seria and Barra, though he could not discern whether either of Ian and Taren's old foes were aboard the ships. He sensed the mages' fear of Taren's power. Whatever power the Council held over these men was waning—they were at their wits' end with worry and desperate to see their people off the island.

"Bring the ship about!" Odhrán ordered. He caught James's understanding nod, then walked forward as the crew raised the undamaged sails and the ship turned to catch the wind.

As expected, the *Phantom* had already begun to make her way into the harbor. The *Chimera* would remain at the entrance to guard the *Phantom* should the Ea ships' captains change their minds.

The thoughts of Bastian he'd sought to suppress returned without warning. Something had changed. He suddenly felt more at ease.

He glanced upward and was not surprised to see the outline of a winged creature, black against the fuchsia-and-purple sky. "Bastian," he whispered, half fearing if he spoke the name, he might look again and realize he'd been looking at a cloud. He raised the telescope and saw that the dragon appeared unharmed and was headed toward them.

Some of the men glanced nervously at Odhrán, who put down the spyglass and said, "He saved our lives in battle. He will not harm us."

"Back to your work," James barked, dispersing the men. Then he turned to Odhrán. "You can't blame them for their fear."

"No." Odhrán nodded. "But I will not permit them to indulge in it."

Odhrán drew a long breath as the dragon grew closer. The bright sun caused its scales to shimmer like fire, and it glided down on its enormous wings, riding the wind toward the *Chimera*.

In the height of the battle, with the rain and the wind having darkened the sky, Odhrán had not gotten a clear look at Bastian's celestial form. Now, as he grew nearer, Odhrán noticed that some of his scales seemed to change color with his movement, as did his eyes, which burned yellow and red with a hint of the familiar green. This dragon was not a mindless animal like the one who had destroyed the *Sea Witch* and nearly killed them all. Odhrán saw intelligence in the swirling orbs and in the dragon's expression. Kindness as well.

The dragon—Bastian—slowed his descent, then hovered above the water between the *Chimera* and the *Phantom*, beating his wings so slowly Odhrán marveled that he could remain aloft.

Ian and the men aboard the *Phantom* had gathered at the railings, just

as Odhrán's crew. Bastian looked around, then, fixing on Odhrán, moved to within a few feet of him and inclined his enormous head in submission. Some of the men gasped as Odhrán held his hand out in welcome.

The dragon closed his eyes, and the reddish light of the dying sun seemed to wrap around his body, whirling about much like the water around the egg they'd discovered beneath the water. This close, Odhrán felt the heat roll off the dragon's body—not hot enough to burn, but a beautiful and comforting warmth that embraced him.

A memory stirred in Odhrán's mind—Bastian's boyish laughter as he played with Fiall and Aine in a relaxing waterfall on their journey back from the Northern Territories. Odhrán had longed to join them in their revelry, but he'd watched them instead as they'd dived from the cliff into the clear, cool water below. In that moment, Odhrán had known he would not easily part from Bastian—that losing Bastian would pain him at least as much as the loss of Treande so many years before.

The dragon vanished into the mist of color and light. At its center, light took the form of a man, becoming more solid with each passing moment, his wings growing smaller. Bastian floated down and settled onto the deck near Odhrán. This time, however, when he pulled his wings into his body, they vanished beneath his skin.

Bastian gazed at Odhrán, his eyes once again green, his freckles dotting his nose and cheeks. But where before Bastian had appeared as a youth, now he stood proudly, shoulders back and chin held high, his body now that of a fully grown man. The man Odhrán remembered from the *Sea Witch*.

THIRTY-FOUR

“WELCOME HOME.” Odhrán said, joining Bastian in the captain’s quarters a short time later. His face heated as he realized the implication of his words. He had no claim to Bastian. Now that Bastian was fully grown, he’d leave.

It’s for the best.

“Thank you.” Bastian had dressed in a tunic and pantaloons he’d borrowed from one of the crew. He now stood nearly a head taller than Odhrán, and unlike the slightly awkward adolescent he’d been before he’d transformed, he seemed comfortable in his skin.

“You’ve changed.” Odhrán knew the words were pointless, since Bastian seemed to realize this, as well.

“Aye.” Bastian nodded and the edges of his mouth quirked upward in a near-smile. “I didn’t know it at first. Then James offered me some clothing, and I realized I was as tall as some of the other men.” He held up his hand and eyed it with interest, as if he still hadn’t quite gotten used to his new appearance.

“Do you remember anything more of your life before?” Odhrán asked, his curiosity tempered by a nagging fear that he could not quite comprehend.

“Nothing.” Whereas before, Bastian might have betrayed his sadness, now he seemed to school his expression. “Perhaps when this is all over, I might travel to the place of my birth... learn what I can about my past. Perhaps you might...” Crimson stained Bastian’s cheeks.

“We will speak of it later,” Odhrán said, feeling ill at ease. He knew what Bastian had intended to say: that he wanted Odhrán to come with him to discover what he could about his people. “The *Phantom* is ready to drop anchor. James will need me on deck.”

“Aye,” Bastian said. He forced a smile as if to reassure Odhrán.

Odhrán pressed his lips together and gathered his courage to say what he knew he must.

Bastian cocked his head to one side, the gesture an echo of the birdlike child he once had been, then lifted his chin and watched Odhrán.

“I’m sorry,” Odhrán blurted, surprising himself with his lack of self-control.

“Sorry? For what?”

“For doubting you,” Odhrán replied. “For doubting your strength.”

Bastian smiled outright this time, his bright green eyes ablaze with what Odhrán knew must be pride.

“Without you,” Odhrán continued, “we’d have all perished.”

Bastian blushed but did not look away as he once might have. “I only did what I knew I must. I... I’m glad you aren’t angry with me.”

“I’m proud of you,” Odhrán said. “You did the right thing. You didn’t listen to my nonsense.”

“What now?” Bastian asked.

Odhrán felt relief at the change in topic. Plans were easier to discuss than his feelings for Bastian. “Ian and Taren will go ashore.”

“Ashore?” Bastian looked horrified. “But they’ll kill—”

“Ian will not let Taren come to harm,” Odhrán said, speaking the words to convince himself as much as Bastian. He’d lacked faith before. He would not do so again. He would trust in Taren’s strength, as he’d trust in Bastian’s.

THIRTY-FIVE

IAN TURNED over command to Renda, who slowed the ship and readied the men to drop anchor as they sailed through the entrance to the harbor. Back in their cabin, Taren pulled on a clean shirt and trousers. He splashed his face with water, then looked into the mirror and tied his windblown hair at his nape.

“Feeling better?” Ian wrapped his arms around Taren and sighed. “Sure you don’t need to sleep before we go ashore?”

“I’m sure.” Taren leaned back against Ian. “I think I just needed a bit of food.”

“You look a bit tired,” Ian pressed.

Taren had noticed the dark circles under his eyes when he’d seen his reflection, and though he felt *something*, he wasn’t sure “tired” quite described it. He felt strange, as though the stone around his neck had awakened something inside of him—a newfound calm he’d happily embraced. A sense of rightness and something like surrender. His body ached from the strain of the magic, but he’d rest only when they’d done what they’d come to do.

“Thank you,” Taren said.

“Why are you thanking me?” Ian countered, then pressed a kiss to Taren’s cheek.

“For taking my part when the others opposed my speaking to the Council.”

“I don’t deserve your thanks,” Ian replied.

Taren took Ian’s hand and forced him to meet his gaze. “You do. And you’ll accept them.”

Ian squeezed Taren’s hand. “Next thing you know, you’ll be wanting my command.”

“Perhaps you should be concerned,” Taren teased, knowing the lighthearted banter eased the fear in Ian’s heart, if only a little. “I might be inclined to throw you overboard.”

“You’re the one who usually ends up swimming,” Ian pointed out, then leaned in, almost but not quite meeting Taren’s lips. “Better you have your way with me instead.”

“Aye.” Taren pulled Ian roughly against him and kissed him hard. He hoped his kiss might convey all of the things he might not be able to adequately express—his love for Ian, his hope for their future, and the sense of peace he felt knowing Ian would be at his side through it all. “Later, after this is done.” He wouldn’t think about the possibility that there might not *be* a later.

After reassuring himself that the stone was well hidden beneath his shirt, he released Ian and pulled on his jacket. “Ready, Captain Dunaidh?”

“As much as I’ll ever be,” Ian answered with a longing look at his sword. They would have a better chance of winning over the islanders if they went unarmed. The only exception was the stone itself, which Taren had only agreed to take because both Odhrán and Renda felt it was more secure in his care and might be the only thing that would save them if the Council refused their offer of help.

Please keep us safe, Taren prayed as they boarded the launch and made their way to the dock.

THIRTY-SIX

THE *PHANTOM* sailed into the harbor at Crias'u flying the simple blue Ea flag. "They will know our meaning," Ian told Taren, "even if they do not trust that we come in peace."

From the small boat, the town appeared just as Ian remembered it, with its assortment of shacks, tumbledown stone houses, and muddy streets. As they grew closer, however, Ian saw the houses nearest to the volcano were now gone, replaced by smoking trails of lava. The usual chickens and other animals that roamed the roads were not to be seen, but in their place, soldiers patrolled with swords. Ian pushed back feelings of guilt and anger—now wasn't the time to dwell on the past or what might have been.

A dozen uniformed men met them as they disembarked from the launch. The faint scent of sulfur hung on the air, but the volcano remained eerily silent. *For now*. Ian knew they had yet to experience the last of the volcano's wrath. The goddess had given them time, but she would not wait forever.

Taren caught Ian's gaze as they made their way toward a group of armed guards who awaited them. Ian did his best to hide his concern for Taren's safety but stood between the men and Taren, prepared to defend Taren if necessary. He knew Taren feared that the island Ea would try to execute Ian for treason, but the only place Ian could imagine himself was at Taren's side.

"Captain Dunaidh?" one of the men said, clearly startled to see Ian.

Ian nodded in acknowledgment as he recognized Keran, one of the men who had served under his command during the war. "Good to see you, Keran." Ian smiled, then asked, "How are Via and the children?" He

genuinely hoped they were safe.

“They’re well,” Keran replied. He offered Ian a tentative smile in return, then glanced furtively around as if fearful someone might overhear him. Ian didn’t blame Keran for his conflicted emotions—he knew the Council had painted him a traitor to his people, and he understood what any whiff of dissent might mean to Keran or any other island Ea.

Some of the other men acknowledged Ian but eyed him warily, as if they too feared their connection to him. He held himself with pride, hoping to be worthy of whatever fond feelings they might still hold for him. “We’ve come to help,” he said, loudly enough that they might hear. “We offer safe passage to anyone who wishes to leave.” He doubted it would do much good, but when he received no chastisement in response, the hope in his heart grew by leaps and bounds.

As they walked through the streets toward the Council building, men and women peered cautiously out of their dwellings. After a few minutes, children began to run behind them, laughing and playing, until one of the guards turned and told them to return to their homes. Ian saw no hatred in their faces. Instead, they asked him about his journeys with apparent interest. Had things become so desperate for these people that they would consider defying the Council?

They reached the entrance to the Council building. Ian clenched his jaw and willed himself to relax and focus on his surroundings. He would do Taren no good if he allowed himself to be distracted.

Several of the Council’s guards stepped through the doorway, most with swords drawn. Taren touched Ian’s arm, the brief contact a reassurance for Ian.

“Captain Dunaidh. Taren Laxley. Follow me,” one of the guards said briskly as he turned and led them through the long hallway to the chambers beyond. Ian had seen a flicker of something in his eyes he couldn’t quite place. Pity, perhaps?

From the outside, the Council building appeared much the same as the other stone buildings in the town. Unlike at the other buildings, guards stood at attention on either side of the entry, and the building was free of the ubiquitous vines that encroached on the Ea habitations. Inside was much the same. Simply appointed with polished wood walls, the Council chamber was nonetheless grand compared to the ramshackle dwellings of the

harborside town. On closer inspection, however, Ian noticed cracks in some of the furnishings and water stains on the ceiling—things he hadn't seen when he'd been here last.

Taren appeared a bit unsteady on his feet, and from the distant look in his eyes, Ian guessed he'd had another vision—a memory, perhaps, of the island in Treande's time. Since he'd recovered the rune stone, Taren had regularly experienced such flashbacks.

Taren leaned on a chair, garnering Ian's concern and a glare from one of the guards. "I'm fine," Taren reassured him. "It's nothing."

"You will stand," the guard who'd spoken before told them. He motioned them to move behind a low barrier that divided the long table where the Council sat from the rows of chairs.

The guards took their places on either side of Taren and Ian, as well as behind them. They waited for several minutes before six men and women filed silently into the room and stood behind their seats.

"The sovereign of the Ea'ta," a guard announced from near the door through which the Council members had just entered. "Ea'tana Gurian."

Ian bowed his head as the sovereign entered the room. His ancient body bent, his hair white and thin, Gurian appeared frail and shaky on his feet. Ian immediately recognized the man who entered behind Gurian, his hand on Gurian's elbow as he helped him to his seat.

Seria raised his head and stood taller, then stood at Gurian's right. The other Council members took their seats. "Welcome," Seria said.

TAREN DREW a long breath and met Seria's hard gaze. A strong gust of wind rattled the building's windows, and the rune stone warmed against Taren's chest. He forced himself to breathe through his dread and allowed his body to relax. *Not now*, he commanded the stone. He would not show this man his fear. Ian's strength reinforced his own, and the memories of his torture at Seria's hands faded.

"What do they want?" Gurian asked Seria in a tremulous voice.

"I'm not sure, Sovereign." Seria directed his words to Gurian, but his eyes never left Taren and Ian.

"We've come to help," Taren said. "To offer our assistance now that

the volcano—”

“You’ve not been given permission to speak,” Seria said. He appeared more amused than irritated.

“My apologies, Ea’tana Gurian,” Taren said. He got to his knees, careful not to move too suddenly and risk the point of one of the guards’ swords. He bowed his hand and said, “I ask your permission to speak.”

The sovereign appeared confused and looked to Seria.

“The spies, Sovereign,” Seria supplied. “The ones who escaped the prison?”

“Ah,” Gurian said, as if he’d finally put together the pieces. “Yes. What do they want?”

Taren glanced up and caught Ian’s slight frown. Clearly he’d not expected Gurian’s confusion. From what Ian had told him, Gurian was willful and strong. The man sitting before them appeared old and frail. “We wish an audience, sir.” Taren bowed his head still lower.

“Audience?” Gurian appeared to consider Taren’s request. “Who are you?”

Gurian was either too infirm to understand or Seria had bewitched him. Taren tried to collect his thoughts. *He isn’t the only councilor here.* Perhaps the others would consider his pleas.

“I am Taren,” Taren said. “Son of Larin and Duri. I come on behalf of the Ea of Callaecia to offer our assistance.”

“Assistance?” one of the other councilors, a woman who appeared nearly as infirm as Gurian, snapped. “What need do we have of your assistance?”

At least someone had heard and understood his words. *It’s a start.*

“We know the volcano has returned to life,” Taren said, hopeful that this time no one would interrupt him. “We’ve come to offer you help in evacuating your people to safety.”

Seria laughed. “Help? The Council is more than capable of helping its own, isn’t it, Sovereign?”

Gurian did not respond.

Seria offered Taren a bland smile that felt more threatening than reassuring, then asked, “Where do you propose to take them?”

Taren hesitated. He and the others had discussed what he might tell

the Council about the ancient colony, but they'd only been able to agree that it must be Taren's choice.

"There's a colony," Taren said. "Ancient and abandoned, but where our people would be safe and might rebuild their lives."

"A colony?" Seria raised an eyebrow.

Taren did his best to ignore Seria, focusing instead on the councilor he figured must be Zera. Ian had said she was intelligent and thoughtful. She and Ian had once been friends, although Taren doubted she would give anything Ian said credence after he'd been revealed as a spy for Vurin.

"The colony our people came from before they settled in the Derryth Kingdom," Taren explained. Zera appeared unmoved.

Taren thought he saw a flash of glee in Seria's eyes, but he kept going. "You must sense that the volcano won't wait much longer. I've seen what it's already done to the island. It will only get worse."

Seria laughed under his breath and shook his head. "I've heard what they say about you, Taren Laxley." Taren knew better than to respond, although it took all his willpower to hold his tongue. "That you're the reincarnation of the mythical Treande. If Vurin is so weak that he pins the hopes of our people on a fantasy—"

"It's no fantasy." The words left Taren's mouth before he realized what he had said. He could no longer contain his anger, and the realization that Seria's spies had most likely provided the information about Treande caused the last of his self-control to evaporate. "I am Treande. He is me."

Some of the members of the Council regarded him with surprise, others with what Taren recognized as pity. Zera, however, appeared intrigued.

"Pathetic," Seria said with a shake of his head. "I've never heard such —"

"Let him speak," Zera said, her voice rising over the whispers of the others in the room.

Seria paled just a bit, but Taren's spirits soared. If only he could convince them he meant them no harm!

"I didn't believe it myself." Taren glanced at Ian, who nodded and smiled. "But it's true. I've seen my past. I know the truth of how we came to be here. The goddess—"

“You claim to speak for the goddess?” Gurian appeared incredulous.

“I did not wish to be her conduit,” Taren admitted. “I wanted only to live my life quietly.”

“Sacrilege,” another of the councilors said.

“He speaks the truth,” Ian interjected, his entire body tensing as he spoke.

“You expect us to believe you? After you betrayed your people? You, a convicted spy, sentenced to die by this very Council?” Seria hissed.

“Do you believe Ian and I care so little for our lives that we’d come here—that we’d offer ourselves up as a sacrifice for your pleasure?” Taren’s desperation grew as he saw the faces of the men and women, saw their disbelief and hatred. “I came—we came—to offer our assistance. We have men who can help lead your people to safety. If we act now—”

“Enough!” Gurian stood and glared at Taren. “You come here with a known traitor and ask us to trust that anything you say is true? What fools do you take us for?”

“Not fools,” Taren answered quickly. “I understand that it might be difficult to bel—”

“We will confer.” Gurian’s expression made it clear he would hear no more from Taren or Ian on the subject.

The guards took Ian and Taren by the arms and led them from the room. Taren met Ian’s gaze as the men pulled their wrists roughly behind them and clamped restraints upon them.

THIRTY-SEVEN

ARMS AND legs shackled, Ian and Taren followed Seria and the Council's guards along the water. The path was well worn, the brush recently trimmed. Ian knew his way too well, and he had no need to ask if the Council had decided upon their offer of assistance: their destination was Dubra Prison.

Had the Council only feigned interest in Taren's pleas? Ian had hoped Zera might prevail upon some of the others to consider their offer, but he now understood that their errand had been as foolhardy as Odhrán and the others had expected. Seria had undoubtedly known what the Council would do, and stacked the deck against them. No matter. Ian understood Taren's need to plead with the Council, and he respected Taren's resolve.

The building appeared much as Ian remembered it. Dubra Prison had long before shown its age, but it now crumbled before Ian's eyes. Creeping plants had carved away at the mortar that held the blocks of graying stone together. Only the rooms at the building's center had roofs to speak of. Most of the prisoners' cells were covered in palm leaves that barely kept out the elements. The lack of real shelter, whether intentional or not, made conditions in the prison far worse. With heavy rain, the dirt floors became muddy and the cells dank. At the height of summer, the sun made the rooms intolerably warm. Ian knew. He'd been a prisoner here for years, and he'd barely survived his internment.

Ian's guilt surged as he and Taren stepped over the threshold into the damp darkness of the prison. He forced away the memories of rescuing Taren from this place and how he'd been unable to help the other imprisoned Ea. He knew of only one Ea who had made it from the island to Derryth after escaping the prison that night. How many more had perished? How many of the island's inhabitants had been silenced and condemned to

rot here since he'd left?

At his side, Taren walked with his head held high. Beneath his calm exterior, however, Ian knew the turmoil of Taren's emotions buffeted him like a gale. But Taren had been right to insist they try to convince the Council to allow the islanders to leave. Neither they nor the goddess wanted to see blood spilled.

"In here," Seria snapped.

The guards pushed them inside the familiar windowless room. The same room Ian had rescued Taren from. The room where Seria had tortured Taren. But for a few cracked stones on the floor, no evidence of Ian and Seria's fight remained. Still, those cracks made Ian smile.

"You'll not be smiling in a moment," Seria said as the guards attached their shackles to hooks on the stone walls. He approached Ian, hatred glittering in his eyes, then turned his attention to Taren.

Ian spat, striking Seria's cheek. Seria rewarded him with a blow to the face. Ian ignored the sting of Seria's hand. That pain was nothing compared to what Seria was capable of inflicting. Ian was only too familiar with Seria's particular brand of torture. Even so, he was sure they'd not yet experienced the full range of Seria's powers. No matter. He would endure this to keep Taren safe.

"What are your true motives for coming here?" Seria asked, his manner far too calm.

"I spoke the truth before the Council," Taren said. "Why can you not see it? Why do you insist on endangering—"

"Danger?" Seria snapped. "You and your *captain*"—he glared at Ian—"have created the danger to our people."

"But the goddess—"

"The goddess has punished us because of you." Seria's eyes burned with hatred. "Here, on Ea'nu, we were safe. Content to live our lives apart from human filth."

"You allied with them," Ian pointed out. "You sent them after your own people!"

"I did what I had to... what I believed was right," Seria answered. "The volcano is proof enough. When the humans attacked Callaecia, the mountain was appeased. It is only upon your return here that its flames rekindled. Is that not proof enough?"

"Proof? Are you mad?" Ian asked. "Do you not see that the goddess

has awakened the volcano because she wishes our people to leave the island? That there's another place—a place we are meant to live?"

"Your deaths will appease the goddess." Seria pressed his palm to Ian's chest. "The volcano will sleep as it did centuries ago."

Pain seared Ian's skin, and he bit his cheek in an effort not to cry out. In the periphery of his vision, Ian saw the look of anguish on Taren's face. They had both understood what might happen should Taren fail to persuade the Council, and they had both decided the risk acceptable under the circumstances.

"Indeed," Seria said. He touched Ian again but did not remove his hand as he'd done before. Ian cried out, unable to stop himself. The pain shot through his extremities, causing his body to shake. He closed his eyes and imagined himself swimming at Taren's side in the tranquil waters of the cove at Callaecia.

"No, please!" Taren shouted. "I've told you the truth. We want to help you—"

"Not good enough," Seria said. He pressed harder, the pain increasing until Ian could no longer focus on anything but his pain. His vision exploded in a haze of red, and he sagged momentarily against his restraints.

"I've seen the colony," Taren said, his voice full of desperation. "We lived there once, long ago."

"If your colony is so perfect," Seria said under his breath, "why did we leave in the first place?"

"I... we.... Our people were in danger. The war had—"

"A war!" Triumph lit Seria's face. "A war waged by humans, no doubt. Don't you see the folly? This island is the one place we are safe, yet you ask us to blindly follow you, knowing the humans may again seek to harm us." Seria pulled his hand away, and Ian gasped.

"The goddess has spoken to me," Taren answered. "She has shown me —"

"Shown *you*? A worthless slave to humans? Of course you would want us to believe such a thing. You know nothing more than servitude." Seria shook his head and turned his attention back to Ian, who braced himself for the onslaught of pain.

"I was a slave," Taren admitted. He looked down as though mustering his strength, then once again met Seria's gaze. "And I may be worthless in

your eyes. But I am Ea. I would not seek to harm my people. I only want them to live as they were meant to, as does she.”

“You lie.” Seria once again touched Ian’s chest. Ian screamed. “Tell me about your magic. What powers do your mages possess?”

Taren remained silent.

“So you *do* have something to hide.” Seria appeared quite pleased with himself. “Good. Why don’t we try this again, then? Tell me about your mages.”

“No... mages,” Ian forced out, his voice rough.

“Indeed? And what about this stone?” Seria spoke in a hushed tone that sent shivers up Ian’s spine. How did they know about the rune stone?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ian said between clenched teeth.

“And you?” Seria looked at Taren and raised an eyebrow.

Taren, whose face was deathly pale, shook his head.

Seria raised his eyebrows and the hint of a grin spread across his face. He turned to Ian and asked, “Had enough?”

Ian braced himself for more. “Hardly.” He’d endure this. Every minute Seria spent with him meant another Taren was spared the pain. Ian slowed his breathing and his heart ceased its galloping. His vision cleared and he struggled to his feet once again, defiant.

“Ian, no!” Taren shouted as he pulled against his shackles.

Seria walked over to Taren and studied him with interest. “He’s protecting you,” he said, face only inches from Taren’s. “He thinks I don’t see what he’s doing.” He glanced at Ian and smiled with smug satisfaction.

“Taren’s nothing to you,” Ian said. Seria might not understand Taren’s importance to their people, but he’d guessed at Taren’s importance to Ian.

“And you’re everything to him, it seems,” Seria mused. He grabbed Ian by the throat and squeezed.

Ian gasped as flashes of light danced before him. Seria squeezed harder and Ian thrashed against the restraints. Then Seria touched Ian’s forehead and Ian’s world erupted into a blur of pain. Ian’s strength faded as Seria’s power clawed into him. His wrists ached as the metal cut into his flesh.

“Stop, please!” Taren shouted.

“Then tell me the truth,” Seria demanded. “Tell me about your mages and that *thing* the men say flew out of the water.”

Of course Seria would have heard of Bastian.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Taren said, his voice stronger now.

“I see.” Seria’s grip on Ian’s throat grew tighter. Ian could no longer breathe. He struggled to remain conscious, but his body grew cold and he heard buzzing, like hundreds of bees swarming around him. His vision turned black, and he fell.

“IAN!” TAREN shouted as Ian slumped against the wall, unconscious. Seria released Ian as Taren pulled against the metal bindings. “Ian!” He couldn’t reason with Seria. Ian had been right to call him a fanatic. Seria would never see the truth, he would only twist it to serve his own purposes. Seria’s belief would never waver—he’d grown too accustomed to the power he held over his people to consider ceding it.

Seria watched with a self-satisfied smile, then motioned to the guard by the door. “Bring the healer. I need this one awake.”

Taren’s throat burned with bile as he continued to tug on his chains. At least Ian was still alive. *Not for long, though.* Taren wouldn’t allow Seria to touch Ian again. Outside, the wind howled, echoing Taren’s shouts.

The wind. He’d been able to call upon the stone before. Maybe he could use its power now.

Taren expected blinding pain when Seria touched his chest, and he steeled himself against it. In spite of this, he screamed in agony as Seria’s power penetrated his body. Panting from the shock of Seria’s touch, Taren closed his eyes and called upon the stone with all his being.

The rune stone grew hot against Taren’s skin as the zing of its power thrummed through his body and moved out toward his limbs. The sound of rain on the thatched roof grew louder with Taren’s magic and the echoes of Treande’s tears for his people.

A nearby clap of thunder shook the prison’s foundation. Taren continued to pull against his chains, and the stone that held them in place began to crumble. Again Taren called upon the stone, and again the prison

walls shivered their response as the wind shrieked and moaned. Drops of water stung Taren's face, but he ignored the pain and pulled harder.

The binding that held Taren's left hand loosened as Seria touched his chest again. Taren panted and moaned, unable to open his eyes and face the pain as it shot through his body like a hundred knives. He saw himself as he had been months before, battered and barely alive, his feet shattered, his will broken. The memory threatened to devour him whole, to consume what was left of his resolve to see the goddess's plan come to fruition.

"No," Taren said through his clenched teeth. He wouldn't bend to Seria's will. He wouldn't allow Seria to control him. He forced his eyes open and met Seria's gaze.

Seria stretched out his palm and touched Taren again, but this time his hand met the small stone that hung around Taren's neck. Seria immediately withdrew his hand, then pulled open the laces of Taren's shirt. Seria took the stone in his hand, turning it over, his brow furrowed.

"This.... Is this what I think it is?" he asked in triumph.

Taren pulled hard on the chains, which at last broke free. He grabbed for the stone, dislodging it from Seria's hand, but Seria pressed his palm over Taren's hand, trapping the stone between Taren's hand and chest. Taren's body tensed with the combined power of Seria and the stone, his limbs becoming momentarily rigid with pain. He fought to remain upright as his body relaxed.

"I see I have my answer," Seria hissed as Taren tried to pull Seria's hand away. It was as if Seria was somehow attached to him through the stone.

Taren sensed the stone respond to Seria's touch. *Goddess, no!* Was there more than one wielder? If Seria controlled the stone, they would all die here.

With his free hand, Seria worked to pull Taren's wrist away until Taren feared he might break it. The wind, which had continued to gain force during their struggle, now blew like a gale. Drops of water raked Taren's skin.

The stone grew hotter still, burning Taren's skin, combining with the excruciating jolts of fire from Seria's hand. Beckoning. Calling to him.

It wants to join with me. But without the knife....

Taren released Seria's hand and watched, spellbound, as Seria tried without success to pull the stone away from his body. Seria's hand stuck

fast, his eyes growing wide with shock and fear.

“*Surrender yourself to me*” came a voice in Taren’s mind, comforting and sweet. Sure he had imagined the voice, Taren once again struggled against Seria.

“*Little one,*” the voice said, more insistently, “*trust that I will help you. Surrender yourself to me!*”

This time Taren obeyed, closing his eyes and allowing himself to float into the darkness of his mind. His body grew limp and the pain Seria inflicted became a muffled echo that lingered at the periphery of his thoughts.

Then, suddenly, the pain in his chest exploded. A different pain this time, as though someone had cut him open to expose his beating heart. The smell of burning flesh worked its way to his nostrils. His vision grew white and he screamed.

Just as quickly as it had come on, the pain subsided. Taren no longer felt his body, but he knew the stone now existed inside of him.

THE SMELL of salt water caressed Taren’s senses, and he imagined he heard a choir of Ea heartsong in the distance, as though a hundred Ea sang the goddess’s praises. Freed from its earthly bounds, his soul traveled above the prison. Like a shooting star, it raced over the island, giving him a bird’s-eye view of the land and water below.

The black smoke of the volcano moved ever closer to the harbor as rocks and debris rained down on the hillside. Flames had begun to claim the dwellings at the edge of the harbor town as a river of flowing lava grew ever closer, threatening to submerge them. Ea screamed as they fled down the dirt streets toward the water, where guards shouted, panicked and clearly hoping for some direction.

In the harbor, the Chimera and the Phantom still faced down the Ea Navy, both sides alert, as though anticipating an attack at any time. Taren felt Odhrán’s presence, and he reached out to him. He saw Odhrán glance upward, his lips parting in surprise.

Taren’s soul traveled over the mouth of the volcano, and he glanced down. A winged creature reached the edge of the crater, then

dove into the sea of flame and smoke. Taren's heart grew cold when he realized the creature was none other than Bastian, his wings pulled back against his long body as he flew into the volcano's core. Taren knew this was the future, but he feared for Bastian as though he were watching the present unfold.

He sensed a gentle hand on his shoulder urging him onward. He rose higher still, toward the heavens. The goddess's presence surrounded him and infused his soul with strength. For an instant he felt her power as his own, and he understood everything. The world below him shone with a bright light, as though he could see past the pain and sorrow to something beautiful that hid beneath. He felt the warmth of the goddess's love for her people, much like Ian's love for him, steady and pure. He floated in that love, a cocoon that protected his body and his soul.

Then the contact faded and he fell toward the waves.

No! Please! Let me stay here with you. He reached out to grasp the goddess's hand, but she moved beyond his grasp.

"Not now, little one," she said as she gently pushed him earthward. "But in time, the stone will demand payment."

Taren wondered vaguely what sort of payment the stone might exact. He floated downward for what seemed like hours, the sky like a soft blanket that wrapped him in light and warmth. He could stay here forever.

"TAREN!"

Ian's voice sent him rocketing back to his body in a blaze of color. The silence became sound as an explosion from the volcano pierced the air. Taren drew a long, stuttered breath, filling his starved lungs. The light faded and he blinked as the real world came back into focus, at its center, Ian's cherished face.

"Taren!"

Taren reached out to gently cup Ian's cheek. "I'm all right," he said. The truth, although he also felt strange, as if he could sense the rhythm of the earth beneath their feet and see the wind painted on the sky in bright colors. The wind caressed his skin like the gentle touch of a lover.

"Thank the goddess," Ian whispered. Seeing his face, bruised and

bloodied from Seria's torture, made Taren's heart ache. Once Ian transformed, the wounds would heal. Still, he knew the pain of what Ian had endured all too well.

Seria lay at Taren's feet, clutching his charred and barely recognizable right hand. He moaned and writhed in agony. The guards had disappeared. Taren guessed they'd abandoned their posts in fear of their lives.

Ian nodded, and Taren focused his thoughts on the rune stone. An instant later the room exploded in a blaze of white and silver lightning, sending the ceiling flying away on the wind. The ancient stones that had weathered centuries of the elements crumbled like sand around them, and the iron shackles that held them dissolved as though they'd been dropped in acid.

Taren knew this for what it was—the goddess's hand. He had no such power, nor did the rune stone grant him the strength to destroy solid rock. The realization buoyed his spirits and gave him new resolve. Vurin had been right all along: the goddess would see his people safely through this.

Ian! Taren reached for Ian's hand—sensing him more than seeing him through the blur of the rain and smoke—and clasped it tight. All around them they heard shouts of men and women—prisoners and guards alike.

“We have to get out of here,” Taren said. He felt the pressure build in the volcano as the wind twined its feathery tendrils around him. He smelled something foul on the air, something far deadlier than the smoke and rocks that belched from the maw of the mountain. They were running out of time.

Ian glanced down at Seria, then looked expectantly at Taren. Taren shook his head. “Leave him. His fate is no longer in our hands, and there's no time to waste.”

Ian hesitated, but then Ian grabbed Seria's sword and shoved it into his belt. He took Taren's hand and pulled him forward, and they ran from the room, dodging piles of debris as they made their way out of what was left of the prison. Taren thanked the goddess that Ian knew the prison well, for in the chaos, people screamed and ran through the thick dust and smoke, blocking their way.

After what seemed an eternity to Taren, they emerged into a dense tangle of small trees and vines. Taren slipped on the muddy ground as he struggled to follow Ian through the thicket, Ian pushing the thorny vines back with his bare hands, sometimes ripping them from the ground by their

roots. From time to time, sunlight cut through the leaves and smoke, revealing the cuts and gashes on Ian's forearms.

Finally they broke through the vegetation onto a small path. "The water's this way," Ian said. "We can swim to the *Phantom* and—"

"No." Taren stopped. "No ship. I need to go to the harbor." The rain had abated now, but the fog rose around them. With each step Taren took, the subtle vibrations of the volcano called to him.

"But Seria's men guard the harbor," Ian protested. "If you go there, they'll—"

"You must trust me." Taren squeezed Ian's hand. "I can't do what I must from the water."

Ian nodded, and they began to make their way back to the harbor. Several times Taren tripped and Ian had to steady him as they ran over roots and slipped in the mud. By the time they reached the water, both of them were soaking wet and filthy.

Men, women, and children filled the streets, some huddled beneath blankets, others with faces scraped and bloodied, all of them afraid. Soldiers with weapons drawn walked up and down the docks, patrolling the area.

Taren slipped into the crowd with Ian at his heels, hoping the soldiers would not see them. He needed to make his way to the far side of the docks near the base of the volcano, back toward the building where the Council met. The pungent smell of gas and smoke from the volcano burned his throat, but he ignored it and pressed onward.

All around them, people coughed and tears streamed down their dirty faces. Children sobbed in their mothers' arms, cowering in fear beneath the blankets, as some of the men confronted the guards who blocked the way to the docks. Did the Council intend them all to die here? Taren's heart ached as they snaked their way through the people, stopping from time to time so the guards would not grow suspicious of their movements.

They had just escaped the crowd and reached the street that climbed upward when someone shouted "Ian!" over the din. "Captain Dunaith!"

Taren turned to see Barra, the *Phantom's* former sailing master. The man who'd betrayed them to Seria and had nearly killed Taren. Dressed in a soldier's uniform, he held his weapon pointed downward and shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

“Barra,” Ian hissed and furrowed his brow. Ian grabbed Barra around the neck, then twisted his arm so his weapon clattered to the ground. “I’m going to enjoy killing you.”

“Please... I mean you—”

“You nearly kill Taren and you have the gall to beg?” Ian tightened his hold around Barra’s neck. “If it weren’t for you, Rider would still be alive.”

Barra gasped and spluttered. “I... I’m not here to... I have no intention of.... Goddess,” Barra finally spat out, “I never wanted to hurt him. I don’t want to hurt either of you.”

“You’ve a fine way of showing it. First you try to kill him and make it look as though he perished in battle, now you greet us with your sword drawn. What the devil am I supposed to think?” Ian growled as he tossed Barra to the ground and retrieved Barra’s sword.

“I’m here to help,” Barra said. Ian pointed the sword at Barra’s heart. “Seria... he threw my brother and sister in prison. He said he’d kill them both if I didn’t cooperate.” Barra’s eyes filled with tears and he tensed his jaw as if schooling his emotions.

Taren felt more than saw Ian flinch. He placed a gentling hand on Ian’s arm. Tension vibrated in Ian’s body, easing only slightly at the touch. “What happened to them?” Taren asked.

Barra tensed his jaw, and Taren could almost see the emotions roll off him like waves on the shore. “I couldn’t save them,” he said, his voice breaking. He took a deep breath and regained his composure. “But I can help now.”

“Why should we believe you?” Ian demanded.

“Please,” Barra said. “There’s no time. Seria has forbidden the people from leaving, but word of what you told the Council has spread across the island. They want to leave. They’re afraid. Most of the men are helping them, but some of Seria’s most faithful soldiers—”

“There they are!” someone shouted from the edge of the crowd. Taren looked over Ian’s shoulder as a half-dozen soldiers began to force their way through.

“I can help,” Barra said, his desperation evident. “Please. Let me do right by you this time.”

Ian hesitated, unmoving.

“Ian,” Taren said urgently, “if what he says is true, that most of the Council’s soldiers wish to leave....”

“Get up,” Ian ordered. Barra scrambled to his feet. “If you’re lying, I’ll have your head for it.”

By now the soldiers had nearly reached them. Ian tossed the sword to Barra, who caught it and nodded, then turned to meet the men as Taren and Ian ran across the docks to the edge of the mountain. The smell of sulfur and smoke grew stronger as they neared the base of the volcano, and bits of mud and rocks showered down on them, stinging their skin.

Taren glanced back to see Barra and the other soldiers running back toward the harbor. *Odhrán*, he thought, hoping his thoughts would carry far enough to reach the *Chimera*’s captain, *tell Renda to bring the Phantom to the docks. Do what you can to get as many of the islanders aboard her as possible.* He glanced out over the harbor as the *Chimera* came about.

THIRTY-EIGHT

ODHRÁN SAILED the *Chimera* into the harbor at full speed, something he'd never have done under normal circumstances, but Taren's wind favored them, and he knew they had no time to waste. He half expected the Ea vessels that had blocked their way to attack them as they moved, but instead they let them pass. The Ea soldiers had mutinied.

"Captain, sir!" Bastian swung down off the ropes and landed nimbly on the deck, his red hair blowing about his face. "The volcano—"

"Will wait," Odhrán said dismissively. He had too many other things to worry about, not the least of which were the hundreds of islanders pushing their way onto the docks. Others had already jumped into the water and headed for the Ea ships.

"No. You may know about many things," Bastian said, his face nearly as red as his hair, his anger plain, "but you do not know this. Something more dangerous lingers at the volcano's core. Silent, but just as deadly as the fire it belches."

Odhrán considered this, then shook his head. "Even if it's true," he said while the men began to tie the ship to the docks, "there's nothing any of us can do to stop it."

"Let me help." Bastian met Odhrán's gaze with determination. "I can help slow the volcano's eruptions. Keep the fumes at bay."

Odhrán's heart leapt. "It's too dangerous. We have no idea what—"

Bastian drew himself up to his full height. Fully grown, he was hardly Ian or James's stature, but he was taller than Odhrán. "Please. I owe you all my life. I have no intention of perishing here, but I'll take the risk." He pursed his lips.

"He's right." James, whom Odhrán realized had been listening to the conversation, now rested his hand on Odhrán's shoulder. How long had he

been standing there? Odhrán had been too distracted to sense his presence. “If we don’t do something now, everything we’ve fought for will be lost.”

Odhrán gazed at James in surprise. James, a human born and raised in the caves of Odhrán’s Gateway Island stronghold, cared enough for the plight of the Ea that he was willing to stand up to his commanding officer.

Who’d have believed it? A human and a dragon, giving me grief! If Bastian’s proposal didn’t frighten him so, Odhrán might have laughed. Instead he frowned at James, then turned to Bastian and said, “You will return. We have much we need to discuss.” *That we should have discussed if I hadn’t been such a fool.*

He wouldn’t lose Bastian. He *couldn’t*. He wouldn’t think about Bastian not coming back.

Bastian nodded. “I’ll return,” he said with resolve. “I promise.” For an instant he hesitated; then he clenched his jaw, his many freckles seeming to dance over his nose and cheek. Far too charming.

The ache Odhrán had felt when he and Bastian had argued weeks before reasserted itself with a stab to his gut. He did his best to focus on something else, instead shouting to one of the crew to tidy up the ropes.

Bastian pressed his lips together in a half smile, then walked to the bow and raised his hands skyward as if in supplication. Flames rose from his skin, undulating with the wind, burning red, orange, and yellow. The air around him swirled, the colors blending, stretching as they spun. Bastian’s face changed, his full lips stretching, his nose and chin reshaping, nostrils flaring. His arms lengthened as the flames changed into the familiar feathery scales that ruffled and appeared to shimmer in the colorful haze. Even before his transformation was complete, Bastian launched himself into the air, his body elongating, his human shape no longer recognizable. His wings grew to match his enormous body, and his tail flicked back and forth as he rode the warm currents upward.

Odhrán gasped, overwhelmed by Bastian’s powerful form as he rose higher and higher over the water, then turned to approach the volcano, casting a shadow over the ships and harbor below.

Bastian!

For a moment Odhrán could almost imagine Bastian’s reply, lost on the wind: “I will return to you!” Then the sound vanished amidst the chaos of the docks and the crew who struggled to bring aboard as many of the islanders as the ship could handle.

Never before had Odhrán felt so bereft. Never before had he regretted his silence and buttressed heart. With each powerful movement of Bastian's wings, Odhrán grew more and more certain he would never see Bastian or the dragon again. Tears prickled the corners of his eyes, and he clenched his jaw to regain control of his emotions.

"He'll survive," James said with conviction.

Odhrán remained unconvinced. They knew so little of the Anuki. Even he knew nothing of what might happen if an Anuki were killed outside of the love bond. Would they be reborn? Or would death claim them forever?

He pushed the thought from his mind once again and walked to the bow, watching Bastian's graceful wings lift him high over the island as he made his way to the mountain of fire.

THIRTY-NINE

BASTIAN GLANCED down as he flew over the docks and saw Taren lift his hands skyward, his body glowing like a tiny sun. The wind rose and blew toward the volcano, forcing the smoke and bits of stone back from where they had come. He inhaled and felt for the warm pockets of air, then rode them up the side of the mountain.

The smoke reminded him of the feel of the water against his human skin, like gentle caresses. It also reminded him of a place that he could not picture but that his blood remembered, and he realized he ached to see once again: his home. Someday, perhaps, he might journey there, but now he was content to remain at Odhrán's side, and he'd stay as long as Odhrán would have him.

As he reached the gaping maw where the summit had once been, he glanced back at the harbor and saw the people on the docks, all desperately trying to secure a place aboard one of the ships.

A deep rumble from far underground brought his attention back to his goal. *Not long now.* The mountain refused to wait. He sensed the pressure of the magma building at its core, pushing against an opening far too small to allow passage. A few more minutes and the eruption would send lava and deadly gasses that even Taren, with all his power, could not contain.

Bastian opened his mouth, and the roar that issued from it sounded both familiar and strange. He beat his wings harder, took a deep breath, and dove into the sea of swirling magma. Deeper he traveled, swimming in the viscous rock, seeking another opening where the mountain could vent, if only briefly. Enough to appease the raging forces long enough to allow the others to escape.

Even with his incredibly thick skin and the magic that infused it, the heat pushed his body to its limits. He instinctively understood that he could

withstand the high temperatures only for a short time, that his body would need to regenerate soon or he would die. He didn't worry for himself, although he had no intention of perishing here given the choice. He would do what he must, then rest and hope he hadn't taxed himself too much.

As he made his way deeper inside the mountain, he sensed something he hadn't expected. A single presence, then another, made themselves known. He reached out with his thoughts, hoping to speak to them, but realized they were promising sparks that would grow into living things. *Dragon eggs!* Fear for their safety fled as his memories told him they would flourish here, even amidst the explosions and the inferno.

The volcano shuddered and groaned as he crossed the river of lava and left the eggs behind. He could no longer see, but he swam, allowing the heat to direct him until he reached a place where the rock grew thicker and the liquid cooler—the side of the mountain facing away from the village. He steeled himself, gathering his strength and calling upon his magic. He imagined the magma superheating and snaking its way into the cracks in the hard rock.

Slowly, very slowly, the bedrock of the mountain began to heat. Bastian imagined the stone heating like the coals of a long-dead fire. Again the mountain protested, sending shudders throughout the island and nearly knocking him away from his task. He beat his wings to push closer still, adding dragonfire to the magic, using the last of his breath to encourage the inferno.

It wasn't enough. The rocks heated, but they remained in place. Distantly he sensed the volcano teeter on the brink as the pressure sought release. His lungs cried out in protest and his thoughts blurred from lack of oxygen. He must act before the volcano exploded or risk the islanders and his friends aboard the ships. He backed up, distancing himself from the superheated boulders, then flung himself forward, nose first, using his wings to increase his speed. He imagined his magic as the point of a sword cutting into the rocks and his body as a cannonball launched with blinding speed at an enemy ship.

He met the softened rock head-on, slamming into its surface. The bones in his face and shoulders broke as they met the harder surfaces beneath, but he ignored the pain that screamed for him to stop and save himself. He cared nothing for himself. He would keep those he loved safe, just as Taren would.

The mountainside gave just slightly—enough to allow the volcano to do its work. He smiled, knowing he'd done all he could.

The side of the volcano exploded as Bastian lost consciousness.

TAREN AND Ian ran toward the docks as the ground shook with a large eruption. Black smoke belched from the mountain, rising like a snake about to strike, teeth bared. Near the shore, the *Chimera's* crew was still working to evacuate the islanders and their belongings to the small launches as the ship herself grew closer to the docks.

Overhead, a dark figure flew, silhouetted against the billowing smoke. A dragon. At first Taren wondered if Odhrán had sent him to assist the islanders, but as Bastian's trajectory became clear, Taren shivered. He'd seen this when he'd joined with the stone. He knew where Bastian was headed. Bastian would buy them some time, but at what cost?

He must not think of it now. He sensed the deadly gasses of the volcano penetrating the air around them. He stopped running and turned to face the volcano.

"Taren, we must—" Ian began.

"There's no time." Taren raised his hands skyward. "The volcano will not wait."

Ian stood between Taren and the edge of the crowd by the docks, ready to protect him.

"*Ve'a'nat, Ea'nat, Tur,*" Taren chanted as he raised his hands skyward. *Come and dance, wind!* The words came naturally to his lips, without any thought, although whether supplied by the goddess or Treande's memories, Taren wasn't sure.

The zest of power vibrated in the air, and the wind responded immediately. A strong gust sailed overhead, gathering momentum and mingling with the heat of Taren's power. Cold air met warm, causing steam to rise around his body. The wind shot as though from a cannon, traveling toward the black smoke.

Stronger. Faster.

The wind cleared the smoke over the harbor and sent black fingers out over the ocean, where they thinned and vanished. Taren sent more wind back toward the volcano, coaxing the plume of fire and smoke to turn out to sea, beyond the island.

Thank you.

Taren released his hold on the wind, confident that he'd given the remaining islanders enough time to safely board the ships. He turned and looked at Ian, who had been watching him.

"We must get back to the *Phantom* before she departs," Ian urged, taking Taren's hand in his own.

They ran until they reached the edge of the crowded docks. The *Chimera* had joined the *Phantom* there, but the docks were too small, so she was tethered at her stern with her bow pointing outward. Men, women, and children climbed the rope ladders up to her deck as the crew of the *Phantom* readied the ship to depart. From his vantage point near the docks, Taren saw the *Phantom's* deck was already filled with people huddled under blankets, clutching their belongings.

"Stay where you are!" a voice shouted from behind them. Ian and Taren turned to see Seria and several men, swords pointed at them. Seria held his blade in his left hand, his withered right hand hanging uselessly at his side.

Ian shoved Taren behind him and drew his weapon. "Get to the ship!" he told Taren.

"But—" Taren protested.

"I'll join you there. I promise," Ian said.

"I won't leave you," Taren snapped. "Not now, after—"

The volcano exploded, the sound so loud it hurt Taren's ears. People screamed and scattered as rocks and steam burst from the mountain and rained down on them. An enormous cloud of smoke began to descend over the village.

"Taren," Ian shouted over the noise, still facing Seria and his guards, "help them!"

Taren nodded and ran, his eyes watering from the smoke. He glanced up at the mountain and saw a thick trail of lava running down its side, red-hot and burning everything in its path. But it was not the lava that concerned him. "The gasses are the most dangerous," Vurin had told them when they'd spoken of the volcano back in Callaecia. "They're invisible but deadly."

We should have told them to abandon their possessions and take to the water. But the islanders clung to their ways. They saw themselves as humans first, Ea second. The Council had done its insidious work well and

had stripped them of their true nature. They would need time to adapt to their new circumstances.

He saw James at the docks and shouted to him over the din of panicked villagers. “Tell them to take to the water if they can!”

James nodded and began to shout orders to the soldiers. A moment later the first of the remaining Ea jumped into the water. The few elderly and women with small children who could not easily transform were herded toward the *Chimera*.

Taren hesitated only a moment before making his way closer to the volcano. He must let Ian fight Seria, not only because Ian wanted this—*needed* it—but because Taren’s place was elsewhere.

FORTY

OUT OF the corner of his eye, Ian saw Taren disappear into the crowd. He turned back to Seria. Seria's face was covered in blood and soot, the whites of his eyes almost glowing in stark contrast. Hatred burned in his eyes. Hatred for Ian, for Taren, for everything they stood for, for what he believed they had done.

"I don't have time for this," Ian said under his breath. "Surely you see there's no hope for the island. At least let us help those who can flee before it's too—"

Seria swung his weapon, and Ian moved to block the strike. The men at Seria's sides glanced at each other as if unsure of what to do, lowering their weapons and waiting. Good. In his weakened state, Ian doubted Seria could do much.

"Fight me, traitor!" Seria shouted as he parried and thrust his sword so that Ian had to jump back to avoid the blade.

Ian raised his sword, then swung it down, missing his mark as Seria moved out of the way but catching Seria's upper thigh as he pulled the weapon up again. Seria hissed as the blade easily cut the tattered fabric of his britches, but did not withdraw.

Ian didn't wait for Seria's next move, instead running toward him with his blade pointed at Seria's heart. Seria spun about and caught Ian's sword with his own, forcing it upward as the sound of metal upon metal rang loudly enough to turn the heads of those not already watching the fight.

As soon as the blades met, pain flooded Ian's body, white-hot, as though his blade had turned to molten metal. Surprised, he dropped his weapon, breaking the contact with Seria's magic. He barely had enough

time to roll out of the way as Seria's blade sliced the air above his head.

Seria moved to kick Ian's sword away, but Ian grabbed it in time to meet another swing of Seria's sword. He missed, and Seria caught his left shoulder. Not a deep wound—easily healed—but it stung.

Ian shouted and shot to his feet. Seria appeared to be inspecting his handiwork and was unprepared as Ian aimed for the back of his leg. Ian caught Seria's left calf, the blade cutting near to the bone. Seria dropped to his knees.

"Ian!" someone shouted behind him. "Look out!" A hail of rocks and ash followed the cry of warning.

The debris burned his forearms and face, but Ian ignored them. He didn't have time to waste. He took advantage of Seria's surprise to thrust his blade at Seria's chest. The blade slowed sickeningly as it met flesh. Seria fell forward onto the cobblestones. The two guards who'd been watching dropped their weapons and ran toward the docks. Ian had expected they'd have much to sort out when they reached the colony, not the least of which would be ascertaining the loyalties of the Ea they'd rescued.

"Ian!" Ian turned and saw Aine waving at him from the *Phantom's* deck.

Ian sheathed his weapon and began to walk to the docks. He didn't expect the shout from behind him. "You bastard!" He turned to see Seria pointing a pistol at him.

Taren, he thought, *I'm sorry. I didn't want to leave you again.*

He waited for the shot, but instead he saw a blur behind Seria. The next thing he knew, the point of a blade emerged from Seria's chest. Pierced through the heart, Seria widened his eyes in surprise as he dropped the pistol. It discharged as it fell onto the cobblestones, its deadly payload hitting a nearby building.

The man who had run Seria through now withdrew his blade. Seria clutched his chest and collapsed. He gasped and writhed for a moment, then grew still.

"Barra." Ian stared at the man who held the bloody sword. Barra looked back at him, his slightly parted lips belying his hard expression. He wiped his sword on his pants, smearing the blood in an arc, then spat on Seria.

"Death is too good for him," Barra said in an undertone, as if the words were meant only for himself.

"Aye."

“Ian!” Taren ran to him, panting. “What—” He saw Seria’s body on the stone and his eyes grew wide. “Goddess.”

The volcano rumbled. “Get to the ship!” Ian shouted. When Barra did not move, Ian said, “You too, man. No time to argue.”

Already the *Chimera* had begun to pull toward the mouth of the harbor. Barra nodded, and they ran toward the ships.

FORTY-ONE

TAREN, IAN, and Barra climbed aboard the *Phantom* as she followed the *Chimera* from the mouth of the harbor. The Ea ships were already under sail, moving away from the island.

"Take him to the brig," Ian ordered, pointing at Barra. Several men grabbed Barra by his arms. Barra did not fight them.

"But he—" Taren began to protest. After all Barra had done for them, did Ian still hold Barra accountable?

"He saved my life, aye," Ian agreed. "But it isn't my place to pass judgment on him. If we are to start again, build a new colony, the word of one man cannot be law. He will be judged by his peers."

Taren nodded. He hadn't considered that if Barra were to live with them, the people would need to decide upon his guilt.

Barra, who had listened to this interchange with obvious surprise, said, "I will accept whatever punishment is proper." The men led him away as Ian and Taren made their way to where Renda steered the ship.

"They mutinied," Renda told Ian as he took the wheel. "Some of the villagers have joined the navy ships."

"Aye. Seems Barra got the word out that we were here to help the islanders flee and not attack their ships," Ian said. "He saved my life."

"Barra? My, my," Renda said with the ghost of a smile. "Now *that* is something I'd not have expected."

Ian did not reply.

"Has Bastian returned?" Taren asked, suddenly aware that he hadn't seen Bastian since he'd flown toward the volcano.

"Bastian?" Ian asked. "I thought he was aboard the *Chimera*."

"He transformed," Renda said. "He hoped to calm the volcano long

enough to allow us safe passage. He has yet to return.”

At that moment the volcano erupted with renewed violence. Taren grabbed the mizzen as the volcano blew fire, rocks, and water skyward. He sensed the volcano was near collapse and that it would take the entire island with it when it imploded.

Bastian! His thought carried on the wind. *Come back!*

“*Get the ships out of here!*” he imagined he heard Bastian say in response.

“We need to leave,” Ian shouted over the din of the rumbling island. All around them, bits of rock and ash fell into the water, sending steam rising from the surface. The waters around the island roiled with the vibrations, creating large waves that buffeted the ship.

“But Bastian—”

The ship caught the edge of a particularly large swell, and Ian struggled to keep her on course. Ian was right. If they perished, Bastian’s work to keep the volcano at bay long enough to evacuate the island would be lost.

But the stone would not let Taren be. It burned in his chest, urging him on.

The goddess wants me to help him.

For the first time since they’d returned to the ship, he realized Vurin had been standing nearby, watching them. He met Vurin’s gaze and drew a long breath. Inscrutable as ever, Vurin looked back at him and inclined his head.

“Go with the goddess,” Vurin said. “She will guide you.”

Taren nodded and ran to the stern. With the volcano in his sights, he reached out with tendrils of wind to touch it. Inside what was left of the mountaintop, lava churned and spit, scraping the earthen sides like a bird’s claws. Each time the earth weakened, lava spilled forth through the cracks, rushing down the mountain and setting more of the trees below ablaze.

At the volcano’s heart, Taren felt Bastian struggle to tamp down the gasses and molten rock that burst upward. He felt the powerful beat of Bastian’s wings as he attempted to direct the flow, Bastian’s hope to redirect the mountain’s fury away from the village. It was doing little good now. The process was too far along. But if Bastian stopped, the mountain would claim them. The slowest of the islanders’ ships would not make it to the open sea in time.

Taren put his hand over his heart and called upon the power of the stone. He felt the wind take hold of the volcano, and he imagined the cooling breezes solidifying the rock. Slowly, crust formed over several of the fissures.

Goddess, Taren prayed, grant me your power. And keep Bastian safe!

FORTY-TWO

“WHAT THE hell is he doing?” Ian ran after Taren with Renda on his heel. He stopped a few feet away from Taren and stared.

“Giving Bastian and the rest of us time to escape,” Renda said. “But —”

Taren’s body shimmered from within a swirling cloud of vapor. His dark hair appeared nearly white as it moved upward, blown by the force of the wind. His eyes were no longer dark but pale silver. Ian gasped to realize he could nearly see through Taren to the ship’s rail behind him.

“You must stop him.” Renda’s eyes shone with both awe and fear.

He will die. Ian sensed the power moving through Taren. But it was too much for his body. This power—the goddess’s full power—had never been meant to be wielded by an earthly being.

“You must let him fulfill his purpose,” Vurin said. Renda glared at him.

“Taren, please,” Ian pleaded. “Let it go.”

“I can’t,” Taren answered. “Not yet. The ships aren’t safe.” His voice blew around them, floating on the wind, rising and falling with it. “It’s too soon.”

Ian’s need to protect Taren warred with his fear for the ships. Taren was right. They needed more time or they’d lose the slowest ships and all the precious souls they carried. The last of the fishing boats had made it past the entrance to the harbor. *Not far enough.* A minute more, perhaps two. But even now, Taren’s body had become more transparent.

“No.” Ian’s whisper was lost as the wind blew harder, filling the sails. He felt Taren’s presence throughout the ship. He was pushing them away, knowing the volcano would no longer be denied. Taren was becoming the wind.

Ian reached out to touch Taren, but something pushed him back. The wind blew him onto the deck several feet away.

“Let me go,” the wind said. *“This is what I was meant to do. What I am meant to be.”*

“Taren,” Ian begged, “you must stop.”

Taren met his gaze and smiled. *“Just a little longer,”* the wind whispered.

He wouldn’t let Taren die. The goddess hadn’t given him his own gift of power to watch the soul he treasured above all others vanish.

“Take my hand,” he commanded Taren as he reached out his own. “We do this together, or this ends now.”

Taren’s body, which had nearly faded, now grew more corporeal. Taren met Ian’s gaze with eyes wide and dark with emotion.

“Taren. I was born to help you with this. You can feel it, can’t you?” Ian prayed Taren could understand him. “It isn’t a coincidence that we were both reborn. The goddess intended us to work together.”

Another moment passed, and Ian despaired that Taren would even understand what he had said. Just when he was about to charge Taren in hopes of stopping him, Taren extended his hand.

Ian took Taren’s hand, but his fingers slipped through Taren’s, as if there was nothing left to make contact with. “Taren!” Ian shouted. “Come back to me!”

Taren blinked, then briefly closed his eyes. His hand, which had nearly vanished, solidified. Ian grabbed hold of Taren and pulled him against his body. He focused his power on protecting Taren. He imagined Taren’s body growing more solid.

The heat of the energy from the rune stone flowed through Ian’s body. Pain like fire lanced through his chest and arms. Taren’s pain became his own. He gritted his teeth and held Taren tighter. Taren’s body flickered and came back into focus, reminding Ian of an image seen through a spyglass.

Ian’s consciousness raced on the wind alongside Taren’s, their minds now one as Taren struggled to maintain his tenuous hold on the wind. Ian saw himself through Taren’s eyes—the kind soul Taren treasured beneath the stubborn exterior. He felt Taren’s fear for him and knew Taren felt his own. With each pulsing wave of power that tugged the wind and forced it to obey, Ian felt Taren’s love for him like Ea heartsong rising on the breeze and wrapping itself around him.

The wind whistled, yet they remained untouched by it, as though they stood in the eye of a storm. Here, the music grew louder still, its melody lifted up to the heavens. Music for the goddess's ears.

Don't leave me, Ian pleaded, knowing his words were meant more for the goddess than for Taren. She had commanded this. She had known that without the other, neither of them was strong enough.

"Ian. Beloved Ian. I love—"

The volcano exploded with such force that the wind redoubled. What was left of the mountain collapsed in a cloud of black and silver smoke, and the resulting shockwave stung Ian's face. Bits of hot lava fell into the water, but none of it touched the sails. All around, he heard the shouts of his men as they struggled to douse the flames that licked at the deck and railing while the ship was buffeted in the waves. The smaller ships, however, moved quickly and smoothly over the surface of the water, riding the waves out to sea. Above them, the wind swirled like a dome, protecting them from the falling debris.

Ian held Taren, pushing away the wind that threatened to devour what remained of his body. Ian cared nothing for his own life. He knew only an overwhelming desire to keep Taren safe in the midst of the maelstrom. The fire of his own power mingled with Taren's, keeping the wind at bay. The heat seared his body, and still he continued to release the fire.

Slowly the winds quieted and the world outside his thoughts returned. Ian saw the small ships in the distance, well beyond the volcano's reach. The smoke that belched from the island blew away from them, against the wind. Taren had done this. Taren had calmed the winds in their path and coaxed them forward. Taren had shielded them from the volcano's wrath.

The swirling vortex around them ebbed and died. Taren collapsed soundlessly into Ian's arms. Ian cradled his body, which seemed more solid than it had a moment ago.

Black smoke mingled with clouds in the distance. They had made good time thanks to Taren. The larger, faster ships had taken some damage, although nothing that couldn't be repaired while they were underway.

Ian glanced toward Renda, who shook his head. *Too late*. He felt it too. The stone demanded payment for the power Taren had borrowed.

No, please. Don't take him.

For the first time, Ian noticed the outline of something red amidst the pale wisps of Taren's body. The rune stone, glowing hot and beating like a

heart. Ian put his hand to Taren's chest. No heartbeat save the pulsing of the stone.

Ian looked up at Renda. "What can we do for him?" he asked, afraid to hear the answer.

Renda knelt beside Ian and put his hand to Taren's chest. He shook his head. Beside him, Vurin, too, appeared at a loss.

"Taren, come back to me," Ian whispered as he held Taren's head against his chest.

Taren did not answer.

Ian got to his feet, still holding Taren. He walked over to the railing, past some of the crew, who stared at him in shock and horror. Tears streamed over Aine's dirt-stained face.

Ian didn't wait for Renda or Vurin to tell him it was hopeless. He wouldn't have listened anyhow. He stepped onto the railing and dove into the water, transforming with Taren in his arms, his clothes shredding as his body changed.

Beneath the waves, Taren's body seemed more substantial, less like an echo of the man. But he hadn't transformed.

Taren! Come back to me! You must transform.

Taren's eyes fluttered open, then closed again. Ian sensed him surrender to death as the water filled his still-human lungs.

No! It doesn't need to be like this again.

"The goddess is waiting," Taren whispered.

You must transform, Taren. Ian took Taren's face in his hands and drew him close, then kissed him tenderly. *Please. You must try.*

Taren moaned, the sound dying quickly in the water. He opened his eyes again and smiled at Ian. "*Transform,*" he repeated.

Aye.

The water around Taren grew hot and glowed like fire. Ian was forced to release Taren, who drifted a few feet away but did not sink deeper. Tendrils of fire mingled with water and snaked around Taren's body, caressing it and causing it to turn in the current they created. Taren opened his arms, palms facing upward in supplication.

The music Ian had heard before returned. The goddess's voice, like a mother's lullaby. Taren's pale skin pinked and his eyes widened in surprise as bands of silver wrapped around his skin, then fused with it, leaving shimmering trails much like the markings of an Ea tail all over his body.

Upward they traveled, caressing Taren's cheeks and leaving their marks on his face.

Taren's tail took the place of his legs, but here, too, the markings differed from those Ian remembered. Kisses of color mingled with silver. Even Taren's dark hair had turned a silvery white, and his eyes were the color of the ocean.

But it was Taren's chest that held Ian's attention. The skin over Taren's heart remained translucent. Beneath, Ian could clearly see the rune stone—or rather, what had *been* the rune stone, for now it glowed blue like the ocean. Taren put his right hand over his heart and stared back at Ian in shock.

So beautiful, Ian said, at a loss to describe Taren's transformation.

Taren flexed the muscles of his tail and glanced downward. His eyes widened and his lips parted in surprise. *"I'm not the same?"* he asked.

Ian embraced Taren and claimed his lips. Taren took Ian's hand and laid it where the rune stone beat. Ian felt the steady pulse there. *You're still mine*, Ian said.

Taren laughed and spun Ian around.

It's over, Ian said.

"No," Taren answered as he took Ian's hand and led him up to the water's surface. *"It's just begun."*

Ian smiled as he followed. Taren's movements in the water seemed different than he remembered. Easier. More powerful than before. More powerful even than Ian's own strokes.

They reached the surface a moment later, then broke through the waves. Ian transformed and inhaled the sweet air. Beside him, however, Taren spluttered and coughed, then sank down.

Taren! Ian once again transformed. He found Taren a few feet below the surface. *Are you all right?*

"I can't." Taren stared back at him.

What's wrong?

"I can't transform." Taren didn't seem to believe the words.

You're tired. You should rest awhile, then—

"It won't matter." Taren swam over to Ian and brushed his fingers over Ian's lips. *"I've changed."*

Changed? No. You're just—

“I can’t,” Taren repeated. “The stone’s power demands payment. The goddess told me so.”

The goddess...?

Taren nodded. He extended his left arm and ran his fingers over it, then gazed back at Ian and said, *“She has given back my life. The only life I ever wanted. A life beneath the water with you.”*

Taren. Se venrusa. Ian gathered Taren in his embrace and wrapped his tail around Taren’s. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the feel of Taren’s body, solid and warm. *The goddess gave you back to me. I may spend the rest of my life serving her, and I won’t have thanked her enough.*

FORTY-THREE

WRAPPED IN a blanket one of the *Chimera*'s crew had provided him, Ian watched Odhrán for several minutes without speaking.

"How long are you going to stand there?" Odhrán asked finally. He continued to gaze out over the water.

"I might ask you the same."

"I'm glad Taren lives," Odhrán said. The unspoken words cut Ian to the quick.

"Bastian will return," Ian said in an undertone.

"If he lives." Odhrán's shoulders sagged almost imperceptibly.

"You love him, don't you?"

"Of course I love him. He's been like a son—"

"Not as a son," Ian said.

"What are your plans?" Odhrán asked.

"Taren and I will travel by water," Ian said, knowing full well it was useless to press Odhrán. "We'll meet the ships in the Eastern Lands. With a little luck, we won't be long behind you. Taren asked that you lead them, along with Vurin. Some are fearful of him."

Odhrán's laugh sounded bitter. "And you believe they fear me less?"

Ian smiled and nodded. "Aye. That I do. They've seen your crew. They understand what you've done—how you've lived alongside both humans and Ea. They respect you for that."

Odhrán turned and met Ian's gaze. "I will do what I can." He paused, then asked, "How is Taren?"

"Relieved. He knows there will be much to do when we reach the ancient colony. He understands that many of the islanders will not be willing to give up their way of life. It will take time to convince them of where they

belong. For now, if they wish to live on land, Vurin will make sure they are safe. Perhaps later they will join the others at the colony.” Ian felt quite sure Taren would prevail in this as well. How far they both had come since his crew had fished the unconscious Taren from the water, barely alive, unaware of his true nature.

“I do not believe in your goddess,” Odhrán said, his eyes glinting with challenge. Ian held his tongue. “But I must admit there is a certain beauty in the outcome. The boy who once believed he was human can never return to that life.”

“Aye. But he couldn’t be happier than he is beneath the waves. He regrets nothing. He is where he always wished to be.” Ian inhaled deeply, his chest warming with the thought of Taren and him together, where they belonged.

Odhrán nodded. “I will assist Vurin. We will await your arrival. The humans in my crew will assist those who wish to live on land.”

“Thank you.” Ian fought the urge to embrace Odhrán. He knew Odhrán feared being touched. Perhaps someday that too would change, but he wouldn’t press Odhrán.

“Safe travels, Captain.”

“May you run with the wind,” Ian said, turning to leave.

ODHRÁN WATCHED Ian dive into the water and transform. Taren emerged and waved, then disappeared beneath the swells.

“I look forward to swimming with you again,” Taren said. *“Fair winds until then.”*

“Fair winds, Taren.”

Odhrán descended the stairs to his cabin. He’d avoided returning here since Bastian had joined the crew of the *Phantom*. He’d never admitted it to himself, but he’d hoped someday Bastian would decide to join his crew. And perhaps.... But Bastian was gone forever, and now Odhrán would never have the chance to ask him to stay.

Odhrán picked up one of the pillows that had fallen into the center of the room during the battle and tossed it atop the others. A single feather caught his eye, iridescent orange and red.

He’d pushed Bastian away. He hadn’t lied when he’d told Bastian he

cared for him. Bastian had needed him. Not like his crew, who needed a leader. Bastian had needed him the way Odhrán had needed Luka centuries before. Odhrán had once feared he would become as cold and callous as Luka. But Bastian had shown him that his heart could love again, and that he needed nothing in return.

Odhrán yawned. How strange. He never slept unless he'd overtaxed himself by using his magic.

Bastian will return. The words echoed in his mind, but he no longer believed them.

FORTY-FOUR

The Northern Territories, Eight Months Later

ODHRÁN SAT on the beach, his feet covered with warm sand. Much as he loved the colony Taren and the other Ea had built, he often found himself here when he needed a moment to think without interruption. In the distance, the mountains rose like sentinels guarding the turquoise water. For a moment he imagined the shadow of wings dancing over the sun. It reminded him of the time he'd spent wandering after he'd left Astenya.

A solitary figure emerged from the waves, the ends of his long hair painted with bits of foam from the surf.

"Taren sent me with an invitation to join us for the evening meal," Ian said. "He's worried about you."

Of course Taren would worry. And though Odhrán didn't want Taren's concern, the thought that Taren cared for him warmed his soul. Ian and Taren had given him so much. Friendship. A home of his own on the outskirts of Ea'ga. Acceptance at last. That he still grieved Bastian in spite of the gifts he'd received angered him. What right did he have to complain about his lot?

"I'm well, thank you," Odhrán answered, unwilling to indulge his weakness.

"Then you'll come?" Ian eyed him with concern.

"Aye." He scanned the horizon as he had many times before.

"Bastian will return," Ian said, as if reading his thoughts.

Odhrán shook his head, more at his own folly than Ian's. Bastian would never return.

Ian furrowed his brow. "You don't know that Bastian's dead." Odhrán saw rather than sensed Ian's own pain. The flicker of emotion in his eyes,

the press of his lips, the bob of his Adam's apple.

Odhrán shrugged, hoping the casual gesture would cover for his anguish and guilt. "There's been no word." James and several others of his crew had returned from the Luathan Islands a week before, having spent nearly a month asking after Bastian. Odhrán had not asked them to do so, but neither had he stopped them.

"Anuki are immortal," Ian pointed out.

And we know so little about them. Still, he wouldn't argue with Ian, who was only trying to be kind. "Please tell Taren I'd be happy to join you for dinner."

Ian studied him for a moment, then nodded and walked back into the waves, disappearing a moment later.

Odhrán lay on the sand and closed his eyes, allowing his thoughts to drift back to his time aboard the *Chimera* with Bastian. The sound of the waves breaking on the sand punctuated the memories that danced in his mind like ghosts. Luka. Treande. Bastian. All gone forever, for better or for worse.

He was tired. Tired of outliving his friends, tired of pretending he didn't care for those he'd lost. Taren and Ian did all they could to make him comfortable, as did most of the Ea. But it would be time to leave soon. Once again, Odhrán would say his good-byes and move on.

If only time might stand still for once. The wind caressed his face as he drifted off to sleep.

"I thought you never slept."

Startled, Odhrán opened his eyes. The sun overhead obscured his vision, the figure gazing down on him silhouetted in a blur of light. Odhrán put a hand over his eyes to shield them as the blotches of purple and green imprinted on his retinas began to dissipate.

"Bastian?" No. It couldn't be. He'd fallen asleep and he was dreaming.

Bastian's musical laughter sounded so real. So close. "And here I thought you'd be happy to see me."

Odhrán was on his feet, wrapping his arms around Bastian in a loving embrace before he even knew what he was doing. When he realized Bastian was naked from his transformation, he pulled abruptly away. "Bastian. You're not a dream, are you?" He forced himself to look away from Bastian's creamy skin with its myriad freckles and the slight curve where

back met buttocks.

More laughter, then soft fingers on his cheek. Bastian's touch felt so good. "It took me a bit longer to make it back," Bastian said. "I'm sorry to have worried you."

"I wasn't wor—"

Bastian wrapped his arms around him, and this time Odhrán did not pull away. He allowed himself to enjoy the feel of Bastian's bare skin and the warmth of his body. They were both grown men, after all, weren't they?

"You don't need to lie," he said against Odhrán's cheek. "I can feel when you hide your true self from me."

Odhrán sighed in spite of himself. "What happened back on the island?" he asked.

Bastian sat in the sand, pulling Odhrán along with him. This time the laughter was Odhrán's. "Later," Bastian said. "For now I just want to sit here... with you." His freckled cheeks flushed crimson. "If you don't mind, that is."

"I don't mind," Odhrán answered. The feel of Bastian's shoulder pressed against his reassured him.

"Have you thought about what I said the night before the battle?" Bastian asked a few minutes later. "I promise I'll work hard. I'll do whatever you and James tell me. I'll—"

"I wish you to stay with me, aboard the *Chimera*." He wouldn't lie. Bastian could always sense his lies anyhow. "But I wonder if first we might travel.... You had mentioned that after this was over, you might...."

"Travel to the High Mountains?" Bastian supplied, his expression bright with excitement.

"I... yes." Odhrán inhaled slowly. "It's been a very long time, and I'd like to see the mountains again. And perhaps I can help you find your people—"

Bastian shouted happily and embraced Odhrán so enthusiastically that they tumbled onto the sand. Bastian raised himself up on one elbow and gazed down at Odhrán with such happiness that Odhrán could not find the words to speak.

"Odhrán?" Bastian said, the broad smile he wore now becoming something far more introspective. Serious.

"Yes?"

Bastian opened his lips as if to speak, then closed them again.

“What is it?” Odhrán pressed.

“I...,” Bastian began. “Nothing.”

“But you intended to say something. Speak your piece.”

Bastian hesitated a long moment, then leaned down and caught Odhrán’s lips. Sweet, with the promise of more, the kiss was both entirely unexpected and wonderful.

“Is that what you’d planned to say?” Odhrán asked after their lips parted, doing his best to school his expression and repress the grin that threatened. His lips vibrated with the aftermath of the kiss, and his heart raced.

Bastian lay next to him on the sand, his hands beneath his head, his thigh pressed firmly against Odhrán’s. “Yes.” He gazed out at the waves, green eyes glowing in the warmth of the setting sun.

“Indeed.” Odhrán allowed the smile he’d withheld moments before to take hold. He felt it spread to his cheeks, his eyes, his nose, and his mouth, and for once, he didn’t resist its siren call.

FORTY-FIVE

TAREN WATCHED from beneath the surf as Ian, then Vurin, shook Eiran's hand. Taren drew a long breath and smiled. He knew he'd never again set foot in Xiat. Although the realization saddened him, he didn't regret his changed circumstances. The colony of Ea'ga had thrived since his people had returned, and he couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

There were fewer huts near the shore than when they'd first arrived with their ragtag ships and meager belongings. Most of those who still chose to live on land now regularly traveled to the colony to visit friends and relatives, and Taren hoped that they'd eventually become comfortable enough to forsake their surface dwellings and join the other Ea. Even the very old and very young had learned they could transform. Babies were now born in the water, able to breathe easily, born as Ea rather than humans.

Some of Odhrán's human crew and those human crewmembers from the *Sea Witch* who'd cast their lot with Ian had established a small settlement a few miles inland. And although Odhrán had chosen to spend his days beneath the water, Taren suspected he would not remain at Ea'ga much longer. Since Bastian's safe return, Odhrán had spoken of traveling with Bastian to the High Mountains in search of Bastian's kin. Taren smiled at the thought that perhaps with Bastian, Odhrán might find a future and a home.

Ian entered the water with a splash, followed by Vurin. "*The king sends his greetings,*" Vurin said as they swam side-by-side back to the underwater city. "*When we are ready, he has invited us to trade with his people.*"

"Governor!" someone shouted in the distance. "*You're needed in the regent's chambers.*"

“No doubt another dispute over land,” Vurin said with a sigh.

It will take time for them to stop thinking as humans. Taren offered Vurin a sympathetic smile. *We can speak later about the trade accord.*

Vurin nodded and swam into the darkness.

Ian slipped his hand in Taren’s. *“Having second thoughts?”* he asked. *“I’m sure Vurin would appreciate your help should you decide you’d like to serve in the government.”*

None at all, Taren replied. *I’m content to serve my people as a priest. I’ve never aspired to politics.* He’d never considered serving as a priest either, although that choice had seemed simple. He’d survived because of the goddess’s grace. The rune stone that beat in his chest bound him to her, body and soul.

“Myself,” Ian said with a broad smile, *“I’m glad to have you by my side at the temple.”*

They followed a school of silver fish downward until they reached the outskirts of the community. Here, Taren paused momentarily as he liked to do, taking in the entirety of their newfound home. Beneath, the temple sparkled in the sunlight. It had been one of the first buildings the Ea had chosen to rebuild after they’d settled here. Those Ea who had lived their lives on Ea’nu under the Council’s tight control had been some of the first to pay their respects to the goddess. Even now, daily offerings of fish and kelp covered the altar.

“It is beautiful.” Ian caught Taren’s hand and laced his fingers with Taren’s.

Taren had never doubted his choice to rebuild the temple or to serve as its first priest. He’d been surprised, however, that Ian had so quickly chosen to serve with him. When he’d asked Ian, who’d often doubted the goddess’s existence, why he’d decided to dedicate his life to her, Ian had just smiled and said, *“I can think of no better way to thank her for my happiness.”*

TAREN COMBED his fingers through Ian’s hair as Ian lay in his arms later that night. Their bed of seaweed and kelp felt soft against his slippery skin, the stone that cradled them warm with the proximity of their bodies. Taren didn’t know if the magic lived in the stone itself or if the Ea who had inhabited the colony centuries before had created it. He didn’t need to

know. He only knew that it felt as though he'd come home. This place healed his soul.

"*You're quiet tonight,*" Ian said, then turned and pressed his lips to Taren's.

Taren sighed happily. *Vila and Viro knocked over one of the stalls in the marketplace. Again. Tyrr and Lesta asked to be handfasted at the full moon. Fiall and Aine left with Eiran to spend a few months in Xiat. Renda mended two broken tailflukes and helped deliver a healthy girl child. He kissed Ian back, then grinned. Life is wonderful. The way I dreamed it should be, years ago, when I still lived at the inn.*

"*Aye.*" Ian grinned. "*Wonderfully normal.*"

Vurin says Barra will be released soon, Taren added, watching Ian for his reaction. *He approved the Senate's order. They believe his punishment is adequate.*

Ian sighed. Taren shared his mixed emotions. Others who now lived at Ea'ga had once supported Seria and the Council, including several who had served on the Council itself. It would be some time before the rest of the colony accepted them, if they ever did. The newly formed senate, which had been elected by the colony's people, had sentenced to prison only those deemed the most complicit in the atrocities committed in the Council's name.

"*He's more than paid the price for his treason,*" Ian agreed. "*Perhaps now he'll find a measure of peace.*"

Taren wondered if Barra would ever truly know contentment or if he'd even stay with the colony upon his release. He hoped Barra would remain. Renda had told him that Ian had asked him to stay. Taren hadn't pressed Ian on the topic. He knew how much it still pained Ian that Barra had not come to him when Seria had threatened his family. Some grief ran too deep.

"*I've been thinking,*" Ian said as Taren continued to stroke his hair. *About?*

"*We're priests now,*" Ian replied as he stretched his tail and settled deeper into their bed.

Taren wrapped a curly lock around his finger. *I'm quite aware of that, beloved.*

Ian's eyes glimmered with amusement. He was up to something,

although Taren had yet to figure out what. *"We must do more to encourage our people. Show them the past is behind us and their future is here to claim."*

An eloquent thought. And how would you suggest we, as their priests, encourage them?

Ian wriggled his tailflukes so they brushed Taren's. *"Set an example for them."*

An example? Taren sighed and settled onto Ian's chest, his head against Ian's shoulder.

"Aye." Ian reached beneath himself and withdrew something. *"An example."*

What are you up to, Ian?

"Nothing." Ian pressed his lips together, then slid out from under Taren and floated upright at the side of their bed.

Ian... Taren sat up, concerned that perhaps he'd misread Ian's playfulness.

Ian's expression grew suddenly serious. He held out a simple gold pendant, which Taren took by its chain. He inhaled sharply when he realized what it was: the tiny shell he'd given Ian months before. The shell that reminded him of Treande and Owyn, and of their handfasting.

"I meant what I said." Ian's voice sounded like a caress in Taren's mind. *"That someday we will celebrate our own handfasting, as they did."*

Taren took the necklace and placed it over his head.

"Then you will have me?" Ian asked, his voice surprisingly tentative.

Do you fear my answer? When Ian did not respond, Taren took Ian's hands in his own and clasped them against his heart. The rune stone responded by warming their hands. *Of course I will have you.*

Ian's face flickered for an instant, and Taren saw another familiar face in its stead. *Owyn. Beloved.* The voice was not Taren's.

"Treande. My own."

Taren gasped, and Ian's lips parted in surprise. *"Did you hear that?"*

Aye.

Ian's smile lit his soul. Such a beautiful soul. *His* soul. Then and now.

Don't miss how the story began!



Stealing the Wind

Mermen of Ea: Book One

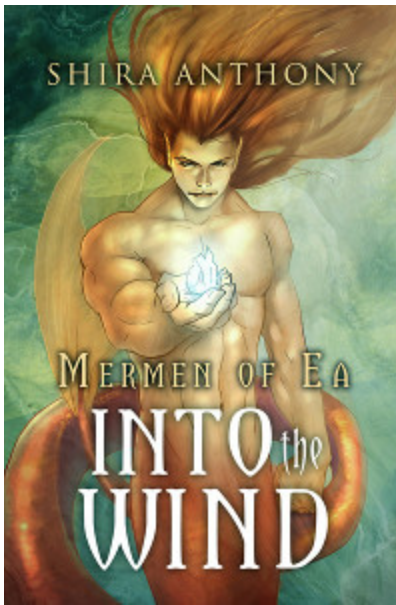
By Shira Anthony

Taren Laxley has never known anything but life as a slave. When a lusty pirate kidnaps him and holds him prisoner on his ship, Taren embraces the chance to realize his dream of a seagoing life. Not only does the pirate captain offer him freedom in exchange for three years of labor and sexual servitude, but the pleasures Taren finds when he joins the captain and first mate in bed far surpass his greatest fantasies.

Then, during a storm, Taren dives overboard to save another sailor and is lost at sea. He's rescued by Ian Dunaidh, the enigmatic and seemingly ageless captain of a rival ship, the *Phantom*, and Taren feels an overwhelming attraction to Ian that Ian appears to share. Soon Taren learns a secret that will change his life forever: Ian and his people are Ea, shape-shifting merfolk... and Taren is one of them too. Bound to each other by a fierce passion neither can explain or deny, Taren and Ian are soon embroiled in a war and forced to fight for a future—not only for themselves but for all

their kind.

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>



Into the Wind

Mermen of Ea: Book Two

By Shira Anthony

Since learning of his merman shifter heritage, Taren has begun building a life with Ian Dunaidh among the mainland Ea. But memories of his past life still haunt him, and as the threat of war with the hostile island merfolk looms ever closer, Taren fears he will lose Ian the same way he lost his beloved centuries before. Together they sail to the Gateway Islands in search of the fabled rune stone—a weapon of great power the Ea believe will protect them—and Odhrán, the pirate rumored to possess it.

After humans attack the *Phantom*, Taren finds himself washed up on an island, faced with a mysterious boy named Brynn who promises to lead him to Odhrán. But Taren isn't sure if he can trust Brynn, and Odhrán is rumored to enslave Ea to protect his stronghold. Taren will have to put his life on the line to find his way back to Ian and attempt to recover the stone. Even if he does find it, his troubles are far from over: he and Ian are being stalked by an enemy who wants them dead at all costs.

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SHIRA ANTHONY was a professional opera singer in her last incarnation, performing roles in such operas as *Tosca*, *Pagliacci*, and *La Traviata*, among others. She's given up TV for evenings spent with her laptop, and she never goes anywhere without a pile of unread M/M romance on her Kindle.

Shira is married with two children and two insane dogs, and when she's not writing, she is usually in a courtroom trying to make the world safer for children. When she's not working, she can be found at the Carolina coast aboard *Land's Zen*, a 35' catamaran sailboat, with her favorite sexy captain at the wheel.

Shira writes what she loves, be it contemporary musicians, shifter mermen, or time-traveling vampires. Her Mermen of Ea series book, *Into the Wind*, was named one of the best books of 2014 by both Scattered Thoughts and Rogue Words and Hearts on Fire Reviews, and was a finalist in the 2014 Goodreads M/M Romance Member's Choice Awards. Her *Blue Notes* series of classical-music-themed gay romances was named one of Scattered Thoughts and Rogue Word's "Best Series of 2012," and the most recent book in the series, *Dissonance*, was named one of the best books of 2014 by Hearts on Fire Reviews.

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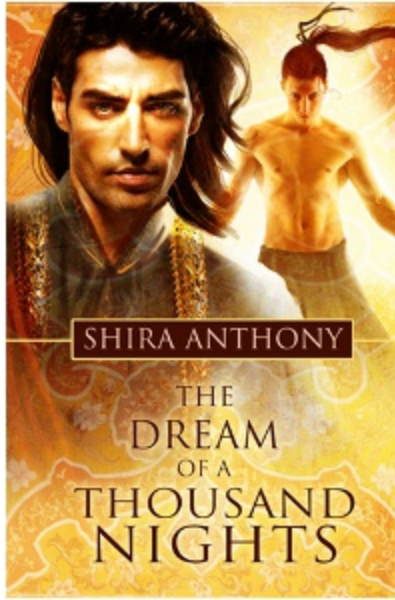
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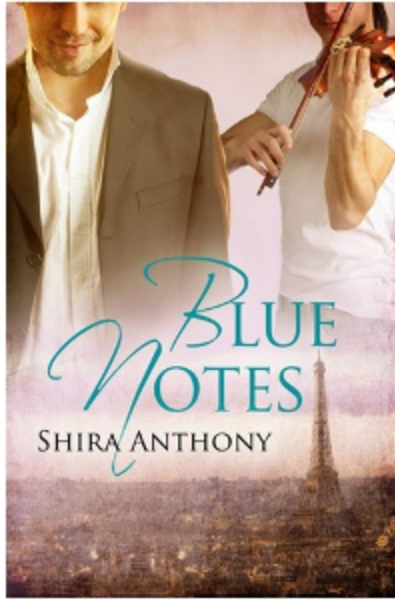
The Dream of a Thousand Nights

By Shira Anthony

Neriah, the crown prince of Tazier, escapes his father's deadly wrath with the help of a Jinn named Tamir. Knowing that the other Jinn would find and punish him for falling in love with a human, Tamir takes Neriah's memories of their brief time together and leaves him with only a jade pendant as a token of his love. Tamir is then stripped of his powers and imprisoned for his crime.

Ten years later, Neriah is still on the run from the King's assassins, but each night he dreams of a lover whose face he cannot see and whose name he does not know, but who fills his heart with peace. Tamir, freed at last from his prison cell, poses as a pleasure slave and offers to serve the prince. Although Neriah does not recognize Tamir, he falls in love with the powerless Jinn. But just when Tamir has earned Neriah's trust, he is forced to betray it. There may be no hope of mending their broken relationship, but Tamir is determined to see Neriah on his rightful throne—even if it costs the Jinn his life.

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Blue Notes

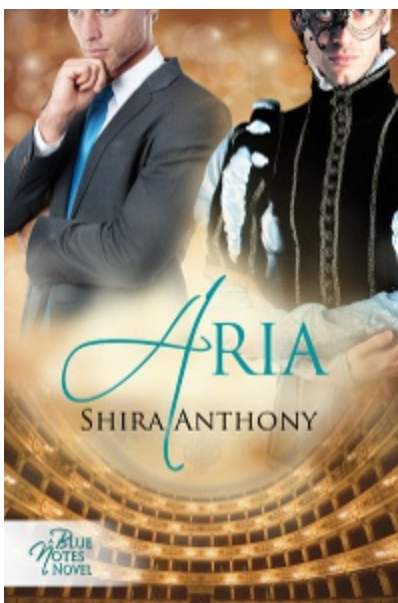
A Blue Notes Novel

By Shira Anthony

Blame it on jet lag. Jason Greene thought he had everything: a dream job as a partner in a large Philadelphia law firm, a beautiful fiancée, and more money than he could ever hope to spend. Then he finds his future wife in bed with another man, and he's forced to rethink his life and his choices. On a moment's notice, he runs away to Paris, hoping to make peace with his life.

But Jason's leave of absence becomes a true journey of the heart when he meets Jules, a struggling jazz violinist with his own cross to bear. In the City of Love, it doesn't take them long to fall into bed, but as they're both about to learn, they can't run from the past. Sooner or later, they'll have to face the music.

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Aria

A Blue Notes Novel

By Shira Anthony

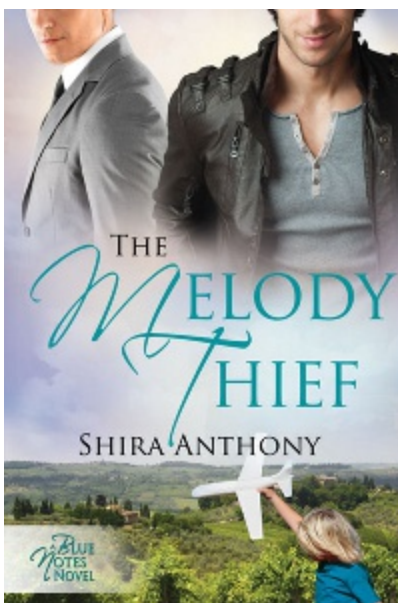
Five years after a prestigious scholarship jumpstarted his opera career, Aiden Lind has it all: fame, choice roles, and Lord Cameron Sherrington to share his life with. Maintaining his façade takes effort, but under his poised, sophisticated mask, Aiden is still the insecure kid from rural Mississippi. Then he walks in on Cam with another man, and the illusion of perfection shatters.

Philadelphia attorney Sam Ryan never moved on after his partner died, though he tried. Instead of dating, he keeps himself busy with work—but when he unexpectedly runs into ex-lover Aiden while on a rare vacation in Paris, he's inspired to give their love a second chance. First, though, he'll have to get Aiden to forgive him. Because when Sam was still grieving five years ago, he broke Aiden's heart.

When rekindled lust blossoms into a true romance, it seems like the start of something wonderful. But Aiden's career has him on the road much of the time, and the physical distance between him and Sam starts translating into an emotional disconnect. If Aiden and Sam can't learn to communicate,

their separation may prove more than their love can bear.

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The Melody Thief

A Blue Notes Novel

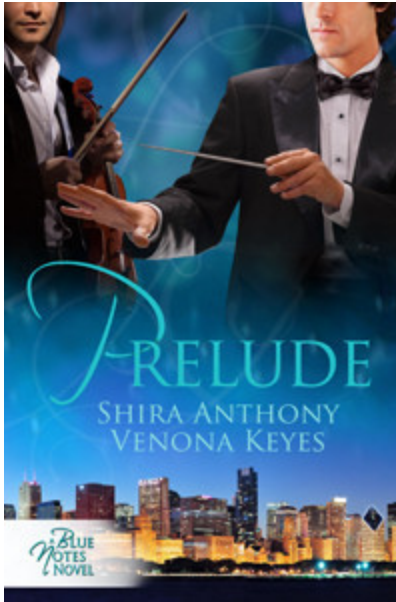
By Shira Anthony

Cary Redding is a walking contradiction. On the surface he's a renowned cellist, sought after by conductors the world over. Underneath, he's a troubled man flirting with addictions to alcohol and anonymous sex. The reason for the discord? Cary knows he's a liar, a cheat. He's the melody thief.

Cary manages his double life just fine until he gets mugged on a deserted Milan street. Things look grim until handsome lawyer Antonio Bianchi steps in and saves his life. When Antonio offers something foreign to Cary—romance—Cary doesn't know what to do. But then things get even more complicated. For one thing, Antonio has a six-year-old son. For another, Cary has to confess about his alter ego and hope Antonio forgives him.

Just when Cary thinks he's figured it all out, past and present collide and he is forced to choose between the family he wanted as a boy and the one he has come to love as a man.

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Prelude

A Blue Notes Novel

By Shira Anthony

World-renowned conductor David Somers never wanted the investment firm he inherited from his domineering grandfather. He only wanted to be a composer. But no matter how he struggles, David can't translate the music in his head into notes on paper.

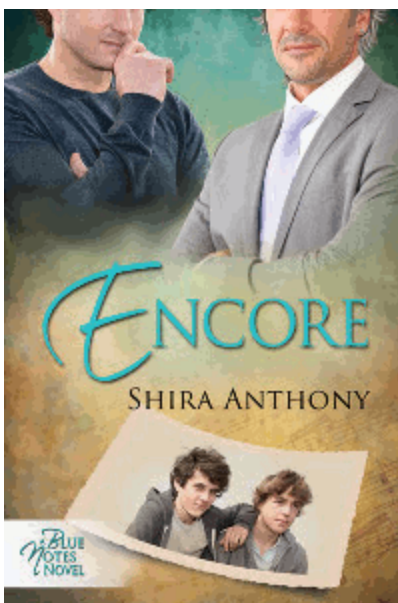
When a guest violinist at the Chicago Symphony falls ill, David meets Alex Bishop, a last-minute substitute. Alex's fame and outrageous tattoos fail to move David. Then Alex puts bow to string, and David hears the brilliance of Alex's soul.

David has sworn off relationships, believing he will eventually drive away those he loves, or that he'll lose them as he lost his wife and parents. But Alex is outgoing, relaxed, and congenial—everything David is not—and soon makes dents in the armor around David's heart. David begins to dream of Alex, wonderful dreams full of music. Becoming a composer suddenly feels attainable.

David's fragile ego, worn away by years of his grandfather's disdain, makes

losing control difficult. When David's structured world comes crashing down, his fledgling relationship with Alex is the first casualty. Still, David hears Alex's music, haunting and beautiful. David wants to love Alex, but first he must find the strength to acknowledge himself.

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Encore

A Blue Notes Novel

By Shira Anthony

Cool kid violinist Roger Nelson doesn't give a damn about anything. Wannabe conductor John Fuchs is awkward, effeminate, and just figuring out he's gay. Despite their differences, they become friends—then lovers—and after college, they try to make it work. But it's the 1970s, and Roger can't bring himself to admit he's gay. Worse, after his brother is killed in Vietnam, Roger tries to live up to his memory and be the perfect son. Then after suffering one tragedy too many, he makes the biggest mistake of his life: Roger pushes John away.

Through the years, they dance around the truth and in and out of each other's lives, never quite able to let go. Twenty years later, Roger still carries the pain of losing his dream of a brilliant career with him, while John is a superstar conductor with a wild reputation. John's off-stage antics get him plenty of attention, good and bad, though deep down, he wants only Roger. Finally determined to hold on to what really matters, Roger asks John for another chance, and when John panics and runs, Roger has to convince him to listen to his heart.

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Symphony in Blue

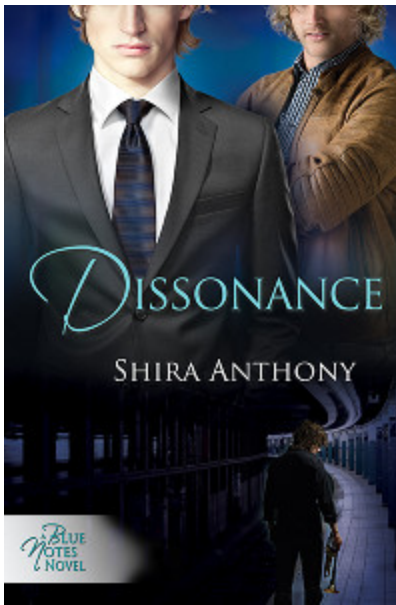
A Blue Notes Novel

By Shira Anthony

Are you a fan of the Blue Notes series? Would you like to know where the couples from the first four books are now? This is your chance to catch up! Aiden and Sam are finally getting married. But when Cary and Antonio's baby daughter makes her appearance a bit earlier than planned, the big reception is put on hold. David Somers normally conducts orchestras, but this time he devotes his energy to "conducting" his friends so that everyone can join him at his Milan villa for a reunion at an intimate Thanksgiving dinner.

Sam and Aiden, Jules and Jason, David and Alex, and Cary and Antonio are soon assembled, and each couple shares something they are thankful for. Played out in four movements, this symphony is a celebration of friendship and love, orchestrated by David.

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Dissonance

A Blue Notes Novel

By Shira Anthony

British noble Cameron Sherrington has hit rock bottom. The love of his life, opera sensation Aiden Lind, is marrying another man, and Cam knows it's his fault for pushing Aiden away. As if that's not enough, someone is trying to take away his family business, and the US authorities are pursuing him on charges of money laundering. Fearing for his safety and unable to return to London, Cam runs, but he's too broke to find a place to stay, and his fugitive's life doesn't even remotely resemble a Hollywood thriller.

Desperate and betrayed by the people he thought cared about him, Cam takes refuge in the subway station where Galen Rusk plays his trumpet for tips. Though Cam hears the beauty in Galen's music, it's Galen's firm hand on his shoulder that stops him from throwing everything away. Their unusual relationship takes a turn that surprises them both, and neither man is sure he wants the complication. Galen is fighting the ghosts of his past, and Cam has his own nightmares to face. When Cam's troubles threaten to tear them apart, Cam figures he had it coming—that it's all penance due for a life lived without honesty or love. But he never considered the possibility

that he might not survive it.

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