

THE SPHINX'S HEART

Talena Winters



PROLOGUE



CALANDRA DISTINCTLY REMEMBERED THE DAY she'd learned she was most likely destined for Madness. She'd been seven, a second-year novice, and she and her classmates at the Royal Academy were sitting in a circle on the flagstones in the Grotto atrium of the Opal Palace for history class. Calandra wanted to go sit on the edge of the fountain of Atargatis and change to *ichthys* state, like the erect statue of the Mother in its centre, letting her banded blue-green fish-like tail dangle in the cool water—but she'd already asked, and Daskala Medea had said no. That didn't stop Calandra from daydreaming about it.

The *daskala*—a young woman with bright green eyes and a bright smile in her round brown face who'd just recently graduated from the Academy herself—leaned forward, trying to meet the eyes of each pupil in turn as she told them the story of Nadia kor'Hera, the Mad Queen who'd sunk Atlantis.

“Panaceas are extremely rare,” Daskala Medea said, “and Nadia was the most powerful one of all. They say she could move the earth without even touching it. She could make water dance like no one had ever seen. She could even control the wind. Unfortunately, when she went Mad, her great power was her downfall, and everyone on Atlantis, especially the humans, paid the price.”

Calandra's hand shot up in the air.

“Yes, Calandra?” the *daskala* said with a long-suffering air. Calandra had already asked quite a few questions that day.

“Panaceas use all the elements, right?”

Daskala Medea shook her head. “No, not fire. No one can use that. Some of them use air, though. Really powerful ones like Nadia.” She grinned and winked at Calandra. “You might be that powerful someday.”

Calandra pondered this, wrapping her hand in one of her long wavy honey-coloured pigtailed. She hadn’t managed to use air yet, though she kept trying and she thought she was close. But Daskala Thea had told her several times how she would most likely be as powerful a panacea as her mother, and even more powerful than she herself was. Already, while most of her classmates wouldn’t specialize into healers or sirens for another four years, Calandra’s stone healing came as naturally as breathing, her plant healing ability surpassed many adepts’, and she’d made significant progress as a physic.

She raised her hand again.

The *daskala*’s smile became a bit forced.

“Yes, Calandra?”

“Why didn’t everyone just leave Atlantis and move over to Sirenia? The undines could have helped the humans, and—”

“I’m sure they tried, dear, and obviously some succeeded, or we wouldn’t be here.”

The *daskala* looked around the circle for other hands, but Calandra raised her hand again, jabbing it toward the arched marble ceiling until the *daskala* pursed her lips and acknowledged her once more.

“But *why* did Nadia go Mad?” she asked.

The *daskala* sighed, the cowrie shells woven into her long black braids clicking with the movement. “No one knows. But after the Sinking, she was condemned to the Abyss, and her consort, Alessandro, was never heard from again. Her daughter Melissa was left to carry the

Atargasian undines through the greatest tragedy in our history. Under her guidance, we thrived and grew strong once more. Now, does anyone *else* have a question?”

Calandra’s cousin Narcissa, who sat several girls over in the circle from Calandra, raised her hand. Her pale blond hair was arranged in neat braids pinned up on her head, and her short sapphire-coloured chiton was made of the finest silk, the hems embroidered with gold thread and pearls. Her icy green eyes were narrowed and calculating, and a pit formed in Calandra’s stomach.

Tiny bubbles of surprise at the princess’s atypical participation floated from Daskala Medea into Calandra’s spirit. “Yes, your highness?”

Narcissa gave Calandra a sly look before asking, “Isn’t it true that *all* panaceas go Mad?”

The *daskala* drew in a breath, her discomfort hitting Calandra like sprayed sand. She glanced at Calandra and slowly nodded her head.

“Unfortunately, most of them have, yes. Daskala Thea is the only exception I know of.”

Narcissa smiled smugly, and Calandra shrank into herself. Her mother had gone Mad—everyone said so. That’s why Mother had left, so her powers wouldn’t hurt anyone. But it wasn’t until that moment Calandra realized the same thing was likely to happen to her.

That was eleven years ago, and much had changed since then—she’d become a panacea to rival Nadia in strength, or so everyone kept saying. She’d tried—and failed—to heal the Heartstone, the Light of Atargatis, and it had nearly been snuffed out as a result. She’d been trained by a dream spirit named Damon who claimed to also be Alessandro, Nadia’s long-dead consort, and he’d almost ruined her. She had started a revolution, exiled the man she loved, and discovered she had a brother—the first undine male to be born in over three thousand years.

She’d even found the reason why healers like her went Mad. But she had no way to stop it. And her Madness had already begun.

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SHIPWRECKED



Bridgetown, Barbados

July 11, AD 1799/8 Dumuzid 4155 EK

ROBERT COX PULLED HIS WIDE-BRIMMED straw hat low over his eyes and kept his chin low, trying to remain unnoticed as he loped along the crowded, dusty street. Avoiding notice was something he was quite used to; since the accident five years before that had left half his face puckered with scars, he'd become an expert at becoming invisible. Back in England, it had been easier—the cooler weather had allowed for collars and coats that the sweltering heat of Barbados in July made unfathomable. Still, seeing gentlemen walk the narrow streets of Bridgetown in the tall collars and long sideburns that were so in fashion was not uncommon, so most of the passersby barely gave him a second glance, even if the hair combed low over his scars was the colour of flame.

Ahead of him, his quarry rounded a corner, and he sped his pace to catch up before he lost her. The street was crowded with black slaves and white workers driving donkey carts loaded with enormous rum puncheons, bags of sugar, or bales of cotton on the way to the wharf. Dodging gentlemen and ladies about their business at the shops that crowded the edges of the street, he

reached the corner just in time to see the gold-tipped dark brown spiral curls of the object of his pursuit disappear into a coffee shop with a purr of tawny silk.

Robert stopped and waited, crossing his arms when she did not immediately re-emerge. He frowned. That shop didn't allow coloureds. How had she not been thrown out immediately?

He sighed. Why was he still surprised at anything Miss Abela Bethel could accomplish?

This morning when he'd gone down to breakfast in the common room of the Port House Inn, he'd insisted to his companions once more that he was fully ready to take a stroll down to the quay alone. However, it had been to his utter shock that both Reverend Berian and Miss Bethel had agreed, letting him go on his solemn oath that he was feeling in quite good spirits and would attempt nothing untoward. As irritating as it was to have self-appointed guardians shadowing his every move since they'd arrived here, given the physical and emotional malaise he'd been plagued with, he could hardly blame them. But after three weeks, nearly half of them bed-ridden, he was ready to stretch his legs on his own—and do a little investigating as to the potential fates of the crew and cargo of the *Atlanta*. He couldn't believe that the three of them had been the only survivors out of several hundred. He *daren't* believe it, or the black pit that had nearly swallowed him while on board and several times since would be impossible to resist.

Please, God, if you have any mercy, grant me some small absolution.

But his queries of both the harbour master and at the local slave agencies had availed nothing. He'd been returning to the inn, fighting the gravity of the pit, when he'd seen Miss Bethel hurrying away from their residence along the covered sidewalk on the other side of the narrow street.

Where is she going?

He wrestled with himself for only a moment before he started trailing after her. For her own protection, of course. A young gentlewoman, especially one of her lineage on Barbados, should never be without protection.

Now, he strolled forward, pretending interest in some shop window displays, but keeping an

eye on the door of the London Coffeehouse in case Miss Bethel's powers of persuasion failed her after all. Eventually, he reached the window of the coffee shop itself. Inside, the beautiful bronze-skinned woman he'd been pursuing sat at a small round table immediately beyond the painted glass. Her back was to him, and she was not alone.

A man Robert had never seen before sat across from her. A despicably handsome gentleman with flawless tan skin and short dark hair left wild and deliberately oiled and tousled. He wore fine clothes and had fine teeth, which he displayed often with a charming smile that made Robert want to punch them right out of that smug face, though he wasn't usually the violent sort. The man looked like an utter dandy. A Spanish dandy. The nerve of a Spaniard showing up on one of the English islands. The nerve of him wooing Miss Bethel!

The Spaniard and Miss Bethel were engaged in intense conversation, their eyes locked on each other.

Robert's gut clenched. Is this what Miss Bethel had been doing when she'd been slipping away from the inn for her *important appointments*? Was this man why she'd travelled to Barbados in the first place? Is this why she continually spurned his affections? He'd thought her rejection was because of Zale Teague, the handsome young man she'd been travelling with when he'd met her. After all, she'd barely left the lad's side on the *Atlanta*, despite the tension between them, and Zale's perfect face was much less repulsive than Robert's own disfigured one. Almost as perfect as this interloper's.

Robert touched his scars, sliding his fingers over the ridges around his eye. His heart caved in. If Miss Bethel preferred the company of someone less repulsive than himself, such as Zale or this dandy in the coffee shop, it was another thing he couldn't blame her for. Especially as he had no right to be jealous of Zale for anything—not when the lad had come back from the dead, relieving Robert's personal load of guilt a smidgen.

Despite the four-year gap in their ages, Zale had been Robert's childhood playmate until the accident that had left Robert scarred, after which Zale had disappeared. Robert had thought his

friend dead and blamed himself. If he'd only stood up to his brother Gryffyn's bullying, the events of that terrible day five years ago at Chyandour Brook would have gone very differently. Talwyn Penrose, the pretty girl with skin like cream who had followed Zale around like a puppy, might still be alive. At fifteen, it had been up to Robert to protect both the younger children from Gryffyn and his friends—and his failure would haunt him all his days.

That, and so many others. The slave hold of the *Atlanta* filled his vision, and the pit clawed at his stomach. How many times had he imagined the dark bodies of the men and women floating on the waves since the ship had sunk—a ship that had made their final days a misery? *My fault . . .*

Desperately, he blinked away the gruesome images and stared through the painted letters on the shop window, studying the man who had won the heart of the woman he loved.

Miss Bethel began to turn toward the window, and Robert ducked away before she could see him.

I should go. This is none of my business.

But instead of walking back the way he had come, he sat at a table on the wooden boardwalk near the propped-open door and quietly ordered a black coffee from the thin mustachioed waiter.

While he waited for his coffee, he watched the people passing by. White men in fine clothes engaged in indolent conversation in the shade while they watched dark-skinned men load wagons with food and other supplies. The working poor plied their trades among the shops, calling out to passersby to see if they needed shoes or barrels mended. Sailors on shore leave loitered on the corners and watched the women with rum jugs in hand. There was even the occasional group of fair-skinned ladies under frothy parasols and bonnets out for a lark at the shops with their friends—often trailed by black women in the clothing of domestics with loaded shallow wicker baskets on their heads holding their mistresses' purchases.

Robert realized he was searching the faces of the slaves and sailors as they passed. Not one

of them was a face he recognized. He frowned, but the disappointment had been expected. If God didn't think him worthy of forgiveness, who was Robert to argue?

The waiter brought his coffee, and he took a sip. Just then, he overheard the throaty voice he loved best say something about Tartarus, the place where Zale's mother, Delphine, had been taken, and he stopped, the cup halfway to his lips. He didn't mean to eavesdrop, but could he help it if the sound from the table just inside the door carried particularly well to this spot?

"Do you think he could be looking for a way in on his own?" asked the man. His voice was a rich baritone with a slight accent, the kind women swooned over. Of course.

"Zale?" Miss Bethel replied. "I'm sure of it. He's very determined when he wants to be, and even though he's under house arrest, so my sources tell me, he's probably looking for escape at every opportunity. It is only by the grace of Elyon his circumstances aren't much worse, considering what we've discovered of the place." She paused. "I ask you to reconsider allowing me to go after him."

Zale was alive and captive somewhere on Barbados? Why had Miss Bethel not told him? And what did she think she could do to save the lad? He could call lightning and kill with a touch—Robert shuddered at the memory of Mr. Crow's convulsing body hitting the floor of the *Atlanta's* orlop deck—and, more than that, Zale wasn't even human. No, the boy hadn't meant to kill the first mate. He hadn't meant to call the lightning that had left Robert blind on the bank of Chyandour Brook either. He'd only been trying to defend someone helpless to defend themselves—something Robert should have been doing both times. And, both times, Zale had manifested as a merman, with a silvery green tail and frilly neck gills that finally explained those weird, luminescent green eyes of his.

For five years, Gryffyn had told Robert the water demon he'd seen at Chyandour Brook was a figment of his imagination. But when Robert saw Zale dive off the deck of the *Atlanta* with his legs fused into an enormous fish tail after Mr. Crow's untimely demise, he'd understood the truth. Whenever he'd brought up the event with Miss Bethel, however, she'd acted like she didn't

know what he was talking about. But Robert knew what he'd seen—or did he? A lump formed in his throat, and he swallowed. Wherever Zale was, he didn't need help protecting himself, house arrest or not. Certainly not from a young mulatto gentlewoman of uncertain ancestry, no matter how capable and charming she might be.

Who will help him then? Me?

The spot between his shoulder blades itched, and he shrugged to ease the sensation away.

"I'm sorry," said the Spaniard to Miss Bethel with such tenderness, it took all Robert's willpower not to look around to see if he had taken her hand as he said it. "You know how important it is to guard your heart. We cannot risk it, not when he is so well protected."

Even if Robert applauded the man's response, how presumptuous was he to talk about guarding her heart, and in that tone!

Not knowing what the man was doing was maddening. Robert glanced over his shoulder, but he could barely see the edge of the man's chair through the open shop door. He frowned and turned back to his coffee, straining to listen while his conscience strained against the urge. He ignored it.

"Berian, then?"

"It's even riskier for him, uh? Your previous visits can't have gone unnoticed, and—"

"We were very careful," Miss Bethel said. "The only ones who know our true appearance are the allies we contacted."

When Robert had first seen Zale swindling passersby on the street six months ago in Bristol, the boy's features had been distorted beyond recognition. It was only later, when Zale and Miss Bethel fled the scene, that his disguise must have fallen away so Robert could identify him. Had the disguise been Miss Bethel's doing? What was she, some kind of spy? But that would be ridiculous.

The Spaniard's next words were so quiet, Robert couldn't make them out.

Miss Bethel sighed. "Of course. But if we can't go to him, how will he get to us?"

“You have told him what he needs to know to find his mother. Now it is up to him, uh? And once he’s outside the middle ground, you can rejoin him.”

He said *middle ground* with special emphasis, like it was a specific place. The Middle Ground. Maybe there was a new plantation called the Middle Ground somewhere in the centre of Barbados. But even if the Spaniard justifiably didn’t want Miss Bethel anywhere near a plantation, why wouldn’t he approve of Reverend Berian going to find Zale? And who gave him the right to decide?

Robert frowned. This was the most confusing lovers’ conversation he’d ever heard. Even with this man, Zale was all Miss Bethel could talk about.

“You’re certain Delphine is still alive?” Miss Bethel said. “Berian has been trying to locate her, but . . .” Her voice faded beneath Robert’s hearing.

Robert drew in a sharp breath. It was thanks to Delphine Teague’s healing touch that Robert had only ended up scarred, not blinded. As far as he was concerned, he owed her his life.

In fact, it was to bring news to Zale about Delphine that Robert had abandoned—definitely not fled—his brother and their shipping partnership in Bristol. He’d caught up to Zale off the coast of Africa, transferring to the ill-fated *Atlanta*, and finally shared what he’d overheard Gryffyn say about Delphine’s kidnapping and location with Zale and his companions, Miss Bethel and Reverend Berian.

He shuddered as he remembered the strange ceremony he’d witnessed. Gryffyn and the other hooded figures had been addressing—no, worshipping—a glowing dragon-like face with red eyes who had appeared in a strange black mirror. They’d said Delphine had been taken to Tartarus. He didn’t know where on Earth that was, but Miss Bethel and Mr. Berian had seemed to. Not that they’d illuminated him. Those two had more secrets than the Catholic Church.

The man cleared his throat. “It’s difficult to get information on Delphine from her current location, but we know she is little use to them dead.”

“I’m afraid Zale will fall into their clutches. Can you imagine how disastrous that would be?”

Especially now that his sister is dead . . .” Her voice quivered. “I can’t believe we were too late to save her. I don’t want Zale to suffer the same fate.”

“I understand,” said the Spaniard. “But you must not give in to fear.”

“I know.” She sighed. “But the island is in a much worse state than I would have thought possible. If they could manage that with their limited resources, what would happen if they get their claws on Zale, with Delphine already in their grasp?”

Robert frowned. Zale had never had a sister. He was an only child. But that wasn’t the reason for the tightening grip of dread in his heart. He’d been jesting before, but *was* Miss Bethel a spy? Perish the thought!

“What if Zale takes too long to break free and the Soulstone fails?” Miss Bethel’s voice became pleading. “You know what’s at stake. Not just for the world, but for me.”

The man blew out a long stream of air. Finally, he said, “I was going to wait to give you this, but, circumstances being what they are, I think you should have it now.”

Whatever he handed to Miss Bethel caused a sharp intake of breath. “Solomon’s Ring? It’s more beautiful than I’d even imagined.”

“You and Zale will need it to retrieve Delphine. Protect it with your existence. It cannot fall into enemy hands.”

“Thank you. This means so much.”

Enemy hands? What’s at stake? The lump was back in Robert’s throat. Miss Bethel sounded emotional, as most young ladies did when presented with a ring. If it had been a romantic gesture, though, why was the conversation still all about Zale? The seed of doubt that had been planted moments ago grew, and Robert’s heart raced.

“Don’t worry,” the man said. “You’ll find Delphine and Zale. Elyon will protect them.”

“Like he protected Calandra?”

Robert couldn’t hear the Spaniard’s murmured reply. But from what he *had* heard, they were hardly discussing picnics or parties or walks in the park.

Robert had been wrong about Miss Bethel yet again—she wasn't here for a lovers' rendezvous. This dandy, whomever he was, sounded like he was merely an informant of some kind, someone Miss Bethel conducted business with. *Spy business?* He shook his head. Whatever was going on here, Miss Bethel was *not* a spy. Though Robert had yet to determine why she was so invested in Zale's welfare. This conversation was the most nefarious activity he'd seen Miss Bethel engage in—and it had been all about locating Zale and Delphine. Wasn't that the reason Robert himself was here in Barbados?

But if the Spaniard were a simple informant, why did he speak to Miss Bethel with such affection in his voice? And why was she the one having this conversation instead of the dumpy reverend? Women, especially coloured women, didn't conduct business on Barbados. It simply wasn't done.

It seemed clear the sect that had kidnapped Delphine was also after Zale, who was being held captive by someone else, somewhere on the island. But who? Someone who was afraid of Zale's abilities perhaps, or trying to use him as leverage? Perhaps Robert could make enquiries and surprise Miss Bethel with answers. Prove to her and Mr. Berian that he was more fit than they believed him to be . . . and try to make up for the sins of his past.

It would help if he knew a bit more about where Zale was being kept. He would have to find a way to bring the topic up with Miss Bethel later—not in such a way that she'd know he'd overheard her, of course. Just casually, as if he'd heard a rumour that some of the people from the *Atlanta* had survived and he wondered if Zale was among them. If he could find out where Zale was being kept, he might even be able to negotiate the boy's release. Robert was the son of a lord, after all. He had connections, or he could use his position to make them.

Maybe that would prove how earnest his intentions were to Miss Bethel. If only he could get her to trust him with her secrets, maybe she would eventually trust him with her heart.

The tinkle of bangles drew his attention. He glanced up the street, then grew cold, despite the growing heat of the day. For just a moment, he thought he'd seen the young gypsy woman

who had come looking for Zale and Miss Bethel back in Bristol—the one who had summoned the face in the mirror—standing in a shop door, watching him. But when he looked again, the door was empty.

He shook his head. It would make no sense for the gypsy woman to be in Barbados. His guilty conscience was playing tricks with his eyes. *Perhaps I'm not fully recovered after all.*

“Excuse, you help?” said a woman’s smooth voice nearby.

Robert glanced toward the woman, who stood on the sidewalk in front of the jeweller’s shop next to the London Coffeehouse addressing a young lady in the flock of gadabouts Robert had seen earlier. The woman was stocky, middle-aged, and black, with a cap of short curly hair and an erect bearing. She wore an unusual flowing mustard-yellow linen dress with a high waist gathered only by a woven hemp girdle, a Greek style that would be the envy of many a young lady in London if it weren’t for how grubby it was. Behind the woman stood a tall muscular black man in a rough cotton shirt that looked about three sizes too small. He had the casual grace of a soldier. Despite their regal postures, both of them looked like they had seen better days—their garments were torn and dirty and they bore a desperate look of hunger in their coal-black eyes.

The beribboned young lady wrinkled her freckled nose at the woman in disdain. “Begone, slave. Help yourself.”

“Please, I only want ask—”

The girl’s blue eyes narrowed. “Are you deaf?”

The older woman closed her mouth, her face blank.

The young lady shied around the woman with a fearful glance at her tall young companion, and the group walked on in a cloud of girlish titters.

The woman turned to her companion. “Do not worry, my son. We will find someone.”

Robert stared. The accent was unusual, but the woman had spoken in perfect Classical Greek, better than Robert himself could manage. How would a slave have learned to speak like

that?

He glanced over his shoulder. Miss Bethel and the Spaniard were still deep in conversation. Robert stood and stepped toward the unusual duo on the sidewalk.

“What is the trouble?” he asked in Greek.

The woman glanced up at him in surprise and blinked—a common reaction when someone first saw him—then gave him a broad smile. The young man said nothing, but his eyes filled with cautious hope.

“Good sir, God bless you. We need someone to help us trade our gems for coins with the jeweller. He would not help us. He treated us with the utmost animosity and threw us out. I did not understand his words. I only speak a little English.” She stopped and looked up at Robert. “You understand me, do you not?”

Robert gave a small smile. “Yes, madam, I understand you. How did you come to learn such fluent Greek?”

The two of them exchanged glances. “We . . . worked in a place where it was spoken much.”

Robert frowned. “In Greece? How did you come here?”

“No, not Greece. Our mistresses spoke it.”

The woman looked prepared to say no more on the subject, and Robert nodded. How odd that the woman should specify *mistresses* instead of masters as their owners, though. Perhaps the lady of the household was a widow. He knew of several landholding widows on the island—perhaps one of them was Greek. But with Barbados being a British colony, it seemed unlikely. His gut tightened.

“Why do your mistresses not help you with changing the gems? Are they unable to do it themselves?”

It was odd for someone to entrust such a task to their slave, who would get a far worse price than if the mistress had come to make the bargain herself. But if she had, the trust she placed in this woman far exceeded the norm. Again, an unlikely circumstance. Something about this

woman's story was starting to smell.

"No, sir," the woman explained. "We do not work for them any longer. They set us free, and we wish to return to Africa, so we must have coin to buy our passage."

Robert raised his brows, the expression pulling uncomfortably at his scars. He pursed his lips, trying to decide if he should believe them.

There were several things about their story that didn't add up. The last thing he wanted was to be charged for abetting escaping slaves. And the longer he stood there, the more tension coiled into the two people before him, until they looked as tight as two springs ready to loose. It was all very suspicious.

"Do you have your papers of manumission? I would very much like to see them." He held out his hand expectantly.

The man spoke for the first time, also in Greek. "Perhaps this would suffice?"

He placed a cool angular stone in Robert's hand. When Robert examined it, a perfectly formed amethyst crystal the size of a pebble rested on his palm, with a deep violet pointed terminal that faded to clear quartz on the rough end. He stared at it in astonishment. If this was what they offered him in bribe to help them, how many more did they have to exchange?

He glared at the man. "You have no papers, but you have a queen's ransom in jewels. Where did you get this? Did you steal it? Who are your mistresses?"

The man's face darkened. "We didn't—"

"There they are!" came a man's shout from behind them. "Those are the two I told you about."

The jeweller, a paunchy balding man with a ruddy complexion, stood in front of his shop talking to the leader of a group of rough-looking men, pointing toward the man and the woman. Before they could even take two steps, they were surrounded. One of the thugs grabbed the woman's arms from behind, and two others attempted to grab the man. He evaded several lunges, but the street was too crowded for him to get far, and the attackers eventually caught

him. He struggled valiantly until he was subdued by several blows to the head and kidneys and sagged.

“What is this? Why you do this?” the woman cried. “We free blacks. Let us go.”

The leader of the group, a slaving agent named Marcel Kaminski whom Robert had met only that morning while making enquiries, swaggered to stand before the two of them, giving Robert a nod of acknowledgement.

“Thank you for keeping these runaways occupied until we could nab ’em, Mr. Cox. You saved us a great deal of trouble chasing after ’em.”

The woman stared at him in astonishment, and the man glared at him.

Robert swallowed, his hand wrapped around the gem. He didn’t know whom to believe. If they were truly free, could he allow them to be returned to their enslaved state after what he had witnessed on board his own slaving ship?

Then again, what free black would ever be without their papers, the only proof of their freedom? He couldn’t, in good conscience, aid a couple of runaways either, who had more than likely robbed their mistresses, to boot.

“Of course, Mr. Kaminski. What will be done with them?”

Kaminski smiled. “We’ll see if someone claims ’em. If not, they’ll go back on the block.”

At this, the woman gave a cry of alarm and began shouting in a language that Robert didn’t recognize. The men put iron manacles on her and her son’s wrists and urged them away.

Eventually, she turned to Robert and cried in Greek, “Help us, please! We are not runaways. We are not even from Barbados, and know no one here who can vouch for us. We will be sold into slavery if you do not help us.”

“Hush, you,” growled the man who held the woman’s arm. He pushed her ahead of him down the street.

Robert stared after her. Had he made the wrong choice? He looked at the amethyst. This certainly did not come from Barbados, and what were the chances a lady would keep unset,

uncut gems in her jewellery box? But where would two blacks, even free ones, come by such riches?

But what if they had been telling the truth?

“If you’re not from here, where are you from?” he shouted after her.

The woman closed her mouth and glanced at her son uncertainly. The young man glared at his mother. They were nearly lost in the crowd.

“I can’t help you if I don’t know where you’re from,” Robert called after them.

The woman glanced at her captor, then shouted over her shoulder. “Sirenia. We are from Sirenia.”

The man who held her growled at her to be quiet and pushed her in front of him into the crowd.

Robert stared after them in consternation. While his Greek was shaky, his geography was not. He’d spent months poring over maps as part of his job with the shipping company, and he knew every charted island in the West Indies like the back of his hand. But he’d never heard of a place called Sirenia.

Something tickled the back of his mind, and he frowned.

“What is happening?” asked Miss Bethel’s voice from beside Robert, and the thought faded to nothing.

Robert glanced at her guiltily. Her companion was nowhere to be seen, and all of her fingers were still bare. Where had she concealed the ring?

“Miss Bethel, what are you doing here? I was, er, getting some fresh air and a change of scenery. I had no idea you were—”

“Never mind that,” she said, glancing up at him, her brows furrowed in irritation. “What happened with them?” She flicked her hand at the backs of Kaminski’s men and the two people they held captive.

“Those two blacks wanted help trading some jewels, but it appears they were runaways. They

tried to bribe me with this.” He held up the amethyst for Miss Bethel to see.

She took it and examined it closely. “There are no amethysts like this on Barbados. How did they come by the jewels?”

Robert shook his head. “I wondered the same thing. They said they were from a place called Sirenia.”

The word had the most startling effect on Miss Bethel. Her gaze snapped to meet his, her golden eyes wide and intense.

“Sirenia? You’re certain?” She scanned the street, but there was no sign of Kaminski, his men, or their charges. They’d been lost amongst the crowd.

He nodded. “Yes. You know it?”

“Yes.” She grasped his arm above the elbow. “I must speak to them as soon as possible. Do you know where they were being taken?”

“I suspect to the merchants’ yard. But it is not fit for a lady, Miss Bethel.”

She grew very still, cocking her head at him in that maddening way that made him want to reach out and stroke her lovely neck. “After I spent four months on a slave ship, you think the merchants’ yard will upset me? We must go there at once.”

Robert debated the wisdom of such a thing. “I could go by myself and bring you word.”

Miss Bethel’s jaw set. “Robbie Cox, take me there *at once*.”

Robert sighed. “Yes, Miss Bethel.” He didn’t know where she had learned of his childhood nickname, but it somehow sounded completely natural falling from her lips. And when she used it, he knew she would not be swayed.

She smiled, and it was as though the sun shone for him alone. “Thank you.”

He paid for his coffee, then offered his arm to Miss Bethel so they could make their way along the crowded boardwalk.

“What happened to your companion?” The words slipped out before he considered them properly, and he cursed himself.

She looked at him sideways. "He has gone about his business."

She said nothing else, though her mouth was set in a bemused line. Robert did not press her further.

They turned the corner of the street and the Carenage came into view. The shallow sliver of water that served as a harbour for the small craft used to aid in loading and unloading the ships anchored out in the bay bounded the far side of Trafalgar Square, the green where slaves were auctioned off. The square was empty now but for the few slaves erecting rope pens for tomorrow's auction of the shipment that had come in that morning. At the sight, he was once more thrust into the stench and closeness of the hold of the *Atlanta*, with hundreds of slaves forced to lay in the heat and dark in their own filth, and the weight of his conviction heavier than the smell. All of them were probably now dead.

My fault.

He closed his eyes and shuddered. The black pit that had pursued him for weeks clawed at him with sticky molasses tentacles once more, and his gut felt lined with lead.

"What is the matter, Mr. Cox?"

He opened his eyes to see Miss Bethel gazing up at him in concern. "Tis nothing. The wind, it gave me a chill."

She nodded. "Winds can do that. They can also push us to our destinations. Might this be such a wind, Mr. Cox?" She looked at him with that steady gaze that pierced to his very soul.

He glanced away, afraid of the truth she might see there. "One can only hope," he muttered.

2

HOUSE ARREST



Opal Palace, Sireniapolis, Island of Sirenia

ZALE TEAGUE LUNGED AT THE girl posed in defensive position opposite him, his bamboo *deiktis* staff clutched in slippery, sweaty hands. His shoulder-length blond hair flopped in his face and he tossed his head to clear his vision. Around the semicircular courtyard, the clacks of staves reverberated off the marble walls of the stone palace on one side and echoed into the empty blue sky on the other, fading beneath the occasional roar of pounding surf far below.

“Remember to flow with your opponent,” said Daskala Stamatia. The siren instructor, dressed in a short blue practice peplos with a wide woven hemp belt with her black hair pulled back in a braided bun, strolled between the sparring students with her hands clasped behind her back, watching them with an appraising gaze. “Be stable like earth and fluid like water.”

Sweat dripped into Zale’s eye. He’d been practising the *Tropos Hydor Zon*—the Way of Water—with the class of fifth-year siren cadets for the last hour, and he was starting to flag. He was taller than most of them, and he’d definitely become more fit in the last few months while scampering over the decks and the rigging of the *Atlanta*. But that was not enough to compensate for the fact that the girls who surrounded him had been training in the art since

they were seven, whereas he'd spent most of the last five years in a water tank, being gawked at for money. He'd been assigned to this class because they were all approximately the same age, not the same skill level.

Scratch that. His age mates were in sixth year. He couldn't imagine trying to keep up with them.

"Hah!" Damaris, his sparring partner, a girl of about fifteen with a ponytail taming long wild curls the colour of wet sand and luminescent eyes several shades paler than his own emerald-green ones, lunged at him in a ferocious attack. "Stay on task, Wonder Boy. It's easy enough to beat you when you're paying attention. At least give me a challenge."

Daskala Stamatia stopped near them, observing them with interest. "Keep your stance wider, Zale. Let the energy flow through you like water. Remember to use your own energy sparingly, and direct your opponent's energy against them."

Zale tightened his gut. The *daskalas* were always on his case about using the water element, no matter what he was doing. After spirit, water and earth seemed to be the most common elements among the women of his kind. Since he was the first male to have been born for three thousand years, he tried to be patient as he explained to them over and over that he could barely even sense water, let alone use it. Fire and air, on the other hand . . .

"Like this, *tapeinos*." Damaris, who looked like she was barely exerting herself, fainted around him. With a jab as fast as the flick of an eel's tail, she caught him in the back of the knees with her staff and sent him hurtling to the sanded tiles of the practice courtyard.

Zale stared up at her, heat gathering in his veins and a breeze rustling the leaves of the fruit trees surrounding the terrace courtyard. In the three weeks he'd been on Sirenia, he hadn't lost control of his powers and hurt anyone once. Well, that wasn't true—he had once, on the second day, but not since. But there were times he'd come close, like now. Normally, he kept the feldspar bracelet that would dampen his powers and prevent disaster near him in his waistcoat pocket—the waistcoat that lay in a bright yellow patchwork heap next to the far wall of the courtyard.

Zale closed his eyes and took a breath, and the heat cooled. With a single, fluid motion, he pushed himself off the floor of the courtyard with his back, leapt to his feet, and swung his *deiktis* staff in the move that Daskala Stamatia had taught them only that morning. When Damaris moved to block it, he twisted his staff around hers until her staff went flying away, clattering to the sandy stone. She glanced at her fallen weapon, which was her undoing. By the time she looked at him again, Zale had the butt end of his staff pressed against her throat.

“Do you yield?”

Damaris, her open hands in the air, glared at him with a tense jaw. “I yield.”

Zale stepped away and lowered his staff, then looked around. The other students had stopped their own sparring to watch the ferocious match between him and Damaris, but none of them looked impressed by his surprise win. The expressions on their faces ranged from stunned disbelief to annoyance to outright anger. Even Daskala Stamatia looked less than pleased. As Damaris bent to pick up her stave, the *daskala* pressed her lips into a thin line, then turned to face the rest of the class.

“Sparring practise is over for this afternoon. We’ll resume tomorrow morning, as usual.”

With a final unreadable glance in Zale’s direction, she turned toward the open archway that lead to the Royal Academy wing of the Opal Palace.

Zale ran the back of his hand over his eyebrows to divert some of the sweat as he waited for his turn to put his practice stave in the wooden stand along the wall. The girls in the class shrank away from him when he came near, subtly avoiding his touch. He stared at the smooth white marble wall behind the stand and took a deep breath to hide how much it bothered him. The girls put their staves in the stand, then headed to the refreshment table, the occasional comment and giggle disturbing the after-exercise tranquility. No one bothered speaking to him.

He was used to people not touching him. In the human world, it had been understandable. After all, he was a freak as far as humans were concerned, and besides, it’s hard to touch someone separated from you by glass. But when he finally came home, to the land of the

undines, he'd expected it to be different. After all, he was like *them*.

Except he wasn't. The very fact that he was a male set him apart in a way he'd never experienced before. He glanced at the pairs of human *tapeinos* guards posted at each entrance to the courtyard. He was certain the class of sparring siren cadets did not usually require such heavy security, or any at all. Not even Narcissa, his cousin and the acting queen, trusted him.

He moved to the refreshment table and poured himself a bowl of water from a flask with lemon slices floating in it. After taking a few swallows to quench his thirst, he moved away from the others to the far side of the courtyard near the rail. Settling himself on the grass beneath an orange tree with his back to the trunk, he surreptitiously studied the human men that stood guard around the courtyard—their blank faces testimony to their equally blank minds. He suppressed a shudder. What the undines did to these men—a practice they called Redemption, but as far as Zale could see, was turning the men *into* slaves, not redeeming them from anything—was one of the most horrific things he'd ever seen. And he'd spent five years as a freak show in a tank and had travelled on a slave ship to get here.

"I hate how quickly you pick everything up. It's annoying."

Zale looked up to see who had spoken. Damaris glared down at him, her brows furrowed and her lips twisted, but she didn't seem hostile. She held a bowl of water in one hand and two barley cakes in the other.

"You mean you weren't just letting me win to be nice?" Zale gave her what he hoped was a disarming smile, but after three weeks of being ignored by his classmates, he'd lost faith in the charm that had always served him so well while hustling *gorgios* with his friend Gio. The best he could hope for was to annoy her enough that she'd leave him alone.

"I'm not that nice."

She surprised him by joining him beneath the orange tree. After sitting on the grass, she handed him a barley cake, then took a bite of her own. Resting her arm on her knee, she stared over the curved white marble railing that separated them from a steep drop and the view of the

turquoise-blue ocean beyond. Light, puffy clouds scudded across the cerulean blue sky, and far below, the Atlantic pounded against the black basalt cliffs. From this terrace, the city of Sireniapolis was completely concealed from view, and the verdant spike of Green Mountain was just barely visible beyond the pointed tip of the royal quarters wing, already starting to cast shadows into the yard. Across another low marble railing defining the convex opposite boundary of the yard, the kitchen gardens lay nestled between the two southern wings of the triquetra-shaped palace. Bright pink bougainvillea and other colourful flowers Zale didn't recognize clambered over the barrier, leaving their sweet, heavy scent in the air.

Zale quirked his mouth, wondering if the conversation were over. He shrugged and took a bite of the barley cake, expecting to be met, once again, with a new flavour experience. Most of the food here was unfamiliar to him. Having grown up in Cornwall, England, he was used to honey cakes and pasties. His mother hadn't often made him the food of her homeland. Possibly because she never learned to cook until she left here, what with being a princess of the realm and all—not that she'd ever let that slip.

However, as soon as Zale took a bite of the barley cake, bittersweet sadness exploded in his mouth. He closed his eyes, back on a rocky cliff in Cornwall, eating the packed lunch his mother had made him to enjoy while playing with his childhood friends, Robert Cox and Talwyn Penrose. The memory was quickly followed by a wave of frustration and anger. The whole reason he was even here was because his mother had been kidnapped and somehow taken to the Underworld, and he was on a mission to rescue her. Finding Sirenia had only been meant to be one step on his way so he could be reunited with his older sister, Calandra. But that hadn't worked out at all. His chest tightened. *I didn't mean to kill her. It was an accident.*

He'd had so many accidents. His breath hitched and the breeze picked up again, rustling the leaves of the lemon and orange trees surrounding the terrace. He glanced at his waistcoat once more, the security of the bracelet calling to him. Narcissa had forbidden him to wear it during practice—to decrease his dependence on it, she said. But practice was over . . .

“So, how do you like living here?” Damaris asked.

Zale shrugged, taking another bite of barley cake. “The food’s good.”

She barked a short laugh, then sobered. “Oh, you were serious?” She eyed her barley cake. “This isn’t bad, I guess. But you should try the ones Cook Stephanie makes at my mother’s house. And her Panselinos bread. Mm.” She stuffed another bite in her mouth and chased it with a gulp of water.

“My mother made the best barley cakes I’ve ever tasted,” Zale said wistfully.

“Your mother cooked?”

Zale blew out a breath. “Yeah, she made all kinds of things.”

Damaris laughed. “I’m just trying to picture Queen Adonia cooking. Or Narcissa or Calandra or Hebe. Can’t do it. How did the queen’s sister pick it up?”

“I don’t know. She just did.”

“Like you, huh?” Damaris eyed him.

Zale ignored her, picking a few crumbs off his cake and placing them in his mouth to savour the flavour. He hadn’t really known his aunt, Queen Adonia, but he’d known enough. She’d been killed less than a day after he’d met her by Thea, one of her own advisers, and he’d spent most of that time under a *sklavia* bond she’d subjected him to. *Redemption, Saint Peter’s knees*. He clenched his fists to suppress the sudden panic the memory evoked.

All he’d wanted was to find his sister and his home and go save his mother. How had it all gone so terribly wrong? He’d asked Narcissa about helping him get to Tartarus a few times to find his mother—he’d heard a rumour there was a gate near here—but she kept putting him off by saying . . . by saying . . .

What *had* she been saying? Actually, why was he so upset? Narcissa was taking care of everything. She’d promised she would. A dreamy feeling of peace washed over him, and he smiled. He took another bite of barley cake, enjoying the sound of birdsong.

Something’s wrong with me, he thought lazily, but the thought faded as soon as it had come.

He struggled against the lethargy that weighed his limbs down. *I need to find Mother. I need to—*

“Hey, Damaris!” shouted one of the girls from under a tree across the courtyard. “Are you going fishing later? Oh, wait. You’re doing it now.”

The girl and her three friends exploded in a chorus of giggling.

Damaris shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Ignore them. They’re just mad they didn’t get the nerve to come over here and talk to you first.”

Zale barely heard her. *Mother. I need to . . . why can’t I remember?*

He took another bite of his cake, but it tasted like paste in his dry mouth.

Damaris glanced at him. “For someone who just bested the top siren cadet in the class, you seem awfully upset.”

That caught his attention. He still wasn’t used to the fact that many of the undines could sense emotions, or your very presence, without ever looking at you. When he’d realized it was one of their most common abilities, he finally understood why his own intuition had always been so strong. However, it was quite another thing to be surrounded by others with the same ability at all times. It was difficult to put on a stoic mask of nonchalance when everyone in the room could tell your mood with a single glance.

“You don’t want to talk about it?” Damaris studied him, sunlight glittering from her seafoam-green eyes.

“Do you want to hear about it?”

Damaris cocked her head in challenge, but then relented, her posture softening.

“Look, I know I haven’t exactly been welcoming. Having a boy in the class is taking some getting used to. But you know what? You’re pretty good. And I thought maybe you were getting tired of sitting by yourself all the time. But hey, I can go back to my friends.” She glanced at the girls in the shade of a tree against the wall, who were staring at the two of them. She snorted and muttered, “I don’t want to stay where I’m not wanted.”

Damaris began to rise, but Zale put out a hand. “I’d like you to stay.”

Damaris glanced at him over her shoulder, and her eyebrow arched in surprise. “You sure?”

Zale nodded. Damaris sat back down, leaning against the trunk of the orange tree, but she still didn't touch him. Zale wondered if it were intentional or not. The small cluster of girls on the far side of the courtyard kept glancing at them and giggling behind their hands. Suddenly, Zale regretted asking Damaris to stay. She was probably here on some kind of dare, gathering information about the freak that the girls could laugh about in their dorm rooms later. He'd experienced something similar a time or two with girls from other Roma families at gatherings.

Zale sighed. He was so lonely, he didn't even care.

He took a sip of his water, studying Damaris's profile. Her sandy hair was pulled back into a long ponytail of unruly curls, and her round, olive-toned face was still slightly flushed from the exercise. She was nearly as beautiful as Abela.

He swallowed, feeling slightly guilty at the comparison. Not that there was anything going on between him and Abela, the sphinx-lamassu guardian who'd accompanied him from England. The one time he'd tried to kiss her, she'd ducked away so fast, he'd almost banged his nose on a door instead.

But still. He couldn't help but wonder if, somewhere in her cherub heart, she carried a candle for him. After all, she'd been looking out for him his entire life—her previous iteration in flesh had been his friend, Talwyn, who had been around as long as he could remember. She had been pretty as Talwyn Penrose, but as Abela Bethel—the brown-skinned, golden-eyed African girl she'd become when she returned from wherever lumasi went when they weren't here “on the Ground,” as Abela called it—she was breathtaking. Zale's heart sped up and his veins started to warm again. He gulped the last swallow of cool water from his bowl to hide his discomfiture.

Damaris glanced sideways at him, her head cocked. “Watcha thinkin'?”

By all the saints! There's no privacy in this place at all, is there?

Zale cleared his throat. “I was thinking of my friend I was travelling with. I haven't seen her since I got here, and I'm worried about her.” Abela wouldn't have been affected by the sirensong,

which only worked on men, and she'd probably used her chariot to blink herself away from the ship before the undines scuttled it. But if she was okay, why hadn't she come and found him yet? "Not that Narcissa would let me look for her, anyway."

"You have friends?" Damaris looked at him innocently.

He gave her a tight smile. "Hilarious."

She grinned. "Aw, lighten up, Icarus. I'm just teasing you."

"Icarus?"

"You know, the idiot child of the brilliant inventor Daedalus who got cocky, flew too close to the sun, and died trying to escape the labyrinth?"

Zale scowled and said nothing. He hadn't heard that story, but he was certain he was *not* an Icarus. He could breathe underwater, not fly. Abela and Berian could, though, or so he assumed—he'd never actually seen them do it, but the wings of their lumasi forms implied as much.

Damaris raised an askance eyebrow at his silence. "Besides, I know being restricted to the palace grounds probably seems severe, but Narcissa is being cautious for your own good. It's not safe out there for you. With the city guard under orders to Redeem any Wild male on sight, you wouldn't get five steps down the Street of Pearls before you were turned into a mind-melted moron like them." She jerked her thumb toward the *taps* at the nearest entrance. "And, call me sentimental, but I just started getting used to you like this."

Zale felt a grin trying to creep out of the corner of his mouth and squelched it. She didn't get to call him an idiot child and make him laugh in the same breath. Baked offerings notwithstanding, she was right—she wasn't that nice. He didn't want to encourage whatever little game she and her friends were playing.

She batted her eyelashes at him in mock coyness. "So, is this *friend* you were thinking about pretty?"

Zale gave a barely there shrug. "Why do you care?"

Damaris's glib manner slipped, and Zale sensed her hurt. Which meant she was much more

hurt than she was letting on, because he couldn't usually do that.

"Well, if you must know, I thought I could look for her, or send a message to my mother or sister Eudora to do so."

Zale sat up straighter and frowned. "Why would you do that?"

Damaris looked uncomfortable, all her breezy superiority gone. She fidgeted with a pebble on the grass. "I guess I just thought it must get pretty lonely with no one to talk to, and no one who wants to talk to you . . . or even touch you."

"So that's intentional, then."

Damaris's face flushed slightly. "Touch is a powerful way of sharing emotions for sirens, since all of us have the gift of spirit. I think everyone might be, um, *scared* to find out what you're feeling." She glanced down. "I guess, what I mean to say is, I decided it was stupid to be scared. I mean, how different can you be?"

Zale studied her, trying to decide if she was being sincere. Her thick dark eyelashes hid her beautiful eyes and her curls tumbled around her bare shoulders and down the back of her turquoise sparring bodice. She was at least putting on a good act of penitence—but he'd lived with the Roma, who made a living out of duping unsuspecting *gorgios* out of every available pence. After five years with them, he knew how convincing an act someone could put on.

But then, he also knew that if she would touch him, he'd see exactly how sincere she was.

He held his hand palm-up in her line of sight. She glanced up, following the line of his arm until she met his eyes.

He pulled out the disarming grin again. "Do you want to find out if you were right about me?"

She said nothing, looking like a rabbit caught in a snare. She glanced over her shoulder at her friends. The girls were watching her and Zale's every move with rabid intensity.

He didn't even care. He looked back at Damaris, his hand still outstretched.

Slowly, she reached out and clasped his hand in her own.

The instant they touched, a flood of her emotions surged through him—fascination, revulsion, and another emotion he couldn't quite place. Attraction? Surely not.

She stared into his face, obviously processing what she was feeling from him too. Her delicate nostrils flared slightly, and from this close, he noticed that she had a little mole on her cheekbone that accentuated her beauty instead of diminished it. She really was stunning. He stared at her soft, pink lips, which slowly curved into a smile.

Realizing what he was feeling, and that she would know exactly what it was, he let go of her hand and jammed his back against the tree trunk, his face burning. She leaned against it next to him, chuckling. This time, their bare arms touched, putting the awareness of those same emotions front and centre in his mind. He thought about Reverend Berian, the fat ungainly human form of the bull-lamassu who had made the journey with him and Abela, to douse the fire rushing through his veins. Lidded lizard eyes. Frog mouth. Crow legs.

No use. The physical touch on its own was distracting enough, let alone the amusement that rippled through him. *Her* amusement, at *his* emotions.

He'd never felt so exposed.

She giggled. "It's okay, you know. I don't mind."

"Mind what?" Zale tried to sound casual, but his breath still came in shallow gasps and made his voice crack.

Which only made her laugh again.

"You're not half-bad-looking yourself. Certainly more attractive than the options we're usually presented with for mates from the Redemption Harvest. Most of those men are old, or missing teeth, or way too skinny." She made a face.

Zale laughed nervously. "You . . . you want to be my mate?"

"What?" Damaris sat bolt upright, turning to glare at him. "No. That's not what I meant. I mean, we're too young for that, and besides, sirens don't usually have consorts, and besides, Narcissa would never let her cousin marry a siren, and besides . . ."

She ran out of points to add to her list and stared up at him with wide eyes. It was her turn to blush.

Zale decided the best thing was to just move past it.

“Er, speaking of the Redemption Harvest—”

He swallowed, remembering the night the *Atlanta* had been captured by sirens and he and every other soul on board—the men mesmerized by sirensong and then Redeemed—had been brought to this island with the intention of auctioning them off as consorts and *douloi* to the highest bidders. It had been the night he’d met his sister, Calandra, who’d Freed him and told him he was different, even here. It had also been the day before he’d lost her. *Killed her, you mean.*

He swallowed again, trying to move the lump lodged in his throat. Damaris once again placed her hand on his in the grass, but this time, only soothing peace flowed from it. Calandra had done that to him once, helping him get a grip on his out-of-control powers. He glanced up and smiled. “Thanks.”

Damaris nodded. “I miss Calandra too. She was a friend of Eudora’s. It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

Zale looked away, out at the flawless blue sky. “Whose was it, then?”

After a moment of awkward silence, Damaris cleared her throat. “What were you going to ask me?”

Zale drew in a deep breath, then pulled his hand away, bent his knees, and wrapped his arms around his legs.

“I did have friends on that ship. Abela, but other friends too. Men. Would it be possible for your mother to . . . to see if she can find them? Could she tell me if they are, um, safe?”

He wanted to ask if their minds were Free, but with the way Narcissa’s siren pods had been roaming the city looking for strays, he didn’t hold out much hope of that. But just knowing that Berian and Kofi had at least made it to the island safe and unharmed would be a great relief. The last time he’d seen Kofi, the sailor had been lashed to the capstan on the gun deck, his back a

bloody mess from the unjust beating he'd just taken for defending Abela's honour—an enslaved sailor attacking a white crewman had deserved such punishment, apparently. Never mind that the crewman—the first mate, no less—had attacked Abela and another slave woman first.

That was one thing about this place, Zale noted, glancing at the group of girls against the wall as evidence. Nobody here cared what colour your skin was. Since arriving at the island, he'd seen women of every shade mingling as equals. They didn't even care much if your eyes were the luminescent green of an undine or not. Human women, such as there were, held many positions of importance within the palace and, he'd been told, society in general.

They only cared whether or not you were male.

Damaris smiled. "I'd be happy to ask her to try. After how I've been behaving—after how all of us have been behaving—it's the least I can do." She pulled her lips to the side and chucked him on the shoulder. "Hey, we're not all stuck-up peacocks all the time. Just most of us most of the time." Her eyes sparkled.

He restrained a smile. "You're wrong, you know."

She frowned. "It's a joke. I know it must seem like we're all snobs, but most of us aren't like that. You just represent something we haven't had to think about for a very long—"

"That's not what I meant."

She frowned, waiting for him to explain.

He grinned at her, thankful for what little contact she'd offered him today, and thankful he hadn't turned her away.

"You *are* pretty nice."

She gave an embarrassed chuckle, ducked her head, and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Don't tell anyone."

Zale smiled and turned to the cadets gossiping across the courtyard. He gave a little wave. So did Damaris. Then she leaned against his shoulder, curling her fingers through his. He stiffened, then relaxed, putting his arm around her shoulders like he used to do with Talwyn.

The girls' eyes widened so much that *Zale* wondered if they might lose them onto the stone tiles.

He grinned. He didn't care. For the first time in weeks, he didn't feel completely alone.

He ate the final bite of his barley cake and smiled.

It was delicious.

3

THE CADET



AFTER THE OTHER GIRLS LEFT for afternoon task duty, Damaris sat up and looked at Zale, breaking contact. She rubbed her arm where a deep purple bruise had begun to blossom.

He frowned at it. “Did I do that? Sorry.”

Damaris waved the comment away. “Happens all the time. No big deal. This one won’t even require healing.”

“Why not?”

Damaris looked down at her arm, examining the bruise. “Not worth the bother. It’ll go away in a few days.”

Zale reached toward it, and she looked up at him in confusion.

“May I?”

She hesitated, but since she didn’t tell him no, he laid his hand on the bruise and closed his eyes.

With the inner vision he’d had so much practice developing while on the *Atlanta*, he sensed the ruptured blood vessels, swelling tissue, and tender nerves. The last thing she needed was more heat. Carefully, he channelled cool energy from the air into her flesh and even managed to add a little earth to reduce the swelling and repair the damaged tissue. In moments, her arm had

returned to its normal unmarred perfection.

Damaris gaped. "You can heal?"

Zale gave an embarrassed smile. "Yeah, but I hear it's a little different for me."

When Zale had first arrived on Sirenia, he'd been surprised to discover that not all undines could heal. While most of them had some ability with spirit, only those with exceptional talent could become sirens. If they had skills with the other elements in addition to spirit, they often became healers—either physics, plant healers, or the stone healers who created the crystal devices the undines used to store and transfer information, among other things. His sister, Calandra, had been a panacea, able to work in all three disciplines, as had Thea and, apparently, his mother, Delphine. Not that his mother had ever revealed her supernatural healing ability to him. He'd just thought she was good with herbs, much like the Romani *shuvani* women of his later experience.

Delphine had never spoken of his undine heritage. Then his powers had manifested in the most disastrous way possible, killing his father and blinding his friend. Scared and confused and trying to protect his mother from the same fate, he'd run away from home at the age of eleven—so there was a lot he didn't know.

When I get out of here and find her, I'll ask her why . . . The thought faded away into silver mist and he gave his head a shake. *What was I thinking about?*

"How did you learn to do it?" Damaris propped her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, staring at him with rapt attention.

He stared at her blankly. He couldn't even remember what she was talking about. "Do what?"

She frowned in annoyance. "Heal. Remember?" She pointed at her arm.

Right. Zale's face warmed.

"On the *Atlanta*, my friend, Kofi, he, er . . . well, he got really sick. Him and some other crewmen. One of the other men died, and it looked like Kofi might die too. Reverend Berian

kept telling me that undines were healers and that I might be able to save him, and I had to just try, you know? And then I did. And then Kofi called me an angel and kept having me heal other slaves when they got sick. The crewmen never figured out why the slaves all treated me with such respect.”

Damaris looked like a startled doe. “You mean you’re the reason why no one on that ship was sick? I heard my sister Zoe talking about it. They’d never seen anything like it before. And you figured it out on your own?”

Zale shrugged, embarrassed. “Yeah, I guess.”

Damaris shook her head. “You’re not just a Wonder Boy, you’re a living, breathing miracle, Zale bet’Delphine. What else can you do?”

Zale wanted to keep that look of amazement on her face. He pointed at the fluffy white clouds above the sparkling sea, and she followed the direction of his finger with her gaze. Closing his eyes, he concentrated. Within moments, the clouds that had been floating lightly along above them zoomed across the sky as though they were seeds a giant had just blown from an enormous dandelion. He glanced back at Damaris and was gratified by the look of wonder on her face.

“A miracle,” she breathed, shaking her head and staring at the rushing clouds.

Zale played with some blades of grass. “I guess. But I can’t *see* people like you all can. I almost always have to touch them first. And even that only started a few months ago.”

Damaris shook her head curtly. “No way. If you can heal, and you have that much power with other elements, then there’s no reason you can’t use spirit without touching someone too. It’s just a different way of using your emotions.”

Zale blinked, suddenly uncertain if he wanted to learn how to do what they did. “You know, it’s overwhelming enough when I touch someone, let alone being able to sense folks all the time. I think I’m good.”

Damaris frowned. “It can come in handy, you know.”

Zale swallowed. “Are you sure? Even when everyone isn’t actively avoiding touching me, I’ve kind of been avoiding them, because it can be pretty disconcerting to suddenly see exactly what someone is feeling. Not to mention, I don’t necessarily want them to feel *me* either.”

Damaris looked sympathetic. “Yes, it can take some getting used to. However, sirens and other undines with training use an emotional shield to prevent others from feeling everything they feel. Like yours. Funny you can’t sense others when you’ve already mastered shielding your own emotions so well.” She frowned.

Zale straightened a little. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t sense you at all unless we’re touching. Now *that* is disconcerting.”

“You can’t?” He shook his head. “Then how did you know what I was feeling earlier?”

She gave him a sardonic look. “You wear your emotions on your face, Wonder Boy. An infant would know how you feel most of the time.”

Oh. Maybe Zale wasn’t as great at hiding his emotions as he thought. But how could he hide himself from their sensate abilities without even trying?

He rubbed the smooth striped brown river stone in the hemp bracelet on his wrist. It had been a gift from his mother, one he’d always kept for sentimental reasons, not realizing until Berian told him so that it had served another purpose—to hide him from the devices known as finders used by lumasi and others like them and to protect him from the same people who had . . . had what?

He shook his head to clear the fog again. *Why does this keep happening to me?*

“What’s that?” Damaris pointed at the stone in his bracelet.

He gazed at it stupidly, trying to remember what the stone was for. Finally, his brain latched on to the answer, but it was like catching a frog in a swamp. “It’s . . . something my mother gave me. Apparently, it acts as some kind of invisibility shield. Maybe it shields my emotions too.”

“Really?” She quirked her mouth. “That would explain a lot. May I see it?”

Zale extended his wrist toward her, and she took his hand again. He thrilled once more as

her warm curiosity surged through him, although with much less intensity than the first time.

“Why can’t I feel you as strongly now?”

“I told you,” she said, focusing on the stone, “I’m using a shield.”

“Weren’t you doing that before?”

She rubbed the smooth surface one last time, then sighed and dropped his wrist, shrugging.

“I’m no stone healer. I have no idea how your mother did it. I can sense spirit woven into the stone, but I can’t see how.” She met his eyes. “And no, I wasn’t. I didn’t know how much you’d be able to sense through your shield, and I wanted to make sure you saw how sincere I was. I guess I needn’t have worried, Wonder Boy.”

Zale smiled. “You know, *Wonder Boy* isn’t that bad. I far prefer that to *Waterboy*, which is what they used to call me when I was, um, putting on a show.”

“Yeah? Well, Wonder Boy, if you can do all that other stuff, can you sense me without looking at me?”

Zale closed his eyes and concentrated. He could hear her gentle breathing between the loud chirps of the birds in the fruit trees, but he couldn’t sense her in any other way. He opened his eyes and shook his head.

“Nope. Nothing.”

“Here, let’s try this.” She moved to sit cross-legged in front of him so their knees almost touched, then took both his hands in hers. “You can sense me now, right?”

Her frank curiosity and earnest intention flowed through him.

“Yes.”

She studied him, her brow furrowed slightly. “You don’t have your own emotional shield at all, do you? It was all the bracelet.”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t have the faintest idea how to make one.”

“Huh. So bizarre.”

The expression on her face reminded him a bit too much of the wonder-filled gazes he’d

seen for years from his tank when he'd been a curiosity on display, and he shifted uncomfortably.

The shift in his mood wasn't lost on her. She straightened, all business now. "First, I'm going to teach you how to shield yourself from others' emotions. Close your eyes."

Zale hesitated before he complied. He felt a little silly and awkward to be sitting cross-legged and holding hands with a beautiful girl, especially with his eyes closed.

"Now what?"

"Now I want you to picture me in your mind. Picture that we're both standing in the middle of the terrace. Feel my emotions as coming from the image of me in your head. Can you see it?"

"Yes."

"Great. Now imagine a wall between us with an open door. You can still see me, but I'm on the other side of the door."

Zale did as she said, placing Damaris and her emotions on the other side of the wall in his mind.

"Now close the door. Walk over to it in your imagination and close it, with me and my emotions on the other side of it."

Zale opened his eyes in surprise.

"It worked! I mean, I can still feel you, but it's not nearly as intense. It's more like hearing someone talking in another room but having no idea what they're saying." The sudden stem of the flow of her presence brought back his feelings of loneliness. "Um, thank you."

He tried to hide his disappointment, knowing she'd be able to sense it, but he had no idea how to shield himself without letting go of her hands—and he wasn't willing to lose that final thread of connection just yet. He snorted and looked away.

"You must think I'm pretty stupid, asking you to teach me to do something, and then being upset when it works."

"Is that what happened? I thought you were thinking about something else again. Your emotions have been all over the place while we've talked."

“You couldn’t tell?”

“I’m empathic, Zale. I can’t read your mind. No one can.” She looked thoughtful. “That’s probably a good thing.”

Zale laughed. “Thank God—I mean, Elyon—for that,” he muttered, looking at their hands. “You know, I’ve been taking daily lessons from Narcissa for three weeks on how to use my powers, and she never once mentioned this emotional shield thing. All she ever talks about is taking control of the fire within me. When are you usually taught how to do this?”

Damaris tapped her chin. “Hmm. Usually as soon as our abilities start to manifest, I suppose. Maybe earlier, as most undines have some ability with spirit, and it’s not polite to walk around with your own private feelings on display or snooping into the feelings of others. But Narcissa hasn’t ever really had much power to speak of. Not until she started taking the *sklavvia* bonds this summer, anyway. Maybe she doesn’t know about it, or it just didn’t occur to her as an issue—especially since your personal shield seemed to work just fine.” She glanced meaningfully at the bracelet.

“Maybe,” Zale said, but something about that seemed off.

Damaris gave him a sidelong glance. “I’m surprised she’s been able to teach you much, considering.”

“Me, too, I guess.” He lowered his voice. “Honestly, she hasn’t taught me a lot. I mean, she seems to know how to channel fire—she does it easily enough herself—but the way she tells me to do it doesn’t make sense at all. I feel like I learned more in the last twenty minutes with you than I have in three weeks with her.” Guilt pricked him at the admission, as though he were being disloyal, and he closed his mouth.

“Really?” Damaris smiled shyly, then deflated. “That sucks. Why do you keep going then?”

“Why do you keep coming to sparring practice when you’re already the best in your year?”

“To improve.”

“Yeah. That. Also, I don’t have a choice.”

Damaris gave a wry smile. “Also that.”

There was another reason, though—during Zale’s tutoring session, he was the centre of Narcissa’s attention. But the moment he left, she barely seemed to care if he existed. He couldn’t explain why, but he lived for the two hours every morning when he knew she’d be doting on him—her pale blond hair tickling his cheek as her slim arms guided his movements, every move punctuated by an athlete’s grace. Even now at the thought of her, an overwhelming desire to be by her side and do everything she said flowed over him like honey, seeping into his pores. *Ah, Narcissa*. He’d do anything to please her. Narcissa was so wonderful and beautiful. Like Venus. Or Aphrodite. Or—

Damaris adjusted her posture. “Next, I’m going to show you how to—Zale, why are you smiling?”

Zale started, soupy golden fog sifting through his thoughts. “I’m smiling?” He straightened his face and focused on her hands with effort. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

Damaris smiled uncertainly, then continued. “Now for part two of the lesson.” Damaris pulled her hands from his. “Close your eyes again and look at that closed door between me and you. Do you see it?”

Zale closed his eyes, conjuring the imagined courtyard from before. “Yes.”

“Now open the door and look at me. Picture yourself walking through the door, or the part of yourself that usually senses emotions in others. Can you feel anything?”

Zale breathed deep, concentrating. Nothing. He opened his eyes. “I can see you, but it’s only because I’ve imagined you there. I can’t feel anything.”

Damaris frowned. “Hmm. Try again. This time, picture the courtyard with only you in it. Then just turn around and *look* at everything in it, but look with your heart. Don’t picture anything unless you can feel it.”

Zale closed his eyes and pictured himself back in the courtyard. On impulse, he imagined him holding his arms out wide and spinning slowly around in a circle. And then he felt it—

Damaris's presence. He snapped his attention toward it, and there she was. She stood there in the courtyard in a beautiful white dress, the sun glowing on her hair, which flowed down her shoulders in a curly cascade, and a beatific smile on her face. She looked like an angel he'd seen in a painting in the squire's house once, perfect and with hardly any clothes on. He walked closer to her in his mind, mesmerized by the image. As he concentrated, Damaris's emotions changed from expectation to amusement and then discomfort. He opened his eyes.

"It worked. I could sense you."

Amusement and embarrassment played on Damaris's face. "I gathered as much."

Zale's face grew hot. He coughed to clear his husky throat. "Sorry about that."

She rolled her eyes. "That's nothing. If you knew what the girls in my dorm were like . . ." She seemed to think better of continuing and gave her head a shake. "Anyway, that door trick works both ways. If you want to shield your own emotions—you know, *without* your bracelet—you can also close them behind a door, or gather them in a ball and put them in a basket, or whatever works for you. Those are all different ways to use the same technique. Even though you weren't trying to do that during our exercise, it did have some effect when you closed the door in your mind."

"Let me try." He took her hands again so she would be able to feel him, then conjured up the wicker pack basket he used to use to take pasties and vegetables to the market for his mother. He pictured his own emotions as a burlap bag of onions, put them in the basket, and closed the lid.

Damaris wrinkled her nose. "I see that, in your typical annoying fashion, you picked up a new technique on the very first try. You're making it hard for me to like you, Wonder Boy."

Damaris's voice was deadpan, but, cracking open that door in his head, he could feel the amusement leaking through.

"You're not annoyed. You're pleased."

"See? Super annoying. Wonder Boy."

He dropped her hands and leaned back. "And you're a real rum kiddy."

"What does that mean?"

Zale's heart skipped. "It's what we used to call the one who brought in the best haul in a day when I was with the Roma, because they'd been the most clever thief."

"You're calling me a thief?"

He could sense her now. She was not happy. Why on earth had he said that?

"I only meant to say you're the best fighter in fifth year. And the best teacher I've had so far."

Zale chuckled to cover his embarrassment. "Sal used to call Gio a rum kiddy."

Thinking of Gio and Sylvie and Lucius and all his other Roma family, Zale was struck with a wave of homesickness. When he'd run away from home, the Chapman clan had taken him in as one of their own. He'd been happy there, even if his long days in the tank earning his keep had been excruciatingly boring. But Eric, the man who had become like a father to him, had been lying all along. His throat tightened. Had everyone else been in on the ruse too? Were they just playing him for a sap? How gullible he'd been.

"That was a different life, though. Whatever I thought about them, I was wrong. My mother is the only family I have left, and I have to get to her."

He clenched his fists. He needed to accept that his Roma family was gone. Eric and his daughter, Josefina, the people who had welcomed Zale for the past five years, were now pursuing him on behalf of the Order they served. All that time, they'd only been guarding him until the plans of some unknown mastermind had been ready to put into place. If it weren't for Abela, he'd probably be in Tartarus right now, chained and in torment, like his . . . the thought disappeared into mist.

"Where is she?" Damaris asked.

"Where is who?" Zale asked, gazing through her.

"Your mom. You said you had to get to her?" She looked annoyed. "Chains of Prometheus, your mind is as focused as a sea slug's. Are you always like this?"

He shook his head, trying to remember what he'd been thinking about.

"My mom is . . . Abela's gone. Did I tell you that? She should have found me by now. She has a chariot, and Berian has a chariot, and they could find me whenever they . . ." That thought slipped away into golden mist too.

Damaris looked at him, brow furrowed in worry. "You're really not with it right now. Maybe we should go see Healer Evadne. You might be coming down with something."

He shook his head. "No. No. I'm fine."

"You're as fine as Icarus's wings. May I try something?" She raised her hand toward his forehead and paused, waiting for permission.

He nodded, and she put a palm on his forehead and closed her eyes. After several seconds, she dropped her hand, frowning, and opened her eyes.

"Maybe you just need more water. Stay here."

She jumped up, took his bowl over to the water fountain and refilled it, then brought it back to him. He guzzled it down.

The cool water did clear his head a little, enough to know that Damaris was right. Something weird was happening to him. Something he couldn't control and couldn't see.

He didn't like it.

In the distance, dark clouds gathered on the horizon, and the low rumble of thunder reached them. Damaris glanced at the storm that had seemingly formed out of nowhere, then at Zale.

"Is that because of you?"

Zale closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and cooled his anxiety to a low simmer. When he opened them, the clouds had dissipated into friendly white puffballs.

"Nothing I can't handle."

She looked worried, though, and kept glancing at him sideways and then at the archway, like she might be thinking about possible ways of escape. Just like every other undine woman on this bloody island had done since he'd arrived. Zale had had enough of being distrusted just for

being a boy. If Damaris couldn't trust him, then he wanted to know it now.

He glared at her. "Why did you come over and talk to me? Was it just so you could brag to the other girls later how you touched the scary boy?" He hadn't meant to sound so harsh, but he wasn't sorry.

Damaris jerked her face toward him. "Is that what you think? I just wanted to use you to gain some kind of popularity points?"

Zale shrugged noncommittally. "Why not? You don't seem to trust me. No one does. Not even my own cousin."

Narcissa. He started feeling all floaty again, but he was too angry to daydream, and he wasn't done.

"They lock me in an enormous empty dorm room at night and keep *taps* on me at all times. I can't even go to the latrines alone. And they never let me go anywhere to swim. I'm a merman in a city of mermaids, and I'm not allowed to swim! They're probably afraid I'll swim away or something, and they might be right, the way I've been treated. And now here you are, acting like you want to be my friend, but at the first hint that I might be a little upset, you start acting all cagey. So what's your deal? Do you want to be here or not? Because if not, I don't need you. I'm better off alone."

He jumped to his feet and strode away from her, needing some space. The storm clawed at his gut once more.

She gripped his arm and spun him around to face her. He crossed his arms and scowled at the tiles.

"Look, Zale. I'm sorry, okay? You have to understand, though, that until you showed up here three weeks ago and Calandra made her big announcement about why we can't have boys, none of us had ever imagined that someone like you could exist. You are . . . well, you're different. You're a brand-new thing. And no one knows if what Calandra said is true."

Zale threw his hands in the air in exasperation. "Everyone keeps saying that, but it doesn't

make sense. You have men here. They can't all be imbecilic automatons. Don't you have a father? Aren't there human boys around here somewhere? Surely there are a few."

Damaris stopped, her jaw working. "All human boys are Redeemed and trained as *douloi* or *tapeinoi* from the age of twelve. The only one I knew at all as a freeman was Redeemed when I was still very young. He is now my sister Eudora's consort. And my father was the same. Redeemed. He was my whole life, since before he arrived on the island until the day he died, just like the men you were brought here with. You really are different."

At the news of her father's death, Zale paused. "I'm sorry about your father."

She shrugged. "Don't worry about it. He died years ago. An accident."

Zale's throat went dry. "Mine died in an accident too."

He missed his own father so much, sometimes it was still a physical pain, the loss compounded by guilt at the part Zale played in his death. Kenver Teague was the best man Zale had ever known, his hero. He couldn't imagine having never known him at all. Yet Damaris hardly seemed bothered by her father's loss. Her reaction only added fuel to his fire.

"But I *am* sorry. I'm sorry you missed out on knowing your father, and he missed out on knowing you. What if he was the most wonderful person who ever lived?" He gestured around. "Isn't it high time things started to change on this island? Most men are absolutely harmless, just like most women. Aren't you sad you aren't more sad?"

Harmless? Zale hadn't exactly proved harmless—but his intentions had always been good. Not like his childhood friend Robert Cox, or Robbie's older brother Gryffyn and his friends. While Gryffyn's gang had been trying to hurt Talwyn and Zale, Robbie had stood by and done nothing, which is when Zale had lost control and the lightning had responded. He hadn't known Talwyn was his guardian back then—she'd just been the girl who had always been there.

They'd all been younger then, just kids, and people could change. Or at least, he desperately hoped they could, or how could he ever redeem himself for his own past mistakes? Though lately Robert had been trying to turn over a new leaf, Gryffyn seemed to be getting worse. Zale had to

admit, it was pretty great that Robert had followed him across the ocean to warn him about Gryffyn and the Order taking Zale's mother.

But men like Gryffyn Cox were the exception, not the rule. Surely Damaris and all the other women in this whole crazy society could see that? If she could only understand, maybe he could get her to help him find Robert and Kofi and his other friends from the *Atlanta* and Release them, since they must all be *douloi* now themselves.

Damaris did not appear to see it. "Whether it is time for things to change or not is not for me to say. Narcissa has decreed to uphold the law in all cases except yours, and a household caught harbouring Freeman is subject to imprisonment and death. Even if I knew Calandra's trick for Releasing a man whose bond I don't hold—and, frankly, my instructors won't even teach me how to *make* the *sklavia* bond for two more years—it would be treason to do so. Besides, my father was not like you. He was human. Who's to say that human men aren't every bit as dangerous as we've been taught to believe? You heard what Cain did at the Bonding Ceremony. Why, that one man alone killed two dozen sirens in seconds—"

"I thought it was four, total."

Damaris scowled. "You may be right. Even undines are prone to exaggeration. But whether four or twenty-four, he killed several women before he got away. And in case you've forgotten, when all the men in Sireniapolis for whom Adonia had been bondmistress were suddenly Free, it was chaos. There were at least five other deaths around the city and plenty more injured before order was restored. And the Wildmen keep picking people off. I heard another girl went missing yesterday, someone who worked right here in the palace. That hardly seems harmless."

"How can the Freed men be responsible for that? There are no Freeman in the palace, are there?"

"Except you." She arched a taunting brow, then relented and peered at the refreshment stand across the lawn, which had been emptied by servants while they sat chatting. "I never said she lived in the palace, Icarus, only worked here."

Zale wanted to argue further, tell her about how torturous it had been to have his emotions and will stolen by someone else when *he* had been Redeemed, and how disorienting it was to be Freed from that state—all his emotions swirling in a big, confusing jumble—but she didn't seem to be in a listening mood. Besides, every time he thought about what it had been like to be Redeemed, he went cold.

He crossed his arms again. "Well, if you're afraid of me, perhaps we'd be better off going back to acting the same as before. It's hard enough with the others jumping every time I sneeze. Maybe you'd better go. Thanks for the water and the barley cake."

Damaris scowled. "So you're going to do that, are you?"

Zale said nothing, just concentrated on keeping the door closed in his mind. He didn't want to know what she was feeling right now.

In the distance, a gong sounded.

Zale glanced at the shadows falling long across the courtyard. "It's time for the evening meal. Best go find your pod before they wonder what's become of you."

"*My* pod? Won't you be joining us?"

Zale crossed his arms and stood his ground. "I've lost my appetite. Besides, prisoners have no pods."

When he showed no signs of moving, Damaris turned and strode away, eventually disappearing through the archway that would take her through the royal quarters wing to the Great Hall for supper.

Once her footsteps faded away, he went to the wall and picked up his waistcoat, dusted it off, and put it on. Narcissa didn't like him wearing it over the fitted linen *tapeinos* shirt she'd provided him, but he wore it anyway. In this land where nothing fit, it reminded him of the familiar world he'd left behind.

He hiked to the far end of the courtyard and stepped through the same archway Damaris had used, hoping he could sneak into the Great Hall without her noticing. Despite what he'd

said, he'd worked up a healthy appetite. And he had no intention of returning to his empty dorm room a moment sooner than necessary.

The *tapeinoi* near the door fell into place behind him, and Zale glanced uneasily over his shoulder. The faces of the men remained as blank as always, staring straight ahead as though seeing nothing, yet somehow seeing everything. He'd seen them sparring in the courtyard in the mornings, and their dispassionate movements had made him think of the sparring dummies along the wall—while the men moved with intention and skill, they did it without emotion. Their blank presence was yet another reminder that although this was the land of his own kind, he didn't really belong.

How long until Narcissa decided to lift the reprieve she'd given to him alone among all the men on this island to remain Free? And how long until the novelty of Damaris's new male undine friend wore off, and she abandoned him? He'd made the right decision, blowing her off. He had to make sure he stayed focused on his mission to save . . .

Narcissa. He had to trust Narcissa. She was the one who would do the saving of . . . whomever it was that needed it.

Floating on a dreamy golden cloud, he turned and wandered toward his dorm room, smiling when the lock clicked shut behind him.

4

THE REBEL



CALANDRA KOR'DELPHINE GLIDED THROUGH THE dark green water of the narrow drainage tunnel, propelling herself toward the centre of the lowest level of the Opal Palace with a flick of her tail, using her hands to keep herself away from the rough-hewn, algae-covered stone walls. In the soft glow of the lightstone laced onto the left shoulder of her bodice, she could make out the aubergine fluke-like tail fins of Kynthia in front of her. Ahead of Kynthia, a defected siren singer named Airlea led the way, and Nelly kor'Nyx followed Calandra. The antiques merchant's salty pilot of a sister, Nicandra—or Nick, as she insisted on being called—had stayed behind with the submersible, waiting for the rest of them to return.

Other than Nick and Kynthia, every member of this team had joined the Free Will Society in the last three weeks, and most of their skills lay far outside the territory of stealth and rescue. But when one incites a rebellion, one must take what one can get.

Rebel. There's a word I never thought I'd claim.

Then again, three weeks ago, Calandra wasn't sure she'd even live this long.

Calandra's Tear bumped against the bare pale flesh of her décolletage as she swam. The dark green opal pendant had been bequeathed to her by her mother, Delphine. Normally, Calandra would take the Tear off in the water, but for this mission she needed the emotional field

dampening abilities that her mother had imbued it with. Last week, she'd finally figured out how Delphine had created the emotional shield, and now the other three members of the stealth team wore their own dampening shieldstones—multi-coloured red, orange, yellow, green, and black oval fire agate stones from the mines at Fire Lake, not teardrop opals, on woven hemp bands around their upper arms. If Atargatis smiled and Narcissa hadn't increased the guard at the lower levels of the palace, they would get all the way to their goal undetected. Calandra closed her eyes and sent up a silent prayer for insurance.

The tunnel went on forever, and she was glad she'd brought lightstones. Even though she hadn't had a nightmare for weeks, it was dark enough in the passage that even her and her companions' sharp night vision wouldn't have been able to see much, and the last thing she needed was to feel trapped in the darkness of a vast, empty ocean. Not that a tunnel would have felt like that anyway, she supposed. Still, she kept peering past Kynthia's and Airlea's fluttering swimming skirts, hoping for a hint they were nearing the grates that would let them into the pool at the base of the Mother's Heart chamber, the home of the Heartstone.

The enormous spherical fire opal encased in rock quartz suspended five stories above the waterline in the Mother's Heart chamber was the most precious object on Sirenia—Atargatis's gift to protect her children from the bloodthirsty humans who would prey on them. Despite its long, slow decline over the millennia, the Heartstone was still Sirenia's primary source of power. At least it used to be, until three weeks ago when Calandra and her brother, Zale, had attempted what no undine in three millennia had been able to do—use conjoined male and female powers to heal it. But instead of renewing the hope of the Atargasian undines, she and Zale had damaged it further, and the barrier that protected their island had vanished. *Some Saviour of the Heartstone I turned out to be.*

She still got a shiver up her spine every time she thought of the bolts of lightning and the booming crack that had signalled the Stone's further devastation. Never in all their history had their island been so defenseless and exposed. It was what kept Calandra up at night.

Well, one of the things. There were so many others—how to feed the rebels and Freed human men sheltering at Margaret House. How to help those in the city who were cowering in fear of the feral Freeman roaming the streets and bring those men under the FWS's protection. How to protect the island from outside ships until the barrier could be restored—if it could be restored. And what to do about her cousin Narcissa's complete lack of concern for any of it.

Ironic—I finally get rid of my nightmares and there are four other even bigger problems to take their place. Or more like four dozen.

The bundle of stinging nettle-like *sklavias* bonds she carried in the back of her mind—tethers to the minds of men around the island—flared red and bright in her vision, and a dull, throbbing ache in her temples threatened a seizure. *Not now. Please!*

She hummed under her breath, reaching for the peaceful centre that had been her refuge since she'd become one with the Spirit of the Heartstone three weeks ago. That Spirit, which she'd felt so keenly at first, had been harder and harder to sense ever since—and so had the peace she needed to prevent the seizures. Which was why Airlea had come on this mission, though Calandra would have preferred to leave the clingy volunteer at home—she seemed to have a knack for soothing Calandra's headaches, something that had eluded every physic who'd tried.

The throbbing pain signalled the biggest problem causing her to lose sleep—the eventual insanity that would surely mean the destruction of the entire island and beyond. With the way her power had been growing lately, probably *far* beyond. Unless, of course, she did the right thing, following in the wake of the Mad healers before her, and exiled herself to the Abyss.

She shivered and flexed the hand her mentor, Thea kor'Aglaia, had had to regrow after she'd lost it to the Voidstone. She'd had a brush with the Abyss and the creatures who lived there already, and she didn't care to repeat the experience.

Still, if it's between me or the destruction of the island . . .

She knew which she would choose. It was what she always chose. She just hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Airlea peered through the grate into the darkness beyond. When she looked back at Calandra, her emerald-green eyes glowed faintly in her pale, heart-shaped face.

“Feels clear.”

Calandra moved forward and placed her hands against the edges of the copper grate. Copper was not as easy to manipulate as stone or crystal—most stone healers wouldn't even attempt what Calandra was about to do. To Calandra, though, breaking the bonds that held the metal in place was as simple as tying her bodice or combing her hair. But she felt no pride in the fact. Why should she? She had failed in her duty, the one thing she'd been raised to succeed in—healing the Heartstone. No other accomplishment could ever shine brightly enough to make her forget that.

She moved the grate aside and slipped into the Mother's Pool. Moonlight from the open tower above the pool didn't penetrate this deep, but the water was a slightly lighter shade of night.

Her empathic sense on high alert, she reached out with spirit to see who was in proximity and if there were any danger from within the palace. She sensed only one presence in the vicinity of the antechamber above—someone with an emotional aura of waiting about her. That would be Zoe kor'Dione, the siren singer who'd been working with them from the inside. Zoe had been with Calandra when she'd finally learned the truth about the Madness and had helped her in many ways since. Calandra felt a sliver of gratitude that not everyone in the palace who trusted her had suffered for it. Without Zoe's continued loyalty, Calandra could never have gotten this far.

She hummed the all-clear signal to her teammates over her shoulder. When Airlea—the only other team member fully trained with spirit—hummed back confirmation that she also sensed no danger, Calandra used her powerful tail to propel herself to the surface of the pool. The water brightened with every thrust, until she broke the surface into one of her favourite places in the Opal Palace—the tricorn-shaped tower at its core.

Moonlight streamed through the glass ceiling over seven storeys above them, refracted and amplified by the thousands of rock crystals that lined the walls of the vast chamber, making her feel as though she were floating in a cavern of silver fire. Far above her head, connected to the wall by six golden spokes, loomed the Heartstone, its centre pulsing with a dull red glow like the last embers of a dying fire. Calandra stared at the Stone. The beating heart of their island should be blazing with brilliant red fire. Instead, its rock quartz surface was marred with a jagged fissure on one side, and the fire opal at its heart would barely outshine a candle.

Still, the Stone was not as damaged as she'd expected. There was the crack in the surface, yes, but the Heartstone was otherwise completely intact, the rest of the surface smooth and whole, and no other fissures pierced the heart. She stared at it in curiosity. If the Heartstone was still working, why had the barrier gone down? Tentatively, she reached out with spirit to see if she could touch the presence she knew resided in the Stone.

Nelly broke the surface beside her. "Is that it?" She frowned at the Heartstone, sounding more disappointed than incredulous.

Calandra ignored the question and opened her heart a little further. The Spirit was definitely there, warm and welcoming, like sun on the salt sea with clear blue sky above. She took a breath that smelled of tangy summer rain on an easterly wind, despite the still air of the chamber. She drank in the promise and comfort of it. For a moment, everything seemed less hopeless.

Beside her, Nelly and the others floated in the dazzling water, staring around the Mother's Heart chamber in wonder. It was the first time any of them besides Airlea had seen it.

"It's stronger than I expected," Airlea murmured, staring at the sphere above them. The Heartstone's dim pulse reflected in her big eyes. She turned her earnest, heart-shaped face on Calandra as though waiting for a response.

Calandra sucked in her lips and studied the Heartstone. So it wasn't just her imagination.

"I agree." She retracted her empathic sense to return to the task at hand. They didn't have time to solve the mystery of the Heartstone right now. She jerked her finger at the small ledge

about ten feet above their heads. “Zoe’s waiting above.”

She began swimming toward the ladder, making soft swooshing noises as she pulled herself through the water, her long, honey-blond braid trailing behind her.

As though on cue, a woman with a dark brown braided ponytail hanging over her shoulder stuck her head over the ledge. When she saw them, a spike of alarm shot from her and she whispered, “Took you long enough.”

Calandra smirked. So the shieldstones had worked. It was rare for Zoe’s emotional shield to be rattled by anything.

“We had to avoid the siren pods patrolling the cove.” Calandra reached for the ladder notches cut into the smooth stone of the wall. When she looked up again, Zoe had disappeared into the room beyond.

Calandra changed to *podia* state, her banded blue-green tail dividing into slender legs, the scales fading, the slick protective layer of gel absorbing into her skin, and her ruffled leathery gills flattening against her neck. She ascended to the small ledge protruding from the wall at the top of the ladder and clambered into the small arched marble antechamber beyond, standing near the edge of the black marble triquetra inlaid on the white floor. On the wall, torches burned in sconces next to lightstone fixtures that hadn’t been used for years—not since Calandra’s aunt, Queen Adonia, had declared a blackout as a preventative measure against the further degradation of the Heartstone when Calandra had been thirteen.

The five-year blackout had probably helped the Stone to survive until Calandra came of age last month, which is exactly what Adonia had intended. Just as she’d intended for Calandra to take the *sklavvia* bonds of all the unmarried men on the island—which Calandra had been doing when she’d lost her hand and had to return to Sireniapolis midway through the island tour—and bond a consort in order to enhance her power as much as possible before attempting to heal the Heartstone with the help of a circle of stone healers. She’d also intended for Calandra to eventually take the throne, naming her the Opal Princess, much to Narcissa’s outrage.

Then again, there were a lot of things Adonia hadn't intended—for Calandra to learn that the *sklavia* bonds were not only the reason why powerful healers like herself went Mad, but also why no boys had been born on the island for three millennia. For Calandra to Free her intended consort, Osaze, proving to herself and the rest of the island that not all men were the violent monsters she'd been raised to believe. And for the son Adonia's sister had fled the island to raise to return right before the Heartstone healing ceremony by a stroke of divine grace, proving that a woman who conceived with a free-minded consort could, indeed, bear a son—and that son could be gifted with fire, an element no female undine had ever had access to.

Delphine hadn't been Mad. She'd been convicted with glorious purpose. And she'd given Calandra the burden of following in her footsteps.

For Releasing Osaze, Adonia had intended to have Calandra executed, as was the law. Except, instead, she'd gone Mad and died, and the niece she'd raised to be the Saviour of the Heartstone had fled the city in defeat—her mentor dead, her consort-elect exiled by her own volition, her brother abandoned, several of her allies imprisoned, and the Heartstone darker than ever.

So many mistakes. Tonight, she intended to right two of those wrongs.

Calandra and her companions stood in a loose circle on the marble floor, water dripping from their dark green hemp swimming skirts and scoop-necked bodices, with small oiled-canvas dry pouches tied to their swimming belts. Working quickly, they withdrew small towels from their pouches and dried off as best they could, then tied short linen sarongs around their hips over the wet thigh-length skirts, covering them to the knees.

Zoe descended the stairs just beyond the antechamber's back arched entrance and reentered the room. The siren was in full land-duty uniform, the communication stone and silver triquetra pin set with a single pearl denoting her rank as a singer laced onto the left shoulder of her leather-belted turquoise-blue fitted bodice. She laid her bamboo *deiktis* staff against her shoulder and flicked her regulation braid behind her.

“We’re still clear. How did you get this far without me sensing any of you?”

Zoe’s tone was casual, but her unease at their stealthy entrance seeped from her pores and into Calandra’s empathic soul, and the throbbing behind Calandra’s eyes increased.

Calandra pointed to her Tear, which still glistened with drops of water. “I finally figured out how my mother made this. Should make it easier for us to get to the dungeons this way.”

Zoe eyed the teardrop-shaped cabochon-cut opal pendant hanging from the silver chain around Calandra’s neck, then glanced at the fire agates the others wore. “Did you bring one for me?”

“We don’t have that many yet. I’ll add you to the list.”

Zoe nodded once, then indicated the hallway receding into the dark depths beneath the Opal Palace next to the stairwell that ascended to the upper levels.

“Everything’s looked after. No one suspects a thing.” Zoe glanced around the circle of women. “Are you going to introduce me?”

Calandra swallowed. “Sorry. This is Kynthia, a woman who joined us from Fire Lake. You remember, we met her that day at Elpida. She has a little boy named Xander.”

“Yes, I remember.” Zoe nodded toward Kynthia but did not salute.

Kynthia bunched the fingers and thumb of her right hand together and pressed them to the centre of her slightly bowed forehead. “Nice to see you again, Singer kor’Dione.”

Calandra indicated the elegant middle-aged woman with her light brown hair in thin rows of long braids gathered in a ponytail.

“This is Penelope —”

“Nelly,” she interjected, bunching the fingers of her right hand and pressing them against her forehead in salute. “I believe you’ve met my sister, Nick. You’re doing good work here, Singer kor’Dione.”

Zoe nodded, hesitantly returning the salute.

“And you probably know Singer kor’Phile.” Calandra indicated the slim young woman next

to her.

Airlea gave a crisp salute, pressing her fingers to her forehead as though they'd been pulled there by magnetic force. "Singer kor'Dione."

Zoe's expression did not change, but Calandra sensed a coolness come over her.

"You still use your designation?"

Airlea's face turned red. "I do not. Calandra insists. Please call me Airlea."

She dropped her gaze in shame, and Calandra realized she should have felt bad for embarrassing her. But, like the rest of her emotions lately, the place in her heart that should have held shame for hurting another was as dead as the Heartstone in the chamber behind them.

"I apologize," Calandra said woodenly. "I still call her by the rank she held when she served with Rhapsodist kor'Zelia."

While Calandra and Zale had been trying to heal the Heartstone, Calandra's insane aunt had been trying to kill them from inside the Mother's Heart Observation Chamber using spirit—something Calandra hadn't thought possible until she'd seen Adonia do it in Fire Lake. If Calandra's best friend, Tanni kor'Zelia, hadn't attacked, Adonia probably would have succeeded. Tanni had diverted Adonia's attention but had been killed seconds later with a single blast of spirit from the queen's hands.

Calandra's hands shook at the memory. She pressed them against her legs to still them. "I have so few ways to honour her sacrifice, or the sacrifice that Airlea has made in joining our cause so publicly. Not that I want you to do that," she added quickly. "We need you on the inside, and I appreciate the risk you take in remaining where you are."

Zoe nodded. "Your appreciation is appreciated. It's not easy, as I'm sure you can imagine, while surrounded by so many powerful healers and sirens."

Calandra nodded. The Opal Palace was populated by humans and undines alike in various roles, but it was also the home of the Royal Academy, where the most gifted girls on the island were sent to train to become sirens, stone healers, plant healers, and physics. And since the

events of three weeks ago, Zoe had been in danger every moment from either her siren podmates or any other undine with sufficient power who happened to notice something off about her. Fortunately, Zoe had the most emotional discipline of anyone Calandra knew—she rarely let her own emotions show, even without a shieldstone.

“I know. Thank you.” Calandra laid a hand on Zoe’s arm, hoping to convey gratitude, but found her well dry. She said the words, but that’s all they were.

Startlement and something else—guilt?—seeped through the touch before Zoe stiffened and turned away. Was Zoe hiding something?

But of course she was. She was aiding and abetting a wanted criminal, a defector, and two other rebels in getting into the palace to break other criminals out of prison. Calandra hadn’t realized how much the siren’s subterfuge bothered her, but, if anything, Zoe’s inner struggle put Calandra’s mind at ease. It wasn’t easy standing against tradition for what one knew was right—Calandra knew that better than anyone. If Zoe weren’t questioning herself, that would be of greater concern.

Zoe frowned and gestured down the hallway. “Let’s get to this, shall we? The longer we stand here, the greater the risk of discovery.”

“Yes, let’s. After you, Singer kor’Dione.”

With a look around the circle of women, Zoe turned and padded down the hall in bare feet.

Calandra swallowed. No turning back now. Their fate was in Zoe’s hands.

She beckoned to the others and followed Zoe into the bowels of the Opal Palace.

5

JAILBREAK



AS SOON AS THE SILVERY moonlight diffusing from the Mother's Heart faded behind Calandra and the others, Zoe pressed her thumb against a lightstone on her wrist and held it aloft. Calandra glanced high up on the wall—yes, even the lightstone that had stayed dimly alight during the blackout had gone dark. Calandra lit her own lightstone, and the others did the same. *If the barrier is down and not even the guide lights remain, how long until the Voidstone fails too?*

A charging red-gold dragon with its mouth open to consume her filled her vision, and she blinked it away. Cold sweat trickled down her back.

How long until Damon comes for me?

Zoe led them up a level on a staircase that had been hewn directly out of the black basalt of the mountain, then set off along the curving stone passage toward the dungeons. Calandra could have guided the group herself—while growing up in the palace, she'd spent many nights wandering the hallways, plagued by sleeplessness. The lower corridors carved from black stone by long-dead stone healers—passages others had forgotten—had been her refuge. When she'd been caught, which wasn't often, she'd paid for it. But that had been better than enduring the nightmares of an ocean devoid of life and light—every living creature dead by her failure.

Damon had taken the nightmares away . . . for a time. But then he'd proven to be the worst

nightmare of all. What had happened to the dragon spirit who'd attacked her and Zale in the Heartstone? Had he escaped as she feared, or was he still trapped in the Void?

And why hadn't Adonia replaced the guide lights with self-powered lightstones years ago? Perhaps torches were more readily available. The more crowded Sirenia had become, the further resources had had to stretch. Calandra may not have always agreed with Adonia's tactics, but until she'd gone Mad, the queen had been a good leader of her people. If only her daughter could have taken the best, instead of the worst, from her mother.

In the darkness ahead of them, she saw Tanni fall once more, the siren's throat crushed by Adonia's outstretched hand from across the Observation Chamber. Something about being here again, where it had all happened, was bringing everything back. Calandra's heart sped up and the throbbing in her temples increased.

A light touch on her shoulder made her open her eyes.

Airlea looked at her in concern. "Are you okay?"

Calandra nodded. "Splashy," she muttered, and shrugged off Airlea's hand. She might be wearing an emotional damper, but Airlea would be able to sense her emotions through touch, regardless, and she didn't want to share them with anyone. Not right now. Her pain was all she had left of Tanni. And it was *hers*.

If Tanni were here, she'd call me a lump fish.

She clamped her jaw and clenched her fists.

If Tanni were here, she'd be calling me a lot of things right now. But at least she'd be here.

She had shared everything with Tanni from the age of seven when they became bunkmates at the Academy, right down to an empathic bond no one else had known about—a technique Calandra had discovered by accident. Well, no one except her consort-elect, Osaze, with whom she had shared one much like it. At the thought of the man she loved, a man who was now thousands of miles away, never to return, tears threatened at last, and she blinked them away. Where those two emotional links used to be in her brain, comforting her and connecting her to

her loved ones, all that remained was a vacuum to remind her of all she had lost.

Zoe motioned for them to stop, and they melted against the wall. To their right, a short stairwell descended to dungeon level. If they continued along the hallway, they would eventually reach the stairwell that would lead them down to the other underwater entrance Calandra had discovered long ago, which she, Nick, and Thea's consort Gerrick had used to escape after their plans had gone so awry. Calandra had originally planned to use that as the entrance for this rescue mission, thinking it would have been simpler and less dangerous to come back that way, but Zoe had warned them that Narcissa had posted guards at the entrance to the passage, and no one was allowed in or out. Entering through the Mother's Heart had been the only other option besides coming in the front door. And her cousin would not have given her a warm reception.

A quick check with spirit revealed four presences in various stages of alertness in the otherwise-empty dungeons below. Calandra leaned toward Zoe.

"I thought you said you cleared the way for us." She jerked her head toward the stairs. "There are four people down there. I don't want to give anyone a story to tell. We can't afford for you to blow your cover."

Zoe arched an eyebrow. "Don't you trust me?"

Calandra, chagrined, nodded. "If I didn't, we wouldn't be here."

Zoe gave a perfunctory nod. "Good."

She walked over to a nearby alcove and fetched two copper flasks from behind an antique Phrygian vase depicting Melissa stalking the white hart. It was chipped and dusty and the paint had faded—Calandra could see why it had been stashed out of the way down here.

"Now, to take care of my duty-mate." Zoe turned toward the stairwell.

Calandra eyed the flasks, wondering what she planned to do with the other siren who had been posted on guard duty for the night. "But—"

Zoe halted next to Calandra. "I forgot to mention, they brought in a new prisoner last night,

a young human woman they caught trafficking Freeman out of the city. I assume you'll want to take her with you."

A human woman helping the Freeman? Intriguing. Trying to sneak Freeman past the royal guard now patrolling every road out of Sireniapolis was either incredibly foolish or incredibly brave. Or both. Calandra wondered where she'd been taking them. At least that explained the fourth person. She supposed the Freeman had already been re-enslaved and returned to their mistresses, and her heart pinched. *But Osaze is safe.*

"What are you planning to do about your podmate?" Calandra asked.

From the back of the line, Kynthia strained to hear the answer.

Zoe smiled. "Don't worry. As I said, I've got you covered. Just stay out of sight until I signal."

"How will we know what your signal is?" Kynthia asked.

Zoe gave her a look of disdain. "You'll know."

Kynthia, chastened, took a step back and said nothing more.

Zoe gestured for them to stay out of sight, and Calandra and the others pressed themselves into the wall of the hallway. Then Zoe turned and strutted down the stairs and along the passageway, hailing her fellow guard.

"What took you so long?" came the other woman's voice. "Was there a lineup at the lavs in the middle of the night?"

"I really had to go," Zoe said, and laughed. "And I stopped at the kitchen on the way back. Here. Courtesy of Maria. Mulled spiced wine, fresh from the cauldron."

"I thought you were going to the lavs, not to flirt with that scullery maid who fancies you."

"Too bad I don't like women. She's a pretty one." Zoe's tone was jovial. "Besides, it was on the way, and I thought we could use a little nightcap. It's not like anything ever happens down here."

"That's the truth," the woman said. "But drinking on duty? I don't know . . ."

Zoe guffawed. "What do you think will happen? Someone will come check on us? Like

anyone ever comes down here unless they absolutely have to. We won't see another soul until duty change at dawn."

"What if Narcissa goes on one of her rampages and starts stalking about again?"

"Don't you mean *her majesty*?"

The other guard harrumphed. "Such a pity that Calandra died before she could claim the throne. But until there's a formal ceremony, I'll call Narcissa what I want. Her name's a lot better than some of the choice words I had in mind."

Calandra's throat closed and she exchanged glances with her companions. *They think I'm dead? Why would they think that?*

"Your funeral," said Zoe. "And as for her majesty, she won't be stalking any time soon. I just saw her, let's say, *holding court* in the Great Hall."

The other woman gave a dry, barking laugh. "If you can call drinking herself into a stupor and being fawned on by *douloi* 'holding court.'"

"Yes, that is what I meant." Zoe's voice was tight, but when she continued, it had returned to joviality. "So, are you going to make me drink alone, or what?"

"Well, I hate to see good mulled wine go to waste."

Calandra could feel the woman's desire to give in washing up the stairs in little ripples. But even Kynthia, who had almost no talent with spirit, could probably discern Zoe's victory in the woman's voice. Zoe was an exceptional actress. She never let a hint of her duplicity shine through her emotions. No wonder she had remained undetected in the palace for so long.

"Thank you," the woman said at last, followed by a quiet space which must have meant she'd taken a long swig from the flask. "If only all of my podmates were as relaxed as you. This duty is the worst, isn't it? Give me barrier duty any day over—"

The soft *whump* of a body being eased onto the stone floor signalled the success of Zoe's plan. In moments, Zoe called softly up the stairwell.

"All clear!"

Calandra and the others crept down the stairs and joined her. There were far more cells on this level than ever got used, so the only torchlit space was the small guards' common room near the bottom of the stairs. Zoe's wine flask sat on a small table along with a small cloth-covered basket that likely contained a snack for later. On the wall, a broom and some feldspar cuffs hung from pegs. Anxious to see her friends, Calandra jogged past the unconscious siren slumped against the wall and stopped at the entrance to the hallway beyond, where Zoe was opening the last of the cells, and the others followed. Three women cautiously moved into the corridor and stared at them with shocked expressions. With a muttered comment, Zoe returned to the common room for the key to unlock Meg's feldspar cuffs, pushing past Kynthia and Airlea, who stepped backward into the common room to give her space.

"Calandra!" Judith ran to her and threw her arms around her, and Calandra returned her former lady's maid's embrace. "You're alive!"

Calandra gave a short laugh. "Of course I'm alive. It's good to see you."

Judith stepped back and looked down at her filthy indigo chiton, one of her palace livery outfits she'd received when she'd signed up as Calandra's lady's maid. She'd been wearing it when she was arrested for helping to Free as many of the *douloi* at Calandra's failed wedding as she could manage before being captured. Her dusky skin was smudged with dirt and her long curly black hair was snarled and greasy, but she had obviously tried to keep it braided.

"Are you sure? I feel as fit as last month's Panselinos bread."

Judith had been Calandra's first contact with the Free Will Society, the rebel organization started by Calandra's mother, before Calandra even knew they existed. Though she and Judith had gotten off to a rocky start, the girl had become a loyal friend, risking her life to help Calandra multiple times—as had Judith's mother, Ignatia, when she'd brought Judith's little brother, Zeke, to face Adonia at the Court of the Redeemed three weeks ago, showing all of Sirenia that Delphine's theories about the bonds and androsterility were true—Zale's existence was not an isolated incident. Calandra would trust Judith with her life.

“You have no idea how good, no matter how you look. Or smell.” Calandra gave a teasing smile, and Judith chuckled. “I take the blame. If it hadn’t taken me so long to rescue you, you might have looked less a fright.”

“I’ll go guard the entrance,” Airlea said, and moved away.

Calandra barely glanced at her in acknowledgement, caught up in the elation of the moment. She turned to the other familiar face, a tall, willowy girl with long, straight black hair, a round face, and long, narrow green eyes beneath perfect black eyebrows. She rubbed her wrists where the cuffs that had dampened her powers had been chafing them.

“Meg.” Calandra clasped the other girl’s hands, noting that her stone healer ring was still in place. At least they hadn’t stripped her of that.

“Calandra.” Meg dropped her hands and gave her an awkward hug instead. “I have so many questions, but I assume they will have to wait.” She stepped aside. “This is Tafrara. She came in last night for . . . harbouring Freeman, was it?”

She turned to the slim young woman behind her for confirmation. The girl had pretty round black eyes, her thick, shiny black hair spilled down her shoulders to her waist, and she wore a natural-coloured linen chiton belted at the waist. Bisecting her golden-brown face on the forehead and chin were intricate dark blue tattoos made of hatched geometric lines. She looked slightly younger than Calandra’s and Meg’s eighteen years.

“Yes, that’s right,” Tafrara replied in a timid voice. She darted her bunched fingers to her puckered forehead in a nervous salute, then clasped her hands in front of her and wrung them. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” She looked back and forth around the group. “Won’t we be in worse trouble if we’re caught?”

“Don’t worry,” Kynthia said soothingly. “We’ll be away from the city before anyone’s the wiser.”

This trembling sea urchin was harbouring Freeman?

Then again, Calandra had been surprised by people before. The girl must have more

gumption than met the eye. She glanced at the inert body of the woman in a turquoise siren uniform slumped against the wall—Zoe's duty mate.

"What did you use?" she asked Zoe.

Zoe was busy locking the doors and glanced over her shoulder to see what Calandra was talking about. "Daphne's Bane. She'll sleep it off in a few hours."

"Won't she be suspicious? Especially when the prisoners all escaped during this time?"

"Not if I threaten to report her for drinking on duty. I'll tell her that after she passed out, you came in and put me to sleep using your physic-sedation trick and she should say the same thing happened to her. I'll take these women to the exit point and be back long before she wakes up, trust me. Everyone will assume you broke them out of prison with your abilities. You've certainly proved your adeptness at getting through locked doors before."

Calandra nodded. She'd been opening locks since she was a child, which was why her aunt had insisted on posting guards outside her door at night from the age of thirteen. She had gotten into trouble one too many times for her guardian's liking. She and Tanni.

It had always been her and Tanni.

"Why did she think I was dead?" She looked at the prisoners. "Why did you all think I was dead?"

Zoe looked uncomfortable. "That's what Narcissa has told everyone. I could hardly correct her without exposing myself."

Nelly growled. "She probably thinks it will bring her more support for claiming the throne if everyone thinks you're no longer an option. Then her only real competition will be Hebe, and she's so young, she's not much competition at all. Chains of Prometheus, that girl has some nerve."

Calandra turned back to Zoe. "Do you think she believes it? That I'm dead, I mean?"

Zoe shrugged. "Who knows. She's been acting strange lately. But then, some odd behaviour is to be expected after the death of her mother and her, um, best friend."

“Best friend?” Meg looked blankly between them.

“Mari,” Zoe replied. “When Cain’s bond was loosed, he killed everyone on the platform with him before running off, including her. Did you hear Narcissa’s blaming Thea for Adonia’s death?”

Calandra frowned and nodded. She’d heard, but she didn’t know whether or not to believe it. The last time she’d seen either woman, they had joined battle in the Observation Chamber while Calandra and Zale had been engaged in healing the Heartstone, and in the end, both were dead. It didn’t seem likely that Thea would kill the queen, but who knew what could happen in the heat of battle? And as for Mari, the girl that had been Narcissa’s lover . . . well, both sides had suffered losses. She thought of Tanni again, then pushed the thought away.

“Wait.” Judith looked at Calandra. “Exit point? Are you not taking us out of here?”

Calandra shook her head. “Nelly and Kynthia will lead you to the submersible once Zoe gets you out of the palace. Airlea and I need to go find Zale. We’ll join you once we’ve rescued him.”

Judith nodded, biting her nail.

Meg laid a hand on Calandra’s arm. “Be careful. Soldier gossip says Narcissa is worse than ever.”

Calandra glanced at Zoe, whose face remained unchanged. She turned back to Meg. “We will.”

Meg nodded, then she and the others turned to follow Zoe back the way they’d come. Calandra wondered what Zoe would do if any of Narcissa’s sirens showed up, then shrugged. Zoe would handle it. She had never let them down so far.

She turned to Airlea. “Ready?”

Airlea pulled her *demi-deiktis* staff from its holster on her back and gave a curt nod. “Lead on, your majesty.”

Calandra sobered. “Don’t call me that.”

Airlea’s brows drew together, but she nodded. “Sorry, I forgot.”

Calandra turned toward the stairs and gave a grim smile. “All right, then. Let’s go save my

brother. From the sounds of it, he should be happy to see me.”



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