

MONSTERS OF DARKNESS SERIES

THE

KRAKEN KING'S CURSE

CHARLOTTE SWAN



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For Elizabeth...

(You deserve all the meatballs!)

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CONTENT WARNINGS

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EVE

This is the worst date I've ever been on.

Which is really saying something, because I've experienced some truly awful ones. Like the one guy who decided we should meet at a seafood restaurant only to tell me he's deathly allergic to shellfish.

Or the one who thought a baseball game was the perfect spot for a first meet-up.

It would've been cute if he wasn't already ten beers deep by the time I arrived. Trying, with the other sloshed men around him, to make an obscenely long snake of plastic cups that resulted in lukewarm beer spilling all over my shoes.

There were also the guys who lacked basic hygiene or the ones whose biggest crime was being boring. That was the risk you took dating in the modern era.

A dating profile could be as deceptive as a possum. By the time you got comfortable enough to agree to the date, they'd spring to life, bite your hand, and give you rabies.

Honestly, rabies might improve the man across from me.

God, what was his name? Conner? No—Conner was last week. His name starts with an 'M'.

Morgan? No. *Maxwell*? No, that's not it either.

"So then my boss said, 'Miles, no one's ever done the report this fast. That's what we like to see from our senior associate'—"

Miles, that's right. I smile pleasantly at his sprawling tale about the work he does for some hedge fund he's been name-dropping since I sat down. Downing the rest of my white wine, I glance around the dimly lit bar.

We aren't the only two on a date. The couples around me seem much happier. Engaging in lively conversation and stealing lingering glances at each other. The only thing Miles has been casting appreciative stares at are my breasts. Gross.

My stomach growls as he prattles on, the conversation growing into a low hum.

Men like Miles all have the same look about them. Dark hair that's thinning at the temples. Pressed slacks and crisp shirts, the result of a dry cleaner. Or worse, their mothers. The proprietary gleam in his eyes sets my teeth on edge.

It's hopeless out here.

I've been lacking in love for so long I don't know what I'd do if I actually found it. Miles is one in a series of bad matches. From the moment he opened his mouth, I knew liking him on *Heartfinder* was a mistake.

Making a profile on the damn app was an even bigger one.

My friend Jen had had success on it, but I think she got the last man in Chicago who was willing to commit. Not that Harry is a prize, by any means. They have their disagreements from his refusal to grow up. Arguments she tends to hide. Harry is just another victim of *Peter Pan Syndrome* that no amount of joint tax-filing and sworn vows can remedy.

She's been married for over a year. They had just welcomed their newborn in the suburbs earlier this year. I've hardly heard from her since she said 'I do'.

That's been the running theme for all of my friends.

As the only single one at twenty-seven, you'd think I'd contracted a disease the way they talk about my relationship status. If one more person looks at me with pity and murmurs, '*It'll happen when you least expect it,*' I'll gouge their eyes out.

Is it so bad to be seen wanting something? Why do I have to pretend to be aloof in order to be worthy of affection? I bring my glass to my lips for the final tart droplets of wine sitting at the bottom.

I've come to the realization that the devotion I'm looking for may elude me forever.

The all-consuming love I want is something I've never glimpsed among my friends and their partners. Maybe it's merciful that I have been picky. Better to be alone than shackled to someone in perpetual disappointment.

I believe in soulmates and that your perfect person is out there.

Mine must also be suffering terribly if he's found himself in a similar situation. I wonder what he's doing right now—my perfect match. If he even exists.

"What do you do for work again?"

Miles's question catches me off guard. I have to blink several times to process that he's actually asked me something. The wine is already making my head spin.

I had spent hours in the studio today and forgotten to eat. By the time I realized how hungry I was, it was time to meet Miles.

I try my best not to search out our waitress, but I'm growing more irritable the longer my stomach rumbles.

"Art," I say, tapping my empty glass with a nail. "I'm a painter."

"Really?"

The crinkle in his nose and the cocked brow are typical when I tell people my profession.

It's the same look I've gotten since dedicating myself to fine arts. My father looked at my career path the same way. God rest his soul. He never understood me. He worked too much after my mother passed when I was a baby for us to properly bond.

The only thing I have from them besides a few memories and old photographs is their money. It's sustained my art, and I don't have it in me to wonder whether that makes my father roll in his grave. It doesn't matter. He's been gone for over six years.

I've lived longer than I ever knew my mother. It'll be the same with my father before long. What he did or didn't approve of in my life won't matter.

What would it have been like to have approving parents? Who saw my art exhibits and met them with awe instead of mild annoyance?

I'll never know the answer. My life has been a series of what-ifs.

What if I had pursued a typical career path and settled down with a stable, albeit boring coworker? What if I hadn't broken up with Jake our senior year of college and followed him to New York? Would it have been us getting married at his family's house in the Hamptons instead of the girl he got with three months after we split?

What if I had eaten before this date and didn't feel like I was going to pass out? What-if. What-if. *What-if.*

What-ifs can drive a girl insane. Not insane enough to make me lose sight of myself. A year in the suburbs with Jake, no matter how white the picket fence, would've stolen my sparkle.

One thing about me, Eve Quinn, is that I like to shine.

No matter how lonely I feel, giving up on what I love is never an option. The man I'm meant to marry won't ask me to change. Not as Miles wants to, as he prattles on about another uninteresting work tangent.

I'm never going to see him again. It's one thing all my dates have in common. I can't seem to get past the first one.

"Isn't that ridiculous?" Miles asks, brows high.

I inwardly curse as he looks at me expectantly. I haven't paid one second of attention to anything he's said. Staying on this date is unfair to both of us. There's a woman out there who will hang on his every word, but that woman is most definitely not me.

"Oh, um—"

I'm spared from answering as our waitress reappears. I nearly sag with relief. Her easy smile is sympathetic as she looks between my second empty wine glass and his half-full first beer. My eyes stray to the plate in her hand and the appetizer we had ordered nearly an hour ago.

"Sorry about the wait. The kitchen always gets slammed on game days."

Apart from the happy couples, the bar is crowded tonight with alumni from schools I'd never heard of. Riotous applause rings out every few minutes as more patrons in baby blue stream in.

Miles had already checked his sports-betting app a couple of times, after explaining to me in great detail his prowess at the art of chance. As if her words reminded him, he did so again as she settled the porcelain plate between us.

The red flags just kept getting more and more crimson.

At least the food was finally here. I could inhale fifty meatballs. Miles had already eaten, so surely he wouldn't mind if—

It looks like a murder scene. Marinara splatters onto the white plate like blood. At the center, one malformed meatball, oozing white cheese as if it were a head leaking brains. It was small, barely constituting an adult portion.

How had this taken an hour?

Gripping my fork, I hold my breath as Miles slices off over half the meatball. I meet his gaze as a sheepish smile curves his thin lips.

“I know I said I wasn’t hungry, but it smells good. I hope you don’t mind.” He plops three-fourths of the spherical meat monstrosity onto his plate. “And I’m paying so...”

The statement trails off and red settles over my vision.

Stabbing the pathetic sliver of beef, I drop the steaming mass onto my plate. My stomach growls, but my anger suppresses it. Emotions flood me, making my ears ring, and my fingers go numb.

Inherently, I know this isn’t Miles’ fault. Bad manners and selfish men are hardly something new. However, this one moment makes every bad date I’ve been on compound into one. They play like a movie in my head.

The handsy dates, the boring ones, the disinterested mansplainers, the shy guys, the mean older men. All of them rotate on a loop, whipping up my anger and anguish into a maelstrom.

It’s not Miles’s fault I hadn’t remembered to eat, just like it’s not his fault that I’ve felt alone for so *fucking* long.

Loneliness made me agree to this date in a noisy bar, when I could’ve been curled up on my couch with takeout in the quiet of my apartment. If I wasn’t so lonely, I wouldn’t be sitting across from a man with an all-too-familiar look in his eye, thinking that a fraction of one meatball entitled him to sleeping with me.

I can tell he’s itching to ask. They always are.

This was a complete and utter waste of my time. Just like everything else in my life. I had no family, no real friends anymore. My life as an artist was stalling, and I was stuck on this wretched date.

I need to break the cycle. No matter the cost, I can’t keep living like this. Something has to change. I’ve let life happen to me for far too long. I need to take back control while I still can.

I’m done being trapped in this unending nightmare of bad first dates and sticky floors. Of staring at the blank canvas before me and waiting for inspiration to strike. I need to get out of Chicago and out of my own head. At least for a bit, until I remember who I am and discover what I want.

If that meant being alone forever, so be it. Anything is better than spending one more minute with a guy like Miles.

Of course I want to find love, but it’s not here with these happy couples and cheering drunks. I’ve never felt more alone in a room full of people.

Miles glances down at his phone again, and that's my final straw. It's time to get the fuck out of here. *Now.*

Rising on trembling legs, I fish a fifty-dollar bill out of my purse. I slap it onto the table and take my first deep breath since I stepped inside.

"This isn't going to work."

Miles hardly glances up from his money line as I thread between the thicket of bar patrons by the door. I don't stop. Not even when the cold November air rips across my cheeks.

I breathe in the scent of cigarettes and motor oil. The sidewalks are crowded with more throngs of happy people. I can't stand the sight of them.

The train sign glows in the distance, and I set off for it.

I pull out my phone to unmatch Miles and block his number. I doubt he'll even try to reach out to me. He's no doubt already texting his friends to meet him so he can tell them all about the insane girl he went on a date with.

Trudging down the train platform, I lean against a pillar, grateful the stop isn't busy. The damp scent of being underground settles the fraying edges of my nerves. As I wait for the train, I can't help but wonder how I ended up here.

Was I really too picky like all my friends said? Was it my parents' fault that I became hyper-independent so young and expected more than any normal person could give? I wish I had friends close by to turn to, but they're all enjoying marital bliss.

Some of them are happy, or happy enough. For now. At least they had someone while I was alone and stuck.

The platform vibrates as the swirling wind kicks up, disturbing the litter hiding beneath the worn wooden benches. Rattling to a halt, I wait for the doors to slide open, then step into the warm car. I take a seat near the back and survey the others on the train, wondering if they're returning home to someone special.

God, I sound pathetic.

It's hard to feel like I'm not behind when so many of my friends are celebrating milestones. At twenty-seven, I know I'm not old. I have plenty of time to make something of my life and to find the perfect person to settle down with. But being the only single friend, the one who never gets a plus-one to any wedding, is isolating.

In these dark, insecure moments, I do wonder if my standards are too high. The man of my dreams might not exist. Perhaps he's living in another world far from me. A world I should've been born into, but something went wrong. I was trapped on Earth and would die alone because of it.

Being so near starvation has clearly warped my brain.

My phone chirps, and I pull it from my purse. *Jen*. The name blazes on the screen as I tap her message. Our texts are sporadic, but I had mentioned meeting up with Miles to her early in the week.

How was your date?

I huff through my nose before typing out my reply.

Awful.

Oh, no. Why?

There was only one meatball.

What?

Nvm. My quest for love continues.

Three dots appear as if she's typing, then disappear. It occurs five times before a large grey text block appears. Groaning, I fall back against the train seat.

Look, Eve, I know you hate when I do this, but hear me out. These dates aren't working. Maybe it's the guys out there, maybe it's Chicago. Maybe it's something else. All I'm saying is, it might be worth taking a break. I know you've been stressed at work, so why don't you take a look at this? Harry's cousin did one of these, and he and Melissa are one of the happiest couples I know. Think about it, okay?

Beneath the message is a link. A large white cruise ship overlays a pulsing red heart. I tap it and read the sleek website.

Love on the High Seas promises love and a tan in one. A singles cruise that takes you throughout the tropics, it's specifically designed to feel like a vacation and the beginning of your happily ever after. Their tagline also mentions a ninety-seven-percent rate for couples who meet on board and stay together for at least two years.

Tapping on more information, a list of included perks glows from my phone screen. A week aboard their modern vessel includes luxurious staterooms and personalized dates designed by their certified matchmakers. I can enjoy getting to know the men they believe I'm most compatible with by the pool or at their variety of dining establishments. I could be snorkeling with my future husband by day three.

It sounds too good to be true.

It likely is too good to be true, but Jen is right. I needed a vacation. But a singles cruise? I wasn't seriously considering it, was I? Tapping through the photos, the glossy deck and sprawling pool look inviting. As does the expansive spa. It had been a while since I took a real trip.

I clearly wasn't the best at choosing dates. Maybe it was time I enlisted a matchmaker. And if I could get a tan while doing it...

Hovering my thumb over the link for departure dates, I take a deep breath as the train rumbles beneath me.

What's the worst that could happen?

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EVE

The worst thing that could happen was that *Love on the High Seas* was a mild scam.

Not in the sense that I hadn't received what I paid for. My room is comfortable and clean. The spa is relaxing. Since the ship is adults-only, no screaming children splash and hog chairs by the pool.

The food is amazing, and paying the extra two hundred and fifty dollars for unlimited wine on top of my fare was more than worth it.

My glass of sauvignon blanc hasn't been empty once during the entire trip.

I catch the eye of Hank, the kindly waiter who has tended to me each night inside the *Love Story* bar located on the mezzanine level. The crew was exceptionally attentive and friendly.

Everything on board has been wonderful. I've been able to relax, regroup, and, most importantly, get a grip. It is the getaway I desperately needed.

The only disappointing part of the trip so far has been my dates. Go figure.

This is only my third night on board, and I've already had dinner with two potential matches and breakfast with another set of three. I even went out of my comfort zone earlier today and partook in hot-tub speed dating.

The process definitely leaves much to be desired. If I were to leave a review, this is the part I would mention felt a bit *scammy*.

I'm being a bit pessimistic. I had had worse dates.

Thanks to the questionnaire we all had to fill out before boarding, these men at least had things in common with me that aided conversation. All of them were nice, but there was no spark. No instant attraction that made me want to invite them back to my room for a night of fun.

Plenty of others on board were having said fun.

It echoed through the cruise ship's halls, much to the envy of guests like me. It's been a while since I last had sex and even longer since I had *good* sex. Knowing who I was about to meet up with at dinner, I'm certain *hair-pulling-teeth-clenching-fucking* wasn't in my immediate future.

I uncross my legs and stretch out my arms. I had spent the morning in the spa getting a full workup. Freshly massaged, exfoliated, waxed, and moisturized, I was ready for my second date with Evan.

He had been my first date of the trip and, from the briefing delivered to my phone this morning, my top match. I had groaned at that.

Yes, we had both gone to art school, but his emphasis was in graphic design. He was in commercial advertising and, just like every man I met, couldn't fathom why I'd give my life to a dying physical medium like oil paint on canvas.

Sure, he had been inquisitive about my painting—of my achievements and accolades—but our conversation had lulled several times. He was nearly forty and, like many of the others I had met, was looking to settle down and start a family.

It wasn't that I didn't want a family, but I needed companionship first. Someone who truly got me before I committed to bringing a child into this world with them. At his age, Evan approached our dates like a last-ditch effort to check the final boxes of wife and kids off his list of accomplishments.

As I down the rest of my wine, Hank immediately tops it up.

"For good luck," he says, winking.

"You're the best, Hank."

Tossing some cash onto the bar, I grip my glass and head for the exit. The mezzanine level is flooded with people. Happy couples hold hands while a group of young women who had come on the trip together laugh and briskly walk by. Loneliness rises within me like a tidal wave.

Stalking towards the elevator, even my wine can't make me excited for the date.

I push the button for the fourth floor where the restaurant *Half-Shell* is located. Tonight's dinner will be more casual than our first. The matchmakers wanted us to do something interactive.

What's more fun than stilted conversation while shucking oysters and snapping crab legs?

Glancing down, I'm still in my bikini top and bottoms from earlier. The pale gold pairs nicely with my blue linen button-up shirt and short set. My white painted toes are framed by simple slip-on sandals.

I indulge in Hank's heavy pour of crisp wine as I wait for the elevator doors to peel open.

Once I reach the fourth floor, I walk slowly down the expansive hallway. Nautical artwork adorns the walls. The tightly woven carpet stretches toward the far end, where the open clam-shaped neon sign buzzes. A few other couples are in line. No doubt the matchmakers have given them the same activity as us for tonight.

Glancing at the sprawling line, I catch my breath when I see Evan standing stiffly at the front. My mouth opens as if to call out to him. I *should* say something, at the very least wave him over.

However, my body has a different idea.

Instead of going towards him, my feet pivot. I walk down the opposite hallway towards the door to the deck. The idea of spending another dinner in bland conversation holds little appeal. It's cowardly to stand him up.

I owe it to him to end it in person, or to at least inform the matchmakers I don't see us working out.

My feet carry me down the carpet until I'm pushing through a set of glass doors. The evening air is cool and briny. It whispers over my cheeks and tugs at my unbound hair. There's hardly anyone out here.

The moon glows overhead while the stars sparkle down and reflect off the inky water.

Walking towards the railing, I lean against it and let out a deep sigh. Salt water and wood polish fill my lungs. The tart wine settles my nerves and warms my stomach.

The boat cuts quickly through the ocean. Spray tickles my face as we glide through a large wave. The water seems endless from this angle. From beneath the foamy surface, a pair of dolphins emerge and swim beside each other. I read somewhere that they mate for life.

That must be nice.

I wonder how many happy pairs of fish are swimming below, unaware of my sullen thoughts. Am I truly envious of animals? Perhaps this trip hasn't been as good for me as I thought.

It was a mistake to come.

I would've been better off on a regular cruise, getting splashed by children and eating at a buffet. At least no one would've bothered me. I could have recharged without needing to do these activities with men I didn't see a future with.

The sad truth slams into me. It's time I finally came to terms with the fact that it wasn't the apps, or the matchmakers, or life hiding all the good men from me.

I was the problem.

I knew what I wanted, and I refused to settle. I had fun in relationships before, from serious ones to short-term flings. I had been flirty, outgoing, and full of life, but loneliness slowly eroded it all away.

All that's left is a ghost of my former self, flitting between first dates as if she were haunting them.

It would be so much easier to give that power to someone else. If only there were such a man to put my trust in. To leave all these feelings with him, knowing he'd take care of me. That was a dangerous idea. Giving anyone that much authority was reckless, but it would take the burden off my shoulders.

It was wrong to wish for it, but a small, wicked part of me wanted to be carried away. That my perfect match saw me, fell in love instantly, and we lived happily ever after. No more dates. No more what-ifs. Just the two of us forever.

It was a foolish dream, but the longing inside of me unfurls as I finish the rest of my wine.

Tomorrow I was meant to go explore ancient ruins with Mark, my second most compatible match. I should message the matchmakers and tell them I want out. The process is voluntary, and you can end your participation at any time.

I should hole up in my room and eat room service until we return to the port.

My chest feels strangely tight. I rub at the sore spot, surprised by the burning in my eyes. I blink away the tears. I refuse to cry over this. My life

could be so much worse. I should be grateful for all I have and all I've done.

The loneliness inside me yawns open, threatening to swallow me whole. I can't shake the feeling that it'll always be there waiting to strike and drag me down into the depths of my despair.

A low humming echoes in my ears. The wind picks up around me. It pulls at my clothes and makes a sun-lounger skid across the deck. The temperature plummets as the howling air blows through the deck.

The ship fights the sudden force. I grip the railing as the large vessel shudders and turns sharply. My wine glass slips from my hand and falls hundreds of feet to the sea below. The moon illuminates the rough sea.

The water is churning violently. My sadness quickly gives way to unease.

Another sharp gust of wind cuts through the deck, picking up another chair and launching it overboard. A blaring siren shakes me out of my daze. I shouldn't be out here. As I turn from the railing, I see it.

Murky water swirls along the ship's sides.

We're no longer cutting through it. It's surrounding us. The ship is spinning. Its nose is careening off our set course. My body jerks as I take in the horror unfolding.

The ship is stuck in a whirlpool.

A chorus of screams rings out as the vessel groans. The lights inside flicker, then go out. The ship creaks as it turns at another harsh angle. The water is rising higher from below. A few people from inside have spilled out onto the deck beside me.

"What the fuck?" a man yells over the howling wind.

"Oh my god," says another.

"We're gonna die!" shrieks the woman on my left.

That would be just my luck—dying on a fucking singles cruise.

"What is that?" the first guy asks, pointing into the water. "What's that shining thing—"

His question chokes off as something shoots up from the water. A metallic clang echoes as a strange-looking hook latches onto the railing.

As if in slow motion, I turn towards the man. His brown eyes are wide. Short, floppy black hair blows over his pale brow. He's looking at me in horror, hands clutching his throat.

A thick liquid seeps between his fingers. Blood.

He falls to his knees with a sickening crack. Turning back towards the hook, the man's blood coats the deadly edge.

I let loose a terrified scream, as do those around me.

"We need to call someone!"

"No, we need to run. We're being boarded by—"

The wind swallows the words as a loud thud lands on the deck beside me.

I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. This has to be all the wine. Or maybe I've fallen and am hallucinating in the ship's medical wing. There's no way this is real.

The moon shines on the imposing, humanoid figure. Its two strong legs end in fins at the ankles that match the one protruding from its back. Its skin is pale gray. Eyes the color of the night sky gleam with feral intent.

It reeks of death and the deep sea.

Its webbed fingers end in claws. Bearing its two rows of sharp teeth, another scream loosens from my chest. This one breaks my trance as I turn and run. The others follow suit as we race down the dock.

My feet slide on the polished wood as bodies press in all around me. Women are yanked off their feet with snarls. The men fall to their knees. I don't have time to stop and take it all in.

My mind is one thing: survival.

I pump my arms wildly as the siren blares on. The ship twists again, careening into a rogue wave that has the floor jostling under my feet. The stairs on the far end come into view.

If I can just make it to the muster station and board a lifeboat—

The boat shudders again, and the rough water sends me flying into an overturned chair. I slam my head on the deck, and no one pauses to help me. Those I had just been running with trample over me to get far away from the creature stalking us.

This *can't* be happening.

My brain tries to think through the pain. I roll to my knees, but the throbbing in my head is too much. Touching the back of it, I gasp as my fingers come away bloody.

This is how I'm going to die. Lost at sea, eaten by some creature from the deep. All because my loneliness made me think this was a good idea.

If this was my karma for wanting love, then the universe was crueler than I thought.

My vision blurs as the ship keeps shaking and groaning. Wood splinters and riotous waves lap over the sides. More screams echo in the night. Creatures board over the sides as I curl in on myself.

A wet squelch echoes in my ears.

Through half-lidded eyes, I watch two webbed feet approach. I should fight, but my body isn't listening. The pain is too intense. A clawed hand wraps around my arm as I'm ruthlessly yanked to my feet.

My mouth goes dry as its razor-sharp smile stretches. Fear grips my heart. The world around me tilts and blurs. The creature says something, but I can't hear it. Icy terror freezes my muscles, and the darkness sweeps in before I can stop it.

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HARVEN

“**H**ow many?” I demand.

My fingers dig into the arms of my golden clam-shell throne. Anger causes my tentacles to snap along the marble floor. I inhale the briny air through my nose and sigh.

After centuries of breathing this way, air offers little relief compared to open water.

Once this report is finished, I'll need a good long swim to revive myself. My whole court's ability to breathe air won't matter if I never find her. Another tidal wave of anger washes over me. My lips peel back from my teeth.

The throne room is somber as it is after every unsuccessful hunt.

My guards in their sapphire armor clutch their golden tridents tightly, avoiding my gaze. My council lords studiously take stock of the gold veining in the floor. They know the pain I can inflict when provoked. The need to spill blood pounds through me.

I can't give in to the instinct, not yet.

My *Pearls* are arranged artfully on the white marble steps. Seera, Bly, and Nixie wear dark blue silks. Seera's teal hair is braided loosely down her back, while Bly's muscular stomach is coated in silver dust. They look bored, while Nixie looks as she always does.

Her full lips curl upwards as her flowing navy hair is threaded with fresh water pearls. Her hard nipples press through the sheer fabric of her

gown. Her gaze lingers on mine. Hungry, seeking—wanting.

I'll visit their chamber tonight. The need to fuck away my disappointment burns in my veins. The seed I spread between them will be useless.

Everything I've fought so hard to keep will turn to dust if I can't find her. The Sea Witch made sure of that. Without an heir, the throne I spilled blood to gain will be for nothing. My Sea Council grows restless with each year that passes without finding her.

I see them whispering to each other around the room. Hiding their plots behind jeweled sleeves in low voices. Cowards all of them. They are careful not to meet my eye, but I see their disdain all the same. The king who was never supposed to be. The unworthy bastard who will lead them all to ruin.

My tentacles coil, ready to strike.

"One-hundred-and-forty-two, Uncle," Princess Hyra says solemnly.

Her fathomless blue eyes betray the careful mask she's arranged on her lovely face. Draped in pale silk, her flowing blue tentacles hang limply next to her webbed feet. They match her skin. It's the same hue as my own. A marker of our shared blood.

Hyra hates the practice. She has made her disdain for all those who have perished beneath the waves over the centuries known. The deaths have made her angry. A similar rage kindles within me, mixing with unbridled disappointment.

I had been certain this vessel would contain her. Had been sure enough that I sent a larger horde of sharkin and royal guards than usual. An invisible string pulled me toward it, but it seems it was a misplaced hope.

My skin feels stretched too tightly over my bones. The physical weight of having to endure more months—more years—without her is excruciating. I used to have remorse over those who died, but I can't bring myself to care.

Not when my people's survival depends on her being found. I can admit that losing so many females is wasteful. It doesn't change that none of them are mine. They can't bear my heirs. It's why they don't survive in my palace.

Only she can endure it.

Once she is in my possession, I will care for her. She will be protected. Especially once my heir is in her womb, securing my line and silencing the detractors littering my court.

I wouldn't share her bed beyond procreation if she didn't wish for it. That's what my *Pearls* are for. To attend to a king's needs.

They are my lovers. She would be my mate. My queen. She need not suffer my attention once she has fulfilled her obligations. She will be happy here. I'll make sure of it.

If she wanted to keep her own lovers, I would permit it so long as precautions were taken not to get her pregnant. She was meant to only bear my young.

That is, if I ever managed to find her.

"All have died."

It's not a question, but Hyra nods anyway. Her eyes harden in time with her jaw. The room buzzes with soft chatter. My hands curl into fists. The weight of my crown presses against my brow.

More wasted souls. More searching. How long will the Sea Council give me before pressing the issue again? The throne is mine by blood, but they could make my life more difficult if they begin to suspect I'm unfit. If I can't secure my line of succession, questions about my replacement will arise. I'm stronger than all of them, but that won't always be the case.

Maybe I should kill them all before they get the chance to move against me.

Nixie rises from the floor like a rippling current. With a mournful sigh, she reclines in my lap, her face the picture of sympathy. Her glowing blue eyes give away her true intent.

Her dress gapes open, revealing her flat, glittering stomach. Her blue scales sparkle in the dim light. Normally, I'd enjoy the wanton display, but as her hand strays to my bare chest, irritation rises instead of my cock.

"Don't blame yourself, King Harven. Maybe your true mate isn't human after all."

Her words worsen my already foul mood.

With a disinterested flick of my tentacles, I push her from my lap. Nixie lands with a dignified thud. Her narrowed gaze bleeds away as her mask of sensual elegance returns in an instant.

Nixie is many things, but she is not my queen, no matter how many times she's pushed to be. She'd do well to remember her place. If things were different and I wasn't forced to bear this curse, I could've sired a dozen children with her over the centuries.

Unfortunately for Nixie, my seed will never quicken within her.

No child of mine will ever grow until I find my mate. My mate, who's been born into the fragile body of a human far beyond my reach. Just as the witch intended.

This is all her godsdamn fault.

As if my thoughts had summoned her, hazy black smoke pools along the floor. The temperature drops as a figure seeps from the dingy mist. Tendrils of inky black hair spill onto the floor. Her serpentine body unfurls in a stained white gown.

The hem is tattered, revealing her fin-like feet. Black claws tip her bony fingers. Wholly black eyes peer up at me through her curtain of hair. Dark magic fills the air and burns my lungs with its rotten stench.

A snarl loosens from my chest. With coiled tentacles, my knuckles turn white as they curl into the metal.

"Come to gloat?" I snap.

The Sea Witch Gyll merely curves her pale lips. This is a familiar part of the routine, for her spell tests each of the females I drag down here from the surface. Technically, their deaths are at her hand.

She doesn't know what my mate looks like, or so she tells me.

The ritual will determine if the soul the human female bears is my kindred. Those who don't possess the magic inside them wither and die. I've lost count of the number who have perished inside the ritual chamber.

As much as my anger is directed at Gyll, her motives still remain elusive. She did not lay her curse on me directly. She aids me in a sense, but cannot point me towards my mate. She is a servant of the tides as well as their master. Neither good nor bad, the Sea Witch Gyll just *is*.

A fact I find increasingly irritating with every passing year.

Ignoring my snarl, her dark eyes swirl as she purrs, "You've been tricked, my king."

My blood runs cold as she snaps her frail fingers. From her cloud of dark smoke, one of my sharkin guards appears at her feet. His royal uniform is in tatters. The oily, bluish-gray skin covering his bare chest is torn. Dark blood trickles from the wounds.

The Sea Witch brushes a hand over his backfin, and he shivers. Heavy iron shackles hang from his meaty wrist. Blood seeps between his broken teeth. Whatever torment she's inflicted on him has left a lingering impression.

He's not a guard I'm familiar with.

“He stole one of the humans,” Gyll continues, claws pressing into the sharkin’s flesh. “Hid her away in his private quarters. She could’ve died without magic for so long.”

My growl vibrates through the room.

The humans must be brought straight to the castle. My magic has crafted this sprawling, marble palace to support human life. Too long in the ocean will kill a human. They need air to breathe.

Gyll’s ritual will also help preserve my mate this far below the surface.

“Quell your rage. The human has been recovered.”

My tentacles slide along the floor with predatory grace as I approach the trembling guard. An inferno churns inside me, demanding I spill blood.

“Speak,” I command.

The sharkin pales, shaking his head from side to side.

“I’m s—sorry, my king. I hadn’t meant to take her. She was just so beautiful. I thought that you wouldn’t miss one of them. They all die anyway—”

I snarl at his words. My failures couple with my anger as my tentacles slink forward, itching to rip his arms from his body. His eyes finally lift to meet mine, beseeching mercy.

“I thought if I kept her she would—”

“Live,” the Sea Witch interrupts. “Despite your foolish act, it seems to have paid off. She is alive. Even after my test.”

The word almost doesn’t register. My anger is too great. It’s blighting everything around me. The ache in my chest grows, sparking with a newfound warmth. I rub at the sore spot as the room around me goes silent.

The wide eyes of my councilmen and Hyra’s gasp shock me into my body. I replay the witch’s words. Fire spreads through my veins. Alive. The human is *alive*.

That means—oh, gods—that means she has to be—

“Where is she?” I demand.

With fluid grace, Gyll gestures towards the door.

“Shackled with all the others. May I suggest that when she wakes, the first being she sees is alive.”

My hands shake as the sharkin falls forward. His fate is sealed, and he knows it. That doesn’t stop his pathetic begging.

“King Harven. Please, mercy—I didn’t know. Please, pl—”

His words are cut off as my tentacles collar his throat. A loud screech cuts through the throne room as I wrench his body into two bloody halves. Crimson spills over the tiles as his torn flesh hits the ground.

He touched my mate. Sought to keep her from me. The only punishment for that is death.

Let this be a lesson to anyone who thinks of touching her. Death will come swiftly for those who covet what belongs to me. And belong to me she does.

My instincts had not been wrong. No one would survive Gyll's test if she wasn't my true mate.

Finally, she is here. Awaiting me just down the hall. I have already wasted too much time.

"My king," Nixie calls.

"Uncle, wait—"

I pay them all no mind. My counsel rushes me, but they know better than to delay my journey to her. Lest they want to join the sharkin in death. My tentacles slap down the hallways as the ritual chamber looms behind a heavy stone door. Ancient runes of protection have been carved into the surface and backfilled in silver.

My heart thunders in my chest. After centuries of searching, it's overwhelming that I'm about to meet her. Touch her. Feel her heartbeat against my hand.

I've imagined what she's looked like countless times. How she'll glow when pregnant with my heir. My mouth waters at the faceless image. Demanding that I make it real immediately.

I push open the heavy doors with a groan.

The scent of death hangs heavy. Corpses of the captured human women litter the small cots around the room. Their skin is already graying. Milky eyes stare blankly at the ceiling. A few have begun to bloat and rot.

It doesn't take me long to find her. She glows like the brightest pearl.

The air freezes in my lungs as I stalk towards her. She smells of citrus and sunshine. The sharkin had been right. She is beautiful.

I fall to the floor. My tentacles absorb the impact.

She is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Every detail of her perfect existence is seared into my memory. My heart reaches for hers, syncing our heartbeats into a gentle rhythm. There is

no denying that she is my mate. The primal urge to have her burns hotly in my blood.

My hands shake as they grip the thin mattress.

I take in every inch of her. Golden hair spills in soft waves over her shoulders. Matching thick lashes rest atop her freckled cheeks. Her full lips are the color of pink coral.

She is dressed similarly to some of the other humans. A short-sleeved shirt is unbuttoned, baring the sparkly fabric covering her chest. My fingers itch to remove it. To taste and suckle from her breasts just as my heir will one day.

Her covering ends at the top of her lithe thighs. Her waist is narrow, and her hips are deliciously shapely. My cock kicks to life as I listen to her gentle breaths.

I've studied the human body, learning the difference between them and the seafolk. I'll know how to pleasure her thoroughly just as soon as she opens her eyes.

She looks impossibly soft and smooth. All mine. The word clangs through me.

Mine. Mine. *Mine*.

There's a large welt on the side of her head. A red ring marks her wrist where the shackle has been clasped too tightly. My heart thunders at the signs of her mistreatment.

She'll never experience pain again. She is with me now. I'll keep her perfectly safe. Forever.

After all this time, through all the odds and uncertainty, she is within reach.

My tentacles show no restraint as they trail against her soft skin. I groan at the feeling of her against my suckers. My hand clasps hers. She's so fragile. Her sweet scent envelops me.

Does she smell this sweet everywhere? I long to find out. To taste her essence straight from the source between her thighs. Holding her small hand between my large one, I press a kiss to the back of it.

Her eyelids flutter, but she remains asleep.

"Wake up. Please, my mate, wake up."

I've never begged for anything in my life. The pleading tones in my voice are strange, but I can't bring myself to care. Nothing matters while I'm touching her.

“Let me see your eyes, my mate. I’ve been waiting to meet you for centuries. You are more beautiful than I ever imagined. I just want to see you. Please, wake up. Please.”

I kiss her hand again. Her golden brows furrow as her lashes flutter. With a groan, she twitches on the cot. After what feels like an eternity, her eyelids finally peel open.

I feel caught in a rampant tide. Swept away by her gaze, I happily drown in the depths of her swirling blue eyes. Open water is where I’ve always felt most at peace, but under the weight of her stare, I finally feel like I’m home.

“Gorgeous,” I breathe.

My tentacle sweeps over her cheek as I lean forward. Her breath catches as our faces drift close. This is it. The moment I’ve killed thousands for. A kiss to make the centuries of loneliness worth it.

Swallowing a groan, I press closer and—

A blood-curdling scream rips through the room, shattering my heart in an instant.

EVE

This can't be happening.

There's no way this is happening. My memories are hazy. They flash through my mind in rapid succession.

The ship. Being chased by those creatures and hitting my head. Coldness and darkness swallowed me, and now I was trapped in a nightmare. A monster looms over me. His tentacles skim over my bare skin.

I'm vaguely aware that I'm only in my bikini top.

Mercifully, I don't feel touched in any way, but the realization provides little comfort. I'm in some sort of dimly lit room with stone walls. The cot below me has a thin mattress.

A putrid smell hangs heavy in the air. It's almost completely blotted out by this creature's masculine scent of salt water and sandalwood.

"Calm yourself, my mate," he thunders in a voice that reminds me of honey.

Thick and rich, it spreads along my skin and teases my nerve endings. The feeling unsettles me. It shakes off the final dregs of my stupor. This isn't some hallucination. I'm not dead. This is all very real.

I lurch up from the bed with a gasp. This creature looms over me, blocking my view of the rest of the room. His firm hands cup my shoulders. He must be at least seven feet tall, as he towers over me on his knees. Well, not knees. A thick, blue-green tentacle slithers along my thigh.

The breath rattles out of me as I tremble. Fear rakes icy nails down my spine. I have to get out of here. I need to run. I've fallen into some horrific sci-fi creature feature.

How is this possible? Where am I?

"Calm down," he repeats. "I'll explain everything, my mate."

Mate. Mate. *Mate*.

The word pounds through my head. As does the vague awareness that he isn't speaking English and yet I can understand him perfectly. The words come to me as if they had always been there. As if I were a native speaker of whatever language this is.

"What is going on?" My voice sounds rough from disuse. "Who are you?"

I push myself to my feet. The cold stone floor bites into my bare soles.

The tentacles along my arms feel sturdy. His fingers glide over my cheek. I'm not in some sort of demented coma. This is all too real. I need answers if I'm going to plot an escape.

A lone tentacle burrows under my chin. It is slimmer than the others, with a pale scar running across its length.

My stomach rolls, but I manage to swallow the bile down.

"I am the Kraken King Harven," the male announces.

A kraken? That explains the tentacles. God, could this get any weirder?

"I've been searching for three centuries to find you."

The reverence in his gaze makes my head swim. The sweet scent of rot doesn't help my frail nerves. I feel like I could pass out again.

My knees buckle, but Harven is there before I can hit the ground. His arms and tentacles envelop me, holding me tight to his warm body. As he rises, my earlier assumption about his height proves true.

He's huge.

Black hair threaded with silver tickles my cheeks and flows down his back. Dark eyes bore into mine. Blue-green skin is warm and slick, stretched tight over the corded muscles of his arms.

His torso is just as heavily muscled. The cut of his abs looks like it was hewn from marble. If the situation were different, I wouldn't mind being pressed up against a body like this.

The situation, however, isn't different.

Warning bells go off in my head. I gasp as his thumb sweeps over my lower lip. Shock has left me immobile. I should be fighting, but my head

can't make sense of anything.

"There is no need to be afraid, my mate. I don't like fear tainting your lovely scent. I have you now." His fingers trace my jaw. "You will be cared for. Whatever your heart desires, I will make it yours. I would never allow the mother of my heirs to go without or be in any danger. I will eradicate any threat to your life. This is my vow to you."

The command in his voice makes my mouth go dry. The deep timber teases my body.

Feverish heat sweeps over my skin. His words make no sense. The edge of my vision darkens. The scent of decay chokes me.

"Mother," I mumble. "H—heirs?"

"My heirs, yes."

His eyes blaze like onyx flames. They aren't entirely black like I first thought, but a hazy gold. Like the sun through a cloud of smoke. It's easy to get lost in them—in the absurdity of the situation—as his hand slides deftly down my body.

"For centuries, I have been searching for you. My human mate. The only one capable of bearing my heirs and furthering my bloodline." His finger traces my collarbone. "You are so beautiful."

The compliment is growled against my ear. My frozen body begins to thaw at his pleasure-filled groan, even as my stomach remains rigid. What is happening to me?

"Bedding you will be no hardship."

My heart stumbles in my chest.

"I—I—"

The words are stuck in my throat. King Harven doesn't seem to notice. His fingers continue their lazy exploration of my skin. His tentacles slither along my legs, leaving behind cool, suctioning kisses.

"How fortunate you survived when the others did not. I can feel your strength," he murmurs almost reverently. Lust kindles in his gaze. "Your womb will be just as strong and fertile."

My womb?

It's like ice water has been dumped over my head. Dread floods my stomach. This is his true intention. The reason I've been brought here.

Oh God, I can't believe it. This can't be happening.

I can't afford to pass out. Not as the Kraken King slithers his tentacles all over my body.

The gleam in his eye. The words he's purring. I'm going to be fucking sick. I'm going—

"If you are amenable to it, my mate. I would like to begin trying immediately." His jaw clenches. "I know your journey here wasn't the easiest, but I will do all the work. It's typical for a king to court you properly, but my desire is becoming hard to ignore."

His nose presses against the top of my head. The king's hand strays to my chest. Something hard pushes against my outer thigh as a tentacle slips under the edge of my shorts.

A deep groan leaves his throat.

"Tell me, do you taste as good as you smell?"

I watch as if I'm a spectator outside my body.

The whole scene plays out in slow motion. The Kraken King closes his eyes and lowers his head. His hand collars my throat gently to hold me still. Seconds trickle into minutes as I wait for what's coming.

My body is taut, unsure what to do. How to move. There's nothing I can do but await it.

And it comes swiftly. Determined. Claiming.

King Harven's mouth lands on mine with finality. His lips are soft and warm. They claim mine in a harsh press. The slight touch is brutal, as is the searing pain in my chest. He tastes of salt and spice.

He breathes me in as if one touch could own me.

It's a simple kiss, but the web of sensuality weaving around me threatens to turn into an unbreakable binding. It's an unwanted possession. A claiming—declaring that I'm his to do with whatever he pleases.

I've never been kissed like this. I never want to be again.

His tongue slithers like a serpent into my mouth. The desperation in his groan as he ravages my lips awakens my dormant fire. It flares to life. My ire sparks into a raging inferno. I was cold before.

Now I'm boiling with molten rage.

How dare this male touch me? How dare he say those words as if I have no say in the matter? I've dealt with my share of handsy men who take without asking. I'll be damned if I let this tentacle monster touch me a moment longer.

A growl rips from my throat as I roughly shove him back. The shock weakens his tentacles as I stumble a few steps away. Clutching the side of the cot for support, I curl my lips and bare my teeth at him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I snarl.

The king blinks slowly. A deep furrow forms between his arched brows as if I’m a wild beast instead of the docile human he planned to ravage. Good. He should fear me. He should keep his hands to him- *fucking*-self.

A gasp echoes behind me.

The hairs on my back stand up. Hating that I have to look away from him, I dare a glance behind me and see the bodies seeping in through the open doorway. They are all different types of scaled creatures. Some have tentacles like the king, while others bob on thick tails or stand on webbed feet. Their glistening eyes regard me warily. Some hide their disgust better than others.

If the situation wasn’t so bleak, I’d almost laugh at how absurd it is.

A figure steps forward. She is otherworldly beautiful with dark blue hair and piercing eyes. She breaks away from the other two sea creatures, dressed similarly. They eye her warily as she extends a manicured claw.

If looks could kill, I’d be dead.

“How dare she reject our king!” the female spits. “She should be punished.”

Another female floats to her side. Delicate tentacles drape towards her fin-like feet as if they were a skirt. A headband of pearls and broken shells rests atop her white hair. Milky blue eyes stare hard at the first female.

“Remember your place, Nixie.”

A tentacle hooks around my arm until I’m spun backward. The room blurs before I can look at it. The king blocks my vision once more.

His dark eyes bore into mine. His face is hard. The anger there makes my stomach curdle.

He could hurt me if he wanted to. I doubt these monsters care about consent. If he wished to fuck me in front of all of them, there’s nothing I could do to stop it.

The blood in my veins ices over, even as his anger kindles my own. I will not be meek. If he wants to take me unwillingly, I’ll fight him. I’m no easy prey. It’s best everyone here learns that.

“What is the meaning of this, my mate? Surely you feel it too.” He runs a shaking hand through his hair. The crown at his brow glints. “Our bond, the pull, the need. Once I’m inside you, you’ll—”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I snap. “One minute, I’m aboard a cruise ship. The next I’m in some nightmare, where a kraken is

threatening to fuck me every five seconds.”

The king steps closer. His tentacles slither over my feet. I jump back, and my hand catches. That’s when I finally notice the iron shackle around my wrist. The adrenaline had numbed me to the pain of it chafing my skin, but it comes roaring to the surface.

My body vibrates as I sneer at the king.

“Let me make one thing very clear to you, King Harven. I don’t know what horrible thing I’ve done to be trapped here with you. What sort fucked up karma is making me your captive, but let us come to an understanding. I will never welcome you. Not in my life, and certainly not in my bed. I’d rather die than let you inside me, so unless you are planning to pin me down and force me—”

The king’s eyes flash. A gasp falls from his lips.

“I’d never do that—hurt you like that. You are my mate. Please, I know you are confused. I will explain everything. If you would only submit to me and—”

“Did you not listen to a fucking word I just said?” My nails curl into my palms as I try to stop myself from striking him. “You’ve got the wrong girl, kraken. I’m not your mate. I’m nothing to you. Return me to the surface. Now.”

His hand reaches for me, but my responding jerk back stops him. The others gathered at the doorway gasp. I’m sure it’s a capital offense to speak to their king like this. They may demand my head. So be it. Rather be dead than breeding stock for this disgusting creature.

The desperate hope in his eyes goes out like a blown candle. I almost grin.

Pulling sharply, the shackle’s chain rattles against the metal frame of the cot. Crimson trickles down my arm. The biting pain is good. If I want to survive my new reality, I’ll have to be strong. I’ll have to fight.

I yank again to no avail. The scent of death deepens.

I had been wrong before. There is a fate worse than being single at twenty-seven. My loneliness sent me aboard that cruise, and because I was such a weak-willed individual who didn’t properly appreciate all I had, I was going to pay the ultimate price. Forget finding my perfect match, I’d be lucky not to be rutted upon by this kraken and his tentacles.

If it comes to that, I’ll find a way to end it. Bearing his children would be a fate worse than death.

“You're hurt,” Harven breathes.

His voice makes me tremble. I replay all that's transpired since I awoke. My head pounds as I sift through the memories, trying to find any clue as to how I might escape. A kernel of a memory snags.

“What did you mean by others?” I can't hide the tremble in my voice. “The humans from my ship. Where are they?”

There is no way I'm the only one who was taken. I saw the others get snatched overboard.

The king's expression turns grim.

My tongue feels too large in my mouth. Only when he retreats a fraction and sweeps out his hand do I finally see it. My mind hadn't been able to register them before. It had been too angry and confused, but I can see them with stark clarity.

Some of their faces are familiar despite the bloat. I recognize a woman who sat next to me on the sun lounger yesterday. Mira, from Tennessee. A divorcee finally ready to put herself back out there.

Her eyes are milky white. The color leeches from her lined lips. Black veins spread up her discolored skin.

There are a hundred bloated bodies in the room atop similar cots. They are arranged artfully in a line. Their final moments on display. The sickly sweet scent deepens. It punches through my chest and chokes me.

Face after distorted face. Festering corpse after festering corpse.

A whimper rifles out of me.

“It is a waste,” the king says, “but sacrifices had to be made to find you.”

My stomach rolls. The stench is more than I can bear. I vowed not to pass out again, but I can't help it.

How long until my face resembles theirs? The room swirls and tilts. I feel the cold stones collide with the back of my head.

Then there is nothing. Nothing at all.

EVE

With a gasp, I lurch up from the bed. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I take in the unfamiliar room. The shackle is gone from my wrist. My skin has healed as I rub the faint pink mark. I'm still wearing my crumpled clothes.

Blue silk sheets tease my skin. I turn to survey the ornate headboard. It's shaped like a clam shell. Instead of a pearl at the center, it is my wondrous bed.

Rows of fluffy pillows crowd behind me. It's larger than a king-sized bed—meant to fit someone seven feet tall, I'm sure.

The room is decorated sparingly.

A small desk and sitting area make up the right side of the room. To the left, a wardrobe with silver handles presses tightly against the wall. Beside it is a small door that I'm praying leads to a bathroom.

My breath catches as I take in the window.

An expansive glass frame runs from floor to ceiling. It makes up the entire right wall of my room. Beyond it, I can make out the murky blue hues of ocean water. Hazy shapes ripple in the distance, distorted by the glass.

A school of rainbow fish swims by in a rush.

My eyes track lower, taking in the small silver pool fitted to the bottom of the window. Foamy white water crests at the lip. It bubbles and shimmers.

It's more than just a pool, I realize with a start. The bottom is dark and opens into the ocean. It may be my only way out. There's no way my door isn't being guarded.

Stretching my arms above my head, I rub at my skin. Oiliness from his tentacles lingers. I bare my teeth at a few red suck marks along my legs. Hickeys from a kraken, how wonderful.

My head pounds as I take stock of myself and my limited options.

This room is a testament to their knowledge of human comfort. If what he says is true and he's been searching for me for centuries, he's spared no expense. How is there breathable air this far below the surface?

All the monsters I had seen, including the king, bore gills in some capacity. Were they all forced to breathe like humans for my comfort?

These are all questions I would gladly forgo asking in exchange for a way to reach the surface.

Harven's face swirls in my head. The desperation of his kiss and the desolation at my refusal to have him replay over and over. *Mate*, he called me. *Heirs*. *Bedding*.

The dead bodies of those other women. He killed them. All of them. He's a murderer—a monster.

I'd rather die than let him touch me.

The phantom stench of death returns and sours my stomach. It's all too much to withstand. My heart clenches painfully the more I think about it. I need space to form a plan.

Maybe I could try the pool and see—

The door to my room bursts open on groaning hinges. I fight not to roll my eyes as I take in the three figures polluting my entryway. As if this situation couldn't have gotten any worse.

They're still in their matching outfits from earlier. The male with closely cropped white hair and glistening abs stays tucked close to the female with curling teal hair. Both their faces are carefully blank while the female with dark blue hair casts me a disapproving glare.

She tosses a pale scrap of fabric onto the bed beside me.

"Up, human," she commands. "King Harven sent us to prepare you for dinner."

"And if I refuse?" I arch a brow

"You'll break his heart," murmurs the male with a wry smile.

My eyes drift over his tall frame. Not nearly as imposing as the king, there is an openness about him that settles my nerves. It doesn't hurt that he's ridiculously handsome. Even for a sea creature.

I still can't believe I'm here. That monster like this exists. If I manage to escape, I'll write a tell-all about what I've found. Make millions and never give love a second thought.

The teal-haired female glances between the two of us, brushing his arm with the back of her hand. Her gaze is wary. As if she is bracing herself for a blow. Her glimmering scales have gone pale.

With a sigh, I slowly stand. The marble floor is warm against my bare feet.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"*The King's Pearls*," the glaring one states. "We've served as the king's lovers for centuries. We are a staple of his court and a marker of his virility as a ruler."

"Nixie has served the king the longest. A fact she never lets anyone forget," the male says, inclining his head. "I'm Bly. This is Seera."

He jerks his webbed thumb towards the other female. She bestows me a soft smile before sliding herself behind the male.

Maybe it's because I've spent my life around couples—was just on board with a dozen newfound lovers—but the two of them are clearly together.

In a capacity that's much different from what they are with the third.

"The king sent us to make sure you are comfortable," Seera explains. "As queen, it will be our job to serve you as well."

King Harven has given me personal use of his lovers. How considerate.

My disdain must show on my face, for Nixie narrows her gaze. A delicate snarl falls from her navy lips. The thin material of her gown bares most of her slick, silver-dusted skin.

"You're getting ahead of yourself, Seera," Nixie sneers. "She may not last the week down here. Her kind is so fragile."

A humorless chuckle leaves me. I've seen enough of the world to know what this is. Nixie suits blue far better than the green tones of jealousy.

I pluck the dress from the bed and let the thin sheet of pale blue silk unfurl.

"Relax. I have no desire to replace you. If it were up to me, I'd happily let you serve in the king's bed and return to the surface without a second

glance.”

Nixie grins, clearly pleased by my answer. The other two exchange wide-eyed glances. Bly and Seera share an unspoken conversation. In unison, they turn, their bodies drifting closer again as if they can’t help it.

“There is no way out. The king believes you are his mate,” Seera says. “Once you are pregnant, it will be fully confirmed. The curse decrees that only his true mate shall bear his heirs. That is not a role any of us can fulfill.”

“Curse?”

“Did they not—”

“Be quiet, Seera,” Nixie hisses. “This is not our information to share.”

Seera steps further behind Bly. The male shoots Nixie a warning look that she dismisses with a haughty wave of her hand.

“Dress, human. We will escort you to dinner.”

I glance between the three of them, then back down at the dress. I raise a brow.

“Can I get some privacy?”

“There is no need for modesty,” Nixie scoffs. “Your sole job here is to be bred by the king. You are lucky to be given such fine material to wear. It’s wasted on your dull skin.”

“Ouch, tell me how you really feel.”

Color darkens Nixie’s cheeks.

A part of me can sympathize with her. She thinks I’ve come to steal her man and her job. Her worries are unfounded. Still, maybe if she were a little nicer, hooking up with the king out of spite wouldn’t be making a small, devious part of me grin from ear to ear.

I won’t. I hate him, but Nixie shouldn’t push me to prove a point. He had been desperate for me. If I’m in possession of this magical womb he needs, surely I could use it to my advantage.

Lucky for her, I have no plans on ever letting him touch me.

“Wait outside, Nixie. We will dress the human,” Bly says, stepping forward.

The dark-haired female huffs but strolls to the door. Her dress parts, revealing more of her scaly thigh.

“Hurry. The king is in a foul mood, thanks to her.”

That shouldn’t make me as happy as it does.

The doors rattle shut, and Bly smiles. He extends a hand toward the dress I'm clutching and winks at me.

"Come on. We won't bite."

Rolling my eyes, my lips twist to the side.

Nixie was correct. In this nightmare, there was no room for modesty. Why should I care that these creatures are seeing me naked? Much has already been taken from me. What's a little bit more?

My hands shove down my shorts. I slip the shirt off my shoulders. My fingers tangle in the tie of my bikini top when Seera holds up a hand.

"Wait. Perhaps we should turn around." Both Bly and I raise eyebrows at her, but she presses on. "The king may not be pleased if he discovers we were the first to see her naked. Or naked at all, for that matter."

The fact that he thinks he has any sort of ownership of my body makes my rage spark. I'm almost tempted to order them to look at me out of spite. My better judgment wins out as they turn around.

Tossing aside my bikini, I'm displeased to discover bras and underwear haven't made it to this underwater society. Nothing covers me except the thin dress. If you can even call it that. A scrap of silk is a more fitting description.

The fabric is cut to billow to my ankles. It is thin enough for my nipples to press through the front. It gathers with a pearl pin at the top of my breasts and gapes in the center, leaving my arms and stomach bare.

"You can turn around."

They do so immediately. Seera's eyes brighten while Bly's secretive smile returns.

"Very lovely. May I?"

Seera gestures towards my hair.

Dipping my chin, the female approaches and twists small sections of my limp hair away from my face. I doubt I'll ever use a blow-dryer again. Good thing I've always been partial to my natural hair.

"What are you?" I ask, before pursing my lips. "Is it rude to inquire?"

Seera chuckles softly. Her teal curls tickle my shoulder as she threads a glittering pin through my hair.

"Bly and I are both merfolk. Nixie is a siren."

"That seems fitting," I mumble.

"Please forgive her, my queen." She continues before I can argue with the title. "She has been King Harven's favored *Pearl* for a long time. With

you here, our roles will be changing. She doesn't know how to handle someone else being more important to him."

Finishing my hair, I gently touch the artful style she's arranged. I look like a queen despite the circumstances.

"What about you two? Do you feel put out by me being here?"

The two of them look at each other with soft smiles. Secrets thread through their eyes as another unspoken conversation passes between them. The look is so intimate I nearly avert my gaze.

"We don't mind," Bly finally answers.

I'm sure they don't.

"The king has been searching for a long time," Seera adds. "Leaving our bed for yours is no slight. Not when it means furthering his line and strengthening the realm."

I groan. I can't take any more talk about my magical womb.

"Sorry to disappoint, but my bed will remain empty while I'm here. The last person I'd share it with is King Harven. Unless he means to take me by force."

Bly swallows thickly.

"The king would never do that." When I don't look convinced, he presses on. "It's the shock of your new situation. Once you have eaten and properly rested, you'll see that—"

I hold up a hand.

Rest and a good meal will not change my resolve. The burning in my chest intensifies in agreement. No amount of time will convince me to fuck the king who has murdered so many of my people. Who would've murdered me had I not been fated for him by some fucked-up god?

"My mind will not be so easily swayed." I meet both of their gazes, making sure they hear me when I say, "I will never welcome that monster into my bed."

HARVEN

The dining room is teeming with the usual attendees.

Hyra sits near the middle, trying to catch my eye. She is not the only one intent upon meeting my gaze. My lords and councilmen anxiously track my every movement, looking for any sign of weakness. They're waiting for me to snap. To wither under the shame of my mate's rejection.

They can continue to wait. Despite what some of them plot, I'm not going anywhere. Especially not now—not when she is finally here. No matter what she said in anger.

I glare at the four empty chairs as the minutes seem to stretch into hours.

Lord Terion drones on about the latest tithes being collected in the western settlements. A few others dare to ask questions in low voices, eager not to plunge back into stilted silence. I don't have the mind for politics at present. All my thoughts are with her.

My little mate. I hadn't expected our first meeting to go the way it did.

I refuse to feel shame over it. I would've preferred her ire away from the prying eyes of my court for both of our sakes, but it couldn't be helped. She will learn just how thin the castle walls are. How her display endangers her.

I swore to protect her from every threat, and I meant it. Opportunists are rife within the palace. I won't let them get their greedy hands on her. She

will learn her place and fall into her role as my mate.

She has to. For the good of us all.

My mate is incredibly beautiful. Instead of waiting for her to arrive at dinner, I should be with her. In her room. Buried deep inside her sweet body. I'll wring pleasure from her and watch her grow round with my heir. The ache in my chest worsens.

My tentacles coil as if they can stretch all the way into her room and snatch her away.

I had foolishly believed that once the initial shock wore off, she would understand. That she would feel our bond as acutely as I do, and we would satisfy the urge that's been building inside of me for centuries.

It's no surprise she is wary. Humans don't know we exist. My magic stretches throughout all the oceans to conceal us. Contact with humans has only been due to discovering my mate dwelled among them. We raid lone vessels and ensure there are no survivors.

The truth is a brutal one, but nothing—not even death—was going to stop me from claiming her.

I can admit that perhaps it was a bit naive of me to think it would be easy between us. What I've learned about humans is that they are born into societies that rely on moral codes that don't exist beneath the waves. I knew she would need time to adjust to her new life amongst unfamiliar creatures. The deaths I've caused would surely cause her some hesitation until I could properly explain myself.

What I failed to consider is that she would hate me for them.

As devastating as her hatred is, it doesn't matter. If she wishes to live, she'll have to give me what I seek. Once she provides me with an heir, we could live separately.

I'd never force her to remain entirely by my side. She is entitled to my *Pearls* or to find lovers of her own.

My heart jolts as if shocked by an eel.

It isn't a pleasant thought—sharing her. Mates are meant to be sacred. She is the other half of my soul. If I wasn't cursed, I'd have enjoyed at least one iteration of her already, but I wasn't as lucky as my father. There will only be one mate for me.

To have her hate me—I can't consider it.

A growl rises in my throat. My dinner companions look my way but wisely say nothing. I rub at my chest until my skin feels raw. The primal

edges of the bond make me restless.

In my desperation to find her, I have become confused.

Conflating my need for her womb with a need for her. If we could have an amiable relationship, that would be nice, but not entirely necessary. Once I fuck her and satisfy the urge—once she is pregnant—this overwhelming need to keep her will surely fade.

I'll go back to fucking my *Pearls* and not concern myself with the happiness of the human whose life I stole. Far more would've died had I not done what I did. If that makes me a monster to her, then so be it.

I resign myself to hardening my heart against her lest I seem even weaker to my scheming lords. However, I can't help but wonder if she's leaving someone behind on the surface. A family? A lover of her own?

It doesn't matter if she did. The magic keeping her alive binds her here. Once she is pregnant, the Sea Witch Gyll will perform the final transformation and break the curse with my line secured.

My mate is staying here whether she likes it or not.

The dining room doors slam open. Nixie slithers in first.

Her glowing eyes are seductive as she prowls along the marble with fluid grace. I always enjoyed how eager she was to please me. A desirable trait in a lover, but one that's starting to annoy me. I don't have time for her games. I have a mate to bed.

"My king," she purrs, reaching for the chair at my side.

"The far end, Nixie. You know your place," I rumble.

Her lips part in surprise before twisting to the side. She throws a haughty glare over her shoulder. Bowing low, she scampers towards the end. Settling onto her silver chair with a pout, she crosses her arms over her breasts.

My gaze returns to the door as Seera and Bly appear, smiling at each other in their secretive way.

They are a pleasure to bed together. Unlike Nixie, they prefer to share while the siren prefers my undivided attention. The two merfolk bow towards me with gracious smiles. I wave them off as moisture beads along my skin.

I'm eager to see her again. Until I fuck her, this primal need is going to run away with me. My tentacles feel impossibly heavy. I stir in my chair, honing in on the soft footsteps approaching the open doors.

Her delectable figure is highlighted by the bioluminescent light of the algae I have floating in glass sconces. The blue hue they emit highlights her eyes. My mouth goes dry. She is a beauty. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Her pale gold skin is complemented by the blue fabric of her gauzy dress. Large swathes of her body are on display. Her golden hair falls in soft curls down her back. Pieces have been artfully twisted away from her face.

With large eyes and full lips, she is all delicate softness. I long to trace the curves of her with my fingers, my tongue—my tentacles. I want to memorize every inch of her. Commit every freckle and smell to memory.

She is more radiant than the sun and glows brighter than the moon. More glorious than the most dazzling pearl. She is life. She is—

Not looking at me.

"You sent your *Pearls* to retrieve her?" Hyra hisses.

I cut my niece a warning glare. She should know her place more than anyone.

Rising onto my tentacles, I extend a hand towards my mate. Her eyes finally lift to mine, and my cock hardens instantly. Fire burns in her irises. She is no meek thing. My mate looks every bit the queen I'm determined to make her.

She eyes my hand warily. The chatter around the room ceases, and silence stretches.

Clearing my throat, I gesture towards the chair beside me. My tentacles writhe and snap, eager for another touch of her soft skin.

Her top lip curls as she stares at the polished white marble table.

"You look lovely, my—"

Her glare has my tentacles turning inward. I swallow thickly as unfamiliar heat spreads across my face. Huffing through her nose, she rolls her eyes and takes measured steps forward.

"Is there anyone not attending this dinner?" she asks before sullenly dropping into the empty chair.

I retract my hand and take my seat.

Glances are exchanged around the table as unease grows. My mate doesn't notice them. She seems far more intent on glaring at me than surveying the crowd. This pleases me.

Even when angry, her eyes are only for me.

“There are many lords and ladies not in attendance,” I say, more than eager to answer her question. “Lord Misa is missing, as is his mate Rhydana. Then there are Lord Jissa and Lore. They are in the eastern settlements. Of course, I can’t forget—”

“I believe, Uncle, the human was making an observation about the large number gathered,” Hyra interjects. “The question was not in earnest.”

My mate's lips twitch as if suppressing a smile. Heat spreads down my neck and chest. I say nothing, merely signal for the servants to present the first course.

White plates click as they present sea-goo atop a bed of moss. I had researched humans' eating requirements. This should provide her with all the necessary nutrients she needs. My mate doesn't seem convinced as she eyes it warily. Gripping the silver two-prong fork in her hand, she stabs at the dull green spread.

“Eve,” she says, looking between Hyra and me.

What an odd sound to make. Is this some human word that can't be translated into our language? My brows lower as she leans back in her chair.

“My name,” she explains. “My name is Eve. You can stop calling me *the human*. Or mate, for that matter.”

Mate. Mate. Mate.

The word on her lips makes my cock painful. My tentacles work to adjust it as I digest the information I've been given.

Shame cramps my stomach. How could I not have asked her name? I had felt her silky skin and her warm lips against mine, but I hadn't gotten her name. My mouth still tingles from the too-brief press.

She had tasted like life. Sweeter than sea-wine.

“Eve,” I repeat.

A shudder wracks her, but she looks angry again. She stabs at the goo with quiet fury. Her blue eyes slide to mine. Anger and apprehension swirl like a whirlpool in her irises.

“Is this safe for me to eat?”

“Yes. Everything in this palace is conducive to a human.” I spread good onto my moss. “Once I learned my mate was one, I've spent the last century acclimating my court to your needs. My magic keeps the water out and provides fresh air. We have all learned to breathe it and walk upright.”

“Why go to all the trouble?”

Her pink tongue darts out and licks a speck of goo from her prong. Her lips curl in disgust, but I'm fascinated by her mouth. Everything about her torments me. I hadn't properly appreciated her tongue when my mouth was on hers.

What would that slick muscle feel like against my—

"If breeding is all you need me for," she continues, "it hardly seems necessary to change so much."

"I—" Swallowing, I try to hide the raging lust in my voice. "I want this to be your home. Not a prison. As my mate, I wanted you to have some semblance of normalcy. I've spent years studying your kind, trying to figure out the best way to keep one in comfort."

Her smile is as sharp as broken glass.

"I'm sure all those corpses would be happy to know that—had they lived—they could've enjoyed all these luxuries."

The room plunges into icy silence.

Forks hit plates with sharp clanks. Tension gathers like a receding wave ready to drown us. My tentacles whip along the floor in anger.

Mate or no, I refuse to allow anyone to question my authority. Or speak to me that way, especially in front of my council.

My mate has much to learn about respecting my authority.

"How dare you—" Nixie begins to hiss, but Hyra's glare silences her.

Breathing deeply, I turn my full attention on Eve. I don't particularly care for the entitled tilt to her mouth. She's goading me, but I'm too tightly wound to not take the bait. If she wishes to discuss this now, so be it. The sooner she understands my reasons, the better.

"I understand that you may see it as wasteful, but I had no choice."

"Because of your curse?"

My blood runs cold.

Every mention of it elicits the same response no matter how many years have passed. Every time I think of it, it calls up memories of that fateful day. Of the blood and death that followed to bring her here. To save her and my people, we had to make sacrifices.

It's something beyond her mortal comprehension, yet I want nothing more than for her to understand.

"Yes." I unclench my jaw with force. "A Kraken King could've sired heirs with anyone. The mating bond had existed, but it wasn't necessary for procreation. My father sired Princess Hyra's father with his first mate. Then

he sired my ten other brothers with reincarnations of her soul, or his favored *Pearl*, just as I was.

“Once I assumed power, things were different. I couldn’t breed as he had. I was to bear the curse the Sea Witch laid upon my family to atone for our bloodline’s misdeeds. At the time, I didn’t know how severe it was. I foolishly thought it wouldn’t take as long to find you. And without you—”

Her eyes flash, but I won’t be perturbed. I’ve already shared more than I intended. She doesn’t need to know the gory details of my rise. The truth of how the curse fell on my head. My fingers curl around the edge of the table to stop me from grabbing her and forcing her to understand.

“If my line cannot continue, then my life will be for nothing.”

“What about their lives?” Eve snaps, blue fire raging in her gaze. “What about mine? All my hopes—my dreams—are gone because some cursed thinks I’m supposed to spread my legs for you without complaint?”

I bare my teeth as my tentacles tighten, ready to strike.

We are two predators sizing each other up, deciding who will strike first. Hurt the other one the deepest. I can’t let it be me. She is young. She is human—she can’t possibly understand the life I’ve endured. All that I’ve fought for and lost to give my people even the slightest hope.

If I can’t produce an heir, none of what I’ve sacrificed will matter.

“That is not—”

“I won’t do it,” she hisses. “I’d rather die than fuck a monster like you.”

My lips curl in a feral smile. If she thinks I’m a monster, then let me prove her right. She needs a reminder of her place, especially in front of my court. She already hates me.

“A true monster would’ve already had you, despite your objections. Remember that, human mate.”

Eve rears back as if I’ve struck her. Her anger deepens until she’s burning with it. I’ve never seen something so vengeful. My cock shouldn’t be getting harder. My eyes shouldn’t be straying towards the upper swells of her breast that tease the top of her dress with every ragged breath.

And I most certainly shouldn’t be thinking about pinning her to this table and fucking the attitude right out of her. Maybe after I make her come with my tentacles, she’ll learn a bit of respect. I’d surely enjoy it. She wouldn’t fight me for long.

A passion burns beneath her anger. I can tease it from her if she would only—

Glass shatters at the end of the table.

I jerk my gaze away from Eve to take in Nixie's broken goblet. Her face twists in anger.

"Foolish nymph," she spits, then backhands the young servant. "Pick it up."

The servant falls to her knees as Hyra snarls at Nixie. The nymph clutches her dull green cheek as she begins to weep softly. Her webbed fingers pick through the pieces of glass that have fallen to the floor.

Nixie sneers over her with feral glee.

"What is wrong with all of you?" Eve breathes.

Licking my lips, I glance between Nixie and Eve. The siren's cruelty doesn't surprise me. She loathes everyone who isn't me.

It's something I didn't care to question, as her job was to serve me. Yet, as I watch the frail sea nymph shake with quiet sobs and slice her skin on the glass, unease prickles my neck.

I'm seeing it all unfold through Eve's eyes.

My world is a cruel one. It is the haves and the have-nots. Power and protection are earned by force. There is no room for weakness and certainly not softness. If I had been a gentle male, Eve would be suffering for it. It's my cruelty that keeps her safe. She can hate me for it, but I won't apologize.

Still, I can't help but regret the words I just snarled at her. My stomach feels as rough as the stormy sea.

To have said that in front of so many—

I extend a hand toward where she tightly grips the fork and soften my voice.

"My mate, please let us eat. We can talk again in the morning. After you've rested."

Eve shakes her head and pulls away from my grip. Rising on sturdy legs, she walks towards the end of the table. Crouching beside the nymph, she takes the young female's hands.

The glass drops to the marble with a soft clink.

"What is your name?" Eve asks.

Her voice is softer than I've ever heard it. Those around the table don't know what to make of it. They eye her as if she is a predator from the sea's depths. Accusatory stares are thrown at me, but I ignore them all, transfixed on my mate.

"Leri, my—my—"

“Eve is fine. Will you escort me back to my room, Leri? I’ve lost my appetite.”

The servant looks towards me. Teeth grinding, I dip my chin sharply. Leri rises alongside my mate. Eve gently takes the nymph’s wrist. Blue blood seeps down her arm.

Reaching to the bottom of her dress, Eve tears off a piece. She presses the silk into the servant’s hand. Gasps ring out. To bestow such fabric on a servant, especially to tend to her wounds, is unheard of.

Anger is the last thing I feel as I watch her bind the female's fingers.

“Here. We’ll need to clean it properly.”

“T—thank you.”

Eve smiles, and I nearly fall to my knees. If she would ever look at me like that, I could die a happy male. But I don’t deserve it. Gods, I’ve been such an unrelenting fool.

Anguish weighs me down like an anchor.

Nixie sneers at the two of them as they walk past her chair. Eve holds her stare, unafraid and beautiful. Not many would go up against Nixie, but Eve is as fearless as she is lovely.

“No need to worry about me taking your place beside the king.” Her gaze hardens as it lifts to me. “You two are perfect for each other.”

Threading her arm through Leri’s, she leads the trembling nymph from the room. My tentacles fall limply to the floor. The fight leaves me entirely as I watch her go. Her citrus scent fades from my lungs with each step.

For all my knowledge about humans, it seems I know nothing at all. Nothing that matters when it comes to Eve.

How did I make such a mess of everything?

“She’s not worth it, my king,” Nixie states, gripping her fork hard enough to bend it. “Give her to the sea. Once she is gone, the gods will choose a new mate and—”

“Silence!” I roar, slamming my fist onto the table.

Glasses rattle, and shards of marble crash to the floor. Nixie slinks back into her chair. No one else dares voice their agreement. I see it gleaming in their gazes all the same.

Fools, all of them.

The sea will not give me another mate. Eve won’t be reincarnated to spend eternity with me. I only have this one chance with her, and I’ve ruined it.

Icy fingers squeeze my skull.

The need to roar loud enough to bring the castle down pounds through me. I want to rage—to spill blood. I need to fuck this anger away, but as I look over my *Pearls*, I know they won't satisfy me. Only Eve will. I need to taste her fire and feel her come apart beneath me.

Until I do, I will suffer this potent desire.

Thousands of humans have met their untimely death because of me. I'm a cruel male. I've never claimed to be different. That softness Eve showed to Leri is not something that I possess. All these centuries of fighting and searching have twisted me into this creature. If she expects me to change, she will be disappointed.

A humorless laugh leaves me.

Perhaps this is the Sea Witch's final punishment. It wasn't enough to place my mate among the humans so that I may never find her. Gyll had a far crueler fate in mind:

For me to find my mate and realize I'll never be worthy of her.

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EVE

The walk back to my room is quiet save for Leri's shallow breathing. The poor female hasn't stopped trembling, and I can't blame her. My own hands shake. Not in fear but with the white-hot anger pulsing through my veins. This place is hell.

Turning down a wide hallway, I glance towards Leri.

She is willowy, with pale green skin covered in delicate scales. Dressed in a simple white smock, her green hair hangs loosely over her shoulders. Her milky green eyes are framed by white lashes. Leri doesn't possess that ageless quality so many of the creatures here do.

"How old are you?" I ask, before pursing my lips. "And what are you?"

"A sea nymph, my—my—"

"Eve is fine. Please. I don't want a title."

Leri nods. The tears on her sallow cheeks finally dry as we travel down the white marble floor. The gold veining glows in the blue lights that illuminate the hall. A kind of rippling algae is what powers the whole castle.

It would be interesting if I didn't already resign myself to hating every bit of this place.

"It is a lesser seafolk. Hierarchies here are based on magical abilities. The krakens—like the king—are at the top. Followed by merfolk and sirens. Nymphs, sharkins—we possess very little magic and are thus resigned to servitude in noble houses."

My stomach tightens at her words. How archaic. If I were ever forced to be queen, I'd abolish such designations. However, I'm sure as a human, I rank lower than Leri.

It's once again my *highly-sought-after-murder-spree-inducing* womb that gives me any value.

"I see. And your age?"

"My twentieth was four full moons ago."

I nod. "Is Nixie always this cruel to you, or was tonight a one-off?"

Leri's eyes harden, but she quickly shakes it off. A blank mask settles on her face, smoothing out any hint of what she really thinks.

I squeeze her arm and glance around the empty hallway.

"You can speak freely, Leri. This is no trick. Whatever you say to me won't be shared," I assure her.

Leri scans the hallway too. Satisfied that we're alone, she keeps her voice low.

"She is horrible, Eve. Always has been." Leri's lips curl in disdain. "Her position as the king's favored *Pearl* has given her delusions of importance. She lords over all the servants as if she *is* queen. As if she is not as replaceable as one of us. There are whispers."

"Whispers?"

Leri's green hair brushes my shoulder as she nods.

"The servants talk. We see everything. Many believe she takes a forbidden lover to her bed. It's all alleged. She is discreet and has never been caught outright. The rumors still circulate despite her best efforts to quell them."

Unease sours my stomach.

"Quell them how?" I ask.

Leri's eyes shudder. "She beats anyone caught sharing them."

We pause outside my door. The ornate golden handles glitter in the low light. I'd never thought I'd be so happy to see this room. Or so thankful it locks from the inside. I'm sure if the king wanted to, he could force his way in.

"That's awful, Leri. This place is awful." The nymph opens her mouth as if to argue, but I press on. "What of the king? Does he share Nixie's affinity for cruelty?"

Leri shakes her head. Tendrils of her green hair cling to her shoulders.

“No. Not to the servants, at least. He pays us little mind. He’s been solely focused on finding you for as long as anyone can remember.”

Well, isn’t that sweet.

“How old is he?”

I don’t know why I’m asking any questions about the king. The less I know about him, the better.

However, deep down I know that’s a foolish sentiment. I need to learn as much as I can if I plan to escape. A feat that seems impossible, but I owe it to myself to try. At least somewhat.

“Three centuries? Maybe more.” Leri’s eyes turn sad. “The Kraken Kings can live for a millennium, but the rest of the seafolk—even those with plenty of magic—don’t live past two and a half centuries.”

Centuries. Millennia.

I try to rationalize the length of time. It’s beyond my comprehension. My time here will be a blip in his long, drawn-out life. No wonder he cares so little for human lives.

They are nothing to a monster like him with centuries to do as he pleases. Limitless power. We are all expendable. Me most of all. Once he has what he wants from me, he’ll toss me aside.

Not that I plan on giving him the chance to have me. I meant what I said in front of his court. I’d rather die than let him inside me.

If things were different—if the situation weren’t as it is—maybe there would be a chance.

I’ve been looking for love. I do want a family, but not like this. Not with a male like him.

He is handsome. I don’t find him as repulsive as I should. His actions have hardened my heart against him more than the tentacles.

A dark, hidden part of my soul I’ve kept buried loves the desperate way he needs me. Once he has me, though, that desperation will cool. I’ll be left with nothing save his bastard.

A fate worse than death.

My stomach growls, and Leri pales.

“Are you hungry?”

“I can’t stomach any of that weird fish food.”

The goo atop that bed of grass had tasted like a mix between rotten eggs and anchovies. I shudder at the memory of the bitter taste. My stomach growls again, desperate for anything to fill it.

“I could bring you a bowl of the servant’s stew.” Dark green sweeps over her cheeks. “It’s not proper for someone of your station to eat, but perhaps you would like it. It’s made from crustaceans.”

I tilt my head, considering her words. Anything is better than that wretched goo.

“I’d love to try a bowl, Leri. Thank you.”

“Y—you don’t have to thank me, Eve. It’s my honor to serve you.”

“I see manners are also lacking in this court.”

The nymph chuckles softly. A new tenderness warms her gaze.

“You are very kind. That is a good quality for a queen to possess.”

Huffing a laugh, I shake my head.

“I have no plans on becoming queen. In fact, I hope to never set eyes on the king again.” I study Leri, surmising I’ve earned enough of her trust to risk my question. “I need to get out of here. Please tell me there is a way to get to the surface.”

Leri rears back. The shock on her face makes cold sweat break out across my skin. Whatever she’s about to say, I know I’m not going to like.

“The surface? As in leave the king?”

“Yes, Leri, as in leave the king. As in never see this place or sea-people again.”

“But,” Leri pauses, licking her lips, “you can’t—did they not tell you?”

My jaw clenches. I’ve had more surprises in one day than one needs in a lifetime. I don’t think I can survive another one.

“Tell me what?”

Leri looks everywhere but at me. She’s suddenly very interested in her webbed toes.

“Leri,” I snap, harsher than I intend. “Out with it.”

The nymph dares a look at me. I watch her breathe deep and summon the courage she’ll need to destroy all my hopes.

“You can’t leave, Eve. The Sea Witch’s magic aided your arrival—it preserves you. As does your mating bond with the king.” Her sharp teeth dig into her lower lip. “The magic also keeps you here. If you entered the ocean without the king at your side to protect you, the water would kill you in minutes. The ocean would freeze you if you didn’t run out of air first.”

A low ringing echoes in my ears. The floor under my feet feels unstable. I knew my chances of escaping were low, but I thought there would be at least something I could do. Form a plan and attempt a return to the surface.

“There must be vessels? How else was I brought down here?”

I say the words, but they don’t sound like my voice. Leri’s eyes are sympathetic as she shakes her head.

“After you were found, the king had them all destroyed. There will be no more trips to the surface now that you’re here.”

No more humans will be taken, but that also means—

“I truly am stuck here. Forever.” My stomach feels hollow. “I’m going to die down here.”

Leri opens my door and guides me inside.

She unpins my hair and lets it fall in loose curls over my shoulders. I’m too numb to do anything. I barely even register her stripping me and sliding a teal nightgown over my head. I feel like a puppet on a string.

I don’t know what to think. The king will make good on his word to have me. I can only keep him at bay for so long before he comes to take what I will never offer. What a bleak existence.

“I’m sorry, Eve. Truly.”

Leri slips from the room, no doubt to retrieve a bowl of stew for me. I’ve lost my appetite as I collapse on the bed. The sound of rushing water makes my head turn towards the shallow pool. It releases into the ocean.

A dark portal into the unknown.

I can’t believe I’m considering it, but the undulating waves do offer me a way out. A permanent one.

I’m not safe here. Nixie wants me gone—the king wants me pregnant. If I leave, the sea will kill me, but maybe that would be better than the future I have in store. My stomach cramps as I roll onto my front.

I’m not ready to give up just yet. Clinging to a fleeting tendril of hope is foolish, but I do it all the same.

This is my karma for being so desperate for love. The universe had seen how I longed for my perfect match and tethered my mortal soul to a monster.

How wrong I had been to think being single at twenty-seven was a fate worse than death.

Being single is nothing when the alternative is being chained to the bed of an overbearing, yet annoyingly handsome kraken.

Handsome is the only compliment I’ll give him. It’s not enough to tempt me into letting him put his cock inside me. Even if I allowed him to have

me, there's no guarantee that once I gave him an heir—or two—he'd keep me.

Once I served my purpose, he could dispose of me.

All these considerations about my comfort were merely a way to make me more agreeable to the fact that he needed to breed me. Once he has what he wants, all promise of protection will be gone. He'll go back to fucking his *Pearls*—if he even planned to stop—and I'll be left with nothing.

Lifting my head, I look out of the massive window. The sea is quiet. The dark water is just as foreboding as my mood. Cupping my hands around my head, I can't believe the way my life has shaken out.

What the fuck am I going to do?

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HARVEN

Four days.

Four long, miserable days since I last saw Eve during our tumultuous dinner. Four days of scenting her down every hallway, until the point of madness. Far from my reach, as she only unlocks her door for the servant she escorted from dinner.

Leri she is called.

If she didn't give me regular updates on Eve's health, I'd have broken down her door by now. My mate wouldn't like it, but I won't sit idly by while she rots.

Despite mild boredom, Leri assures me all is well.

Eve refuses every meal and gift I send. I'm told she would rather dine on the servant's stew than any of the fine dishes I provide. The large array of jewels from the royal collection remains sealed in their boxes.

I scratch at my overheated skin.

The air stings like a jellyfish. I should be in the open water, filling my gills and letting my tentacles float freely. The water has always been a balm when I found myself wound too tight.

I can't risk leaving the castle. Not when Eve could emerge at any time or some accident could befall her.

Rumors of threats to her life are already abounding. I can't afford to be far away if something happens. She is fragile, with no magic to protect her. She can hate me all she wants, but there's no denying that she needs me.

And I need her. Badly.

My cock stirs in agreement. I cast it a glare as it presses against the silk of my skirt that conceals it and the upper portion of my tentacles. I have not touched my cock nor any of my *Pearls* since Eve's arrival.

Eve. *Eve*. Was there ever a more beautiful sound than her name?

The time apart from her has driven me headlong into madness. She is in my every waking thought. My tentacles snap and writhe, eager for another graze of her skin. Her scent of sun and citrus burns in my lungs.

The details of her face aren't as sharp as they once were. I'm a fool for not committing more of her to memory when I had the chance.

Then there is this need.

A yawning, clawing need—deeper than any trench. It's sprawling and endless. At its heart lies my desire for her. The ache in my chest clenches in agreement.

I need to bed her—fuck her full of my seed—and maybe, just maybe, I can become a level-headed king again.

Navigating daily tasks has become difficult. I find the court politics particularly dull. All I care for are the reports of her well-being from the sea nymph. There is nothing else.

I'm a snarling beast who prowls the castle halls, waiting for my mate to emerge.

How had the dinner gone so poorly?

In her absence, I've had time to contemplate my regrets. I would've done many things differently. Namely, following her to her room and apologizing for whatever I had done to offend her.

I'm not a gentle male—have never claimed to be—but I do have the capacity for complex emotion. I understand her human way of life is different. I hadn't been careful enough with her feelings.

Had I shown a bit more tact, she could be with me now. Moaning beneath me in pleasure and begging me to fill her with my cock.

Instead, she hides away, while I'm left to catalog my many failures.

A monster she called me. An astute observation. In my haste to find her, I became that. A servant to my curse. The need to preserve my line, and all that I've fought for, has twisted me.

When I found her, I merely saw the end of my suffering. I hadn't been considerate enough for her.

More than anything, I hadn't learned how to make her happy. Yes, I had done extensive research on keeping humans alive, but I knew very little of what brought them joy. I knew nothing about what would make Eve's life here enjoyable.

Foolishly, I thought our bond would do the bulk of the problem-solving. She would come to me with the same raging desire I have for her, and after she was pregnant, we could navigate what life for her would look like.

What a fool I was. A cruel, neglectful fool.

You two deserve each other.

Her biting words make me down the rest of my sea-stout. Wiping foam from my lips, I glare into the empty room. My stomach churns like rough water.

Her comment had cut deeper than calling me a monster. Nixie had been a fixture in my life for centuries. It's hard to remember a time when she wasn't here. That said, it's not as if I know her.

Our relationship had nothing to do with companionship.

I gave her station within my court because she served me in bed. I didn't care for her personality. In fact, I knew very little about her. Or about Seera and Bly.

It was the nature of being *the King's Pearls*. My mother had understood her place just the same. I had made amends with it growing up as the king's bastard. It was our way.

That's why it didn't matter to me if Nixie was cruel. With the curse in place, Nixie always knew a day would come when I spent time with someone other than her.

It would be different than when I showed favoritism to Seera or Bly for the sake of variety. She was happy to hold out, knowing I would come back to her.

This is different. Eve is different. She is my mate. More than a lover, she is to be my queen and mother of my children.

I want many things from Eve that never crossed my mind with Nixie.

As my *Pearl*, her job was to serve my pleasure. She fulfilled that role with zealous dedication. If she was awful to servants, so be it. She would never rule them. I could send her away swiftly if she caused too much trouble.

A callous truth, but no less true.

I had never felt the need to check her behavior because I didn't care to. She pleased me. That was enough.

Yet, when she struck Leri, Eve acted out of compassion. She showed kindness to the lesser sea nymph without hesitation. It was unheard of. Leri's kind was born into servitude, to be cared for by Eve—

She is brave, my little mate.

Kind. Traits long missing from this court. Traits I didn't think I would find as enticing as I do. I shouldn't be surprised. Everything about Eve is alluring to me. From the fire in her eyes to her white painted toes, I want to touch and possess every inch of her.

I want to hold her close and demand she tell me every thought and recount every dream.

I've never heard the mating frenzy affect a king in this way. Perhaps because we've delayed it, it's hooking its claws deeper. Ripping me apart until I have no choice but to relieve this burning need.

I will need to show restraint if I'm to be a worthy mate to her. She deserves more compassion than I've shown. Still, I worry. My thoughts are plagued by the thought of her alone in that room. Any manner of accident could befall her.

Without my child growing inside her, Gyll's magic and my own won't be enough to keep her safe. If she never comes out—

A snarl rips from my lips as I throw my glass mug across the room. It shatters against the marble column. The silence sweeps in, more overwhelming than before.

She is human. As fragile as she is lovely. She is vulnerable when not at my side. Is she hurt right now? In pain, or gods, is she sad? I couldn't bear it if she was—

The room to my study slides open.

Hazy blue light spills against the gold-vein white marble. Hyra's elegant figure lingers in the doorway. Dressed in a simple teal gown with gauzy sleeves, her delicate tentacles drag along the floor beside her webbed feet.

Half-kraken, half-siren, and born before the curse was laid to my brother, the throne could never be hers. It could only pass through the male line and be won by blood. There are many regrets I have over the slaughter of my brothers, but Hyra's father's isn't one of them.

I relished his demise.

A soft smile curves her pale lips. Thick tendrils of her white hair are braided back with a thin silver band. Pink dust highlights the blue-green hue of her cheeks.

I'm relieved it's her and not Nixie.

The siren's been adamant that I see her. Just tonight, she has come in ten times in varying degrees of undress, begging me to visit her before I have the guards drag her away. She has sent me countless notes over the past few days pleading for me to return to her bed. I've ignored them all.

I have no doubt a teeth-clenching climax would soothe me, but since Eve's arrival the thought of touching another makes my stomach cramp. I have to have her.

Until I do, none will truly satisfy me.

"Uncle." Hyra bows at the waist in greeting. "You look terrible."

A wry chuckle escapes me. Hyra's smile widens as she settles into the ornate upholstered seat beside me. I had these made for human comfort. I fear they will rot long before Eve's perfect body graces the dark blue satin.

Hyra's glowing eyes survey my study. The large painting adorning the wall depicts the sprawling castle. Beside it are gilded bookcases that comprise the room. Centuries-old scrolls and ancient tomes litter the shelves. Dust dances through the air, but Eve's scent undercuts it.

The need to follow it like a shark after blood burns in my veins.

"I take it you haven't seen her?" Hyra asks, turning her focus back on me.

"No," I grumble. "Every time I try, she ignores me. Only let's Leri in at meal times. Any attempts I make at entering with the nymph result in us both being cast out."

I'd rather not see her than let her go hungry.

Hyra considers my words, tilting her head.

"Have you considered apologizing to her?"

My tentacles curl inwards as I say, "I don't even know what I'd be apologizing for."

My niece's brows arch towards her hairline.

"How about kidnapping her for starters?"

I purse my lips. "But I'm not sorry I did that."

"Maybe you should be. Apologize for capturing her—for holding her against her will. For reducing her to nothing more than a breeder for your heirs instead of treating her with the respect your mate deserves."

Anger sparks a cold fire in my veins. I glare towards my niece. Family or not, I'm king. She needs to respect my authority.

I'm in no mood to hear more about my failings with Eve.

"Enough—"

"If you had shown her kindness and understanding, given her space to process everything," Hyra continues, unperturbed by my growl, "then perhaps things would be different. I'm not saying you should lie or shy away from what you've done. Our morals differ from her human values, but you could've been a bit gentler in your approach. You are a good king—a wise male. Did you really think she was going to wake up in a room filled with corpses of her fellow humans, learn you were responsible for their deaths, and welcome you between her thighs?"

Laid out like that, it does sound ridiculous. Regardless—

"It would've made things easier."

My sullen tone is very unbecoming for a king. Hyra shakes her head.

"Humans are not like us. They don't have mating bonds. Their courtships are less physical and more emotional because of it. You've treated her with all the care of a newly purchased pearl."

"That's unfair," I snap. "Of course, I care for her. She is my mate. I've waited centuries to find her. I'll admit I acted rashly—spoke too harshly—but I would never hurt her."

"You *have* hurt her, Uncle. That's what I need you to understand." My tentacles feel weighed down with anchors at her words. "You sent your *Pearls* to prepare her. The king's lovers sent to retrieve his mate. What kind of things do you suppose Nixie said to her?"

Red settles over my vision.

"If Nixie has poisoned her against me, I'll kill—"

"I think you've done enough killing, Uncle." Hyra leans back in her chair. "Focus on formulating your apology. Leave Nixie and her callous tongue to me."

"What are you going to do?"

Hyra's eyes glow anew. A softness overtakes her features. In the dim light, she looks every bit the regal princess.

"Your mate is brave," Hyra states. "I know very few in this court that would've defended Leri. Even fewer would risk Nixie's ire."

That I can agree with.

“I’ve allowed Nixie to move unchecked. It was no secret she was my favored *Pearl*. In my search to find Eve, I have given Nixie too much freedom for servicing me all these years. I fear this freedom has made her think she means more to me than she does.”

“It’s a king’s right to keep his *Pearls*,” Hyra says, “but Eve is not seafolk. Her customs may not be as understanding of lovers. The human fondness for monogamy is surely something you’ve run across in your studies.”

I had heard of this. Not all humans were content with one partner, but most were. Once again, like a fool, I thought these were all discussions to have later. Once she was pregnant—once I had fucked her a hundred times, she might welcome the reprieve.

As the king, my desire for pleasure is rampant. I would never expect her alone to satisfy it. That may be beyond what she can give me.

Though if she never comes out of her room, all these considerations are for naught.

Exhaustion weighs me down. My tentacles fall limply to the marble. The pounding in my head returns with a vengeance. One word rattles in my mind. It echoes my heartbeat.

Eve. Eve. *Eve*.

“What should I do then, Hyra? She won’t speak to me long enough to apologize.”

My niece presses to her feet in a swirl of silk and glittering tentacles. Her eyes are brighter than before, and her smile is more secretive than ever. Whatever she’s planning, I’m not sure I’m going to like.

“Leave it to me, Uncle.”

She turns from the sitting area and prowls towards the door.

“Where are you going?” I call.

“To fix what you broke. Like always.” She glances over her shoulder. “Come to dinner tomorrow with a proper apology if you ever hope to claim Eve as your mate.”

The door rattles shut behind her. I fall back against my chair and scrub a calloused palm down my face. I can’t remember ever apologizing to anyone. I’ve been king for centuries. My word is law. Even when I have been wrong, admitting it would show weakness.

Yet, if anyone is entitled to me forsaking a small bit of my kingly pride, it would be Eve.

Especially if it meant earning her forgiveness.

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EVE

Scraping disgusting sea goo from my plate into the small pool, I watch it float out with glee.

I leave the dirty plate beside the rippling water and return to my steaming bowl of stew. It's easily the most delicious thing I've ever eaten. I have no desire to know what's in it, but I can say with confidence these royal seafolks have it all backward.

This stew is a meal fit for a king, not that gelatinous mess that tastes like licking a dead fish.

I moan around a mouthful of spicy, rich broth. What I'm assuming is shrimp bursts against my tongue. I lean my head back against my bed.

Dressed in a silky blue tank top and matching frilly-hemmed pants, I had been pleased to discover the wardrobe could produce any manner of clothing I wished.

Leri showed me how to use it. As an item spelled with the king's magic, I merely needed to describe what I wanted. Within seconds, it would appear. Very handy.

Fresh from the bath, my golden blonde tendrils dry into nice, beachy waves thanks to the water's salt content. Leri had procured my jugs of fresh water before I died of thirst.

The sea-wine is far too potent to be drunk for leisure.

The sea nymph was a good companion, but she couldn't linger for long. She only came to deliver meals and bits of gossip. Of course, she also came

bearing the king's unwanted gifts.

I didn't need sapphires or silver hairpins. I needed something to do.

I can admit that after four days holed up in this room, I was getting a bit stir crazy. Any thoughts of escaping had died after day two. I was trapped here, and since I have vowed to never leave this room, I guess I'll be dying here too.

Realistically, I know it won't be that easy. I'll have to see the king again at some point. Truthfully, I'm surprised he hasn't pressed the issue. Many nights, I hear shuffling at my door and brace myself for him to break it down.

He hasn't. Not yet.

At least my cage was gilded. My bed was softer than a cloud and fitted with the silkiest sheets that Leri routinely changed every day. Sleep came easy enough, and it was the best way I knew to pass large chunks. The king's decree that this castle would suit a human was never more evident than in this room.

A few books decorated the simple silver vanity. They were waterlogged and clearly pilfered from some offshore drilling site. They were all manuals on heavy machinery.

Still, the sentiment was nice, even if the execution was poor.

There was a small bathroom with a toilet, shower, and bathtub. They also provided all the necessary toiletries: shampoo, conditioner, body wash, razors, and lotion. However, there was very little in the way of cosmetics, meaning I needed to embrace my new bare-faced look.

The room temperature was mild, keeping out the chill of the ocean pouring in through the large windows. As much as everything looked like what I needed, it was much like the manuals.

The seafolks clearly understood the basics of what a human required to stay alive, but they knew nothing about us. Everything here was a very shallow understanding of the human condition.

It was most obvious with Leri, since she's the one I spent the most time with. She couldn't understand how I didn't like the fine food. How I could turn away King Harven's gifts.

"A male would not give them if he wasn't remorseful for what he did," she had said while delivering my morning stew.

When I had explained that I couldn't be bought that easily, she had just blinked.

Clearly, the concept of an apology was hard for these beings to grasp. I had tried to explain my plight to her, but Leri was hyper-aware of her position. If word spread that she was also being disparaging of the king, that could mean trouble.

I'd hate for her to suffer because of my ill will toward her boss.

If I were feeling more charitable, I'd tell the king how little he understands about humans. He said he wanted me to be happy here, but how could I be? Everything in this castle is hollow—soulless.

It's not my job to educate them. I have resigned myself to being a prisoner in my room. I will stare idly out of the window until the madness sweeps me away into the current.

Until then, I'm going to eat as many bowls of stew as my heart desires.

Slurping down the last of it, I almost jump out of my skin at the soft rapping on my door. The knocks are far too delicate to be the king's demanding fist.

He is no doubt disappointed with me. Not that I particularly care. However, these days in isolation have cooled the hottest parts of my anger. I can understand in a sense why he did what he did.

That doesn't make it right, nor does it entitle him to my womb. Yet, I can understand part of his desperation. He's murdered so many in order to find me. For me to cast him aside has to be frustrating.

Leri informed me of their mating cycles.

How Kraken Kings can live for a thousand years and enjoy countless iterations of their mate's soul, siring as many offspring as possible. Surely he is now longing for me to die so a new, more amiable mate can be reborn. I won't give him the satisfaction. Not yet.

If the situation were different, his desperation for me would be appealing.

Had I not wanted that overwhelming devotion all my life? I had thought I was born into the wrong world, and I guess that was partially true. Still, I wouldn't be a kraken's fucktoy just because I wanted love. Love is firmly off the table for me.

Especially not with a monster who'll never care for me beyond my fertile womb. How archaic. He has all the charm of a rutting beast, not a king. No matter his rippling muscles and decadent voice.

I'm even choosing to ignore that I did find the sensation of his tentacles rather pleasant. Apparently, days in isolation and over a year and a half

without good sex have let my fantasies run wild. I'm not considering it. I'll never allow King Harven anywhere near me. I can't.

My aching chest says otherwise, but I shove all thoughts of desperate kisses from my mind. Bounding to my feet, I leave my empty bowl on the floor. My mouth begins to water.

"Leri, I hope you've brought more—"

The words die in a gasp as I take in the female at my threshold.

My eyes narrow and my lips pull back as I take in her flowing white hair and glowing blue eyes. Her delicate tentacles are dusted with silver that matches her short dress. A rope of pearls rests above her brows.

Her smile is soft as she extends a steaming, coral bowl towards me. A peace offering if I've ever seen one.

"Apologies, Leri was called away to attend a matter on the other side of the castle. I took the liberty of bringing you another bowl myself."

Her even tone does nothing to soothe my wariness. Pressing onto my toes, I peer around her petite frame. The hall is quiet as usual save for the rigid guards keeping watch in their blue breastplates. They clutch deadly tridents tightly in their webbed hands.

"My uncle is not here, if that is what you're worried about. I came alone."

"Is he with his playthings?"

I inwardly cringe as my face warms. Of all the things I had to ask—

Hyra notes my question with thinly-veiled amusement.

"His *Pearls*? No. He hasn't been with them since your arrival."

"My abduction, you mean." She inclines her head. "Maybe he should start."

"Would you tolerate that? Sharing the king?" Genuine curiosity colors her voice. "It is our understanding that the majority of humans seek only one partner and demand they be faithful."

I huff a laugh.

"It doesn't matter what most humans seek. He won't be getting any from me. I'd hate to see a much-needed job left unfulfilled." I take the bowl from her hand and reach for the door handle. "Thanks for the stew."

Pushing the door, Hyra's hand braces the edge. Her webbed fingers curl around the side as she shoves it back with considerable strength. Her glowing eyes take on a dangerous edge.

"I think we should talk," she says.

Hyra steps into my room as I retreat.

“And if I say no?”

Hyra merely raises a delicate shoulder. Her tentacles press firmly into the floor as she loosely crosses her arms over her chest. I swallow my groan and turn toward my bed.

“Right,” I grumble. “Alright, let’s hear it.”

Plopping atop my sheets, I tuck into my fresh bowl. The reddish-brown broth has flecks of seasoning floating on the top. Fleshy chunks of meat swim as my stomach rumbles. I could eat fifty bowls a day and never get sick of it.

Hyra looks carefully around the room. Her willowy silhouette distorts in the large mirror. When she turns towards me, she lets loose a shuddering sigh.

“You didn’t get a good introduction to life here,” she says. “The king has been so absorbed with finding you that he neglected to consider what it would be like once you were found. It was a grievous error on his part.”

“Waking up in a room full of corpses isn’t a great first impression,” I mumble around a decadent mouthful.

Hyra rubs her hands down the front of her dress. The shaky gesture clashes with her calm posture. Like the king, there is a need when she looks at me. This one isn’t in a lustful way. It’s as if she is begging me to hear her out.

She’s lucky I have no plans for the evening, so I’m willing to oblige.

“You must understand, Eve. The king is desperate. To find you—yes. But also to ensure our safety. He must secure his line.” Hyra swallows. “The curse has driven him to do things he wouldn’t normally have had to.”

“Like mass murder? Not exactly an ideal trait for the father of my children.”

“He has regrets about that.”

“Does he?”

I can’t keep the skepticism out of my voice.

“Yes,” Hyra says firmly. “I know it may be difficult for you to understand, but if you could try to find some compassion and extend my uncle some grace, you’ll see he is a kind male.”

My laugh is sharp. The spoon clinks the side of the bowl as I settle the mostly empty vessel between my crossed legs. The stew’s residual heat soaks into my skin.

“A kind male wasn’t at dinner. He was just as cruel as his girlfriend.”

Hyra’s face hardens. The room temperature plummets, making me shiver.

“Nixie has wanted to be queen from the moment she got here.”

Venom drips from every word. Clearly, these two females have history together.

“Fucking the king is the closest she’ll get.”

Walking towards me, she settles atop my mused sheets. She smells of salt and the air just before it rains. An enchanting quality about her pulls me in despite my reservations. It must be her magic.

I can’t stop myself from turning towards her.

“You can be more, Eve. You can be everything. My uncle will listen to you and change things.”

Ignoring her pleading tone, I roll my eyes.

“I have no intention of changing things. Or of being his queen. If there isn’t a way back to the surface, then once I grow bored enough, I’ll throw myself into the water and be done with this whole ordeal.”

Hyra gasps.

Gripping my arm, her webbed fingers place cool, sticky kisses against my arm. I jerk back, but she holds firm. Stew sloshes over my bowel and soaks into my pants. I glare between her hand and the stain on my clothes.

“You can’t.”

“Why not?” I snap. “Leri told me mates’ souls are not contained to one body. Once I die, another mate will be born. He can try—”

“There won’t be another mate.” Hyra’s blue eyes swirl with the intensity of a thousand whirlpools. “It’s the nature of the curse. My uncle’s mate was to be human with a soul that will be born once.”

Frost licks over my skin. Unease trickles into my stomach.

“For Kraken Kings like Harven, who live seemingly endless lives when the rest of the seafolk do not, you are correct. Mates were reborn. Harven’s father lived through three iterations of his mate, each one living for centuries before perishing. He also sired Harven with one of his favored *Pearls*, *Mysta*.

“The old king had dozens of children and ten full kraken sons who had a claim to the throne. My father, Jarden, was the old king’s eldest.”

“And why is he not king?” I purse my lips. “And how were you born?”

“I was born before the curse was laid. Only full krakens can be male, and the throne will pass to them. My mother had been a siren from a lower house.

“My birth wasn’t celebrated because she was seen as unworthy of the royal seed. I was seen as lesser than. It was King Harven who legitimized me and gave me the title of princess so I could take my rightful place at court.”

The chill in my heart thaws at the soft smile on her face. Still, I won’t be swayed by Harven’s character over one nice deed.

I set my bowl on the floor and cross my arms over my chest.

“Where are the rest of his brothers?”

“Dead,” Hyra says simply. “There can only be one ruling kraken when the king passes. The throne must be secured by blood. Harven was also seen as illegitimate in his claim to rule. A bastard born to a *Pearl* instead of the former king’s mate.

“When it came time for the duel, it didn’t matter. Strength is rewarded amongst our kind, and Harven is the most powerful kraken in history. He slaughtered his brothers with ease and claimed the throne for himself.”

The most powerful kraken in history?

He certainly looks the part. I felt that raw power when he touched me. His staggering build demands submission. However, hearing the bloody truth of his past makes my mouth go dry.

“A family annihilator. How wonderful.” I shake my head. “All these things I’m learning don’t make me want to share my gene pool with him.”

Hyra releases my arm. A soft tentacle skims up my leg in comfort. I withstand the touch and brace myself for the rest of her tale.

“We are all better off with Harven as king, Eve. I’m sympathetic that you haven’t seen him at his best. Believe me when I say Harven is the best king we could’ve asked for given the alternatives.

“His brothers were cruel—my father worst of all. They killed for sport. Raped—pillaged small territories. Conquered settlements for their females and gold. They terrorized the seas for amusement. It’s his brothers’ cruelty, and his father’s inaction in curtailing their horrible deeds, that led to Gyll cursing them.

“She struck before anyone sired a full kraken. She appeared on the night of the old king’s death to lay down her edict. You must understand, Eve, lineage is everything. It indicates a king’s strength by how many full

krakens he can produce. It proves his seed is strong. Gyll's curse bound them. It decreed that none could produce children with anyone.

"The only one who could bear them an heir would be their fated mate whose soul was tucked away into the human world. Enraged by this, the brothers vowed to breach land and slaughter every human until they found her.

"They agreed that whoever secured the throne would keep her chained to a bed until she bore enough heirs to last for centuries. Once she was properly used up, they would give her over to the tides."

Dizziness washes over me like a wave. I have to grip the sheets to keep myself upright. Is that Harven's plan, too? If so, why is she telling me this? Is it her way of saying, supplicate now before things get a lot worse?

Hyra notes my alarm and wraps a soft hand around my white-knuckled fist.

"It was Harven who voiced a differing opinion. He proclaimed whoever his human mate was would be treated fairly—with respect. You must understand, Eve, our society is structured around those with the most magic—the most power—to rule it. And without magic you—"

"Rank no better than the seaweed?"

Hyra cringes but nods.

"Yes. The curse wasn't just to punish the brothers by limiting their ability to sire heirs. It was to determine who was worthy to rule. A human mate would be seen as sullyng the bloodline. The Sea Witch Gyll may seem evil, but she is not. She just is. A piece of the sea from its creation.

"When Harven decreed that his human mate would be queen, many laughed at him. It would be an embarrassment to call such a weak being queen, but Harven wouldn't hear of it. His brothers were still laughing during the duel when he tore them to shreds. It was the first step in passing the Sea Witch's test.

"King Harven would be a firm, but much kinder ruler than his father—than any of his brothers. But he still had the curse to contend with if he didn't wish for the kingdom to backslide into old ways.

"If he can't secure his line with a son to continue his era of peace, there are many that will take us back to the dark, violent days of the past. Where the weaker seafolks are killed for amusement. My uncle has worked so hard for our people's betterment. It would be a shame to see it all be for nothing."

Hyra looks at me expectantly.

I avoid her searching gaze and stare into the dark ocean. Had I known what I was going to learn by letting her into my room, I never would've opened the door.

Even as I think it, I know the words are untrue.

More annoyingly, I find that the burning rage I had towards Harven is gone. My hardened heart has a crack for him—for the choices he was forced to make. Despite his growled statement at dinner, he hadn't hurt me. Had not forced me in any way. Not as his brothers would've done if they ruled instead.

I want to scream. I refuse to feel sympathy for my kidnapper and yet—

"You don't forgive him, not yet," Hyra says. "But all I ask, Eve—all any of us who have seen the good Harven has done ask—is that you give him another chance. He may surprise you. Let him prove himself worthy. You can be happy here."

"How?" I whisper.

"With the king." Hyra squeezes my hand. "He has hunted for you for centuries. The lives he claimed would pale in comparison to the ones his brothers would've taken. They would've flooded the world in order to find you. Hundreds of thousands more would've perished, I assure you."

"A comforting thought," I mumble.

Hyra's eyes glow anew. Warmth radiates from her body.

"He longs for you, Eve. In a way he never has for anyone else. You are his mate—his queen. Consider all that I've said tonight and give him the opportunity to fix his mistakes."

Hyra rises with fluid grace. Her silver dress reflects the blue light from my bedside table.

The throbbing at my temples comes roaring back. I don't even know where to begin with unpacking everything she's told me.

"I'll think about it, princess."

A feral gleam kindles in her eyes.

"I'd think quickly if I were you. There are many in this palace who would see you dead. Nixie most of all. If they believe the king has no attachment to you, poison may just find its way into your stew."

Bile races up my throat. I hadn't considered that.

Hyra makes a good point. Harven is my only lifeline. If the court believes he's tossed me aside, they won't think twice about killing me. That would destabilize him and throw this world into chaos.

Whether I like it or not, this world is mine too. I'd hate for more to suffer just because I was being stubborn. A part of me still needs to fight—push back and demand more. I had sworn to hate Harven forever, but that's changed in the span of an evening.

Isolation really does take a toll on a person.

"What am I meant to do then? Send for him and spread my legs?"

"No, that's not what I'm suggesting." Hyra's grin is all teeth. "My uncle is a complicated male. He won't admit it to anyone—probably not even to himself—but what he wants most of all is a companion. He has been lonely these centuries."

"His *Pearls*—"

"Don't provide him with what you can."

"Which is?"

"Love."

With one simple word, the whole room shifts. *Love*. It's what I've been searching for all my life. What I was determined would never happen for me. Love is what sent me aboard that fateful cruise.

Can it still be mine? Is it even possible to love a being like Harven? Can he truly love me in the way I've always desired?

I open my mouth, but Hyra raises her hand.

"He doesn't love his *Pearls*. Despite Nixie's wishes, they are only there to provide release."

"I notice the other two *Pearls* are exempt from these conversations."

An unknown emotion flickers in Hyra's gaze.

"Seera and Bly are different. They understand their roles far better than Nixie ever could." Hyra shakes herself, eyes refocusing. "The king could love you, Eve. If you would open your heart to him, I promise you will be surprised. As you may have noticed, love isn't as important here. It would be a weakness if the court ever found out just how much my uncle wants it. To love and to be loved."

The crack in my heart grows deeper. The frozen shell encasing it melts away. *Goddamnit*. What happened to all my resolve? I can't seriously be considering this.

"Don't humans desire love?" Hyra asks gently.

Fuck, I am considering this.

I'm stuck here for better or worse. It's not as if I have a family to return to. My career was stalling, and my friends—well, I haven't been important

to them in a long time.

I was the girl they used to party with. The one pitied for still being single. I was the third wheel, then the fourth, then the fifth, before they fled to the suburbs and I stopped being considered at all.

The simple truth is I could make a life here. With Harven's help, I could forge a new path for myself. What that life would look like, I'm not sure, but I could be willing to try.

"We desire respect too," I state instead of answering.

"You can have both," Hyra says. "The king needs someone who's strong. Brave. Kind. Those are qualities you have—"

"I wouldn't say I'm exceptionally nice."

Hyra's smile widens.

"By our standards, you are. Don't get swept up in the Sea Court's politics. Be confident in yourself. My uncle wants you exactly as you are. These four days—I've never seen a male look worse."

A smile dances on my lips before I can stop it. If I'm not careful, the next time I see the king I'll arrive as a puddle. I can't afford to get too soft just yet. Many unanswered questions still hang over both our heads.

"Be bold, and you will win his heart. Give him the chance to win yours, too." Hyra walks towards the door. "Let him atone for his mistakes and earn your forgiveness."

It sounds simple enough. Can it really be? I guess there's only one way to find out.

What do I have to lose? I'm stuck here. I've got a vengeful lover on the verge of poisoning me. A Kraken King who's been searching for me for centuries.

There must be something twisted and wrong, but I'm going to do it. I'm going to give life here a chance. Not just for my sake, but for the sake of all these beings who have flourished under Harven's rule.

Maybe I am more selfless than I thought.

I don't have the luxury of living with my human morals any longer. I'm in a new world. If I want to survive, this is the game I have to play. Maybe if the king and I are both lucky, we can get something true out of it. Only time will tell.

My lips tingle as they remember his fevered kiss. If he can kiss that good, I can only imagine how skilled he is—

“How do I go about reacquainting myself with the king?” I ask, willing my face not to burn.

Hyra pivots and walks toward my wardrobe. Yanking open the heavy silver doors, she flips through a wide variety of garments.

“Simple. All you need to do is attend dinner tomorrow.”

She pulls a bolt of pale fabric out of the wardrobe. My mouth dries as she lets it unfurl. Slinking over to me, Hyra allows the silk to float gently atop my bed. Amusement dances in her ocean eyes.

“And wear this.”

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HARVEN

Another boring dinner awaits me. I ignore the flirtatious stares Nixie throws from the end of the table, as well as the droning questions from my council lords. I don't have the mental fortitude to do much more than sip from my wine and think of her. All my thoughts turn to the eastern wing of the castle, where my mate resides.

Faint traces of her scent tease my nose. Gnawing hunger erupts in my stomach. It's maddening to miss someone I spent centuries without. Eve's absence causes physical discomfort. As if the worn tatters of my soul are reaching towards their perfect other half.

I wonder what she's doing for the hundredth time.

Is she happy? Does she think of me, or is she still stewing with hatred? Leri's latest reports on her condition have given me no indication of her state of mind. The nymph is tight-lipped about Eve's feelings.

What if she never comes out? What happens when the days stretch into months, and she withers behind the locked door?

The metal fork groans as I bend it around my fist.

Eve's discomfort pains me. If she ever decides to come out of her room, I'll cater to her every whim.

Despite the pain her absence brings, I've never felt more alive.

My *Pearls* have merely been a tool for release. They offer me no companionship—I can't turn to them to discuss the problems facing me

from the court. They aren't mine beyond the pleasure we share.

Eve *is* mine.

She is more delicate than the seafolks. Not only because she lacks magic, but because of her human principles. Hyra is right. She expects more from a mate. I should've considered that instead of running my hands all over her the moment she opened her eyes.

I have no regrets about feeling her or—*gods*—tasting her. However, I should've exercised more restraint. I should've given her some time to process her new life and offered to guide her through it with understanding instead of asking if I could fuck her immediately.

I could bring her pleasure, but that wouldn't be enough for Eve. She has to know me to care about me. I long to learn everything—all of her human quirks that enthrall me.

I wish to be worthy of her.

If she gives me a chance, Eve will dictate how it goes between us. I'll let her set the pace and court her as she sees fit. I'll do anything to make her happy if she gives me the chance to prove I'm worthy. I can show restraint.

The male she deserves is still inside me, albeit buried deep beneath centuries of desperation and bloodshed.

My ruthlessness is what saved her from a fate worse than death.

"What news of your human, my king?" the councilman beside me asks, sneering. "Does she still prefer isolation over her duty?"

Red settles over my vision. The glass in my hand cracks from the force of my grip.

"Please, Lord Quilton, talk of humans makes me lose my appetite," Nixie whines.

"Her name is Eve," I snap. "You will not speak of her."

Lord Quilton inclines his head. The gills along his neck open and close, the only clear sign of his agitation. Seafoam-colored hair curls around his ear-fins. I can see the accusations threading through his eyes.

Does he wish to overthrow me? Let him lay down a challenge, and I will gladly accept.

"Quilton asks a necessary question, my king," Lord Astar drones. "Why does she hide? Why have you allowed her to avoid you?"

"If she is the only hope in ending the curse, you need to press the issue, King Harven," Lord Quilton adds, eyes glittering.

"Indeed."

A chorus of agreements and seeking questions rises from the table. My irritation rages hotter and hotter. I care nothing for their input or what they think of me. They've called me all manner of ill names before my ascension. After I took the throne, they didn't stop their plotting.

I can withstand their ire.

I refuse to let them drip poison all over Eve.

My tentacles curl in agreement, ready to tear them all to shreds for even daring to think about her. She is mine.

A snarl gathers in my throat when the doors open. The dining room immediately plunges into heavy silence.

At first, I think I'm dreaming. Surely I've fallen asleep during this boring dinner. She's come to visit me in my slumber, as she has every night since her arrival.

The sound of Lord Quilton's teeth grinding together eradicates the thought.

In my dreams, Eve and I are always alone. This must be real. Dangerous hope wraps tightly around my heart, compounding with the ever-present ache.

Eve is more beautiful than before. Her absence has made her lovelier than I thought possible.

Glowing like a pearl, and sparkling brighter than sea glass, she looks impossibly gorgeous. Her long blonde hair curls loosely down her back. She pins back sections, showing off her delicate features. I've never properly appreciated the point of her chin or the upturn of her small nose.

A travesty I shall rectify immediately.

Pale shells weave between her golden hair and match the color of her off-white dress. The silk sparkles in the blue light. Billowy sleeves hang loosely from her upper arms, leaving her shoulders and chest bare. The rest of the dress collects at the top of her breasts. It falls in a silken waterfall to her feet.

Taking a careful step forward, the side of the dress parts, revealing her from toes to upper thigh. My mouth waters as my cock turns painful. It presses hotly against my skirt, demanding entrance into her sweet body.

Calm down, I will the errant appendage. Remember our vow of being level-headed.

My tentacles have a will of their own. Perking up for the first time in days, they undulate in appreciation. All of them are eager to feel her again,

just as I am. They will have to wait if we have any hope of making her ours.

Eve clears her throat.

Her small fingers play with the delicate hem of her sleeve. Glancing around the room, I nearly snarl in satisfaction when her eyes meet mine. There is no burning hatred. No rage.

An openness gleams in her blue eyes, making my heart race.

“Apologies for my late arrival,” she says softly.

Her voice is the melody I’ve waited centuries to hear. I could happily drown in the sound.

Lurching up, I nearly knock my chair to the floor. I ignore the hard stares of the others at the table. They don’t matter to me. Only she does. Eve has come at last. I don’t know how much of her time she is granting me, but I will make the most of it.

“You are perfectly on time,” I assure her. “Please, join us.”

The servants rush to retrieve the upholstered chair I had removed from my right side after Nixie’s repeated attempts to sit there.

Eve settles gracefully into the seat.

Everyone else seems intent on studying their half-eaten plates, except for Nixie. Rage burns in her glowing eyes. My growl is one of warning. The siren can be angry all she likes, but it changes nothing. Nixie has been with me a long time. She should know her place.

She could learn something from Bly and Seera, who are perfectly content staring at each other in their quiet way. Nixie needs to watch herself if she values her life.

“A plate for Eve,” I order from the nearest servant.

“Actually,” Eve interjects, eyes snagging mine. “Could I get the stew, if it’s not too much trouble?”

“The servant’s stew?” Lord Quilton spits the question. “How odd.”

Dark pink spreads along Eve’s cheeks as her shoulders slump.

“She will have as many bowls as she desires.”

Each word is a soft snarl. I level a glare at Lord Quilton. He pales to a sickly shade of green. Satisfied that he won’t speak again, I give Eve my full attention. Her lips twitch in the ghost of a smile.

Desire swims thickly in my blood. I don’t know what has softened her to me, but I won’t take it for granted.

“You look beautiful,” I say, low enough for only her to hear. “You are beautiful, Eve. Very beautiful. The *most* beautiful—”

Her smile widens into a grin.

“Thank you.” The color on her face deepens. “I wanted to speak to you, King—”

“Harven,” I breathe. “Call me Harven. Please.”

Call me whatever you’d like, so long as you keep speaking to me.

Eve dips her chin.

“Harven.”

I could come from the sound alone. How she torments me, and she doesn’t even know it.

My errant cock pulses in agreement.

“There are many things I’d like to say. It’s just that...”

Eve trails off, her eyes straying towards the table teeming with attendees. I had forgotten we had an audience. All my focus rests squarely on her.

Swallowing thickly, Eve lifts her delicate hand. I’m not sure I’m breathing as she gently sets her palm atop mine. The warmth of her skin thaws the coldest parts of my soul.

How can this slight touch stir such raw need?

“I was hoping we could have dinner. Just the two of us,” she whispers.

My mind is a whirlpool of raging thoughts.

I marvel over the differences in our skin. How well the colors and the textures complement each other. This is the first time she’s touched me of her own volition. I need to discover if she’s this warm and soft everywhere.

My tentacles rise in agreement, eagerly slipping over her bare feet and gliding along her ankles.

Her breath catches, but she doesn’t pull away. Eve merely tightens her hand on mine.

“Get out.”

She blinks rapidly. Her pink lips part, and I wish to slip my tongue between the gap. Wariness dims the easy brightness in her eyes. She lifts her hand, but I snatch it back.

“Not you. Never you, Eve,” I assure her. I level a glare at the rest of the table and let as much menace into my voice as possible. “The rest of you. *Out*. All dinners will be held privately with my mate until I say otherwise.”

Nixie jumps to her feet with a high-pitched squeal of, “My king!”

“This is unheard of, King Harven,” Lord Qilton mutters. “Surely, you can’t—”

“Out. Now. I won’t repeat myself.”

One by one, the others rise, casting me shocked stares.

Nixie struggles as Bly and Seera pull her from the room. She throws accusatory glares at Eve, who dutifully ignores them. As well as the questioning stares of my council. Her attention is focused solely on me.

The tilt returns to her luscious mouth.

Once the door rattles shut, she leans back. Her tan skin sparkles like a jewel. She glows brighter than the moon. She is somehow even lovelier when there’s an amused set to her brow.

As much as I loved her fire, I’m finding her gentleness just as appealing.

“I didn’t expect you to do that,” she admits.

“You are my mate.” I wait for her to refute the claim, but she merely inclines her head. “And you are more important to me than anyone.”

Her eyes turn knowing as more charming color crawls up the side of her delicate neck.

“Because of the curse?”

My tentacle glides along her bare calf. The suckers ache to leave their marks behind.

“Not entirely. I want—I *need*—you to be happy. Preferably with me.” Her citrus scent deepens. “I made a terrible mess of things, Eve. I should’ve acted with more compassion—given you space. I let the joy of finding you blind me. I didn’t take into account what you’d been through, and instead thought only of my selfish needs. I wanted you so much. More than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

The flesh of my face feels like it’s baking beneath the sun. Her blue eyes stare into the depths of my soul. I beseech the gods to let her see something redeemable.

My mate. The only one I’ll ever get to claim.

“You agreeing to eat with me is a gift, Eve. I thank you.”

I can’t resist leaving a soft kiss on the back of her hand. My mate sighs as I savor the feeling of her against my lips. I release her hand with a firm squeeze. Eve’s eyes glow with delight as her bowl of steaming stew is delivered.

The scent is off-putting, but Eve inhales it greedily. She’s practically salivating over the discolored broth. How interesting.

Lifting her spoon, she blows on a heaping spoonful.

I don't have the heart to tell her what manner of bottom-feeders are in it. If she enjoys it, that's all that matters. She moans around her bite, delight dancing over her gorgeous face.

Have I told her how beautiful I find her? I feel the need to tell her again when she extends her spoon toward me.

"Have you ever tried the stew?" I shake my head. "It's delicious."

"It's for the servants."

"And me," she adds.

"And you," I agree. "If you enjoy it, Eve, that's all that matters."

"Do you want to try a spoonful?" she asks, dipping the silver utensil back into the bowl.

I wrinkle my nose, but Eve's delight only grows. She fishes out a pale piece of crustacean and holds it out to me.

"Come on," she urges. "One bite. It might surprise you."

I'm glad my council has been dismissed.

The king eating the servant's stew at a human's behest would surely inspire more plots to overthrow me. I can't bring myself to care. Not when the chance to put my mouth on something Eve has touched is on offer.

Leaning forward, I accept the bite. The weak broth is spiced with low-quality seasonings to mask the meat's fishy flavor. I hide my disgust and swallow dutifully.

"Well?"

Reaching for my wine, I wash away the foul taste.

"If you like it, Eve. So do I."

It's the right answer to give. My mate rewards me with a giggle.

"I didn't know a king could be so agreeable. If this is the new attitude you're taking when it comes to our relationship, there might just be hope for us."

An easiness settles in between us.

Warmth envelopes my aching heart as she tucks into her meal. I could spend eternity like this. Just watching her eat and breathing in her scent. I've never felt more at peace. A restlessness I've carried with me for centuries has finally calmed into a gentle wave.

My tentacles are more demanding. A few prod carefully at her feet and skim over her delicious toes. Two trail the edge of the table, testing how close they can get before she notices. Eve bestows them a curious smile, which they preen under.

“How do your tentacles work?” she asks. “Can you manipulate them?”
I nod.

“They answer to me. I can move them as I would my arms, but they have their own motives. The tentacles are connected to the deepest recesses of my mind. A more primal part of me.”

One slithers towards her, braver than the others.

It’s the smallest, with a large white scar marring the top and injuring one of its suckers. It stops just beside her palm. Eve eyes it curiously, running a short nail over the tip.

It’s like she’s stroking my cock. My whole body tightens at her curious touch.

She’s ignorant of my distress as she smiles down at the tentacle.

“What happened to you?” she asks, tracing faintly over the scar.

Opening her palm, the tentacle nuzzles into her soft hand.

I don’t need to command it. It’s doing exactly what my entire body wants—getting as close to Eve as possible. She caresses it softly, cooing at it as if it were a small pet and not something capable of strangling a fully grown male.

“That one was injured in the duel with my brothers for the throne. It’s weaker than the rest.”

Eve shoots me a glance of mock-reproach. She covers the tip with her other hand, stroking it softly. Guiding it up, she nestles it near her racing heart.

“Don’t listen to him,” she whispers to my tentacle. “You are just as cool as the others.”

The muscles of my face pull. It’s an odd sensation as I’ve hardly ever made this expression over the centuries. I’m smiling.

Smiling like a fool as I watch my mate soothe my injured tentacle. She is marvelous, my Eve. The words to describe her haven’t been invented yet.

“You’re taking them remarkably well. All of this, really. It had to have been quite a shock. We don’t know much about humans, and you all know even less about us. I’ve been worrying that it might be too much for you to overcome.”

Eve releases my tentacle with a lingering stroke. Leaning against her chair, she smooths a hand down her dress. Her eyes are clear and inviting. Silver and gold thread through her blue irises.

“I’ve had some time to think. About you. About this place. I needed space to sort it all out. Thank you for giving me that.”

“It wasn’t easy,” I admit.

“I know,” she says. “But I’m grateful you did. I’ve learned some things. The duel with your brothers. The reason you wished to secure the throne—it’s why I wanted to have dinner with you. Hyra told me everything. What your father and brothers had done. What they would’ve done to me or some version of my soul had they prevailed over you.”

She drums her fingers lightly on the table.

“It doesn’t absolve you of the lives you took in order to find me.”

“I know it doesn’t.”

I run a hand through my hair. I’d forgone my crown lately. Its weight has been too heavy since Eve’s arrival.

“In the beginning, we only took a few. I didn’t know when you’d be born, or what you’d look like. I vowed never to take my forces onto land to search, or I’d be doing what my brothers had planned. I kept hunts to lone passenger ships, hoping I would get lucky. That you would be aboard one. I was so, so desperate to find you, Eve.”

“But those women had loved ones—families. All of them died on the off-chance I was brought here.”

“It’s shameful. I can admit to that. It’s a stain on my soul to be responsible for the deaths of so many innocents. But if I hadn’t acted and raided those ships, desperate seafolk would have disobeyed my orders and ventured to the surface. Those who have prospered under my rule wanted you found just as badly. They would’ve done abhorrent things to try and discover you if it didn’t seem like I was searching hard enough.”

“Oh God,” she breathes.

“An apology can never convey the depth of my upset over what I’ve done. It was necessary. I hope you can see that, Eve. But that doesn’t make it any less terrible. I’m sorry all the same. I wish things had been different. That I could’ve found you without it being marred by death.”

Eve’s blunt teeth sink into her lower lip. Her head tilts as she considers my apology.

I had tried for hours last night trying to craft one. It’s not good enough, but I refuse to lie to her. I am sorry humans died, but truth be told, I would kill them all over again to find her.

Nothing was going to keep her from me.

“Their losses can’t be for nothing,” Eve finally says. “If they all perished so I could be brought here, we owe it to them to try and make something out of this.”

My tentacles freeze. The chair beneath me feels unsteady as I take in the quiet determination on her face.

“Are you suggesting—”

“A fresh start, Harven. For you and me. To see what we can have—if we are compatible. I can’t return to the surface.”

It’s not a question, but I shake my head anyway.

“If you had a family—or lover—I’m sorry, but—”

She waves a hand.

“I don’t. There is no one waiting for me back home.” Her confession shouldn’t please me as much as it does. “Let’s try again. For real this time.”

Lifting her hand, she extends it towards me. I clasp it between my larger ones in an instant. I skim my fingers over her warm skin, tracing every bump and freckle.

“You’ll set the pace, Eve. Teach me how to properly court you.”

Our hands remain clasped even as a new bowl is delivered. She eyes it hungrily, and I want her to bestow that same look on my cock.

“This is a good start. For our first date.”

“Date?”

I test the word. It doesn’t exist in our language.

“A date,” she repeats. “An activity done, typically done by two people, to test how well they get along. The good ones flow. The bad ones involve a lot of being talked *at*.”

“Has this one been good for you, Eve?”

Tenderness seeps into her eyes.

“Yes. Very good.”

My chest rises in satisfaction. I have pleased her. Excellent.

“When can we have another?”

Her laughter is the sweetest sound. It will fill the castle halls until it’s joined by our children’s.

“Eager?” she asks. I nod sharply. “Typically, a date is only once a day, but there is no time limit. It’s over when one or both parties want it to be.”

She trails her nails along my palms. Seed threatens at the tip of my cock. I give her hand a final squeeze, then release it so she can enjoy her stew. I watch her tuck into the meal and finish off the last of my wine.

“So we are still on a date?”

Eve smiles around her spoon and nods.

“I will give you the best first date of your life.”

“Confident, my king. I like that.”

My king.

She purrs the words. Her eyes tempt me to do wicked, wicked things to her. I must resist. She’ll tell me when she’s ready for more.

I watch as her pink tongue licks broth from her spoon. Her eyes stay on mine the entire time. Seed slips from the head of my cock and stains my skirt.

Gods, she’s going to kill me.

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EVE

After my third bowl, I'm finally full. I lick the last of the savory broth from my spoon with relish while catching Harven's eye. The feral gleam in his gaze sends a wicked thrill through me. He hasn't stopped staring at me since the moment I walked in.

After both agreeing to try again, we settled into comfortable silence.

I feel the tension kindling between us. His posture stiffens as he watches my tongue graze the spoon. With a knowing smirk, I drop the utensil into my bowl and recline.

Harven's gaze lingers on my face as if to trace every detail.

I can't believe the change in me—in him. The male who dismissed his *Pearls* and councilmen from the table is a far cry from the one I woke up to pawing at me. He was open and honest about his role in murdering those women.

It's hard for me to wrap my mind around, but in his position, I do understand why he did it.

Him letting me set the pace erased any lingering trepidation.

Harven's need for me could blossom into something wonderful if coaxed properly. We could have an amenable relationship outside of his need to get me pregnant. He could be the companion I've been searching for.

Only time will tell.

There is no way to change the past, just like there is no way out of here. I can either choose to behave as his captive or forge a different path. I'd rather not spend the rest of my life in isolation. It'll take work, but happiness inside the castle can be mine if I claim it.

While humans don't have mating bonds, I always believed in soulmates before the dating apps crushed my spirits. It's hard to believe Harven is mine. My perfect match isn't some tortured, starving-artist type I always thought it'd be.

Rather, he's a king. With tentacles.

Who is obsessed with telling me how beautiful I am.

I still want a family—a partner. I can have that here if Harven stays compassionate. I'm sure it seems wrong to give him a chance, but I owe it to myself to try to be happy. It doesn't mean I'm ready to let him fuck me just yet.

It's gonna take more than one dinner for me to do that.

Hyra had come to see me before I arrived to impart more wisdom on their kind.

The seafolks were hedonists in every sense of the word. They fucked first and swapped names later. If I want to get along with the king, I'll have to accommodate our differences. However, he also needs to understand mine. And the word no.

If he is sincere in letting me set the pace, then there is no harm in testing his restraint.

"What do you normally do after dinner?" I ask, taking a small sip of water.

Harven's lips twist in thought. His scarred tentacle teases my forearm, eager for another stroke. It reminds me of a kitten seeking extra pets.

"Walk around the castle. Review any correspondence from the council meetings, or assess the latest threats affecting my kingdom," he rattles them off.

"Sounds stressful," I say. "Don't you ever take a break from being king to do something fun?"

"Well—"

Harven looks away. The blue-green hue of his skin blanches. His tentacles whip back and forth with unease. That's when it dawns on me.

My cheeks warm.

"Your *Pearls*. That's how you normally relax."

“It’s the king’s custom to keep them. I don’t care for them beyond the physical.”

“I see.”

I’m not loving the dejected tone of my voice. Harven hears it too, as his eyes go wide. He reaches for my hand and clutches it tightly.

“I haven’t been to see them since you arrived. I won’t—”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Harven. Your customs are different from mine, but that doesn’t make them wrong.”

It still doesn’t stop the sour feeling from spreading through my stomach. I hate the idea of them, but I was the one who told him to bed them. Yes, it was out of anger, but a part of me still meant it. If once I’m pregnant he does lose interest in me, it’s better I’m used to the idea of his kept lovers.

“You are my priority, Eve.” His voice is firm.

“Then would you mind not seeing them until things are settled between us?”

I hold my breath, but Harven agrees immediately.

“Of course. Whatever you want.”

I almost sag with relief. The first test and he’s passed. That entitles him to some sort of reward, doesn’t it?

My heart says yes, while my mind is reminding me to be wary.

Harven’s tentacles wrap around my chair legs. They squeak along the marble as he drags me closer. My thigh brushes his nest of tentacles beneath the table.

I shouldn’t like them this much.

They are animalistic and primal. At first, I thought they would repulse me. However, I’m quickly growing enthralled by their teasing strokes. Being attached to his sculpted eight-pack abs and bulging arms doesn’t hurt either.

He looks every bit the most powerful Kraken King in existence.

I raise a brow. Harven’s smile is pure amusement. It’s a devastating expression that makes my lower half tingle. His masculine scent invades my nose. I have the urge to rub all over him as his tentacles do to me.

“You’re too far away. Tomorrow I’ll have a smaller table brought in,” he declares.

Laughing, I look pointedly at the belt adorned with glittering shells that holds his skirt in place.

“If I were any closer, I’d be in your lap.” I lift my chin. “Which is highly inappropriate for a first date. Unless it’s going *extremely* well.”

He shudders in response. Harven holds himself so tightly, despite the desire burning in his gaze. It kindles my own and encourages me to be bold.

I used to be. Back when I cared enough, I loved the game—the challenge—of seduction. I can be that woman again. Confident.

I *want* to be her.

Sliding to my feet, I slowly prowl towards Harven. I slip myself between his mass of tentacles and the edge of the table. The seeking appendages skim over my dress and place kisses along the tops of my feet.

Harven’s breathing turns ragged as I settle my hands on his shoulders.

His skin feels like hot silk. Beneath my palms are the harsh ridges of his impressive shoulders. I test them for good measure. His eyes unfocus.

I love the way he pants when I lean closer. Sandalwood fills my lungs.

“Are you enjoying our date, Harven?”

My voice is akin to a purr. I press our foreheads together. His long hair tickles my bare shoulder. Strands of silver weave through the ink tendrils like stars in a night sky. His knuckles turn white as they curl into the arms of the chair.

He’s waiting for permission to touch me. Good boy.

“Eve.” His voice is deep and rough. “What—what is this? What are you doing?”

I giggle, sliding deeper into his embrace. Tentacles trace my arms. I skim my nose along his.

I’d typically need a bottle of wine to be this bold, but with Harven it comes naturally. He’s so desperate for me. His need fills the room, heightening the building tension.

My lips find his ear, and his whole body tightens.

“We call it flirting,” I whisper. “Teasing. Tempting. Won’t you let me play with you? Just a little bit, my king.”

He groans at the title. I dip my nose lower, dragging it through the coarse hair of his beard. Normally I prefer a clean-shaven man, but Harven is no man.

His hazy golden eyes swirl with lust.

“This will make you happy?”

I grin against his neck.

“Very.”

He dips his chin once. It's the only confirmation I need.

I can't believe I thought about throwing myself into the pool in my room and letting the ocean tear me apart. This is the most fun I've had in years.

I have a Kraken King in the palm of my hand.

"Then you can flirt with me all you want, Eve. Just, please—don't stop."

My lips skim his jaw as I settle atop his lap.

His tentacles provide ample cushion as they fan around me. Something hard presses between us. A knowing smirk graces my lips as the king's cheeks darken. His thundering heartbeat matches my own. The warmth of his body soaks into me.

His impressive chest rises and falls rapidly.

"What I really want is for you to show me something interesting." I purse my lips. "I've been bored in my room."

My fingers shift through his hair.

It's coarser than human hair, as if made from flexible scales. It's not an unpleasant sensation as I let the long, dark strands thread through my hands. My nails scratch his scalp.

I delight in his deep groan. His tentacles press at my back, urging me closer. The chair's arms groan under how hard he's clutching them.

"Can I touch you, Eve? Please."

I bite my lip.

"Touch me where?"

"Anywhere. *Gods*—anywhere, Eve. Please."

I pluck his large hands from the chair and settle them on my waist. His thumbs dig into my hip bones with a moan.

"I like when you beg me." My eyes narrow. "Don't get greedy, Harven."

Large hands stay firmly where I've put them. His fingers test my skin. The silky dress is so thin his hands may as well be on my naked flesh. The sensation is decadent, eliciting an ache between my thighs I haven't felt in a long time.

This is dangerous, and yet I can't bring myself to stop.

"Don't you have something fun to show me?" I whisper. "The longer we are in here, the more tired I become. That'll mean an end to our date."

Harven's eyes blaze as he lurches upward. I gasp as he hefts me fully into his arms. My breasts press against his hard chest. My arms have no

choice but to curl around his neck.

“I know just the place.”

He moves at a breakneck speed.

We pass startled servants and guards as we glide through the hallways. I register their shocked expressions, but Harven pays them no mind. Wherever he’s taking me is his singular focus.

His tentacles nuzzle into my hips and weave through my hair. I’d never thought I’d enjoy being touched this much, but then again I never thought I’d find a kraken attractive.

“You’re very determined,” I say.

“I don’t want our date to be over yet.”

A large set of doors loom ahead. They are made of the same white marble as the rest of the castle. Golden tridents, surrounded by a circle of pearls, gleam beside the handles. Harven pushes them open with his tentacles and glides us inside.

The steamy room makes my dress cling to my skin. A large pool sits at the center. Crystal-blue water bubbles in the golden room. The tiles glitter, slick with moisture. Across from us, another large window reveals the ocean.

A silver shark swims close, then turns its nose and floats away.

In the distance, I can see the outlines of buildings etched in faint light. The varying sizes and quantities steal my breath. It’s a sprawling sea city.

“Wow,” I breathe. “How has no one ever discovered this place?”

Harven chuckles. The sound teases my nerve endings and makes my heart race.

“My magic keeps us hidden. It’s only recently that your human technology has posed a threat.” He sets me on my feet, but keeps his hands on my hips. “We have been here for longer than you surface dwellers. The stories you are told about us aren’t very accurate.”

“I’ll say.” My hands splay across his abs. “No one ever mentioned a kraken could be so handsome.”

Harven sucks in a breath, his fingers pressing harder. Teasing the harsh contours of his stomach, I give them a fleeting stroke before turning towards the pool. I dip my foot in and moan at how hot the water is.

Salt and musk float on the steamy breeze. More water pumps in from the flowing fountain in the corner.

“What is this place?”

Harven prowls to my side, his tentacles tickling my leg.

“My personal bathing chamber.”

I wrinkle my nose.

“Is this your way of telling me I smell?”

His eyes go wide.

“No! No, I—”

I laugh, tossing my head back. Tracing a glittering conch shell along his belt, I look up at him from beneath my lashes.

“I was teasing you, Harven.” I gesture towards my dress. “I didn’t know I’d need a swimsuit for this date.”

“I can have it fetched for you.”

I merely smile up at him.

“There’s no need since you’re going to behave yourself.”

My hands fall to the top of my dress. Balmy air teases my bare skin. Curls stick to my dewy shoulders.

“Seeing your date naked is less likely than crawling into his lap.” I undo the pin and let the material gape. “But never impossible.”

Harven swallows several times before shaking himself. With a sharp turn, he gives me his back. Laughing quietly, I shrug off my dress and jump in the pool. Warm water envelops me like a hug.

I pick out the pins from my hair and set them on the edge.

“You can turn around.”

He does so immediately. Looking between me in the pool and my pile of clothes, he seems conflicted. I tread water. It’s deeper than any normal bathing pool, clearly built for a seven-foot kraken.

I dip my hair into the water to slick it back.

“Aren’t you going to join me?” I ask.

He solemnly shakes his head.

“I can’t. Not if you want me to behave.”

The sentence ends in a growl. I giggle, then slip deeper into the water.

“Suit yourself, I won’t be long.”

The water is cloudy enough to keep me concealed. I float through the bath in measured strokes. My muscles relax the longer I soak. Harven watches my every movement. The bulge at the front of his skirt rises.

I have to look away from the impressive length before I do something even more reckless.

“You’re a very graceful swimmer, Eve,” he compliments.

“It’s like I knew I’d be spending the rest of my life surrounded by it.”

Tenderness floods Harven’s gaze.

I’ve said too much. I’ve bared a part of my soul I’d rather keep hidden a little longer. Today has been good. I don’t want to ruin things by rushing them. Harven and I will need to come to an understanding.

If he wants us to be together in any capacity, then some things will need to change.

I float to the edge where there is a variety of different soaps. They smell strongly of Harven. Lathering a teal colored bar in my hand, I wash my chest and underarms. I feel Harven’s eyes on me.

The ache between my thighs deepens.

Once I am clean and have had my fill of the bath, I float back towards him. The king’s eyes are half-lidded. His tentacles drag on the tiles as if searching for me.

“This has been wonderful, Harven. But I think I’m ready to go back to my room.” My hands grip the side. “Could you get me a towel, please?”

With a nod, he retrieves a fluffy white one and leaves it beside the pool before turning around. I blot my hair, then secure the fabric snugly around my body. Picking up my dress, I stare at this muscular back.

Faint scars mar his blue-green skin. Some are old and faded, while others are puckered and fresh. A true warrior king.

He has behaved perfectly tonight. Every time I’ve pushed him, he’s done exactly as I’ve asked. Harven hasn’t once taken it further than I wanted.

Will he remain accommodating of my orders after we fuck?

I don’t have an iron will. The longer he’s around me with those rippling muscles and desperate eyes, I’ll cave. Everyone longs to be wanted in the way Harven desires me. It’s as if I’m the only thing in the world to him.

Right now, that might be the case, but once he has me, will things change?

It’s too dangerous to give in just yet. Besides, I’m having my fun tempting him. I want to see how far I can push this before he breaks and makes the decision for both of us. When that happens, I just pray he cares for me enough to want me once I’m no longer something new.

I touch his back. He jumps slightly, taking in the sight of me dressed only in a towel. My wet hair drips onto the floor.

“Can you take me back to my room?” I ask, clutching my dress to my chest.

“Is our date over?”

Harven lifts me, holding me tight to his chest. His racing heart echoes mine. I sling one arm over his shoulder while keeping my towel closed with the other hand.

The sadness in his voice brings a smile to my mouth.

“Not quite.”

Moving much slower than we did to reach the bath, Harven carries me back to my room. The servants we pass keep their faces neutral, but I have no doubt they’ll be sharing what they saw come morning. Good. I want the whole castle to know the king is mine. At least for now.

I tuck my head under his chin. My lips brush his throat.

“Tonight was wonderful. I’m looking forward to our second date.”

“I’ll come up with something fun for us to do after dinner.” He pulls back to catch my eye. “Leri has mentioned you being bored. You said it again tonight. What would you like to do with your free time?”

My lips twist to the side.

“I’m not sure. On land, I didn’t have many hobbies. I was a painter. That was my job. I made artwork. If there was some way to do that here, I would—”

“It will be done,” Harven vows. “I’ll consult with my servants to acquire all the supplies you will need.”

The ache in my chest deepens. If I’m not careful, I’m going to give my heart away to him as well as my womb.

“Thank you,” I whisper against his skin.

We soon reach my door. Harven sets me down on the cool tiles. The guards posted outside are rigid and stone-faced. I ignore them as my eyes connect with the king’s. His hand raises to tuck a piece of drying hair behind my ear.

Tension gathers between us. We are an electric current, each of us capturing the other in our fields. Invisible hands shove us together. A string has us tied around the middle, locking us together. I breathe him in and let his power wash over me.

“Our date isn’t over just yet, Harven.” I lick my dry lips. “Particularly good dates end in a specific way.”

“How?”

Stepping closer, I let his tentacles ravage my bare legs. They curl around my flesh and suction tightly. The sensation makes me go wet between my thighs. My mouth parts as I push up on my toes and pray my towel stays in place.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I brush my lips over his.

“With a kiss.”

I seal our mouths together.

His taste explodes through me, more potent than before. Our first kiss was marred by confusion and distrust. It happened in a room full of corpses while he went on and on about my womb.

This is our true first kiss, one born out of mutual desperation.

Whimpering against his lips, I taste his snarl on my tongue. The careful restraint Harven has kept all night shatters. His hands fall to my waist as he lifts me up. I groan as he pins me to the wall. My legs go on either side of his powerful torso.

The hunger in his kiss feeds mine.

His tentacles lock around my legs, keeping them open. My mouth parts on a whimper and his tongue slides in. I yield to the expert way he teases mine. Over and over he slicks it into my mouth, mimicking the punishing pace I know he intends to fuck me at.

My pussy clenches at the thought. She has a mind of her own, turning even wetter and needier. If I let her decide us, Harven and I would already be inside me.

This attraction goes beyond an initial spark. It’s primal. If I wasn’t certain about our mating bond before, I am now. Harven’s fingers rove over my ass and hips. He squeezes every bit of me through the towel.

His tentacles aid him as they spread along my chest. Two press against my breasts, teasing my hardening nipples.

We break for air as my head falls back against the wall. Harven devours my neck and chest. Biting and sucking as if he can devour me whole.

“Harven,” I moan as his tentacle trails higher on my leg.

It feels too good. He is everywhere. His mouth suction to my throat. His scent is in my lungs. The need for him rages in my blood.

His tentacle slips under the hem of my towel.

“Harven,” I gasp again.

It’s too much. I have to end this now before we end up fucking against my door for the whole castle to see. My hands spear into his hair and grip

his scalp.

“Harven. S—stop, we have to stop—”

With a guttural growl, Harven releases me. I land softly on the marble as his tentacles retreat from my body. His hands on my waist linger before he pulls them back.

Breathing heavily, I take in his stormy gaze. Lust and desire rage in his dark gold eyes. A similar storm is brewing inside me. My breathing is rough as I hold onto the wall to steady myself.

He reaches for me, but stops.

“Eve. I’m sorry. I—”

I shake my head.

“It’s not you. It’s me. I got carried away.” I take his hand and thread our fingers together. “Thank you for stopping.”

The side of his mouth curls.

“You aren’t ready for all of me yet.” He squeezes my hand, then drops it to open the door. “Sleep well, Eve. I want you rested for our date tomorrow. I’m planning a long one.”

Crossing over the threshold, I look back at him. A day ago I wanted him dead. I vowed to die before letting him touch me.

Now, if I delay a moment longer, I’ll give in to my desire and let him take me right here.

Regardless of the danger, I can’t help but tease him one final time tonight.

“With more kissing?” I ask.

Harven’s smile is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

“All the kissing you could want, my mate.”

EVE

Staring at the latest arrivals to my room, I suppress a squeal.

Warmth spreads throughout my body, making my fingers tingle. The supplies arrived damp, but are more than usable. A variety of canvases and thick paper lie across my desk. A small, tabletop easel is propped open. Beside it is a jar of brushes in varying shapes and densities.

I grin down at the pigments. They look more akin to watercolors than my usual oil-based medium. My fingers trail over the cakes, cataloging the varying hues of green and blue.

Satin-lined boxes had accompanied the tins of paint.

I trace the rough texture of the diamond bracelet. Beside it rests a pearl necklace. Another box contains a tiara made of sapphire and silver. I've never seen such riches.

Dating a king definitely has its perks.

Leri and the other servants left some minutes ago, while I've been stuck staring at my new items. In the silence of my room, I reflect on the previous night. What had come over me? I had been bold with men before, but last night with Harven was something else.

I didn't realize I was such a tease. For his part, he withstood my temptation. Toying with his restraint lit a fire within me. One that had burned so low I forgot I even possessed it. I liked that he obeyed me, but I saw the sheer will it took.

When that restraint finally snapped—

I swallowed, my face heating. Part of me wondered in the hall if he was too lost in our kiss to stop. If he had been, I would've welcomed him into my bed despite my protests. I wanted him, even though I knew it was too fast to give in.

Over a year without good sex has left me aching for it.

Harven may not be able to offer me love, but I knew he'd be able to fuck me like I've always wanted. His kiss had brought me more pleasure than any boyfriend had.

There is a dominance to him I haven't come across in human men.

Maybe it's because of his magic, or because he secured his throne by blood. He is a dominant male and wields his power expertly. A powerful king in every sense of the word.

Harven's dominance calls to me. Luring me closer like a siren's song.

Speaking of sirens, Leri's warning rings in my ear. She brought grim tidings along with my morning bowl of stew. The nymph cautioned me that Nixie had many spies stationed throughout the castle, and she wasn't pleased by my adventure with the king. Word of my evening with Harven had spread like wildfire. The servants had all stared at me, whispering in their low voices.

Leri is certain Nixie will seek retribution.

The female may be jealous, but she's not reckless. Harven needs me. She can't be foolish enough to harm me. She'd rather have the satisfaction of taking him from me than killing me.

The thought of Harven returning to her bed makes my stomach ache. It may be their custom, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. He agreed to not see them while we got to know each other, but what about after? Once I'm pregnant, will he seek their company over mine?

I loathe the idea of sharing him.

It's a startling realization. Less than a week ago, I swore to hate him forever. I couldn't really be feeling jealous. Despite my best efforts, I'm growing attached. I always fell too fast. It's what led to the downfall of so many of my relationships. I can't afford to be swept away by Harven too quickly.

I need to keep my wits about me.

However, I couldn't afford to be too aloof. I lived and died by the king's will.

If Nixie perceives me as a romantic threat, that means word of the king's affections has spread. As Hyra bluntly put it, unless I want to find poison in my stew, I'll need to keep close to him. Securing his affection was more important than ever, but what of my own?

How was I feeling? I honestly didn't know.

Confused mainly. Hopeful. Hadn't I set off on this grand adventure to find love? I never would've thought it'd be at the bottom of the sea, but beggars can't be choosers. The scary truth was I could see myself falling for Harven.

Whether out of necessity or genuine connection, I couldn't be sure.

If I gave him my heart and he still sought out his mistress, it would crush me. Only time will tell if we can have something true—something real. I'll just have to be patient and stay on my guard.

Knocking echoes through my room.

My heart lifts, thinking it could be Harven. I smooth a hand down my short satin nightgown as I approach the door. I mask my disappointment when I see Princess Hyra on my threshold.

Her white hair collects in the low bun at the nape of her graceful neck. Her tentacles are arranged under a sparkling skirt that matches her short-sleeve top.

She glides in with a warm smile.

"I'm impressed. The king dismissing everyone from a royal dinner is unheard of." Her smile takes on a feral edge. "Nixie is furious."

"Good."

Hyra chuckles before sobering.

"Be careful with her, Eve. Seera and Bly are one thing. They don't mind being overlooked."

"Because they're together."

It was easy enough to surmise. The closeness. The secretive looks they shared. It went beyond bedmates. They were in love.

Hyra sucks in a breath, slamming the door shut behind her.

"It is forbidden for *the King's Pearls* to form relationships outside of the king. Especially amongst each other. They would be punished if my uncle found out."

"I won't say anything," I assure her.

Her nod is sharp, before her eyes glow anew.

“They would be free to be together if the king dispensed with their service.”

She has all the subtlety of a freight train.

I shake my head and cross my arms over my chest. My nipples harden at the memory of our kiss. The fevered way he took my mouth. His heady taste remains faintly along my tongue.

“One kiss isn’t going to make the king get rid of his lovers.”

Hyra’s smile is all teeth.

“A kiss? That’s good, Eve.” Her tentacles graze along the marble. “I take it you don’t hate him as much as you used to.”

“I don’t,” I concede.

“Good. How was your evening then?”

My heart thunders in my chest. Heat spreads thickly through my veins as I think of the king. So much for guarding my heart.

“It was nice. He isn’t as monstrous as I first thought. He behaved like a perfect gentleman. Took accountability. We both want to make a real go of things. To see if what we have can be more than just procreation.” Biting my lip, I sigh. “We need to spend more time together.”

“And you will,” Hyra assures me, mischief swirling in her eyes. “He’s in the hall.”

My heart stumbles in my chest. I glance toward the door, and my palms sweat. It’s like I can feel him on the other side. His power—magic—brushes up against my skin in a caress.

“Seems dinner was too far off for him to wait. Impatient male,” Hyra mumbles with amusement.

I turn the handle and let light from the hall spill into my room. Harven leans against the wall across from my door. He is dressed the same way he was last night.

A skirt of blue satin hides the upper half of his strong tentacles. A belt of shells and pearls holds it in place. Metal cuffs encase his strong forearms. They are made of the same gold as the crown resting on his head. The sapphire at the center sparkles like a star.

My breath catches at the sight of him. The space between my thighs begins to heat. My nipples press firmly against my thin nightgown.

Grinning, I dip shallowly at the waist as all the others who greet him do.

“Good morning, my king.”

His tentacles spread along the floor as he prowls towards me. He lifts my chin with his fingers, his dark gold eyes burning with intensity. My mouth goes dry at the unbridled lust teeming in his gaze.

“You don’t need to bow, Eve.”

My hands splay across his chest. I love the feeling of his rough-hewn muscles. They ripple under my palms. His tentacles snuggle along my ankles and tease my exposed flesh.

“What brings you to my door this early?”

“I wanted to make sure the supplies got delivered to you before I was sequestered away in my council meeting.”

“They arrived, as did your other presents.” I trail a finger between his pecs, delighting in his soft groan. “You are too generous, Harven.”

His fingers skim over my cheek. The gentleness of his touch burrows into my soul. The invisible force that binds us shrinks the room. He is the only thing I see.

“You deserve them, my mate.” The word washes over me. “You deserve everything.”

“And that’s what you’re going to give me?”

Harven swallows, his strong throat bobbing.

“If you’ll let me.”

“Hm, I’ll consider it.” I raise a brow. “What color would you like me to wear tonight?”

Harven’s tentacle skims up my calf and teases the hem of my nightgown. My breath catches as his suckers graze my inner thigh. Harven’s thumb rubs against my bottom lip.

“Dark blue. Like the ocean at midnight. It’ll bring out your eyes”

Heat licks my cheeks.

“As you wish, my king.”

“When you call me *my king*, Eve, it makes me want to do wicked things to you.”

My eyes glaze over as his thumb dips into my mouth.

“What kind of things?” I ask.

“Ones very unsuitable for a second date, I’m sure.”

“We’ll see about that.” Pressing up on my toes, I taste his lips with a quick press. “Go to your meeting. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Tonight,” he agrees, tasting me once more.

I savor it before he pulls away. His tentacles bestow a lingering caress. I watch him go for a moment before returning to my room on trembling knees.

Hyra sits on my bed, a knowing smirk gracing her full lips.

“We’ll be calling you queen by the next full moon.”

I shake my head as the word settles in my heart. My bones. That is what my future here entails. It should concern me how little I fear the title.

Hyra rises onto her webbed toes.

“The ladies of the court will seek you out for lessons on seduction,” she muses.

“It’s easy to seduce a male who’s already salivating over me due to a primal bond.”

I’m surprised by my tone. Without the bond, would he still want me? The answer doesn’t matter. It’s not as if I can change it, but part of me wants to know if what he feels for me is more than the primal urge to fuck.

If he can love me the way I desire.

Sadness dims Hyra’s eyes.

“He cares for you beyond the bond, Eve.”

My eyes stray to my desk. They trail over the variety of paints and supplies. Snagging on the satin boxes, my heart lifts. I recall Harven’s apology—the reverence in which he speaks of me. Of the vows of protection he swore over and over.

Would he do all of this if he only desired my body?

My heart tells me no, but my mind is not so easily swayed.

Regardless of my confusion, I can’t help the small smile playing on my lips as I say, “Perhaps you’re right, princess.”

HARVEN

Foam from the sea-brew spills over the side of my goblet. I deposit it on the small table for the tenth time since arriving at the dining room. I savor the silence for the first time all day. Typically, dinner was an extension of my council meetings.

From now on, it will be a time for Eve and me to get to know each other.

Eve. I'm eager to see her again in the dark blue dress I've asked her to wear.

My body aches for her. It was physically painful to be without her. Countless times I fought my tentacles from pulling me from the throne room and guiding me back towards her door.

They missed her as much as I did.

When she is out of my sight, I feel trapped in my own skin. This need for her—not just her body, but for her soul—deepens. It confounds me.

The mating bond demands I fuck her until my heir is created. These other urges are just as strong. I need to hold her close. To protect her and make her smile.

I crave her bewitching stares and her whispered teases. The way her small hands rove over my skin makes me feel more powerful than my crown.

Her brand of sensual torment is unique.

My *Pearls* had been skilled in the art of seduction, but it was a preamble to sex. Foreplay meant to heighten desire. Once I left their bed, I never thought twice about their lingering glances or whispered words.

All I can think about is Eve.

Each touch and teasing smile makes me painfully hard.

I'm hard sitting here, waiting for her. My cock pushes firmly against my skirt as I recall the amused tilt of her lips. The way she says *my king* in that breathy voice of hers makes me want to pin her down.

To claim her for all to see.

My councilmen may see her lack of magic as weakness, but I don't. She has no need for magic. Eve wields me. I'd kill thousands more if it meant keeping her safe.

The most startling realization from last night is that I'm not alone in my desire.

She had kissed me of her own volition. Her soft moans were sweeter than wine. Her supple body opened to me as did her perfect mouth. Had she not asked me to stop, I would've made her come against the wall before taking her to bed.

The restraint I showed seems impossible to me now. If she were to kiss me like that again, I wouldn't be strong enough to pull back.

Her mouth says no, but her body screams at me to take her.

Just as it had this morning outside her door. If I had not had my meetings and Hyra wasn't in her room, I could've persuaded her to let me inside. I know she has reservations.

Once I'm inside her, I'll alleviate any lingering doubts.

She belongs to me. Forever. This desire for her will never wane. It goes beyond the physical. She is woven into my soul. Her heart nestles next to mine.

My patience wanes the longer she is out of my sight. As much as I wanted to seek her out today, she needed her space. She was still adjusting to her new life.

Between our date tonight and what's planned for tomorrow, I'll be taking up a bulk of her evenings.

I've ordered a celebration to honor her arrival. It will be a good chance for Eve to see all the wonders that exist in our world. Drinking, dancing, and a night filled with revelry. I'm hoping it will put her at ease.

It would also show my entire court that she is mine. Any threats against her would be met swiftly and decisively.

I had heard the servants whispering about our night together.

Gossip quickly turns to poison. If anyone comes for my mate, I will end them as I did the sharkin who took her. Her safety is more important than ever.

An uprising was afoot. Reports of traitors inside my castle were coming in more frequently. My allies and spies would uncover them, but until I was certain they were all eradicated, I would take every precaution with Eve.

Her safety is what led me into the city this afternoon to personally deal with the latest pair of discovered usurpers. I had personally slaughtered the traitors who meant to overthrow me.

It was a weak rebellion, but I crushed it with force.

Once my heir was safely in Eve's womb, the unrest would die down. However, I have no intention of rushing Eve to ease my court's concerns. I can get her pregnant and win her heart if I play this right. I desire both equally.

I never thought I would want someone in this way. For centuries, a small part of me grew bored with the fleeting pleasure of my *Pearls*. I longed for a relationship that went beyond release.

With Eve, I can have it. I won't be satisfied until I've claimed every part of her.

The room's doors peel open, and I can finally breathe easy.

She is a vision in the dark blue dress. The silk wraps over her breasts, exposing her sides and the flat planes of her stomach. High slits on the side bare her legs as a pearl belt rests on her shapely hips. Her golden hair curls away from her face. She looks impossibly soft as always.

Her teasing smile makes my cock rage beneath my skirt.

"Good evening," she says. "Love the new table."

It is a fraction of the size of the old one and fitted with only two chairs. I wave at the servants to bring out the food. I push back my chair, and my tentacles snap toward her.

"As I said, you were too far away at the old one."

Biting her lip, she saunters over. Her dress gapes, revealing her golden skin.

Forgoing her chair, Eve settles into my lap. Her lithe thighs go on either side of my waist. My tentacles skim along her bare back as she looks at me

beneath her lashes. Her warm body makes my head spin.

“Better?” she asks, skimming her fingers along my chest.

My hands fall to her waist. Her skin is smooth and slick. I inhale her bright citrus scent and note, with satisfaction, that she still smells faintly of my soap. I place my lips against her ear.

“Much.”

She bestows me a dazzling grin.

I’ve never flirted, as she calls it. With my *Pearls*, their job was to serve me. With Eve, I want to drive her just as wild as she does to me.

Rocking her gently, I groan at the contact her backside makes with my raging cock. It’s seeking entrance inside her. As are my tentacles, skimming under her dress.

When the time is right, I’ll cram so much of myself inside of her there’ll be no way to separate us.

“Did you miss me today?”

She flutters her golden lashes. Working her hips faster, I swallow my groan.

“Yes,” I say through my teeth. “So much.”

“I missed you too.” Her fingers shift through my beard. “The painting supplies had been diverting, but my mind had wandered to you. To our kiss.”

“Do you want another one, my mate?”

Color swims in her freckled cheeks. I wonder where else she blushes so prettily.

“In time,” she sighs.

Her pink tongue teases my throat. Seed leaks from the tip of my cock. It’s so hard it could shatter the marble table. Eve’s eyes dance with mischief as she pulls back.

“Patience is a virtue, my king.” Twisting, her back falls against my chest. “And I’m starving.”

Our meals are served together.

I dig into my plate of boiled fish while my injured tentacle delivers Eve her bowl of stew. She scratches it with her nails before it lowers to her lap.

She moans as she leans against me.

I’ve decided Eve will eat every meal from my lap. Her own chair will no longer be necessary. No matter where we are, this is her place. Whether

alone at dinner or before the court, Eve will never sit anywhere but on top of me.

“Eat quickly,” I tell her. “I have much planned for our date. I’ve been doing my research.”

She smiles around her spoon.

“Really? Do tell.”

“Human customs are fascinating. As is the variety of what a date can entail. I’ve decided on a tamer option for us.” Curling a lock of blonde hair around my finger, I smile. “Tonight I have prepared a tour of the royal gardens. Once I have shown you the loveliest plants, we will take a trip to the library. Tomorrow, there will be a celebration to honor your arrival.”

“Fancy.” She grins. “What does that entail?”

“Dancing, singing, all manner of merriment.”

My injured tentacle curls loosely around her wrist as she sets her bowl down. Its good sucker suction gently to her skin. Eve runs a soothing hand over it.

She might as well be touching my cock.

“Sounds fun. I haven’t been to a party in a long time.” She looks up at me. “I’m full, my king. I’m ready to start the rest of our date and eager to see more of the castle.”

Lowering her to the floor, I rise and take her hand.

As I exit the room, my mood instantly darkens at the sight of the three figures in the hall. Bly and Seera stand close together, but Nixie breaks away and heads toward us. Eve steps closer to my side.

My tentacles envelop her, ready to strike the siren down if necessary.

“King Harven,” she purrs, bowing deeply to show off the low neckline of her dress. “I look forward to performing for you during the celebration. You always said I was a lovely dancer.”

I can’t recall ever bestowing the compliment. My patience for the siren is already dangerously low.

Eve looks up at me, brows arched. The wariness in her gaze makes my stomach feel hollow. From the corner of my eye, I watch Nixie’s face twist as I pull Eve harder against me.

Nixie steps closer. Too close.

The siren lifts her hand.

“My king, I’ve missed you. My bed has grown so cold—”

My growl vibrates down the hall. Seera and Bly step up and take Nixie's arms before she can touch me. She hisses at them and tries in vain to break free.

"Out of my sight, all of you," I snap, glaring at the siren. "If I were you, Nixie, I wouldn't vex me further."

"King Harven, I only meant to—let go of me!"

Seera and Bly drag her down the hall, casting apologetic smiles in their wake. Eve turns to watch her go. A strange expression washes over her features. The hint of unease nearly sends me to the floor. Another unpleasant emotion I can't name dims her bright eyes.

I twist her towards me and grip her chin.

"She means nothing to me. None of them do. You are what's important."

Gnawing on her lip, Eve doesn't respond. The uneasy look returns to her eyes.

Conflicting feelings race through me. I understand humans have different customs, but would Eve object to me keeping my *Pearls*? At present, I can't stand the idea of anyone but her touching me, but that could change. There may come a day when Eve doesn't want me anymore. I wouldn't force myself upon her when my *Pearls* were the obvious solution.

The practice of *the King's Pearls* was meant to further procreation. However, no one but Eve will ever bear my children. With that in mind, shouldn't that end the practice of keeping *Pearls*? I'll never want them more than I do Eve—I'll never love them.

Love.

The word rattles around in my head. Love. My kind saw it as a weakness.

For humans, it means a great deal. Is that what Eve seeks from me? Could I ever earn her love?

Giving so much of myself to her would be dangerous. Yet, as I take her fragile hand in mine and lead her down the hall, I can't help but want to risk it all. I've done unspeakable things to find Eve.

She's right. We owe it to all the people I've killed to make a go of things. Their deaths wouldn't be in vain if I could convince her to love a monster with a soul as stained as mine.

I'd like to win Eve's heart.

My heirs would be the product of true love. I could raise them to act with the same bravery and kindness as their mother. They could change things. We could raise them with love and compassion.

They wouldn't need to fight over the throne. It could pass peacefully to one of my sons.

Gripping Eve's hand tighter, I realize she holds my wretched heart squarely in her palm. She has changed everything. With her in my life, the future is bright. The possibilities are endless.

I'll kill for her—I'll die for her. My desperation to make her mine roars to life. With her heart on the line, the need to claim her reaches a new peak.

She is my madness. I pray to the gods I stay under her affliction for the rest of my life.

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EVE

The gardens are lovely.

Large, gleaming planter boxes of silver, bearing the royal trident crest, fan out around the spacious room. Pale blue light pools under each structure. Hazy darkness from the large windows makes it seem like the king and I are in our own world.

Each box contains a unique variety of aquatic plants. Large variations of coral and algae are suspended in floating spheres of salt water. Some pulse with light, while others are as dull and pale as bleached bones.

Some move like living beings. My eyes can hardly take in all the wonder.

The air is humid to keep the plants alive.

My skirt clings to my legs. I bend down at the waist to take in a pool of glittering algae. Silver starfish lay atop jewel-tone rocks. The water swirls with glitter like a pool of starlight.

I dip my finger in, surprised to find the temperature warm. A slender tentacle glides along my wrist, scar glinting in the water's reflection.

I shiver at the touch—at the overwhelming feeling of Harven being so close.

I dare a look at him over my shoulder. The run-in with Nixie had rattled him in the hall. He looks like a male dangerously close to snapping. The weight of the kingdom rests atop his shoulders.

I can see it in the lines of his face and the way he clenches his strong jaw.

Nixie and the other *Pearls* don't need to be adding to his stress. I suppose that's unfair of me. I'm sure I've caused him more stress than anyone.

It's also unfair how much I liked the way he held me in front of the siren, dismissing her with barely a glance.

I hadn't known what to say to him after. I figured silence was better than demanding he relinquish his lovers and be solely mine. I can't ask him to do that. Not yet.

Hyra informed me of just what a primal creature King Harven is.

In no uncertain terms, she had let me know that her uncle needs to fuck. Daily—multiple times a day.

Could I really satisfy that? My pussy clenches at the thought of being taken so thoroughly by a male as powerful as Harven. She would be more than willing to try, but my mind isn't on board.

The small voice in my head reminds me that once he has me, this could all be over.

No more private dinners, no more dates—once I get pregnant, he could toss me aside without a second thought. The idea that I'm expendable to him beyond my womb makes me sick.

Regardless, I can't deny that I still want to push him. To tease and tempt him to take me before pulling back. I want to test just how far I can take this game.

If he snaps, well...I'm not sure what I'll do.

Deep down, I know the answer. I've buried it far below the surface for so many years I'm surprised the desire is still there. It hums in my chest, glowing softly against my racing heart. It's a wicked truth, one I hope won't have to be acknowledged.

Before they had all settled, I used to share this desire to be dominated by a man with my friends.

They all informed me that kind of perverse desire would either land me in a bad situation or leave me disappointed. There was some truth to the latter. No manner of half-assed bondage with a boyfriend ever satisfied me. I craved to be overpowered. Mastered.

I couldn't voice that desire to Harven.

At least not until I was certain of his affection for me. To relinquish my power to him in that way would spell disaster if he did eventually turn from my bed.

I wouldn't submit to a male who hadn't earned it, no matter how much I was beginning to desire him.

Besides, I haven't tested the limits of my fantasy. I could hate it. The thought of being held down is appealing. What if, in the moment, it's more frightening than arousing?

If I needed Harven to stop, would he? Could he?

It would be incredibly risky to partake in such an act with a kraken for the first time.

"What are you thinking about?"

I nearly jump out of my skin as his lips tickle my ear.

I hadn't heard him approach, too absorbed in my wanton thoughts. A tentacle wraps around my waist while another draws lazy circles on my back.

"The past," I say.

Harven's fingers trail over my cheek and along my jaw. I love that he can't seem to stop touching me. Some part of him always has to be on my skin whenever we're together.

"I want to know more about yours," he says.

I huff a laugh.

"Not much to tell, I'm afraid. I was born and raised in a small town. I moved to Chicago for art school at twenty, shortly after my father passed away. My mother died when I was a baby, and both of them were only children with no living parents. With them gone, I was all alone."

My fingers skim over the harsh contours of his abs.

"I used my father's life insurance to go to school. I met friends there, but most fizzled out after school. I realized the foundation of our friendship was that we were all at similar stages in our lives. Once things for them began to change—marriage, kids—we no longer had anything in common."

I shrug. It was a sad truth, but an honest one.

"I was still in the city. Still painting, still alone. In their eyes I must've seemed lost." My lips quirk. "Then you kidnapped me, and now I'm here."

I'm sure news of *Love on the High Seas* has reached them. I hope Jen doesn't blame herself.

Melancholy sweeps in, but I ignore it.

My old life is gone. The Eve they may mourn no longer exists. I can't think about them. I have to give my new life a fair chance without letting the past ruin it.

"Much to my good fortune," he breathes, lifting my chin. "And you're not alone, Eve. You never will be again."

The tentacle around my waist squeezes in reassurance. His mouth looms closer, daring me to take it. Instead, I wrap my arms around his strong back and let him hold me. I want to know we can have tenderness in addition to lust.

Harven's strong arms encircle me, rubbing soothing circles on my back.

We stay locked together for a moment. I'm glad he doesn't offer me pity, but rather quiet understanding. We're more alike than I initially thought.

He presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Did you enjoy the gardens?"

I smile.

"Very much. I've never seen so many beautiful things."

"You are more beautiful than all of them combined, Eve."

My face heats as I nuzzle into his chest.

"Come," he orders. "There's more I wish to show you."

Lifting me into his arms, I giggle as he holds me close.

We glide from the room and into the illustrious hall. Harven's tentacles skim over my arms and legs. They suction lightly to my flesh, leaving behind faint pink marks.

Another set of marble doors pull open, and we slip inside.

My eyes widen at the grand space. It sparkles like a polished pearl.

The white marble floor is veined with gold and silver. Large pillars support the library's three levels. The floor we are on opens into an atrium. At the center is a statue of a sea god that looks remarkably like Harven, with his powerful tentacles and dark eyes.

Beneath it is a shallow pool of gleaming blue water.

Silver bookshelves are laden with all manner of tomes and scrolls. The room's sheer size steals my breath. There must be thousands—hundreds of thousands—of books in here.

Harven carries me deeper into the room.

A long work table sits in the corner. On the other side is another grand window. Seaweed and schools of glittering fish cut through the dark water.

That's not what catches my eye, though, as Harven sets me down and whirls towards him.

Deep blue darkens the highest points of his cheeks.

"I'd love to watch you paint, Eve. If you'd allow it."

Biting my lip to keep from smiling too big, I nod.

I settle onto the bench and instruct Harven to sit on the other side of me. He pouts at the distance, but listens to my instructions. I take in the new tins of paint cakes and fresh canvases. I select a slender paintbrush and dip it in the water bowl to activate the pigments.

My eyes trace over Harven's regal posture, eager to commit his profile to paper. It's been a long time since I did portraits. The challenge of something new is exciting.

I swirl colors together to get the right hue.

"Your turn," I muse, coating the canvas in a thin layer of blue. "I told you about my past. Hyra told me a lot about yours, but I'd rather hear more directly from you."

His muscles tighten. I commit the harsh set of his brow to memory to add to the portrait later. He rolls his impressive neck and sighs.

"The worst of it, you know. I had to kill my brothers to claim the throne. I've had to do many things to ensure stability. To make sure that when I found you—you'd be safe. It hasn't always made me popular. Neither did the fact that I was illegitimate. In the end, it didn't matter. My power can't be denied no matter how many times traitors force me to demonstrate just how deadly I can be." The feral gleam in his eyes makes me shiver. "The deaths of the human women I feel remorse over, but the others—I can't bring myself to care."

My brush pauses on the canvas. A tear of dark green seeps down the front.

"What others?"

Harven takes a deep, calming breath. I can feel the rage coming off him in waves. His fingers curl into the lip of the table.

"You didn't arrive with the rest of the humans, Eve. A sharkin guard took you from the ship and stole you away. Entranced by your beauty, he meant to keep you from me."

Unease makes my stomach turn. My hands tremble, distorting the outline of Harven's painted face. The king notes my alarm and shakes his head.

“The Sea Witch found you before he could do anything.” He curls his fingers into a fist. “I killed him, Eve. With my tentacles. I tore him apart for daring to touch you. I thought he was acting alone—a greedy male seeking a companion—but I’ve since learned he’s part of a bigger plot. With you being my mate, many seek to take you in order to weaken me.”

“Jesus Christ,” I breathe.

My mind whirls. Never have I been important enough to kidnap—or want dead. If I needed a reminder that I was in this treacherous world, this was it.

Paint drips onto my dress. I brush it away with a trembling hand.

“I vowed to protect you, Eve, and I meant it. Today I found more traitors and dealt with them. I will slaughter everyone who seeks to harm you.”

“I don’t love the idea of you spilling more blood for me,” I murmur, trying to refocus on Harven’s portrait.

The king’s eyes soften, but not enough to wipe away the resolve there. His tentacles slide towards me beneath the table. One lightly wraps around my ankle while the others skim over my calf and thighs. It’s a reassuring touch meant to ease my worry.

Is it wrong that I do feel comforted by his declaration?

Conflicting emotions war within me.

What would’ve become of me had I not been found? My stomach rolls at the thought. There is so much violence here. How can one male possibly shield me from all of it? I trust that Harven will.

The depraved things he’s willing to do to keep me safe enthrall that small, wicked part of me I left to die.

“This unsettles you,” Harven says.

I shrug, dipping into more paint.

“It’s not every day I have someone vowing to kill for me. That type of behavior in a human man would be a red flag.”

Harven inclines his head. His sandalwood scent invades my lungs.

“I’m not human, Eve. My world is a dangerous one.” He leans forward, eyes boring into mine. “I will not apologize for it. There is nothing I won’t do to protect what’s mine. And make no mistake, my little mate, you are mine.”

I swallow thickly.

“I’ve given you time—space—to adjust to your new life, but I will claim you. Sooner than you think.”

Warmth radiates from my stomach. My pussy clenches around nothing as my nipples become painfully hard.

What is wrong with me? I’m powerless to stop the desire from flaring to life inside of me.

God, I want him so bad. I know that it’s wrong. It’s too soon. If he asked to take me tonight, I’d still say no, but—

What if he didn’t give me a choice? What if I let him decide for me?

The dark thought takes hold even as I refocus on my painting. A lingering trickle worms into my stomach.

With determination, I set about finishing his portrait. Once I’m satisfied with how it looks, I turn it towards him.

“Ta-da.” I keep my voice light despite my nerves. “Do you like it?”

Harven’s eyes flare as he takes the canvas from my hand. His eyes rove over his face, painted in blues and greens. I think I captured his authoritative expression and the gleam of his eyes well.

As the silence stretches, I begin to get nervous. Maybe painting the king is considered rude. Maybe—

“It’s wonderful, Eve. My mate is so talented,” he praises.

A tentacle suctions a kiss to my ankle as I preen under his wonder-filled stare. He sets the painting down gently, then gestures toward another canvas.

“I want one of you now.”

A self-portrait. I tap my brush handle along the table.

“I’ll need a mirror.”

Harven is quick to retrieve one.

Propping it up beside the canvas, I take in my familiar features and get to work. The tones for this painting are lighter than the ones used for Harven’s. Where his was all deep blues and rough edges, mine is softer by comparison.

A contrast that accurately represents how the two of us appear together.

My eyes begin to ache by the time I’m done. It’s not my finest work, but a smile dances on my lips.

I set my brush down in the water to clean it. Painting has always brought me joy. That Harven found a way for me to have it here makes my chest painfully tight.

I turn the crude portrait toward him, and Harven's lips curl. That's when his eyes drift to the lower portion, and a snarl loosens from his chest. I giggle, feigning mock innocence.

"You're naked," he growls.

Indeed, I had forgone my clothes, but only so far as the upper swells of my breasts. Harven's tentacles slip up my leg as he breathes through his nose.

"You can't see anything, my king."

"It will face the wall as it dries. No one will look at this but me."

"As you wish," I sigh.

Nodding in approval, Harven rises and stalks to the other side of the table. He towers over me. I'm at eye-level with the impressive bulge under his skirt. My mouth begins to water.

Harven's fingers shift through my hair, lightly scratching at my scalp. I moan softly.

"Every part of you is warm like the sun," he breathes. "It's been an age since I felt the rays, but you burn with their intensity."

His fingers skim lower, over my jaw, before curling around my throat. I gasp at the possessive hold. The touch is feather-light. It contrasts with the need burning in his gaze.

"I seek your light. The darkness in my soul wants to hoard it—keep it. Snuff it out until you glow only for me."

"Harven," I whimper.

"Your teasing, Eve. I don't know how much more I can endure. Being near you and not taking you is shredding my self-control."

Every muscle in my body clenches. His broken confession sets off alarm bells in my head. My illusion of power is only the one he gives me. If I keep pushing, he will snap.

Do I want him to?

I don't. Not yet. I have to create some space between us to think before I get swept away by him.

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. My hands move of their own volition, curling into his belt. They smooth over his skin as my pussy heats. I'm wet and slippery between my thighs.

Needy in a way I've never been before.

I need to shove him away—to fight these urges before I give him the one thing that provides me any leverage. I fear a refusal isn't making its

way up my throat.

Instead, the need to have him take me atop the table—amongst the paints where anyone could walk in—begs to be said. Lust burns in my veins.

I tip my face up towards him. His eyes flash with satisfaction. Tentacles curl around my arms and lift me towards the lips I'll spend the rest of my life hungering for. This is wrong. I can't do this.

His warm breath bathes my mouth. I await his desire to swallow me whole.

The room's doors burst open. Harve snarls and quickly stows me behind him. I stand on the bench to peer over his shoulders as his tentacles wrap protectively around me. Ready to snatch me away at the first sign of danger.

Two sharkin guards appear, pale and damp. They tremble under the force of Harven's stare. Will he kill them for interrupting us? He looks poised to, my demanding male.

"I gave strict instructions not to be disturbed," Harven growls.

Liquid arousal slides down my inner thighs at his commanding tone. I'm totally fucked. There's no helping it. I'm just as wicked as I've always feared.

"Apologies, my king," says the guard on the right. "We have located more detractors. Evidence of their crimes has been collected, and they await your judgment in the throne room."

The air turns cold. Harven's icy rage is a palpable entity in the room. I shiver behind him, my hands bracing against his muscular back.

"Go," Harven commands. "I will be in shortly to deal with them."

Once the guards are gone, Harven's tentacles peel away from my body, leaving behind gentle nuzzles of comfort. He lowers me to the floor and cups my face. Anger and anguish play out across his harsh features.

"I'm sorry for cutting our date short, my mate. This isn't the ending for it I had intended."

I place my hands atop his. We've hardly had any time tonight.

"It doesn't have to be over."

His brows lower.

"What are you saying?"

What am I saying? The words have a mind of their own, forcing their way out.

“Take me with you.”

Harven shudders. He shakes his head sharply, his fingers digging into my skin.

“I—I don’t want you to see the male I have to become, Eve. Hearing about the violence I inflict on those who seek to harm you is one thing. Seeing it is quite another.” His thumb trails over my lips. “I don’t want you to fear me.”

I drop my hands to his stomach and hold his gaze.

“I have to see this, Harven. I want to know every part of you. It’s the only way things between us will work.” My fingers grip his belt. “If you want me to be your queen, I’ll have to see what it’s like firsthand.”

I mean the words even as uncertainty grips my heart. I have to see the depths he’s willing to go to protect me. I can’t shy away from it, not if I want us to have a future.

More than that, this brief reprieve will give me a chance to think. I nearly got lost in him a moment ago. Perhaps seeing the cruelty he is capable of will quell some of my desire. It will ensure I think twice before inviting him into my bed.

I need to see him in the most monstrous light if we are to spend our lives together.

“Be certain, Eve.”

“I am.”

His tentacle shackles my wrist. A possessive hold that makes my inner thighs press tightly together. There’s no stopping this. I made my choice. I have to see it through.

Turning us from the room, he tucks me into his side. Deadly power radiates off him in oppressive waves. Cold menace encircles him. The servants know better than to meet his gaze as we pass by.

As we head towards the throne room, I can only pray that I’m not making a mistake. The gentle Harven who eats dinner with me and calls me beautiful is long gone. King Harven is at my side, ready to remind everyone how he secured his throne.

Can I really love a male as ruthless as Harven? Can I welcome such a bloodthirsty creature into my body?

I’m about to find out.

EVE

The throne room is deathly quiet.

Of all the wonders Harven's castle offers, this room is by far the most decadent. A sprawling meeting hall made up of white marble floors and thick golden pillars. Impressive windows on either side showcase the ocean. Banners bearing the royal crest of a golden trident and pearls line the ceiling.

A shallow pool covers the floor. Cloud-like jellyfish float through the water.

Harven's throne rests atop a dais. The cold, silver clamshell is fitted with a silken pillow on the sprawling bench. It would fit both of us side by side, but Harven has other ideas.

The moment we arrived, he settled me atop his lap.

I shiver as his tentacles wrap around my ankles and wrists. They are loose bindings, but I feel their possession all the same.

His large hand spans nearly my entire side as he holds me by the waist. Harven's face looms over my shoulder, the picture of unwavering authority.

The sharkin guards in their sapphire armor look wary. Their fin-adorned hands grip their tridents tightly. No one dares make a sound.

I try to slow my racing heart as I take in the three bloodied figures at the guards' feet. One is merfolk, the other two sharkin with pale gray bodies. Leri has been helping me recognize the differences in their kinds.

One of them I recognize.

Lord Quilton's short hair is disheveled. One of his fin-like ears is torn. Dark blood seeps from the wound and stains his silk shirt. Discoloration mars his temples. The heavy iron chains lock around his feet and hands. He is in the same sorry state as the other two. They aren't going anywhere.

Harven's jaw clenches for the tenth time. Menace seeps from him, chilling the white-hot lust that was burning in my veins just moments ago. It was good we came here. The quiet has given me a chance to sort through my jumbled mind.

It's too soon to fuck him. I'm hoping once this bloody display is over, I will grow wary of Harven again. Not enough to fear him or keep my distance, but enough to remind me to be smart. He is a zealous protector when it comes to my safety.

Regardless, instincts tell me to be wary of a male who can kill so easily. Without conscience. How easily that violence could turn on me if I'm not careful.

I don't think Harven would hurt me, but I can't be sure. I don't know him. It's why I can't give myself to him fully. Not until I ascertain more about his character.

Despite my assertion, that long-buried, wicked part of me rubs her hands together in glee. She loves his brutal nature and demands we fall in line as his submissive plaything.

I pointedly ignore her ridiculous suggestion.

Lord Quilton's glowing eyes scan the room. One is starting to swell shut, but he still manages to narrow it at me. I stiffen under his glare. It's shocking how strongly they can hate me solely for what I represent. I'm no physical threat to them, yet they treat me as one.

As Harven's mate, I'm not entirely defenseless.

He is a commanding king who protects what is his, on principle. Failing to do so would be seen as weakness. Harven has made it abundantly clear that I am his. The way he holds me like I'm a war prize proves it.

The captured sharkins look dutifully down at the floor. Water seeps into their clothes. Harven's masculine scent overpowers the room's dank smell. I fall further into him, letting his tentacles ravage me.

My tan skin is covered in suction marks. They're as much of an indication of who I belong to as the hand on my hip.

Harven bares his teeth.

“Lord Quilton,” he bellows. “Explain yourself while you still have a tongue.”

The merman blanches. His bloody lips peel back as he braces his shackled hands on the floor.

“Lies, my king. All lies! I have been framed!” he screeches.

I can detect the deceit easily. The darkness in his eyes betrays his true intent. Harven notes it too with disgust. A humorless chuckle vibrates against my back.

Harven’s voice is deeper, rougher. The voice of the Kraken King.

“My spies found your correspondence, Lord Quilton. Corral engravings between you and these two, fitted with your royal seal. That was foolish to include. It made discovering your plot much easier.” His fingers slip beneath the slits in my dress to clutch my bare skin. “You conspired with these two sharkins to steal my mate. Why?”

My blood runs cold. I knew this was about me, but to hear that Harven thwarted a kidnapping attempt—

Lord Quilton slams his blue lips shut. He turns his head, clearly refusing to answer.

Harven’s thumb traces my skin, as if reminding himself I’m safely in his arms. While he needs my womb, I’m safe.

What about after? Would he be so thorough in snuffing out these plots once he has his heirs, or will I no longer be worth the trouble?

My mind swirls. I can’t be certain until we spend more time together.

After a few weeks—a month—I’ll be more confident of my place here. I pray Harven can hold off for that long.

Harven turns a steely glare towards the sharkin on Lord Quilton’s left. The male trembles, disturbing the water around him. His gray skin is almost white. The fin on his back hangs loosely from meaty strands of flesh.

My stomach rolls at the gore. The stench of death rises.

“Speak.”

The cold fury in Harven’s voice makes me tremble. The sharkin lifts his gaze while the other one remains fixated on the floor.

“Tell me the truth, and I will ensure your death is quick. Lie to me and—”

The king lets the threat hang in the air. The sharkin’s dark eyes dart toward the shackled lord. He swallows thickly.

“Lord Quilton hired us to steal her,” the male confesses.

“Insolent fool!” the lord hisses.

Lord Quilton’s head snaps back as if struck by an invisible force. Metal dances through the air. Harven’s skin buzzes faintly, as if a faint electric current runs over it.

This is what his magic feels like.

“Why?” Harven snaps.

His calm expression betrays the storm raging in his eyes.

I lean closer. Despite my wariness, I can’t help but want to comfort him. Our bond pulses between us—pulling us closer when I should be fighting for more space.

“To see what magic she possesses. If she is your mate—the one promised by the Sea Witch she must wield power. She will give birth to the next full-blooded kraken. Lord Quilton believes that makes her something other than human.”

My hand drifts idly to my stomach.

Me, possessing magic? My magical womb strikes again. The sharkin lets loose a shuddering breath. Blood trails between his rows of broken teeth.

“And he believed that you didn’t have to be the one to impregnate her in order to birth the next king. Any of the seafolk could do it if she possessed the magic.”

A distant ringing echoes in my ears. My stomach cramps painfully. This goes beyond murdering me to weaken Harven. They want to use me for their own agenda in siring the next king.

Lethal rage pours into the room. Harven’s tentacles coil, ready to strike.

I fall deeper into him, but I’m not sure it’s wise. His disinterested mask cracks. He’s boiling with fury. Any traces of the male who let me tease him and watched me paint with soft eyes are gone.

This is not a male to seek solace from.

He wants me for the same reason they do—to produce an heir. While I may like Harven marginally more, that doesn’t change the facts of our dynamic.

I’m here to serve a purpose. My corpse would be rotting in the other room if fate hadn’t selected me as his.

It’s not a comforting feeling.

Harven slides me from his lap and deposits me on the throne. His tentacles spread down the marble steps. They splash into the water as he

prowls towards the captives.

“Is this the truth, Quilton? Did you covet her, thinking she could make you king by producing the next kraken?”

The merman shakes his head violently.

“King Harven no—I—”

A lone tentacle whips out from beneath Harven’s skirt.

It wraps tightly around the lord’s neck. Quilton chokes, desperately clawing at the constricting appendage encircling his throat.

His tentacles have always been gentle to me. The violence they easily inflict makes my knees feel weak. I’ve been a fool to forget the type of threat Harven poses.

If I refuse him, will he bind me in the same manner until his heir is secured?

Harven drags Lord Quilton forward. His tentacles hold him upright, so he can glare directly into the male’s eyes. The merman’s face turns a sickly shade of purple.

Harven’s tentacles slowly relax their hold.

“Think very carefully about what you say with your final breaths.”

Madness dances in the merman’s eyes. The male knows his death is coming. There’s no need to hide from the truth.

A cruel smirk twists his features.

“There are more of us,” Quilton croons. “They will come for her. Killing your brothers wasn’t enough to keep her safe. Many in your court seek to steal her away. Keep her—breed her. Just as I would’ve. If the future Kraken King was born of my seed, it would give me the power to overthrow you. Without an heir, you have nothing.”

He spits bile and blue blood onto the tiles.

“The gods may have blessed you with power, but you are weak. Cursed with a disgusting human whose only value resides between her legs.”

Quilton’s menacing chuckle rakes icy claws down my neck.

“Enjoy her cunt while you can, my king. Before the rest of the kingdom takes a turn.”

Two tentacles snap out and collar the lord’s throat. He groans as they tighten. Skin rips under the suckers. His neck bones crunch under the force.

The sharkins beside him buck with fear as the room temperature drops.

“It seems, Lord Quilton, you’ve forgotten what I’m capable of. You were there the day I killed my brothers. Seems you’re in need of a

demonstration of my power.”

More tentacles coil around the merman.

They lift him by his bound arms and legs until he’s hovering mid-air. The appendages snap the iron shackles and encircle his wrists and ankles. Spreading his limbs out, the choking lord resembles a macabre starfish.

Harven’s magic gathers as silver mist. The oppressive power brushes up against my toes.

“Eve is mine. *Mine*,” he growls. “Through fate—through curse—it matters not. I get to have her. Touch her, breed her. No one else. Never. I will fill her womb with my heirs while your bones rot beneath us.”

His tentacles fan out further, eliciting a sickening snap of the lord’s bones. The male screams as much as he can with his depleting oxygen.

Harven’s primal possession washes over me. Fear crowds my chest at the scene’s brutality. It’s in sharp contrast to the blooming ache awakening between my thighs.

What is wrong with me?

I should be fleeing. Harven’s worries have come true. Part of me fears him now. I would be a fool not to, when he is capable of such cruelty.

The terror also excites me. It’s wrong in so many different ways.

On land, the decision to leave would be easy. If I had a boyfriend threatening to kill anyone who looked at me, I’d be running for the hills. I’m not on the surface anymore. These seafolk don’t just want me dead. They want to impregnate me against my will to claim the throne.

I can’t be a pawn in their schemes. The only one I can turn to who has offered me any semblance of a future is Harven. If I wish to survive, I’ll need him to keep desiring me.

Do I want him now that I’ve seen what he’s capable of?

Blood seeps from between Lord Quilton’s shoulders as Harven’s tentacles slowly rip him apart. It’s torture in its truest form. For his crimes, death won’t be swift. Harven means to see him suffer.

The darkness in my heart loves it.

My emotions swirl together in one conflicting blur. Fear and pleasure trickle into my stomach. Harven scares me, but I want him all the same. These desires are two sides of the same coin.

Yes and no. Fear and love. Wrong and right.

In this world, they mean the same things. What is primal isn’t always palatable, but it can’t be denied.

A guttural scream tears through the room.

My mouth drops open as Harven cleaves Lord Quilton apart. Torn flesh and blue blood splatter onto the marble. Four sets of limbs fall into the water. The merman's glowing eyes are milky. His purple face is frozen in fear.

The sharkin meets a similar, if quicker, fate. Their corpses float beside the lord's. The pool turns murky from the blood. Sparkling fish swim to the surface and begin biting at their skin.

My stomach rolls. Sweat coats my palms. The violence—the desire. It's all too much for me to withstand. I have to get out of here. I need to ground myself and remember who I am. What I want.

The oppressive stench of death punches through my lungs.

Rising on shaking knees, my self-preservation finally kicks in. My muscles feel like mush, but I have to push through. Ignoring the gore, I retreat a step from the throne. Harven hears my foot slap on the tile and goes rigid.

Whirling towards me, the breath knocks from my lungs.

This isn't the male who feeds me bowls of stew. Who brought me painting supplies and the loveliest jewels. He isn't the one who calls me beautiful and touches me with soft strokes of his tentacles. He isn't the male I've been teasing to test his restraint.

Harven's self-control is shattered.

His golden eyes have gone wholly black. His massive chest rises and falls. Blue blood coats his tentacles. Stalking towards me, instinct forces me to retreat a step.

The king is a monster—a predator. He's looking at me like I'm the ultimate prey.

"Harven," I whimper.

My hands shake as I clutch the sides of my dress. The need to run pounds through me.

"They want to take you from me, Eve. They know I haven't claimed you yet and feel they can steal you away."

I swallow, trying my best to keep my voice calm.

"I'm here. I'm with you, Harven."

I take another step. A tentacle shoots out to trap my ankle. I manage to avoid it with a gasp. Moisture beads in my eyes.

Terror and want. Uncertainty and finality. It swirls inside me, overwhelming my mind until I can't see straight.

"Please. You're scaring me," I whisper.

Harven goes rigid, pausing for only a moment before reaching for me again. No trace of kindness rests on his face. Only a male focused entirely on claiming his prize.

"I can't help it, Eve. The primal rage comes from the thought of someone else touching you. Claiming what's mine. You *are* mine." Each word is a snarl. "Open your legs, and I'll prove it to you."

"No, Harven." I shake my head. "I'm not ready. It's too soon."

"Your pathetic human need to wait won't stop me. They know you're unclaimed, Eve. If they can smell me on your skin, and you are round with my heir, they'll keep away."

The word pathetic sparks my ire. It cuts through the fear as I narrow my eyes.

"And what if it doesn't? What if you get me pregnant and the kidnapping attempts continue?"

Harven bays like a broken beast.

"Then I'll slaughter my entire court to keep you safe. I'll rule over rotting flesh and bones if it means you are all mine."

"Spare me the dramatics," I hiss, but I know he means every word. "I'm not ready, Harven. You can't have me just because you're angry over what Lord Quilton tried to do."

Harven surges forward. His tentacles lick at my feet. The storm raging in his eyes darkens.

"I will have you, Eve." His smile is as cold as the deep sea. "You think I can't tell you want me just as much. When you kiss me, I taste your need. When you rub your little pussy all over my lap, I feel it soaking me."

Indignation flames my cheeks.

"How dare you—"

"Speak the truth. You can lie to yourself, Eve, but never to me." His tentacle teases the hem of my dress. "I could take you amongst these corpses. You want to be fucked by me—owned. Stop listening to your human mind and give in."

He's right. The bastard.

Even before our first date, I had imagined him pinning me down in my bed. Taking me while I fought him off. Pleasuring me against my will and

claiming me despite my protests.

Muffling my screams with his palm while he overpowered me. It was a dark desire. I'm still not entirely sure I can give in.

All of this is wrong.

Harven and I didn't know each other. I was not an object to be claimed in such an animalistic way. Clinging to the fraying tendrils of my pride, I had to demand more from him.

Harven's smirk deepens as he extends his arms. If he captures me, I'll have no hope of resisting him.

"Come to me, Eve. Let me inside your perfect cunt. I've killed for it."

The coarse words awaken me. His madness is too great to be overcome. I eye the door to the throne room. It is my one chance at stopping this before it goes too far.

If he means to take me, I won't surrender without a fight.

My room is the goal. If I can make it back there and lock the door—

I slip from between his tentacles and sprint for the door. Throwing it open, I race through the hallway. Harven's menacing chuckle follows me into the barren hall, but I don't stop.

If he wants me, he'll have to catch me first.

HARVEN

Running was Eve's first mistake. I had been careful not to let the mask slip while we've been getting to know each other. I endured her teasing even as I raged with lust. I gave her space when I didn't want to, hoping to make her more comfortable. All of that carefully constructed restraint snapped the moment I spilled blood for her.

The plot to take her had been my undoing.

Those who conspire don't just seek her life. They seek her. Foolishly, they believe they can snatch her from me. Every inch of her is mine to claim, from her heart to her womb. She is mine.

It's time she understands that. I've let her deny us both for long enough.

I watch her sprint down, all in a whisper of blue silk. Fear and desire twist her citrus scent into a heady combination. My cock is already hard, ready to finally be inside her perfect body.

Primal instincts flood my veins.

I have no choice but to give chase and claim my mate as I should've done the moment she arrived. I tried to be softer for Eve, but I'll never be human. Once I'm inside her, she'll understand this is how it was always meant to be.

She'll yield to me whether she wants to or not.

Her fire returned in my throne room. No doubt she'll fight me. I relish the challenge. Once I have her thrashing body pinned and moaning, she'll

submit to me completely.

The scent of her desire sends me racing after her.

She can deny herself, but I won't listen to another of her pretty lies about not wanting me. She desires me more than she likes me. Eve may hate me, but she'll be begging me for more.

Eve is my mate. I feel the invisible string tethering our souls together. It pulls taut as I follow her down the hall. She is mine to claim, and I shall. Repeatedly.

She can bite and claw, but it won't matter. She is mine to do with as I see fit. Now and forever.

My guards on patrol turn after her, but I snarl them away.

No one is stopping her but me. I twist down a careening hall. Eve's delicate arms pump as she tries to outrun me. Her head start does nothing as I eat up the space between us on the tile. She doesn't dare look back at the predator hot on her heels.

Her room looms ahead. No doubt her goal is to reach it and lock me out.

If she does, I'll tear it from the hinges. Every servant and guard can listen as I pleasure her pussy for the first time. They can all watch me fuck my queen if that's what it takes to make her mine.

I close in on her. The silken ends of her hair whip against my chest. She's close enough for me to see the pulse pounding in her neck. Sunshine and citrus fill my lungs.

Her small hand clasps the door handle and throws it open. I'm on her before she can turn around. We both barrel into her room in a mess of tentacles and smooth limbs. I roll her panting body until we land atop her bed.

My weight keeps her pinned as my tentacles shackle her wrist. I grin down into her snarling face as my magic shuts and locks her door. No need for an audience, just yet.

"Harven," she grunts, blue eyes wild. "*Stop*. Don't, I—"

"Stop?"

My tentacles grip her ankles and drag further down the bed. Her dress gapes, revealing more of her perfect breasts. They'll be in my mouth soon.

I pull her legs apart and settle between them. Anger roars in her eyes as I rub my hard cock against her covered pussy.

"You want me to stop, Eve?"

"Yes, I don't want to. Not so you can prove a point."

“Are you sure?”

Another tentacle slips between her thighs. It trails her soft skin, going higher than before. It suctions gently at her flesh before sliding up her drenched slit. A moan slips from Eve’s pink lips. The feel of her—hot and wet—against my tentacle makes my head spin.

Pulling the appendage from her dress, I bring the glistening tip to my mouth. I lick her pleasure from it, groaning at her sweet taste.

“Your pussy isn’t saying no.”

Indignation sparks in her eyes as she thrashes in my grip. I keep her firmly pinned with another rough pump of my hips. She pushes against the tentacles binding her wrists.

“My pussy can’t talk, you *fucking* asshole!” Her teeth snap together. She’s even more beautiful when angry. “Let me go, Harven. Or I swear to God, I’ll—”

“I am your god, Eve. You swear to me.”

She lets out a growl and bucks against me once more.

Her dress slides to the side, almost bearing her pink nipple. Her hair fans around her on the pale blue sheets. My tentacles skim up and down her thigh, teasing her pussy but not touching it directly.

The smell of fear lingers in her scent. Beneath it is a deep pool of desire. It dances with the anger in her ocean eyes. Eve needs a reminder of who wields the power between us.

My hand curls around her throat. Her fluttering pulse quivers against my fingers. She’s so fragile. I could kill her with one twist of my wrist, but I won’t. Never.

Her life is the only thing that matters to me.

“You are my mate, Eve. I’ve orchestrated the murder of hundreds just to find you. I’ve slaughtered my people—my *brothers*—to claim you.” I shake my head, skimming my nose along her warm cheek. “I tried to play your human games and go slow. But I can’t. It’s not in my nature to be gentle. Especially when many still seek to take you.”

Eve whimpers as I tighten my grip. Her mouth parts, begging me to take it with mine.

“Yield to me, mate. Give me what I seek.”

Her head whips back and forth.

“No.”

The word vibrates against my palm.

“Why do you fight me? I can feel that you want me as I do you.”

I stroke my tentacle along her slit again in demonstration. Her eyes unfocus as pleasure softens her snarling features. I do it again and again, until she blinks. Her anger comes blazing to the surface.

“Because—because—get off of me, you *monster*!”

She spits the last word. It’s a challenge she’s issuing me. If Eve wants a fight, then so be it. She won’t win. Not when finally making her mine is on the line.

“I’ll show you just how monstrous I can be, Eve. You’ll beg me for it. Every day for the rest of your fucking life.” My tentacle presses at her entrance. “Your pussy won’t feel whole without me stretching it.”

“Fuck you,” she hisses. “I hate you.”

My other hand slides beneath her dress. Her hips lift, but I have her surrounded. She can’t do anything as I glide along her outer leg and into the valley of her thighs. I cup her possessively, groaning at her hot, wet flesh.

“Hate me all you want. You’re still soaked for me. For a monster.” My lips find her ear. “I could slide my cock into you with ease. This time tomorrow you could be pregnant.”

Eve’s breath hitches as my thumb digs into her clit. I’ve done extensive research about human anatomy. I know just how to drive Eve wild.

“That’s why I fight you,” she snaps.

My whole body stills. Icy apprehension licks over my skin. My hand around her throat locks tighter, as does my grip on her cunt.

“You don’t want to bear my children?”

Eve huffs a humorless laugh. Her lips twist to the side.

“Once I do, what will be my role? You’ll dispose of me and go back to your *Pearls*. I’ll be nothing to you once I’ve served my purpose.”

Shock renders me momentarily speechless.

Beneath the burning anger, I see the wariness in her gaze—the hurt. It darkens her shining eyes.

A crack in her walls lets me glimpse the soft soul she’s been hiding. I see it now with stark clarity.

Eve is lonely. Just as lonely as I’ve been my entire life. That’s what is causing the trepidation. She believes I’ll abandon her once she’s given in to me. I almost laugh at the ridiculous notion.

Eve is mistaken. She’s been adrift, searching for connection for too long. She’ll never be alone again. Her place is beside me. She belongs to

me just as I belong to her.

I'll never let her go. No one else will ever get the chance to know her as I do.

As for my *Pearls*—I don't want to think about them tonight.

This is about Eve and showing her just how wrong she is. She is the only thing I care about. I wish she would've voiced them sooner.

I'd have fucked away her doubts the first night.

"Oh, my little mate. I'm never letting you go. You'll never be free of me." I lick up her cheek and savor her soft moan. "You could bear me a hundred full-blooded kraken sons, and I'd crave you just as much as I do now."

The tension in her body ebbs away. The rage dims into a simmering distrust.

Eve wrinkles her nose.

"I don't think that's medically possible for me to birth a hundred children."

My thumb teases her hammering pulse.

"My seed is strong."

"Your seed." With a groan, she drops her head to the sheets. "What is my life? What is this conversation?"

"Mine." Our gazes lock. "Your life is mine just as mine is yours."

She considers my words, but isn't convinced. Her put-out expression returns. Rolling her eyes, my hands burn to spank the attitude out of her.

"For now, while you still want to fuck me." She lifts a shoulder. "You'll be returning to your *menage-a-tois*'s when you remember one female isn't nearly as interesting as two and a male."

"If your resistance is solely due to thinking my interest will fade, then open your thighs and let me assure you of the contrary."

Her glare would send a weaker male fleeing.

"No, get off me, Harven. I mean it."

Eve's eyes burn like blue flames. She is the sun come to life. Her warmth soaks through my skin and thaws my wretched soul.

My mate. My perfect other half.

Her protests mean nothing. I am her master. I will keep her safe and, in turn, will dictate how this goes between us. At least in the bedroom.

In court, she'll be my equal—my queen. But here, she's my toy to do with as I please.

“You’ve been alone too long, surrounded by unworthy males. A human could never give you what I can.”

“And that is?”

Sliding my hand from her cunt, I pin her hips to the bed.

“A firm hand.”

My mouth comes down on hers.

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EVE

His lips devour mine with brutal possession. I scream into his mouth, but that only spurs him further. His tentacles keep my arms flat to my sides while spreading my legs wide. Pushing against him only makes more of his hard body come into contact with me.

His straining cock rests hotly atop my stomach. Seeking tentacles graze my bare pussy in maddening ways.

It's an invasion, a complete disrespect.

My mind is saying to fight harder—scream louder—while my body wants to yield completely to his dominance.

I'm not enjoying how astute he is. It's as if he looked deep into my heart and beheld the lonely wretch that I am.

Harven sees every jagged piece of my soul, hollowed out by years of loneliness, and seeks to mend it with possessive desire.

I'm right to be wary.

I know myself well enough to understand that once he has me and makes good on his promises of pleasure, I won't be able to hold back from giving him my heart. It's why I've spent so long alone. I couldn't do casual after a certain age.

My mind was constantly wanting more—demanding more. If Harven had me and I became pregnant, I wouldn't be able to withstand him seeking out another.

I fear that more than his brutality.

He assures me that won't be the case. The king kisses me like he's trying to lay claim to my soul with every teasing dip of his tongue against mine. The slick muscles thrust deep, mirroring the motion of his tentacle prodding at my entrance.

Despite his assurances, he made no mention of dismissing his *Pearls*. How can I be certain of my role when they are still within the castle? As long as they are here, a part of me will always worry he prefers them over me.

So my fight continues.

I bite down on his thrusting tongue, tasting blood. Harven rears back with a snarl. The hand around my throat pins me to the satin sheets. It's not tight enough to hinder my breathing, but enough to remind me of my place.

Harven rubs his injured tongue over his lips.

"Not nice, little mate."

I scissor my legs to loosen his tentacles' grip. Defiance rises within me like a tidal wave. I need to fight harder. To tell him no, and mean it.

The words never come. He had been right. I do desire a firm hand, and if anyone can give it to me, it's Harven.

If he wants me to submit, he'll have to earn it.

"What are you gonna do about it?" I sneer.

Fear trails an icy finger down my spine as Harven's face twists. His lips curl into a cruel smile.

The kind he bestows on his enemies before ripping them to shreds.

A monster has me pinned. I shouldn't be provoking him, but I can't help it. His dominant nature sparks a contrasting urge to push back. I have to fight him.

I've always wanted this—needed this. No one I'd been with before was willing to take the game this far. My boyfriends and flings were shocked when I'd voice my desires to be overpowered. Harven does so without asking me. He hears my no and blatantly ignores it.

It's wrong—wicked—and I need to test its limits more than my next breath.

Harven's hand splays over my breast. I moan as he roughly shapes it. His large thumb teases my nipple through the satin. His tentacles pull my legs farther apart until my inner thighs burn from the stretch.

Harven settles deeper against me. The scent of sandalwood seeps into my bloodstream. He crowds me—overwhelms me with his oppressive presence.

The only thing separating me from his cock is two thin layers of silk. I feel his decadent weight and breadth. When the time comes, I have no idea how I'll fit him inside of me.

Harven will make it fit, no matter what. Of that, I'm sure.

He releases my wrist only to shackle them above my head. My body bows off the mattress as his fingers trail between the valley of my breasts. They hook into the low neckline as my breath catches.

"Don't even think about it."

The sound of fabric ripping fills the air.

My chest is bare in the room's blue light. Cool air teases my distended nipples. The pink buds stand at attention for Harven, who greedily teases each one. I shove against him with my lower half, but that only succeeds in forcing his cock tighter between us.

"You bastard!" I screech.

Harven gently pinches my nipple.

The pain and pleasure make a keening moan fall from my lips. He gives my other breast the same treatment, then soothes the ache with his tongue. Sucking one breast into his mouth, he gently plays with the other.

I turn obscenely wet between my thighs. The fabric pooling between my legs clings to my damp flesh. Harven's tentacles softly flick against my clit. The slight press makes me moan and thrust my breast further into his mouth.

Releasing it with a pop, Harven bites and sucks his way across my chest, leaving behind red marks. Giving the same attention to my other breast, he looks up at me with feral delight.

"I am a bastard, Eve," he muses, tracing a finger around my pink nipple. "It's why I had to fight ten times harder for my throne. You should remember how ruthless I can be when I want something. How deadly."

"Get off of me!"

"You're so beautiful, Eve." The wonder in his voice softens the deep timber. "I don't care if you get tired of me saying it. The depth of your beauty will enthrall me for eternity."

I roll my eyes.

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

He pinches my nipple, and I scream.

Biting the upper swells of my breasts, Harven licks at the mark. A slim tentacle joins him on my chest. The injured one with the pronounced scar nuzzles into my other breast. Using its good sucker, it latches on. The force of the suction makes pleasure spread thickly through my veins.

“Stop.” *I don’t mean it.* “Harven.” *My king.* “No.” *Yes.*

He ignores me as if reading my mind. This is wrong, so incredibly wrong. I’m powerless to stop him.

My fight dwindles the more he teases my body.

He licks my nipple again, causing my hips to lift, desperate for any sort of friction to relieve the ache. Broken moans fall from my lips as I rub against him. If he let go of my hands, I’d pull him closer, not push him away.

Harven grins against my skin.

“That’s better, my mate. Look at how good it can be when you stop snarling at me.”

“Fuck you,” I grumble.

Harven’s blunt teeth dig into my skin again. The pain once more sends wetness dripping out of me. My arousal spreads down my thighs.

“That’s the idea, Eve.”

Licking and sucking his way up my skin, he kisses the hollow of my throat. The tentacle between my thighs dips into my entrance. My eyes snap open at the sensation.

“Don’t you dare—”

My words die in a groan as his tentacle pushes inside me. The slender appendage doesn’t travel too deep, but I feel deliciously full as it parts my wet folds.

Harven slides it deeper, then pulls back, setting a maddening rhythm.

He chuckles into my neck.

“You’re soaked, Eve.”

My face heats as his tentacle slips in deeper. The suckers graze along my inner walls in a maddening way.

“You fucking bastard—I’m going to kill you!”

“Threatening the life of the king is a capital offense, my mate. Do you wish to rethink your words?”

“No,” I bite out.

The tentacle inside me pauses its thrust. Looming over me, Harven's smile is one of pure male satisfaction.

"Then you will be punished for your treasonous words."

My eyes widen as his tentacle slips from my body. Gripping my hips in his large hands, I claw at the sheets to try and scramble away.

"What are you—"

The rest of my dress shreds between his palms. My naked skin is flushed and glistening, but I don't get a chance to stare at it before he flips me onto my hands and knees. I brace my palms on the mattress as his tentacles lift me around the middle.

A few remain curled around my ankle, making it impossible for me to escape.

Harven's hand thrusts my ass higher into the air. A second set of tentacles bind my arms behind my back, and I'm forced to support my upper half on one shoulder. I glare at Harven, who merely smiles. The bastard is enjoying this.

His calloused fingers skim down my spine.

"You have the softest skin."

Warm palms settle atop the globes of my ass. He pulls them apart as my face burns. The tentacles keep my legs apart. He can see every needy inch of me.

"Harven," I keen.

"My king," he corrects. "As my prisoner, you'll show me respect."

A thick finger slips between my ass cheeks. The digit teases my back entrance as I push my face into the sheets.

"Has anything ever been in this little hole?"

"Absolutely not," I bark into the satin.

His finger swirls around the tight ring of muscle.

"Something will soon enough."

Oh, god. I open my mouth to argue, but the words die in a moan as Harven thrusts one finger inside of me. I whimper into the sheets as he stretches me. His hair tickles my ass as he presses a kiss to my left cheek.

Adding a second thrusting finger into my pussy, I can't catch my breath before I feel his tongue at my back entrance. He licks the unused hole with relish. The slick muscle glides in with determination. No one has ever touched me there.

The sensation is dark and dirty. I need more. All of it.

“Harven—”

He smacks my ass. Hard.

I yelp in pain. His fingers rub the sting away as I seethe.

“What did I say, Eve?”

“You fucking—”

He spanks the sore spot again, then another on my other cheek. The pain burns through my body, making my pussy clench around his fingers. Harven chuckles, no doubt reveling in my desperate state.

“Try again,” he purrs.

Snarling into the sheets, I meet his eyes over my shoulder.

“My king.”

“Good girl,” he praises.

He returns to his sensual assault.

The two fingers inside my pussy set a punishing rhythm.

They curl inside me, pressing firmly against my G-spot. Stars dance in my vision. I’m not normally this receptive to fingering. It may have something to do with Harven’s tongue in my ass.

His slick muscle fills my hole as his fingers work in time. I’ve never felt so full—so thoroughly used.

His scarred tentacle slips over my hip and delves between my thighs. It works my clit, alternating between harsh sucks and firm presses.

My heart pounds and my breathing turns shallow. Again, I’m shocked by how quickly he’s brought about my climax.

I typically require a lot of foreplay before I’m ready to come. With Harven, release barrels toward me. Fire licks at my skin as my stomach begins to tighten.

“My king, I’m going to—”

Everything stops. Harven pulls his fingers and tongue from me. My impending climax dissipates like sugar in water.

Leaving a lingering kiss on my ass, he rubs the sore spot.

“Then let’s commence with your punishment.”

I pant into the sheets. I really am going to kill him.

Gliding me toward the edge of the bed, he releases my arms, letting me prop myself upright. The tentacles lock around my wrists like shackles, keeping me on all fours. Harven prowls in front of me. His large hands go to his belt and deftly undo it.

It falls to the marble floor with a thud. His silken skirt follows. This is the first time I've seen him fully.

He is a glorious creature, so different from me. His lower half is a mass of impressive muscular tentacles that writhe and snap. They are just as powerfully built as the rest of him.

I don't fear our differences. If anything, his naked body makes me want him more. I want to feel those tentacles all over me—inside me. We can't hide from each other. Our souls are one. The bond pulses between us, demanding and seeking.

Harven's tentacles pull back, and I'm greeted by the largest cock I've ever seen.

Its sheer length alone is mind-boggling.

It's nearly the length of my forearm and almost as thick as my fist. It's a darker blue than his skin and is covered in small ridges. No, not ridges. Suckers. Like the ones adorning his tentacles. Pearly white seed drips from the tip as it stands at attention.

My mouth waters despite my sharp intake of breath. Harven's hands thread through my hair.

"Open your mouth, Eve."

I need to see how far he'll push me. I crave it. One day, maybe I'll play the docile lover, but not right now. Not when he just denied me an orgasm.

"No."

A tentacle cracks across my ass.

I scream at the sting. Heat blooms along my skin. It compounds with his earlier spanks. My body jerks forward as if it can crawl away from the pain.

Harven's fingers dig into my scalp.

"Open your *fucking* mouth."

"I'll bite your cock off if you even think—"

A tentacle spanks me again. It's quickly followed by another. The pain fills my stomach and deepens my desire.

I didn't know I was such a masochist. The things one discovers while at the mercy of a Kraken King.

"Do that, my mate, and you won't sit down for a week."

"Fuck you. You *motherfucking* bastard."

Harven's head falls back with a booming laugh. His eyes glitter with predatory intent.

“You have a filthy mouth, Eve. Let me fill it and spare you any more trouble.”

I clamp my lips shut as he rains spans all over my ass.

The tentacles strike like whips, leaving my flesh burning. I surrender to the pain. The onslaught widdles me down until I’m a trembling mess. Adrenaline hums in my veins as I absorb each strike. My ass is on fire, my head is a mess. I need to be pleased. I need Harven.

I release a shuddering breath and lick my lips. Meeting his gaze, I open my mouth wide.

“Good little mate.”

He slides forward.

The head of his leaking cock grazes my tongue. His flesh is hot enough to burn. The salty sweet taste of his seed fills my mouth. His tentacles trace over my face as his hands keep my head steady.

My jaw unhinges to take him all in. The rough texture scrapes down the back of my throat. I choke on the intrusion as tears burn my eyes. Harven doesn’t stop, not until he’s fully sheathed inside my mouth.

I gag around his length, unable to breathe. He pauses for a moment, making a show of his dominance, before pulling his hips back. I cough and sputter onto his length.

My saliva makes his cock glisten. The excess mixes with his seed and dribbles down my chin.

“I was wrong before.” Using a hand, he slaps the head of his cock on my tongue. “You look the most beautiful with my cock in your mouth.”

I narrow my eyes, but before I can say something that’ll earn me another spanking, Harven surges forward. It’s not so much a blowjob as it is him fucking my throat.

He thrusts in and out of my mouth with snarled groans. His tentacles slither over my jaw and shoulders. I keep my mouth wide to taste as much of him as I can. Tears stream down my cheek as he bumps the back of my throat.

I’ve never been used like this. There’s no reprieve. He sets the rhythm, and I have to withstand it.

It’s the dominance I’ve always craved.

I surrender to it as I moan around his length. My pussy comes alive, desperate to be filled by him again. I need to come so bad I’ll do anything.

His tentacles hit my ass with considerably less force than before. Strikes land on my sore cheeks and upper thighs. The renewed pain deepens my pleasure. One touch of my clit and I'll erupt.

"Look at how well you take my cock, Eve. You were born to give me pleasure."

I bob my head in time with his thrusts to take him deeper. His praise washes over me and makes me work hard. I moan louder, eager to please him in a primal way.

I want him to be as desperate for me as I am for him. I need to be his undoing.

"Do you like my cock?"

"Yes," I garble around his impressive length.

He pulls it from my mouth and holds it aloft. A challenge blazes in his eyes, and I meet it. Pressing a kiss to the leaking tip, I run my tongue down the sides of his shaft. Each bump makes liquid arousal race down my thighs.

"It's so big, my king." I look at him from beneath my lashes as I lick the seam of his balls. "How will it ever fit inside me?"

Harven snarls as he captures my face in his hands. He ruthlessly powers into my throat again.

"I'll make it fit. Even if you scream and bite and scratch—it's going inside your perfect pussy." His thrusts turn choppy as his pace falters. "Swallow it, Eve. Every drop."

I brace myself as he fucks my face in a series of brutal thrusts.

Punching his hips deep, he doesn't stop until he's crammed into the back of my throat. My nose presses firmly against his stomach as he erupts into my mouth.

I dutifully swallow each torrent of hot, sticky seed. Harven shudders at the force of his climax.

He leaves my throat with a slick glide.

Sticky seed and saliva bead along my lips. I make a show of licking them clean. Panting, I dig my fingers into the sheets. I tremble with the need to come. I'm wound so tightly I'm about to burst.

Harven's tentacles lock around my middle and flip me onto my back. I hiss as my spanked ass lands on the cool silk sheets. The king's strong body comes down on mine.

His hard muscles fit perfectly to my softness. My nipples press against his chest as he takes my mouth.

Slicking his tongue against mine, he groans as he tastes the remnants of his release. It's erotic and so thoroughly wicked.

I moan with him, sucking on his tongue and using my free hands to hold him closer. They mold to his strong back, digging into his dewy flesh.

"Beg me, Eve," he rumbles against my lips. "Beg me to make you come."

Pulling back, I lick my swollen lips. His hard cock rubs against my pussy. I'm so close. I should give in and enjoy the release he's promising me.

But what's the fun in that?

"Don't push it," I say.

Harven's face hardens. His hand wraps around my throat again, reminding me of my place while in this bed.

"Beg me, Eve. Or I'll punish you again and again until you give in."

His fingers squeeze my throat, challenging me to fight back. I don't have it in me. There's no point in resisting. He has me where he wants me, and it's exactly where I want to be.

My muscles lose their tension as I go soft beneath him. It's time to tease the king in a new way. I need the kind male he's been at dinner. After so much punishing roughness, I crave his softer side.

That's the male I want to make me come for the first time. I desire both sides of him equally, but for my own well-being I need to know both can make an appearance in this bed. I know just the way to tease the kinder Harven out.

Batting my lashes, I score my nails down his back.

"Please, my king. Make me come as only you can."

His lips find my cheek, my temple. The gentle kisses make my pussy clench.

"You surprise me at every turn. I thought for sure I'd need to spank you again."

"I can be good." I rub my pussy against his hardening cock. "Especially when I need to come this bad."

"And how shall I make you do it the first time? My fingers? My tongue? My tentacles?" He thrusts against the cradle of my hips. "What would my mate prefer?"

I know a trick question when I hear one.

I'm surprised he didn't mention his cock. Tentative hope lifts in my chest, but I smother it. Emotions can come after I find release.

Once my mind is clear, I can unpack everything that's transpired.

"Whatever you want to give me, my king. I just need you. So badly it hurts." I nip at his jaw. "Please."

His grin is pure male satisfaction.

"I'm the only thing you'll ever need, Eve. Remember that."

Trailing his hand over my stomach, he settles it atop my pussy. His eyes bore into mine.

"You've been with human men, yes?"

I nod. Apprehension trickles into my gut. I'm unsure how he'll take the news. Harven is animalistic in his need for me. The male has kept lovers. He better not give me shit over not being a virgin.

My concerns are alleviated as his grin turns feral.

"You're about to learn how inadequate they were." His fingers part my slippering folds. "Watch your mate pleasure you. No one will ever touch you again. I'll kill them if they do. I'll slaughter anyone who looks at you for too long, Eve. I swear it."

Madness coats every word. His finger swirls around my entrance.

My eyes blur around the edges. There is only him. Only us. He won't have to kill anyone because I'll never want another.

My desperation to come may be twisting my mind, but the truth settles in my blood—our bond. It strengthens in my chest, binding us together permanently. I feel his heart beating alongside mine. The threads of souls weave together.

He slides a finger into me.

"Harven," I gasp before I can think.

My body goes still. Harven's smile is all teeth as he nuzzles into my neck.

"No need to fear, little mate. You sucked my cock so well, you've earned the right to call me by my name."

"Merciful king," I quip.

His teeth bite into my neck. Come morning, I'm going to be a mess of bite marks and tentacle hickeys.

"Watch it. I've been wanting to fuck that attitude out of you since you got here." His tongue licks over the fresh bite with relish. "Scream my

name loud enough for the whole castle to hear.”

Licking down my body, he teases both of my breasts before licking into my navel. His lips travel across my hips before he settles between my legs. His beard teases the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. Tentacles wrap around my legs, locking them in place and lifting my hips back.

I’m completely bare to his hungry gaze. The pink flesh of my pussy glistens. I prop up on my elbows to take in the carnal sight.

His mouth falls onto my flesh with a groan.

My head falls back as he devours my pussy with devastating strokes. Pleasure compounds within me. The almost orgasm from before swirls with the new peak he’s pushing me towards.

His slick muscle tastes me from clit to whole. Alternating between biting and sucking, he works me into a frenzy. My hips lift as he pushes his tongue inside me. I rock myself against his face, chasing my climax.

Gripping my waist, he grinds me against him. My clit bumps his nose as he tastes me fully. I’m so sensitive the pleasure is almost painful. His fingers dig into my sore ass, deepening the well of my arousal.

“Harven,” I slur. “It’s so good.”

His lips are glossy with my arousal as he presses a kiss to the top of my pussy.

“Sweeter than wine, softer than silk—hotter than the sun. You’re perfect everywhere, Eve.” He kisses my wet flesh again. “This pretty cunt will consume my every thought.”

“It has that effect on people.”

Harven nips my clit, earning a throaty moan. A finger tucks into my entrance. With three shallow thrusts, my peak looms closer.

My nails score his back.

“How can it feel this good, Harven? I’ve never felt like this before. With anyone.”

His eyes blaze with golden fire. He slips a second finger into me, scissoring them exactly how I like without even having to tell him.

“Because you are my mate, Eve.” A tentacle replaces his fingers, sliding in deeper than before. “Say it.”

The tentacle is a preamble to his cock.

The appendage fills me to the brim. The suckers skim along my hypersensitive inner walls. It nuzzles against my G-spot. My vision darkens.

Harven's fingers push against my sore ass.

"Say it, Eve. I won't ask again."

"My mate," I breathe. "Harven. Make me come. Make me yours."

His tentacle retreats, then thrusts back in. His tentacle leaves me in want of his cock. I need to feel his come inside me, spilling down my thighs.

I want it so badly.

I withstand his thrusts. A separate tentacle begins worrying my clit. Harven's hands stay locked on my hips as I absorb more of his body into me.

The sloppy wet sounds come from my pussy, heightening my pleasure. The room smells of sex and Harven's wonderful scent.

"Apologize for fighting me, Eve."

His tentacle pauses and I nearly sob.

"I'm sorry," I say in a rush.

I'm rewarded by a particularly deep thrust.

"Say you'll never do it again. Never deny me what's mine."

"Never," I vow.

The words pull from the deepest parts of my heart. It's my voice, but it sounds unfamiliar. These promises and feelings belong to the new Eve who was born in this bed. The questions and burdens from the past have been wiped away.

Harven's dominance has awoken the real me. It's given me the clarity I need. This is my new life. I'm giving myself over to it. That doesn't mean I won't push back on Harven, but I'm not going anywhere.

I want to let him take me and have heirs with him. I want us to be a family. We can work out the details concerning his *Pearls* later. All I want is him.

I'm choosing to believe his words when he says I'm the most important thing to him. It's evident in the way he looks at me—how he holds me.

I have to trust that this is the right choice.

His tentacle fucks me without mercy. Others wrap around my breasts as Harven kisses my throat. He nips at my pulse, and my fate is decided.

I want to be his queen. A real one. I don't want it to be a title he bestows on the mother of his heirs. Harven's stressors are endless. I want to be his partner in court matters. To support him beyond the physical.

I want to be the keeper of his heart. He already owns mine.

I've given my heart and soul to him in this bed, whether he knows it or not. So much for self-preservation. That's a problem for tomorrow's Eve.

A tentacle suctions to my clit as his tentacle pounds me.

"Come, Eve."

I obey without question.

A scream tears from my lips. Harven's name echoes around the room and into the hall. My muscles snap tight as white-hot pleasure envelopes me. Black dots mar my vision. My toes curl in the air as my fingernails shred his back.

I've never come so hard in my life.

Harven slips his tentacle from me as his mouth comes down on mine. I shudder with aftershocks. My body feels limp, thoroughly wrung out. I can hardly reciprocate his kisses.

I taste my pleasure on his tongue.

Unbinding me, Harven pulls us up the bed until we rest atop the pillows. His fingers trail circles over my sweaty skin. My heart is ready to beat out of my chest. I curl into his chest, seeking comfort after everything that's happened. Harven welcomes me with whispered praise and soft kisses on my head.

"Did I please you, my mate?"

I smile against his chest.

"Already seeking compliments?"

"Reassurance."

It requires all my strength, but the wariness in his voice makes me lift my head. I see the unease brewing in his eyes. He was swept up in our back-and-forth just as I was.

Revealing this side of him to me was a risk. It could've spelled disaster if it hadn't awakened my kindred spirit. We were made for each other.

Our bond glows in agreement.

I offer him my mouth, and he takes it greedily. I'll never tire of his kisses. Despite my exhaustion, the need for another round rises swiftly.

"You were right, my king. I do need a firm hand." I stroke the nuzzling appendage at my hip. "Or should I say tentacle."

Stretching my arms above my head, I smirk as his gaze travels down my naked body. There's no need to cover myself.

"I'd let you fuck me if I wasn't about to pass out."

Experiencing his dominant possession firsthand, I need all my strength to withstand his brutal pounding. Exhaustion creeps up on me as I try to stifle a yawn.

“Good to know, you’re finally amenable to the idea.” His hand traces down my spine. “Rest, Eve.”

His abs bunch as he slides from beneath me. I grip his forearm.

“Don’t go.”

Harven smiles and reaches for the sheet to cover us. He curls around me and lifts my chin. The depth of emotion in his hazy eyes makes me sigh.

“I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me, Eve. Forever.”

Satisfied and content in his arms, sleep hooks its claws into me.

I whisper a word into our perfect moment before the darkness pulls me under. I don’t fear it, now that Harven is mine. I look forward to the challenges it will bring us and all the pleasure we will enjoy.

“Forever.”

EVE

Time is different underwater.

No streaming sunlight tells me it's morning. The change in water color indicates the same. During daylight hours, it's a gentle blue. Clear enough for me to see far along the white sand floor. It looks endless, the blue void. It's peaceful in its expansiveness.

Daunting, but I don't feel overwhelmed. I've never felt better.

Thanks to the male lying beside me. My body feels like goo. I released enough endorphins last night to float on a cloud of pure bliss.

Our shared passion has chased away my lingering doubts.

Whether it's a reward for us indulging in the mating bond, I'm not sure. Regardless, I have no conflicting thoughts. I'm right where I'm supposed to be: at the side of a most dominant Kraken King.

Groaning, I stretch out my deliciously sore muscles. Many of which I haven't used in a very long time.

The sheet falls away from my bare body. The remnants of my dress litter the floor. I shake my head at the number of red marks all over my body. There's no denying who left them. I've always hated hickies but from Harven they make my insides melt.

No one who sees them will deny he owns me.

All the fear from last night washes away as I turn towards his chest. Tentacles glide along my hips and legs. I've never been much of a snuggler,

but the way Harven held me all night was perfect. In his arms I've never felt safer. More at peace.

Sleepy gold eyes blaze over my face.

"I thought you were never going to wake up."

The deep timber of his voice skitters along my bones. I clench my inner thighs together, enjoying the feel of his hard muscles tucked against me.

My ass is sore. It'll be tender for a while today thanks to Harven's spanking.

"I was ravished by a monster. I needed my beauty sleep."

Harven's tender smile deepens the ache in my chest. His hand rubs at the same spot between his pecs. It must be the physical manifestation of our bond. It glows quietly next to my heart. Hoping he'll finally take me this morning.

"If I had time, I'd ravish you again, but my council meeting is soon." His tentacles flicker in annoyance. "You slept late. I didn't have the heart to wake you."

His hands splay possessively over my ass. I hiss as he massages my sore skin.

"Your tentacles are as wicked as your palms." I slide my fingers through his beard. "Are you going to be busy all day?"

We haven't even fucked, and I'm growing needy.

It can't be helped. I feel territorial over him. I'd love nothing more than to spend all day together in bed. Knowing I want him to have me fully makes me even more eager.

He is king. I'm sure he has many important matters to attend to, but selfishly I want him all to myself. Releasing my ass, he nods solemnly.

"Unfortunately." Kiss my temple, he lifts from the bed. "At the celebration tonight, I'll be all yours."

"Lucky me."

Harven's hand loosely collars my throat. The loose grip makes me slippery between my thighs. I want him so much it's a physical pain. His thumb traces my pulse.

"You will watch the festivities from my lap." He pulls me close, lips smiling against my ear. "Wear something flimsy so I can play with your little cunt."

I gasp as his tentacle snakes over my wet folds. If not for his grip, I'd be a puddle on the bed.

“In front of everyone?”

My face warms at the idea of submitting to him in front of an audience. God, he has me considering such wicked, devious things if it means pleasing him.

And I do want to please him, but not in a subservient way. He likes my fire, likes that he can't control me. I'll push back when I need to and give in when the reward is the sweetest.

“You are mine, Eve. Wherever—whenever I want you. I could fuck you in front of my whole court, and you'd let me. Wouldn't you?”

The confidence with which he says it sparks my ire. I twist my lips and cross my arms over my chest.

“Last night, I think I got swept up in the moment. Let me remind you that I'm not a piece of meat for you to—”

His mouth captures mine with a growl as his tentacle slides inside me. Harven thrusts his tongue deep.

He fucks my mouth as his tentacle pounds my pussy. I grip his strong arms to keep upright.

“Deny you're mine again, Eve,” he growls against his mouth, “and I'll spank you in front of my council before feeding you my cock. Do you want them to watch how well you take it into your perfect throat? How sweet your moans are when I'm turning your ass pink?”

My blood sings as he roughly pumps in and out of me. He pushes me onto my back and gives me his weight. The thrusting tentacle only picks up speed.

“Say you are mine, Eve. Now.”

A second tentacle joins the first. They both slide into me on their sides, skimming their suckers along my inner walls. Pleasure scores my flesh. Harven is in my lungs—my heart. Everywhere.

“I'm yours—I'm yours!”

I feel a third tentacle at my back entrance. My whole body goes stiff as it tests the ring of muscle.

“Soon,” he vows, “you'll know what it means to be completely filled by me.”

It's too much. The pleasure from last night kickstarts my climax. I'm so close, and he's barely touched me. The fullness is decadent.

“My king—*Harven*—I'm too sensitive—I can't stop it. Please, *please*!”

The third tentacle leaves my ass to suction to my clit.

Harven takes my mouth with a snarl and devours it. The kiss is a bruising one. A mark of his complete ownership. My hips lock as pleasure tears through me. The tentacles fuck me through my peak. I scream into his mouth as my nails sink into his forearms.

Once I return to my body, Harven slips the tentacles from me. He holds them before my mouth.

“Suck,” he commands.

I lick the closest one. I taste the sweet musk of my arousal.

Catching his eye, I give the appendage the same treatment I did his cock. Bobbing my head, I work it in and out of my throat. My teeth score its sides as my tongue licks in the suckers.

Harven groans, licking my release from the other tentacle. The sight is too obscenely perfect. Pulling his tentacle from my mouth, a familiar one nuzzles against my chest. I trace my nail across its scarred top.

This one has a particular fondness for me. I let it nuzzle under my chin.

“If I had the time, I’d give you my cock, but you’ll have to be a good girl and wait for it.”

“As you wish, my king.”

Harven rises with predatory grace. I roll onto my stomach and watch him dress. He picks up his discarded belt and skirt. He must’ve placed his crown on my bedside table at some point during the night.

He threads it through his dark hair. I trace over his delicious muscles, longing to taste them with my tongue.

I want him so much I can hardly think of anything else.

Crawling forward, I watch the heat in his eyes deepen as he takes in my naked breasts. I sit back on my heels as he prowls over. My hand strays to his belt, pulling him closer.

He shifts his fingers through my hair.

“Do you really have to go?”

“Yes, my mate.” He chuckles at my pout. “I thought you’d welcome the reprieve. A *motherfucking bastard*. Isn’t that what you called me? Was that before or after voicing your desire to kill me?”

“I may have said things I didn’t mean,” I murmur. “You can be persuasive.”

Cupping my cheeks, he bestows a lingering kiss. I clutch his hands, relinquishing them only when he glides back.

“Take it easy while you can, little mate. I’ll be back with you soon.”

He casts me a lingering look before slipping through the door. With a groan, I roll onto my back. I trace my fingers over all of the red marks adorning my skin. I shake my head, unable to stop the smile from forming.

I'm in so much trouble.



A SOFT KNOCK echoes from my door as I secure the final pin in my hair.

"Come in," I call, hoping it's Harven.

I fluff out my skirt and shake out my loose waves. I had taken extra care, shaving every inch of my body and applying thick cream until my skin glistened. What a difference a day can make. If you had told me a week ago I'd eagerly be counting down the minutes until I saw Harven again, I wouldn't have believed it.

I missed him so much. Painting had not been enough to distract me as the hours dripped by.

The footsteps padding across the room are far too light to be Harven's. Masking my disappointment, I turn, expecting to see Leri or Hyra.

The last person I expect is Seera, strolling in with her head down. Her teal curls are artfully arranged in an updo. She's wearing a simple silver dress.

I try not to let jealousy overwhelm me as I look at the *Pearl*. It's her job to serve the king, even if I loathe that she knows him so intimately. Still, she's never been mean to me. If my suspicions about her and Bly are correct, we could help each other.

"I'm sure you're surprised to see me," she muses.

Her large eyes widen as she takes in the marks along my body. There was no point in trying to hide them, so I decided to display them proudly. I'm sure Harven will like it.

His ownership is clear to anyone who looks at me.

"The king did that to you?"

I nod.

My outfit is revealing even by seafolk standards.

It's a top and skirt that took me many tries to explain to the wardrobe how to make. Composed of pearl colored silk, the top barely conceals my

breasts.

It's more similar to a bra than a shirt, with its plunging neckline and off-the-shoulder sleeves. The skirt is just as revealing, clinging to my hips before brushing the tops of my thighs.

The look on Seera's face—surprise and awe—told me I'd made the right choice in showing them. News of my night with the king had spread. The servants looked at me differently.

As if I were more than just a human for the king to bed. The marks said I was important.

Leri informed me when he brought my bowl of stew that I smelled like Harven, which apparently meant a great deal to their kind.

"You look lovely," Seera says, then gestures toward my bed. "May I?"

I nod, cross my arms, and watch her lower herself onto the satin. The openness of her face makes me relax a fraction.

"Why have you come?"

I look pointedly at the door. No one seems to be hovering in the hall, but where there's one *Pearl*, there always seems to be another.

"Nixie isn't out there, don't worry. She doesn't know I'm here." Seera shakes her head and bestows a brittle smile. "The female has been downright insufferable. Wailing at all hours of the day and night about how unfair this is. She sends King Harven endless notes he doesn't respond to. This is the longest he's ever gone without seeing us. Nixie, especially."

Satisfaction blooms in my stomach. My lips curl in delight. Seera raises a dark brow.

"This pleases you?"

"Humans value monogamy. I know that isn't the norm for you all—especially the king—but I want him all to myself."

At my confession, Seera nods. Looking at the shut door, she speaks in a low voice.

"Then we share a common desire. This time without the king's attention has been...welcome."

I note the desperation in her eyes. She twists her hands in her lap.

Smiling gently, I settle beside her on the bed.

"Because you're in love with Bly," I whisper.

Seera's teal lashes hit her brows. Rearing back, she swallows thickly. I gently cup her delicate shoulder and squeeze.

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me,” I assure her. “I see the way you two look at each other.”

Seera sighs, leaning back on her palms.

“It’s becoming harder and harder to be discreet. We came to the palace around the same time. We both were happy to serve the king. We saw it as an honor. Nixie always wanted to be alone with King Harven, but Bly and I would often see him together.” A smile quirks her lips. “It didn’t take long for us to realize it was each other we truly craved.”

“An unorthodox workplace romance, I’ll give you that.”

Seera sighs, deflating.

“It is forbidden for *Pearls* to take relationships outside the king until they are dismissed from his service. If King Harven found out we have been—”

“He won’t,” I vow. “We want the same thing, Seera. If Harven truly desires me as much as I believe he does, I will press the issue of disbanding the *Pearls*. You and Bly will be free to be together.”

“Thank you, Eve. Truly.” Her grin turns wry. “Nixie will not be as amiable to being dismissed.”

“I’m sure she won’t be.”

“He doesn’t love her.” Seera gestures towards my body. “He’s never left any sort of mark like that on her. On any of us. You’re his mate. The court will see these marks and understand what statement he’s making. Nixie will be furious.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Seera’s expression sobers.

“She’s a nuisance, but she can cause harm. You’d do well to remain on your guard.”

“I can keep myself safe from Nixie.”

Seera slides to her webbed feet. I follow her up.

“I should get going. Nixie has quite the performance planned for tonight.”

“What does that mean?”

Seera chuckles, shaking her head.

“You’ll see. And I can’t wait to see the look on your face when you do.” She squeezes my arm. “Try not to order her killed.”

My smile is all teeth.

“No promises.”

Laughing, Seera slips out of my room in a whisper of silver silk. If Nixie seeks to impress the king tonight, I'll just have to remind her of who he really desires. He won't pay her any attention. Not with the show I'm planning for him.

His eyes will be firmly elsewhere.

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HARVEN

If I have to listen to one more member of the Sea Council drone on, I'll drown myself in the ocean.

The day had dragged on as I heard every plight and rumor swirling within my kingdom. My anger spiked countless times as pieces of information concerning plots came to light. The sources needed verification, as did the end goal.

Were they trying to harm only me, or Eve? Either wouldn't be tolerated. *Eve.*

My entire body heats as I think of her again, tuning out Lord Lore's incessant ramblings. I've wanted to return to her all day. My mind replays our kisses. The feel of her naked skin. The dreamy expression that transforms her face as she comes.

I need to be inside her.

The primal urge presses down on me. My cock begins to stir as I think of how I left her beautiful body covered in my marks. It's evident what she means to me. No one will touch her if they value their lives.

I scratch at my chest. The clenching ache is back, warming against my fingers. It seems to deepen whenever I think of Eve. She had looked so gorgeous while asleep.

Her luscious blonde hair fanned around her like a golden curtain. The soft lines of her face were serene. I had wanted to rouse her with my tongue in her cunt, but thought it best to let her rest.

Tonight, I will claim her completely. I will hold her down and watch my come drip out of her pink pussy. I have no problem taking her over and over until my seed takes hold.

Eve is mine. I made her acknowledge the undeniable truth between us. I'm never letting her go. As confident as I feel about our bond, questions remain. Decisions to be made.

Namely, about my *Pearls*. That would be a problem for another day as my meeting adjourns, and I take the first chance to exit. Racing down the barren halls, I clutch my gift tightly.

I twist her door handle, not bothering to knock. No false sense of propriety existed between us. I've had my tongue in her ass.

Eve stands before her mirror, securing a necklace of pearls and silver shells. The air stills in my lungs. My tentacles go limp, almost sending me to the floor. I can't think of anything beyond the vision she makes.

Biting her lip in the mirror, she turns in a slow circle.

Her short skirt lifts in the air, baring the bottom curve of her ass. Memories of it turning pink make my cock press against the front of my skirt.

A chain of pearls encircles her narrow waist. Her top barely conceals the fleshy swells of her breasts. I want to bury my head between them and bite her sweet flesh.

Every single one of my marks is on display. She hadn't chosen to hide them, but to wear them with pride. As if she wants my whole court to know she is mine.

The ache in my chest becomes painful.

"Do you like it?" she asks, eyes teaming with mischief.

My cock surges forward at the sound of her voice. It pushes through my tentacles to stand at proud attention. Her eyes drop there, noting my hardness as a charming color sweeps over her cheeks.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"You look like a goddess." I eat up the distance between us. "A queen."

I pull my gift from behind my back and present it to her.

Eve gasps as she takes in the tiara. It mirrors my crown. It's far more delicate in its construction. Made of spun silver and adorned with diamonds and pearls, it glitters as I rest the circlet atop her head.

"Harven. It's beautiful." Licking her lips, she places her hands on my chest. "Are you sure?"

“You are my queen, Eve. I want everyone gathered tonight to show you the respect you deserve.” My hands cover hers. I trace the backs of them with my thumbs. “More than that, I want everyone to know you’re a permanent fixture in my life. We will always be together, Eve. No matter what. You’ll never be alone again.”

Moisture beads in her blue eyes. Her giggle is watery as she shakes her head.

“You can’t be the same male who mercilessly spanked my ass with his tentacles last night.”

I kiss her soundly, chasing away her tears with my passion. Eve moans into our kissing and throws her arms around my neck. My hands trail the backs of her bare thighs.

“I like keeping you on your toes.” I smile against her mouth. “And off your feet.”

She squeals as I heft her into my arms. Clinging to me in the way that makes me feel powerful, I turn her from the room and into the hall.

Servants and guards bow low as we pass. I note the stares they try to hide. The smell of seawater clings to the air due to all the attendees coming from outside the castle. Low conversation hums around each corner.

As we make our way toward the grand hall, the crowds grow denser. Eve burrows deeper into me. My tentacles wrap around her waist and legs. Some nobles hide their surprise better than others. Especially as they note the tiara atop her head.

“Everyone is staring at us,” Eve whispers.

“I want to kill them all for looking at you.”

“Harven,” she gasps. “If this is to be my home, you have to accept that others will see me. Unless you plan on keeping me locked in your room all day.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I agree.”

“Only the king is permitted into the king’s rooms.”

Eve pulls back from my neck, brows high. The haughty set to her mouth makes me want to put my cock inside of her. Gods, she’ll torment me with her attitude until the end of time.

She’s lucky I enjoy doling out punishments as much as pleasure.

“Is that so?”

I shrug. “It’s tradition.”

“And if I get bored of fucking you in my room, then what?”

Her flippant question heats my blood. Her filthy mouth rivals my most cutthroat soldiers. A beautiful queen with the wickedest tongue. I’m beyond lucky to call her mine.

“You can have any room in the castle, my mate. A different one each day if you wish.”

“But not yours?”

“No.”

Eve says nothing, but I feel her retreat into herself. I hate when she does that.

Humans think a lot. Seafolk are more direct. If she is upset with the tradition, I’d rather she tell me than silently stew. Tonight is a celebration. I don’t want this tainting it.

I’m unsure why this issue would cause such a reaction. It’s no doubt some human custom I’m unaware of. Her people have so many. It makes my temples throb.

The king’s rooms are my sanctuary. Away from the court’s prying eyes. Councilmen, lovers—even servants—are forbidden. When the stress of ruling becomes too much, I can lock myself inside and sleep peacefully, without the threat of being disturbed.

However, after spending one night curled around Eve, I don’t know how I’ll sleep again without her in my arms. My desire for her will never wane, but hers may. She is so young compared to me.

Her mind will change as she moves through the centuries. I’m an overbearing male. She enjoys it now, but in fifty years she may be grateful there’s a room she can send me to where I’ll be required to leave her alone.

Beyond the grand hall is the royal theater. The silver doors open wide as Eve and I approach. She perks up, breaking out of her sour thoughts. Good. Tonight is for enjoyment.

Her golden hair brushes my shoulder as she takes in the sprawling splendor.

It is a three-level structure. The bottom is where the royal orchestra sits, fine-tuning their coral instruments and seaweed strings.

The second level is made up of marble floors that give way to statues depicting each one of our sea gods. The stage is also on this level, gleaming with fresh polish. Behind it, a towering window frames the sprawling city.

The third level is the king's private balcony. A smaller version of my throne sits in the center behind a low retaining wall. I settle her onto my lap. Wonder threads through her blue eyes.

"This room is amazing. What events take place here?"

"Plays, concerts, dances—all manner of artistic entertainment."

"What's on the agenda tonight?"

A servant rushes over and begins setting up a small table for our meals.

Eve's attention stays on the room's grandeur. My tentacles trace the bare skin of her legs, loving how soft and smooth she is. A few renew the suck marks along her thighs.

"Music mainly," I say in response to her question. "The royal choir will sing in your honor. A few members of the court have prepared dances that showcase various parts of our history and culture."

"Is that what Nixie's performance will entail?" Eve asks.

Clenching my jaw, I trail my fingers along her arm.

"I have no idea what she plans to do. I haven't spoken to any of my *Pearls* beyond her accosting us in the hall."

Eve is quiet for a moment. Blue eyes openly appraise me as if seeking some hidden answer lying in the planes of my face. After another moment, she speaks.

"Am I right in assuming Nixie has never been in your room either?"

I nearly groan, and not with satisfaction.

"Never," I assure her.

I wish to get off the topic of annoying *Pearls* and my bedroom. Eve seems satisfied with my answer as plates and utensils are arranged atop the small table.

I may be a dominant male, but Eve has me wrapped tightly around her finger. It's ridiculous how she winds me up with just one look.

Almost as ridiculous as the happiness I feel when she bestows a smile on me, followed by a lingering kiss.

Gods, I've missed her so much. Her taste is far sweeter than the finest wine.

"Good."

The deadly sparkle in her eyes is new. My fingers dig into her waist as I take her mouth again. Our tongues slick together. I only pull back once she's panting. The scent of her desire chokes me.

"Are you jealous, Eve?"

My dinner plate and Eve's steaming bowl are delivered. I don't reach for it. Not as my question hangs heavy between us.

My mate inclines her head.

"And if I said yes?"

I can't hide my surprise.

Have I not told her countless times that she is mine?

I gave her the tiara as a sign of just how important she is to me. My feelings for Eve go beyond the primal. She will be a permanent fixture in my life. When she passes from this world, I'll—

Reaching for her bowl, Eve blows on a steaming spoonful and shrugs.

"I'm a territorial person, my king. Remember that."

She is perfect for me in every way.

"As am I. I just threatened to slaughter anyone who looks at you."

"I feel the same about you, Harven." She grips her spoon tightly. "I don't want to share you in any capacity."

Reaching for my plate, I'm not sure what to say.

Could I really break with tradition and disband my *Pearls*? Every king has kept them as an indication of his prowess and status.

Yes, they were for procreation, which is not something I can do except with Eve. I will never grow bored of sharing her bed, but she might. I've claimed her while she knows so little about the world. She could want to try someone new in twenty years—fifty.

The thought of another touching her is abhorrent. She is for me only, but I can't be so selfish. If I keep my *Pearls*, then I must accept that one day she could want her own lovers.

I had made peace with that arrangement when I first discovered her, but the thought of her seeking pleasure with another makes me feel hollow.

Is this how she feels when she thinks of my *Pearls*? It's not the same. I will never care about them like I do Eve.

What worries me about Eve turning to someone else is her human heart. No matter the transformation that will take place once she is pregnant, she'll always have it. She seeks love—companionship. Pleasure is one thing. It's fleeting.

If Eve ever came to love me, only to bestow that love on someone else—

She snuggles back into my chest and tucks into her bowl.

“We don’t have to talk about it tonight. But before long, it’s a conversation I want to have, Harven.”

I sag against my throne in relief.

“Later,” I agree.

The theater lights dim as applause rises. Eve’s eager eyes brighten as she devours her stew. The instruments pick up.

A beautiful melody fills the theater. It’s a ballad inspired by our god of war and his lost lover. The lilting harmony is sweet and heartbreaking. The royal choir soon joins the instruments.

We finish our meals quickly.

Servants remove the table as Eve curls further into me. My tentacles keep her close, bestowing suction kisses and gentle pets. My hands stray down her back to firmly cup her ass.

She gives me a mock-glare as I squeeze her sore cheeks.

Two glasses of sea-wine appear. The pale blue color sparkles through the crystal goblets. Eve only manages half her glass before handing it to me, explaining it’s far too potent for her.

The effects of the alcohol are immediately evident.

Her cheeks flush. Her movements become languid as she sprawls atop me. I chuckle softly at my little mate, never passing up the chance to touch and kiss her. She is greedy for everything I offer.

Keeping my promise from this morning, I slip my hand beneath her skirt.

She sighs into my neck as I find her wet and waiting. I spread her folds and tease her clit with my thumb. The sound of music drowns out. All I can focus on is Eve’s breathy moans and pleas for more.

Each time I feel her begin to tighten, I back off. After the third time, the festivities lull as the stage is set for another performance. Tucking my finger into her entrance, I swirl it once before retreating.

She nips at my neck.

“You’re a horrible tease, my king. Absolutely wretched.”

“I learned from the best.” I kiss her temple. “I’m merely ensuring you’re nice and wet for later.”

“Later?” She flutters her lashes. “What’s happening later?”

My hand tightens over her sweet pussy.

“I’m going to fuck you.”

She shivers, but that playful set to her mouth returns.

“Is that a fact?”

“Do you wish to deny me like yesterday? I have no problem disciplining you here in front of the court. They’d love to see their queen’s ass pink from my spanking.”

Her face swims with the same charming color her ass had the previous night. Ducking under my chin, she runs her nose along my throat.

“No need for that, my king. I will be good.”

“See that you are.”

I give her pussy one final squeeze before sliding my hand to her waist.

The music shifts and the stage illuminates with a single spotlight. I fight not to groan as I watch the figure saunter towards the stage.

It takes Eve a moment to recognize her. The moment she does, her whole body goes stiff.

Nixie slithers onto the stage with predatory grace. Her dress is a scrap of teal silk that she sheds with a knowing smirk.

Once fully nude, she casts me a longing smile. Her scales sparkle, and her navy hair gleams like the water under a full moon.

Her beauty is nothing compared to Eve’s.

Despite having been my favored Pearl, she is nothing compared to my mate. I don’t hold contempt for her. I hate how she behaves toward Eve, but Nixie has always been jealous.

It isn’t me she wants. It’s power. I think she thought the longer I sought her bed, the greater the chances of her getting pregnant would be.

There’s darkness in Nixie.

Her smile is a mask meant to convey happiness as she twirls around the stage to the melodic beat. I can see how brittle it is. It lacks all true warmth, unlike Eve’s grin.

Every one of Nixie’s moves is calculated.

The siren’s eyes stray to Eve and harden. My mate merely scoffs as Nixie continues her sensual dance. I’d laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation if I wasn’t caught squarely in the middle of it.

All thoughts of Nixie’s dance ebb away as my mate’s hand falls to my lap. I turn my attention to her as she teases my belt with a finger.

“Will you indulge me, my king?” she murmurs.

I nod as she buries her face into my neck. My tentacles coil in anticipation as she reaches beneath my skirt. Her small fist finds my hard cock and wraps around it. Eve trails kisses along my throat.

She licks my jaw as she gently strokes me.

With precision, she pushes away my silk covering and bares my leaking cock. All thoughts of the performance disappear. There is only my mate and her delicate hand straining to wrap around my proud length.

Using my seed to aid her, she jerks me roughly.

“Who’s the tease now?” I ask through clenched teeth.

Eve giggles against my throat, working me harder. My abs bunch as I withstand her beautiful torture.

Her sunshine scent overwhelms me. My tentacles skim along her legs and under her skirt. I’m desperate to enter her, but I hold back. I don’t want to disrupt whatever she’s playing at.

“Eve,” I warn, seed already threatening to spill.

“I just want to get more acquainted with your cock,” she replies primly. “It was only my mouth that had the pleasure of experiencing such magnificence yesterday.”

My knuckles turn white as they curl atop the arms of my throne. Eve sucks on my pulse before biting me again.

She’s intent on marking me just as I had her. I’ll wear them with the same pride she wears mine.

“You’re so big, my king. The biggest I’ve ever seen.” Pride spreads through my chest. “I’ll need to be dripping in order to take you.”

“You will be,” I snarl. “Nothing will stop me from having you, Eve. My cock’s place is deep in your tight cunt.”

Eve moans into the crook of my neck. Her rough pumps turn choppy. Arousal slides down her thighs and soaks my lingering tentacles.

Lust burns hotly in her gaze. Her full lips slide against mine. Warm breath bathes my mouth.

“Have you thought about how you’ll take me the first time, my king?”

Seed rolls up from balls and seeps from the tip.

My mate works me faster with her tight fist. Her wanton whisper turns my blood to fire. The bond between us pulls tight. If she keeps this up, I won’t be able to stop myself from fucking her in front of my whole court.

“Eve—”

“Do you want me on my back?” Her lips graze mine again. “Or on my front, where you can take me the hardest—the deepest?”

“Eve.”

It's the only word I know. I'm a servant to her touch. My climax looms close. A tingle runs down my spine, making me pant.

"Or do you want me to ride you, my king? I should work for your come." Her pink tongue licks along my cheek. "I want to earn it while you fuck your heir into me."

I erupt. My snarl tears through the hall.

It disrupts the musicians, causing them to miss their notes. Nixie missteps and falls to the stage. I don't care as the heads of every member of the court whip towards us.

My seed covers her hand. Eve jerks me through each wave of pleasure as I coat her in my come. Once I'm milked dry, Eve smiles wickedly.

She lifts her covered hand and licks my seed from her skin. She moans, remnants of the pale substance cling to her lips.

Her grin turns feral. Never breaking eye contact, she lifts her skirt. I groan at the sight of her beautiful pussy.

Sliding her legs apart, my tentacles support her as her back turns towards the crowd. This display is only for me. The music picks up again, but I can barely hear it over my ragged breaths.

Eve rubs my seed all over her bare cunt. Sliding two delicate fingers into herself, my come pools at her entrance. She works herself slowly as she spreads my essence all over her skin.

"This is what it'll look like, my king." Eve slowly pulls her fingers from her opening. "When you fill me with your seed, it'll look just like this."

My sticky come mixes with her arousal and trails towards her tight asshole. I capture her hand and suck our mingling releases from her fingers. Eve moans, tossing her head back.

"You've made a mess of yourself."

Another challenge sparks in her eyes.

"Make me messier, my king."

She doesn't have to tell me twice.

I fix her skirt, wrap her in my arms, and carry her from the theater. I don't care what my council will think about leaving a royal performance early. They'll question my restraint. I have none when it comes to Eve.

Let the rumors spread. I'm needed elsewhere. My mate's needs will always come first.

No matter what.

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EVE

Harven carries me swiftly through the desolate halls.

I'm just as eager for what awaits me once we arrive at my room. Despite my anticipation, I tuck that little tidbit about being forbidden from entering his chambers away.

The seafolk have odd traditions. Multiple lovers? Cool. A shared bedroom? That's where the line is drawn. There was no way I wasn't going to be sleeping next to my mate every night.

Mate. The word clangs through me. Warmth seeps from my chest until my fingers tingle.

"Are we going to get married?" I ask.

Harven's tentacles stumble on the tiles. I try not to read too much into his shocked expression.

"Married?"

"Yes. You know, a ceremony where we exchange vows of commitment and call ourselves husband and wife."

Harven is quiet. The hazy depths of his eyes swirl like a stormy sky.

"You want to marry me?"

"If we are going to have a kid, yes. I'd like us to be married. To be a family."

"We don't have such a custom," Harven explains. "Mating bonds are the only form of binding relationship. Some seafolk have mating ceremonies, but it's rare."

I purse my lips.

"I see."

Oily disappointment slips down my throat.

Of course, he wouldn't see the point. Their mating bonds are primal. If the mate is meant to reincarnate, I suppose there's no reason to bind one iteration of them at a time.

In my short time here, I've learned that concepts like love and devotion don't mean the same thing to seafolk as they do to humans.

Harven cares for me. He is devoted in a unique way. One that is rife with bloodshed and violence. He shows me what I mean to him through action.

I appreciate that, but I crave the human labels too. The softness of what a soulmate is meant to offer. This will be another topic we'll need to discuss soon. Along with his *Pearls*.

The tension between us shifts.

While my anticipation for our night together remains high, I can't help but feel a bit dejected. Harven senses the shift in my mood.

He lifts my chin.

"This is important to you, Eve? Your human custom."

"Yes."

Harven nods once.

"Once you are pregnant with my heir, we will be married."

I beam up at him. While I'm ecstatic he's agreed, he needs to understand something.

The brightness between us dims a little as I cup his face.

"I feel it's imperative to mention that marriages are meant to be sacred." My thumb teases the rough line of his jaw. "Between two people."

"I thought we weren't discussing my *Pearls* tonight?"

"We're not," I sigh. "I'm just telling you what I expect."

Harven shakes his head. Coarse tendrils drag over my bare arms. His tentacles slip and slide over my bare legs. He tucks me closer and kisses the top of my head.

"Demanding little thing you are."

I giggle, but don't deny it. Many conversations await Harven and me before we welcome a child into the world.

There's another thing I've been meaning to bring up to him. I'm not sure how he'll react.

“Harven?”

“Yes, my mate.”

“On land, I was on the pill.”

“The pill?”

“Yes. A contraceptive. Medicine that prevented me from getting pregnant.”

I’m certain my pills are currently at the bottom of the ocean. The last time I took one was the morning all hell broke loose on board.

I had no idea where I was at on my cycle. Time moves differently down here. I’d have to wait for my period to begin to properly track it. Thank god I was regular.

“But you aren’t taking it now?” Harven asks.

“No. But Harven, you have to understand, humans can only get pregnant during certain times.” He pauses outside my door. “I’m telling you this so—if we start trying and I don’t immediately get pregnant—I don’t want you to think the worst.”

Coming off the pill brings its own challenges. It could take two weeks to get pregnant or a month—longer. I just want Harven to understand that it may take more than one try.

Like anyone who's wanted something for a long time, with it so close, I just worry about disappointing him. I’d hate for sex to become something we had rather than the dominant possession I wanted it to be.

Harven is quiet for a long moment. As the silence trickles, unease cools my burning lust.

“The gods made you for me, Eve,” he says finally. “You are my perfect match—the other half of my soul. You alone will bear the future king. No matter if it takes months or years. I will enjoy every moment of bedding you regularly until you grow round with my heir.”

Laughing, the tension eases away.

“It won’t take years.” My lips twist. “Well, I hope it doesn’t.”

“If it does, I won’t mind. My only concern is for you. The Sea Witch told me that once you are pregnant, the curse will fully lift. You will be transformed and live as one of the seafolk. My heir will provide you with the magic needed to live amongst us.”

It’s hard to wrap my mind around the prospect of not being human. Of wielding magic and living for centuries. It’s hard to fathom that length of time.

What will Harven and my relationship look like in a century? The discussions we need to have are more important than ever. We need to build a strong foundation if we want to withstand the coming years together.

“Does that frighten you, Eve?”

Harven pushes into my room. He sets me on my feet, his hands sliding to my waist. His magic slams the door shut and locks it.

We aren’t to be disturbed.

“It’s just a lot to process.” I bite my lip. “Things move very quickly here. We’ve only had three dates and are already planning marriage and a baby.”

His dark chuckle spreads over my skin like warm honey. My breath hitches as his lips find my ear. The sheer size of him will always inflame my desire.

“Let me make tonight very simple.”

His fingers shove my skirt down. Lifting my arms, I let him remove my top until I’m clad in only the thin chain of pearls and my necklace. Plucking the tiara from my head, he sets it and his crown on my bedside table.

Strong hands shift through my hair as tentacles nuzzle against my ankles.

“Beautiful, Eve.” His nose skims up my cheek. “You take my breath away.”

Every light in my room flares to life. There’s nowhere to hide from Harven. He’s seen into my soul. I’ve given him my heart.

Whether it was wise or not, I couldn’t stop it.

The king’s mouth descends on mine. The firm press of his mouth makes my body come alive. Heat spreads through my blood. Wetness pools between my thighs.

Harven’s hard cock pressed tightly against my stomach. I writhe against it, swallowing his snarl.

His tongue tangles with mine. It’s a dance of sliding muscles and clashing teeth. I surrender to the brutal nature of his kiss. My hands fall to his back and dig into his hard flanks.

Harven kisses down my neck.

When he reaches my breast, he roughly palms one, while his tentacle wraps around the other. His mouth licks my hard nipple, causing my head to fall back. His sandalwood scent overwhelms me.

He releases my breast with a pop.

“These fill my hands perfectly.”

A tentacle glides up my leg. I shiver at the intrusive appendage that smears my wetness and the king’s dried release over my folds. It nuzzles at my clit, making my knees wobble. I gasp as another one joins it.

Both slide slowly inside of me

“Harven.”

“You’re soaked, Eve. Wetter than the fucking ocean.”

A lazy smile curls my lips. I absorb each decadent inch with relish.

“All for you, my king.”

His tentacles punch deep, earning a gasp. Harven smirks, then sinks his teeth into my skin.

“I need to prepare you for my cock.”

His tentacle thrusts in and out of me while he suckles at my breasts. I moan as his teeth tease my nipple.

Another tentacle suctions to my clit with force. I’m already on edge from his early teasing. My peak looms close.

My muscles tighten around his sliding appendage. One more thrust and I’ll—

Harven stops moving them.

The tentacles fall away from me as he nuzzles between my breasts. Anger flares to life, spurred by my desperate need for release.

“Let me come, you sadistic bastard!” I snap.

The feral set to his lips makes me turn obscenely wet. A challenge sparks in his eyes, and I know I’m in for it. Good. I need him to be as rough as he was last night.

I crave it almost as much as my climax.

“I don’t appreciate your tone, Eve.”

“And I don’t appreciate you edging me all night. It’s cruel.”

“Cruel?” Erotic menace seeps into his deep voice. “You haven’t seen cruel, my mate. Allow me to show you.”

Before I can speak, his tentacles wrap tightly around my arms and legs. He hoists me into the air, completely immobile. I buck against my restraints, but that only makes them grip me tighter. His suckers suction tight to my skin

Harven tips my body forward until my pussy is before his hungry gaze.

“What are you—”

A tentacle wraps around my head, slipping between my lips.

He's just gagged me. The bastard.

"Shh," he murmurs. "I don't want to hear your voice right now."

My ire blazes to the surface. I glare at him, trying to bite the tentacle keeping my mouth open. I snarl curses, but they are all garbled against my gag.

Harven chuckles, teasing his fingers up my thigh.

"There it is. That fire. Only I can play with it—tame it. I am your master, Eve. You are my plaything. My *mate*."

A tentacle slithers through my wetness before settling at my back entrance. My breath catches, unable to do anything but withstand his sensual torment.

"My toy to fuck whenever I want."

His tentacle pushes past the tight ring of muscle. I scream against my gag, but it's useless. Fighting the restraints only makes his slick appendage push deeper.

The burn is obscenely decadent. Tears sting my eyes and slide thickly down my cheeks.

"I told you something would be going in this little hole very soon."

His other tentacles tease my sensitive skin. Strung up like a puppet, I'm completely at his mercy. I'm a toy for his personal use.

My only purpose is to withstand his sensual assault.

"I used to dream about what you'd look like." His hands fall to my splayed thighs, forcing them wider. "Wondered what kind of human the gods crafted for me. If you would be worth all the death it took for me to finally claim you."

The tentacle in my ass pauses its invasion. I've never felt anything like it. Harven is everywhere. All I can feel and see is him. He's the center of my entire world. My master.

My *mate*.

"I can say without a doubt you are worth everything. More beautiful than I could ever imagine." He shakes his head. "Seeing you like this—having you at my mercy—I can't be sorry for all those I killed. I'd do it again, a hundred times, if that's what it took to make you mine."

A moan rasps against my gag.

I hate how much I love his confession. Its depravity should scare me, but I'll never fear anything about Harven. It was always meant to be like this between us.

Through death and darkness, we found each other. We will live in the light and bring life into our world to atone for the sins of the past.

The primal need in his eyes makes me wetter. I need all of him inside me.

Harven has given me the thing I've always wanted: complete domination. He's killed for me and will gladly do so again.

This extreme possessiveness is what I've always craved. It's why my relationships were lacking. No human man could ever give me what Harven could. The total ownership—the pleasure.

I can relinquish myself to him and trust he'll do whatever is necessary to keep me safe.

Harven is a kraken. I can't impose my world's morals on him. I'd never want him to change. I like him just as he is.

Fuck, I love him. I can't deny the fact any longer. I'm in love with the male who kidnapped me. My captor. My dominant lover. My king. I love him.

I'd tell him I wasn't currently being gagged.

"Does it scare you, Eve? The lives I've stolen to find you. The ones I'll have to take in order to keep you."

My head thrashes to the side as he sinks two fingers inside of me. He curls them just the way I like. With his tentacle in my ass, I feel extremely full.

Harven fucks me roughly with his hand, smiling at the wetness that drips down his wrist.

"Your cunt says you like how ruthless I am over you. Good girl."

He pulls his fingers out of me. My scream of desperation turns into a yelp as he smacks his palm down on my pussy. The sting is too much. Conflicting sensations swirl inside me.

Pleasure and pain. Wrong and right. Love and hate. I'm everything all at once.

I'm Harven's.

"You said you'd never share your bed with a monster like me." He delivers another spank to my pussy. "Do you remember, Eve?"

I nod as he spans me again. My eyes water as my pleasure spikes.

"Were you lying to your king, Eve? Or would you like to amend your answer?"

Slapping down on my pussy once more, he releases the tentacle from my mouth. I greedily suck down air as I stretch out my jaw. I stare at his lifted hand, knowing the answer I should give.

The masochist in me desires a bit more pain.

“I—I meant it at the time.”

Harven tsks while spanking me again. The tentacle in my ass pushes deeper.

“And now?” he challenges.

“N—now.” *Slap.* “Now.” *Slap.* “I—I.”

Slap. Slap. Slap.

The pain clears my head. It breaks through my last reservations until I’m nothing but a trembling mess. Pleasure rises like a wave, threatening to drown me. I’ll die happily from Harven’s torment. I crave it. Need it more than my next breath.

The confession tumbles from my lips.

“I don’t ever want you *leaving* my bed,” I whimper. “Never, my king. My mate. Stay with me. Breed me. I am your fucktoy to use whenever you want. I can’t live without you.”

I pant, awaiting another blow to my pussy. That’s why I’m caught off guard when a tentacle slaps my ass.

It renews my soreness from the previous night. Harven releases a snarl. His tentacles drag me into his body. The harsh lines of his face are beautiful. Primal need surrounds us.

Our souls tether together in unbreakable iron.

“You are mine, Eve. I’ll hear you admit it every day. With every breath, you’ll swear yourself to me.”

His tentacle strikes my ass again as Harven bites into my neck. My nails dig into his scalp. I let him see the mirroring madness in my eyes. I’m every bit as possessive as him.

“You’re mine too,” I growl. “It doesn’t matter who you fuck. I own you. I own your fucking *heart*, Harven.”

He spans me again. My bindings tighten until my skin burns.

“You. Are. My. Mate.”

I spit each word.

His mouth comes down on mine with a snarl. He releases me, and I fall into his waiting arms. I yelp into our kiss as he slams me onto the bed. The air knocks from my lungs as he comes down on top of me.

Cupping me under my knees, he thrusts my thighs apart. Red welts and pink lines decorate my tan skin. Harven's tentacle slithers from my ass as he sheds his skirt. Gripping his leaking cock, he slaps it roughly against my clit.

My body bows, desperate for any relief.

The head of his cock slips inside me. My whole body melts. Keeping my eyes open is a challenge as he slowly invades me. The suckers on his impressive length tease my inner walls. The size of him is obscene.

I grip the sheets until my knuckles turn white.

"Watch me, Eve," he commands. "Watch me stretch your little pussy."

The further he pushes, the more I feel like I'm being torn apart. I've never felt something so hard and hot before. My nails scrape down his back. Leaning forward, I sink my teeth into his shoulder as I withstand his brutal invasion.

"That's it. Bite me. Claw me. Nothing will stop me until I'm fully inside your perfect cunt."

He makes good on his promise.

The only reprieve I get is once he's fully inside. The head of his cock butts up against my womb. His rigids tease my sensitive inner walls. My body gets wetter to accommodate him. I breathe through it, willing my body to adjust and relax.

Releasing his shoulder, I lick metallic blood from my lips. Harven's smile turns deadly.

"Naughty girl, making your king bleed."

His hips roll back, then slide forward again. A keening sound falls from my mouth.

His tentacles keep my legs open as he thrusts again. My mind feels like mush as pleasure sweeps in. I'm unaware of anything but his cock inside me.

It's pain, it's pleasure—it's everything.

Sliding back until only the head of his cock remains inside me, Harven surges forward. I moan as he finds a punishing rhythm. The erotic sloppy sounds of my pussy fill the room. Oranges and briny air swirl with the scent of our fucking. It's heady. It's perfect.

My breasts jostle with every brutal thrust.

Haren palms one, teasing my nipples. My thighs snap around his torso, needing him as close as possible. I take everything he gives me. I lift my

hips to meet every brutal thrust.

“Eve,” he pants, sweat glistening on his brow. “Tell me you love it. Tell me you need me fucking you every day.”

His hands fall to either side of my head to leverage himself to take me rougher. Our bodies slap together in a beautiful harmony of wet flesh.

My fingers curl into his forearms as I withstand the brutal pounding.

“I need it, Harven. I can’t live without—without you.” I press our slick foreheads together. “I love you.”

The words slip out before I can stop them.

Saying ‘*I love you*’ during sex is a bit of a cliché, but when one is being fucked this good, the truth has a way of coming out. Harven stares at me with wild eyes. His thrusts turn uneven and even more punishing, as if he can cram more of himself deeper.

He won’t be satisfied until our bodies fuse into one.

Golden eyes assess me as if waiting for me to take it back. I let him see the truth in my eyes. I surrender to him—to us.

My heart is his to take.

With a snarl, he pulls me from the bed. I’m still impaled on his cock as he rotates us. My knees go on either side of his torso. Even at this angle, he still looms over me.

His cock grazes my G-spot and my vision blurs.

I try my best to canter my hips, but the size of him makes it hard. I take him as deep as I can, only managing half of his shaft before pressing up. My arms wrap around his neck. Harven cups my ass, guiding my movements to set our pace.

A tentacle slips between our bodies to play with my clit.

“I love you, Eve. I didn’t think it was possible. Love is not necessary for seafolk, but,” he swallows, “I’ve wanted you since I first saw you. I loved you the moment you opened your eyes and demanded to know what the fuck I was doing. My beautiful, fierce mate.”

Tears glide down my cheeks as my laugh turns watery.

“Isn’t it too fast for such a declaration?” I ask, pleasure pounding through me.

“Those are human concerns. Shed them.”

And I do.

Giving myself over to him, I work myself on his impressive length. Between his teasing suckers and the tentacle on my clit, the tingle in my

stomach returns with a vengeance.

This orgasm will destroy me.

“I’m close, my king.”

“Me too.”

He roughly squeezes my sore ass. With our peaks looming, I know just how to set my mate off.

“Give me more, my king. Every inch of you. Make me your queen.” My lips ghost over his. “And fuck a baby into me.”

Harven snarls like a wild animal.

A tentacle wraps around my middle to hold me aloft while he brutally powers into me from below. My breasts bounce in time as he slams himself deeper each time.

The sounds, the smells—everything—pushes me towards completion.

I hold on tight as he fucks me for all I’m worth. My teeth snap together as his tentacle suction to my clit. His hand spears into my hair and grips it tightly. The bite of pain undoes me.

Tossing my head back, my pussy locks tightly around his cock.

“Harven!” I scream until my voice is hoarse.

His teeth find my shoulder as he thrusts deep. Torrents of hot seed fill me in a rush. It bathes my inner walls.

I sob at the pleasure. My body twitches with aftershocks as Harven gives me a few shallow thrusts, ensuring all of his seed makes it into my womb.

Pulling out of me, his come slides down my inner thighs and onto the bed. He made a bigger mess of me than I had at the celebration. We both note it with a smile as he clutches me close.

I crave this part almost as much as his domination. The tenderness of his reverent touches makes my heart clench. The glowing in my chest dims as if satisfied we’ve finally given in.

The ever-present ache remains, a permanent reminder of my love for Harven.

Exhaustion weighs me down as I trail my fingers limply through his beard. Harven captures my hand and kisses it.

“Rest, mate. My cock already wants back inside you.”

Tentacles skim up my hips. The scarred one presses against my heart as I burrow into Harven’s chest. His racing heartbeat steadies me.

“Being mated to you for centuries won’t be so bad.”

“High praise.” He kisses my temple. “And what brought about this change of heart?”

I give him a sleepy smile.

“You’re really good at sex.”

Laughter booms from him as he clutches me close. I inhale his scent and absorb the warmth of his body beside mine.

We fit together perfectly.

“Sleep, my little mate. While I allow it.”

“So bossy,” I mumble.

“But you love me anyways?”

The wonder in his voice forces me to open one eye.

“I do,” I say. “You’re one lucky kraken.”

“Don’t I know it.”

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HARVEN

“H arven,” Eve pants. “Someone could see us.” Her nails press into my shoulders as I mercilessly slam her into the wall. Her seafoam-colored gown bunches around her waist. My deft hand pulled the small straps down to bear her delicious breasts.

Her nipples are hard and shiny from my mouth.

Eve’s tight pussy grips me like a fist. She is hot and wet and perfect. All mine. Her knees rest in the crook of my elbows as I hold her aloft by the ass. She whimpers, no doubt her flesh is still sore from the spanking she took last night.

I ram my cock as deep as it will go, giving her all of my without reprieve. Despite her protests, she doesn’t push me away. If anything, her sweet little cunt grips me tighter.

Three days. Three glorious days have passed since the celebration. Three days since I filled Eve with my seed and have spent every day since doing it again and again.

I can’t keep my hands off her. The need to fuck her senseless burns in my veins.

After our first time together, I woke her with my mouth before sinking my cock back inside her perfect body. We had spent the entire day wrapped around each other. Only breaking to sleep and eat.

The next day was much the same.

I had my kingly duties to attend to, but thoughts of her distracted me during every report. I smelt her on my fingers, and I had to have her again. Ending my meeting early, I found her painting in the library and took her roughly amongst the stacks.

My hand muffling her screams for more.

Tonight, we promised to be better and try to make it through a meal without falling into bed. We even invited my council to join us, but that was a mistake.

The moment she walked in, wearing her short dress and glowing from the pounding I gave her less than an hour ago, any thought of a civilized dinner was gone.

My council made an excuse to leave before I could snarl at them to get out. I dismissed the servants and closed in on Eve. My prey—my mate.

Now here she was taking my cock so well. Her beautiful face twists in pleasure. I capture her mouth and groan into it. She whimpers, her body tightening in the way that tells me she's close.

Eve takes every part of me. I was always a dominant lover, but with Eve it's something else. We don't have to fully sink into the roles every time I take her. She's been very obedient these past few times, but that need to defy me burns in her eyes.

I'll be there to correct her for the rest of her life. She craves my brutal possession and welcomes the darkest parts of me.

She loves me. I love her. Her confession had unmade me. Her heart is the best thing I've ever claimed.

It's more important—more vital—than my throne.

How will I manage being king with her here? My kingly duties have taken a hit in favor of fucking my mate. It's reckless to be distracted, with so many dangers still looming.

She isn't pregnant yet, but now that the castle knows I'm bedding her regularly, the rumblings have died down. Still, many seek to take her, and I will not be caught unaware. She is the most precious thing to me. If harm were to befall her, I would perish at her side.

In addition to my duties as king, other important conversations have been left to the wayside.

Namely, about my *Pearls* and what I shall do with them.

A letter from Nixie arrived for me while I was in Eve's room last night. My mate grew sad, even as I refused to open it. I was able to brighten her

mood by eating her pussy until she screamed, but this wasn't a topic we could avoid forever.

I had to do something about them. Nixie's letter, I'm sure, was another plea for me to return to them. This is the longest I've ever gone without their company.

Truthfully, the idea of seeking them out holds little appeal. Eve satisfies all of my carnal urges and then some. What's between us runs deeper than it ever did with my *Pearls*.

It's more than release. When I'm inside Eve, I can feel her soul.

My *Pearls* can never give me that.

Still, to do away with the tradition would be cause for alarm. Many in my court would see it as a weakness. With Eve being here, I'd hate to do anything that would bring more danger—

"Harven," Eve moans, pulling me from my thoughts. "We should stop."

The dream-like expression on her face tells me she doesn't mean it. This is all a game to Eve. One designed to snap my restraint.

If she wants me untamed, then so be it.

My hand loosely snaps around her throat.

"Stop? Your greedy pussy wouldn't let me out even if I tried."

"But we're in public," she whimpers. "Anyone could—"

"Do you think an audience would keep me from fucking you? They can watch me claim you. Maybe once they see the pleasure I bring you—see my seed dripping down your thighs—they won't covet you the way they do."

The mere mention of the traitors makes me fuck her harder.

Eve's breasts bounce as my hips slam off her backside. My tentacles trail along her chest, sucking her sweet skin. Her blue eyes roll back as I punch deep, tickling the spot inside her that makes her wild.

Eve carries my scent, but her womb remains empty.

I'll need to keep fucking her until my child takes hold. Her transformation will be complete. She won't be as fragile as she is in her human form.

"No one is taking me from you, my mate. I'm yours."

Mate. I love when she calls me that. I love her so much it overwhelms me.

"Mine."

My tentacle glides between our bodies. Finding her clit, it roughly sucks on the greedy bud. Eve moans low, head falling back against the wall. Her hips seize as her nails scrape my shoulders.

“Come on my cock. Let me fill your pussy again.”

Her cunt clamps down on me. I empty into her waiting depths, loving the way her inner muscles milk me dry. As if they know where my seed needs to go.

I give her every drop, grinning as I slip out and watch it splatter on the marble floor.

I lower Eve onto trembling knees, keeping an arm around her for support. I take her lips, savoring the sweet taste of her mouth with relish.

“I needed that.”

Eve rolls her eyes as we make our way back to the table. Settling her atop my lap, she stirs her cold stew. She dismisses my offer to warm it up and bites into a piece of pale meat.

“You were very busy today. Didn’t even seek me out midday like usual. No wonder you were wound so tight,” she says with mock admonishment. “Needing to fuck me before and during dinner is a bit much. Even for you, my king.”

“Don’t forget about after,” I say. “I’m fucking you after dinner as well.”

“Incorrigible. I’ll never walk without discomfort again.”

My tentacles splay around her. The scarred one snuggles against her lap.

“Being king has never felt like more of a burden when I can’t spend my days how I want. With you. You’re all I can think about, Eve.”

Her smile is more glorious than a deep-sea pearl. Once she’s done with her stew, she leans into my chest. Her fingers shift through my beard and trace over my muscles.

My arms curl around her, the restlessness in me settling.

“What do you want to do tonight, my mate?” I kiss her temple. “I’ve been greedy, and our dates have suffered because of it. I want us to spend real time together.”

She beams.

“You spoil me, Harven.”

“I’m just giving you what my mate deserves.” My eyes snag on a school of fish swimming past the window. The distorted buildings in the back spark an idea. “How would you feel about going into the city?”

“Leave the castle?” she asks. “Isn’t that dangerous for me?”

“My magic can protect you. It’ll keep you in a bubble that will ensure you can breathe and stay warm. We can go to the marketplace. You’ll see what my world has to offer. The castle is great, but there’s much more beyond these walls.”

“I’d love to go there, Harven. Thank you.”

My lips find her ear.

“You’re very agreeable after you’ve come.” She smacks at my chest, pink rising to the surface of her cheeks. “Why don’t we head there—”

The doors slam against the wall as a disheveled sharkin guard comes in. His gills flex as he sucks down air. The hand around his trident trembles.

“Your Majesty, forgive the intrusion.” He bows low at the waist, keeping his eyes off of Eve. Good. “A matter of grave importance requires your attention. Councilman Lord Bane is awaiting a private audience in your study, King Harven.”

Anger burns through me at the intrusion. I’ve given enough of myself today, and they still want more.

Bane is one of my loyalists. He’s proven to be a true ally. If he says this matter is important—

“Go,” Eve says, kissing me softly. “Our date can wait.”

“This won’t take long,” I vow, settling her on my chair before departing with the guard.

Bane is awaiting me at my desk. His blue robes are trimmed in a silver thread that matches the merman’s waist-length hair. The teal scales of his tail glimmer in the low light.

His face is grave as I approach.

“My king, thank you for seeing me. I’ve uncovered correspondence that I thought was best given to you directly.”

Crossing my arms, I incline my head.

“Tell me.”

“Our spies raided a sharkin lair. We discovered a series of letters stored within the walls. They seemed innocuous at first, but upon further inspection, I think you’ll want to read them.”

From his pocket, he produces a stack of coral slates. Their pale pink surfaces have been etched with a fine instrument.

Handing them over to me, I read the sprawling text.

My brows lift. They are love letters. There must be something I’m missing—a code I’m not understanding—as I read the redundant messages.

The evening comes to the garden early, my love. Find it there and then come to my chambers for your reward.

The evening glows brightest through the fourth window on the left. Swim into its glow and snuff it out once I give word. Your bravery shall be rewarded when the night finally falls.

The king loves the evening most of all, but he forgets that his stars need attention. When he comes, my love, be ready.

They are all nonsense. One word remains a constant. The mention of evening. It's the only thing connecting the letters. It doesn't make any sense how it's being used.

The evening comes to the garden, the evening glows the brightest—the king loves the evening most of all. Evening, evening, eve—Eve.

Eve.

My blood runs cold. The fourth window on the left. That's Eve's window. This references her painting in the garden. The final message is a warning—an order to strike while I'm distracted.

My stomach feels hollow. The plates crumble beneath my palms. Red mist clouds my vision.

"Who wrote these?"

Bane shakes his head.

"We don't know, my king. Nor do we know who they are being written to. Sharkins live in large colonies inside their lair. Upwards of fifty were coming and going. The one we caught didn't know, even under the most astute torture."

"Someone wants my Eve. Plotting to steal her away."

Bane runs a trembling hand down his face. His tail flicks in agitation.

"That was my understanding as well. These letters are about her." He blows out a breath. "It's clear they are working with someone in the castle. We will remain vigilant, my king. I swear it."

"I want guards stationed around her room at all times. Inside and outside. Trusted ones only. Patrols will be stepped up immediately."

"Of course, my king."

I roll my neck. The peace that being inside Eve brought me is gone. Lethal rage is all that remains. This plot against her life is more overt than the others.

With the conspirator inside the castle, I will need to take more precautions. Eve will hate the extra security, but I'll make her understand.

Her safety is paramount.

“Decipher these messages, Bane. There has to be a clue as to who wrote this.” My tentacles coil. “I will see personally to their slaughter.”

“My king.”

Bane bows as I depart the study. I fall against the wall and scrub a shaking hand down my face. I need to suck the rage back in lest I scare Eve.

The last thing I want is for her to worry. I hate keeping her in the dark, but it’s for the best. Whoever is plotting to come after her needs to think we aren’t on to them. The additional guards aren’t surprising since I’ve started bedding her.

That won’t raise any additional suspicions.

More than that, I don’t want Eve to carry this burden. Her sole focus should be on getting pregnant and letting me love her. The stress could hinder her ability to conceive.

I will deal with this threat swiftly.

If blood is the price of keeping Eve safe, I will gladly pay it. A thousand times over.

EVE

Picking at my cold stew, I eagerly await Harven's return. Being away from him causes physical pain. I know he has responsibilities to the court, but I hated that he couldn't seek me out today. I'm hoping that once I'm pregnant and fully realized as his queen, he'll begin including me in his work.

I'd rather spend my days by his side than ticking down the minutes until I see him again.

We've entered into a mating frenzy. It's a mutual need we both indulge all the time. One minute in each other's presence and we're consumed by the need to fuck.

I'm not pregnant, but it's not for lack of trying. I don't think I've ever had this much sex in my life.

When it's as good as it is with Harven, the tenderness when I walk is no hardship. I can still feel the remnants of his seed on my thighs. I'd gladly welcome him back into my body the moment he steps through the door.

The two of us have figured out our sex life, but there are other things we haven't had the chance to discuss. We've been too consumed with being in love to risk ruining it with tough conversations.

They are necessary ones, though.

I want to have them before I get pregnant, so that the matter can be settled. I've realized I won't stay with Harven if he sees his *Pearls* after I'm

pregnant. Maybe my opinion on them will change in fifty years, but right now I don't want him seeking them out.

My mood darkens along with the room.

No matter how much I love him, I won't be able to withstand him choosing another's bed over mine. Once I'm pregnant, my body will change, and the thought of him not by my side will be too great for me to bear. I'll think the worst. I know myself.

I won't raise my child in that environment.

I'll let Harven take time and wrap up the loose ends—get fucking them out of his system if he has to—but I won't accept them as part of his life as king. If he fights me on this, I don't know what I'll do.

The bliss we've been living in will stop.

This isn't something I can waver on. It goes beyond a difference in customs.

Why couldn't I have fallen in love with a creature who mated with one partner for life and lost sexual interest in any other? That's what I thought being mates meant.

Harven desires me—he loves me—but sometimes I wonder if what I feel is different. If there are limits to what he can offer me emotionally.

How can he snarl at the guards who look at me for too long, but expect me to be okay with him fucking other people?

A familiar ache blooms at my temple. I'll work myself up if I keep thinking about it. I need to talk to Harven before uncertainty threatens to spoil our love.

The room chills, and it has nothing to do with my sour mood.

A dark cloud spreads along the floor. I shiver in my chair.

A figure emerges from the smoke. Oily black hair seeps over her bony shoulders. Her tattered white dress hangs limply, brushing her clawed toes. Eyes the color of a midnight sky bore into mine.

Fear grips my heart. I should call for Harven. I should—

“Hello, Eve,” the female purrs.

Her serpentine movements unsettle me. Her magic smells like fire and rotting wood. There's something otherworldly about her, and that says a lot given the creatures I live with.

She approaches in measured steps.

“Don't be afraid. I mean you no harm. I've been waiting a long time to speak with you.”

That's when it clicks.

"Are you the Sea Witch?"

Her pale lips pull apart, revealing broken, black teeth.

"Call me, Gyll."

"Why have you come?" I ask, relaxing if only by a fraction.

She lowers herself into the chair beside me. Her clawed hands trace the table's edge. Despite her outward appearance, there is a softness to her.

Hyra's earlier words float back to me. She is neither good nor evil. She just is.

"To check in on you. You've done remarkably well. Captured the king's heart and gave him yours in return." She inhales deeply. The thin gills at her neck flex. "I can smell the depths of your love. Good. You'll need it for the final trial."

"What trial?"

Her smile is as indulgent as it is sharp.

"I can't tell you, my child. It would spoil all my careful planning."

Gyll snatches Harven's plate. She slices into it with her fingers. I try not to wretch at the sound of her consuming bone and scales along with the meat.

"Why did you curse Harven and not his father directly? Can you at least tell me that?"

The Sea Witch fishes a bone fragment from her teeth. She downs my glass of sea-wine and sighs.

"I didn't curse him. I cursed his bloodline. His father had grown too powerful—too callous. He threatened the ocean's order. It was up to me to reestablish balance. If his sons had more sons, the cruelty in their bloodline would've spilled onto the land. Throwing our world and yours into chaos."

Gyll shrugs as if we are talking about the possibility of rain. I suppose for a witch, curses and retributions are a mundane topic.

"I wanted Harven to secure the throne," she adds. "He was kinder than his brothers. Softer. He would be a noble king if others didn't threaten him. If he had the power to take them all down. Power I bestowed on him when he was tucked inside his mother's womb."

The Sea Witch gestures around the room.

"I see all, my child. Past, present, future. It is up to me to act. And act I did. I forced him to eradicate the cruelty from his bloodline for the good of us all. For your sake. I gave him a lover's heart as much as a warrior's

strength. But good doesn't come without evil. My aid in giving him such power came at a price."

"The curse," I breathe.

"Precisely. It was to keep the order. The power Harven wields had to be contained to a mate. A mate he would love. He would never grant another his child, even when the curse breaks and he's free to. He loves you too much."

Her words warm me, but not enough to lower my guard. If Harven can get others pregnant, then we need to talk about his *Pearls* immediately.

"The curse breaks when I'm pregnant?"

Gyll's eyes drift towards my stomach. A soft smile curves her lips.

"When you are pregnant, yes. The babe in your womb will fortify you. Its magic will change you. Neither human nor seafolk. Something else. Something wonderful."

"But not immortal like the king."

"No."

The pit in my stomach yawns open. It's another conversation our rampant fucking has made me lose sight of.

Harven can live for a thousand years. Longer.

I'll inherit the lifespan of the other seafolk, but that's a blip for him. My soul won't be reincarnated.

When I die, will he choose to come with me? Or will he forget me and turn towards another?

I shake myself from my insecure thoughts. Without speaking to Harven, I can't just assume what his answer will be. Maybe he'll surprise me. I can only hope.

"Sounds like a magical pregnancy," I offer.

"It will be." The Sea Witch's cold hand encircles my wrist. "Stay alert, Eve. Listen to your heart. Trust it. Trust the king."

She releases me and quickly munches through the rest of the fish. Swallowing soundly, she rises with fluid grace.

"We will see each other again very soon."

That's all the goodbye she offers before disappearing into a plume of smoke. My mind races with all that I've just learned.

I don't have time to sort it all as the doors fly open and Harven walks in. He looks haunted.

The blue-green of his skin is pale. A fine sheen of sweat beads along his brow. I rush over and take his hand.

I need to feel him to chase away Gyll's lingering warning.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

Harven looks around the room. His eyes snag on the devoured fish and the traces of black smoke on the tiles. Tentacles skim over me as if inspecting for injury.

"The Sea Witch was here."

His hand tightens on mine.

"What did she say to you?"

"Vague riddles. Told me to listen to my heart and prepare for a final trial. Whatever that means."

Harven envelops me in his strong arms. Tentacles rub soothing circles along my back.

"I will protect you, Eve. No matter what."

I smile into his chest.

"Would you be opposed to postponing our date?" My tongue darts out to lick his nipple. "I suddenly have the overwhelming urge to be alone with my mate in bed."

Harven chuckles, the tension in his body ebbing away. Curling me into his arms, he turns towards the hall.

"As you wish."

HARVEN

I t's been a week and Eve still isn't pregnant.

Nor was I any closer to discovering who was responsible for threatening her life. The former was more palatable.

Eve had explained more about the medicine she took and how it would linger in the body. Most likely she'd have to get her period for us to know when she was able to conceive.

I didn't like waiting. The longer she was without my heir, the more fragile her human body seemed.

With threats abounding, I need her to be strong.

I've had countless sharkin, sirens, merfolk—all manner of seafolk—executed for their parts in the plots connected to that sharkin lair housing the letters. Each time I find the end of a traitorous web, another emerges.

The network of conspirators is great, but not stronger than my need to protect Eve.

The threats to her life have taken a toll on me. I've been working more, sequestered away in my study. I want nothing more than to be with Eve, but a part of me doesn't feel worthy.

Not when her enemies are all around.

She picked up on my mood and, in turn, has grown more reserved. She is vibrant when we finally fall into bed together.

Yet, as each morning comes and I make to leave her, I can see the despair wearing her down bit by bit.

It's my fault she's feeling this way. If I were a worthy mate, I'd have found out who was behind it all. This sadness she feels is surely hampering her ability to get pregnant. I've failed my mate in many ways.

Taking her to the market tonight had helped.

She giggled over the bubble I used to transport her, the first real sign of her joy in a while. I held her close as we looked over the sparkling stalls. All manner of jewels were on display, along with bolts of glittering fabric. I bought whatever her fingers landed on.

I watch as the servants load her new dresses into the wardrobe.

Boxes of diamond necklaces and sapphire bracelets sit beside her stacks of tinned paints on the desk. I dry the moisture from my hair with one of her towels.

The sea had done me good too. I could use my gills to breathe deeply for the first time.

When Eve transforms, I wonder if she'll have them. It would make venturing into the city easier.

Turning from the small pool along her window we used to enter her room, Eve's blue eyes sparkle up at me. I don't like the dark circles under them. Or the green hue to her skin.

She could never be anything other than beautiful, but she doesn't look well.

"Thank you," she sighs, wrapping her arms around my middle. "The market was wonderful. You got me far too many things."

I hold her close. Her touch soothes some of the ever-present restlessness within me. Her rapid heartbeat gives me strength.

I'll need all the power I can get for this conversation.

The market had been a way to soften her, and it seemed to work. She was going to hate what I had to do.

With the threat to her life looming, I couldn't afford to let the public know how important she was to me. More so, I couldn't let the spy within the castle learn how much power she wielded.

Dismissing my *Pearls* would do that.

Breaking with tradition would inspire even more of my court to question my ability to rule. Giving such power to a human would make me a fool in their eyes.

If the spy got word of my dismissal of the *Pearls*, they could act rashly. It wasn't a flawless plan. I've mired in so much unrest that I don't even

know if it's logical.

At my council's behest, I had to keep up appearances.

I didn't want to see the *Pearls*. All I want is Eve.

For her safety, I'll risk her wrath. Even if she hates me, I'll do what I must to protect her.

Taking her hips, I release a shuddering breath.

"What is it?" she asks.

Licking my lips, I trace the delicate bones beneath my fingers.

"My *Pearls*." My stomach turns. "I've agreed to see them tonight."

I had sent the note shortly before we set off for the market so Seera, Bly and Nixie could prepare.

When I got to their room, I wasn't certain what would happen. I didn't have the carnal appetite they were used to. Eve satisfies me, even when I'm not inside her.

My mate flinches as if I've struck her.

She stumbles back in a daze. My tentacles reach for her, but she puts more distance between us. The brightness in her eyes dims to a dull blue.

"You haven't been feeling well." It's a poor excuse. A half-hearted attempt to make her understand without revealing too much. "I must see them, or people will talk. My absence from their chambers has already been noted. They don't mean anything to me, Eve."

"But you would seek them out over me?"

I make a grab for her. I loathe how she's looking at me.

Like I'm a stranger, not the male she loves.

"It's not like that. Eve—"

She reaches for the blanket at the foot of her bed. Wrapping herself in it, I snarl as she conceals her body. Eve sinks onto the bed as far away from me as possible.

Moisture beads in her eyes, and it shatters my heart.

Her sickness has only made her mood worse. She said it was due to her incoming cycle. Once it came, at least we'd know when she was most fertile.

Right now, it doesn't look like she'll let me touch her anytime soon.

Rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand, her face goes blank. There's no fire—no anger that I love so much. There's nothing.

It feels as if my insides have been hollowed out.

“I understand. You are king.” Her voice is a broken whisper. “I must be a disappointment to you.”

I stalk to her side. My tentacles trail over her feet, but she tucks them away. It would be less painful if she tore my heart out.

At least she understands why I have to do this, but to think it’s because I’m unhappy with her—

“How can you say that, Eve?”

“You blame me for not being pregnant. It’s why you’ve been so removed. I told you it could take time. I’m trying my *best*.”

Her voice breaks on the last word.

“Eve,” I breathe, wrapping her in my arms.

She is tense, but she doesn’t fight me.

I breathe in her scent. Her head fits perfectly to the center of my chest.

“I’m not disappointed. Far from it, my mate. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Eve blinks her large eyes up at me.

“But you’ve been keeping something from me.”

I couldn’t admit to it. Not yet. Once I had the situation in hand, I’d reveal everything.

I squeeze her tightly, allowing my tentacles to stroke her gorgeous body.

“I have to see them, Eve.” She steps back. “Let me get this over with, and I’ll come back to you—”

“No.”

“No?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she turns away.

“Enjoy your evening with them, my king. I shall sleep alone tonight.”

I lift my hand, but I pull it back as she walks towards the bed. I don’t have the right to touch her. I understand her refusal even as it feels like my tentacles are being sliced off.

She curls into a ball at the center of her massive bed.

How can I do this to her? I swore to never hurt her, and yet here she is miserable. I wanted her to be happy.

She gave me her heart, and I squandered it.

Once the threats to her are eradicated, things will change. I have to pray to the gods she’ll still love me by the time the threats are neutralized. Earning her love and losing it would be a fate worse than death.

I cross to the door and pause with my palm on the handle.

“I’ll have Leri bring you tea for your stomach.”

She’s nothing as I step out into the hall.

Eve has built a wall around herself. One too strong for me to climb. It’s agony to feel the space she’s put between us.

I have to do this, and yet it feels so wrong. Stopping in my study, I down two goblets of sea-wine before heading towards the opposite wing of the castle.

The pain in my chest plagues me all the way to the room with the crimson door. A gold-plated pearl rests at the center.

The thick scent of jasmine and seawater filters from beneath the door.

My stomach lurches as I push the door open.

Nixie is there immediately. Her teasing smile is sharp around the edges. A short, thin skirt is her only covering. Seera and Bly are dressed modestly by comparison. I note the surprise in their eyes and the predatory gleam in Nixie’s.

“My king,” Nixie purrs, guiding me into the room by my belt. “It’s been too long.”



EVE

SOBS WRECK me as I wail into my pillow.

I don’t know how I managed to hold it together until Harven left. I felt like dying when he told me his plans to see his *Pearls*. It’s my fault we hadn’t talked about them since the Sea Witch visited.

I hadn’t felt comfortable enough.

When he came back to me, something was off. He’s been distant—busier than usual.

He’s present when we’re fucking, but afterward, he barely makes time for me. The trip to the market was the most we’d been together outside of bed in a week.

Old insecurities raged within me.

He had gotten what he wanted. Was I no longer as interesting? Had he been seeing his *Pearls* the whole time and was only now coming clean?

Not being pregnant wasn't helping the situation. Harven's eagerness for the child had first been about the heir, but his desire had taken on a new intensity.

He kept reminding me how fragile I was until my final transformation. My nausea, which usually signaled the beginning of my cycle, hadn't helped.

Every morning I woke up retching. Harven had asked me what was wrong as he held my hair back, and I had to tell him.

I wasn't pregnant. It would take more time. I thought he understood that. He said he did—reaffirmed it to me just now—but I'm not sure. Love means something different to the seafolk.

My stomach rolls as I think about him with them.

Does he touch them as he does to me? Does he whisper the same teases and hold them afterward? Do they know how to make him come harder than I can?

They've had decades of practice together.

The thought of another touching me is repulsive.

I was a fool for falling so hard and fast for someone who can't reciprocate the kind of devotion I'm looking for. When we finally discuss giving up on them, he won't agree. I'll be forced to decide.

What will I do? Leave?

It's not that simple. I was kidding myself when I thought I could convince him I was enough. If I had gotten pregnant immediately, maybe things would be different. He loves me now, but what will that love be like in twenty years? Fifty. A hundred.

Can he ever love me as I do him?

Yes, a small voice whispers. *Don't give in to your doubts. Trust the king.*

I snarl at it to let me wallow. How can I not have doubts?

My mate left me when I'm sick to go be with his lovers. The need to vomit pounds again through me. The force of my cries is making me sicker.

My small pool laps against the sides with intensity. It's the only other sound besides my sobs.

Without Harven beside me, my bed feels impossibly large and empty. Cold. I miss him.

I'm angry with him, but that doesn't change the fact that I want him with me. I can't let him, not tonight.

He won't sleep beside me after fucking someone else. I couldn't stomach it.

How had all of this soured so fast? Whatever that councilman, Lord Bane, said to him during our dinner turned him against me. I wonder what cruel thoughts he shared to have Harven rethinking his devotion.

Does the court believe the gods have chosen poorly? Is my empty womb proof of their disdain? Will the seafolk ever accept a human as—

A sharp blade presses against my throat.

The cold metal bites into my skin. My sobs end in a hiccup as a large hand grips my shoulder.

"Don't make a fucking sound," a gruff voice spits in my ear.

Whimpering, I slowly rise to my feet. The dagger remains at my throat. With one slash, I'll be dead. The male turns me slowly.

I've never seen this sharkin before.

His gray skin is decorated with black veins. The fin on his back is scarred and missing chunks as if bitten off. Scars adorn most of his body. He's not as powerfully built as Harven, but his muscles are deadly enough. Especially against someone like me.

Madness burns in his eyes. His movements are jerky as he peers around the room.

I scream in my head and will it towards Harven. I beg him to return to me, but I know it's foolish. No one is coming to save me.

Not unless I can alert them before he slices me open.

The sharkin trails the tip of the blade down my chest. My blanket is left on the bed, leaving me clad in only my thin dress. When Harven is with me, I feel safe wearing my outfits. Being alone with this male makes my stomach feel hollow.

He presses the blade between my breasts and licks his dark gray lips.

"Hello, human," he murmurs. "You are very pretty. The others will enjoy breeding you."

I'm a fool for doing it. If I had more time to think, I would've devised a smarter plan. My instinct kicks in as he slices the top inch of my dress.

A scream tears from my lungs. I only manage to yell for a second before he grips the back of my head.

"Bitch," he spits, slamming me forward into the stone pillar.

Darkness engulfs me.

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HARVEN

Something is very wrong.

The warmth in my chest I've always associated with Eve has grown cold. Perhaps that kindness has been taken away from me for coming to see my *Pearls*.

They surround the room, undulating suggestively to some silent song. Every time Nixie's hands graze me, I fight the urge to vomit.

Bly and Seera keep their distance. They see more than they'd ever admit.

Nixie saunters over to me in a twirl. She falls onto the floor near my tentacles. They pull back from her, as disgusted by her touch as I am.

The siren is not perturbed. She merely gives a happy shimmy of her shoulders, making her breasts bounce.

"My king," she whines. "You're wearing far too many clothes."

Her wandering hand strays to my belt, but I snatch it before it gets far. My lips curl as I shove her away. Surprise twists her features into anger before another sickly sweet smile consumes her face.

She twists away with fluid grace.

What am I doing here? Had I really meant to fuck them to keep with tradition? I'm a damn fool. This was wrong. So incredibly wrong I don't have the words for it.

I don't want to be here. I don't want them.

The only thing I'll ever want for the rest of my life is Eve. I love her. I gave her my wretched heart and bound our souls together. When she transforms into her final form, I planned to tell her that when she dies, so will I.

I can't imagine life without her. I hate being away from her. I couldn't draw breath knowing she was in the afterlife.

Wherever she goes, I will go. Forever.

She's more important than anything. How many times did I tell her that, only for me to come here tonight when she's been sick? I've kept her in the dark like a fool. It made her think I didn't want her, and coming here only made those feelings worse.

I've failed her spectacularly. I have to make this right.

Eve is kind and brave. She let me come here, even though she hated the practice. I'd never show that kind of understanding if she sought out another. I've been selfish.

The truth is that if Eve ever did want to leave my bed, I wouldn't let her. I'd bind her to it every time she thought about running until she was so thoroughly pleased she'd agree to anything.

Her place is at my side just as mine is beside her.

There will never be anyone else for either of us. If she cast me from her bed, I'd rather sleep on her floor than in someone else's.

I love her.

My blood burns with the desire to have her. To hear her laugh and listen to stories of her past. She's seen into the depths of my rotten soul and loved me afterward.

I betrayed her tonight. I have to make this right.

My tentacles sag with relief. I push up on them as the *Pearls* stop their movements.

Nixie's eyes brighten.

"Finally come to join us, my king? Perhaps you'd like my ass to—"

"No." My word cuts through the room like a blade. "The practice of the *King's Pearls* ends with me. You are all dismissed. A royal wage will be paid to you. Accommodations will be made. Tomorrow you will be formally escorted from the palace."

Bly and Seera glance at each other. Their shock turns to delight. I don't care enough to study it further.

Not as Nixie stomps her foot.

“What!” she shrieks, charging towards me. “You can’t do this—not for that human whore who can’t even—”

I collar her throat.

Lifting her off her feet, she claws at my hand. I squeeze tightly until her pulse flutters weakly against my palm.

I snarl into her face. My voice drips with deadly menace.

“Never disrespect my mate again.” I toss her to the floor. She gasps and clutches at her throat, eyes seething. “If you value your life, Nixie, I better never see you again.”

I turn from the three of them, but before I can reach the door, it bursts open. A frantic Leri makes my hackles rise.

“My king,” she pants. “Come quick. It’s Eve. She’s gone.”

“Gone?”

My heart stumbles in my chest. Pushing into the hall, the nymph races alongside me.

“I went to deliver her tea as you asked, and she wasn’t in her room.” Leri turns a sickly green. “There was blood, my king.”

Anger roars in my head. Denial punches through my gut.

No, no, no. This couldn’t be happening.

I pray that Leri is mistaken and that Eve will be waiting for me on her bed just as I left her. I’ll confess everything to her as soon as she’s back in my arms.

I arrive at Eve’s room at record speed.

I break down the door and take in her desolate room. The blanket she was wrapped in is still on the bed. Nothing seems missing. My hope that she’d moved to a different room for the night dissipates.

My breath catches at the crimson splatter on the marble pillar. A red trail leads to the entry pool at her window. I should’ve sealed it off. I didn’t think anyone would try to gain entrance with the additional patrols.

Gods, I’m such a fool.

Whoever made my mate bleed will be treated to a fate worse than death.

A flurry of movement comes through at the door. Five of my royal guards pour in wearing their sapphire armor. The leader catches his breath while bowing.

“My king, the guards stationed outside your mate’s room have been slaughtered. It had to have been multiple assailants.”

Rage and fear, unlike anything I’ve ever known, consume me.

I hold tightly to the fleeting warmth of our bond as I shuck my crown and dive into the water. My guards know to follow.

I catch the scent of her blood and follow it through the murky depths. No matter what happens, I will find her.

Hold on for me, Eve. I will down the bond. I'm coming for you.

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EVE

The cold is everywhere.

Each breath is like swallowing knives. The pain in my head makes my stomach roll. My limbs are numb. Icy water surrounds me as I'm pulled deeper into the unknown.

A hand grips my arm like an iron band.

I force my eyes open. Dark water rushes past. My head is contained in a small bubble, like the one Harven had put in early today. It had encased my entire body. The sharkin who's taken me clearly didn't know I needed to be fully covered.

Being exposed to the open ocean is torture. This is how I'm going to die.

My skin is a disheartening shade of blue. My frozen muscles are hard to move. I pour all my will into it and force myself to fight. To thrash and kick at my captor. I owe it to myself to go down swinging.

It's of no use. He overpowers me with ease, snarling into my face.

The fight leaves me as quickly as it came.

The cold is slowing my body. I can feel my dwindling heartbeat. The blood in my veins is sluggish, unable to rush to my numb extremities.

The pain in my chest worsens. I latch onto it lovingly. It's the last piece of Harven I have.

The thought of him makes me glow. White light spills over my skin. I think I'm hallucinating, but the sharkin pauses.

I don't get to consider what any of this means as a tentacle wraps around my middle. The scarred tip beams up at me. Despite my exhaustion, I manage a smile.

Two royal guards swim up beside us and shackle the sharkin.

The tentacle winds me back until I connect with a familiar warm chest. I can't lift my hands. My body screams to get closer to his heat, but I can't move. I feel my life slipping away in a cold trickle.

Eve, the sound rattles against my mind.

It's how we spoke at the market. Underwater communication was fascinating. Too bad I won't be around to experience it again.

Stay with me, Eve. I've got you.

H—harven. S—so cold.

I know, my mate. I know. Stay with me. Stay awake. We'll be home soon.

The need to obey him swims in my veins, but it's too late. Nothing can stop this. I have to make peace with it while I can.

In the end, I found my perfect match. My Kraken King. My soulmate. I just wish we had more time.

You're my home, Harven.

Our fight seems pointless in the face of death.

Summoning my last strength, I brush my fingers against his stomach.

I love you, Eve. Listen to me. Keep your fucking eyes open. Eve—

The darkness consumes me one last time.

HARVEN

My magic glows over Eve's concerningly blue skin. Lying atop my bed, I pour every ounce of my will into her. I send it down our bond. I blast the deepest recesses of my primal magic over her. Desperately hoping it's enough to wake her.

I can feel her hovering here, clinging to my soul as if it were a tether in the open ocean. I will not let her go.

Her arms rest limply at her sides. The gash on her head enrages me. I channel the anger into my power, letting more flow.

Eve's shallow breathing turns irregular.

"Eve!" I scream. "Eve! Listen to me, my mate. Come back to me. Wake up. Please. *Please!*"

She remains still. There's movement at my back.

I've broken with all traditions today as Hyra and other trusted members of court fill my room. Healers stand by, having tried their best to warm her. Their attempts hadn't worked.

My great and terrible magic was enough to kill my enemies. Can't it be enough to save my mate?

I clutch her cold hand and kiss her palm.

Lord Bane crouches below me. Pain creases his face as he touches my shoulder.

"I understand now isn't the time, but I wanted you to know the sharkin talked. We know who's been feeding him information."

“Hold them in the cell until—until—”

I couldn't say it. I wouldn't leave Eve until she woke up or unless she—

“Understood, my king.”

Bane rises and joins the others.

If she dies, I will last in his world only so long as to torture the ones who plotted this. They will beg for death. I won't grant it. Not until they've suffered as I have for losing her.

If she is gone, I will be too. It can't all be for nothing. Centuries of death and fighting to only have my mate for two weeks.

“Eve,” I kiss her hand again, pleading. “My love, wake up. I need you.”

Surprised whispers sound off behind me.

I don't care if they know I love her. I'll never deny the fact again. If she pulls through, there will be no question about who I belong to. I will proclaim our love from the castle's highest towers.

Word of it will spread into the city and the settlements beyond.

Murmurs quickly turn to gasps as black clouds fill the room. I snarl at the figure who emerges beside me. Her pale lips lift as if she's happy to see me.

The sadistic witch. This is her fault.

“How dare you give me a mate only for death to snatch her away?” I demand.

Gyll's smile turns indulgent. She waves a hand over Eve.

“Calm yourself. She's not dead. Yet.” Her eyes turn sharp. “Nor is the child.”

My whole body goes still. The roaring in my ears is deafening. I look towards the flat planes of Eve's stomach.

Gyll throws her head back and cackles.

“How else do you think she survived in the water so long? She's no longer human. Not seafolk, either. She just is.” She traces a claw down Eve's arm. “But she's not free of death's grip just yet.”

“Save her,” I beg. “I'll give you anything. Please—”

“You've been a good king, Harven. I want nothing from you, and you certainly don't want to owe me.” I couldn't argue with that, but still. Her gaze gentles. “You can heal her.”

“How?”

Gyll places a slick palm over my racing heart. My magic sings in answer.

“By giving her half your power. I bestowed this magic on you before you were born. I knew you’d need to be powerful to take the throne. You would’ve done it even without my help. I gave it to you for this reason.” Her nails bite into my skin. “Give her your heart. Cleave it in two and place half inside her. Bind her with your power and share your immortality. Weave your lives together and never know a moment apart.”

From the depths of my chest, Gyll pulls an orb of golden light. It swirls like a whirlpool of glittering starlight. Using her deadly claws, she splits it in half. Pain lacerates my body. My power dwindles as I weaken.

The Sea Witch shoves half back into my chest. With my strength restored, she hands me the other half of the sphere.

“Be happy, King Harven. Love her well.”

Gripping my life force, I shove it into Eve’s chest. Amber light envelopes her skin. The blue is cleared away. Her tan skin sparkles, as does her hair.

Pink spots bloom on her cheeks. Her breasts rise and fall with her even breaths.

Our bond snaps tight. Her soul brushes against mine. I feel our hearts beating as one. Sunshine and citrus fill the air. She is in my blood, my lungs. Everywhere.

One soul in two bodies. The mating bond becomes iron.

Unbreakable.

Everlasting.

EVE

Golden light pours into my eyes.
I feel on fire. Warmth radiates from my chest down my arms and legs. My senses are heightened. I can smell everything. Including the saltwater on the pillow beside me.

I open an eye and realize I'm not in my room. The sheets are different, and so is the bed. It's double the size of the one back in my room.

The window is on the wrong side. It's a sprawling cavern filled with silver furniture and overlapping tridents on the wall.

A comforting arm rests hotly on my hip. Harven's handsome face is relaxed in sleep.

Memories of the previous night come rushing in. The sharkin. The water. I felt like I had died.

Maybe I did, but Harven had saved me in time. Just as he always did.

I ghost my fingers over his cheek. Dark lashes flutter. His arm around me tightens as he comes awake.

"Eve," he gasps, curling me into him.

We are both naked. I fit my body along his. Tentacles rove over my skin and lock me close. I breathe in his sandalwood and musk. Our heartbeats pound in sync. It's like I can physically feel his heart against mine.

How strange.

"What happened?" I ask, not entirely sure I wish to know.

"I got you back, Eve. I'm so fucking sorry I never should've left you."

“I don’t understand. Who was—”

“The reason for my distance was because of a plot Lord Bane had helped uncover. We discovered correspondence between a sharkin and someone working in the castle who had been keeping an eye on you.” His hands trace along my spine. “They plotted to abduct you from the palace. I hadn’t wanted you to worry—confident I could crush the threat immediately. I was a fool, blinded by many things. I increased security, but it didn’t matter because whoever the sharkin was working with knew when and where to strike. Knew I wouldn’t be with you last night.”

My blood runs cold.

“How?”

“Because it was Nixie. She orchestrated the entire thing.”

“Nixie?”

The female didn’t like me, but to go to such lengths. I wouldn’t have suspected her either. I thought she’d want to embarrass me—take Harven from me—not see me dead.

“My dismissal of the *Pearls* last night, I’m sure, solidified her choice in wanting you gone. The fool probably thought with you gone, I’d take her as my queen.”

The breath stills in my lungs. I replay his words, sure I hadn’t heard them correctly.

“You what?”

Harven rises into a sitting position. He drags me onto his lap and cups my cheeks.

I peer into the depths of his soul.

“I love you, Eve,” he says. “I don’t want anyone but you. If that makes me weak in the eyes of the court, so be it. You are my heart and soul—the only mother of my children. We are bound, you and I. For eternity. We will never be apart. Half my heart rests inside your chest. It was the only way to save you.”

His hand drifts to my stomach, stroking it with reverence.

“Our child kept you alive long enough for me to reach you.”

“Our child?” I gasp.

I place my hand over his. The king’s smile is breathtaking.

Harven tickles my cheek with his nose.

“The Sea Witch confirmed it, as did the healers while you were asleep.”

It made sense.

I had believed my nausea to be a part of my cycle, but looking back, it was definitely morning sickness. Harven repeatedly reminded me of his strong seed, and it seems to be true.

Pregnant. I can't believe it.

Joy fills me as I take in my flat stomach. It won't be that way for long. I'm ready for the next adventure with my kraken at my side. My mate. Who loves me. Who dismissed his *Pearls* and gave me his eternal life.

"This is a lot you're throwing at me this morning, Harven," I quip. "What did you do to Nixie?"

Harven's eyes narrow.

"She's being tortured along with her sharkin lover. I'm having her scales pulled out one by one until they grow back. Then the whole process starts again." He scrubs his hands along my shoulders. "As for the sharkin, he's being fed to all manner of predators. Sharkins can regenerate limbs, but very slowly. Painfully."

"Remind me never to piss you off, my king."

Harven chuckles before his eyes turn serious.

"I've had Seera and Bly detained as well until we can confirm if they plotted with her or not."

"They didn't," I assure him.

"How can you be certain?"

Males. Always so oblivious. Since he's dispensed with their position, there's no harm in telling him.

"They want us together." My palms press against his chest. "They love each other. I know being together when they were your *Pearls* was forbidden, but sometimes it can't be helped. Let them be united, Harven."

His agreement is swift.

"If my mate wishes it, then it shall be done."

Biting my lip, I raise a brow.

"So that's it?"

"What?"

"No more *Pearls*?"

"None."

"Ever?"

"Ever. You're the only one I'll ever want, Eve." He curls a strand of hair around his finger. "You live so long as I do. The same goes for me, so take care of yourself, little mate. We are one. You are mine alone."

“Greedy as ever,” I purr. “Whatever shall I do with you?”

“I can think of something.”

His lips find my neck. My head falls back on a gasp, but it’s not from the nip to my pulse he delivers.

Above the bed are the two portraits I painted during our date in the library. Surveying the room again, realization dawns on me.

“This is your room.”

“Our room,” Harven corrects, licking the hollow of my throat.

“Told you I wouldn’t be kept out of here.”

He kisses my cheek.

“Your place is with me. Getting your pretty pussy fucked regularly.”

“Hm,” I muse. “That sounds nice.”

“We can get married,” he offers. “And I can officially crown you queen.”

“It seems there are many things to be done.”

“But not right now.”

I slide my fingers through his soft hair, and my lips curl.

“Did you have something else in mind?”

My hips lift. I grind myself against his hard abs. Harven’s hard cock presses against my backside. Pleasure spreads through my body.

“I need to be inside you, Eve,” he groans. “Need to fuck away the vision of you blue and unmoving.”

My fingers dig into his skull. I drag his lips against mine.

“Take me, my king. Give me every inch of you. Make me your queen in this bed.”

He snarls, capturing my mouth.

The air knocks from my lungs as he rolls me onto my back. My thighs wrap around his middle as his tongue slides against mine. His injured tentacle tickles my cheek.

Breaking our kiss, I open my hand towards the appendage.

“I think this one might be my favorite.”

Harven shakes his head.

“You can’t have favorite tentacles.”

“Why not?”

“The others will get jealous.” He bites my collarbone. “I’ll get jealous.”

“Possessive, my king?”

“I’ll show you possessive.”

Using his tentacles, he threads them through the silver bars of the headboard. They quickly encircle my wrist until my arms are taut. I pull against them, but it's futile. Completely at his mercy, Harven throws me a wicked smirk.

His tongue dips into my mouth once more before he trails down my chest. I moan as he takes my nipples into his mouth. His large hands squeeze and knead my breasts expertly. My thighs rub against his sides, desperate for any relief.

Traveling lower, he licks into my navel with relish. He places a lingering kiss on my stomach before biting across my hips.

Hefting my legs over his shoulder, he pins me to the bed with his massive hands.

He devours me with groans.

I scream as his tongue tickles my clit. Arousal leaks from me and into his waiting mouth. Harven eats me like I'm his last meal. He bites, tastes, and plunges into my pussy with precision.

Pleasure gathers in my stomach.

"So sweet," he growls. "All mine. Mine for a century—mine for a thousand years."

He spits onto my pussy.

I moan as his saliva collects at my opening. His lips return to my clit as he slides a tentacle into me. This one tunnels without reprieve. It fucks me ruthlessly. The suckers glide along my inner walls. The tip nuzzles at my G-spot while Harven works my clit.

"Fuck, Harven. I'm close—I'm—"

Fire licks at my skin as I erupt. My head falls against the silky pillows as my back bows off the bed. My feet curl against his muscular back as I tremble with the force of my climax.

Harven doesn't give me a chance to catch my breath.

He rotates us until I'm astride him, then leans against the headboard. His tentacle wraps around my waist and keeps my arms pinned at my sides.

Silk sheets brush my heated knees. A tentacle looms before my face.

"Open your mouth," he commands.

It's been too long since we last played our game. I eye him warily and shake my head.

Harven's palm cracks along my ass.

"Don't make me repeat myself," he warns, squeezing the burning flesh.

Begrudgingly, I part my lips. The tentacle slides down my throat. I choke on the slick appendage. Tears burn into my eyes as it fucks my mouth.

Once it's slick, Harven lets it slip free. A trail of spit clings to my lips.

"What the—"

My snarl ends in a moan as the tentacle pushes into my ass.

I shudder in pleasure at the dogged invasion. It doesn't stop, not until it's completely sheathed inside me. My mind whirls. Pleasure and pain chase each other in my blood.

Harven's tentacles lift me and deposit me onto his dripping cock.

I scream at the fullness. In one downward glide, he fills me to the brim.

I've never been so stretched—so thoroughly used. His tentacles push and pull me on his impressive length. The ridges glide along my sensitive walls. His other tentacles trace over my skin, renewing their suck marks.

My breasts jostle from the force of his brutal impalement.

Harven's head snaps forward to capture a nipple. I groan as he toys with it. He releases me with a pop and grins.

"Feel me, Eve. Take all of it."

Another tentacle slithers into my mouth.

I suck on it like it's Harven's cock. Bobbing my head, I work it deeper into my throat. I bite and suck and lick for all I'm worth.

Surrendering to his mercy, I take whatever my mate throws at me. He said I was his fucktoy and I am. I'm a vessel for his pleasure. To be used however he wants.

There is power in surrender. In relinquishing your troubles to the one person who would do anything to keep you safe. It's why our game comes naturally.

Harven will never take things further than I want. I'm giving him pleasure, but he's also ensuring mine. That's what it means to be one with another.

Harven snarls as he pounds me from below. Each thrust is timed perfectly with the sliding tentacle in my ass. One goes in while the other pulls out. The alternating sensations make pleasure heighten.

I now know what it means to be fucked senseless.

The only thing I care about is my impending climax.

"Remember this feeling of being completely at my mercy. That's how I've felt from the moment I saw you," he snarls. "Only I get to have you—"

only I get to fuck you. Keep you. My toy to play with. Mine to own completely. Anyone who tries to take you from me will be met with death.”

I garble my assertion around the tentacle in my mouth. Saliva dribbles down my chin. Harven’s smile takes on a feral edge.

“You love it, Eve. Love that I’ve slaughtered thousands for this perfect cunt.” His eyes blaze with golden fire. “When I bound our souls, Eve, I saw all the things you tried to hide from me. Every depraved desire and obscene want. You are my mirror. For years you were taught to fear what you crave most, but I’ve freed you from those shackles. You need my dominance in order to feel complete. Isn’t that right?”

The tentacle slides from my mouth. Sucking down air, I nod frantically. His cock and tentacle slam into me at the same time. I’m not going to last much longer. The tingle in my stomach is back with a vengeance.

“Yes, yes! Kill for me, Harven. Keep me safe. I’m yours forever. Yours to fuck. Yours to breed. Yours to love.”

Harven takes my mouth with a groan.

Plundering it with his tongue, his tentacle slides between my thighs. I wait for it to touch my clit, but it pauses.

Without warning, Harven tosses me onto the bed. I snarl as he pulls his tentacles and cock from me.

Before my peak can disappear, he shoves his cock into my ass. The burn, the pain—the decadence of it all is too much. I erupt from the brutality of his claiming.

I scream his name. My pussy clenches down on nothing as he pounds my ass. My jaw slackens as I shift into another position. His tentacles support my middle as he crowds behind me.

Without a moment’s reprieve, Harven slides two tentacles into my pussy. My climax quickly barrels into another one as he fucks me like a male possessed.

My fingers claw at the sheets. I tilt my hips back to take every bruising inch.

He rains slaps across my ass. The pain heightens everything, and I’m once more thrown overboard into a whirlpool of pleasure. I let it drag me down into the murky depths I may never resurface from.

I can only lie there and take his pounding.

His tongue licks sweat from my spine. Biting into my shoulder, I savor Harven’s guttural growl.

My monster. My kraken. My mate.

"I love you, Eve."

His fingers find my clit, and it's over.

Coming on a silent scream, my soul leaves my body. Harven slams into my ass one final time before emptying himself into my depths. I absorb every hot splash of his come. It prolongs my pleasure until I feel drunk with it.

Sliding out of me completely, I slump forward on the bed. My body trembles with the lingering remnants of pleasure. Harven's strong body spoons around me. He cuddles me close, kissing my forehead and whispering gentle praise.

I tremble in his grasp, barely aware of my body.

"Mine." He kisses my lips, then places his hand on my stomach.
"Mine."

"Ours."

"Ours."

So much death brought this one tiny life into being. Two weeks ago, I thought I was going to die alone. Now I'm about to be a mother. To a baby with tentacles.

Life has a funny way of shaking out.

A giggle burst from my mouth. Harven quirks a brow.

"That cruise ship you stole me from promised to lead us all to our perfect match. Never thought mine would be the kraken who kidnapped me."

Harven smiles, pulling me closer.

"Life is funny like that."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

He lifts my chin and kisses me with a gentle press.

"You're what's perfect, Eve," he whispers.

"I am pretty perfect."

"And beautiful."

Kiss.

"And creative."

Kiss.

"And wicked in all the best ways."

His kisses soon turn to more. Hands become seeking, and our moans rise inside the room. I give in to him as I always have. Always will.

Forever.

It doesn't sound so daunting when Harven will be with me for every moment of it.

I used to be so uncertain of my future. I let life pass me by and wallowed in my loneliness.

Finally, I was home. The bond glows gently in agreement.

My great love was never on a dating app. He was a king who'd spent centuries searching for me at the bottom of the ocean.

If that wasn't a fairytale ending, I didn't know what was.

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EPILOGUE

HARVEN - FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

My son is the perfect blend of Eve and me. His golden hair floats around his shoulders, while his pale blue tentacles flicker with disinterest. The silver circlet on his brow sparkles in the algae lights. He wears a light blue tunic that matches mine and his mother's dress.

The smaller clam shell throne mirrors the one Eve and I share.

At fifteen, he's more mature than other males. However, even the most mature teenager would rather be with his friends than listening to court politics.

"Patience, my darling," Eve says, reaching from her spot on my lap to ruffle his hair. "The council meeting is almost done."

His pursed lips say he doesn't believe her. I stifle my chuckle.

"Your mother is right, Cove. We are almost done. Then you can go back to sneaking off with Lord Bane's daughter."

Dark blue splashes the tops of his cheeks as he sinks lower on his seat.

Eve swats at my chest.

"You are awful," she whispers, trying in vain to hide her grin.

She looks lovely in her blue gown. The skirt falls to her delicate ankles. The sleeves are translucent over her lithe arms. The fabric complements the blue glimmer of her tan skin.

Once Cove was born, her transformation continued. Neither human nor seafolk, as the witch had said. Eve was uniquely herself.

Her skin glows faintly. Light blue scales cover her calves and forearms. Her blue eyes rival a sapphire for brilliance.

Though she had no gills or fins, she could swim in the open water without needing a bubble for protection. It made traveling to the city much easier.

She is more beautiful with every passing day.

Her round stomach makes her look every bit the goddess I claim she is. After Cove was born and confirmed to be a full-blooded kraken, I hadn't minded waiting for a second one.

Eve and I both wanted time to adjust to being parents. I wanted to raise my son to be a good king. One who, if he had a brother, wouldn't slaughter him over the throne.

Luckily, that wasn't a concern just yet.

With the curse broken, Eve and I hoped this child would be female.

The healers confirmed it a few weeks ago, much to our relief. Eve is beyond excited for our daughter, lamenting that she's been surrounded by males for too long.

As the councilman gives the final report, my hand strays to her stomach.

Our child rolls beneath my palm. She's as active as her brother was.

It seems impossible to love her more than I did in those initial months—than at the birth of Cove.

As I look into her sparkling eyes, I feel overwhelmed by the sheer affection I have for her.

We could spend a thousand years together, and it still wouldn't be enough time. Each day the bond between us grows deeper. We are rarely apart.

The broken halves of our hearts are only calm when the other is close. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Once the meeting is adjourned, Cove rises from his throne.

He bestows a kiss on Eve's cheek and tangles his tentacles with mine in farewell. I watch him glide toward Lord Bane's lovely siren daughter, Tula.

Her white curls and teal scales offset her simple green gown.

The sight warms my heart. I want him to be inspired by his parents' love and seek out his own. Having a mate is the greatest gift in the world.

Princess Hyra approaches with a low bow.

"You are looking lovely, Eve."

My mate chuckles.

“Thank you. This little female is luckily smaller than her brother and not making my ankles swell just yet.”

“How are things with you, niece?” I ask.

Hyra left court a decade ago to rule over a small settlement in the east. The lifestyle suits her far better as she recounts her tenants' happy state.

“Come to dinner before you depart, Hyra,” Eve offers. “It’s been too long.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

As we wave our goodbyes, a yawn sneaks up on my mate.

She gives me a sleepy smile as shame creeps into her tired eyes. At this stage in her previous pregnancy, she could hardly stay awake for more than a few hours.

I lift her into my arms, and she burrows into my chest as I take her from the throne room.

“This is just like old times,” she hums.

“I never pass up an opportunity to have you in my arms.”

As we journey back to our chambers, the change in the room is staggering.

Everything bears Eve’s touch for artistic surplus. Her gowns litter the room. Large chests of jewels that I’ve given her throughout the years rest against the wall.

Books pilfered from the surface line the table next to countless tins of half-used paints. Her easel nestles against the window. Drying canvases rest below it.

Her artwork covers the walls. From detailed portraits of us and Cove to sprawling seascapes, I’m in awe of her talent.

I set her gently on the bed and cup her small foot. Digging my fingers into the soles, Eve lets out a keening moan.

The sound stirs my cock. My scarred tentacle wraps loosely around her ankle.

I rub her other foot as her eyes roll back.

“You are the best mate ever.”

“What about husband?” I ask.

“That too.”

“And king?”

She smiles wryly.

“Seeking compliments again? How unbecoming.”

Setting her feet down, I brace my hands on either side of her head.

“I’ll show you unbecoming.”

My lips come down on hers. Eve sighs as I slip my tongue into her mouth. I kiss her lazily, tasting her sweetness from the source. Her arms wrap around my neck and pull me down. I brace my weight so I don't crush her.

With my tentacles, I flip up her silky dress.

Her pink pussy is dripping and begging for my attention. I glide one appendage through her slick folds. She gasps into my mouth, already shaking with need.

“Harven,” she breathes. “I’m so sensitive. That feels a—amazing.”

My belt hits the floor with a thud. Parting my tentacles, Eve groans at the sight of my cock. A pearl of seed beads at the tip. She licks her lips. Color dusts her cheeks and chest.

“Let me tend to my queen’s needs.”

Eve’s lips twist to the side.

“I feel like I should misbehave, earn a spanking,” she confesses. “But I need you to fuck me too bad.”

Baring her breasts, I cup one of the fleshy mounds. They’re much larger when she’s pregnant. I worry her nipple in the way that drives her wild.

Crawling up behind her, my tentacle lifts her leg, and I slide my cock into her perfect tightness. This angle on our sides makes her especially tight. Her pussy squeezes me like a fist. I don’t stop until I’m fully inside. Her head falls back against me with a shuddering moan.

Her rich scent of citrus and sunshine deepens as she nears her peak.

“Once my daughter is here, I’ll take you roughly again. I promise.”

“Good.”

No more talking is necessary.

Not as I fuck her with measured strokes. My hand toys with her nipples while my tentacle suctions to her clit. Eve is very responsive when pregnant. She’s already clenching down on me.

I pinch her nipple, and she comes with a low moan. I push deep and spend inside her trembling body. Lifting the hair from her damp neck, I place kisses along her shoulders.

Twisting her into my chest, I hold her close, careful to avoid the sharp tips of her tiara.

Letting out a contented sigh, Eve trails her fingers over my stomach. Biting her lip, she gives me a soft smile that makes my heart race. The bond between us glows happily.

“Our lives are going to change again,” she warns.

I kiss her forehead, her racing heart twinning with mine.

“I welcome all the changes. You have brought nothing but joy and happiness into my life, Eve. I’ll never stop being grateful for you. For our family.”

I had been born into a brutal world. A brutal family. I clawed my way out in order to claim a better future. To be the male worthy of a mate.

I had killed thousands for her. I kidnapped her, but I wouldn’t change a thing.

Everything was worth it to have Eve in my arms just like this.

I kiss her again, needing another taste. Eve breaks it to yawn, then cuts me a stern look.

“Don’t let me sleep too long, Harven. I’ll need my king’s cock again.”

Snuggling her under my chin, I rest a hand on her stomach. My daughter presses against me in greeting, then settles down enough to let her mother rest.

“If my queen demands it, it shall be hers.”

Our bond pulses between us. Eternal threads bind us together.

“You really are the best mate ever.”

“That goes without saying, my love.”

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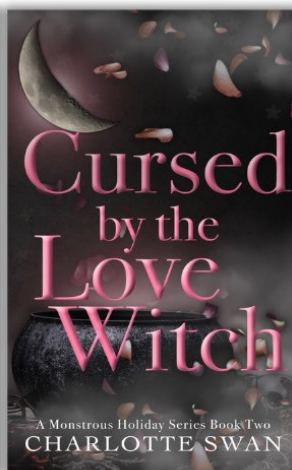
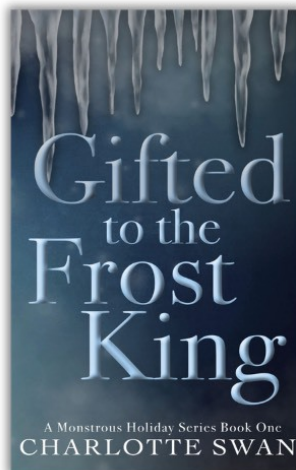
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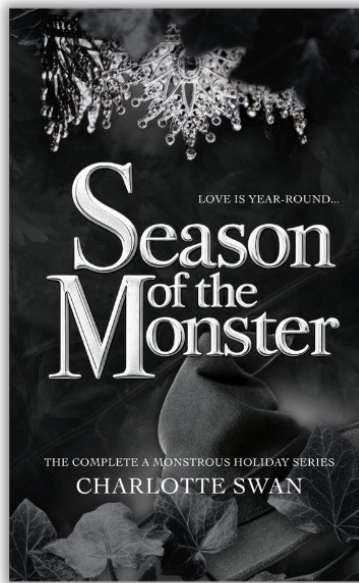
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Thank you so, so much to JP Sina for including me in on this series. My first ever dark(-ish) monster romance! Starting the book off in our modern world was new for me.

I promised my dear friend Elizabeth I'd work in one of her hilarious dating adventures in a book one day. I hope I did your meatball story justice!

Thank to my patrons, ARC readers, followers, and monster lovers who mean so much to me! I couldn't do this without all of your support.

I'll see you in the next one.

xoxo Charlotte

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