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I swing around, heart pounding, and my arms alight with blue energy. I instinctually swing my hands up to shield my face. “Stop!” I push my ability into my voice.

It’s a female. Her shape does not resemble Siltworth the froggen, the only other one to call me ‘silver mage.’ She’s not pot-bellied with long limbs. However, her hair and pale skin have a distinct greenish tint to them.

Like a froggen’s.

Her wide eyes move back and forth, though her body remains frozen.

“*Tambrynn, who is this?*” Lucas flutters down beside me and changes back.

“Do I know you?” I ask the creature through gritted teeth.

Her mouth moves only slightly as she tries to speak, but is unable to.

“Return,” I state, letting her go.

She sucks in a great swallow of air and bows.

“Who are you?” Lucas orders. His immediate anger and suspicion set my frazzled nerves snapping.

The girl raises her head. Her glance darts from me to Lucas. There's a calculating sharpness to her gaze. "My apologies for the misunderstanding. I saw you land and thought you'd heard me—"

The clouds move and light spreads across her face. She has large, deer-like eyes, pale skin, and her clothes are worn and shabby—dripping from the stream.

I inwardly groan. I should've known better than to land near the water. Especially the same one where I was dragged up to Siltworth's castle. But, what did she mean by *heard* her?

"What misunderstanding?" Lucas steps toward her.

"I was too eager. I shouldn't have touched you without announcing myself first." Her mouth is wide with an overbite and the sun reflects off a scaly, multi-colored patch of skin at her nape. She bows her head again.

"You shouldn't have touched her at all. What is your business with us?" Lucas's tone is demanding, inserting himself into the situation without hesitation.

I'm relieved he is asking the questions for the moment while the shock of surprise wears off and my heartbeat returns to a normal pace.

"I only wish to thank you for breaking the spell that has held me captive." If possible, she bends lower, her stringy hair grazing the wet ground.

Lucas and I both stiffen.

*"It may be a trick, my lady. Be careful what you say."* Lucas's warning beats like a drum in my mind.

"*I'll be careful,*" I assert, though I'm confused. I want to be sure of what I'm dealing with. "I don't know what you mean," I say.

"His talisman. The pearl you broke," she states tartly as if I should've known.

And though Bennett told me as much, it is quite

disconcerting to discover it's true. "His necklace," I murmur, my mind rolling in thought. There had been hundreds of froggen at the castle. I hadn't stayed around to see what happened. What horror had I unleashed after I broke Siltworth's prized jewelry?

"Yes. When you broke it, the spell on us was destroyed. Well, most of us." She waves a hand as if that's of no consequence. "I am ever so grateful and wished only to thank you in person. So, when I spotted you in the air, I called out to you." She moves forward, her hands outstretched.

Lucas reaches in front of me and pushes me back a step. "How did you recognize us?" His voice is tight. I can't blame him. My throat constricts as well. "*Did you hear her?*" he asks in my mind.

*"No. Though I did hear some sort of hissing the moment I changed—"*

Her wide eyebrows scrunch together. "Is there another silver bird that burns bright like fire?"

I narrow my eyes at her. There's a hunger beneath her intent that seeps out of her like steam above a boiling pot. My necklace is warm against my collar, my hands covered in crackling blue magic. If she were truly wishing me well, the magic and my senses wouldn't be on alert.

Lucas lets out a low groan. "Are you fishkin or finfolk?"

She blanches. "I am Shellsea of the Bay of Hargough. I do not claim those titles of which you speak. I am merfolk, though our coral crowns are gone and our king's trident is missing."

Lucas shifts beside me. "Coral crowns and trident?"

She makes an annoyed gurgling noise in her throat. "Our crowns are what enable us to turn back into our water bodies. The trident is the power we use to protect our underwater cities."

I'm confused by the whole lot of it. "Where are your crowns and trident?"

Shellsea's face twists into an ugly grimace, making her eyes bulge more. "They were excised when we were taken." She moves a hand from one scar on her forehead to a matching one on the other side. "We searched *his* castle when you broke the spell, but they weren't there." For someone who's here to thank me, she seems irritated instead. "Siltworth's hiding them, probably among the deep canyons in the sea. None of us can return to the water properly to search for them."

Lucas crosses his arms over his chest.

I squint at her, not believing her claims. "But you came out of the water."

She shrieks, her eyes taking on a dangerous glint. "Any creature can swim in shallow water. Tell me, how long can you hold your breath, oh daughter of the death mage? Can you swim to the bottom of the sea without oxygen, half-djinn Watcher?"

Her acidic tone reminds me of Adelia, the maid who lied and got me dismissed. Anger flares in my gut, hot and liquid. It spills into my temper and ignites it. I raise my hand and clutch her throat with a blue magical hold. "Don't get snotty with me, *oh scaley one!* I wasn't insulting you. I was simply asking for clarification."

Anger, fear, and revulsion hit me, one after another, each crashing harder than the first.

My head starts to pound at the onslaught. I release her to rub my temples. "You've said your thanks. You can leave now."

She chokes, struggling to regain her breath, then shrieks at me. "Don't do that!"

"You come on too strong. You've tasted a piece of my ire. Be very careful what you say." I reply as indignant as she is.

“What do you want from us?” Lucas speaks through tight lips, breaking up our bickering.

I shiver at the raw emotions coming from both of them. I try to shut my mind to them, but they bombard me like a hammer in my head. There’s more the girl desires from me.

Losing my patience, I take a step closer. “You want something from us. Spit it out and be done with it. But be aware, I make no agreements with anyone.”

She hisses and now I understand. The sound I heard. It was her. “You’re no better than the eldrin, silver mage, and they have the blood of all fishdom on their hands. I should’ve known. You’re *all* the same. Unhelpful. Uncaring. I’ll make you help me. Help all of us.” Spit flies out of her mouth as she rushes toward us. Though we stand close together, her eyes are on Lucas.

I would die before one more hair on Lucas’s head is hurt.

“Get back!” I shove my hands out to stop her and knock Lucas to the side. My eyes heat and my skin is no longer glowing blue but tinged with an angry red haze. Something whispers in my mind. “*Protect him. Touch her. Burn her down, end her.*” For a moment I agree. My fire responds, building, getting hotter.

And then my hands are on her. Her skin is cold and damp, my hands orange flames, burning, burning.

Her scream is high-pitched, startling the birds around us into flight. She stumbles back into the water, dipping her hand in and dribbling the cold liquid over the red marks on her chest and arm where I’d touched her. Tears stream down her sickly-green-stained cheeks.

The water responds with murmurs and words I can’t fully hear or understand.

“Tambrynn?” Lucas’s face is creased with worry.

Horror at what I’ve done mixes with anger for having had

to do it. I fist my hands and jerk them to my sides. I take a breath and stifle the voice in my head urging me on. “I told you to be careful.” I enunciate carefully to maintain control of my anger. “I don’t want to hurt you, but if you come at us once more, you may not survive.”

*Especially if she tries to get to Lucas again.*

Shellsea stops crying. “All I ask is for some help. Is that too much? Aren’t you here to fulfill the prophecy? Make us all equal?”

“You weren’t asking for anything. You were demanding and then you rushed us.” Lucas points a finger at her. “And what do you know of a prophecy?”

She snuffles wetly. The voices from the water die off. All of the birds chitter cease. It’s silent as if nature itself is listening. She recites: “Silvery moon and Maker’s mark. There’s one who will bring light from the dark. They’ll restore the balance to each and all. Bringing even the lowest back to equal.”

Birds call out and the water laps at the banks once more.

I touch my head, willing the pressure to go away. “What if I’m not who you think I am? I can swim, yes. But even as a firebird, I can’t go to the depths of the ocean. I barely managed to survive when Siltworth dragged me to his castle. You’ll have to find help from somewhere else.” I step back, preparing to leave.

“Lies! You’re lying!” Shellsea explodes.

“Now, hold on there—” Lucas starts.

Her big eyes glisten and she wails. Giant tears wash down her face. “I’m desperate. It has been a turtle’s age since the merfolk have inhabited the seas in our true form. I wish only to regain that which was mine, ours, and reestablish my kin.” Her shoulders rise and fall with her sobs.

Sadness and pain echo in the onslaught of emotions

seeping out of her. Guilt nags at my gut, and I'm wavering. Everyone deserves to be helped when in need.

"We cannot help you." Lucas is firm, startling me out of my thoughts.

Anger replaces her anguish. She swipes at her face with a webbed hand. "It was the djinn who first started this with a mage's help. Your kin. Your curse. And we suffer for it." She points a finger at me. "You recklessly broke our curse. It's your fault we can't swim back to our homes. If you don't help us, you're no better than your despicable father."

The confusion that had wrapped itself around my mind is gone as if it hadn't happened. Is it some sort of power the girl has? I'd heard the tales of sultry mermaids with their beguiling voices. And how they lure the unsuspecting with their powers.

My body is humming now. A knowing passes over me. "*Take hold and see the truth,*" it states. I take three steps forward and grasp her hand in mine. They're webbed, and cold, with blue tips and jagged fingernails. My blood rushes in my veins and blue flames erupt from my arms, engulfing both of us.

No sound comes forth as she tenses and jerks.

I see into her mind. There's water, fish creatures, and seagrass meadows. Endless songs lift on low and high tides, the voices singing in a strange underwater harmony. Then I see a man with a leering face. He tried to capture her. Shellsea turns away from the ancient choruses to her own path after the assault. Next are moonlit bays, her rhapsodic ballads, handsome sailors making promises they won't be able to keep before she gets her revenge and steals their breath forevermore—once, twice, a dozen times. More. Their life force fills her up, a tantalizing sensation—energetic and delicious—but it doesn't last. So, she lusts after it again. And again. Ceaselessly again, until there are too many corpses to count.

Next, I spy her captor sitting astride a massive seahorse

among a group of a dozen other froggen behind him that ride atop a stormy tide. They attack her small underwater village, carrying numerous merfolk off with them. A blink and then there's pain at a forced transformation when a younger Siltworth pries her crown off her head and tosses it in a chest full of other crowns, crests, and mantles still bloody from their owner's flesh.

All along I hear the events as if she sings them to me. Her dulcet tone reflects the events in its highs and lows, soft notes, and crashing crescendos.

My stomach revolts and my eyes are tearless though I want to pull back and cry. But I can't let go.

Finally, the memories of what Siltworth made her do come in dizzying clarity in a haunting aria. Turning dozens of innocent fishkin and not-so-innocent finfolk into the monsters he required. Others she devoured to ease the cravings of killing and soaking in their life's energy. Like she craves mine now. My light tantalizes her senses on so many levels. She lusts for my soul's power. The only thing holding her back is the knowledge that I'm the best chance at the help she desires more. There's no other that gives her hope. But it's truly a struggle in her mind, her heart, her soul. Which side will she take?

I'm disgusted and mournful all at once. The depravity I'd experienced as the mergirl churns like acid in my gut. Though my grandfather had warned me that this kingdom was no better than Tenebris, I'm still shocked at the atrocious vision. I've witnessed enough.

In a flash my fire winks out, leaving Shellsea panting on the ground, cradling her arm to her chest. She's so small and yet all I see is her vast appetite. It's large—insatiable.

I don't flinch from the fury on her face, I'm not afraid of it. Or of her. I've faced wickedness before. First on Tenebris and



then on Anavrin. All of it leaves a vile taste in my mouth. I spit to get rid of it.

My path is clear, but she may not like my offer. “Equality may not be what you think, mergirl. I will help you if I can and only if I can. You come as a spokesperson for your kin. So, you and your ilk, in turn, will not harm me or any of my allies, even if we fail to retrieve your crowns and scepter. Your underwater world may not be able to be restored due to its wickedness. You may have to come to terms with living as you are currently.”

Hatred shines brightly from her large eyes.

I step back. I’m not done yet. “And you will promise not to follow us or try to snoop into our affairs. You won’t rally your kin against any of our kind. You will not speak of us at all or you forfeit your life. Agreed?” I’d tasted the greed in her desire to live. I knew ultimately what her choice would be.

She’s still panting, her grimace revealing sharp, needle-like teeth. I can sense the inner turmoil within her soul. “Agreed,” she snarls.

A flash of magic quickens in my gut. She flinches and shifts away from me as if regretting having approached me.

“Then leave. If I catch you searching for me again, I’ll unleash my true fire on you and all of your deceitful kin will be no more.” I turn to go.

She laughs bitterly. “You aren’t safe, silver mage. Siltworth won’t take losing his empire without striking back. At this moment alliances are being made. Dark deals are done. He has a secret that will put an end to all of this.” She waves her hands around at the meadow as if that makes any sense. “He won’t stop until he drowns you, guts you, then feasts upon your flaming entrails.”