



GILLIAN ST. KEVERN



DEEP
MAGIC

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

DEEP MAGIC

By Gillian St. Kevern

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A man sits alone in the long grass atop a cliff. His head is bowed, and he is oblivious to the beauty of the sunset behind him. The gold, orange, and red of the sunset fade into the calm waves of the sea beyond him. Superimposed over this are two men, one gazing intently at his laughing companion, a memory of lost happiness.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

So strange to be back. Nothing's changed. The same soft gold of the September sun against my face, the crash of waves against the sheer cliff face of the Welsh coast below my feet. Even my grandmother's cottage, with the only half-tamed garden, is exactly the same. The only difference is she's not there, not anymore. I'm alone in my memories of her... and of the mysterious boy I once met in the smuggler's cave on the shore.

I told her of him, back then, of how he was a merman prince and I the knight of the garden gnomes. When I told her that she was the witch queen watching over the fragile peace between the spirits of the sea and the garden, she waved her spoon as though she was really one.

She was always like that, very accepting of me. Even when I came out to her, she never batted an eye, but said she loved me.

Every summer of my childhood was like that, until I moved to Australia. I never went back. Until I received the terrible news of my grandmother's death, that is. Now I stand here, where I once did, waiting...

He is waiting as well? Or was he only a dream?

Sometimes I still see the twinkle in his eyes...

Sincerely,

Achim

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, paranormal

Tags: mythical creatures, fairy tale/folklore, friends to lovers, magic users, reunited, slow building romance, seals, Vegemite

Content Warnings: off-page cruelty to an animal, near drowning, kidnapping

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Chapter One

The Journey

How does the journey of a thousand miles end?

Think about it.

Everyone and their best friend's mother knows how it starts. A single step. And then another. And another. And then what?

"Hey, Siri." I leant my bike against the lichen-crusting stone of the fence. It was warm with the heat of the afternoon, even as the sun dipped behind the verdant hills. "How many steps in a mile?"

"Let me check."

I stroked my neck, feeling the scratch of two days' travel beneath my fingertips. Me and the fence were both overdue a shave.

"One mile converts to four thousand two hundred and twenty-four steps."

"How many steps in the journey of one thousand miles?"

"Checking my sources." Siri beeped. "Perhaps this will help."

I glanced down at my phone. A shoe store? "You tried."

"If you say so." Siri's tone was mild as tea with too much milk in it. Polite, soothing and instantly forgettable. I'd heard the same voice every day of my life since I'd got my phone, and I still wouldn't recognize its owner if I passed him in the streets. Isn't that a terrible thing to say about your best friend?

But that's me. Oliver Evans: terrible person.

"Hey, Siri?" Siri's bell-like ring indicated he was at attention. "Why is there a 'For Sale' sign on Nan's house?"

"Could you repeat—"

"Forget it." I shoved my phone into my pocket and thrust open the gate. When confronted with something like the red and white monstrosity now crouched in Nan's window, what true friend says 'Could you repeat the question?' Clearly I needed better friends. An android maybe. I'd heard good things about Google Now.

But as I turned the key and heard the lock click open, I would have traded all my gigabytes of storage and latest apps for a friend of the flesh and blood

variety. I'd been firm with Bethan, telling her I wanted to be alone when I went to the house.

And I was.

Abandoned places have a special sound to them, an audible absence. I fumbled for the light, but my relief at the electric hum filling the room was short-lived. Things jumped out at me. There was the teapot set on the bench by the kettle, ready for a visitor. Next to it, the breakfast dishes had been washed but not put away. A bookmark poked out from beneath the pages of the novel on the table. I picked it up, but the words blurred, and my eyes were suddenly damp.

Nan wasn't coming back to finish her book.

She wasn't coming back at all.

I don't know how much later I heard a car rumble to a stop before the gate. I wiped my sleeve across my eyes and looked out the window. A stout woman in an all-weather jacket waded through the overgrown lawn with her sleeves rolled up in a way that said 'business.' The over-keen realtor here to do battle? Perfect. I needed an outlet.

I opened the door just before she reached it, drawing myself up to my full height: Bilbo confronting Lobelia Sackville-Baggins.

My opponent, however, got in the first attack. "If you want to camp, there are sites on the other side of the village." There was a strident note of schoolteacher in her voice. "This is a private cottage."

"I know." I rallied grandly. "Seeing as this is my house."

She tensed, and then the stern lines of her face relaxed. "Why, I never! It's Bethan's boy, little Olly! Step outside, let me get a look at you."

I let out my anger in a short exhalation of breath. There was more grey than brown in her hair, and she'd shrunk, but I recognised her too. "Mrs Griffith." Nan's neighbour and occasional partner in crime.

She clucked at me, sharp eyes taking in the dust on my jacket and the lines around my eyes. She was, in her own words, an escaped schoolmistress, and missed very little. "You never biked here."

I grinned at her outrage. "Took the trains as far as Pwllheli. It's a nice trip. Great views of the coast."

“You should have called! I’d have picked you up from the station.”

“Couldn’t remember if they had phones here.”

She laughed, showing a lot of teeth. “Cheeky lad. Is that what they taught you in Australia?” She stepped close. “Give us a *cwtch*.”

I leant in for the hug. Something of the aching desolation eased, and I was nine years old again, fresh off the bus, eager to tell Nan and anyone who’d listen how I’d made the journey myself for the first time. But it wasn’t Nan, wiping her hands on the tea towel as she turned to greet me—

I didn’t think of it. “*Diolch yn fawr*.” My tongue stumbled over the words.

“Well, they certainly didn’t teach you *Cymraeg*. *Diolch. Yn. Fawr*.” Mrs Griffith enunciated for my benefit. School teaching habits die hard. “You’ll want a good meal, after all that cycling. Join us—”

“No.” It sounded ungrateful, and I hastily amended it. “Not tonight. It’s my first night back.”

Mrs Griffith considered me. “You’ll find it lonely here, you will.”

I hesitated. It was impossible to explain why I felt that I had to spend my first night in Nan’s house alone, just as it was impossible to explain why I, inveterate traveller, had never owned a car. It boiled down to a private superstition. I believed that a journey should start and end on your own feet, under your own power. “I know. But I’d like it better this way.” I swallowed, feeling again the emptiness of the house. “I haven’t said goodbye.”

Mrs Griffith had quick, brown sparrow eyes. They lighted on my face with understanding, and she squeezed my arm. “Tomorrow then. I can give you all the news.” She motioned back to the house. “Let me see that you’re set up for the night.”

Anyone else and it would have been an intrusion, Mrs Griffith had decades of friendship with Nan behind her. I stepped back automatically. “I picked up food on the way, and I’ve got a sleeping bag if all else fails.”

Mrs Griffith bustled past me into the living room. “It won’t come to that. Your grandmother left things—oh, now, would you look at that.”

Her voice held an odd note. I joined her in the doorway.

The living room was a mess. The bookshelf nearest the window had fallen, taking with it a side table and various knick-knacks. The floor was a sea of

books, doilies and glittering fragments of glass. At the centre of it, a small black shape was curled in on itself.

“A blackbird.” It was incongruous lying there, still. Its eyes were closed, and there was no stain on its dark feathers. It looked like it slept and the slightest touch would wake it, send it flying again. “Must have flown into the glass, broke it.”

“What a thing to happen, and Sylvia gone! No, don’t touch it.” Mrs Griffith pulled thick gardening gloves out of her jacket pockets. “Get the broom. You remember where it is? Some newspaper too.”

Between the two of us, we set the room back to rights. I stacked the books and Mrs Griffith swept up the glass. She remembered as I did that the Cambrian vase went on the mantelpiece and that the pair of porcelain horses grazed on the little side table. Something of my loneliness eased, knowing I wasn’t alone in my memories of Nan.

I had to work to right the bookcase, more books spilling out as I did. “Incredible to think that one small bird could do all this damage.”

“It is.” Mrs Griffith wrapped the bird in newspaper as if it were fish and chips.

“I expect the weather helped somewhat.” I straightened the painting nearest the window and turned back to find Mrs Griffith frowning down at her bundle, lips pressed tightly together. “I remember the wind getting very fierce up here on top of the cliffs.”

Mrs Griffith stood slowly. “The weather’s been changeable lately,” she allowed reluctantly. “Since—well. You’ll need to order a new window from Pwllheli. Until then, we’ll have to find something to block that hole.”

“I know just the thing.”

When she returned from taking out the bird and broken glass to find me taping the For Sale sign over the hole, she clucked again. “You sure that’s wise? The tourist season’s almost over, there won’t be anyone to see it soon.”

“Makes no difference if there was. The house isn’t for sale.”

“Of course, it would have been best to wait until we could contact the family.” Mrs Griffith’s voice took on a soothing lilt. “And Muriel left messages with the lawyer. But when he said he hadn’t heard—”

“We’d moved.” Several times actually. “The message got lost.” It was only luck that a few months earlier I’d dropped in to visit Bruce, Bethan’s partner

when we'd moved to Australia, and given him my e-mail. I swallowed. "We didn't know until after the funeral."

"Ah," Mrs Griffith said as if an unasked question had been answered. "That would do it." Then, apologetically, "Sylvia didn't leave her address book anywhere I could find it."

It made sense that someone would have come into the place afterwards, and the fact that it was Mrs Griffith made me feel better about it. "The lawyer explained. I saw him in Bangor this morning."

"Muriel was doing what she thought best," Mrs Griffith continued. "None of us wanted to see the cottage sitting empty, knowing how Sylvia loved it. And Bethan—I'm as fond of her as if she were my own daughter, but you can't deny, she is flighty."

Flighty was polite. Fickle, restless, beautiful Bethan never stayed put. Bruce had been the longest, eighteen months, and he'd even moved with us to Wollongong, but it hadn't been any good. Bruce tried, really, and Bethan did too, but when you've got the wanderlust you've got it, and when you don't, you don't. Bethan had packed her suitcase and me, and we'd followed the coast as far as Melbourne. Bruce had returned to his north-facing studio apartment on the hills above Sydney. "Nan didn't leave the house to Mam. She left it to me."

The sparrow-eyes settled on me interestedly. "Well, now. That's interesting." She seemed about to say something but caught herself. "Mind you come for dinner tomorrow. Sylvia left me something to give you."

I shook her hand at the door. "Thanks for your help."

"It's nothing, Olly *bach*." She squeezed my hand. "You're welcome to stay with us anytime." Before I could protest that I had a house of my own, she continued, "Sylvia mentioned some problems with the pipes."

I watched her drive away, wondering at the invitation. Olly *bach*. Did she still think of me as a boy? Was this a desire to be of use to an old friend? Or had she already summed me up, seen in me the evidence of my mother's restless spirit?

My bike still leant against the gate. I wheeled it down the path, found a space for it in the lean-to beside the house and began to remove the saddlebags. Was it even worth taking them off? How long before I was off again, chasing that indefinable feeling that something was waiting for me, if I could just reach it—

“No.” I shook my head quickly. “I’m home, now.”

If anywhere was home, it was here.

Mrs Griffith had left behind her the slap of the waves on the rocks below, the rising tide almost at the cliffs. I knew the sound so well that I usually only heard its absence. Resting my palms on the rough wood of the gate, I felt the sound settle within me. Was this my missing piece? Wherever we’d stayed, I was always happiest near water—

The wind lifted, fluting through the countless crevices of the cliffs. I dug my fingers into my arm, but it was no good. I felt a cold that had nothing to do with the evening chill creep beneath my skin. Desperately I armed myself with the familiarity of the gate and the waves and the cottage behind me, no mere memories now but my reality. “Home! I’m—”

The Longing hit me. I half-leaned, half-fell against the gate, legs suddenly trembling. If I’d eaten anything, I think I might have been sick with how strong it was. I needed it desperately, but it was beyond my reach—and then the wind sighed away into nothing, and I found myself clutching the gate still, cold with sweat and breathing as fast as if I’d just biked up the hill from the village.

My hair stuck to my forehead and with a shaking hand, I brushed it out of my eyes. I tried to laugh at the stupidity of it, but no sound came. The emptiness that came after the Longing was sometimes even worse than the Longing itself, and I made my way back to the cottage, feeling as if I was sinking deeper into chilly ocean depths with every step. The Llŷn Peninsula had been my best hope for peace. Instead, the Longing was back, stronger than it had even been before.

With a deep breath, I pulled myself together and turned for the cottage. I needed a good pot of tea—

“Christ on a bike. Where did you come from?”

A girl stood in the middle of the garden, just on the edge of the dried out fishpond. Her arms were crossed, and she studied me with a mutinous expression. “You’re never Oliver Evans.”

I stared at the girl. She had a square face, framed by long, dark hair worn in two straight plaits. The knees of her jeans were scuffed and starting to fray, and a leaf stuck to the elbow of her striped cardigan. Not exactly intimidating, but the unexpectedness of her appearance threw me. “I think you’ll find I am.”

“Prove it then.”

I scratched my head. This was absurd! “Want to see my passport?”

“Answer three questions. If you can, I’ll give you something of your nan’s given me for safekeeping.”

“Something from Nan?”

The girl nodded. As ludicrous as the situation was, she took it seriously. “But you have to answer the questions properly.”

“All right. I’ll play. What is question number one?”

“Who is Sir Spikesalot?”

My mouth twitched in amusement. Not the question I’d expected. “He’s right here.” I pointed to the thistle that grew beside the cottage wall. Nan had warned a younger Oliver to stay away from it so that I didn’t hurt myself on its spikes. Instead, I’d convinced myself that the spiny plant guarded something fiercely important. I’d woven an entire history of adventures around the sturdy weed and Nan’s plans to uproot him brought tears of protest. “Watching over the garden just like always.”

The girl nodded slowly. “I didn’t think you’d be old.”

“Old? I’m only twenty-three.”

“I’m eleven. You’re old.”

“I’d rather be twenty-three any day,” I told her. “Come on, I don’t have time to be playing games. What did Nan give you?”

“You have to answer all the questions.”

“But you know it’s me.”

The girl put her hands in the pockets of her jeans. “Just because you look like you doesn’t mean you’re you. There are powerful forces out here on the edge of the land. Everything’s not all it seems.”

Her perfect composure as she made this extraordinary statement made me grieve. Not for Nan this time, but for myself—the younger self that had delighted in stories just as this girl did. No wonder Nan had taken enough of a liking to her to entrust her with this task. She might even have hoped we’d make friends. “I’m sorry. What’s the second question?”

“How do you remove the enchantment on someone whose true shape’s been stolen?”

“I—what?”

The question made no more sense the second time.

“With magic? I don’t know. I’m a grown man. I don’t go around making up stories anymore.”

The girl nodded unsurprised. “She said you wouldn’t know the first time I asked you.” She turned, squeezing through the fence that separated Nan’s garden from the Griffith’s farm.

“Where are you going? You’re actually leaving?”

“Mrs Evans said ‘mind you don’t give it to Olly until he can answer all three questions’.” The girl paused to detangle one long plait from the fence. “So that’s what I’m going to do. You can try to answer as many times as you like. There’s no limit.”

I tried to decipher how serious she was. “Someone whose true shape has been stolen.”

“That’s what I said.”

“What’s your name? How will I find you again?”

“I’ll find you.”

“Is the answer in a storybook or something? It sounds like a myth.”

“No hints! You’re on your own.” The girl immediately relented. “If you’re still stuck in like a month, then maybe.”

“And if I’m not here in a month?” I watched her trek across the fields to Bryn house. There was only one outcome to feeling the Longing.

Halfway across the field, the serious tread of my Inquisitor was replaced by an undignified bounce. I shook my head. Children would always be children. “Someone whose shape had been stolen?”

Maybe Siri would know.

“Problems with the pipes.” I leant in the bathroom door. “That’s like saying the Llŷn gets a bit of rain, or that Australia’s kind of warm. What on earth happened here?”

Siri beeped modestly. “Did you mean to search for plumbers near you?”

“Too late tonight. It’s gone eight.” Or was it nearer nine? I was still on Australia time. All I knew was that it was dark out, chilly and I wanted a bath.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Never mind. I’ll have a go at this myself.”

The tub was coated in a layer of dust. Turning the taps disturbed spider webs and the only thing that came out the taps was a dried up fly. Whatever had gone wrong, it had done it in a major way.

A thought occurred to me, and I went back to the kitchen to try the tap there. No spider webs clogged up the kitchen sink, though my first attempt at turning the tap met with failure. “Who the hell used this tap last, Gareth Thomas?”

As I stepped back to shake my sore hand, my eyes fell on the wrench resting on the windowsill. A couple of twists and the water flowed smoothly from the tap. No rugby player then, but Nan herself? “That’s taking water economy a little far.”

Was Nan herself responsible for the bath? “Doesn’t make sense. How did she wash?” Nan and the Griffin (my childhood imagination had immediately associated Mrs Griffith’s forceful personality with that of the mythical creature) were close, but I couldn’t see my Nan walking twenty-five minutes down the road with a towel over her shoulder.

On the right of the bench, tucked out of sight behind the kettle, was a block of soap balanced on a wooden scrubbing brush. “You’re not serious.”

But opening the pantry revealed a large metal tub. I reached out, feeling its cool edge. I’d seen it before... in this very kitchen. But why and who...?

Who? “Shouldn’t that be how?”

No reply.

I filled the kettle from the tap and set it to boil. As I did, I noticed a detail I’d overlooked. Wound tightly around the kitchen tap was a string of beads. A rosary? “Nan wasn’t that kind of Christian.”

No, I corrected myself. The Nan I remembered wasn’t that kind of Christian. “A person can change a lot in seven years.”

Just look at me.

And that’s the story of how I ended up sitting in a tub in my grandmother’s kitchen, knees up around my chin, hoping that the rest of Nan’s cronies would wait until I was done scrubbing my back before visiting.

Luck was with me. Either the Aberdaron village grapevine had taken the night off, or Mrs Griffith had gone easy on me and held off sharing the news of my arrival. The screech that had me leaping out of the tub, scattering water across the kitchen floor wasn't that of an outraged pensioner, but the kettle reaching the boil.

“Hot! Hot! Hot!”

The emptied kettle did not make much of an impact on my bathwater. I refilled it and set it to boil. “Nan chose to do this?”

Maybe she'd got religious in her old age. Making things harder than they needed to be was a common tenet, right? Discomfort brought you closer to God, which also explained the size of the tub. If I wedged myself back as far as I could fit, I could get both feet in the tub, but my arms hung over the side. Still, that last jug of water had raised the temperature of my bath to 'tolerable', and I settled back with a sigh.

My eyes shut on their own accord. All at once, my long journey had caught up to me. The sound of the kettle mixed with the rise and fall of the waves. Lulled by their even rhythm, I let myself drift.

“But though they sang their hardest, and used all their most cunning songs, the wrath of King Gurcant was too powerful. One by one, their voices failed, but still the waves came. On and on until the entire land was taken under the sea.” The voice came directly into my ear, so close it tickled my skin. “And the *morgen* grieved, that they might no longer live upon the land, and the city was lost to men, and none dared challenge the King beneath the Cliffs who rules all within the Deep and on and on, until the city and the *morgen* and even the King were all forgotten.”

Much like the waves, the voice had a hypnotic quality to it that filled me with lazy satisfaction. The sun was warm on my skin, but the arms draped around my shoulders were pleasantly cool. High overhead gulls rode the headwinds. There was not a cloud in the sky, nothing to break this endless contentment. “I'd like to hear you sing.”

The arms tightened around me. “You would like to be driven mad! If a man were to hear our song without the cliffs to carry it, it would break him.”

“A knight is no ordinary man—”

“But he is yet a man! Do not ask me this. You must not, even in jest.” His fingers were uncomfortably tight. “You understand? Promise me that you will not ask me again.”

“All right, all right! I get it.” I swatted at him. “Get off, you big lump.”

“Say that you promise.” His hold did not budge.

Cold fingers closed around my throat, pulling me down. My nose and mouth filled with water. I choked, throwing out my arms in panic. My foot connected with the side of the tub, bringing me back to reality. I sat up, coughing hard. It took a moment for my mind to understand the kitchen chair, my towel hanging over it, or the kettle, hissing and spitting on the bench.

I took a deep breath before levering myself up out of the bath. “A dream. That’s all it was. A dream.” A combination of my vivid imagination and the cooling bathwater. “Get a grip, Olly.” I turned the kettle off, leaving the tub for the morning. Wrapping myself in the towel, I made my way upstairs to the bedroom that had always been mine. Best cure for an over-wrought mind was sleep, and if my first night back in Aberdaron had been any indication, I was well in need of some shut-eye.

But as I pulled the blankets over me, it wasn’t the waves I heard, but the fading ripples of that voice.

God, that voice.

I’d always had a soft spot for arrogance. The voice checked that box, and more besides, boxes I didn’t know I had. It got me intimately, but as I settled back, I found myself puzzled. If the voice was so familiar, why couldn’t I place it?

Chapter Two

Strange Things

If this was a story, I'd have slept terribly, haunted by the lingering feeling of fingers closing around my throat, or the weird, wild whisper of the wind. I'd have tossed and turned constantly, or been visited by Nan's ghost warning me about my impending doom. Once upon a time, I'd even have enjoyed it. Oliver Evans: gothic hero.

Instead, as proof of what a heartless individual I'd become, I slept like a rock. I opened my eyes to an even grey sky, the muted warbling of birds outside in the trickling rain, and the need to pee. I stayed put as long as I could, enjoying the steady murmur of the rain and the consciousness of being warm and dry despite it, but eventually my bladder won.

I got up.

Nan might have made do brushing her teeth at the kitchen sink, but to shave I needed the bathroom mirror. I had a go at the sink taps with the wrench, but it was no good. I ended up filling a bowl with water from the kitchen and carrying it in with a hand towel hanging over my arm.

It made the everyday ritual an occasion. I imagined myself a valet in times past, come to serve his master. Or maybe I worked at an extremely upmarket boutique? I snorted, abandoning the fancies. I was Oliver Evans, badly in need of a shave. End of.

“What in the hell?”

I leant into the mirror, not believing my eyes. “Trick of the light. That's all.” I pulled back the curtains, let in the early September morning.

But still the shadow hung around my neck.

“I leant on something. Dust maybe. Who knows when Nan last cleaned that bedroom?”

Grimly now, I lathered up my neck and got to work. I avoided looking too closely at what I was doing. I probably came dangerously close to cutting my neck, but an unaccountable fear kept me from looking until I'd finished. If I didn't look, it wouldn't be there when I was done.

Finally, I wiped the last of the foam away. My skin was smooth beneath my fingertips, but as I leant into the mirror, I already knew what I would find.

“Bruises.”

They were faint but there, either side of my neck, just where—

I swallowed.

Just where I’d felt the hands last night.

I heard the car pull up with relief. The Griffin was remorselessly practical. Five minutes in her company would lay my foolish thoughts to rest. I grabbed a jacket to cover my neck, shrugging it on as I made my way downstairs.

But the woman who threw open the door before I reached the bottom of the stairs was entirely unfamiliar. “Salutations, weary traveller! *Croeso i ben tir yn*. Welcome to Land’s End!” Her bangles jangled dramatically as she threw her arms wide.

Was she waiting for applause? I stayed put on the bottom step, trying to get a handle on this strange apparition. She might have come direct from a psychedelic trip, with her tie-dyed skirt of blues and purples partnered with a bronze vest embroidered with flames. A knotted headband only just restrained her red-brown hair, and her wrists were almost entirely covered by bangles. Her sole concessions to Welsh weather were a long-sleeved shirt and the stout boots. She beamed at me, expectantly, and I realised this was the sort of person who said ‘Salutations’ un-ironically.

I patted my neck dry with the towel still draped around my shoulders. “Come again?”

“Welcome, dear friend! Welcome!” She swooped forward to seize my hand within her two thin palms, pressing it urgently. “It is a privilege, no, an honour, to meet dear Sylvia’s family! When I heard that you’d arrived, I just had to come over immediately!”

In retrospect, I was rude, but I resented her approbation of my grandmother. I shook off her hand. “Who are you?”

Again, she threw her arms wide, this time in a jangling bow. “Only a fellow traveller on this road we call life, a humble disciple of your excellent grandmother. Dear Sylvia was kind enough to allow me to use her path down to the beach. I’ve found some wonderful specimens there, truly unique pieces.”

I leant back against the wall. “Pieces?”

“Oh, yes.” She tugged the collar of her shirt down, a thin hand darting into its depths.

I blanched, stepping back—I did not want to be flashed by someone calling herself my grandmother’s disciple—but to my great relief, she fished out a highly polished crystal, cut in a cylindrical shape.

“I am a collector, a dabbler in mystical stones and purveyor of crystals. I have an online store, *Cerrig Canu*, the Singing Stones.”

Perhaps it was relief at placing her at last (Bethan had made any number of new-age friends). Perhaps I was just glad not to be looking at her tits. Whatever the reason, I relaxed. “You’re not going to find any crystals on the Llŷn.”

“I source my stones from a variety of dealers, but I make a point of cleansing them and imbuing them with natural energies before I pass them on to my dear ones—that’s what I call my customers. I really feel there is something very personal in the rocks I sell, you see. Each one is personally blessed so I feel like I always give a little of myself.” She laughed. “But living in Cardiff can be so draining. I make a point of getting out in my caravan as much as possible. The Llŷn just called to me, with its history of pilgrimage and its natural beauty, and of course, its isolation. I need peace and quiet to work! It’s *wonderful*. The gorgeous countryside, the breathtaking views... it really is a world apart.”

I blinked. While I had to admit that Aberdaron had quiet in plenty, somehow I could not imagine it appealing to this woman for longer than it took to upload a scenic selfie. “Have you been here long?”

“Three wonderful months. I have learnt so much!” She sighed ecstatically. “The air here is so clean, and the land has such strong lines of power. I really feel it enhances my rituals so much.”

“Wiccan?”

She shook her head, and I saw that chunks of amethyst dangled from her ears. “I don’t adhere to labels,” she said. “I am about *liberating* the mind, not imposing limits on it.”

I suspected her mind had been liberated enough. “Interesting.”

She beamed fatuously. “Dearest Sylvia said the exact same thing. We had *such* interesting conversations about healing energies and the legends of the land. I had a book I *so* wanted to give her... Actually, on that note, I left something of mine here. A book as it happens. I hate to intrude but if you wouldn’t mind if I looked for it...”

I waved a hand towards the bookcase, but she didn’t even glance towards it.

“I think it might be in the kitchen.” She made her way to the pantry with a certainty that confirmed that she’d been in the house frequently. Lucky I didn’t do morning baths!

I watched her scan the shelf of recipe books. Doubt niggled at my mind. The Nan I remembered had no patience for such over-enthusiastic adoration. “What did you say your name was?”

“Did I forget to introduce myself? Joanne Davies. Call me Joanne.” Her bangles jangled busily as she dug through the pantry. “I think she might have mentioned putting it in a tin. Have you seen it, perhaps? It has wild flowers on it.”

I stared at her. “You mean the cake tin she keeps her bankbook in?”

Her cheeks flushed pink a second. “Oh, you do know it! That makes things *so* much easier.”

“Why would Nan put a book about stones in with her important documents?”

Her laugh sounded somewhat forced. “There, you’ve caught me out! I should have said so from the start, but I thought it might be hard to explain... As a matter of fact, it’s a book Sylvia wanted to lend me. ‘Oh, Joanne,’ she said. ‘I know just what you want. I’ve got a curiosity, handed down in the family’—I’d told her about my little project, collecting the traditions of the Llŷn, you see. I want to publish a booklet. ‘Come to me next time you’re in Aberdaron, and I’ll give it to you,’ she said, but of course...” Joanne shrugged meaningfully. “Such a loss to us all and so inconvenient.”

I eyed her with dislike. “Are you talking about the book or my grandmother’s death?”

She clapped a hand to her mouth in horror. “Oh, my dear! I should have thought—of course, I had no intention—the very thought is impossible! Why, no one was more devoted to your grandmother than me!”

I stepped past her to scan the pantry. “I don’t see it.”

“It might have been tidied away. Maybe it was given to the lawyer for safekeeping?”

I shook my head. “He didn’t say anything to me about it.”

“Her bedroom—”

“If it turns up,” I raised my voice to be heard over the cacophony of bangles, “I’ll let you know. Unfortunately, I have somewhere to be.”

Her eyes glittered. “You’ve made plans fast.”

I met her gaze blandly. “Mrs Griffith invited me over when I saw her last night.” And because I was feeling spiteful, I added, “She mentioned she had something for me.”

“Oh! Of course, dear Lavinia—I should have thought.” Long skirt twitching, Joanne trailed after me to the front door. She kept glancing over her shoulder, only stepping outside when I cleared my throat.

She offered me a ride as far as Bryn house, the Griffiths’ cosy home, but I cited a desire to stretch my legs. As I strode the clifftop road, feeling the damp drizzle of the welcoming Welsh weather on my hair, I wondered at myself. I had friends who dabbled in New Age stuff, believed in aliens or practiced Wicca. And none of them got up my nose the way this woman did.

It was the shock of losing Nan, I decided. I wasn’t ready to process my grief, so I was taking it out on any convenient target—and the brightly coloured Joanne was too easy a target to miss.

Like I said. Terrible person.

The rain stopped as I walked, and I opted to strike out over the fields rather than follow the road. Standing atop a stile, I took in the cloud rolling down off the hills. Where the ancient stone fences made cutting hay impractical, long dry stalks waved in the wind, scattered remnants of summer. But the grey cloud and the particular green of the fields indicated autumn was on its way. Not long, and the fields would be dotted with irregular circles of brown mushrooms in the lush grass.

Not that I was going to be here to see the fairy circles.

How to explain the Longing to people that don’t have it? It’s an itch, and it only gets worse as time goes by. There’s a word over here, *hiraeth*, which kind of comes close. It’s more nostalgic than nostalgia, makes you sicker than homesickness and is more painful than culture shock.

The Longing is *hiraeth* times ten. It started a week or two before we went to Australia and followed me ever since. Bethan’s got it too, that’s how I know it’s chronic. She thought that maybe the wide-open expanses of Australia would be wide enough that it wouldn’t cage her in, and it was. But only for a while.

Me, I hoped it’d be silenced by the one place in my childhood that remained constant. Look how well that worked. Not even one night back, and the Longing had set in, a lingering unease that would build to an undeniable compulsion that made homes, friends, pets and lovers all equally impossible.

It didn't seem fair that the Longing could catch me here, pulling me between the place I loved most and the thing I needed most. The immediate, sickening tug was gone, but I knew it would be back.

"Cry more, can't you. Anyone would think that you weren't standing in the most beautiful country on earth with your whole life in front of you."

Maybe I hadn't tried hard enough to beat the Longing. With the Llŷn behind me, surely—

A dark figure intruded on the edge of my vision. I wasn't alone.

The man stood at the far end of the paddock. He turned abruptly as soon as I spotted him, striding quickly behind the hedge.

Watching me? "Hey!" My legs careened wildly as I jumped down from the stile, but I ignored the shakiness, running after him. "Wait up!"

You couldn't throw a stone on the peninsula without hitting a dark-haired man. I should know (it was an accident and Nan made me apologise). Why I should feel sick and giddy at the sight of one was a mystery, unless it was the fact that his long hair fell in thick locks around his neck, and the way the wind lifted it made me think of the curling seaweed in the rock pools revealed by the retreating tide. "Do you hear me? Wait for me! I'm not angry. I want to talk!"

By the time I rounded the hedge, he was almost out of sight, climbing towards the cliff. He didn't seem to have increased his speed, and I chased after him with determined vigour. The cloud was so thick that I might lose him.

I did. I lost the path, too. I picked my way forward carefully. There was a path that hugged the cliff edge. He must have headed for it. If I found that, I'd find him.

If I found it.

I'd never seen cloud this thick. It muffled sound, gave my own footsteps an eerie distance. The waves at the bottom of the cliffs echoed weirdly. No longer the Llŷn I remembered, this was a strange, unfamiliar place.

And then I saw him.

He looked out as if he saw past the cloud. He had a profile that belonged to history, a proud, down-turned mouth and a powerful jaw. Something about the way he stood jarred with the old woollen jersey and trousers he wore and did really conflicting things to my heart and stomach.

I knew him.

I knew I knew him.

But I had no idea who he was.

He turned towards me, and I got another shock. His eyes were cool, where I'd expected—what?

“Hello. I mean, *Bore da.*” What was I, fourteen years old with my first crush? “I hope this doesn't sound weird, but I want to talk to you.” I licked my lips. “If that's okay, of course. I think I—Wait!”

The man turned, unhurried, and walked into the mist.

I was speechless a moment. Then as the cloud closed over him, anger overtook my shock.

“Hear me out! Look, I'm from around here, and I—”

I was jerked backwards. A figure I hadn't even noticed seized my arm with enough force that we collided.

As soon as I regained my footing, I rounded on my attacker. “What the hell was that?”

He looked down at me, a tall, ungainly man the wrong side of middle-aged, with a forgettable face and eyes as flat as the grey stones that lay above the high tide mark. He did not say anything.

I shook my arm free. “You had no right to grab me! I deserve an explanation—and an apology!”

He smiled, an abrupt transformation of his mouth into something alarming. “It is not yet two months since I buried your grandmother. I have no wish to bury another of your family so soon.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged off my glare, looking past me into the cloud. “See for yourself.”

I swallowed. Just talking to this man had my heart running a 100-metre sprint. My brain was in overdrive, cataloguing the exact nuance of his voice and my reactions to it and coming up distressingly blank. Every sense I had screamed that turning my back on this man was disaster, but I refused to be intimidated by him. I looked—and felt suddenly sick.

The cloud had thinned enough that I saw the print of my shoes in the damp soil and the nothingness beyond. Another step and I would have been Oliver Evans: tragic loss.

“You have strayed far from your chosen path, Oliver Evans.”

I looked back at the man, feeling bereft. “There was a man here. I saw him. He walked past me—is there a path down?” I’d seen him continue his even stride, there’d been no sound of falling. “You must have seen him.”

He folded his hands in the long jacket he wore, displaying a flash of white at his collar. “I saw one man on the heads, and I talk to him now.”

“But—” The wind had picked up, and the cloud was fast evaporating. There was nowhere to walk and no traces of the man I’d recognised. I took a careful step towards the edge and looked down.

A single shearwater wheeled slowly on the breeze. Below it, the rocks grinned ravenously. There was no trace of anyone, living or dead.

The man’s eyes travelled with me as I stepped back. His attention was too fixed, putting me on the defensive. “I know what I saw.”

His smile was inward and not happy. “More walk this peninsula than merely man. And not all those walking have reason to wish you well.”

Even in broad daylight, his words gave me a chill. “What do you mean?”

He was already turning away. “I will show you the way back to the road,” he announced adding entirely unnecessarily, “since it is clear you do not have the slightest clue what you are doing out here.”

I rolled my eyes. “With an offer like that, how can I refuse?” I looked back, still unwilling to believe that the man I’d seen had vanished so entirely, but there was nothing. Even the cloud had lifted, revealing a mellow sea and pleasant sky. No reply came, and I looked to see if my sarcasm had been noted only to find my would-be guide halfway across the paddock already.

I had to jog to catch up with him. “What happened to guiding me?”

“I thought you capable of walking in a straight line by yourself. Was I wrong?”

I slowed down, unsure how to take his mockery. “You called me by my name before. Do I know you?”

“We have met,” he answered with sudden gravity. “Whether you remember our meeting is, of course, not for me to say.”

I racked my brains for an answer and only came up with more questions. “You’re not from around here.”

“That depends on what you consider ‘here’.”

“The village,” I said.

“There are many villages on the Llŷn.”

I frowned. He didn’t have the accent of a Southerner, but I couldn’t imagine someone, who danced around a topic so unnecessarily, practical enough to make a living from the land.

“You’re never a farmer.”

“Perhaps I am. Not of sheep or cattle—”

“A priest.” The dark colours of his clothing and the contrasting white collar fell into place. “You could have just said that.”

“I thought I did.”

Infuriating. I wouldn’t give him any more ammunition, I decided, and tramped along beside him in silence.

We reached the road quickly. For all my companion’s hair was more grey than brown, and his face carved with tired lines, he walked with an energy a younger man might envy.

“I think you should be capable of finding your way from here.”

We stood at the ridge where Old Mr Jones’s farm met the Griffiths’, looking down at the grey stone of Bryn house.

“I can do without having my hand held, thanks,” I said with asperity.

He gave me a knife-like smile, quick and darting. “Be careful. I cannot always take the time to stop you walking off cliffs.” He turned to follow the road in the direction of the village.

I made a face at his back. “Maybe I don’t want you to.”

His laugh travelled back to me on the wind, leaving me cold throughout.

I’d never heard it before. Why did it sound familiar?

“Olly! I didn’t expect to see you quite this soon.” Mrs Griffith, coming from doing the dishes, wiped her hands on a tea towel as she answered the door. “Come in and take a seat. Gavin, you remember little Olly?”

Mrs Griffith had got older, but for how little Mr Griffith had changed, the man might have been cut directly from the rocky cliffs that bordered one edge

of his farm. He shook my hand, but as soon as my scant repertoire of *Cymraeg* was exhausted, returned to his reading of the latest *Llanw Llŷn*. His wife bustled in with tea and a slice of cake and proceeded to spend the next couple of hours alternately interrogating me on everything that had happened since my last visit to Wales and plying me with seemingly endless amounts of food and drink.

I bided my time, knowing that eventually even the Griffin would pause for breath. When she did, I pounced. “I ran into a man on the cliffs. Recognised me, but I couldn’t place him. Tall-ish, not from the village. Said he was at Nan’s funeral.”

“That’d be the curate, Rhys Hughes. Strange, that. He recognised you?”

I seized on the opening with relief. “Is he all there?”

“As sane as you or me.”

Mr Griffith snorted, and his wife gave him a meaningful look before she continued.

“We all have our idiosyncrasies. He’s got a reputation for being proud, and I can’t say I’ve ever found him particularly friendly. But he does read a sermon well, and there’s some would say that being uncommunicative is a good quality in a priest.”

Uncommunicative was right. I’d never known anyone to talk so much and still say so little. “He said plenty to me.”

“Did he?” Mrs Griffith wasn’t interested. “He visited Sylvia a lot. They’d talk for hours. He might feel a kinship, seeing as you’re her only grandson. Speaking of grandchildren, we’ve got Myfanwy with us. Her parents are having some difficulties, and she’s here to stay while they sort things out.” Mrs Griffith took an apologetic tone. “She’s at school now, but she might come by the cottage. She was a favourite of your nan’s, and Sylvia encouraged her to play in the garden. With the cottage empty, I didn’t think there was any harm in it.”

Myfanwy. It was an old-fashioned name, but somehow it suited the girl with her severe long plaits and serious manner. “We already met.” I paused. I was curious about what Nan had left with the girl, but hesitant to inflict one of the Griffin’s lectures on her. So what if the girl wanted to play? The Llŷn could be a lonely place. No, I’d tell Mrs Griffith only if I hadn’t got whatever Myfanwy had by the time I had to leave. “She’s welcome anytime.”

Mrs Griffith's hospitality was flawless. I could not have been better looked after if I was her own long-lost grandson. And yet, I wasn't disappointed when she stood to put the dishes in the sink. "I expect you have a lot to be getting on with."

"Nothing I need to rush off to. I can help with the dishes—"

"No you will not. The very idea, Olly!"

I was sorry to leave the kitchen, even as I was relieved. If you don't have the Longing, then you don't know how strange it is to sit in someone's home, knowing you'll never have anything like it. It's worse when you're made to feel welcome, because that makes you even more aware of what an outsider you are. I did not look forward to meeting more of Nan's friends and their warm houses and orderly lives.

Mrs Griffith walked me to the garden gate. "Remember, Olly *bach*, if there's anything you need while you're here, don't hesitate to ask."

I felt a pang of regret. How long before the warmth of the Llŷn became claustrophobic? "Actually, there is one thing. You know a Joanne Davies?"

Mrs Griffith snorted. "*Twp tywello* if I ever met one. What's she done?"

I no longer felt guilty about my dislike. "She stopped by earlier. Said Nan had a book she meant to lend her, was very insistent about looking for it."

"That's very interesting." Mrs Griffith's tone didn't match her words. "She stopped in to see me, too, just this morning. Asked about your Nan's cake tin. Thought I might have taken it for safekeeping."

I felt a jolt of horror. "You didn't give it to her?"

Mrs Griffith sniffed sententiously. "Wouldn't even if I had it. But that reminds me—Sylvia's letter." She ducked back into the house, returning with a crumpled envelope. "It's odd, you know. She came by with this, about a week before. 'Lavinia', she said, 'I'd like to leave this with you. In case anything happens'."

The hairs of my arm stood on end as I took the envelope. "You think she knew?"

I couldn't remember having seen the Griffin hesitate before. "There's some as would swear your Nan had the second sight... ah, but it's just as likely to be an old woman's whim. When you get to a certain age, you think about what you'd like to happen once you're gone. It must seem pretty morbid to a young person like yourself, but myself and Gavin, we've talked about it many a time."

“I suppose so.”

The Griffin watched sadly as I folded the letter into my pocket, proving there was a curious woman underneath her rocky facade. “*Tara*, Olly. You’re welcome to come back and see us anytime, mind.”

I nodded. “Bye, Mrs Griffith.”

I dawdled back along the cliffs, weighed down with lamb and roasties. If anyone had dropped me in the ocean then, I’d have sunk like a stone. A neat plop as I hit the surface would be the last anyone heard of me. But while my stomach was comfortably full, I felt a vague unease gnawing at the rest of me. The Longing was making itself known.

It was stronger the closer I got to the shore. Perversely, I decided to push back at it, sending pebbles skipping down the rocky path as I half-scrambled, half-slid down to the beach. My sudden arrival on the shore sent a startled gull skittering into the air. But I wasn’t done. The rocky skeleton of the shore lay exposed in the extreme low tide, its spiny ridges and hollows naked beneath the overcast sky.

Legend said there’d been a city here once that emerged with the retreating tide. A local variation on “The Drowning of the Bottom Hundred”, a sort of Welsh Atlantis. I’d been more interested in free traders than fairy tales as a kid, but I had to admit there was space enough for a city in Aberdaron Bay. I could have walked for miles before meeting the sea.

Instead, I followed the cliffs around to the channels where the heavy slap of kelp against the rocks indicated that the powerful current was still at work.

“So I’m here!” The cliff caught my voice, echoed it back at me. “Do your worst!”

I could feel the Longing twist inside me, as if it were caught in the endless tug of war of the tide. I drew in a deep breath of fresh sea air, felt myself made powerful by it.

“Do your worst—I dare you!”

My words faded, replaced by the rush of incoming water. I stayed perfectly still on the edge of the rocky ledge, feeling the urgency of the Longing fade away. The channels carved in the rocks before me had been there since ancient times, their regular lines probably the inspiration for the legendary city, drains

cut by the faery folk supposed to have once lived there. In reality, they were the legacy of the same ice walls that had formed the cliffs behind me. The waves had danced in and out of them for hundreds of thousands of years and would continue to do so for just as long. Compared to that, I seemed more than usually pathetic.

I snorted. “What is wrong with me?” I hadn’t asked Mrs Griffith the question I most wanted answered because—why? Fear?

“Fear of what exactly? Fond forbearance?” I knew exactly what the Griffin would say. I even knew how she’d say it, a quick shake of her head and a half smile half snort as she turned away. ‘A man who walks in the cloud and literally vanishes into thin air? You and your stories, Olly. You haven’t changed one bit’.

I shivered, feeling the shadow of the cliffs. “I have changed. I’m different now.”

The sea reflected back the stone grey of the sky, while the cliffs looked down unmoved. If the coast had a voice, it would have said ‘Yeah, right’.

There was something weirdly comforting in the existence of something bigger than my problems. I walked slowly back towards the shore, feeling that it didn’t really matter if I was Olly Evans, hopeless dreamer, or Olly Evans, just plain hopeless, when a movement in a rock pool sent my pulse racing and the Longing into overdrive.

“Get a grip.”

It was just my face in the water, but with the dark kelp twisting out around it, it had looked like an oddly secretive face with dark hair. I peered down in the pool. What exactly had I expected to find? Some exotic creature from the Deep? “I’m losing my mind. Seriously. Mermaids?”

Still, I thought, as I followed the line of the waves all the way to Bardsey Island, if there was one place in the world where you would find a merman—

Man? Mermaids were girls, weren’t they?

“Hey, Siri. Are there boy mermaids?”

“Checking my sources.” Siri beeped. “OK, I found this on the web.”

I scrolled through the links. Wikipedia, tumblr, costumes—tails to rent? There was an entire store with everything from custom-made tails to T-shirts...

Something hit the water with a lazy slap. I jumped, almost losing my phone in the process. “What the—”

A dark shape darted through the waves. As I watched, a second seal rolled off the rock it sunned itself on and into the water.

“So much for mermen, eh, Siri.”

Now that I was looking for them, I could see dozens of furry bodies, almost indistinguishable from the rocks they slept on. Dark eyes watched me suspiciously, and I stayed still, unwilling to scare any more seals from their rest.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that.”

“Forget it.” I dropped my phone back into my pocket, picking my way back across the shore.

Something bounced off the back of my head.

I yelped, plunging knee-deep into a rock pool as I lost my balance. “Son of a—” I sloshed through the water, hauling myself up on the other side. “What the hell was that?”

Scared by my yell, the seals took to the water en masse, leaving me entirely alone on the rocks. No movement, except the birds wheeling overhead. I rubbed my aching skull. Had a gull taken a pot shot at me?

Something rattled, and I looked down to see a tin roll to a halt on the rocks. I felt lightheaded as I picked it up. It was rustier than the last time I’d seen it, the floral pattern obscured by corrosion. Not that it mattered. I knew the pattern by heart.

And that wasn’t all I knew.

“Please, Nan. Any old tin will do. It doesn’t have to be a good one! It just has to keep the water out,” I wheedled.

Nan kept on at the dishes. “What did you say you wanted it for?”

“Smuggling,” I said promptly. “I have to keep my stolen cargo dry.”

Nan didn’t turn around. “A good knight wouldn’t lie, Olly. And a smart knight would know better than to lie to a witch.”

My cheeks burned. “I do want it for playing, Nan! But my friend—well, he’s shy. He didn’t want me telling anyone about him.”

“A friend is it? One of your garden gnomes?”

“No!” Proud of my new discovery, I unbound a little. “He’s from the sea. He won’t tell me where he’s from, but I know he’s a noble.” With his long hair and pride, he had to be. “A prince. From a lost underwater kingdom.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.” I gathered speed as I warmed to my subject. “And I’m going to help him reclaim his rightful kingdom by slaying the dragon that stole it!”

“Dragons live underwater now? That must be interesting with the fire-breathing.”

“This is a very old dragon,” I said, affronted. “Clever. It’s learnt magic, too. That’s how it can live in the ocean.” I paused, nine-year-old cunning working overtime. “There are some that say it’s even more powerful than the Witch on the Cliffs.”

Nan sniffed. “We’ll see about that.” She dried her hands on her smock before turning purposefully towards me. “A tin you said you wanted?”

“To keep our supplies in for the trip.” I stood on tiptoe to watch as Nan lifted down an old tea-canister. “Can we really have it?”

Nan removed the tea bags the tin held. “It and provisions for the trip. You’ll be away years, I suppose?”

“At least a dozen.” I watched in delight as Nan filled the tin with her homemade biscuits.

“Don’t spoil your tea, now.” Nan eyed me severely. “I want you back before it gets dark.”

A voice called. Looking up, I saw two people making their way down the cliff path. The Longing jumped in my chest, and I jogged towards them. Only when I neared them did I realise they were entirely unfamiliar. The guy was too tall to be local and the girl too blonde. I stopped, holding the tin tightly.

The guy grinned, showing shockingly white teeth as he strode towards me. “Giddyay, mate. Having a gander at the local wildlife?”

I stared at him, confusion outweighing my disappointment. My mind could accept shadowy sea creatures in the waves, but an American in Aberdaron? “That is the worst Australian accent I have ever heard.”

“Thank you.” The woman had shorter legs and caught up to us belatedly. “I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen.”

I snorted. “At least you tried.” I paused, digesting her clipped vowels. “New Zealander?” But tourist season had ended in August!

“Greymouth.” She tilted her head back to consider me. “You don’t sound like an Australian.”

“I’m not,” I said. “Grew up—well, all over really. But we moved to Australia when I was sixteen.”

“A repatriated local.” The guy sighed dramatically. “I got all excited for nothing.”

I frowned. “What?”

“That came out wrong.” His smile was smooth, forgiveness assumed. “But when we heard there was another foreigner in Aberdaron we had to come see for ourselves.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s all it takes to get you excited?”

He laughed, showing very white teeth. “You have me there.”

“Rob exaggerates,” the Kiwi said. “As always. But it’s good to meet someone who gets what it’s like to be a long way from home.” She smiled at me. “I’m Natalie.”

I returned the smile. “Olly. Nice to meet you.”

Rob shook hands with me. “You’ll be fluent in Welsh, of course.”

“Forgotten everything.”

“Thank God. Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

“We’re WWOOFers,” Natalie explained, elbow deep in the weeds that had overtaken the vegetable patch. “We’re mostly here to help out with the building project on *Felin Uchaf*. Usually we clock off at half-four but we were allowed to leave early today.”

“Because of the rain?”

“If they stopped working every time it rained in Wales, nothing would ever get done.” Rob was engaged in warfare with the hedge that had invaded the garden. “But no, this little visit is all due to you.”

The Aberdaron grapevine at work? “All I know about *Felin Uchaf* is that it promotes old traditions, and they have organic vegetables at very good prices in the summer.” I paused. Was that where my companions came in? “WWOOFers. World-wide Organics?” I paused. What was the F for?

“Willing Workers on Organic Farms.” Natalie stopped to tighten her ponytail. “Not that it has to be organic.”

That explained why they had dived so enthusiastically into Nan’s garden, if not what they were doing here in the first place. “Don’t take this the wrong way—I wouldn’t know where to start with the garden! But—”

“Who are you and what are you doing here? It’s something of a mystery to us, too.” Rob’s big laugh filled the garden. Definitely not short of confidence, that one. “See, until about half an hour ago, we thought we’d be spending yet another day laying the stone for the new visitors centre flooring, but then Mrs Lloyd dropped in for afternoon tea with the news that Sylvia Evans’s grandson from Australia had moved into the cottage and Natalie suggested you might be lonely. Being that New Zealand is just an outer suburb of Australia anyway—”

“Don’t even start, Rob—”

“The idea that you might be put at ease by members of your own kind quickly took root, and we were volunteered to help you settle in.” Rob bowed to me, narrowly avoiding getting hit in the face by the branch he released. “Enjoy your welcome party! With compliments of all at *Felin Uchaf*.”

“We’ve got eggs for you, too,” Natalie added practically. “They’re on the floor of the truck, so they didn’t get jolted about. You probably want to go and get them now, before we forget.”

I hesitated. The small-town grapevine worked fast, but I wasn’t *staying*. “And you really don’t mind?” I loved the over-grown tangle that was Nan’s garden, but it was a lot of work.

“You don’t know how happy we are not to be looking at walls right now.” Natalie’s fervency was believable. “We’ve been inside almost an entire week!”

“Besides,” Rob said. “We have an ulterior motive.”

I eyed him, trying to decide if he was serious, but he only grinned.

“Well. At least you’re up front about it,” I hesitated. “This is a long shot, but either of you know anything about plumbing?”

“Plumbing?” They both stared at me.

“I think Nan might have purposefully turned off the water to the bathroom, but I can’t figure out how she did it.”

Natalie shook her head, but Rob put down his shears.

“I’ll take a look. Know where the shut off valve is?”

“The what?”

“Okay. I think I know what your problem is.”

Natalie and Rob insisted they didn’t mind being left to get to grips with the garden, so I took them at their word, celebrating the return of running water to the bathroom with a shower. It was only as I dried my hair with the towel that I remembered the tin. I carefully patted my head dry, but there didn’t seem to be any bruise left by the projectile—which made those on my neck even more confusing.

The tin was still on the kitchen table where I’d left it, sitting next to the eggs that Natalie and Rob had delivered. I ran my hand over the tin’s mottled surface then twisted it open. It still contained a few ancient crumbs, and I snorted. If I’d needed any proof that this was the tin I remembered, that was it.

Nan prided herself on always having something on hand for any visitors that came by her cliff-top cottage. Being distant from the village had not reduced the frequency of her guests, a fact that might have had something to do with the cakes and biscuits she produced without even needing to open a recipe book. I glanced out the window at Natalie and Rob, hard at work. I heard Nan clear her throat as loudly as if she had been standing next to me.

I put the kettle on.

“It might be an invasive species to you, but it’s Olly’s garden—look, you can ask him yourself.” Rob tossed his armful of hedge clippings in the wheelbarrow. “Nat wants to know if you’re keeping the foxglove.”

I looked over to the window where the familiar pink-purple cones bobbed gently in the breeze, a welcome splash of colour against the grey day and white cottage walls. The foxglove was a tailor, I remembered. Charged with preparing the gowns worn by the garden gnomes to their balls. “Definitely keeping him. The thistle, too.”

“Pests, both of them,” Natalie said. “Foxglove is poisonous. If a neighbour’s sheep were to get in here—”

“Then that’s the neighbour’s problem isn’t it?” Rob shrugged. “Should have trained his sheep better.”

“You don’t train sheep,” I started, but Natalie wasn’t done.

“And the thistles! They spread like anything. Once they’re established, you’ll have a really hard time getting rid of them. Look! This one’s already spread across the garden.”

I looked. Sir Spikesalot had been blessed with progeny in my absence, judging by the purple tufts poking out of the cornflowers. “They can go. But this one’s an old friend.”

Natalie shook her head as she picked up the grubber. “I will never understand this country. Actually encouraging gorse... Back home, it’s a pest, an invasive species that took root. Much like Americans, actually, when you think about it.”

“Watch it. Besides, Jones said the old woman was funny about weeds. You knew this was coming,” Rob reminded her. “Where do I dump these, Olly?”

“The compost’s out the back. But leave it for now. Come in and have some afternoon tea.”

Natalie looked around the kitchen with interest. “I’ve been dying to see inside one of these little cottages for ages,” she admitted. “At *Felin Uchaf*, they’ve got us in thatched roundhouses.”

Rob, meanwhile, was investigating the pantry. “And you really don’t have any coffee?”

“Even if you find any, it’ll be seven years old,” I warned him. “Nan only bought it for Mam.” I finished slicing the crusts off my plate of sandwiches and put them down on the table. “You’ve been here for four months. You should be used to tea.”

Rob pulled up a chair reluctantly. “That doesn’t mean I like it. What’s this?”

“Haven’t had the chance to go shopping yet, so you’re making do with what I threw in my pack before I left.” I helped myself to a seat. “This is Skippy peanut butter and that’s Vegemite.”

Rob’s hand paused over the plate. “That anything like Marmite?”

“It’s the inferior Australian version,” Natalie explained, picking up a slice.

“And the gauntlet has been thrown! You’re not going to take that lying down, Olly? Insulted in your own house?”

I shook my head. “I’m not Australian. I just lived there for a while. You should try it.”

Rob shook his head. “I’ve heard the stories. I know better.” He picked up a slice of peanut butter and looked at it mournfully. “It’s just not the same without jelly.”

“Jam,” Natalie corrected.

The difference between jam and jelly had never been as hotly contested. *The Great British Bake-Off* had nothing on a homesick American and a kiwi out for vindication. I didn’t dare consult Siri, remaining firmly on the sidelines behind my cup of tea.

When they started getting repetitive, I risked standing. “Anyone for another cuppa?”

“No, thanks,” Natalie said regretfully. “It’s time we were heading out. Llewellyn wanted the truck back by four.”

“You haven’t told me what your ulterior motives are.”

“Getting to it,” Rob said comfortably. “Anyway, now you’re entirely in our debt, we’re inviting you to the pub tonight for a few drinks and some conversation.”

I snorted. “You don’t need to weed the garden to invite me to hang out.”

“We’re desperate,” Natalie said. “You heard us just now. After a week of being the only non-locals this side of the Llŷn, we’re ready to kill each other.”

I winced. “That bad?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I love the country. Hell, I came here because it was so isolated,” Natalie said hastily. “I figured I could handle the quiet, see a part of the country that most tourists miss. But there’s a big difference to being out in the wops in Greymouth where I know everyone, and being here where everyone has their own lives and their own concerns—and those don’t involve us.”

“Like, I get it and it makes sense—most WWOOFers stay a week in one place, tops. Why bother making friends when your new friend is going to be

gone in a day or two? But I've been here four months," Rob said. "Four months, and I'm still a guest. Unbelievable." He glared at his half-full cup of tea.

I glanced at him as I placed my cup in the sink. Rob had the kind of tan that accompanies a genuine love of the outdoors, but his hair was meticulously arranged and his clothes new and crisp. Of the pair of them, Natalie in her boots and over-sized men's shirt looked more likely to spend four months on the Llŷn. "Remarkably, my social calendar for tonight is empty."

"Great! Need a lift there?"

I shook my head. "It's an easy walk into the village. Just one thing." I paused, wondering if I was making a mistake. "Will Joanne be joining us?"

"God no. If she does, it's nothing to do with me."

"With us," Natalie corrected Rob. She caught my eye and looked contrite. "I'm sure she's very nice, and she did show us around a lot, but she's just so—" She grimaced.

"Just checking," I said. "She came by this morning. Described herself as Nan's disciple. It was—odd."

"She is odd," Rob said promptly. "She's been trying to pawn off one of her God-awful stones on Harry. Says that it will cleanse the old man's chakras, heal him. Won't take a hint. Poor guy is stressed enough without having to deal with extra crazy."

"Harry." The name called up a faint echo within my memory. "Harry Jones?"

"Yeah." Rob's eyes settled on me coolly. "You know him?"

"We might have played together when we were little," I said, trying to disguise my eagerness. "He's still here?"

"Still here. And good luck trying to get him to go anywhere else."

Natalie's reply was mild in contrast. "We could invite him to join us. You ask him, he's bound to say yes."

"Sure. As they say over here, it will be a right lark."

Rob's Welsh accent was equally atrocious as his Australian. "What language was that, exactly?"

Natalie laughed at Rob's discomfiture. "You had it coming."

“Hey,” he protested elbowing her. “At least I don’t go about skylad, or apprenticing myself to witches.”

I felt as though the great wide sea outside had crumbled to a thundering halt in my ears. “What?”

Rob stared at me. “Well, it wasn’t a secret, was it?”

“When I got here one of the first things anyone said to me—well, that I understood anyway—was that the shortest way to *Felin Uchaf* from the village was to take the cliff road where the cunning woman lived,” Natalie added.

“And cunning woman’s basically Welsh for witch, right?”

I shook my head at Rob. “They’re totally different things—and you’re wrong besides! Nan was never a—” I swallowed.

There are some that say it’s even more powerful than the Witch on the Cliffs.

Rob looked uneasy. “It’s no big deal. A local joke, I suppose. She was in on it, too. Laughed about it. I expect they made it up to mess with Joanne, not thinking she’d take it seriously. Must have been a real shock when she moved her caravan into the campsite and announced she was staying.”

I nodded, trying to smile. “That must be it. A joke.” The Witch on the Cliffs, that was my story after all. Maybe Nan got the idea from me.

“Got a phone, Olly?” Numbers were exchanged, and I followed them to the door.

“Thanks for the help with the garden.” I hesitated. “When you came down to meet me on the beach, did you see anyone else there?”

“Only you.” Natalie swung herself up into the driver’s seat of the truck. “Why?”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. I saw someone on the cliffs this morning, a guy with brown hair—”

“Like everyone else in this entire country?” Rob snorted.

“Long, shoulder-length. He was wearing a wool jumper,” I persisted. “About our age. You don’t know anyone like that around here?”

“Probably a day-tripper,” Natalie said. “Lots of people drive over from Pwllheli, or even Bangor.”

“Should have got his number when you had the chance. Catch you at the pub, tonight.” Rob pulled the car door shut behind him.

I stood at the gate. “He wasn’t a day-tripper,” I told the dust left by the truck. “I knew him.”

The silence was somehow unsatisfying. I returned to the kitchen, to treat my discontent the best way I knew how. A second pot of tea.

I took my time over my cuppa, absorbed in reconstructing the playmate of my memory. I had his voice, I was pretty sure, but his face and name eluded me. “Martin. Marvin? No, definitely not.” Whoever heard of a prince named Marvin?

I shook my head to clear it of the scowl of the man on the cliff. His mouth was right, but instead of being pressed firmly together it should have smirked, or shifted suddenly and alarmingly into amusement. I frowned at the tin. “There was a cave. On the beach. I’m sure there was.”

Was that where he’d vanished to? But the curate hadn’t seen him.

“The curate *said* he hadn’t seen him.” Would a curate lie? They were sort of junior-vicars, weren’t they? Maybe he was still in training. I snorted, standing to put my cup in the sink. If Rhys Hughes was still in training, then he’d left it late in life to become a vicar. “Or maybe he’s just really bad at it.”

The sight of the Griffiths’ battered jeep going down the road towards the village jogged my memory. I smoothed out Nan’s letter to read it.

My brave knight—

Ever smiled as you blinked back tears? Good thing I’d waited until I was alone to open the letter. Nan’s voice seemed to speak from the paper itself.

I wish I were there to welcome you back to Aberdaron, hear all of your adventures. No matter what you do, I know that I can trust your courage and big heart to make me proud. You always have.

The house is small, but I think you will find it a suitable holding for a knight if you choose. I have hidden the other half of your inheritance in the old post box. Strange things have been happening on the Llŷn. We need a knight more than ever, and it’s about time you found your lost prince.

Be happy,

Sylvia.

I wiped my sleeve across my eyes. Just like Nan. The first paragraph was all her. She'd said almost the exact same thing my sixteenth summer when I'd made her the first person I came out to. The second paragraph though... What did she mean by my 'lost prince?'

At least the old post box was readily understandable. I didn't wait to pull boots on, stepping onto the damp grass in my bare feet.

Behind the house, sheltered as much as possible from the winds, was what was optimistically called 'the orchard.' In addition to the old damson, there was a Bardsey apple, a crab apple tree, and a tree of unknown parentage that had never flowered the entire time I'd known it. It was ancient and twisted, and a hollow where a branch had fallen away looked, in combination with the tree's leathery skin, like the mouth of a medieval gargoyle. No wonder, that this tree was of particular significance to the garden gnomes, and therefore, of particular interest to me, their knight-protector. I reached into the hollow and immediately felt cool metal.

The cake-tin.

I set it carefully on the dry grass beneath the tree, wiping my palms on my jeans. I almost didn't want to open it. I wanted to savour these mementoes of Nan, spin them out for the times I needed her. But at the same time, I had to see just what Joanne was so keen to get her skinny hands on.

The familiar pattern of wildflowers lifted up to reveal an untidy mess of correspondence. I snorted, lifting out a gas bill—some inheritance!—and my eye caught a bright cerulean blue. A postcard from the Great Barrier Reef. I remembered picking it out to send her. It was bundled together with more postcards, and I felt humbled as I lifted the small tribute. She'd kept them, every one.

There was more in the tin. Her bankbook, the address book that Mrs Griffith hadn't found, and right at the bottom, an old book. The gilt title on its battered leather cover was so faded it was unreadable, and loose pieces of paper were tucked within its pages. I'd never seen it before, but clearly, this was it. I opened it carefully and laughed. A collection of sermons?

A succession of names was printed in neat block letters in the inside cover. I held some sort of family treasure. The book had been handed down from

generation to generation. Beside each name was written three dates. Birth, marriage and death. The paper was mottled with age and damp, and not all the names were decipherable. Nan's was the most recent. I glanced at it and suddenly felt it difficult to breathe.

I ran my finger down the list to check. Birthdate, marriage, death. All three were neatly filled in, in the handwriting I knew so well. "It's not possible!"

A twig snapped loudly. I jumped to my feet, clutching the book to my chest. "Who's there?"

The only reply was footsteps, running.

"Myfanwy? Is that you? Don't go!" I rushed after the noise, but Nan's garden bordered a great expanse of gorse. I took one step into it and suffered predictable consequences. By the time I'd dug the thorn out of my foot, there was no sign of whoever had watched me. I stared at the surrounding fields for a long moment before turning back towards the house.

Strange things were indeed happening on the Llŷn.

Chapter Three

Boy Meets Fish

I stepped into the *Ty Newydd's* restaurant with a bad case of the butterflies, more nervous even than at my first job interview. But as I scanned the faces in the room, the buzzing was replaced by a keen sense of disappointment. There were dark-haired people a plenty, sitting at the bar or around one of the tables in front of the large flat-screen TV. Some of them were vaguely familiar. A few of them even returned my nod.

None of them were the man I sought.

"Ollly!" Rob and Natalie waved to me. They'd chosen a table in the farthest corner, on a raised partition, distant and half screened from the rest of the bar.

I took my seat with relief. Although no one had paid me any outward attention, I was conscious of being very closely studied. "Sorry I'm late."

"Don't worry about that. You're on Aberdaron time now." Rob sized me up. "That's a nice shirt. New?"

I felt oddly defensive, fidgeting with the collar. "Had it ages, actually." But I'd gone to the trouble of digging out Nan's ironing board to freshen it up. "You get yours in the States?"

"Bangor. Picked it up last week." Rob pursed his lips, and I braced myself for whatever was coming next.

"Boys," Natalie interrupted. "You're both pretty. What do you say to a pint while we wait?"

I took the distraction gratefully. "Harry won't mind?"

Rob laughed. "Oh, Harry never minds."

As Natalie made her way to the bar, I glanced around the room, taking a second look at its occupants. Had I missed him?

The sound of the conversation beneath the game brought back memories of drumming my heels against the wooden pews of the stone church on the shore, waiting for Nan to finish her interminably long conversation. Knowing that there was a roast waiting for us in the oven at home made me impatient, and I'd probably incurred the displeasure of half the room at some point or another with my whining.

“Looking for someone?”

I shook my head, turning back to Rob. “Just taking in the local scenery.”

“Must be strange, coming back after so much time.”

“Actually, this is the first time I’ve been inside the *Ty Newydd*. They sold fizzy drinks and ice-cream to day-trippers and us kids on the beach, but we weren’t allowed inside. We’d get sand all over the carpet. Not that I’d have recognised it even if I had been in here.” I nodded to the bar, polished so fine that it caught the reflection of the sitting patrons. “No way that’s more than a year old. And they didn’t have tellys like that when I was here last. Coffee machines neither.”

Rob leant back in his seat. “You knew Harry as a kid, then?”

I tried to relax. “I think so.”

“You think so? Shouldn’t you know?”

“My memories are all over the place,” I explained. “Confused. Mixed in with stories and things, and I don’t know what happened and what didn’t.”

Rob blinked at me. “Back up the track. What?”

I squirmed. “I used to love making up stories. Did it all the time as a kid. That’s why it gave me such a shock when you mentioned witches this afternoon. Nan being a witch was my oldest make-believe.”

“Huh.” Rob took the pint Natalie offered with a nod of thanks. “And you made up stories about Harry?”

“Possibly,” I hedged, smiling quickly at Natalie as she set my glass down. “Like I said, it’s difficult to remember. What I do know is that my best friend was a mermaid prince who lived on the beach below Nan’s house.”

“And you think that might be Harry?”

I bit my lip. Harry had been sick a lot, always being taken to the specialists in Cardiff. Where the village kids had been tanned and boisterous, he was pale and forbidden from spending too long in the sun or exerting himself. I remembered a prematurely serious boy guarded by a fiercely protective mother. Could that have been the inspiration for my lost prince? It was a short leap from Harry to Prince Harry... and Mrs Jones made a very believable dragon.

“Harry’s a mermaid now?” Natalie settled down with her pint. “Have you two been drinking without me?”

“Olly’s just telling me about his childhood here. Tell you what, if I grew up somewhere this dull, I would invent stuff, too.”

I was conscious that while the men watching the game talked in *Cymraeg*, there was nothing stopping them listening in English. “The Llŷn is a world apart,” I said. “I think Nan telling me stories about growing up here is what got me started.”

“What sort of stories?”

“All sorts of things. My mother when she was small, stories about the smugglers, how the landmarks around here got their names, the time my great-grandfather tried to ride a *Ceffyl Dŵr*.” I shrugged. “The usual sort of story that gets passed down.”

Rob hefted his drink. “Don’t mention ‘story’ to Joanne. She devours mythology. Mention the ‘little people’ and she’ll eat you alive.”

“It’s *Tylwyth Teg*, not ‘little people’.” Natalie blushed suddenly. “Not that I’m a mythology geek or anything.”

“Just what we need. Another of them.”

Natalie elbowed Rob. “I’m not that bad. Anyway, I’d love to hear your stories sometime, Olly.”

“I barely remember them now. Sorry.” I shrugged. “It was all nonsense, anyway.” Natalie’s disappointment was evident. “You want real stories, this place has more than its fair share.”

Rob snorted. “And good luck finding anyone willing to tell you them.”

I chewed my lip. Rob’s biting humour, atrocious accents and city-style were not going to win him many friends in the village. And it wasn’t really telling a story, if I was just repeating it... “You ever done the headlands walk? The path that goes from here, all the way around to Y Rhiw and Porthor?”

Rob nodded, but Natalie shook her head.

“It’s been too wet. What about it?”

“There’s a rock up there, past Uwchmynydd, right where the cliffs reach furthest out towards the sea.” I set my drink down. “There’s a bit of a local legend about it you won’t find in any book. Nan told me it once. See—”

“In the days when pilgrims still walked the path and Arthur’s death was still mourned in these hills, there lived in the village a young maid, as good as she was beautiful—”

“And was she beautiful?”

“Hush, you. Matter of fact, she was pretty. Sensible too, which is more than you can say of most girls in these parts, and certainly not of Glen’s daughter who works at the shop and makes cow eyes at the day-trippers, but that’s neither here nor there.”

I smirked. I loved Nan’s trick of telling stories like she personally knew the people involved. “So, she’s somewhat good-looking and doesn’t waste her time chasing after boys. Got it.”

“Well, those two traits being in rare demand around here, it stood to reason she’s going to attract attention. As misfortune would have it, the attention she caught was that of a *morgen*.”

I sat up. “The Welsh sirens?”

“What is this ‘Welsh sirens’? Who is to say the others aren’t Greek *morgen*? You were born on the Peninsula, Olly. Have some pride in your roots.”

“Sorry, Nan. So it’s a story of girl meets fish, now?”

“You won’t stay popular in these parts if you suggest a *morgen* might be related to a fish, but you could tell it that way. Being a good Christian girl and canny besides, the girl wanted none of it, but the *morgen* was well and truly taken with her and pled his suit over many months. The prettiest shells that one could find in the seas around these parts were left outside her parents’ house for her, and her father and brother found that the fish fairly jumped from the sea into their nets. Eventually her father got to thinking that it would not be such a bad thing to have a *morgen* for a son-in-law, and as the *morgen*’s intentions seemed to be more towards matrimony than drowning, and he was good-looking besides, the girl agreed to the match. There was just one problem—”

“Where to have the wedding?”

“Do you want to tell this story, Olly? Because you’re welcome to it.”

“Sorry, Nan. I’ll be good.”

Nan eyed me severely. “I’ll believe that when I see it,” she said. “And not a moment before then.”

“—And she stood on the headland, waiting, for so long that she turned into the stone. And that’s why it’s called Mother Rock.”

Natalie sighed happily. “And this is out on the headlands, you said? I’ll have to find a way to check it out before I go.”

I picked up my pint. “You’re leaving soon?”

“End of the week. I was only going to stay one week, but with the weather so bad, I stayed on. I really want to see Bardsey island before I go.”

I nodded. “And you, Rob?”

“I have two weeks left on my visa.”

“And you’re spending it here?”

Rob leant in with sudden energy. “What can I say? I fell in love with the place. Classic case of opposites attract. The odd couple, only one of them’s a peninsula—”

“You got the odd part right.” A man pulled out the chair between Rob and Natalie. “*Schmae*, Natalie, Rob.” He nodded to me, eyes alert with interest. “Olly.”

My heart skipped a beat.

It wasn’t him.

Or, if it was, my imagination had been working overtime.

Harry shared the dark hair of my elusive companion, but the only traces of the pale, somewhat sickly child I remembered were his eyelashes, so fine as to be almost invisible. The rest of him was weathered. Harry had acquired with age the rugged edge of the surrounding cliffs. His smile was as placid as the gentle slopes of his grandfather’s land and his curly hair tousled by the wind that swept the peninsula. It was impossible to imagine him as anything other than what he was: a solid Welsh farmer.

I swallowed back disappointment. “*Schmae*, Harry. It’s been a while.”

“It really has.” He studied me as seriously as I did him. “How was Australia?”

“All right.” I made an effort to remember what we’d talked about as kids. “How is your grandfather? I heard he wasn’t well.”

“Parkinson’s,” Harry said promptly. “Makes it hard for him to get around. Can’t be on his own anymore. It’s hard for him. You know how Taid loves the land.”

I nodded. Old Mr Jones was another of Nan's frequent visitors. A spiky, rather alarming old man, he delighted in feuding with people. Nan and he had kept up no fewer than five running arguments over the years, but he was kind to me. Harry, following along in his wake, had been something of a non-entity, sickly pallor making him look like a faded photograph rather than a real boy, and with his Sunday-best politeness, it had been easy to forget that he was even there. "Does he still have the dogs?"

Rob laughed. "Hope you didn't have plans to be home early, Olly. Once Harry gets started on farming—"

Harry obediently reached for his pint. "I'm not that bad. It's Olly you've got to watch." His shy smile looked ridiculous paired with his matter-of-fact exterior. "I wasn't sure it was you," he confided. "Until I caught the story. Mam always said you could talk the hind legs off a donkey."

My heart fluttered even as my head protested. *He's too ordinary!* "Those days are behind me. I'm a reformed character now."

"Olly was just saying he'd given up telling stories," Rob cut in.

I blinked. What was that tone?

But Harry didn't seem to have noticed it. "How come?"

That was a very good question. "I don't really remember clearly now," I said slowly, searching my memory. "I think I upset someone with one of my stories. Upset them pretty badly." The guilt was there, a hard knot in my stomach that I instinctively shied away from. "It wasn't you, was it?"

Harry's headshake was immediate. "I loved hearing your stories. Half-believed them, too." He laughed. "Unless it was the time you told me that there was a fairy circle in the paddock behind your Nan's house and Dad caught me climbing out of my bedroom window at midnight to try and catch one. We were both in trouble after that. Though, you never stopped telling stories because the week after that you let out Gavin Griffith's sheep because you said they told you they wanted to see the sea."

"Sheep getting out. The height of excitement on the Llŷn." Rob shook his head. "It's a wonder you were allowed back."

"I'd have been in big trouble if any of them had gotten hurt. Luckily they were rounded up really quickly." I smiled despite myself. "Mr Griffith was not happy."

“He had a go at your Nan about it,” Harry continued. “And you know what she said to him? ‘How do you know the sheep didn’t ask to be let out?’”

I snorted. “I’d entirely forgotten about that.”

“We haven’t. It was one of the things talked about at the funeral.” Harry’s face abruptly fell. “I’m sorry, Olly. It really is a loss, to everyone. She was a rare woman, your Nan.”

I nodded. “I miss her a lot. It’s weird being here without Nan. I keep expecting to see her.”

“You should come by the house. Taid would love to see you,” Harry said earnestly. “They were great friends.”

“I’d like that.” I paused. Harry’s earnestness was flattering, and he wasn’t difficult to look at. In fact, he checked several of my boxes. Dark hair, knew how to smile. Was it really his fault that he didn’t have long hair or the right kind of smile?

Yes, apparently. “This is kind of a weird question, but you have any school photos?”

Harry blinked. “Of my school?”

I nodded. “I saw a guy on the cliffs yesterday. He looked really familiar, but I can’t place him. I’m wondering if he might be one of the local kids, all grown up.”

“What does he look like?”

I told him.

Harry laughed. “That could be anyone on this peninsula, give or take a few years. I’ll have a look at home, but pretty much everyone’s moved now. Will’s farming in Pembrokeshire, Mali’s a solicitor in Cardiff, Dayffd—”

Rob cleared his throat. “You didn’t tell us tonight was an occasion, Harry.”

Harry blinked at him. “What’d you mean?”

“Big crowd. There’s not usually so many here on a weeknight.”

“It’s an international,” Natalie said promptly. Unlike the rest of us, she’d kept an eye on the game. “Rugby World Cup.”

Rob shook his head. “If it was a sport that mattered, maybe—”

Natalie and I tripped over our words in our haste to reply.

“What, like the joke that is American Football? Real men don’t wear shoulder-pads!”

“And if the sport is so dull you need to bribe people to watch it with women jumping around in Lycra—”

“What about baseball? The so-called world series and only America plays in it!”

“Rugby, on the other hand, has a long history and a proud tradition—”

Harry laughed. “You are not going to win this one, Robby.”

Rob grinned unrepentantly. “Whatever. Rugby’s only relevant in Wales and Australia.”

“Hey!” Natalie replied hotly. “We’re currently world number one—”

“Like I said. Only relevant in Australia.”

I snorted. “He’s trolling us, Nat. I say we—”

A throat cleared beside me. “*Ti’n edrych fel dy nain.*” The man delivered his verdict as seriously as a judge, but his eyes crinkled at me, like raisins in a currant bun. “You’ve not forgotten us, I hope, Oliver Evans.”

I stood, ducking my head in thanks, and very conscious of my pronunciation said, “*Diolch yn fawr.*” I paused. His hair hadn’t been as grey then, but I thought I remembered him. “Mr Owens?”

He smiled tightly. “Australia not to your liking?”

I shook my head. “Australia’s a great country, and we enjoyed living there, but it was never home.” Not like I’d imagined the Llŷn was. My throat caught suddenly.

Mr Owens simply nodded. “How’s your mam?”

“Well, thank you.” Mr Owens’s accent was so thick that even with sixteen years’ worth of summer holidays on the Llŷn behind me, I had to listen carefully. “And your family? You have two daughters, don’t you?”

“Three.” Mr Owens considered me thoughtfully. “You’ll be staying then?”

I bit my lip. I knew the answer, but I didn’t want to say it. “There’s a lot to decide, yet.”

He nodded to me, looking over the table. “*Schmae*, Harry. Your friends?”

Harry’s smile seemed strangely thin. “Rob and Natalie are volunteers up at the Centre.”

“*Felin Uchaf*, then. Llewellyn working you hard?”

“Very, thank you.” Natalie smiled politely.

Rob’s smile was sardonic. “Come rain or shine. But mostly rain.”

Mr Owens frowned at him. “I’ve seen you before. You’ve been here a while now, haven’t you?”

“That depends on what you consider a while. To some, four months would be a long time, but to others, barely a drop in the ocean—”

“Is that Richards just come in?” Harry stood. “I’ve got to talk to him about his ram. Come with me, Owens. We might need your trailer.” He nodded to the three of us. “Won’t be a minute now.”

Mr Owens clapped me on the shoulder as they went. “It’s good to see you, Oliver.”

I sat down, relieved. I had not entirely disgraced my proud Welsh forebears!

“What did he say to you? That bit at the start.”

“I have the look of my grandmother.” My jubilation was checked by Rob’s stony expression. “That’s all.”

He pouted, looking over at the table where Harry now sat. “I don’t get why they couldn’t bring Richards over here. Any excuse to exclude us—”

“I seem to remember that the last time we were here you complained that all anyone ever talked about in Aberdaron was farming,” Natalie started.

“That’s not true. Harry’s taught me a lot about farming. I bet Olly doesn’t know what tugging means—”

“That’s when you put the ram in with the ewes.” I smirked at Rob. “They have sheep in Australia too, you know.”

“You worked on a farm?” Natalie asked.

“Nothing long-term. Mam took a job as cook on a station. I enjoyed the lifestyle, but at the end of the season, we were both ready to go.” Much to Bethan’s bitter disappointment, the Longing had followed us even into the parched Australian outback.

“Cattle or sheep?” Natalie leant over the table. “I’ve got a friend in Australia now, and he says—”

Rob put his pint down abruptly and stood. “If all you’re going to talk about is sheep, I’m getting some air.”

I looked up, confused. “We can change the subject—”

But Rob was already headed for the door.

Natalie sat up. “Now, if it were Harry talking about his sheep...” She nodded towards the table. “Hope you like soap operas, Olly, because you have a front row seat to one.”

No one seemed to give Rob’s abrupt departure any attention, but about a minute later, Harry excused himself from the table and stepped outside.

I picked up my neglected pint. “So that’s it.”

“Yup. The non-stop Rob and Harry show.” Natalie breathed out. “And I thought girls were bad... If I didn’t want to see Bardsey so much, I’d have already left.”

“Does Harry’s family know?”

“No.” Natalie grimaced. “I shouldn’t say this, but since you’re going to hear about it from Rob anyway, that’s one of the issues. Harry’s not ready to tell anyone—anyone local that is, and Rob—”

“Only has two weeks on his visa,” I finished slowly.

“It’s a mess.” Natalie hefted her pint. “Take my advice, Olly. Stick to mermaids.”

“Mermen.”

“Really?” Natalie blinked at me. “Huh. Guess that settles that.”

That was the second most anticlimactic reaction to coming out I’d got yet. Progress? “Settles what?”

“Whether you’re staying. I was going to ask you. That cottage is gorgeous! But the dating pool in Aberdaron is—well, look around. This *is* the dating pool.”

I bit my lip. “Just because I’m single doesn’t mean I’m looking. But you’re right. I’m not staying. Much as I love the Llŷn and will always think of it like a second home... there’s something that’s missing.”

“And you’re that sure you won’t find it here?”

I shook my head. “Mam’s spent her entire life looking for it. I’ve never lived anywhere longer than eighteen months. And whatever it is she’s looking for, I inherited it. It’s not in our family to settle anywhere.”

“Your grandmother settled.” Natalie resettled herself in her chair. “Maybe you haven’t found the right place.”

I shook my head. “It’s not a place, it’s a person,” I said. “Until I find him—” I stopped. I’d given myself away.

And from the bright look in Natalie’s eyes, I wasn’t going to be allowed to get out of this story.

Something was invading my nostril.

I flailed half-heartedly with the arm not wrapped around my pillow. It didn’t connect with anything, and I sat up, blinking in the sudden daylight. I was in my bed in Nan’s cottage, tangled in the blankets. My clothes from the night before were on the floor where I’d left them. After saying goodnight to Natalie, I’d got into a spirited discussion about the differences between Aussie Rules and ‘real’ Rugby with two of the younger farmers and had got back so late I just fell into bed. Right on top of Nan’s book.

I picked it up carefully. Now that I thought back, I remembered putting it beneath my pillow for safekeeping. Of course, I hadn’t expected to stab myself in the face on its hard edges.

Wrapping myself up in the blankets for warmth, I settled back to take a proper look at it. Any blank space in the book had been used as space for notes. This is what people did before readily available notebooks, I decided. Take a book, the more boring the better (no one would pick up a book of sermons unless forced to), and fill in any blank spaces with your thoughts. Generations of Evans women had been great thinkers if the amount of faded ink was anything to go by.

There was no particular order to the scribblings. ‘Charm to get a woman with child’ was next to a recipe for Kidneys with Mustard Gravy (useful when rationing). The sprinklings of folklore, recorded as though they were gossip, interested me the most, and I squinted at the faded ink, trying to decipher the spiky handwriting. Most of it was in *Cymraeg*, but here and there a paragraph had been written in English, presumably as a precaution against the book being read by anyone outside the family.

It is well known to all that live on the peninsula that the beautiful songs of the morgen must be listened to only from a distance lest the listener be driven mad by the music of the

Deep. Llewelyn ap Robert that was shepherd to Jones that farms at Abersoch found this to his great detriment this summer past. We found him wandering the shores at Porthor, a broken man, and he died soon after.

Nan had added an addendum to this.

There is a cure. The King beneath the Cliffs gave me a charm to undo the work of a morgen's voice for which he demanded my wedding ring. The charm must be sung in the language of the Deep, which no human has the voice for, and no human but the effected may listen to without being driven mad themselves! Beware the King's tricks. Still, technology (and a willing assistant) do wonders. His mind was saved and he is out of danger, though he has lost his memory of the event. For the best, I think. The King is not happy that I worked the cure in spite of him and has promised revenge.

“What were you playing at, Nan?” I turned the page, hoping for an explanation. There was no evidence that the stories woven over generations were intended for publication. A one-sided game, with no chance of ever seeing the answering replies? That explanation was unsatisfying too. “How to breathe beneath the sea... How a man of the waves might be made to walk on land... A charm to enable a youth to secure the affections of their desired?”

This was one of the most hotly contested charms, with many notes cautioning against hasty application and quite a few questioning its usefulness at all.

‘An idle charm—fit only for idle flirtations’ was one opinion, to which Nan had added, ‘Substituted a hot cup of tea and a large heaping of common sense for the columbine and verbena.’

I snorted. That was Nan for you. Practical to a fault. I relaxed, turning the pages. She must have inherited the book and hadn't been able to resist adding her own commentary. She'd got caught up and added a few flights of fancy of her own. “Now I know where I got my stories from.” Mystery solved, I untangled myself from the bed.

About to head downstairs, I paused. Something about leaving the book lying on the bed in plain sight made me uneasy. I knew it was harmless, but I could see someone as crazy as Joanne or as impressionable as Myfanwy taking it

seriously. No, I decided, pulling my suitcase out from under the bed. Better safe than sorry.

By midmorning, the sky was still mostly free of clouds. This kind of weather was rare enough in September that I walked into the village, feeling like I'd won the jackpot. Perfect weather for visiting Nan.

Perfect, also, for tourists.

I saw a gaggle of them descending from a minibus en masse. St Hywyn's church is a local source of pride, and rightly so, but I felt some unpatriotic annoyance at the sight of the swarm heading directly towards it. I wanted my first visit to Nan's grave to be private. Hoping they would soon disperse, I wandered down to the shore.

St Hywyn's graveyard meandered all the way down to the beach on one end, lopsided gravestones as worn and weathered as the church itself. Just as I was considering climbing through the fence and paying my respects while the tourists were still inside, fussing over the double-nave and the memorial to R.S. Thomas, the black-clad priest I met on the clifftops appeared. I wheeled around, making tracks for the far end of the beach.

The sand on the beach here was lighter and much finer than the shore below the cottage, and I was reminded again that it was no surprise *Aberdaron Bae* won awards. You could usually see a few surfers, braving the cold in their wetsuits in order to take advantage of the waves at the far end of the beach. Today there were none. A sign indicated that there was a dangerous undertow and that swimming or surfing was not advised. Some tattered bouquets of flowers placed on the stones nearby indicated this was no idle warning.

I studied them with a frown. Aberdaron's beach was one of the safest on the Llŷn Peninsula. There'd never been a drowning there in all the years I'd visited Nan. My mind went back to the book. *A charm to secure the safety of all on the waters—*

The crunch of a boot in the sand startled me out of my thoughts. I looked up, right into the strange, shale-coloured eyes of the man on the cliff.

He stared back, apparently as startled by my presence as I was. Surprise made him look younger, more approachable, and this time I felt the jolt of recognition settle into certainty.

"I do know you!"

He tensed. Wariness flickered over his face, for a moment his eyes lost their strange emptiness. “I don’t think you do.”

“We played together as kids. On the beach beneath the cliffs.” I stepped towards him. “You came up out of the water—” I broke off. What had made me say that?

He shook his head. “I’ve never seen you before in my life.” His voice had the same discordant note as his eyes did. Something that should have been there was missing.

“It’s me, Olly. Oliver Evans. You must remember. My Nan lived in the cottage on the cliffs.”

“I don’t care if you’re Myrddin Emrys. I’ve never seen you before, and I don’t want to see you now.” The man shouldered roughly past me.

Not expecting this, I lost my balance, sliding a ways down the bank and almost pitching onto the exposed rock where the tide had retreated. “Hey! That was uncalled for!”

He marched down the beach, not looking back.

Determinedly, I jogged after him. “Look, I’m sorry if that came off as rude, but I’m sure we’ve met. What’s your name?”

He trudged onwards. “If you don’t know, I’m not going to tell you.”

“What’s the point in being unfriendly? This is a small village. I can just ask.” I bit my lip. Way to sound like a stalker! “But since we’re going to be neighbours now, it would be better to hear it from you, don’t you think?”

He laughed, and the sound stopped me in my tracks. It was the cold of the winter storms and the wind that came down from the North. “I am not your friend, Oliver Evans, and you are not welcome in the Llŷn. If you want neighbourly advice, you must go back from whence you came. Now, while you still can.”

I watched him walk away. The laugh shook me more than his dislike. It jarred irreconcilably with the voice I remembered, smooth as the lapping waves and frequently mocking but never harsh.

I put my hands into the pockets of my jeans and started to trudge back towards the church. Despite the sun, there was a distinct chill in the air. Was I—wrong?

Rhys had seen me. I deliberately walked slower as I approached the church. I did not want the curate to connect me with the man's sudden departure from the beach. I could not explain it. I could not explain myself. Why did the man's dislike hurt so much?

Rhys was leaning against the side of the church, looking less curate, more disinterested farmhand as he watched the tourists graze the small graveyard. He detached himself from the wall as I approached. "I thought I saw you on the beach, but you disappeared so quickly I could not say hello."

"I'm not really in the mood to chat." I pulled my jacket securely around me against the snide remark I knew was coming. "I wanted to have some time alone in the graveyard."

It wasn't me Rhys swooped down on, but the unlucky tourists. His black coat flapped out behind him, making him look like a lop-sided cormorant as he shooed them towards the church door. "If you'll join me in the nave, I'll give a short history of the renovations."

The group obediently put away their mobile phone cameras and filed into the church. I waited until the door shut behind them to climb the hill where I knew Nan must be.

Visiting grandfather's stone was a tradition after Sunday church. It was a shock not to see it there, even though the lawyer had told me that it had been sent away to have Nan's name added to it by a proper stone-carver. In contrast to the weathered stones with their mottled lichen, the wooden cross with its brassy nameplate seemed extremely inadequate. I sat on the grass beside it. "Well, Nan." My throat was suddenly tight. "I'm back."

Chapter Four

Pilgrimage

I stepped into the church, careful not to disturb the restful atmosphere as I shut the door behind me.

Rhys looked up but didn't stop his flow. "In those days, of course, we called men Saint not as a title of honour, but to indicate they were Christian. So you see, Hywyn and his brother Cadfan—"

Not a great talker? I raised an eyebrow. I had no idea how long I'd spent at Nan's graveside, but if he'd been holding forth on the church history that entire time, the Griffin had vastly underestimated him. Or, was it possible that even eccentric priests were afraid of retired schoolmistresses?

As the talk concluded and the little collection of tourists spread out around the church, I walked over to join him. "Thank you." I hesitated. What did you call a curate? "Reverend Hughes."

His smile was thin, self-deprecating. "Reverend is an adjective. Call me Rhys. Did you find what you were looking for?"

That was a good way to phrase the question. After a moment, I nodded. "She'll be happy there. She always liked that view."

He nodded, looking towards the graveyard. "She gave me very exact instructions for the funeral. I think we did her proud. The entire village turned out and then some. It was standing room only and we had more outside."

Nan wouldn't have cared about the attendance. When I'd graduated high school, I'd called her up to bemoan the fact that she couldn't be there in person, only for her to remind me that she was always with me in thought. Still, the fact that so many had turned out to pay their respects pleased me. "You said you buried her?"

"My first and, so far, only funeral." Rhys's mouth twisted. "As I am a relative newcomer still, most in the village prefer to be buried by someone they have more history with. Father Jones has retired, but he lives with his daughter in Anglesey, and often comes down to join our services. But as your Nan was responsible for me entering the church, I was allowed that honour."

Of all the strange things that had happened since my return, that statement was up there. "Nan was?"

“I had thought of being a hermit, but she told me I was over-qualified and suggested instead a profession where I might enjoy the sound of my own voice.”

That definitely sounded like Nan. I reconsidered the curate.

Rhys had too many contradictions for me to feel easy about him. Father Jones had been vague and affable, like rock rounded by centuries of gentle rain. This man was sharp and uncomfortable, as if the lines in his face had been carved rather than acquired naturally. His smile was unforgiving, although I knew now that his mocking was as much directed at himself as anyone else. His manner to me was another mystery—or did he treat everyone as though they shared his private jokes? He was strange when he should have been familiar, and familiar where he should have been strange.

I bit my lip, at a loss as to how to reply to him. “And do you?”

His laugh was no less disturbing the second time. “If I say yes, you will think I am vain and if I say no, you’ll think I’m a liar. Perhaps, it is better that I ask you.”

“Me?”

Rhys’s smile uncurled slowly. “Do you like the sound of my voice?”

“I—”

—was not expecting that question. Hoping that I wasn’t blushing, I thought furiously. “That’s a weird question to ask someone you’ve just met.”

“It would indeed be weird if we were strangers,” Rhys agreed, mouth twisting into something ironic. “Do you think—”

“Found you at last!” Joanne beamed at us from the church door like a curly-haired sun, saving me from my dilemma.

I forced myself to smile. “Looking for me?”

Joanne didn’t hear my question, calling over her shoulder to someone outside. “Here he is, and the pastor, too. How serendipitous!”

“If you take serendipity as an unexpected yet fortunate surprise, I must protest.” Rhys took Joanne’s appearance in stride. He motioned that we should take the conversation outside, leaving the tourists to their quiet contemplation of the church. “It is not so strange, surely, to find a curate in a church.”

Joanne laughed girlishly, wagging a finger at him. “You can be very hard to track down, Reverend Hughes. If you knew how many times I’ve arrived here to discover that I’ve just missed you!”

Rhys lifted his shoulders and did not correct her. “A shame indeed.”

Very disconcerting. I followed the pair outside, trying to get a grip on myself. It was all imagination. Curates, even curates that were really bad at their jobs, didn’t flirt with their parishioners. They especially did not flirt with their parishioners inside their own church!

Also, Rhys was *old*.

Old enough to be my dad old.

Natalie, Rob, and Harry waited outside the church wall, looking vaguely apologetic as Joanne led us towards them.

“We couldn’t let such a lovely day go to waste! I was driving past the heads when I saw the young people out for a walk and it occurred to me that it was the perfect day for a pilgrimage, and I just had to invite myself along. And then I thought why not make it a proper expedition and invite dear Olly, too, and here we are!”

“You’ve been driving around, looking for me?”

Harry shook his head. “Llewellyn told us where to find you. We were walking over to invite you on the walk ourselves.”

“How did Llewellyn know?” I didn’t even know I knew a Llewellyn.

“Small town,” Joanne said with a laugh. “Hope you don’t have any dark secrets, Olly, because nothing stays hidden here.”

I noticed Rob’s glance towards Harry and immediately wished I hadn’t. “It’s a good day for a walk,” I agreed slowly. “The pilgrimage, you said?” I wasn’t in the mood for an excursion, but if it was a choice between that and returning alone to the cottage, the walk won. My chat with Nan had left me even more aware of how alone I was on the Peninsula, while the man—

I did not want to think about the man.

“There should be great views of the coast.” The camera around Natalie’s neck indicated she meant business. “I’ve been promised a clear view of Bardsey Island.”

“You’re thinking of following the old pilgrim path along the cliffs, then?” Rhys looked towards the coast. “A fine day for it. I enjoy the walk in any weather, but on a day like this...”

I eyed him. The pause was too obviously pointed.

Joanne shrieked girlishly. “Oh, would you like to join us? It would be so delightful to have someone with as much knowledge of the history of the coast as you with us!”

“I should be charmed,” Rhys said. “If only to make sure that Olly stays on the path.”

The air on the headlands must have contained extra oxygen. One good breath, and my entire being expanded. Two, and I was in such a powerfully good mood, that I was willing to forgive anyone, even Joanne Davies and her one-woman percussion act. She led our little procession, an explosion of colour and energy. Beside her, Rhys maintained a steady pace, his habitual dark clothing jarring wildly with the orange and red kaleidoscope that was Joanne.

Whatever they were talking about, it was apparently hilarious. Joanne shrieked again, smacking the curate’s arm. “Reverend Hughes! To hear a member of the church say such things—”

“Are we sure he’s really a curate?”

Natalie, walking next to me, snorted. “Vicars are human, too, Olly. They’re allowed to marry.”

I jumped. Too much solo travelling had got me into some bad habits. I’d forgotten that I wasn’t talking to Siri.

Luckily, Natalie spared me the embarrassment of covering my surprise by continuing. “And you can’t blame Joanne for trying. He is good looking in a sort of Alan Rickman way.”

I stared at her. “Please tell me you’re not one of *them*.”

“The man has some very enthusiastic fans. Why not? He is an amazingly talented actor.” Natalie flipped her ponytail defiantly. “Admittedly, he appeals more to a—narrow demographic—”

“If you say so.” I could not see Rhys as attractive in any way, shape, or form. But I had to admit he would have made an excellent Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. “Too bad he doesn’t have a spell for warding off overfamiliar admirers.” If Joanne laughed one more time...

“She’ll never have to worry about getting lost.” Natalie pointed out. “We’d hear her a mile away.”

“If she needed to, she could shed bracelets one by one,” I agreed. “Leaving a trail like Hansel and Gretel.”

Natalie laughed. “God, can you imagine? She would set into the woods armed with her notebook, ready to interview the Witch.”

“Poor witch. Not enough meat on her to make it worth her while.”

“She’ll hear you!”

I shook my head. “Wind direction’s all wrong. Why do you think Rob and Harry are so far behind us?”

Natalie looked over her shoulder. Some distance behind us, Rob’s arm waved animatedly, while Harry trudged steadily beside him, nodding in agreement. Neither of them paid any attention to the beautiful day, the thrilling scenery or the musical accompaniment. “And they think they’re not obvious.”

“Don’t be too hard on them,” I said. “Love turns people stupid.”

“Says an expert.”

I made a face. “Am I going to regret telling you about the merman?”

“Only slightly. Spill. Any new memories?”

I shook my head. “I want to have another look for the cave. If I can find that, maybe I’ll know for sure.”

“Huh.” Natalie digested that information. “So the only things that you are sure about are that he’s your age, lived on the coast, had the voice of an angel and the smile of a devil and definite naturist qualities.”

“I didn’t put it like that.”

“You might as well have done.” Natalie cast a curious glance at me. “See the man from the cliff again?”

“Actually, yeah. Ran into him this morning. Denied meeting me back then, had absolutely no interest in meeting me now.” I frowned. The shock of that encounter was still vivid.

“But you said you knew him.”

“I know.”

“Mistaken identity?”

I shook my head. “The way he looks gives me chills. It should be him... but there’s something missing.” I made a face, trying to find words for the feeling that had been eluding me since our first meeting on the cliffs. “Something’s not there that should be there. He’s got the look, the sound, but it’s not right.”

“People change over time. Puberty does a number on voices. My brothers—”

I shoved my hands further in my jacket pockets. “He was late teens already. His voice wouldn’t have changed that much.”

“You think maybe you’re holding on to a memory of what was so much you’re reluctant to accept what is?”

“I don’t know.” As we rounded the tops, the sea wind rose up to meet us. I hunched my shoulders against the chill. “I don’t know, Nat. Another day or two, and I’m going to be suspecting one or both of us is under a spell—” I broke off, remembering my resolution not to mention the book anywhere near Joanne.

Natalie laughed. “You’re as good as a novel, Olly. You ever thought about being a writer?”

I elbowed her. “Give over.”

“No, I mean it. I’d read about your merman any day.”

We were getting dangerously close to Rhys and Joanne. I dropped my voice. “Nothing about the you-know-what to her,” I warned.

“No worries. Your secret’s safe as,” Natalie assured me.

Joanne beamed fatuously at us as we caught up to them. “Here we are then! Isn’t the view simply gorgeous?”

Gorgeous was the right word. The sea danced with the sun’s own brightness, all the way across to Bardsey, which had acquired a light of its own. We couldn’t see the ruins that made it famous, but its lush hills gleamed emerald in the September sun.

“Amazing,” Natalie agreed. “I’m glad I got to see Bardsey Island before I left.” She lifted her camera from around her neck, sizing up the view with a purposeful expression. “I was starting to think it was a myth made up for tourists.”

“An island wreathed in mist,” I started. There were definite possibilities there. “That was only ever seen in cloud so you were never quite sure if you’d seen it or not.”

Rhys’s smile was sardonic. “Shades of *Cant’r Gwaelod*?”

“No,” I said, needled. “My island’s above the water. In the mist, you can just see a building or two, the outline of the stone tower at the centre, but in a

storm, the lighthouse can be seen as clear as anything. On a day like today, with the sun shining, it's invisible, but sometimes an echo comes across the water. A laugh, a snatch of conversation, maybe even a song—”

I caught myself. A song?

“And?” I'd been so caught up in the story that I hadn't noticed Rob and Harry join us. Rob jiggled the change in his pockets impatiently. “What about it?”

They were all looking at me.

“Nothing,” I said, annoyed although whether at them for intruding or at myself for slipping, it was hard to say. “It was just a thought.”

“With the wealth of mythology already existing in these ancient hills, there's no need to elaborate,” Joanne said. “I'm sure that Reverend Hughes could tell us some stories if he liked.” She batted her eyelashes with what I considered undue optimism.

Rhys smiled his private smile. “As a matter of fact, there is a legend about this rock that is dear to me,” he said, and Rob and I hastily stopped leaning on the narrow boulder. “Years ago, a *morgen* fell in love with a woman of this parish.”

“*Morgen*. They're those Welsh sirens, aren't they? I always thought sirens were supposed to be girls.”

“Shut up, Rob.”

“Olly told us this story already—”

“I only caught the last half of it,” Harry said. “And Joanne didn't hear it at all.” He nodded to Rhys. “Please, continue.”

“*Morgen* are known primarily for drowning unsuspecting people. Naturally, the woman's family were not keen at first, but after the woman's father had laid down what seemed to him sufficient safeguards, requiring that the *morgen* be baptised and getting his solemn promise not to drown any of the family, the wedding took place. Time went by and the union was blessed with two sons. But this did not please the King beneath the Cliffs.”

I felt a sudden chill.

“The King beneath the Cliffs?” Joanne laughed. “There's no such personage in any of the myths I've read. And I know mythology *very* well—”

“Go on,” I said. “What did the King do?” My heart beat fast as though I stood on the edge of a precipice.

Rhys looked at me, his hard eyes unblinking. “The King has no love for humans,” he said. “And there is nothing he fears more than that the people of the Deep and those of the peninsula might join together, because then he would truly lose what little remains of his power. He has waged a one-sided war against the people of the peninsula for centuries. Every ship wrecked on this coast has been at his desire and every sailor lost is one more victory in his relentless battle.”

“You sound like you’re talking in present-tense.” Rob shifted uneasily.

“Taid said once that I should never climb the rocks beneath here,” Harry said suddenly, surprising me. I didn’t realise he stood so close. “He said the jealous King pulled two children from the rocks when he was a boy and they were never seen again. One of them was his cousin.”

Joanne smiled politely. “And what has this so-called king to do with this rock?”

I pulled my jacket more tightly around me.

Rhys shrugged. “The King was angered beyond measure at the desertion of his subject. He determined that the *morgen* must regret his marriage, and so he bided his time, waiting until a clear summer night when the water was calm and the moon bright and full and heavy over the ocean, turning the waves to silver. And the King ordered his people to sing their sweetest songs, the songs of the dolphin skimming across the waves, of fields of bright anemones swaying to and fro in the tide, and the songs of the deepest, most secret parts of the ocean where man cannot reach and time changes nothing, even though centuries pass. The people of the village heard the *morgen* song and wondered at its strange beauty, but when the *morgen* heard the songs, he was filled with longing for his ocean home, and he wept.”

“Ah.” Joanne smiled with satisfaction. “He couldn’t help himself and returned to the sea? A typical motif. Even the ancients knew that the oceans have so much to teach us. A seminar I went to in Hawaii—”

“He returned,” Rhys agreed. “Leaving a heart-broken wife behind him. But the King was not satisfied. He must have the sons, too. The wife knew of the King’s ill humour and feared that he would take her children. So she consulted with the cunning woman who lived on the cliffs. The cunning woman advised her to close all the doors and windows of their home at sunset and to block her

sons ears up at nights, that they might not hear the siren call of their father's folk. This she did, and all was well until the youngest had just learnt to walk, and the older brother was of an age to join the fishing boats. That day, just as the sun was set, the woman was called from home to attend her sister in Y Rhiw who was with child. Telling her sons to bide inside, the woman hurried to her patient. And so disaster struck. Left alone for the first time, the boys could not resist opening the curtains to peek out at the moon glistening across the bay. Coming back from the birth of her nephew, the woman heard the gloating song of the King floating up through the valley and ran, knowing she would find an empty house."

I swallowed, remembering Nan's telling of the same story. "The King had his revenge, but the mother did not forget her sons."

Rhys nodded. "She stood here, where the land stretches furthest that she might catch the sound of her sons' voices and call to them. She stood here in the rain, in the snow, in the wind and storm. The cunning woman saw her plight and pitied her and when it seemed the woman could wait no more, the cunning woman used a secret known only to her that turned the waiting mother into stone."

"A charming story," Joanne said. "But according to my research, the rock is actually linked to Saint Cadfan. The etymology of the name suggests—"

"Here we go again," Rob muttered under his breath. He joined Natalie, still busy with her camera, and after a moment, Harry followed.

I placed a hand against the weathered rock. Ridiculous to think that the rough surface beneath my hand had ever been anything but stone, but the story had left an impression that I couldn't quite shake.

"So you see, the rock has no relationship to mothers at all!" Joanne finished triumphantly.

Rhys inclined his head obliquely. "I'm sure it is as you say," he said with a smile that immediately disproved his words.

I waited until Joanne had drifted off to join the others. "Nan called it the Mother Stone, too."

He nodded, turning to look over the sea. "There are not many now, who remember."

"She told the story differently though."

"How did she tell it?"

I bit my lip. Nan had told it from an interested bystander's perspective. Familiar but still detached. When Rhys told the story, it almost sounded *personal*.

"Olly!" Rob beckoned me. "Get over here." He waited till I'd joined the group. "Busy tomorrow?"

"The weather forecast is good," Natalie explained. "And I'm pretty sure Rob and I could get the day off if we ask now."

"Everyone at *Felin Uchaf* knows how badly Natalie wants to see Bardsey. They'll let us go," Rob assured me. "Want to join us?"

"A trip to the island?"

"Well, we're not talking about going to Bangor—"

Natalie elbowed Rob cheerfully. "No pressure. But it would be good if you could come."

I looked past Rob to the jewel-like green of Bardsey. "I don't know."

"Who knows when you'll get another chance?" Joanne warned. "With how changeable the weather has been lately, it could be weeks."

"And it'd be great to have you with us," Rob persisted. "Get a bit of local insight."

I looked to Harry.

He made a face. "Got to see Richards about that ram. And if the weather's fine, we might as well put the stock in the hill paddock."

"So you see, you have to say yes." Rob favoured me with a glowing smile.

Awkward. "I'd like to join you," I said with a grimace. "It's just, I'm not sure I'm up to the trip."

"You get seasick?"

"Not that. I had a bad experience."

"Told you he might say no," Harry said. "You'll enjoy it just the two of you."

"What kind of a bad experience? Look, there's all sorts of products on the market now they didn't have seven years ago." Rob was at his most charming. "Nat's got some tablets."

"Sea-Legs. They really work."

“Thanks, but all the same—”

“This is probably our only chance to do something before she goes,” Rob started. “Most of the peninsula doesn’t give a shit about what we do, but I thought you—”

“Leave it.” Harry’s tone was abrupt. “Olly doesn’t want to go, he doesn’t want to go.”

“It’s all right,” I told him. “I mean, it’s not exactly a secret, is it?” I turned back to face the WWOOFers. “My last summer here, when I was sixteen, I had the bright idea of climbing into an old boat. I got caught in the current, pulled out to sea. A storm came up. The coast guard was called in to look for me. It was against all the odds that they even found me or that I was alive when I did.”

“Jesus.” Rob exhaled deeply. “I didn’t think—I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn’t.” I glanced back across the sea. “It’s not exactly the sort of thing you bring into casual conversation. Welcome to Aberdaron, yeah, it’s lovely, mind you don’t do what I did and nearly kill yourself.”

“Were you okay?” Natalie watched me closely. “I mean, something like that—”

“I had to spend a week in hospital in Cardiff,” I said. “Exposure, mostly. I’m fine now. I had a few nightmares after the fact, but that was years ago. I started swimming again, got dive certified in Australia. But going out here... It seems almost too much like tempting fate.” I felt suddenly self-conscious and laughed. “Like I got off too easily and it might catch up with me, almost.”

“Got off easily?” Harry shook his head. “I visited you in Cardiff. One of the scariest things I’ve ever seen. You were ranting like you were possessed. I was trying to talk with you and you didn’t see or hear me at all. They had to have two orderlies holding you down the entire time.”

I stared at him. “I don’t remember that.”

“You wouldn’t, would you? You had to be drugged to get you to lie still enough to recover. The only reason you weren’t when I was there was that you kept insisting there was someone else in the boat with you and that you had to go back and find him. The doctors thought maybe your mind had confused going on the boat to Bardsey with me and your ordeal and that seeing me might snap you out of it, but it didn’t. You looked right through me. Proper gave me the chills.”

Harry wasn’t alone there. “And there wasn’t someone with me?”

“Of course not. You were alone when they found you. Alone with only the boat.”

I was not sorry when Rhys came to a halt at Nan’s gate. The walk was nice and Y Rhiw was as pretty as I remembered it, but the shadow left by Harry’s story had stayed. When Rhys decided he would walk back to the village with me, I’d been relieved. That’s how badly shaken I was. “*Diolch*, Rhys. I appreciate the company.”

“A pleasure.” But Rhys did not appear to be done with me. “I think it is wise that you decided not to go to Bardsey tomorrow. The sea around here is treacherous, even when it appears calm.”

I now had a reason to want to go to Bardsey. “I don’t require your approval.”

But Rhys looked past me to the cottage. “Did you close your door before going walking today?”

What was it with everyone and their unwanted advice? “Yes, I did. Locked it, too.”

“Well, it is open now.”

I turned sharply.

The door swayed in the breeze. Like the mother in Rhys’s story, I ran to the house, already knowing what I would find.

The pantry doors stood open, tins roughly shoved aside. A puddle started before the sink and stretched as far as the living room, where every book on the shelves had been dumped out onto the floor. All the cupboard doors stood open, their contents strewn across the carpet. I saw damp footsteps leading up the stairs and bolted after them towards my room. Please, anything but that! I could lose my phone, my laptop, but not that!

My suitcase lay open and empty beside the bed. The book was gone.

“No!”

“Olly, what’s wrong?” Rhys had followed me up the stairs. He took me by the shoulders and turned me to face him. “What is it? What’s been taken?”

I was too shocked to protest. “Nan’s book. It’s—” My mind stalled. How to explain the book? “It’s not an ordinary book.”

Rhys's fingers tightened around me. "Did you write in it? Does it have your name?"

I shook my head.

Rhys breathed out, his tight hold on me relaxing. "Then it cannot be used against you." He took my arm, pulling me towards the stairs.

Numbly, I let myself be led back to the kitchen.

"It is a loss," Rhys said. "But it is not the worst that could befall you. He that took it will not find it as useful a tool as he thought."

"But it has all Nan's—" I caught myself from saying 'spells.' A man of God would surely laugh.

"A keepsake. Nothing more." Rhys poured a cup of tea. "A cunning woman worked her magic before there were books on the Llŷn. She does not need one to work her magic today. Neither does a cunning man. Here."

I took the tea without protest. "I don't have sugar in mine."

"You do today. You've had a shock, it will help."

I took a sceptical sip as Rhys poured a second cup for himself. His matter-of-factness about the situation somehow enabled me to be calm myself. "Are you sure you're a priest?"

He raised an eyebrow at me as he sat at the far end of the table. "I think I would know."

"Talking about cunning women," I said. "It's not exactly very priestly, is it? Shouldn't you be trying to, you know." I fumbled for words. "Stamp out that sort of belief?"

Rhys steepled his long fingers over his mug. "A belief in God does not preclude a belief in other things," he said. "In fact, I find it encourages it. If you believe in God you must accept the devil. Accept the devil, and you accept there are things not of God that wield powers undreamt of by the common man, and exist outside of man's knowing."

"And so you're saying you believe in—things like the story you told today?"

Rhys smirked at me. "It would not be wise to dispense with scepticism altogether," he said. "Especially as memories become confused with time. But there is much on this peninsula worth believing in."

“I’m getting really fed up with your non-answers.” My fright had made me brave. “Is it too much to ask for a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

Rhys blinked. For a moment, it almost looked as if he was taken aback. And then with an ironic smile, he ducked his head. “It is not always possible to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to your questions,” he said. “But for this one, Olly, the answer is yes.”

I was not expecting the admission. “And do you know who took Nan’s book?”

He nodded. “I do.”

“Joanne?”

He shook his head. “She tried. She would dearly love to acquire the book. But I do not think the thought to take it was entirely her own. It came from someone else. Someone who was unable to enter the house himself.”

“Who?”

“The King beneath the Cliffs has long wanted to rid the Peninsula of your family,” Rhys explained. “You have a gift, powerful enough to keep him confined to the Deep. As your grandmother did.”

“The King beneath the Cliffs?” I eyed Rhys. He couldn’t be serious, could he? “Do you know the difference between stories and reality?”

The lines in Rhys’s ancient face only looked pained. “A good story is founded in fact. And many things we accept as fact are no more than stories. The King counts on your disbelief. He makes his move while you are yet ignorant of him. With all his power, he could not drive your grandmother from her house, you see.”

This was bad. Any more of Rhys’s solemnity and I might end up believing him. “If that’s the case, then how did he get in here today?”

Rhys looked around the room. “There was a charm here,” he said, coming to stand by the sink. “I do not see it now.”

How had he known? “I removed it.” I gripped my cup of tea more tightly. “I thought it might get damaged by the water.”

“Not that.” Rhys’s amusement was private. “If you have it still, I should replace it. Though now that the King has what he sought, I do not think he will try the house again.”

“What does he want?”

Rhys looked down at me. He looked, suddenly, very tired. “He would drive you from the Peninsula. He fears you realising your gift and interfering with his dealings.”

I shivered, feeling again the cold touch of fingers where no fingers should be. “I think he tried to kill me.”

“He has not the power to harm you,” Rhys said. “Not unless you give it to him. He will do his best to scare you but that is all he can do.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Rhys put down his cup of tea. “What haven’t you told me?”

I unzipped my fleece to show the dark marks on my neck. “My first night back. I was taking a bath when suddenly—”

Rhys’s fingers carefully brushed my skin. His touch was as careful as a doctor’s. I found my mouth dry and swallowed, waiting his judgement in silence.

“Your grandmother placed a powerful protection on you,” Rhys said finally. His hand rested on my collarbone, seemingly unwilling to leave. “It is still very much in effect. He cannot harm you. All the same, I do not like these marks.”

I belatedly found my voice. “You think you have a problem with them?”

“I will give you this.” Rhys took a heavy crucifix from his pocket. “I think you will find it a useful protection.”

I looked at the heavy crucifix in dismay. It was old, probably valuable. “I can’t take that!”

Rhys flat grey eyes looked back at me calmly. “It is of more use to you than me,” he said. “And you should also be very careful around water and watch where you walk. The King cannot harm you directly, but if you were to fall...”

With a jolt, I remembered our first meeting, and the man I’d almost followed into thin air. “Jesus Christ.”

Rhys cleared his throat meaningfully, and I remembered that for all his strangeness, he was a priest.

“Sorry. I mean—”

“You have had many unpleasant surprises,” Rhys said, with an air of benediction. “Not the least of which is finding that someone has been inside the home that you thought safe. If you would like to stay elsewhere, I will accompany you to Bryn house, or maybe to the Jones’s farmhouse.”

The Griffin's common sense would have been very welcome, as would Old Mr Jones's irascible temper and Harry's good-natured tolerance, but I shook my head. "I'm staying here. I'm not being pushed around in my own house."

Rhys's smile was curved, but he only nodded. "If you have need of me, I will come. In the meantime, you cannot be too careful, Oliver Evans." He patted my shoulder. "And also, you should mop this up. It smells unpleasantly of fish."

Chapter Five

Just Pretending

“Can’t you howl any louder? I don’t think they can hear you in Cardiff!”

There was a definite gloating note to the wind that had blown up mid-afternoon. Though, if I was entirely honest, it wasn’t the wind that rattled me. As I set the last spilled tin back into the pantry, I’d discovered a strand of seaweed below it.

It wasn’t the first. There had been other pieces of weed in the living room, even a few shells. Even harder to explain was the fact that while cleaning up, I’d discovered that the water dripping from the kitchen bench was salt. Against all common sense, I was starting to believe Rhys.

“What on earth is wrong with me?”

Believing Rhys was only a few steps above willingly consorting with Joanne. “Is this my life now?” Caught between anti-social and odd curates, overly friendly eccentrics and fairy tales... Ugh. I stood, dropping the seaweed in the bin.

The crucifix lay on the kitchen table where I’d left it. I picked it up. It was cold and heavy with the sort of patina that silver acquires if you don’t look after it properly. I should never have let him leave it behind. The cross was far, far too valuable. And that itself was a problem.

I breathed out, trying to think logically. Rhys wouldn’t have left it if he didn’t believe in the King beneath the Cliffs. But without the priest present, the certainty of his conviction was not enough to convince me. All it meant was that I was dealing with two nutcases, the curate and whoever broke into the cottage while we were walking.

I dropped the crucifix into the biscuit tin and set it on the bench. Out of sight, out of mind. If only Rhys himself was as easily dealt with! I thought longingly of a biscuit tin big enough to stow a curate. The man seemed to have a knack for getting to me that was entirely disproportionate to what he was. No, I told myself as I climbed the stairs to my room. I’d have to be very careful of Rhys.

I snorted as I eyed the mess in the bedroom. Rhys was perfectly happy to sit and spin strange tales, but the moment it came time to do any real work, he

vanished, leaving me to tidy up all by myself. “Typical.” He was, as Nan would have said, ‘only useful so long as you didn’t want him to do anything.’

Then again, was I any better? Somewhere in there was my phone, once my constant companion, now left behind to be burgled without a second thought. “You’ve changed, Olly.”

The contents of my suitcase were mixed in with those of the cupboards. In addition to the detritus I’d acquired over successive summer holidays (endless jars of pebbles from the shore, notebooks where I’d started a diary, kept it up for a day or two before abandoning the attempt until the next year, unidentifiable metal bits scavenged from the shoreline, ragged looking feathers and other small boy treasures), were things of Nan’s, put away for storage. The woollen jerseys must have once belonged to my grandfather, carefully parcelled up to protect them from moths and damp. Textbooks used by my mother. Glass jars, set aside to be used for making jam. A mini-cassette recorder.

I put everything back in the cupboard except the cassette recorder. I didn’t remember seeing it before. It seemed strangely incongruous among my notebooks and the dog-eared copy of *Welsh Fairy Tales*. I wiped the dust off it and discovered that when I hit rewind, it buzzed into life. Couldn’t have been used much before being put away. I turned it over for any clue as to why it might have been set among my things and as I did, the tape finished its rewind.

I sat motionless for a long moment. Did some echo from the past stop me from pressing play? Was it something I’d inherited from my grandmother? Maybe something deep inside me remembered what my mind had forgotten.

The wind rose again, as if mocking my indecision.

“Fuck that.” I hit the button.

A static-y crackle, then a voice I knew very well spoke. “And this tiny box will really catch my voice and send it to Olly?”

Hearing the voice that haunted my memories speak as clearly as if he were in the room with me gave me a shock. The cassette recorder slipped from my fingers. “How—” Even without the sound of the waves and the echo of the cave behind it, the voice was unmistakably that of my summer time companion.

“As long as you do not drip water on it or touch it.” Nan was stern. “Just as I told you. Wait until I reach the top of the cliff path.”

“I am not an infant that I need to be told twice.”

The crunch of Nan's feet on the sand faded away. I sat on the edge of the bed, watching the cassette recorder as if it were a snake.

I could hear the waves, the cry of a seagull overhead. The sound of gravel dislodged as someone shifted.

And finally, his song.

It started low, as if surrounded by great depths, but pulled irrevocably upwards. Water pushed past me, in a dizzying rush, mixed in with bubbles of air, an intoxicating mix. The song allowed its appeal, but continued to advance slowly but surely. The pull of the two disparate elements hurt. I gasped, feeling them as an ache within my skull. The bubbles crashed, exhausted and confused on the rocks, and I pressed a hand against my forehead, trying to hold in the pain long enough to listen.

Just as I thought I had to stop it, the slower stream caught up, lovingly gathering the bubbles back into its mass. The push-pull that hurt so much at first was actually part of a greater rhythm. My hurt places were soothed over as fresh currents flowed in to wrap me in the peace that had endured since time unknown.

The cassette ran out. I didn't hear it. A fog had been lifted from my mind. For the first time in seven years, I remembered everything.

An August afternoon, one of my first in Aberdaron without Mam. Nan wore her big straw sunhat and knelt among the vegetable patch, an increasing pile of weeds beside her. I lay in the shade of the crab apple tree watching her, sticky and tired from helping, thinking up new adventures for Sir Spikesalot. My eyes were half-lidded and, listening to the drone of the bees through the garden, I was already half-asleep.

And then I heard a new sound.

"Nan, who is that crying?"

"Crying?"

The sound came again, a pitiful mewling.

"That's no cry. That's a seagull, Olly. They sound very like a kitten, or even a baby."

"You're sure?"

"There it goes again. Listen."

The sound was unmistakably that of a gull.

I rolled over. "What I heard was different. More like this." I demonstrated.

"I heard anyone making a racket like that, I wouldn't forget it."

"But I know that wasn't a gull." I stood up. "It was a boy."

"You won't catch any Aberdaron kid throwing a sulk like that."

I bristled with injured nine-year-old pride. I had only cried once over missing Mam. "He's not from the village. He's from a long way away. He's lost." I was rapidly warming to my subject. "And that's why he's crying. Because he's lonely." I toed my feet back into my flip-flops. "I'm going to find him."

"You're going to go into the kitchen and pour yourself a glass of water from the fridge." Nan paused to wipe a hand across her forehead. "And you might as well bring me one when you're done."

I drank my glass of water by the garden gate, impatient to get off on my search. "If he's gone before I get there, it'll be your fault."

But I hadn't got very far in my search before I found something even more interesting. A green bottle, bobbing amongst the rocks. It took some careful climbing, a very long stick and a lot of waiting before I was able to coax the bottle into grabbing range, and I was only slightly disappointed to find that there was no treasure map inside.

"After all, Nan, the pirate might have meant to put the treasure map in it and just forgot," I said as I was tucked into bed that night.

"Like someone sent his Nan a Christmas card he forgot to write in, you mean?"

I ignored the dig at my card sending abilities. "Just like that. I mean, I am sure he was distracted thinking about how he was going to hide his treasure."

Nan pulled the covers up to my chin. "It's not pirates in these waters, Olly, but smugglers. I ever tell you the story of Jack the Bachelor?"

I was down among the rocks as soon as I'd finished breakfast. Nan had let it slip among her storytelling that there had been smugglers in the Llŷn, and I was determined to add myself to their number. Instead of the rock pools that were my usual haunt, I clung to the cliffs, searching for anything that might be a cave overlooked by the Revenue Men and hiding forgotten treasure.

I had scrambled up the top of a tall boulder to survey the coast before me when I heard it. Between the quiet laps of the water, an unhappy gasp followed by another.

I felt a flash of triumph. No gull made a sound like that!

But where was my lost boy?

The rocks were bare, even of the seals that sunned themselves in the afternoon. I hunted carefully among the rocks but quickly discovered there was nothing to find. Even with the tide out, the pools here were deep. The only place I could go was up.

I clung to the grass of the cliff to pull myself up, thinking that from the greater vantage point I might be able to find him. Instead, my foot went through the fine topsoil without resistance. Looking down, I discovered a hole only lightly filled in with dirt. A few sharp kicks and I scrambled gleefully into the smuggler's cave.

It was a fantastic treasure to a small boy. The cave was wide, its walls rippled with shadows that shifted with the ever-present motion of the tide. Sunlight trickled in from above where a larger hole in the cave roof had been disguised by the planting of a gorse bush, allowing me to make out the stone steps leading down to the sandy floor. One side of the cave was taken up by a pool that connected with the sea at high tide. And lying in that pool, crying his heart out, was a dark-haired boy, a year or two older than I was.

I slowed my descent into the cave. The sounds coming from the boy were that mixture of half-cough, half-sob that only happens after you've already been crying for a long time. Suddenly, it occurred to me that my lost boy might not want to be found.

My foot slipped on wet rock, and I finished the last two steps rather faster than I wanted.

My companion sat bolt upright and then slid back into the water. There was a pause as we regarded each other.

He squared his shoulders. "I was *not* crying."

I looked into his reddened eyes. "I didn't say you were."

He paused, mouth scrunched up as he tried to gauge me.

I gave him what I hoped was an encouraging smile and crept closer. "But if you were crying, I wouldn't mind." If he played games about not crying when

he obviously was, maybe he'd play my games with me? "You see, I know all about you."

There are very few people who can wipe their nose with the back of their hand and still look regal. He could. "I rather doubt that."

"But it's true." Standing at the edge of the pool, I gave him what I hoped was a knightly flourish. "Sir Oliver Evans of the Garden Gnomes, at your service."

"It's going to be Sir Oliver the extremely wet if you are not careful." He leant back against the rocks of his pool. "To what, pray tell, do I owe the honour of your company, Sir Knight?"

No one else I had ever played with had known to call me 'knight' without serious prompting. It was hard not to jump up and down in excitement, but I didn't want to give my new friend the wrong impression. "I have been looking for you, of course." But a boy who was about two years older would not tolerate being called 'a lost boy' by me. I considered the problem carefully. With his long hair and pallor, he looked exactly like the painting of the Princes in the Tower in my school textbook. Dark and tragic. Definitely royalty. "I heard that Your Highness had been robbed of his kingdom by a foul dragon and have come to offer my aid." I watched him with held breath. Would he accept my history for him?

He considered it slowly. Although he was chest-deep in the water and standing still, I noticed that he didn't shiver. "Your aid?" he said at last. "You are—somewhat small for a knight."

I drew myself up proudly. "Nan says that height is no measure of strength. I have the heart of a knight, and that's all that matters."

My prince snorted. "A boy's grandmother is a worse judge of character than even a sweetheart. She will say many things, less than half of which may be true."

I bristled. "Not my Nan. She is a powerful witch... No. The *most* powerful witch in all of the peninsula. And the wisest, too. She knows everything—almost."

"A witch who knows everything, almost," the boy repeated. He hesitated a moment. "Does... does she live on these cliffs?"

I nodded.

"I apologise. I did not realise I spoke to her emissary."

“That’s all right,” I said quickly, to hide the fact I wasn’t sure what an emissary was. “A lost prince has to be very careful with who he trusts. But you can be friends with me.”

“Friends.” His smile was quick and twisted, and I felt a rush of pleasure at being able to draw it from him. “Well, then. Perhaps my new friend should start by telling me of his adventures.”

“Morning tea time!” I looked around for a suitable spot to sit.

“Tired already?” My friend floated carelessly on his back in the waves. “We have not even made it halfway.”

I’d expressed an interest in following the rocks around as far as Porthor. My companion had heaped scorn on this idea, saying that legs as short as mine would never make it. So, we were now somewhere in the intertidal zone, me on the rocks and him in the pools. “Morning tea isn’t about being tired. It’s about morning tea.” I’d found a suitably flat rock on which I could open my pack without worrying about losing things in the water. “I brought enough for you.”

“For me?” He levered himself up out of the water to sit on the stone, trailing seaweed. So much weed, in fact, that I couldn’t make out his bathing suit beneath it. It almost looked like the weed was part of him. I was momentarily disappointed by the sight of his legs (thin and shockingly pale), then I caught myself. I hadn’t really expected a fish tail, had I?

“For both of us.” I felt an air of importance as I set the tin down. “Nan made biscuits.”

He snorted. “No thank you.”

“They’re really good. Baked yesterday.”

He shook his head, combing his hair back out of his face. It was tangled through with the dark kelp that grew on the rocks. “I did not think even land-folk willingly ate *biscuits*.”

I frowned at him. “Do you know what a biscuit is?” He might be playing. After all, a merman wouldn’t know what human food was like and he had stuck to his role by pulling himself through the pools where it was too shallow for him to swim.

“It is dried out and tasteless, only fit for your dogs. Though not even your dogs want to eat such chaff.” He made the shape of a square with his fingers.

“It is shaped thusly and is hard enough that even if it falls into the sea it will not lose its shape. Men have lost teeth on it. You might gnaw on a biscuit an entire night and never finish it, and it does not taste of anything—” He stared at the object I held. “What is that?”

“A biscuit.” I snapped it in half so that he could see that his teeth were in no danger and then pushed one half into my mouth.

He eyed me, chewing on his lip. “That is never a biscuit.”

I opened my mouth to reply. “It is so.”

“Are those the manners of a knight? I fear your reputation for chivalry must be somewhat overblown.”

I swallowed hastily. “I’m sorry. I forgot I was dining with a prince.” I held out the half-biscuit with a bow. “Your Highness, I humbly offer you this ginger biscuit.”

He accepted it reluctantly, holding it between his thumb and first finger. “I have your promise as a knight that nothing ill is concealed in this... biscuit?”

“Just flour, sugar, eggs, and ginger. I helped Nan make them.”

“Very well.” He took an extremely small bite.

I smirked, fishing a second biscuit out of the tin for myself. “How far do you think we are away from Hell’s Mouth?” I asked, considering the cliffs before us. I hadn’t had any interest in *Porth Neigwl* until Nan had accidentally used its English name, and now I was determined to see its treacherous currents for myself.

“You are not going to eat that entire biscuit?”

I turned back to find that my companion’s biscuit had entirely disappeared and his was attention fixed on mine. “I thought you didn’t like biscuits.”

“I am willing to make an exception for those made by your august grandmother.”

I smirked and handed the tin over. “Help yourself.” I shaded my eyes to look at the coast. The sea was ages away. We had most of the day before we needed to worry about getting stranded. “We’ll have to look for anywhere that seems like a good place to land a boat. That’s where we’ll find the smuggler’s caves, I bet.”

“Mm.”

“Do you think there’ll be anything left? Nan said they sold it soon as they landed it to avoid the Revenue Men, but I think there might be something they forgot.” I chewed thoughtfully on my biscuit. “It’s too bad we’re not allowed to use grandfather’s dinghy.”

“It’s not wise to sail in these waters. Especially for you.”

I frowned at my companion. “What do you mean?”

He waved his half-eaten biscuit in the direction of Porthor. “The King beneath the Cliffs has no love for your grandmother. He would revenge himself on any of your family if he could.”

I shivered. The fact that it was delivered by someone covered in crumbs did not make the statement less impressive. “The King beneath the Cliffs. He’s the one that wrecked all those boats?”

“Yes.” The prince pushed the last of his biscuit into his mouth and reached for another one. “He is old and jealous and does not like any to have power but him. He does not even like others to have joy. Once these waters were full of life and these cliffs sang with the song of our people, and men and *morgen* both rejoiced in it, but it did not please him to see friendship growing on both sides of the shore, so he forbade it and made the *morgen* unable even to walk upon the land that was once their own. And his people grieved and many left for waters where they might live free of his shadow, and those who stayed found the waters intolerable from their absence and they left too and on and on until today where only myself and my brother and the old King remain.”

“Where’s your brother?” I asked, holding out my hand for the tin. “Why doesn’t he come with us?”

My friend shook his head decisively as he gave me the tin. “He is a child. He cries when he does not get his way, and he tells tales. He would go at once to the King and tell him I was making friends with the grandson of his enemy and I would be punished and you would be in danger.”

The King sounded like an even worse opponent than a dragon. I considered the possibilities of him as I stuck my hand in the tin. I found only crumbs. “You ate the entire tin?”

My companion licked a crumb from his fingers with absolute disinterest in my outrage. “You said ‘help yourself.’ You said nothing about leaving any.”

“Because I didn’t know you were going to eat all of them! That was afternoon tea, too!”

The prince lifted his bony shoulders unrepentantly. “We are still within walking distance of your grandmother’s cottage. You could return for more biscuits.”

“But then I’ll never make it to Porthor!”

“You were not going to make it to Porthor to start. And this way, you will at least have accomplished something useful.”

Nan glanced up as the door slammed behind me. “You’re back early. I didn’t expect you till evening.”

“I know.” I flopped myself down at the table. “Princes are jerks!”

Nan made a soothing sound as she scooped up the dried herbs laid out on the table, putting them aside with a leather bound book. “What has his Highness gone and done?”

“He ate all the biscuits! I only had one and a half! And then he wanted me to bring him more!”

“You’ll spoil your lunch.”

“I’m starving! I even got up early and everything to go exploring with him and we didn’t even find any good caves or anything!”

Nan glanced at the kitchen clock. “Can you survive a half hour until lunch?”

“If I have to.” I lay on the table until a thought occurred to me. “Nan, do you know of any biscuits that are made like squares and take forever to eat?”

“What are you talking about?”

I repeated the mer-prince’s description of biscuits. “No one really eats food like that, do they?”

“Hardtack.”

“What?”

“Ship’s biscuits. They’re made to be tough so that they won’t spoil on long voyages. Go get your grandfather’s book. *An Account of Cook’s Voyages in the Pacific*.” Nan finished putting her herbs away. “We’ll see what he has to say about victuals.”

There was much to distract me from my companion’s un-princely conduct in the book. Storms, belligerent crewmembers, and the methodical preparations

for a grand journey of discovery. Maybe I'd seriously miscalculated how much rations a crew of two needed?

Nan snorted when I shared this theory with her. "If you want more biscuits, you'll have to make them yourself. I have work of my own to be getting on with."

"What kind of work?"

"Jones's prize ram drank bracken water and is sick. The Williams that farm at Llanfaelrhys are trying for a child. And there are blankets to knit for the hospital."

"I have homework," I said quickly before I could be enlisted to help with the last. Battling scratchy wool was not how I wanted to spend my summer holidays.

But as I laid out my reading diary and Nan started washing up our lunch dishes a thought occurred. "Nan, you can't take books underwater, can you?"

"I hope that my grandson would know the answer to that."

"But how would my friend know about ship's biscuits if he didn't read it in a book? You said no one eats them anymore."

"Sometimes I wonder if you know the difference between your stories and what is real, Olly."

I snorted. "You're right, Nan." My friend had pretended down to an art, but I couldn't forget that we were just pretending.

Chapter Six

The Call of the Morgen

I stumbled out the front door. The countryside spread out before me, a beautiful patchwork of fields of varying greens and yellows. I lurched blindly towards them, careless where I walked. My gaze was firmly rooted in the past.

“And you’ve never been to school? Really, not just kidding me?”

My companion shook his head. “I know of no matter so serious that it takes a knight from his prince for the span of an entire year.”

Bethan had picked me up from Nan’s a day earlier than expected. In the fuss of getting me packed up and back to Liverpool in time for the school term, there’d been no time to say goodbye. I’d assumed that my companion had guessed what happened and would forgive me the lack of a farewell.

I was wrong. After his initial delight in my reappearance, my companion wasted no time in letting me know just how wronged he felt. The smuggler’s tin, full of biscuits, went entirely unheeded by both of us as we argued.

“You have to go to school. It’s like, the law. If you don’t, they come and make you.”

He shook his head. “Who is there to make me? I tell you, there is no one left. What do they teach you in your schools that you cannot learn from your grandmother?”

“Lots of things. Reading, writing, math. Sometimes we go on field trips. Last term, we watched a video in science about the food chain and we saw a lion eating a gazelle. It was really gross.”

“Useless drivel,” the prince decided. “A waste of time when you could stay here all year round and learn from the sea.”

“The sea?”

“It has much to teach for those who know how to listen to it.” My prince settled on his stomach in the pool. “First, you learn to read its moods and know how it will change and when you might expect it to. Then you learn its creatures.”

It was an overcast day, and Nan had let me borrow the old kerosene lamp she kept in case of power cuts. Its glow made the cave cosier and more alarming, playing over my companion's face with warm affection but elongating the shadows behind him. The perfect atmosphere for storytelling. I settled back against the cave wall to listen.

"The cormorants are different than the shearwaters, just as the seal and dolphin have very different habits. The seal likes to finish his hunting early so that he can sleep in the sun, but the dolphin mixes his work and play. And if you are not too intrusive, the conger eel that lives in the wrecked *Glenocum* has seen much in his long life, and can tell you many stories. Then, there is the history of our people, left in the gardens and houses they abandoned. In tending for them, I have learnt much about the past that was lost to us. So you see, I don't see why anyone wastes their time going to school."

I was torn. I enjoyed going to class, but I had to admit that school paled in comparison to being taught by an actual conger eel. "Books," I said at last. "You can learn anything from books." I dug in my backpack for my holiday reading. "See?"

He took the book gingerly. "It is a pretty thing," he allowed. "But I do not see that it is useful."

"Open it. It's got an entire story inside."

"I hear nothing."

"You read it." Realising that I was going to have to get wet, I reluctantly shrugged out of my jeans. "Come sit on the edge and I'll show you."

He frowned as I read out loud, pointing to each word as I said it. "And these symbols are really whole words?"

"I'm not making it up."

"And you can put anything down in symbols?"

"Watch this." I got my notebook and pen out of the backpack. "O-L-I-V-E-R. Oliver."

"That is your name?"

"Yes."

"Can any name be written?"

"Yes." I smirked. "Want me to write yours?"

He nodded slowly. "I should be interested to see it."

"What is your name then?"

"Myrhydion ap Edenvert."

I stared at him. Maybe I'd spoke too soon.

"Is there a problem, Sir scribe?"

"No," I said, frantically trying to remember all Nan had taught me about reading Welsh place names. "I'm just thinking." I paused. "Give that to me again? Slowly."

"Mi-rid-dee-on." My companion enunciated clearly, leaning over to watch me write.

I scribbled something down, hoping that I got the right number of Ys. "There. Myrhydion."

He took the notebook and considered my scrawl thoughtfully. "And this is really me?"

"Your name, yes."

"And anyone can write it that knows how?"

"Do you want to try it?"

I gave him the notebook to practice, and we spent the entire afternoon that way, him laboriously scratching out his name in my notebook while I read out loud from *Swallows and Amazons*. When I heard Nan call me in for dinner, I stood up with a sigh. "How'd you do?"

"Adequately. As you can see, I have improved it significantly."

"You don't need an entire line for your name! And where did all these Ys come from?"

"A prince must have a princely name. It stands to reason."

In the interest of diplomacy, I dropped the subject of schools and writing.

School only became relevant again my sixteenth summer.

"Knights marry Ladies. And princes marry princesses. That is the way of it." Dark eyes regarded me with scorn. "A man does not lie with another man."

I stared back at him, disconcerted. Lulled into security by Nan's easy acceptance, I had not anticipated this. "And why not?"

“Well, what is there to do with one another?” The water swirled as my companion resettled himself, the water lapping at my bare legs. “A woman has a... secret place between her legs, a sheath for”—it was too dark in the cave to tell, but I could have sworn he blushed—“a man’s sword. Women are made for lying with a man and getting child. A man has no such place.”

I stared at him open-mouthed. Somehow, it had never occurred to me that a boy who lived in a cave and didn’t read or write would not have had sex-ed.

“You are gaping at me, like a flounder gasping on the end of a line.” His foot nudged my leg impatiently. “Do I need to dunk you underwater to clear your head of such nonsense?”

“Men can lie together,” I said hotly.

“How?”

I told him.

“If that is the sort of filth that happens on the land, I much prefer being bound to the sea! Odious—foul—”

“It is not! Lots of people like it! If it was as bad as you think, they wouldn’t, would they?”

“I see no reason they should befoul themselves in that way at all!”

“Well, of course someone who’s never been with someone would say that!”

His eyes settled on me suspiciously. “Have you?”

I swallowed and nodded. I hadn’t meant to share that particular piece of information.

“Done that?”

“Not *that*,” I admitted. “But I’ve done—things.”

“Kissed?”

“Yes.”

“A man?”

Describing Scott McFarlane as a man was exceedingly generous. “Ye-es.”

“He kissed you?”

I summoned all my pride. Myrhydion didn’t need to know that Scott McFarlane had gangly arms, too long for the rest of him, and pimples on his neck. “Yes.” I added grandly, “And I wanted him to.”

Myrhydion disappeared under the water with a neat dive. I sat where I was a moment, before getting to my feet. I'd paced the length of the cave twice and was on my third lap when I heard him resurface.

"You are a very strange knight."

Part of me wanted to give way to relief, to take the poorly disguised apology and never mention this again, but something made me fearless. "It is not strange to want what you want."

"The wants you describe are exceedingly strange." I couldn't see any intent to harm in his face, just a genuine puzzlement. "I can only imagine it is a disease common to land folk."

"I bet there are people under water who like it just as much."

"You would bet wrong."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I would not like such a thing."

I snorted. "You said that biscuits were dried-out, tasteless chaff, fit only for dogs," I reminded him. "And finished the entire tin when my back was turned. And you said that books were full of useless drivel, only good for entertaining the deficient in mind—"

"So I misspoke once or twice. That does not mean I misspeak now."

"But you don't know that." I bit my lip. There was more at stake now than the argument. "I would kiss you," I offered diffidently. "Just to prove—"

"No."

"But—"

"You will not befoul yourself in such a way, not even to defend your people's honour."

My heart sank, even as I nodded. The prince had spoken.

But in the silence that followed, the waving tendrils of weed in the rock pool made me think.

"What if you kissed me?"

He looked at me.

I picked at the damp fabric of my swimming trunks where they clung to my skin, nervously. "If you do it, then no one's going to argue with a prince, are they?" I smirked, remembering that I argued with him constantly.

It might have been the suspicion he was being laughed at that did it. He had no end of princely dignity after all, and he considered me gravely. “And you think I would... like kissing you?”

“You liked biscuits,” I reminded him. “And books. And fish and chips, and—”

“All right! You do not make your argument stronger by belabouring it!”

I sat with my knees over the smooth edge of the pool. “Ready.” My voice sounded nervous. I fought the urge to shift as the wave caused by Myrhydion lifting himself out of the water met me.

He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Laugh and I’m pulling you under.”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. It was suddenly hard to make my mouth work.

His hand was cold but not unpleasant. Any chills I felt were purely anticipatory, as Myrhydion studied me with dark, serious eyes. I’d never noticed before how like the dark pebbles of the beach they were, shining where the ocean lapped at them. “If I do not like this, you are bringing me more biscuits.”

It was all I could do just to nod, afraid that if I gave in to the impulse to lean in and do this for him, his pride would be offended. I hadn’t realised it until now how much I wanted him to kiss me, and now—I wanted it very much. “As many as you like.”

I felt his breath tickle my skin, and then his mouth pressed against mine. He was more hesitant than Scott McFarlane had been and I smiled, amused at this reversal in my usually opinionated friend.

“I knew it!” He pulled back. “You laugh at me.”

I licked my lips. “You taste of salt.”

“I do not.”

“Like the ocean. It’s not a bad thing.” The discovery interested me. “What did I taste like?”

“I did not notice you tasted of anything.” Myrhydion frowned at me. “And you—liked that?”

I nodded. “A lot.” Scott McFarlane hadn’t hesitated at all, but Myrhydion’s shyness gave the lightness of his kiss a special appeal.

“I will try again,” he announced. “Perhaps I missed something.”

His hand settled in my hair, holding me in place as he kissed me again. I tried to stay still and let him explore, but it was too much, and I couldn't resist catching his lip between mine. The salt taste faded and was replaced by the warm glide of his tongue over my teeth and his fingers relaxed their tight grip in my hair. I hummed happily, trying to communicate my pleasure without breaking contact. He pulled me closer, taking his exploration even deeper.

Suddenly there was cold air where his body had rested against mine, the next moment I was tugged abruptly by my arm. I floundered, finding myself in the cave pool.

He caught first one outstretched arm, then the other, guiding me back on to my feet even as he pressed me against the side of the pool. "You are no knight." His face was flushed, and he was breathing very quickly. "This is witchcraft—witchcraft!" His hands clutched wildly at me as if he didn't know whether to pull me close or push me away.

I made the decision for him, wrapping one arm around his torso, the other brushing his damp hair out of his eyes before guiding his mouth down to mine. His lips seized mine at once, and we seemed to be irrevocably tangled in each other. He was clumsier than Scott McFarlane, but if sometimes his fingers hurt when they gripped me, he kissed me unreservedly with no thought of anything else. That woke an answering boldness in me. I was no longer afraid of scaring him off.

My fingers encountered a hard bump on his skin. I discovered that much like a whale, he was dotted with barnacles, the occasional limpet. Truly a mer-prince? But mermaids had tails and I could definitely feel his legs against mine—

"Witch." He pushed me from him suddenly. "You have bewitched me! You have caught me in a net of your magic—"

"No magic!" I sat up. "If it is a net, we are both caught."

He stared at me, fear naked on his face, mingled with want and something indefinable. Then with the soft peal of falling water he was gone beneath the waves. I knew he would not return again that day.

For a long time, I sat still, digesting what had happened. I should have been hurt. Part of me was. But another unknown part of me gloried in my newfound role as seducer. Had I inherited something of my fisherman grandfather? Instinct told me the fish was on the line and I might reel him in at my choosing.

I slid back into the pool, ducking myself underwater before scrambling out the cave and up the path home.

The next day it rained, the sea obscured behind a wall of fog. Nan baked and I set myself up on the kitchen table with my holiday homework. We occupied a warm oasis of light where the murky grey of the outside couldn't touch us. Suddenly, Nan turned down the radio.

"Listen."

For a moment, I heard only the wind. Then a plaintive note rose above the waves, setting the hairs rising all down my arms and my heart beating faster. "Is that a gull?"

"When I was a girl," Nan said. "That sound was said to be the call of the *morgen*."

I closed *Hamlet*. "Morgen?" I'd assumed Myrhydion had invented them.

"Some say they're sea-fairies, others call them sirens. They lure men close with their beauty and by promising to show them their underwater gardens and houses of gold and crystal. Then they drown them."

I shivered deliciously. "Have you ever seen their gardens?"

"Once," Nan said. "A very long time ago. When your grandfather still went out with his boat for the herring. She threw a sextant onto the deck of the boat, gave poor old Huw, your grandfather's mate, the fright of his life, but your grandfather knew it was a token for me, and I took it down to the shore and waited."

Nan's stories were even better than mine. "Did she come?"

"She did. She bartered prettily for a charm to keep her garden safe. She'd stayed behind to take care of it when the others of her people left these waters, but in the end, the loneliness was too much for her and she left, too."

"And you gave her the charm."

"Of course. How could I say no to a fellow gardener? She showed me it in the reflection of a bowl of water."

The call repeated out in the fog. It had an eerie beauty, hauntingly sweet, then entreating forcefully. It rose and fell on the wind, alternately clear or muffled by the fog.

“Did anyone else stay behind?”

Nan stirred her cake mix slowly. “None that’s been told me,” she said slowly. “But I wonder...” The phone rang before she could finish her thought and Nan wiped her hands on her apron before picking it up. “Remind me to tell you the story behind Mother Rock.”

The next day dawned bright and sunny, the perfect weather to explore the coast.

Nan looked at me as I once again set up my study books on the kitchen table. “Not like you to waste a day as fine as this.”

I felt the power of my secret. “I know.”

Either the *morgen* sang again or a particularly obnoxious gull had settled on the cliff. Midmorning we had some silence, but when Nan went out in the afternoon to get the mail, she called me. “Olly. Take a look at this.”

Placed square in the centre of the doorstep was a good-sized rock, encrusted with brightly coloured weed and limpets.

“Help me carry it to the pond.”

It took both of us to get it settled. It looked good in the small fishpond, weed swaying gently in the water. Neither of us said anything about the strength required to lift it from the shore to the front door, or the trail of water that led to the cliff path.

I drank my afternoon tea slowly and wrapped my slice of cake in my handkerchief. “I might go down to the beach,” I said casually.

Nan frowned. “*Morgen* are as cruel as they are beautiful. Watch yourself, Olly.”

Her warning lingered in my mind as I climbed through the secret entrance into the cave. I could drown down here and no one would ever hear me cry out. No one would ever even find me...

“Cruel! Cruel! I did not believe you capable of such heartlessness!” Myrhydion was half in, half out of the pool, sitting up at my approach. “Truly, you are a witch like your grandmother.” Then, in almost the same breath he mellowed, patting the rock beside him. “The water is warm today. Come, sit beside me and feel it for yourself.”

I peeled my T-shirt over my head slowly. “That’s a nice greeting. First you insult me, then you boss me around.”

“I sang for you for hours and you did not listen. I brought a great gift all the way to the door of the Witch and you have not even said if you accept it.” The water rippled impatiently as he shifted. “You stand so far away. Come closer.”

“What’s the hurry?” I stayed put, setting my carefully wrapped slice of cake on a rock where it would be dry.

Once my companion’s eyes would have tracked it religiously, now he barely gave it a second glance. “Again you wound me. You must know what your magic has wrought. I cannot spend a day apart and not think of you. You invade my dreams. Come, kiss me again.”

I slid into the water in my briefs. Before the coolness of the water had registered, the warmth of his body replaced it and his mouth pressed against mine. This urgency wasn’t feigned.

All night long, the wind howled around the headlands. I lay in my nest of blankets, listening to the branches outside be battered against the glass. Occasionally I thought I heard a plaintive cry in the lulls, but the sound was always gone before I was sure I’d heard it, drowned by the roaring gale.

The morning was foggy, but the radio promised it would lift by the afternoon. I slid and scrambled my way down to the cave.

He was not waiting for me in the pool.

He lay face down on the sand at the back of the cave, dark hair spread out around him, looking like a beached beluga. The first time I’d seen him in this sort of mood, I thought he’d drowned in the night and had run to his side at once.

I knew better now. “You’re a week out,” I told him. “I go back on the fifth.”

“But you will go,” he said, not even turning his face to look at me. “You will leave like you always do.” His voice echoed hollowly in the confined cave. “You will leave me.”

I rolled my eyes. “I always come back.” I wasn’t looking forward to saying goodbye this time either, but I knew that goodbyes weren’t improved by dragging them out. “We have an entire week. Is it true there are underwater gardens here, with buildings of gold and crystal?”

“Gold.” He laughed hollowly. “Gold to shine like the sun, even in the water’s deep. Crystal, pure and true, and sharper than any knife. Bone, polished until it shines whiter than even the moon.” He rolled over so that all I could see of him was his bony back. “If I took you to our gardens, you would never leave.”

“Like the old legends?” I sat down beside him, patting his shoulder. “You forget. Princes do not drown knights.”

“Don’t tempt me!” He hunched up even tighter on himself. “I do not believe you even care that you are going away and leaving me sickening with grief.”

“A bit soon to sicken, isn’t it?” I nudged him with my foot as I stood. “I’m right here.” When he was in this sort of a mood, the best thing to do was to ignore him until he realised that you were having fun on your own without him. “I’ve got a book I haven’t finished yet. I could read it to you.”

“What good are books? All the knowledge in the world cannot make seven days last seven years.”

“I think you’d like this one.” I set my bag down on a rock, pushed my towel aside to find the book. “There’s this marine biologist, a guy who studies sea-life and—”

The bag was ripped out of my hands and flung across the cave.

“I do not care for your land-stories!” His fingers were cold where they gripped my wrist. “You should pay attention to me! And only me!”

I had not heard him move. “You’re holding me too tight.” My voice was muted. There was a wildness in his eyes I hadn’t seen before. I didn’t like it.

He didn’t release his hold. “Would that I could hold you tight enough to keep with me forever. Would that I could take you down with me to the Deep. I would put you among the kelp and no one would ever find you.”

I shivered, tempted for a moment to believe him. “But you won’t.”

“No.” He released my hand, almost flinging it back at me as he spun around. “Unable to hurt the one who wounds me! Truly, I am cursed!”

I rubbed my wrist, at a loss with how to proceed. This pretend had gone too far.

“Cursed... cursed... And you do not even care!” His hands clutched his thick strands of hair. Suddenly, he turned back to me. “I will die of your cruelty.”

In spite of myself, I snorted. “No, you won’t.”

“Heartless beast! I will too die. And then you’ll be sorry.”

“I won’t be sorry, because you’re not going to die.”

“I am too.” He clenched his fists tight, warming to his subject. “And I will sing when I do so that everyone who hears it knows that it’s you who killed me.”

“I’m going to Birmingham. Not signing your death warrant!”

“I will sing,” he continued. “And all the hills and cliffs will resound with it until the entire peninsula knows my sorrow and every man, woman and child will weep with it, and they will say—”

“For God’s sake, someone stop that awful racket. I’m trying to watch Corrie,” I supplied helpfully.

He stared at me for a long moment, before letting out a sigh and falling back onto the sand he’d occupied originally.

After a moment’s deliberation, I sat beside him. “It’s not like I want to go back,” I reminded him. “I have to. GCSE’s this year, and I’m already behind because of moving so much. I’ll be back next summer.”

“Only to leave again.”

“People come and go all the time. It’s not the end of the world.”

Silence.

I tried one last time. “It’s not very princely to sulk. Cheer up. It’s a lovely day. We could go over to Porthor—”

“I am no prince.”

The words ‘I know’ were on the tip of my tongue, but his tone stopped me.

“No prince.” The admission was pained. “I cannot order you to stay by me, or trade my wealth to win your favour. I have nothing to offer a knight but my heart—which you don’t want and is broken besides. No, don’t speak to me. It hurts me to hear you.”

I swallowed. Was it possible? All the time I’d been playing, my companion had been serious? “What should I do?”

“Go. Just go.”

I climbed back across the rocks with limbs that felt like stone. I looked back at the entrance to see him lying still. The cave's dim light gave his skin the pallor of the grave. For a moment, I believed his wild claim of dying.

Cloud came in over the afternoon, the oppressive mist doing nothing to lift my thoughts. The coast was quiet. Too quiet. I half-expected a reproachful chorus or a careless invitation, but the silence worried me.

"Nan, do people die of broken hearts?"

She sat at the kitchen table peeling spuds, the kitchen radio giving us the news in *Cymraeg*. "You won't see it written on any hospital report, love."

"Yes, but does anyone really die of it? Tell me." I wrapped myself around the chair opposite.

"If you're going to sit, sit properly." Nan waited until I was sitting with the chair facing forward. "Not technically. But it could be a factor. Think of *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Do I have to?" We'd started off Shakespeare with *Romeo and Juliet* the previous term. "But they didn't die of broken hearts. She stabbed herself and he drank poison."

"If not broken hearts exactly, I think you could consider them a cause."

"They died because they were both great big ninnies," I said with heat. "And their families were pretty terrible too and nobody ever just talked to each other."

"Well, then." Nan shrugged. "As you are not a great big ninny, I don't think there is much danger of you succumbing anytime soon."

I bit my lip. I was fond of Myrhydion, but I knew very well that he could be a real twit at times.

"Something on your mind, love?"

I shook my head. "I wish I didn't have go back."

Nan placed the peeling knife in front of me. "Harder to mope with your hands full."

I took the hint.

Peeling potatoes wasn't fun, but it did take my mind off my guilty conscience. When the last potato had joined his fellows simmering in the pot on

the stove, I had another bright idea. “Nan, could you call Mrs Jones and see if Harry wants to come and play cards after dinner?”

“You do remember Harry! Here I was thinking we weren’t going to see him at all these holidays.”

I fought the urge to blush. The discovery that I could do other things with Myrhydion besides exploring the rocks had dominated my holiday so far. Harry had not got so much as a phone call and even I had to admit that was entirely unfair. It wasn’t Harry’s fault I didn’t want to kiss him. “I’ve been busy.”

“So you tell me.” But Nan picked up the phone all the same.

Harry did want to play cards. It was a fun evening. I’d entirely forgotten that Harry was good company when he wasn’t ill, and he knew a few crude jokes that hadn’t reached my school yet. In return for sharing the jokes currently popular in Birmingham, I was invited to go into Bangor with him and his Mam the next day. Mrs Jones was shopping for school supplies and groceries and we could go to the pictures.

The day was a great success, and I waved goodbye to Harry and Mrs Jones from the gate feeling better than I had in days.

“There you are.” There was an odd note to Nan’s voice, and I turned to see her coming down the path to greet me. “Just what on earth have you been doing, my boy?”

I slowed to a halt. “Going to the movies with Harry. You know. You said it was all right.”

“There is a naked boy sitting in a bathtub in my kitchen who claims to be very intimately acquainted with you.”

I stared at her for a moment. I don’t know why the prospect of these two worlds overlapping had never occurred to me before, but now that it had it was terrifying. I ran past her to throw open the kitchen door.

Myrhydion looked up at me from the old metal tub that had not been used since I was at least four, but Nan had hung on to for reasons known only to her. “You return at last! I have been waiting half the day at least.” He smiled at me, as if it was a normal thing for people to sit around in bathtubs in Nan’s kitchen. “Why do you not greet me? Are you not pleased to see me?”

“Who would be pleased to see you?”

“How rude! After I have gone to such trouble on your behalf.” He drew himself up proudly, even though he only just fit in the tub. “I am here on an errand pertaining to your happiness after all.”

I snorted. Myrhydion might look ridiculously out of place beside the chairs and table, but he was still him. “An errand pertaining to your stomach you mean.” I poked him in the ribs, before picking up the biscuit tin set beside the tub. “This tin was full when I left this morning! Do you want to be the prince of whales now or something?” Inwardly I was relieved. If he could still eat an entire tin of biscuits, he couldn’t be that heartbroken.

“It is just as well I am inured to your cruelty—” Myrhydion sat up straight as Nan joined us in the kitchen. “I have just greeted Sir Oliver,” he said. “I am relieved that he is has returned from Bangor without incident.”

Was this Myrhydion on best behaviour? I studied him with bemusement. “Why are you sitting in the tub?”

“Because the sink was too small.” Nan’s voice had a note that put me on best behaviour too. “Sit down, Olly. Myrhydion has something very important to tell you.”

Myrhydion preened, finding himself the centre of attention. “It took me days. I had to search in the Deep where there is no light for hours until I found a worthy offering for your esteemed grandmother, and I came at once to deliver it.”

“You found something?”

“Your grandmother, in her wisdom, removed it for safekeeping—”

“In the bath,” Nan said. She leant against the bench, holding her mug of tea.

I went at once to look.

The bath crawled with small sea snails and crabs. Clearly Myrhydion had not given the occupants of his find any warning before removing it from its ocean home. Not that I could fault his impatience. This was a find worth getting excited about. A wooden trunk, crusted over with thick seaweed. The rusty bolts that held the lid shut gave at my touch, and I raised the lid to reveal the strong smell of rotting wood and some badly rusted plates. I could have laughed. After all these years, I finally had my smuggler’s chest.

“Did you really find it yourself? Where was it, was it in a boat?”

“It was. An old ship, so old that it had been entirely forgotten. I heard the dolphins singing of it, and it reminded me that there was a tale told me once

about it—” Myrhydion’s eyes flickered to Nan, and he sat up straight again, resting his hands primly on the edge of the tub. “It is but a humble offering, a poor mark of my esteem and affection.”

To Nan? I frowned. Why on earth was Myrhydion giving Nan a present obviously meant for me?

“And the occasion of this gift?” Nan prompted.

“The occasion.” Myrhydion gripped the edge of the tub tightly and looked down with schoolgirl demureness. “I am sure that the occasion is clear. It is not every day, after all, that I meet one such as Sir Oliver, and I have grown exceedingly fond of him—”

I squinted at him suspiciously. Was he blushing? “Say what?”

Nan smiled grimly. “Myrhydion wishes to make an honest man out of you, Olly.”

I stared at her. Was this revenge for leaving her to entertain my friend for hours?

“I hope this does not seem presumptuous,” Myrhydion continued earnestly. “Asking for your hand seemed only natural, but your grandmother has explained that courting works differently on the land than how it was told me.”

“We don’t do dowries any more,” Nan said briskly. “And it’s not my permission you’d be getting, but my blessing. The decision is Olly’s.”

Her matter-of-factness gave the entire situation an air of reality. I sank back into my seat on legs that were suddenly shaky. This couldn’t be happening. Not because of a few kisses!

“There’s also Olly’s age to consider. He’s a minor. So it’s either wait till he’s eighteen or get Bethan’s permission.”

And there was no way that Bethan would agree to this. I relaxed.

Myrhydion pouted. “I do not see that Olly’s age need be any objection. If anything he has waited late—”

“A lot has changed since you lived in the village,” Nan reminded him. “By today’s thinking, the pair of you are still children.”

Myrhydion spilled some of the bathwater in his haste to defend himself. “I was considered a man,” he said. “I worked as hard as one—”

“You’re acting like a wilful child,” Nan scolded. “And you’re not much better, Oliver Evans, so I don’t know what you’re laughing at.”

I sat up straight. “Sorry, Nan.”

She wiped her hands on her apron. “There’s also your livelihood to think of. Olly’s got two more years of school yet, if he wants to do sixth form, so you’d be without an income.”

Myrhydion’s head bowed and he nodded. “I do not have any property of my own,” he said. “I should be entirely dependent on your good will. I would have to leave these waters, learn life anew.” He peered at me earnestly from beneath his thick fringe of hair. “I would work hard to secure your comfort,” he promised. “Your happiness would always be of the utmost importance to me. I could live in the cave and learn about your world from your grandmother—”

“You’d have to work hard,” I warned him. “Nan’s not going to go as easy on your excess Ys as I did.” The thought of either of them working together long enough to get Myrhydion writing was highly amusing. I grinned, but Nan did not share the joke.

“You’ve made your case, Myrhydion. You must give Olly time to think it over.”

He nodded, favouring me with a bright smile. “I shall look for you on the shore tomorrow. Do not make me wait too long.” He held the edge of the bathtub in both hands and pushed himself down. The shallow water of the tub closed over his head in a rush and by the time I reached the side of the tub, Myrhydion had entirely vanished, the only sign of his presence a stray piece of kelp resting at the bottom of the tub and the ripples left behind him.

“How did he do that?” I plunged my hand into the tub but encountered only the metal surface. No optical illusions here. “He can’t have just vanished!”

“It is an old trick,” Nan said. “Known only to the *Ceffyl Dŵr* and the King beneath the Cliffs. I don’t like that your friend knows it, Olly.”

I looked up, searching her face for any hint of a smile. “*Ceffyl Dŵr* are just in stories. And the King beneath the Cliff—” I trailed to a halt. “They can’t be real.”

“Tip that water out in the bathroom, Olly.” Nan reached for the kettle. “We need to have a good long talk.”

Chapter Seven

How to Break a Heart

“But you never told me they weren’t just stories,” I protested. It was well past my bedtime and far too late at night to be on a second pot of tea, but Nan had not said anything about either.

“I never said they were stories, did I?” She sat across the kitchen table from me holding her own cup of tea. “You came up with that piece of wisdom yourself.”

“But ordinary families don’t meet *morgen* or the *Ceffyl Dwr*!”

“Our family has always been unusually blessed,” Nan said. “There’s been a cunning woman—or man—every generation until your mother’s.”

I frowned. “Does Mam know you’re really a wit—a cunning woman?”

“I’m not entirely sure how much Bethan remembers.” Nan’s eyes turned distant. “She had an affinity for the old ways, like none I’d seen before. Knowledge of them came to her easily. She could call the *Ceffyr Dwr* up to the shore, absolutely fearless. ‘They’re just like horses after all, Mam,’ is what she said. Loved playing by the shore just like you do. And then...” Nan shook her head. “Storm came up suddenly. The waves cut off the rocks she was on and it was too rough for anyone to reach her. She clung to those rocks for hours until the storm finally subsided, but it took with it something of hers. Bethan was never the same after that. She said she didn’t have time for stories. It was not long after that she went to York for Uni, and that was the end of that. She’s only ever come back to visit.”

I bit my lip. “Do you think that’s why she’s so restless?”

“It’s hard to say, Olly *bach*. Bethan was wilful even as a girl. She never stood being told what to do. But I do know that it would suit the King beneath the Cliffs very well if I was the last cunning woman on these cliffs.” Nan sighed. She leant over the table to ruffle my hair. “Leave all that for now, Olly. We need to decide what we’re going to do about your *morgen*.”

The shock had worn off enough now that I was flattered by Myrhydion’s proposal and accepted ownership of him with a strange pleasure. “So you see, I really did need those biscuits.”

“He certainly has a healthy appetite, your suitor,” Nan glanced at the biscuit tin. “Afternoon tea, tea and he still finished the cake, the biscuits and the bread and could have eaten more if I’d let him.”

“I’ll go down to the bakery tomorrow,” I offered quickly. I wanted Nan to like him.

But Nan was still thoughtful. “All these years, it was him you were playing with?”

“He was the prince of the mer-people, and I was the Knight of the Garden Gnomes. That’s why he called me ‘Sir Oliver.’” I tilted my head back to look at Nan. “You didn’t correct him.”

“You must do that yourself when you meet him tomorrow.”

My heart sank. That particular problem had not occurred to me before. “I don’t know. I mean, it’s not harming anything, is it—”

“Olly.” Nan leant forward. “That boy is deadly serious.”

I stared at her. Somehow that fact had escaped me.

Nan settled her hand over mine. “He hasn’t said it, but if you accept his offer, he won’t be able to return to the sea. The King will cast him out.”

I shivered, despite the warmth of the kitchen. “Like in the story of Mother Rock?”

“Worse,” Nan said. “The King’s violent temper has driven most of his people away from him. He is not kind to those who remain. If Myrhydion returned to the water, that would be the last you saw of him.”

“But what am I supposed to do?” I looked helplessly at Nan. “It’s his decision. If he wants to live on land, why should I stop him? He doesn’t like the King. And he’s always going on about how lonely he is without me. Maybe living on land’ll be good for him.”

“Make no mistake. He isn’t choosing land, Olly. He is choosing you. Which is why it is very important that you give him your honest answer. If you decide you don’t want to live with him—”

“He’s stuck,” I finished slowly.

“You will not simply be his sweetheart. You would have to be friend and family both, all he has in the world.” Nan squeezed my hand and then released it. “You know best what is in your heart, Olly. If this is what you want, I will

do everything I can to aid you both. But if there is even the slightest bit of doubt—”

“I should say no?”

“Think carefully.” Nan carried her cup of tea to the sink. “There’s no dating with *morgen*, or changing your mind. Once they decide, they’re committed.” She paused on her way out the door to hug me tightly. “Doesn’t seem any longer than yesterday you were running in here so pleased with yourself for finding a new friend. And now look at you. All grown up and getting proposed to by *morgen*.” She sniffed loudly, dabbing at her eyes with the edge of her apron. “Time goes so fast.”

“Nan!” I stood up to return her hug properly. I was taller than her now, her hair just tickling my chin. “You make it sound like I’m going off to war or something. You’re not losing a grandson you know. Just gaining a fish-in-law.”

“Wicked child.” Nan patted me on the shoulder, looked at me and sighed. “Don’t sit up too long, Olly. And remember, whatever your choice, your Nan loves you.”

I was feeling a little weepy myself. “If Myrhydion saw you now, he’d never believe you were the Witch that the King beneath the Cliffs is so afraid of,” I teased. “You’re up past your bedtime.”

“Cheeky boy. I ought to make the pair of you live in the sea. It’d solve everyone’s problems.”

But as soon as the door swung shut behind her, my smile faded. Even after I went to bed the question of what to do haunted me. I lay on my back, looking up at the September sky (clear for once!) from my bed, letting the steady muttering of the tide pull my thoughts back and forth.

I liked Myrhydion a lot. His odd tempers were now as familiar to me as the Aberdaron landscape and just as special. I had taken him for granted just as I had the wild, craggy cliffs and the changeable seas. And he liked me enough to want to court me. Clearly I hadn’t given him enough credit for having good sense. Or had he liked kissing me more than I’d imagined? I smirked, remembering his decidedly negative reaction to my initial suggest.

Score one more for Olly!

You will not simply be his sweetheart.

I settled down to consider Nan’s words seriously. As a friend, Myrhydion was perfect. Ready to laugh with me, flatteringly interested in my stories and

even though he frequently pointed out the shortcomings in my plans, he accompanied me on my explorations regardless. I could handle his sulks and tease him out of being proud. I could manage Myrhydion any day.

It was everyone else that was the problem.

I chewed my lip. There was no denying that people at school were going to think that Myrhydion was... odd. It was hard enough already being the new kid without being the new kid with the weirdo friend who can't even read or write his own name.

"I don't care!"

But Myrhydion would.

I sat up in bed. He would take it personally, too used to being alone to know how to defend himself against the teasing and that would only encourage it even more. Kids were heartless. I knew that very well. I'd been on the giving and receiving end of it plenty of times.

Then there was the marriage business.

No matter how you looked at it, marrying another guy was—pretty gay. I was okay telling Nan about it, but the idea of Derry or Mac or George or any of my friends knowing I was into guys was physically painful. The only guys at school that were out were the guys that no one would have dared accuse of being fem for fear of being punched. And this was a good school.

"What is wrong with just running away to a tropical island somewhere?"

Life was not fair.

I tried to settle down on my bed again, shoving the pillow into place. "After all, I didn't ask him to fall in love with me."

Love. I bit my lip. That was the big one, wasn't it? Myrhydion was in love with me. That was behind all this. And I—

I folded my hands on my chest and looked at the ceiling for inspiration. Did I love him? "How would you even tell?"

There was a definite difference between kissing Myrhydion and kissing Scott McFarlane. Myrhydion still gave me pleasurable butterflies while Scott McFarlane was a race to see how far we got before anyone wanted to use the changing rooms. Was that love?

"All that nonsense they teach us at school, you'd think they could cover this!" I rolled over. I'd done an entire term of *Romeo and Juliet* and was no

closer to understanding any of this. “What if we’d studied *Macbeth*? What then? I’d have even less of a clue! Ugh!”

Though... While there was no denying that Myrhydion was moody enough for Shakespeare, I did not feel like throwing myself down outside his balcony or absconding with him secretly to get married against our family’s wishes. Or even at all.

“Do you, Oliver Evans take Myrhydion ap... take Myrhydion to be your lawfully wedded husband?” Or was that only for straight couples? The same-sex marriage debate had always seemed too far away to be relevant to me. I regretted that lack of interest now as I tried my best to imagine it. Would it be an actual wedding or a civil partnership? Would we live on our own or with Mam? What would happen if I wanted to go to Uni?

I bit my lip. Bethan met my father in Uni. They’d been very much in love—until they’d married.

“It’s a trap,” Bethan said the one time I’d asked. “Love is given freely, not produced on demand. It’s not the sort of thing that can be institutionalised. It has to be freely given to be real and true. Marriage is a prison. If you love someone, Olly, do right by them. Never marry them.”

I rolled over with a groan. It was inevitable then. No matter what, I was going to hurt Myrhydion. The only question was how much.

It was a horribly sunny day. Fine, beautiful and entirely at odds with what I had to do, which made it even worse.

Nan did not ask me what decision I’d come to. She let me mope at breakfast undisturbed while she read the paper, her only response to my sighing was asking if I wanted more tea.

It was midafternoon when my conscience finally dragged me down the path onto the beach. Some knight. How had I ever dared dream of vanquishing dragons when I didn’t even have the nerve to talk to my friend?

Myrhydion was lying on his back on the sand, his hair spread out around him like seaweed, as if he’d been stranded there when the high tide turned. The water was already a good twenty metres down the beach. I’d never seen him so far from the water’s edge and I approached carefully. No longer afraid that anyone might see him?

“At last you join me! Is making me wait your latest game? I do not think it a very good one.” Myrhydion sat up with a pleasurable sigh. He did not seem at all bothered by the sand that stuck to him, brushing it off with cheerful briskness. “I have been trying to imagine what it will be like to walk on the land with you. You won’t mind that I have a lot of questions? There is much for me to learn.”

There was a heavy lump in the base of my throat. I sat on the sand next to him and swallowed.

“It is not like you to be so quiet.” Myrhydion stretched out his hand to rest on my shoulder. “Are you quite well? Look at me, Olly. You worry me.”

I looked out at the sunlight gleaming on the rock pools before us. It was hard to imagine anything more serene and peaceful. It was a liar, just like I was. “When—when you told me that you weren’t a prince, I wasn’t upset.”

“Your grandmother assured me that you were not unduly concerned with titles—”

I shook my head. I wasn’t done. “I wasn’t upset because I made that up. Me being a knight was made up, too.”

Myrhydion’s laugh was tinged with relief. “But that is good news! I was worried that I could not support a knight! And that is even less of a reason for your mother to not approve the match, isn’t it?” His hand pressed down on my shoulder. “You do not smile. Why? Is it not good news, Olly?” He rolled onto his knees, peering up at my face. “Does—does your mother forbid it? Or has your grandmother advised against accepting my suit? Was my present insufficient? I will search again—search the entire ocean—until I find a prize that is deserving of your hand—”

“No!” My voice sounded coarse, unfamiliar. I shook my head. “It’s me. I’m the problem.”

“Then there is no problem at all.” Myrhydion smiled at me, brushing my hair back from my forehead with elaborate care. “You could never be a problem.” He considered me seriously a moment, before leaning in to brush his lips over mine.

I pulled back from the kiss. “When I made-believe that you were a prince and I was a knight, I was just playing—a game. I—never imagined that you would take it seriously.”

I heard his gasp but pressed on without looking at him.

“When—when I kissed you—”

“Do not say it!” Myrhydion tipped himself onto his knees. “I order you not to say another word!”

Falling back on the prince even now? I half wanted to laugh, half wanted to throw myself at him and pretend this past day had never happened. “I wasn’t thinking about how you’d take it. I was just—”

“Playing,” Myrhydion finished. “Making a game of my heart.” Waves rushed over his feet as he stood, the water taking on the cool grey of the rocks below them.

I had never heard that hard note in his voice before, scrambling to my feet. “No. Never—if I’d known—”

“All this time, pretending!” His fists were clenched, the water rushed around him in tight currents.

The waves were already up to my knees. “I never meant to hurt you—”

“And you have succeeded in hurting me badly!” Myrhydion stepped back into waist-deep water. “Woe betide your enemies if this is how you treat your friends!”

The sea continued to swell with his anger, the undertow so strong that it was hard for me to even move my feet. I stumbled towards him, stretching out my hand. “It’s not as bad as that! We can still be friends—”

Myrhydion flung out his hand to shake me off. The same moment, a wave caught me. I was dragged down and then up. Salt water filled my mouth and ears, and I choked on it, trying vainly to find the surface of the water, colliding with rock before suddenly finding myself sliding to a halt on the smooth pebbles of the upper shore. The salt water burned the back of my throat as I heaved for breath, thick mucus blocking my nose.

“Olly—” Myrhydion’s breath sounded shaky. Had the violence of the wave taken him by surprise too?

I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting him to see me so pathetic.

After a moment, he spoke. “We cannot be friends. We cannot ever be friends again.”

I looked up, just in time to see him dive. The water immediately sprung up in harsh ridges. Staggering to my feet, I began the long climb to the cottage feeling as if the wave had gone right through me.

Nan sat at the kitchen table. “Well, love. How did it go?” She glanced up and her expression changed.

I swallowed. I was damp through, sand stuck to me and my leg bled where a rock had caught it, and I was leaving puddles on Nan’s floor, and all I could do was gape at her, like a hooked fish. “Nan—”

“Olly.” Nan held out her arms.

I didn’t care that I was sixteen and much too old to be crying on my grandmother. I hugged her tight and wept.

“Hush now, love. It’ll be all right. Things will work out.” Her fingers were warm, soothing my wet hair back into place.

I choked on a sob. “I am never, ever making up stories again.”

Seven years.

The water stretched out as smooth as a duvet drawn straight up to the edge of the coast. Nothing wrinkled that pristine surface, not even the wind that set the long grass whispering all around me where I sat on the cliffs. The yellows, pinks and purples of the sunset reflected back in the sea’s surface as one harmonious colour. It was impossible to imagine that surface grey and choppy, just as it was impossible to think that anything sinister lurked beneath that surface.

I smiled, a painful contortion that was closer to a grimace. “Impossible.”

The word stuck in my throat. It was impossible to think that I’d spent several summers happily playing with a mythical sea-creature, but the guilt that had settled in my stomach was very real.

Also real: the cassette player in my pocket.

I closed my fingers around it, feeling its shape through the fabric of my jacket. My fingers brushed over the play button but didn’t press it. It was enough to have it there as confirmation. Myrhydion had been right to warn me of the *morgen*’s song. Who knew what would happen if I listened to it a third time?

I looked out over the ocean. I knew everything now. Except where to find him.

In that respect, nothing had changed.

It stormed for three days following our fight. The sea was grey, churned up into huge swells by the rocks. I made one attempt to reach the cave on the second day and was forced back by the angry surf.

I was wet through and shivering with the cold waves when I returned to the cottage, wanting nothing more than to crawl back under my blankets and pretend I didn't exist. But I couldn't have even that. Nan made me sit at the kitchen table in my damp clothes as she rummaged in the pantry.

"Nan, I'm freezing."

"Maybe next time you'll listen then when I tell you to avoid the shore." Nan set an assortment of containers down on the table. From some she took herbs, others little vials of dark coloured glass. "Come and kneel by the fire. Not that close! You'll put it out with your dripping."

Consulting a leather-bound book I didn't remember seeing before, Nan threw a handful of herbs onto the fire and made me breathe in the bitter smoke. "Hold your breath—there." She drew a line on my forehead with the liquid taken from one of the vials. "Once that's dried you can take your shower."

I choked on the thick smoke. "What did you do?"

"A precaution. Unfortunately, there aren't any charms against moping teenagers, so you're on your own on that front."

"Can I please go get a towel now or do you want me to get pneumonia?"

"Just mind you don't dry your hair until my mark has set."

I grumpily wrapped myself in the bathroom towel. "I look like a drowned rat."

Nan snorted as she started packing up her witch's kit. "If you're going to imitate a marine rodent, Olly, how about the beaver? They know to take cover from the water."

I sat down by the fire. "If you're just going to pick on me, I'm going to bed."

"I'm serious, Olly. It is a bad thing to make an enemy of any of the fair folk, and the *morgen* is no exception."

"Do you really think Myrhydion—" I couldn't say it.

Nan came to stand by me, smoothing down my bedraggled hair. "There's more in these oceans than Myrhydion alone," she said. "A storm of this size..."

She trailed off, looking out the window to the storm clouds looming beyond. “Maybe bed would not be such a bad place for you, child.”

My last day in Aberdaron, the sea was still as a mirror. I scrambled down the path to the shore, slipping on the damp earth in my haste. Did the calm mean that Myrhydion had let go of his anger?

“Myrhydion?” He was not on the shore, or in our cave. I sat on the sand beside the pool. “Are you there?”

Even the gentle trickle of the tide into the pool seemed muted.

“I know you’re angry with me. I’m angry with me, too. But I don’t want—I want to leave as your friend.”

No ripple came to break the water’s smooth surface.

“Please. I really want to see you. Talk to you.”

It took the incoming tide reaching my feet to let me know that he wasn’t coming.

I picked my way slowly back across the shore. In only a few hours, Nan would drive me and my backpack to the bus stop and it would be an entire eleven months of not seeing Myrhydion. Going back to the cottage would make it even more final. I lingered on the beach, trying vainly to see Myrhydion amongst the rocks. My eyes fell upon grandfather’s shed. I drew in a sharp breath.

Until Aberdaron was closed to fishing boats and the fishermen moved to Pwllheli, Granddad had moored his boat in the bay. The dinghy he rowed out to it was kept in the shed and when the boat was sold, it remained in the shed. Nan never bothered to lock it and Harry and I had played there undisturbed until one summer, I’d had the bright idea that if we were going to play at pirates, we would be much better off with our own boat. The dinghy was heavier than we’d anticipated, however, and we’d only succeeded in scraping it over the rocks on the shore. We’d gone to ask Nan’s help, been thoroughly scolded for even thinking about heading out on the water on our own, and from then on the shed had been locked.

Now, however...I glanced up the cliffs, towards the cottage.

Nan had taken precautions, which meant she suspected I’d do something like this. That, I decided, was just short of encouraging me to do this. If she’d

really not wanted me to break the lock of the shed with a stone and haul the old dinghy down the shore and into the sea, surely she'd have said something.

I stabbed ineffectually at the water with the oars. Rowing was a lot harder than it looked on TV. By the time I'd more or less got a handle on it, the boat had drifted out beyond the heads.

"Myrhydion?" I leant the oars against the side of the boat so that I could scan the water. A ripple in the water gave me a moment's hope, but it was only a seal. I leant over the side of the boat.

All I knew about his home was that the *morgen* had beautiful gardens and buildings of gold. Both of those were things people would notice, so I wasn't likely to find him around the coastline, which was frequented by kayakers. Maybe south of Aberdaron Bay, I decided, reaching for the oars again. His story of the sea claiming the *morgen*'s land sounded a lot like *Cant'r Gwaelod* and everyone knew that was in Cardigan Bay—

The right oar slid out of my grasp and into the water. I grabbed for it, and the boat tipped. I was just in time to stop the left from following it, but by the time the boat had evened itself out, the oar was floating rapidly away.

Or was the boat moving? I glanced at the coast and discovered that in the short time I'd been distracted, the shore had become distant. Peering over the edge, I saw the telltale swirl of a current. The boat was getting carried out to sea at an alarming speed.

Swim for it? Another sudden dip and I pitched forward, hitting my chin on one of the raised seats in the bottom of the boat. Choppy waves rattled the little dinghy. I sat in the centre, my hands gripping either side tightly. When exactly had the sky clouded over? Or that wind come up?

"A sudden summer squall." I tried to sound confident. "Happens all the time."

But I knew there was nothing natural about this.

The waves were high enough now that I got caught with the spray and the wind was cold. The little boat was pitched up and down, each wave jolting me uncomfortably. The coast seemed impossibly distant.

Nan would notice the weather change. She'd think it strange when I didn't come in from the cold, and then she'd notice the boat was missing. I clung tightly to the boat as we tilted crazily. She'd call the coastguard. All I had to do was stick with the boat and try not to think about how small it was and how tall the waves were getting.

There was a sudden loud sound, like an exhalation of breath. The King beneath the Cliffs, come for his revenge?

Instead I saw a long grey shape slide beneath the water. Shark?

No, I reminded myself. Sharks don't breathe.

The boat lurched as something collided with it. There was the creak of wood and then something fell on top of me.

Jaws! I flung my arm out wildly. I was about to be eaten by *Jaws!* I'd never liked that movie—

"Olly!" Myrhydion grabbed my leg as he pulled himself the rest of the way into the boat. "You should not have come out here!"

"Tell me something I don't know!" I tugged Myrhydion forward just as the boat tipped again, and we were sprawled together in the bottom of the dinghy. "The water was fine when I set out!"

"It was a trap. To lure you." Myrhydion kept hold of my arm. "Would that you had left the peninsula with the summer!"

That was not the sentiment of someone out for my destruction, and despite the situation, I laughed breathlessly. "Myrhydion—"

There was again that over-loud inhalation. There were more bodies in the water, sleek and visible for a moment in the rise of the wave.

"Hold me by the waist." Myrhydion let go of me to take the side of the boat in two hands. "I do not know if I can get back in without their help." He plunged his face underwater.

"What the hell?" No time to question. I braced myself as firmly as I could against the bottom of the boat and grabbed the weed that encircled his waist. I heard a distant rumble. My heart sank. Please, not a storm!

Myrhydion sat upright and we nearly overbalanced again.

"Stay still! Do you want to tip the boat?"

"That would not be advisable." Myrhydion copied me, placing a hand either side and sitting in the bottom of the dinghy. "The dolphins have gone to look for one of your ships. They will let us know which direction to head."

"We're heading nowhere! There's only the one oar!"

Myrhydion looked past me to the gathering swells, his mouth tight.

I discovered a new source of alarm. “What happened to your arm?” His shoulder was a mass of purplish bruises, with ugly red rents that reached halfway to his elbow. “Was that—did the King hurt you?”

Myrhydion looked down at his shoulder. “I have not seen him in so dark a mood. His displeasure has set the sea at war with the land these last few days. I thought to warn your grandmother, but got thrown against the rocks by the waves.”

I had to raise my voice to be heard over the waves. “I went out to look for you—”

“And that’s why I had to warn you! You take the risks of a knight—”

A large wave cut off Myrhydion’s sentence, drenching both of us in cold water. The dinghy rose sluggishly on the next high. Another wave like that and we’d be sunk.

There was nothing in the boat to bail out the water. I shrugged out of my jacket, using it as a scoop. Myrhydion helped me with his hands. His determination never faltered, even as the waves rose around us, or the boat jolted us about. No prince leading his troops against overwhelming odds had ever looked so regal. I let the jacket slip from my hands.

“Olly, it is not so terrible!” Myrhydion’s words surprised me. “Do not give up!”

“I hurt you.” The boat tipped me against the side, but I kept on. “I hurt you and you still came to help me.”

“That is not important now.”

“It’s really important!” If I was going to die, then I had to say this. “I never knew how important you were to me and I’m sorry—really sorry—that I hurt you—”

“Do not cry! It is not knight-like.” The wind flung Myrhydion’s hair in his face, but he did not let that interrupt his scolding. “Nor do I like to see you so solemn.”

“Myrhydion.” My body shivered from the cold, but my voice was strong. “I’m not pretending.”

There was a long moment where only the wind spoke, and then Myrhydion held out his arms to me. “Olly.”

I fell onto him, and he caught me, smoothing back my hair and pulling me close as if I were a child, and we had all the time in the world.

“It is not fair, that I must be the one to hurt you more than any other,” he said. “It is not fair and I see now that this was the King’s design. Either I lose you to the waves or I save your life but destroy you—no, it is too cruel.”

“I don’t care.” My entire body shook, the cold going right through. “I had to tell you—”

Myrhydion crushed me tightly against his chest. I had some confused thought that he intended to drown me, but then I heard a sound that seemed to cut straight through the coldness that had seeped into my skin, electrifying it. It was not blunted by the arms wrapped around my ears. It was the *morgen*’s song, and it was the most achingly perfect thing I’d ever heard, even as I felt its beauty slide into my chest like a knife.

The pitching boat settled into an even keel. Around us waves towered and fell, but we drifted through them in an enchanted calm, the wind falling away and Myrhydion’s voice rising to fill the gaps.

The song had no words that I recognised. It was alternately commanding, ordering the waves to fall before us, then soothing, lulling away all remaining ripples. It stretched out, and I could see that beyond our boat, the rays of the sun were fading.

I did not think about the bus I’d missed or how worried Nan must be. I hadn’t forgotten them. They were wiped so entirely from my mind that they held no meaning to me at all. If I’d seen Nan, I don’t think I’d have even known her. It was only Myrhydion, and it wasn’t even him anymore. It was just his voice.

As the wind died away, the song wavered on the breeze. Its final notes hung in the air for one long beautiful moment. Myrhydion’s chest rose and fell rapidly under me.

For that one moment, I was content. And then the absence set in.

“Why did you stop?”

“I must stop.” Myrhydion’s voice was tinged through with fear. It disappointed me, so far from the sound I wanted—no, *needed* to hear again. “I will need my voice if the storm comes back.”

“Please sing? Just a little. I want to hear you. I have to.” He didn’t respond, and I took his shoulders to turn him to look at me. “Myrhydion. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Olly, do not. Please, do not.”

“What’s the matter?”

“This is the price of hearing the *morgen*’s song.”

“I didn’t think it was that bad. It was actually kind of nice.” I bit my lip. I was suddenly struck by how pale Myrhydion looked in the fading light. His skin was clammy than I’d ever felt it. I let him lean against me, smoothing out his hair, tangled through and through with kelp. He needed to rest, I decided. I wouldn’t ask him again. “It’s really quiet.”

Myrhydion didn’t respond.

“Doesn’t it seem quiet to you? Cold.” I shivered, as the water I was sitting in and my lost jacket caught up with me. “It wasn’t cold at all when you sang.”

“Olly—”

“I don’t know why you were afraid of letting me hear you. Your voice—I’ve never heard anything like that. It was like hearing the ocean, but if it was alive.” I sighed at the memory of it, letting go of Myrhydion to rub the goose bumps from my arm. “While you sung, it was like nothing else mattered. Nothing at all. It was beautiful.”

“It is better not to think of it.”

“I’m going to think of it. I can’t not. It was just immense. I think everyone should hear it.”

Myrhydion turned his face away from me.

“It’s not like you to be shy,” I teased him. “And that song is nothing to be shy about.” The memory of it conflicted painfully in my chest, awaking an ache to hear it again. “You don’t have to be shy with me. I’ve already heard you. Please, Myrhydion?”

His reply was dull. “I told you. The storm may return.”

“It doesn’t have to be the whole thing.” Just the rising lifts that sent me flying high with the cresting waves. Or the sweetness of the waves smoothed out to perfect harmony. “Just part of it. Anything at all. I only want to hear it again.”

“It is worse, even than I thought.”

“It can’t be worse than this silence. Please, Myrhydion.” I stroked his hair. “Make it go away. I won’t complain if your throat’s a little scratchy. Just anything is better than this... nothing!” I was earnest in my praise. Then I was

logical, putting forward arguments in favour of it. “If the storm comes back, you’ll have to start from scratch again. That will be a lot of work, especially if we need to bail out the water again. Don’t you think it makes more sense to sing a little now, to keep the waves down? You’re not thinking about this sensibly.”

“You are not sensible of your words.”

“And if the coastguard hears you, they’ll be able to find me sooner.” Not that I cared about being found, but that seemed to matter to him. “So really, if you cared at all about me, you’d sing.”

Myrhydion’s laugh was wild. “I knew this must be, and still it stings!”

“You think you’re hurt!” I tripped over my words in my haste to explain my pain and devastation. I was injured incurably, so it seemed that the least he could do was to soothe the wound he’d created. “Why? Do you want me to stay cold and miserable?”

Myrhydion didn’t respond.

I shook his weight off me and moved as far away as I was able to in the little boat. “I hate you. I really do. It’s not fair! Why did you let me think you liked me, if you’re going to do this to me? You want me to suffer!”

He had not looked at me once, and I saw his shoulders tense. The memory of how I’d wounded him came back. Suddenly, it all lined up straight.

“I don’t know what I’m saying. This isn’t right. This is why you tried to cover my ears isn’t it?” I placed my hands over them, far too late. I seemed to hear again that strange, emotional swell, but the sound escaped my memory and my attempts to reimagine it were in vain.

“Any man who hears our song without the sea and the cliffs to shield it is made mad,” Myrhydion said. “It becomes all he can think of. And then—”

My heart sank, even as my mind tried to recreate the song in the familiar cadence of his voice. I was scared. Already, the Longing had gone deep.

I wouldn’t look at him. I’d fight it, fight myself. I wedged myself against the side of the boat. The stars seemed duller than I’d ever seen them, but I forced myself to look for ones I recognised. Anything to keep my mind off—

It was there. It was in the stars, in the darkness between them, in my own mind. I pressed my hand to my mouth, trying to hold in the sob. Myrhydion did not have to know how terrified I was.

“Do not weep!” Myrhydion’s hands gently soothed me. “I cannot bear it. I would rather you hated me—no, no. Olly—you must stop.”

“I’m trying to!”

“This is too harsh a punishment.”

I did not understand his words, and a moment later I didn’t care. His voice was thick with his own unhappiness, but even that was beautiful, a haunting melody that seared through my insides even as everything but the song ceased to matter.

My laugh echoed weirdly above the cliffs. No one would ever believe me. They’d think I was mad—as mad as I was when the coastguard eventually found me. I only remembered flashes after that. Myrhydion struggling to sing, though his throat was so sore it hurt him to breathe. Me, reproaching him with his cruelty, or begging him to stop the pressing ache inside me for just a few moments more. Waking at dawn to find myself alone in the boat. The orange blanket the coastguard wrapped me in. Being held back from trying to climb into the water again. Bethan waiting for me, her face as white as the outside of the ambulance they put me in. And then nothing at all until I opened my eyes to see the foot of a hospital bed and two dimly outlined figures to one side of it.

I raised myself onto my elbows. There was a muted feeling about the room, and I didn’t think it was entirely due to the dim light emanating from behind the curtains or the fuzziness in my head. My ears tingled as if they needed to pop, but although I swallowed, the stillness remained.

“Slept well?”

I turned towards the second figure. “Nan?” My voice cracked. My throat was raw, as if I’d been shouting, but at the same time, it felt like I hadn’t used it in a long time. “Why are you in the hospital?”

“The better question, Olly *bach*, is why are you.” She stood carefully, and I realised that her voice was hushed because the shape next to her was Bethan, sitting slumped against the wall, so unlike her usual self that I hadn’t seen her at first. “What do you remember, Olly?”

“Remember?”

“You took out your grandfather’s dinghy,” Nan said. I was lulled by the familiar calm of her voice, even as the words made no sense.

“What, you mean recently?”

“A week ago. You were caught in a storm, and you have been resting here ever since.”

That explained the hospital. “I don’t feel real. My head is really light, but my arms and legs feel heavy. Did I really take the boat out?”

“You don’t remember why?”

I shook my head. “Should I?”

Nan’s smile was strange. Fond and sad at the same time, as she reached out to brush my hair back from my face. “There was a time, Olly, when I didn’t know if we’d get you back.”

And that was the last time I saw her.

Knowing what I did now made the memory all the sweeter. She’d traded her wedding ring for the spell that Myrhydion had sung, and carried it all the way to my hospital bed in Cardiff. She’d saved my mind, and I’d never have known if I hadn’t found the cassette.

The evening chill draped over my shoulders and I stood automatically, leaving flattened grass where I’d sat. I briefly wondered how long I’d been out there on the heads with my memories, but shrugged off the thought. Time meant little in comparison to my discovery.

No. I started towards the cottage. Time meant a lot. Seven years was a long time, even for someone who remembered sailors eating ship’s biscuits. Myrhydion must know that I’d remembered.

Chapter Eight

The Fourth Man

The heartlessness of my own body amazed me. I felt the emotions locked up inside of me for the last seven years with the intensity of the sixteen-year-old that had lost them. I wanted to laugh; I wanted to cry; I wanted to tear my hair out. Instead of letting me do any of those, my stomach insisted I make a fried egg sandwich. It disappeared fast. I made another.

“Maybe,” I told the kettle, “if anyone had introduced Romeo and Juliet to an egg and bacon butty, that whole scenario could have been avoided.” There was something very Nan-like about the kitchen, and I took comfort in that, imagining the room infused with her no-nonsense attitude. “I mean, we’re not children anymore. I just have to find him.”

And finding him seemed a lot more do-able with two egg sandwiches between my ribs.

I spent the evening going over the house for anything that might help me in my search. Just like Cook preparing for his voyage of discovery, or a knight saddling up for an epic quest. I gathered up the tins of herbs and vials Nan kept in the kitchen, and opened every book on the bookshelf to check for notes written in margins. Finally, I went into her room.

I’d dreaded this, afraid that the lingering smell of the soap she put in her drawers to keep them fresh might move me to tears, bringing her absence home. Instead, I felt her care like a hand on my shoulder. “Nan.” Perhaps loss was not as final as I thought?

Her things were all in perfect order. I didn’t know much about clothes or jewellery, but I thought Bethan would want to look through them herself, find something of Nan’s to keep. I shut Nan’s drawers and turned to the wardrobe.

I was amused to realise that I still felt dread at the sight of it. “Seriously? You’re a grown man who knows better than to believe in ghosts!” It was so stupid, too. Another casualty of my unrestrained imagination.

I’d been five. Looking for Nan, I’d peeped through the open door and been confronted with the suit Grandfather had worn as he’d waved me and Bethan off on the bus to Pwllheli three months before he died. As I watched in horror, it swung towards me. Coming for me.

Nan heard my scream and bustled in from the garden immediately, but even taking me by the hand and showing me that the suit was on its hanger had not dispelled my fear.

I snorted. Maybe this time an adult's understanding would undo a child's hasty impression—

I stopped.

The suit was gone. The hanger was still there, and his shoes, but not the suit. I searched the wardrobe, but there was only one conclusion. "She wouldn't get rid of it." Wasn't she always saying how nice the fabric was, and that it might even do for me one day? Not even my decided dislike for it had been enough to make her part with it, and she'd indulged me in everything else. No, the only way I could imagine Nan parting with it was if she'd found—

I caught my breath.

Someone to wear it.

I ran up the stairs to my room. I pulled the woollen jumpers out of the cupboard. Was it my imagination, or did I smell the briny smell of seaweed?

"Hello?"

"Mrs Griffith? I have a question."

"Olly?" She muffled a yawn. "What are you doing, calling so late?"

I glanced out the window. Without streetlights, the darkness of the garden was complete. "Sorry. I completely lost track of time."

"You caught me just on my way to bed. What's on your mind?"

"Did Nan have someone stay with her? Seven years ago, right after we moved to Australia."

"Seven years," Mrs Griffith repeated slowly. "I don't know that I remember. She may have done."

"He was about my age. A boy—"

"The foreign exchange student?"

My heart leaped. "Was he pale, dark-haired?"

"He was. An odd boy. His English was very good, but the way he phrased things—it makes you wonder what they teach them in those foreign countries.

Then again, with how long it takes curriculums to be updated over here, I shouldn't wonder that the textbooks were out of date. The child was skinny as a stick. He looked like a scarecrow in your granddad's old jerseys, but he had nothing else to wear. You would think that whatever scholarship project he was on would look into that—"

"Where did he go?"

"Home, I expect. A student visa only lasts so long."

"No, I mean—" I caught myself. Nan could not have confided everything to Mrs Griffith. "Do you remember his name?" If I had that, I could trace him.

"Nothing comes to mind. All I remember is how strange he looked in your grandfather's clothes. The village children used to laugh at him. You know how kids are. Harry might remember."

I swallowed back fear. "I'll ask him. But you're certain he left? He doesn't come back to the village at all?"

"If he did, we'd remember. A visitor like that stands out." Mrs Griffith's certainty was absolute. "What's all this about, Olly?"

"I remembered something this afternoon," I said slowly. "I need to find him."

"Sylvia left him a bequest? Try the universities. I don't know what school he went through, but it's possible that they might still have your Nan on their books and you can trace him through them."

I already knew that I was not going to find Myrhydion that way. "Thanks." I paused, as another line of enquiry presented itself. "Is Myfanwy there?"

"This time on a school night? She'd better be."

I winced. "Asleep? Sorry. I forgot. I'll call again."

"And when you do, try and do it before nine. I don't know what time they go to bed in Australia, but country folk tend to get up on the early side."

I lay on my bed, wrapped in one of the heavy sweaters. I'd been right.

Myrhydion had helped Nan circumnavigate the King's revenge and cure me. He would not be able to remain safely in the sea, and Nan with her impatience for self-dramatics would not have allowed him to live in the cave. A foreign exchange student was a good thought. She'd have taught him what he

needed to know to adjust to the world he now lived in, and her magic would have let him walk on land. In return, had Myrhydion been a source of company, a replacement for the grandson suddenly so far away?

I hoped so. I felt Myrhydion's loss as my own. He was so proud of his home, the sea. Could he bear to be apart from it? The ache in my chest said no. Or was that my own guilt? If I'd realised sooner what he felt... If I hadn't been so foolish as to take the boat...

My fingers ran over the patchwork bedspread. Had he stayed here, in this room? He might have chosen it for the association with me, and Nan could easily have indulged him. I could see her becoming as fond of him as I was...

"Am." I repeated the distinction clearly. "As fond of him as I am." My feelings were as real now as they'd been seven years ago. They'd just been on hold. My fingers curled to a halt. Myrhydion's feelings, on the other hand, had seven years in which to change.

I sighed, rolling over. I had to find him.

The shop in Aberdaron had a better selection of fishing tackle than it did groceries. I paid for my bread and milk, reflecting that if I wanted to be eating anything more exciting than toast and sandwiches, a bus ride to Pwllhelli was in order.

And it's not like Aberdaron is going to go anywhere, I told myself as I wandered back down the main road towards the bridges. Do I honestly believe that if I leave the village even for a single afternoon, I'm going to miss finding him?

Yes, I discovered, I did.

"I am not Oliver Evans, foolish teenager, anymore," I told myself firmly, walking so quickly that the shopping bag swung against my leg. "I am Oliver Evans, grown-up, and I'm capable of acting like an adult." Too late I realised I was Oliver Evans, making a fool of himself in public. "*Bore da, Harry.*"

"Don't let Rob hear you talking to yourself. I can imagine what he'd say. 'This is what comes of spending your life in an isolated village at the end of the land.'" Harry's smile was both fond and sad. He nodded to my bag. "Doing some shopping? There's a better selection over at Porthor. I'm actually driving that way myself if you want a lift."

I raised an eyebrow. Richards and his ram were to the East in Llanfaelrhys. Porthor, on the other hand, was the same direction as Porth Meudwy and the Bardsey island ferry. “Speaking of Rob, isn’t today the day he and Natalie go to Bardsey?”

Harry coughed. He had retained his schoolboy awkwardness. “You might be right. I’d forgotten.”

Bullshit. But if he wanted an excuse to pine over Rob, I’d be a poor friend if I didn’t give him one. “We should see if we can’t find them. Congratulate them on choosing such a good day for the trip. You don’t get many days like this in September.”

I supplied most of the conversation on the drive over there. Harry’s replies were distracted, and we crawled along the country roads with excessive care. Something on his mind? I was in no mood to hear about someone else’s romantic disasters, but Harry was an old friend. I let the conversation drift off, allowing Harry time to gather his thoughts.

I did not wait long. “Actually, Olly. There is something I wanted to ask you.”

I looked out the window so Harry wouldn’t catch my smirk. “What’s on your mind?”

“It’s nothing, really. Only—well, it’s the pond paddock. We’ve lost three ewes in there this past year alone, and it’s a really good piece of grazing. I hate to fence it up, but it seems like the only way, except Taid’s got it in his head that you can help us.”

“The pond paddock?” This was not the conversation I was expecting. “I’m not a farmer, Harry.”

“I know,” Harry said hastily. “But you know how he is. It’d mean a lot if you looked at the pond.”

“Just look at it?”

“That’s all he wants, Olly. I know it seems daft, but he has a lot of respect for your Nan.”

And a lot of belief. It was one thing for Rob to talk about witches, but it was what Harry very carefully avoided saying that got me.

“I guess it can’t hurt. What—right now?”

Harry had nosed the truck into the space before a gate and was turning us around. “We’re very close. That was actually what put it into my mind.”

Again, I did not believe him, but if Harry had gone to all the trouble of finding me to bring me to look at his pond, then I couldn't say no.

The paddock looked exactly the same as any other paddock except that its grass was longer and greener than that of the surrounding fields which had been thoroughly grazed.

"Three ewes is a lot to small farmers like us," Harry continued earnestly. "I just can't understand it myself. There was never a problem with the pond the entire time Dad worked the farm."

I nodded, considering the pond. It was small, flat as a puddle, but I knew that was no indication of its size. Pockets of ice left over from ages prehistoric had dotted the Llŷn with unexpectedly deep ponds.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and stared at my reflection in the still water. Harry could not afford to drain it, even if there had been any guarantee it was possible to drain the pond. But what was I supposed to say? It was a pond!

I caught the anxious twist of Harry's mouth reflected in the water and decided that I had to give this my best shot even if I had no idea what I aimed at. I made a very careful circuit of the edge of the pond.

Three-quarters of the way around, I paused. "What happened here?"

"What do you mean?"

I pointed to the indent in the soil. Enough time had passed for a few weeds to sprout, but you could still see where a large shape had been. "A sheep didn't shift that rock."

"You're right." Harry knelt by the pond. "Come to think of it, there was like a rock here. Round. There was something carved on the side of it."

"Anyone interested in it?"

Harry shook his head. "I'd remember something like that. No, nothing. Though this was the same paddock that *twp* Southerner wanted to park her caravan in when she first arrived."

"Did you let Joanne stay here?"

Harry shook his head. "Was using it for the ewes that birthed late. She'd have frightened the lambs." He looked at me. "You think she took it?"

I looked down at the imprint of the stone. "I think," I said slowly. "Someone put that rock there for a reason. And Joanne might have recognised the stone

as... special.” It was ludicrous. But standing next to the pond, with Harry looking at me seriously, I found myself believing it. “Rob mentioned that she was really insistent on giving you a rock. She might be trying to pay you back—”

“For the rock she took?” Harry looked at the pond. “That’s what you think?”

“It’s a guess. You—did you accept the rock from her?”

“I don’t have any need for a fancy paperweight like she sells. Nonsense, all of it.” Harry frowned.

Was he wondering, like I was, what the hell he was doing talking seriously to the grandson of a woman he believed to have magical powers? What was my life anymore? “I think maybe you should ask for the rock back,” I said. “And don’t accept anything from Joanne until you have it.”

The drive to Porthor was quiet. Harry mulled over my advice, and I tried to figure out what freak part of my subconscious had produced it. Too much of Nan’s stories growing up? Or was my brain still somewhere out there at sea?

At least, I decided, I no longer needed to worry how badly Harry thought of me. That ship was sunk. “Do you remember a foreign exchange student who came to stay with my Nan for a while?”

“A foreign exchange student,” Harry repeated slowly. “I do, actually. He’d never seen telly before he came to have tea at ours. I’d almost forgotten. But he couldn’t be your friend, Olly, because he only came after you’d moved to Australia.”

“I’d like to find him,” I said. “Do you remember his name?”

Harry shook his head, turning the truck down the road that led to Porth Meudwy. “It was a long time ago,” he said. “And I ended up going to Bangor for sixth form. Didn’t spend all that much time out here.” The truck rattled as we swung over the crest of the hill and down towards the inlet. “Well, there are our pilgrims.”

Natalie was on the edge of the waves, camera in hand as she photographed the ferry coming into shore. Rob’s tall form was folded in on itself moodily, but he straightened up as he caught sight of Harry. “Changed your mind and decided to join us after all?”

Harry shook his head. “We’re here to see you off. It’s not everyone that can afford to take an afternoon’s holiday.”

Rob noticed me belatedly. “Hello, Olly.”

I wasn’t listening.

In addition to the ferry, Porth Meudwy was a busy lobster cove. There were numerous trucks pulled up on the shore where Harry had parked. Further down the beach, four men were busy getting a boat ready to set out. They wore fluorescent jackets over their thick clothes, and three of them laughed raucously as they performed their usual tasks with ease. They called out a greeting as the ferry got nearer, two of them jumping off the boat to help guide it in, while the third, probably their boss judging by the amount of grey in his hair, gave directions.

The fourth continued his work with a sullen disinterest in anything else, but I knew that he was as aware of me as I was of him. It was the man from the cliffs.

I sidled up to Harry, interrupting his conversation. “Who’s that, in the boat?”

“That?” Harry glanced over. “That’s only old Lloyd. You should remember him. He took us fishing once as a favour to your Nan.”

“And the man behind him?”

“There is no man behind him.”

“Right there. In the yellow life vest.”

“The two in front are Luke Williams and Rhys Ford.”

“I’m not asking about them.” How hard was it to answer a simple question? “The other man.”

Harry stared at me. “You see four men? Not counting the ferry.”

“Not counting the ferry.”

“There’s only three,” Rob said.

“I see three, too.”

I looked back. “You’re pulling my leg.” As if he was aware that we were talking about him, the man looked up and scowled at me.

“Why would we make up something that dumb?” Rob drew his Android out of his pocket for a photo. “Look, I’ll prove it.”

“There are all those hollows in the cliffs,” Harry offered. “You could easily imagine a person in one of their shadows.”

The cliffs that surrounded Porth Meudwy were a dark grey, stretching their way down to the equally jagged but darker grey of the rocks, like two halves of a toothy snarl. The profusion of wild grass and greenery that hung over the cliffs did little to diminish its implicit threat. Easy to imagine all sorts of figures lurking in those shadows.

“But not a person wearing a life jacket,” I insisted.

“Optical illusion. Guy’s reflection in the water got reflected back onto the rocks behind him.” Rob displayed his photo. “See, Olly? No one there.”

The photo displayed the beach perfectly. Lloyd stood in his boat, one foot resting on its side as he gathered up the mooring rope, the broad backs of the younger men all that was visible as they loaded it with their lobster traps. Where I could plainly see the man from the cliff was mere empty space.

“I have to go.”

I wobbled across the beach like a drunk. The sand didn’t make it far down the beach, and the gravel slid underfoot. I was too impatient to be careful, worried that he might vanish before I reached him.

He looked up as I approached, mouth settling into a displeased line. “I told you to leave this place, Oliver Evans. I did not think that you were so deficient of wit that I had to repeat myself.”

Now that I remembered, the contrast between this voice and the Myrhydion of my memory was even more marked. “What happened to you?”

He stared at me. “That is an impertinent question to ask a stranger—”

“We’re not strangers.” He blinked at that, colour rushing to his cheeks. “No matter how strangely you’re acting now. You were never cruel for the sake of being cruel, and you didn’t hold on to any grudges longer than a day. This isn’t like you at all, even after seven years of absence. You haven’t just changed—it’s like you’re an entirely different person!”

He glanced around and then jumped down from the boat. I took a step back in surprise, but before I knew what was happening, his hand gripped my arm. He pulled me further down the beach. “What do you think you know of me?”

“Not think. Know. I remembered everything.”

“You lie. It is not possible—”

The cassette player was still in my pocket. I held it up. “And this tiny box will really catch my voice and send it to Olly?” I said, in my best impression of his lilting tone. “So you see, Myrhydion—” I broke off.

Anger rushed over his face in a wave, contorting it. For a moment he didn't even look like him, and I would have believed that the craggy rock behind me had come to angry life. "So that is how!"

"Let go of me."

He glanced down carelessly, as if he'd entirely forgotten that his fingers dug into my arm. His smile was entirely unfamiliar. "But you still recognise me?"

"Of course." I swallowed down the sudden mad fear that I was talking to something entirely unknown. "You look exactly how I remember, only older. And—" Frightening in a way that I'd never experienced, not even when he'd undone my mind. "Clothed."

His smile hadn't flickered at all, not even when the rest of his face moved. "We were good friends, were we not? And we shall be good friends again."

"Let go of me."

"Did I hurt you?" Myrhydion's mocking had never had that edge in it. Had I hurt him that badly? "You must forgive me. I am—excited. I did not expect this."

I rubbed my arm, sore where he'd released me. "Tell me what's going on. Are you in danger? Enchanted? Myrhydion, please. I want to help you."

"You wish to help?"

I took a deep breath. Second guessing myself would not help either of us. "Just tell me what I need to do."

"We cannot talk here."

"It doesn't matter. My friends can't see you." I frowned. "Or is it someone else you're worried about?"

He bowed his head, his smile ironic. "The King's anger has withstood centuries," he said, voice a low whisper that crawled over my skin. "Seven years has not lessened it."

"And these cliffs are his home." I bit my lip. "You know where I live. The cottage—"

He shook his head. "The cliffs are the farthest I can stray from the shore."

"Then where? The shore is his territory, isn't it? There's nowhere safe—" I paused.

Myrhydion looked past me to the island beyond.

“Bardsey.” I swallowed back the swirling feeling of my stomach. “I can’t. You know why I can’t.”

“Centuries of prayer and devotion have left a sanctity that not even he may ignore.” He laid his hand on my arm, gently this time, fingers as cool as I remembered them. “It is the only place.”

I fought the urge to jerk my arm back. I owed Myrhydion too much to let fear prevent me from helping him now. “All right.”

“My boat leaves now. I will look for you on the island.” That peremptory note was all Myrhydion.

I let out a breath, watching as he swung himself up onto the boat just as it caught the waves. I was sick with fear of the thought of the boat—but even sicker at the thought of losing him again.

That was all it was, right? Fear of hurting him anew. I took a deep breath and marched back to the others.

“Jesus, Olly. Are you all right? It was just an illusion, no need to freak out.”

I smiled thinly. If Rob was worried then I had to look bad. “Is it too late to get a place on the boat?”

“You changed your mind?” Natalie looked up from her camera. “That’s great!”

“Don’t force yourself,” Harry said. “If standing on the shore gets you this badly—”

“Not everyone lets their fear prevent them from going after what they want.” Rob slapped me firmly on the back. “Olly wants to face his fears, I say we support him. Hey!” He nodded to the captain of the boat. “Skipper. Can we add another passenger?”

Harry took my arm and drew me a few steps back from the group. “Are you sure, Olly? You don’t have to pay attention to what Rob says. It’s not you he’s having a go at.”

“I know,” I said. “But he’s right. I have to do this.”

Harry frowned. “It doesn’t have to be today. Before, the man you saw that none of the rest of us did... I don’t like it, Olly. In the past, things like that were considered an omen.”

I looked out to where the lobster boat was picking up speed as it rounded the heads. “Not all omens were bad.”

Why didn't I believe that?

“Seal! Look! There's an entire school of them!” Rob pointed wildly, swaying with the boat.

“That's whales.” Natalie's camera rattled like a machine gun as she took pictures rapid-fire. “Seals live in colonies.”

“Those look more like rocks.”

The skipper gave a good natured chuckle. “You're looking at *Ardal Gwarchodaeth Arbennig Glannau Aberdaron ac Ynys Enlli*—the special conservation area. The old sea life's coming back. We'll see dolphins, too, if I'm not mistaken. And on the trip back, I'll take you up the coast to see the puffin colony. That is, providing Olly's up to it.”

I smiled wanly. I sat right at the rear of the boat, where the skipper assured me I would have the smoothest ride. “I'll be fine.”

I must have sounded convincing because the skipper added, “There are sick bags in the box under your feet if you need them.”

I looked over the side of the boat, trying to relax. The sunlight dazzled on the tips of the waves, the day was that clear and fine. Out on the sea, the wind was robust, even purer and more invigorating than the wind that ran up over the cliffs. Rob and Natalie were like excited school children, and even the seasoned skipper had cracked a smile.

It's all in my head. I took a deep breath, forcing myself calm. The day was bright and beautiful. Bardsey Island was going to be amazing. Myrhydion—Myrhydion would talk to me. There was absolutely nothing to be afraid of.

So why did my stomach feel like dead weight, and my skin as cold as if I were already dragged down beneath the waves? “Only imagination.” I was imagining the wind felt cooler and that the waves were larger than before. That was all.

“You two, sit down.” The skipper adjusted the angle of the boat against the waves. “Looks like a sudden swell. Nothing to worry about, but you'd better sit tight until we pass it.”

Rob and Natalie hastily obeyed the skipper.

“Jesus! When did the waves get so big?”

“It’s not the sea so much as the angle.” The skipper was matter-of-fact as he adjusted the wheel. “You want to face them head on. Less chance of tipping, but you feel them more—”

I think I smiled. Now that I was faced with the inevitable, I felt calm. With my fear realised, what use was being afraid? It wouldn’t help me now. Nothing would.

That kind of thinking never helped anyone. I breathed out. Think, Olly! This wasn’t like the last time. I had knowledge now my sixteen-year-old self did not. I was a man, not an emotional teen. And most importantly, I had a goal: rescuing Myrhydion from whatever had made him so unlike himself.

The motor stalled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t know.” The skipper started the engine, but it choked. “Hold tight. If the engine’s overheated, we’re going to have to give it a few minutes.”

At the rear of the boat, I could see what they did not. “There’s weed caught up in the motor.”

“Is that it?” The skipper clapped Rob on the shoulder. “Take the wheel. Keep it faced into the waves as much as you can. You, move up a bit.”

I made room and the outboard motor was pulled up on board. Kelp forest? No. We must have charged through an entire kelp jungle judging by the seaweed clogging the motor. Doing my best to sway with the dipping boat, not against it, I helped tear the weed away.

“There. That should do it—”

It wasn’t a wave. The boat shuddered as something hit it from the other side. Natalie, the skipper and I were thrown against the port side of the boat. Rob lost his balance but stayed put thanks to the fact he still clung on to the wheel. Bracing himself against the skipper’s shelter in the bow, he spun the boat back to meet the coming waves.

The skipper and I hastily pushed the motor back into the water. “Start the engine again,” he called. “Now!”

It rattled into life immediately, bearing forward. But the sea still had its revenge. Something collided with us again, making the boat slide sideways, directly into a wave. It broke over the boat, and I felt fingers in its surf and everything was grey and white and then dark.

I couldn't scream. The water was in my eyes, my mouth, my ears. I was dragged down and then sideways, helpless in the warring grasp of the sea. I broke the surface, only to be immediately snatched up again, dragged along by another wave. My arms flailed wildly, seeking anything to hold on to.

And suddenly something found me. A warm body pressed against me and my fingers closed on fur. Surprised, I took a gasping breath and found myself with my head above the waves, the seal swimming determinedly towards Bardsey's port.

Saved.

I almost couldn't believe it. The waves had died away as suddenly as they'd come, offering no resistance to my furry tugboat. I watched the shore of Bardsey come closer, trying to make sense of my near escape. Something wasn't adding up.

A wave slapped me in the face and I gasped. But where I should have been choking on water, I breathed—air?

“Wait.”

The seal looked back at me. I knew seals had expressive eyes. You saw them all the time in advertisements against animal cruelty, big and soulful, full of hidden sorrow. This seal was no exception, only his large eyes clearly expressed the feeling that I was out of my mind.

Maybe I was.

I released my hold on his fur. Undoing my lifejacket, I let myself slip beneath the surface of the sea. Now that the waters were calm, I was too. I drifted down as gently as if I floated. I breathed out slowly. Without the stormy hand of the waves pulling me this way and that, I could notice that as I breathed in, my mouth was not filled with choking salt. My mind screamed at me. It went against everything I knew to be true, but as I took a second breath and then a third, I couldn't deny it.

I was breathing water.

Was this Nan's precaution?

The seal had joined me underwater. He circled me, and I saw him for the first time. A young seal, still with most of his puppy fat. He looked as outraged by my lack of drowning as my mind was. “I didn't know I could do this either.” My voice sounded strange, distorted by the water.

The seal swam directly into my stomach, pushing me towards the island. Breathing water or not, he seemed to feel that I should get out of the sea as soon as possible.

My fingers closed in its fur. The seal made a strong argument. Rob, Natalie and the Skipper would be looking for me on the waves. When I did not show up to meet him, Myrhydion might join their search. And as long as they were on the water, they were in danger...

Or was this a chance to settle the danger once and for all? I was no longer afraid. "Take me to the King."

The seal butted me in the chest again. Clearly not a fan of the idea.

"I mean it." Having found a purpose, I was resolved. "I will not be pushed about at his whim any longer."

The seal darted off and then wheeled back. He twisted back and forth in the water, unable to resolve on a decision. Finally, he swam back to me, and I held onto his body. He flicked his tail and we were going down, quickly leaving light behind us.

I had imagined that the sea would be still in the depths, without the surface motion to disturb it. Instead I discovered currents that stretched up like walls, and a booming echo of the waves hitting the rocks above us. The regular rhythm really did sound like the tolling of the bells of a sunken city. Suddenly, I felt cold.

We passed kelp forests, thick and impenetrable. Myrhydion was right. Buried there, no one would ever find me. The seal plunged through them expertly, and we emerged into the abandoned gardens of the *morgen*. I only had a moment to take in the strange mix of corals and anemone, artfully arranged crystals and rocks, and decidedly human relics, before we made our way down the streets of an abandoned town, its buildings imperfectly lit by glowing crystals placed like streetlights along the way. Many of the lamps were overgrown with weed, and the houses were choked with corals. Lurking shapes drew back as we approached. I felt the glittering eyes of the conger eels on me as we approached the biggest of all the buildings in that forgotten city, a grand hall with a ceiling that towered up like a cathedral.

I had to let go of the seal to pull open the door. The wooden planks were rotten throughout and didn't prevent me from making my way inside.

Some of the city's distant glory was still visible in the walls of that hall. The lamps shone brightly enough to make the dulled crystal shine. I caught my reflection in the wall as I floated, as weird and insubstantial as a ghost.

“So. You have found your way to my kingdom.”

The voice went through me. Hearing anger contort Myrhydion’s voice earlier was nothing to hearing it now.

“Not even your foolhardy grandmother was so bold,” he continued. “And you have none of her wisdom. You are yet a child, and a stupid child at that. Tell me, Oliver Evans, what part of ‘leave this place’ sounded like an invitation?”

I did not want to look, but I turned towards the end of the great hall anyway. “No.”

Myrhydion’s smile had always had a cruel edge, but that was the selfish pleasure of a cat being scratched beneath its chin, self-congratulatory in its pleasure and careless of anything else. This smile was the slow, calculated cruelty of a sharpened blade. “Maybe now you will listen when I say that you are not wanted here.”

The kelp fanned out around his head, exactly as I had seen it in my memories. His body had aged, but it was otherwise the same, down to the barnacle just below his knee. I could not deny what I saw, what my mind, my memories told me. A sense of helplessness rose up within me. The King beneath the Cliffs had always hated me. And if Myrhydion was here in the King’s place then—

“No.” I shook my head. This couldn’t be right.

“It is of no use to deny it. Your grandmother could not, not with all her tricks and cunning and those are mine now.” He smiled nodding his head towards the wall. Among the collection of figureheads that surrounded his dais and throne was a small leather-bound book I knew very well. “You may have the secret of breathing beneath the waves, but it will do you no good when you are battered against the rocks by the ocean swells. I should have much preferred to have battered that cursed witch, your grandmother, but she was far too canny to come near me, and now you will pay the price she didn’t.”

My hands made tight fists. “How can you do this? Nan was only ever kind to you!” The memory of Myrhydion sitting in the kitchen came back strongly. There had been no hint of this then!

But it had been my mention of Nan that decided him on accepting my friendship. I shut my eyes as if I could cut out the thought, but I could not silence him.

“The Witch was a blight on those cliffs, spreading her foul influence all over this peninsula that was once so pure and beautiful. It was our land, then. We were gardeners of legend, able to sing the birds from the sky and the game from the woods. Our orchards were ever ripe and our sea so full of life that we only had to throw our nets in the waves to gather a full portion of fish. We lived in paradise! Until man came, forcing us further and further back until finally the only place left to us was these waters.”

I swallowed. “But man settled on the peninsula thousands of years ago.”

“You do not forget the theft of your home and the theft of your people!” His voice thundered through the hall, waves breaking on the rocks. “No matter how many years pass!”

Thousands of years brooding on the injustices done him would warp any mind. The wreckage around me was testament to that, a grim monument to a hate that dated back centuries.

I still could not believe it. Not when Myrhydion had risked himself to save me from the storm only days after I’d rejected him. “You didn’t forget. You overcame. Myrhydion, this isn’t who you are.” I took a step towards him. “You’re not one to live in the past. You forgive as easily as you smile. This—” I shook my head. “Someone’s enchanted you. Or something. This isn’t you.”

“No spell but yours, Oliver Evans.” The smile I knew so well was threaded through with grim satisfaction. “Do you not like what you have made me? You should be proud. *Morgen* do not easily change, but the desertion of my only friend left a wound that time will not heal. As I have suffered, so must you. So must all men of the Llŷn!”

My fault. I felt it inexorably. I’d failed to see the depths of his hurt, just as I’d failed to realise that what he felt for me was not affection but love—

And then I understood. “You’re not Myrhydion.”

He went still. “Do you doubt your eyes, foolish child? You said yourself—”

“You are not Myrhydion.” I was certain of it. “You look and sound like him, but you’re not him.” A thrill went through me as I spoke the words, hearing their echo through the hall. At this moment, the power was mine. “You are only Gurcant, the King beneath the Cliffs.”

He roared, the water around him starting to swirl madly. I lost sight of him entirely as it churned. “Trickery! Someone must have told you!”

I was picked up by the spinning current. Did he intend to start battering me now? I struggled to swim free of the water. A shape loomed up in my side vision, one of the King's figureheads, and I latched on to it for safety. "You told me yourself. Your cruelty is legendary! That's how I knew you!"

"Thief! How dare you call me cruel!"

The water stilled and I found myself clinging to the ample bosom of a wooden mermaid. I looked back to the King.

Any trace of Myrhydion was gone. I saw the King truly. He was slight, but no one would have dared call him short. The deep lines in his ancient face were the same as those of the cliffs far above us. The crown on his head was gold, crusted over with green algae and barnacles so thick that the crown was probably unable to be removed. Seaweed and limpets covered most of his body. With his greying skin he might have been taken for a relic himself, a stone statue of a man left underwater so long that what the waves hadn't carved away was entirely taken over by weed and corals. "How dare you speak to me so! And in my own kingdom!"

"It is the truth! Humans might have taken the peninsula, but it is you who drove your people away! You are a sad old man, with no one to blame for his loneliness but himself!"

This time, the King's roar was so strong that the figurehead I clung to snapped under the brutality of it. I was thrown back against the door, which gave way as I hit it.

"Out!" the King thundered. "Out of my sight!"

In sheer self-preservation, I grabbed the edges of the door. I caught a startled glimpse of the seal, cowering in the shadows beyond the door. Broken bits of wood hit me in the face, and I screwed my eyes shut, feeling it disintegrate beneath my hands.

"You will pay for this insolence dearly, wretch!" The King's voice seemed to echo through the entire ocean. "And you, Duhywynt! Did you not think I would know that you brought him here? You are dead to me, as dead as your wretched brother!" Water rushed at us, more powerfully than before. The door gave way entirely, and I was ripped away from the shelter of the hall. "Never return!"

I was spun around, practically thrown through the water. I bounced off rocks, was dragged through the kelp, and had scattered underwater debris

thrown at me. It was a disorientating whirlpool of pain and fear, and my mind closed on just one thing. *As dead as your wretched brother—*

Something brushed my arm, soft and warm. The seal!

I reached out, but he was already gone. Opening my eyes, I saw the small shape tossed about as brutally as I was, the seal's sleek body offering no resistance to the water's tugging. He looked half-dead already. As I was rushed past a smooth rock face, I flung out my fingers to slow my progress through the water and then used it to launch myself towards the seal.

It was luck that I reached him at all. The water would have pulled us apart, but I seized one flipper and used that to draw him against me. It was my turn now to protect him from the waves, and I clung to him grimly. If this was all I had left of Myrhydion, I would protect it with my life.

As if mocking me, an eerie sound rose up all around us. It was as though the crystal spires of that sunken city had followed us up, seeking to impale us on their sharpened ends. The beauty of it was half of its destructive power and as we hit a lull in the alternating currents, I realised how fitting it was. The song of the *morgen*, which had made my life unbearable, would be the last thing I heard.

The seal stirred. He had lain still this entire time, but as he heard the song, new energy seemed to come back to him. He wriggled until he was free to flip his tail, and then he swam deliberately. The song changed, a powerful uplifting current of sound, and a few moments later, we were caught up in a dazzling upstream that carried us all the way towards the surface.

The waves roared with the reflected fury of the King, but the seal didn't falter. He fought against the swells, bearing straight.

It was night, the sky a solid black. I could not see where he led us, or even the waves that picked us up and set us down again, huge ocean swells. We must be far beyond the heads, my tired mind supplied. My body was numbed through with cold, and I could no longer feel the seal's fur on my fingers. It would be easy to let go. Easy just to drift on the melancholy of the waves given voice by the lingering notes of the song. Be still, the song urged. Rest easy. The waves no longer seemed to tug me so violently. It would be so easy, simply to drift off and not worry about anything ever again—

The seal wrenched himself free of my grasp. His small head connected with my stomach, and as I floundered, his body collided with me a second time,

pushing me away. Freeing himself of a dead weight? I couldn't even bring myself to care—

My body scraped against sand. I jerked back instinctively before I realised what I felt. I tried to put my feet down, but a wave tumbled me forward then drew me back. I pitched onto my knees, struggling to find purchase in the sand. A hand grabbed me by my arm and pulled me forwards out of the surf.

I staggered onto the beach on legs that did not quite support my weight. My forward momentum carried me along the beach. I swayed to one side then tipped backwards. Somehow, I didn't fall.

Now I could see a distant cluster of lights further down the beach. I dragged myself towards them, unsteadily. The wind carried snatches of conversation back to me.

“—another story.” The voice was male, entirely unfamiliar. “But at night, there's not a lot we can do until the naval ship gets here with the scanner.” There was a sudden loud crackle and the voice became muffled. “This is Watch Officer Jones of the Holyhead Coastguard. I am ready to receive your message, over.”

His message was received with an undignified squawk. Was there an animal on the beach?

As I got closer, I could see Rob, Natalie and Harry standing in a cluster, apart from a group in yellow jackets who were pulling a rigid hulled lifeboat out of the waves' reach. Behind them was the outline of the *Ty Newydd* hotel, its lights shining down brightly on the ambulance parked outside.

I swayed unsteadily. It looked like the beach at Aberdaron, but there were never so many people here outside of the tourist season. Very strange.

Natalie made a sound like a sob. Rob had his arm around her, but she turned her face away, a hand over her mouth. Then she saw me. She screamed.

“Jesus Christ, is that—”

“Olly!”

Suddenly I was surrounded by people that buffeted me as the waves had. I was enfolded by many arms, swept along the beach.

“Stand back, sir. Let the paramedics through.” A firm hand on my shoulder propelled me towards a crisp woman in a fluorescent jacket.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“My name?” Suddenly it clicked. That was how I’d broken the spell the King had used on me. His name! “I need to talk to Myfanwy.” My voice rattled, and I realised I was freezing cold.

“All in good time. Can you tell me how you’re feeling?”

“Cold.” A blanket was placed around me. “My arm hurts. And my legs. And—everything really.”

“Do you think you can walk over to the ambulance?”

I looked over at it. In addition to the woman talking to me was a second woman, unfolding the ramp so that the stretcher could be lowered, and the driver, talking into the radio. “I don’t need an ambulance,” I said firmly.

“Good to hear,” the woman congratulated me. “But why don’t we sit down and you can tell us what you’ve been up to.”

“And you won’t take me to the hospital?”

“Not if you don’t need it.”

“I don’t want to go to Bangor,” I said, holding my ground even though my legs shook. “I want to stay here.”

“We’ll definitely keep that in mind. Come on—”

I didn’t have the strength to argue with her. I was guided onto the stretcher. The last thing I saw before the doors closed behind me were Natalie’s tear-streaked face, Harry’s grim expression, and Rob, his arms around both their shoulders.

Chapter Nine

The Longing

I woke at night to hear the waves crash against the shore. The plaintive call of the wind mingled with some mournful night bird. I gasped for breath at the painful response it awoke in me, the Longing wracking through my body with no regard for its weakened condition. The only cure for the Longing was Myrhydion.

And Myrhydion was gone.

I smelled lavender, rosemary and, bizarrely, garlic. Had I fallen asleep in someone's kitchen? I sat up gingerly, discovering that moving was a bad idea. My pained gasp was quickly explained as I looked down. The short-sleeved hospital gown I wore displayed arms that were mottled brown with bruises and raised red scrapes.

Something moved at the end of the bed, and I found myself confronted with a ghost. Pale and hollow-eyed, with a raw red mouth... No wonder Natalie had screamed when she saw me. I pressed fingers to the bandage across my forehead and quickly decided I wanted to leave that where it was. I looked around the room.

My reflection was caught in the door of a wooden wardrobe. It had a large bouquet of moth orchids on top of it with a card reading 'Get Well Soon!' The curtains were drawn back to reveal a view I knew well, the green slope of hills stretching all the way down to the cliff-edge. The cover on the bed was not hospital white but a floral print. There were more flowers, in vases on the bedside tables, along with a box of chocolates, a novel, an army of cards and a bell. After a moment's thought, I rang the bell.

Mrs Griffith bustled into the room. "You're awake then? You did sleep well. How are you feeling, love?"

"I look like a banana that's been left out too long."

"You're very lucky not to be looking like a mashed banana. I tell you, you gave us all a big fright."

"I gave myself a fright, too." I relaxed back against the pillows. "Is this your spare bedroom?"

“Yes, it is. You don’t remember telling the ambulance you weren’t leaving Aberdaron? You got quite agitated, tried to climb out of the stretcher yourself. It was only the curate telling you that no one would make you leave that calmed you enough they could take a proper look at you.”

“Rhys?” My voice cracked. My throat was raw.

“Don’t try and talk, Olly *bach*. You’re meant to be resting.”

“What have I been doing if not that?” But the short exchange was enough to tire me. I lay down.

“The waves didn’t knock the cheek out of you, that’s for sure.” Mrs Griffith pulled the blankets back up to my shoulders. “You were badly dehydrated and suffering moderate hypothermia. You’re under strict orders to stay in bed. And as you’re awake, we might as well get some more fluids into you.”

I smiled faintly, discovering even that hurt my facial muscles. “Yes, ma’am.”

“None of your sauce. It’s only my first-aid licence that stopped you going to Bangor, for all the curate argued till his throat was hoarse.” Mrs Griffith smoothed down my hair. “I’ll be back in a moment with a glass of water for you. And would you like a cup of tea as well?”

“Am I allowed a cup of tea?”

“Of course. Just sing out for anything you want. The doctor’ll be by to take a look at you after dinner.”

The doctor was a vaguely cheerful woman with absent-minded eyes. “I don’t usually do house calls, you know.”

I struggled to sit up. “I’m sorry.”

She waved my apology aside. “It’s a novelty, actually. I don’t get to come over this way often enough. It’s beautiful out here, isn’t it? So, Mr Evans, why don’t you tell me what happened to you.”

“We’d just got the weed off the propeller when a wave came.” I swallowed. Hopefully, any pauses in my story would be put down to my throat. “I went over. I was tossed about in the waves, I don’t know for how long. Then there was sand under my feet and someone pulled me out.”

“Someone?” The doctor looked up, her eyes losing their vagueness.

I nodded. “I need to thank them.”

She looked down at her notes, her mouth pursed. “And then you walked right up to the waiting ambulance yourself?”

“I don’t remember much after that.” I licked my cracked lips. “Did I really refuse to go to the hospital?”

“You did. And created quite a fuss in the process.” The doctor snorted. “Though from the looks of things, you’ve been forgiven. You haven’t seen what’s waiting you in the living room? Then I won’t spoil the surprise.”

I tried to smile, feeling utterly lost. “What happens now?”

Now the doctor did her tests, apparently. “You are a marvel, Mr Evans. You’re in fine shape for a man who spent several hours in the water. I’ll have to apologise to Leanne. You didn’t need the trip to Bangor after all.”

“She’s not going to get in trouble?”

The doctor shook her head, packing up her equipment. “With hypothermia, we want the patient kept warm, still and moved as little as possible. By the time the ambulance staff had attended to you, your core temperature had increased and with your distress at being taken from Aberdaron, the hospital might have done more harm than good. Leanne made an unusual judgement call, but your results are so good, I believe it justified. In fact, I might have saved myself a trip.”

I was given painkillers, a prescription for a spray to ease the pain in my throat, and strict orders not to tire myself out. I acted on the latter by falling asleep immediately.

Mrs Griffith thoroughly enjoyed her captive guest. After my first day of sleeping, she orchestrated my removal to the most comfortable chair in the living room, a feat that involved Mr Griffith patiently supporting my weight as I limped down the hall, copious amounts of blankets, two heaters, and, of course, the requisite pot of tea.

“There.” Mrs Griffith judged that my supporting pillow had been sufficiently fluffed. “Make yourself comfortable now then.”

I leant back gingerly, extremely conscious of my full cup of tea. “When did you take up flower arranging?”

The Griffin laughed. “These are for you, Mr Popularity.” She fingered a brightly coloured aster. “They do make the house smell lovely, don’t they?”

The surprise the doctor had hinted at was an outpouring of get well wishes, in the forms of bouquets of over-sized daisies, fruit and vegetables and enough home baking to keep me in cake for a fortnight. “I thought I’d got lost and walked into a florists.” I hadn’t done anything deserving of this. I hadn’t done anything at all. “You’re sure they’re all for me?”

“More than that. I could tell you whose garden they came from and all.” Mrs Griffith left off fussing with a sunset coloured daisy and drew the curtains. “But don’t take my word for it. You’ll have visitors before long and you can ask them yourself.”

“Visitors?” I was guiltily conscious that I’d spent my time in Aberdaron mostly moping round the house. “But I haven’t seen anyone.”

“That’s going to change,” Mrs Griffith assured me. “That is if the amount of calls I’ve had concerning you is any indication. Not a family on the Llŷn that hasn’t had some loss to the sea, Olly. That you survived—well, it’s good news, and we don’t always have a lot of good news.” Satisfied that her living room was ready to meet with visitors, Mrs Griffith turned and caught sight of me. “Now, what’s with that face? Spit it out, Olly. What’s bothering you?”

I grimaced. I’d forgotten I was staying with an ex-schoolteacher. “I don’t know half these people,” I said. “You’ve heard my *Cymraeg*, you know how bad it is. And I don’t even know if I’m staying! All this, it’s too much.”

Mrs Griffith snorted. “As if you weren’t born here in the village. No, you’re a local boy, Olly, and we know it for all you’ve grown up elsewhere. Didn’t you remember Owens and his daughters? And ask Lloyd if he still fishes? And who was it who went and looked at Old Mr Jones’s pond that’s been worrying him so much?”

I stared at her disconcerted. Even for an ex-schoolteacher, that was an alarming amount of knowledge about my doings. “How—”

“Small town. People notice things,” the Griffin told me in a brisk ‘open your textbook’ tone that did not leave room for argument. “And since you’re going to be sitting put awhile, no better chance for you to brush up on your mother tongue. I used to teach at *Ysol Crud Y Werin*. That’s—”

“The Welsh language school.” I reconsidered Mrs Griffith. Did her hospitality conceal an ulterior motive? The Llŷn was primarily a Welsh-speaking community, with little demand for a teacher in *Cymraeg*. Was I now a captive pupil?

Mrs Griffith smiled serenely, unaware of my thoughts. “There, see? We’ll have you speaking properly in no time.”

Unfortunately for my continuing education, my first visitors were Rob and Natalie.

I grimaced at them. “So much for the puffin colony.”

Natalie promptly burst into tears.

“We’ve told her it wasn’t her fault,” Rob said. “Over and over, but—well, look at her.” He gave me a quick grin. “You look terrible.”

“If I’m this bad after two days’ rest, I hate to think what I looked like on the beach.” But that reminded me. “Nat, did you miss your bus?”

She dabbed her eyes on her sleeve as Rob jiggled impatiently in his seat. “I couldn’t go, not until I’d seen you. Olly, if you hadn’t been washed to shore...” She broke off to stare at me helplessly. “When we found your life-jacket, and not you, I thought—”

“Don’t think about that, Nat.” Rob patted her shoulder.

She shook her head. “I have to say it. If I hadn’t wanted to go to Bardsey Island so much, the trip would never have happened.”

“I’m with Rob,” I croaked. “That’s not your fault, Natalie. And even if it was, a couple of days in bed with Mrs Griffith correcting my pronunciation is not the worst thing to ever happen to me. It’s like I signed up for a personal immersion course in *Cymraeg*. Stop that—look, give me a *cwtch*.”

She gave me a watery smile, and I held out my arm for a very careful hug.

Harry’s visit was much more low-key. He ate Mrs Griffith’s biscuits and told me which sheep he’d moved to what paddocks and what local opinion was on the storm. “Those flowers there, they’re from the skipper. ’Course, there was no way he could have seen that squall coming, but he’s still glad to see you safe.” Harry paused. “After your fourth man on the beach, I didn’t think we were going to see you again, Olly.”

I smiled thinly. “If I’d listened to you then, a lot of fuss could have been avoided.”

He frowned. “Maybe. Or maybe not.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head. “It’s just a thought. Though, that reminds me. Taid sent this for you.”

This was a wheelchair. Not the cool, self-propelling kind, but the simple sit and let someone else do the work model. “That’s for me?”

“He had it on loan from the district nurse while they ordered him a walker. Then the walker arrived, and they said he may as well keep it just in case.”

“I’m capable of walking. You saw me on the beach.”

“You know what he’s like once he gets an idea in his head. Anyway, you wouldn’t look out of place in a wheelchair, with how banged up you look.”

I smirked. My bruises had developed impressively, a kaleidoscope of purples, yellows and browns. “I feel like one of Joanne’s skirts.”

“Speaking of her, I went to see her like you said.”

“Yeah?” I wriggled myself upright against my sea of pillows. “What happened?”

Harry sniffed. “She cried on me. Said she was so happy that somebody knew. Gave me the stone immediately. Told me that she’d taken it on an impulse and it had haunted her since. Don’t know why she didn’t just return it herself in that case, but it’s back by the pond now. One of those big bouquets is from her. Had it delivered from Abersoch.”

“Delivered?”

“Left the next day. Must be back in Cardiff by now.”

I nodded slowly. “Good.” Not that it was any guarantee against further sheep drowning, but it was something.

Myfanwy brought me a glass of hot lemon at bedtime and sat on the end of my bed while I drank it. “They’re saying at school that the only way you could have survived a storm like that was magic.” She sounded resentful. “Mrs Jones told them not to be silly, that you were a very lucky young man and this was a good reminder never to be careless on the water.”

“Mrs Jones is right. The water around here is dangerous.” Myfanwy wasn’t impressed. I tried again. “Maybe I didn’t use magic. Maybe I was helped by someone with magic.”

She brightened. “The lost prince?”

I stared at Myfanwy. “How do you know about—the letter box? You read my letter from Nan!”

She scowled at me, but her cheeks were pink. “I thought it was for me at first, till I read it. But I put it back. I’m not like that *twp* woman from Cardiff.”

I paused, mug halfway to my mouth. “You knew Joanne took the rock from the pond? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Myfanwy tossed her pigtailed. “Nobody asked me.”

“You still could have said something. Harry was at his wit’s end—”

“He wouldn’t have listened. No one ever does. They all think I’m just a kid. Only Mrs Evans listened, and now she’s gone.”

I stared at her. I had very little experience with girls. “I’m listening.”

“Well, you’re different. Even if you don’t remember everything.”

I snorted. “You remove the enchantment on someone whose shape has been stolen by saying his name.” I smirked at her surprise. “Well?”

“How did you work that out?”

“That’s my secret.”

“Someone must have told you.”

“Don’t I get the third question?”

For a moment I thought she was going to refuse but with a petulant sigh, she stood. “How do you free the Prisoner of the Deep?”

Something that had been still and quiet in me since the storm stirred. I swallowed, aware that my heart was beating faster. “The Prisoner?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Who is the Prisoner?”

Myfanwy shook her head. “No hints.”

“Please.” My voice was raw. “Myfanwy, I don’t care about the prize. I have to know—who is the Prisoner?”

Her mouth twisted unhappily as she stared back at me and then became a mulish pout. “Sylvia gave me the answers for the other two, but not this one.”

“Then how will you know if I work it out?”

“She said I’d know.”

“Did she say anything else? Any other hints?”

Myfanwy shook her head. “I asked her for one. I was going to try and solve it myself, see if she’d give me the prize, but all she said was that it wasn’t a witch’s cunning that was needed, but a knight’s heart.”

“A knight’s heart?”

“I don’t see what is so special about knights. A lot of the time, they weren’t even heroes! Kidnapping girls, killing people because they felt insulted, making people throw them parties... When you think about it, knights are jerks.”

“Myfanwy,” I said slowly. “Nan was teaching you her ways, wasn’t she?”

She nodded. “It’s a secret. If the kids at school knew... well, who really cares about them? But if you don’t solve the questions or you move, I get to keep the book. Sylvia said so.”

I winced. “Myfanwy, I have bad news.”

She took it with the calm of a teenager. “How could you let him steal the book! You idiot! *Twp!*”

“How was I supposed to know that the King could come out the taps?” I protested.

“Those charms were there for a reason! You should have thought! Now it’s lost forever—and it’s all your fault!”

Mrs Griffith tapped sharply on the door. “Myfanwy, we do not scream at guests.”

Myfanwy glared at me. “You are the most useless person I’ve ever met!” She flung herself out of the room with a flick of her long pigtails.

“Girls,” Mrs Griffith said with a sigh. “Her mother would never have taken that tone with a guest. I don’t know what the world is coming to.” She shook her head. “Do you have everything you need, Olly?”

I nodded. “Yes, thank you.” My voice almost caught on the lie.

The storm had stripped me of energy and emotion then beached me, leaving me hollow, a dried out shell of a man. The ache in my limbs eased gradually day by day, but the Longing crept in as surely as the tide, taking its place. I needed Myrhydion. I needed to speak to him, to know what had happened to him.

And that was one need that Mrs Griffith, with all her kindness, could not fulfil.

The skipper of the Bardsey Island ferry stopped in to see me, as did Mr Owens and his wife and other friends of Nan's. I saw the doctor again, and the district nurse. But not the one person I most wanted to see.

I watched a walker make her way down the road with a familiar lurch of disappointment. From a distance, with the wind lifting her dark hair all around her face, I'd thought—

I sighed, turning back to the dictionary on my lap. Mrs Griffith had assigned me the *Llanw Llŷn* to read and would be coming by to see how far I'd got with morning tea. But as much as I wanted to know what local opinion of the new councillors in Abersoch was, my thoughts kept drifting elsewhere.

“Get a grip.” I shook myself mentally. “You know that wasn't Myrhydion, just the King stealing his shape. Do you want to see him if it's not even him?”

I discovered the answer was yes. It might not have been Myrhydion, but knowing that I could not expect to see that dark head of hair on the cliffs or shore again, I still felt a sense of loss. My most tangible connection to him was gone.

Mrs Griffith walked in just as I sighed. “Tired? Don't strain yourself. You've been working hard at that. No, give it to me. I want you to have a nice rest.”

The paper was taken away from me before I could protest that I'd done enough resting. I wanted to do something.

“You just shut your eyes, now.” Mrs Griffith pulled the curtains shut and bustled back to the kitchen.

Defiantly, I did not shut my eyes. I could still plan.

Daylight dimmed the pain left by the Longing. In the half-light of the living room, I mulled over Myfanwy's words. Was it possible Myrhydion was the Prisoner? ‘Dead as your wretched brother’ the King had said. But the seal and I had both survived the waves. Maybe the King spoke figuratively? On that chance alone, I had to do everything I could to find Myrhydion. Starting with freeing the Prisoner.

“But how?”

I chewed my lip. ‘Free the Prisoner’ was well and good, but I didn’t just need a plan. I needed a plan that would stand up to Rhys. The caustic pastor had not been to visit me yet, but I was sure he was only biding his time. He would come, and when he did, I needed a strategy. My wounds were too sore and my loss too new to want to expose them to Rhys. How to stop him getting under my skin?

Ignore his hints, by being blandly matter-of-fact? Or come out with it all at once, tell him I didn’t care what he thought of me? Not talking to him was not an option. The priest was an itch, and I knew I would not be able to ignore his digs. It was a tough problem, one that took many hours of consideration. At last I felt ready to meet him.

He didn’t come.

Typical.

I shifted restlessly in Mrs Griffith’s best chair all morning all afternoon. I got up every time I heard a car on the road, only to be disappointed. It wasn’t even as if he had a good excuse for neglecting his pastoral duty. Aberdaron was small, and he only really worked one day a week!

Rhys’s inability to do his job properly did have one benefit.

As we finished afternoon tea, Mrs Griffith remarked on how active I’d been. “I think you’re well enough to go back to the cottage.”

“Can I?” I bit my lip. “Not that I’m not enjoying staying—”

Mrs Griffith snorted. “Nonsense. It’s not the same as being in your own place, is it? You just let me and Gavin know when you’re ready, and we’ll take you home.”

Home. My insides must have been still numbed, as the word didn’t hurt me the way it usually did.

After tea, Mr Griffith drove me, his wife and the florist shop back to Nan’s cottage, Mrs Griffith reminding me the entire time that she was only a phone call away. We found other surprises at the house, more cards pushed through the letterbox and the garden, looking better than it had in decades.

“Those two WWOOFers,” Mrs Griffith said. “They might not be local, but you can’t deny they know how to do a good day’s work. Now, Olly—”

“There’s a meal in the fridge for my dinner tomorrow,” I repeated obediently. “And more in the freezer in case I don’t feel like cooking. I’m to

make sure I don't try to do too much too soon, and if I need anything you're only a phone call away."

Mr Griffith laughed.

His wife snorted, but she gave me a quick pat on my shoulder. "Nothing wrong with your ears, at any rate."

Being chauffeured a kilometre down the road should not have tired anyone, but as soon as the Griffith's truck disappeared down the road, I lay down on the sofa for a nap.

There was a knock at the door.

I frowned blearily at my surroundings. Was I dreaming? When I had shut my eyes half a second ago, it had been sunny. Now it was nearly dark, the fading sun coming through the broken window making vague shadows that contrasted sharply with the dark shapes outlined on the carpet by the kitchen lights. Before I could decide which shadows were the right ones, the door opened, adding a third dark shape to the mix.

"Don't bother getting up," Rhys said. "I've let myself in."

I had many replies to that, all of them rude. What I actually said was, "Rhys?"

He stood beside the sofa to look down at me. "Who did you think it was?"

I ignored the question. "What happened to your voice?"

"It is still there." My impatience must have shown on his face because he relented. "I have had a sore throat. Nothing to worry about, but Mrs Griffith considered it too great a risk to expose you to any germs." As I digested that, he sat down in the armchair. "You have made a bad enemy of the King, Olly."

"He made a bad enemy of me." I swallowed, reminded that my throat was still sore itself. "Anyway, he started it."

Rhys stared at me for so long in silence that I had to fight the urge to fidget. "To say that now, with the marks of the King's anger still on you—truly, you have a knight's courage, Olly."

I found myself blushing and looked away. "How many people did Nan tell my daft stories to?" No wonder the priest laughed at me!

"I did not think them daft."

"Too mundane an adjective? What were they? Insipid? Ridiculous? Ludicrous?"

“Charming.” Rhys sat very still, his hands resting on his knees. “The generous offering of a charitable heart that wanted to include others in its happiness.”

I stared at him. If this was a joke, it was told with such dryness that it was difficult to tell where the joke was. I didn’t know how to reply. “Is there a reason you’re here?”

Rhys’s mouth turned up sardonically. “I am a curate calling on a member of his parish. I was not aware that I needed more reason than that.”

“Am I really a member of your parish?”

“Your refusal to take the ambulance to Bangor seems to indicate a certain amount of home-feeling, and in addition, the number of gifts you have received indicate wholesale adoption by the village. I must go where my flock leads me.”

“I’m no expert, but I’m pretty sure that it’s the other way round. You leading the flock.”

“Perhaps it is just as well I am not a shepherd. But I did have another errand in mind, here.”

Getting to the point after only ten minutes of prevarication? This might be a new record. “And that is?”

“The King’s anger has reached new bounds. I would not like to trust your safety alone here. With your permission, I should like to redo the protections your grandmother placed on the house.”

For the second time in our short conversation, I found myself completely at a loss for words. “And you are sure you’re a priest?”

He raised a thin eyebrow, pressing his hands flat together. “You are so sure that the protections I offer are heretical in nature?”

“In a word? Yes.”

“I am wounded—truly—by your lack of faith. But I am willing to forgive and should still like to help. Isn’t that the action of a true Christian?”

Did he annoy people into going to his services? “I am pretty sure that casting spells is not the action of a true Christian.”

“There, see how you misjudge me. I am merely going to bless your pipes that they may not be used against you.”

“And you needed my permission for that?”

“I am not sure that it is altogether seemly for a curate, even one of a village as small as Aberdaron, to break into cottages. There’s nothing against it specifically in the bible, but I think that the Bishop of Llandaff would not approve.”

Thou shalt not break into homes and mess with the plumbing. I bit my lip. I didn’t want Rhys to think that I was encouraging him. “If it will get you out of here sooner—”

I was rewarded by a sudden, sharp grin. “It will not take me long. No, don’t get up. I know where everything I need is, and you would only be a distraction.”

I caught myself from arguing back just in time. “Wasting time unnecessarily? We can’t have that.”

“I am glad you agree.” Was sarcasm not a thing in the church? Or did Rhys not realise that the one wasting time on ridiculous quibbles was him? He patted my shoulder with no suggestion of irony. “Stay here and rest.”

I had no intentions of letting Rhys rummage around the cottage unattended but found myself yawning. Despite the fact that I had just woken from one nap, I was ready for a second. I leant back against the sofa. Rhys had left the kitchen door open, so I could see that he was busy with the sink. I could just as easily watch him from here as I could the kitchen, I decided.

This time, I opened my eyes to a uniform grey. A steady murmur drowned out the constant chatter of the waves. Rain fell steadily outside the window, but I was warm and content. I stretched, discovering that I was draped in blankets. The pillows from the guest room had been tucked under my head, and a heater taken out of the closet and pointed at me.

For a moment, I was completely confused. Then I saw the cross that Rhys had given me resting on a folded up piece of paper. I smoothed it out.

In the interests of not testing the limits of Mrs Griffith’s hospitality, perhaps you should wear this next time you provoke a King.

I snorted. The writing was legible, but only just. A spider dipped in ink and allowed to walk across the paper could have done a better job. “Just as well he’s only got to talk.”

But something about this bothered me. The care Rhys had shown me, the gift of the cross, even his habit of treating me as if we were better acquainted than we were. There had to be some explanation for it. Dropping the cross into my pocket, I went upstairs in search of my laptop.

Bethan wasn't on skype, so I opened a chat window.

Mam, my dad. I hesitated. There really was no way to ask this subtly. *He wasn't a curate, was he?*

Her reply came as I was getting breakfast. I almost upset my plate of toast as I dived to accept the call. "Mam!"

"What on earth have they been doing to you on the Llŷn, Olly?" A single sentence and it was like I'd never left Australia. Bethan's fond frustration was big enough to fill the kitchen.

"Doing to me?" I was glad that she hadn't chosen video call. If a question had provoked this response, I hated to think how she'd react to my bruises.

"Was my dad a curate? Give your mother some credit, Olly—really, the very idea!"

Despite myself, I smiled. "Sorry, Mam."

"What on earth put the idea into your head? Are they that dry of gossip in Aberdaron that they have to invent fathers for you? Because you know I've always said that if you want to meet him, I'll help you find him."

"Nothing like that, Mam. It's just that there's this curate here." I explained about Rhys.

If anything Bethan was even less impressed. "You only have to think about it. You did not get your blond hair from anyone on the peninsula!"

"Yes, Mam."

"I thought you'd grown out of your improbable stories, Olly. Really. The man sounds a headcase."

"He's not that bad—"

"Steer clear. Not that you can really avoid anyone in a place that small. Maybe enlist old Griffith as a bodyguard. That woman can put the fear into anyone." There was a chime in the background, a boarding call. "Now, you're sure you're all right? Only, that's my flight they're calling and it's final call—"

"I'm fine." I bit my lip. "Mam, you hear any stories about a prisoner out here?"

“The cabin attendants are giving me dirty looks. If you need anything, Olly, send me a message. I’ve a three-hour stopover in LA, they must have Wi-Fi there. Now, I love you, and let’s have no more of this curate nonsense.”

I smiled. “Bye, Mam,” I said, even though she’d already hung up. That was Bethan for you. But even if she’d given me more questions than answers, I found myself reaching for my toast with renewed vigour. Mam always had a knack of making me feel better.

I am only capable of so much taking it easy. I puttered around Nan’s cottage to the best of my ability, but there is a limit to the amount of tea a man can drink. No visitors, and with the rain and cloud, I couldn’t see beyond the garden gate. It was as if I existed in a cloud, separate from the outside world. I sat at the kitchen table, staring out. Was I the ghost? Or was it the rest of the world that had ceased to exist? Would the mist lift, revealing a world that had gone on without me, or would I age in isolation, turning to dust at the touch of the first person to break the spell and find the cottage? What did Rhys mean, calling me generous? And what did I care what he thought of my stories?

“Age,” I decided. “You don’t get to that age without losing a few marbles.” Bethan was right. Everyone I knew who was old was a bit eccentric, whether it was Nan and her witchcraft or old Mr Jones and his ideas.

That reminded me.

“Hello?”

“*Bore da*, Harry. You at home this morning?”

“Only to have my morning tea. Farmers don’t get the day off when it rains, you know. You’ll have to come visit another time.”

“I don’t want to visit you,” I told him. “I thought of calling on your grandfather. Birds of a feather. Us invalids need to hang out.”

Harry chuckled. “He was just asking after you. I’ll go ask him if he is up for company.”

Old Mr Jones was delighted to have a visitor, and it was agreed that Harry would drive over to pick me up and drop me home when he came back to the house for lunch.

Mr Jones could have rivalled Mrs Griffith for questions, but he gave as good as he got, peppering his interrogation with lots of local gossip. True, most

of it was fifty years out of date, but the enthusiasm with which Mr Jones launched onto his subject carried me along for the ride.

“You’re wasted as a farmer,” I told him, when I was allowed to get a word in. “You should have been a historian. Maybe even a news reporter.”

“Me?” Mr Jones cackled heartily. “Not likely. There’s been a Jones farming here since the peninsula was first peopled. We’re farmers, through and through.” He settled complacently in his chair. “No matter where else we go, the land always calls us back.”

It was hard to argue with that certainty, and I nodded, wondering how Harry felt about it.

“And what are your plans, lad?”

“I don’t really have any,” I admitted. “I want to stay—”

“But Evans are fishing folk, and the Aberdaron port’s closed to fishing.” His old eyes were filmy, but they glittered as he talked. “Still, it is a strange thing. The *morgen* sang the night that you left Aberdaron, and they sung the night you went over the side of the ferry.”

I almost choked on my cup of tea. “You’re sure?”

“Am I sure?” Mr Jones’s teacup rattled erratically against his saucer, but his words were certain. “Didn’t I grow up hearing their songs from these cliffs? I might not have heard their singing since before I was married, but I’m an Aberdaron man, and I would know that song anywhere.”

I put my cup down. “What do you know about *morgen*?”

“Only what everybody knows. When the *morgen* song echoes on the cliffs, you do not go out on the water unless you want to return home drowned, changed, or forever looking for something you will not find. My father’s father, he said that the *morgen* sung less now than they did when he was a boy, and then their song was always a herald of something. A wreck, perhaps, or a storm. There’s some as said that the song was heard less since the cunning woman took the cottage on the cliffs, but more as said that the *morgen* had left these waters. He said his father told of meeting *morgen* in the bay, but in my living memory, no one’s seen a single one.” He paused. “Excepting perhaps your Nan. I thought she was joking, but now...” He frowned.

I waited for him to slurp his tea. “When you say the cunning woman took the cottage, who do you mean?”

“It’d be your great-grandmother, or maybe her mother before her.” Mr Jones waggled craggy eyebrows at me. “Evans women have always been cunning.”

What on earth did you say to that? “Have they?”

Mr Jones nodded with satisfaction. “It was a good thing, you spotting that the stone was gone. Harry’s a good farmer, but he doesn’t know the old ways. And me, the thought that someone would take away the King’s stone would not have occurred to me any more than it would occur to Harry to notice that it was gone.”

“The King’s stone?”

“The coast round here’s wicked for wrecks. That’s why *Porth Neigwl*’s got the name Hell’s Mouth. But the last wreck was 1914 when the *Harvest Home* ran aground. No lives lost, thanks to the cunning woman—that’d be Sylvia’s grandmother—standing up all night by Mother Rock. But she was old, and the storm played havoc with her bones, so she determined to put an end to the wrecks once and for all and she went and took a boat out in *Porth Neigwl* and sat there in silence. Took her the better part of a year, but the wind and waves got used to her and went about their gossip paying her no mind and that is the way she managed to learn the names of the currents that flow through there. Taxing them with their true names, she won from them their promise not to drive any more ships to their doom.”

Mr Jones paused for a quick mouthful of tea. “Now, the old King didn’t like that at all. So he took his revenge. His pride keeps him from walking on the land, but anything of water is his domain, and we had a sad spate of drownings. A little child fell into the river that goes through the village and old Elisa Williams was discovered in that same pond that you saw. The coroner found that she must have walked home from the pub and being a little worse for drink, mistaken her way and walked into the pond. I ask you! Elisa Williams, who never drunk a drop of wine in her life except for what was given in communion and even then had doubts about that!”

“And that was when the stone was placed?”

“Several of them. Ask Harry to take you round. There’s not a patch of water on this peninsula that doesn’t have a King’s stone by it.” Old Mr Jones nodded with certainty, before adding, “Harry’s a good man.”

As that was true, I nodded. “I’m enjoying catching up with him.”

“I remember the two of you getting into mischief as children. Not much has changed now.” He cackled again, and if I had been in easy range, I would probably have been pinched. “No, he’s a good boy, Harry. He’ll make us proud.” And while I was still nodding, he added, “Will make some lucky person very happy someday.”

For the second time our conversation, I almost snorted tea. “Some lucky person?” I said. “Not some lucky woman?”

Old Mr Jones eyed me blandly from behind his mug. “It is a new millennium,” he pronounced. “You must try to move with the times, Oliver Evans.”

I put my cup of tea down. “Nan told you.”

He nodded. “She did. Took me to town over a thoughtless comment I made. A fine woman, Sylvia. She had a gift for dealing with fool-headed people. I must have taxed her patience time enough, but I think she made a sensible man out of me, even if it took her seventy-five years to do it.”

“You don’t mean—”

He snorted. “It’s only one thing with you young people. No, I was full of myself as a young man, and as she was the best looking girl in the parish, I decided it was inevitable. She put me in my place immediately, told me that she liked me well enough, but she would never be happy without seeing the view from the cliffs every day, and so she married your grandfather who was the youngest of three sons and not too proud to move into his wife’s house. I was livid, let me tell you, and I built this house here with the view of the ocean just to spite her. And the first time she came to visit, I asked her what she thought of the view, and she said it was very nice, but I must remember that when I found a wife, it was me she’d be marrying and not the view.” He cackled. “It was decades before I forgave her, but by that time I realised that I’d found a true friend in her, and that’s rare in this life.” He frowned, teacup rattling against the saucer again as he lowered it. “Very rare.”

It was hard not to reach over and take the saucer from him, but Harry had cautioned me on the drive. “Taid’s sensitive about the Parkinson’s. Doesn’t like it being pointed out.”

I said, “I’m sure your friendship meant a lot to Nan, too. I remember how often you used to visit.” I hesitated. “This might be a strange question, but going back to the old stories, did you ever hear about a prisoner?”

“A prisoner?” Mr Jones settled back against his cushions. “You don’t mean William Williams who was arrested for smuggling and taken to Caernarfon? His mother hid him in a butter churn.”

I was momentarily tempted but shook my head. “Someone taken prisoner by the King beneath the Cliffs. A sailor perhaps. Or one of his own people.”

“A prisoner taken by the King?” Mr Jones mulled over it. He had started to droop in his chair. “Let me think.” He frowned.

A few minutes later, I got my answer in the form of a snore. I snorted, putting aside my cup of tea. Was this what Mrs Griffith had to endure the last couple of days? I should see if she’d take one of my excess bouquets as a thank you.

Before I could decide which one to offer her, Harry was waking me up for lunch.

Chapter Ten

Duhywynt

Mr Jones squeezed my hand as I left. “It would do this old man’s heart good to think that there was an Evans living in this cottage at last,” he said. “Be well, Olly. Don’t go swimming out at sea again.”

Harry snorted as he pulled the driver’s door shut behind him. “What was that about?”

“I think your grandfather’s suggesting we should hook up.” Harry’s strangled exclamation had me looking up from my seat belt. “Are you all right?”

“Olly. You didn’t—you didn’t *tell* him?”

“What? No! He told me.”

Harry leant over the steering wheel, hands over his face. “He never. How would he know? I haven’t told anyone!”

I suppressed the urge to tell him how obvious he was about Rob with so much difficulty I think I pulled a muscle. “I came out to Nan before I went to Australia. She must have told your granddad. And maybe that got him thinking about you.”

Harry groaned.

“Surely it’s a good thing? I mean, when you do decide to tell him—”

“But I haven’t decided to tell him!”

“If he already knows—”

“Only thinks he knows.” Harry drew a deep breath and started the truck. “I’ve got to be sure before I tell him.”

I swallowed what I wanted to say, but I think it must have shown on my face.

“It’s all right for you and Rob.” I’d never heard Harry sound bitter. “If you make a mistake you can up and leave and start again. But it’s different on the Llŷn. People stay. They remember. They don’t see you, they see your past. They see all your failures.”

“And you’re that sure that a relationship with Rob—”

“Would be a failure?” Harry laughed, but it wasn’t happy. “I don’t know. I want it—but I won’t be rushed into it. I have to be sure. And he will keep harping about time...”

“They don’t give visas for holiday flings.”

“I know, I know. But I don’t think that I’m ready to make this serious. And he couldn’t live here. Can you imagine it? He would grow to hate this place. And I can’t live anywhere else.” Harry took a corner with a suddenness that jolted my bruised ribs. He immediately corrected his speed, slowing down. “Sorry, Olly. I—We had a bad fight about this last night. It’s still raw.”

“It’s all right. It’s none of my business anyway.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t mind if it’s you,” he said. “But I hate being talked about.” He brooded the rest of the drive, only shaking himself out of it as we reached my gate. “You won’t tell anyone about me and Rob? I’d like to make my own mind up, on my own time, not be hounded about it.”

I nodded. “I won’t tell.”

“Thanks. And thanks again for visiting Taid. I know it meant a lot to him.”

“Meant a lot to me, too. I had no idea there was so much that had happened on the peninsula. If he remembers what he was going to tell me about the King’s prisoner, let me know?”

“The King’s prisoner?” Harry snorted. “So much for giving up stories, eh, Olly?”

“This is different,” I protested, but Harry had thought of something else.

“This might be an odd question, but do you have someone in Australia?”

I shook my head. “It’s hard to do long term when you’re travelling. And I always thought I’d end up back here, so. It never really seemed to work out.” I hesitated. “This is only my experience, but I once had the chance for something special, and I made the decision that it wouldn’t work out without giving him the chance to try it. I regret that now. Even if it hadn’t worked out, it would have been something.” I looked up, caught Harry looking at me strangely. “Sorry. I was trying not to give you advice.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s different when it’s you. I—Well, I’ll see you around, Olly.”

I watched his truck disappear down the road with decidedly mixed feelings. Harry and I had come a long way from card games and dirty jokes.

The rain had stopped and the lingering cloud had a brisk edge. Not exactly ideal weather for an invalid to go for a walk, but I had been inside for days. Even better, for once I'd slept through the entire night. I had energy to spare, and thanks to Old Mr Jones, I had an idea of what to do with it.

The tide was halfway down the bay, but I still made sure to stick to the parts of the shoreline where the driftwood was bleached white, and plants grew within the loose stones. No sense in taking chances.

This was the first time I'd been back to our smuggler's cave, and despite the bruises that protested every step I took, I found my pace quickening as I approached. I had to force myself to slow my approach. If I wanted to listen as my great-great-great-grandmother had done, I did not want to announce my presence by scaring off anything lurking inside.

It was only when I reached the entrance, half obscured by the long grass, that I heard it. A strained gasp followed by a wet hiccupping sob.

All I could think of was Myrhydion.

It was a minor miracle that I didn't break my neck sliding down into the cave. What had been an easy crawl for a nine-year-old and not much of a challenge for a sixteen-year-old was a different story for a grown twenty-three-year-old who moved like an old man. By an even greater miracle, the crier didn't hear me.

He was face down in Myrhydion's favourite sulking spot in the same attitude of stranded whale. He had the same dark hair and sprinkling of barnacles, but was too small and round to be Myrhydion himself. This had to be his brother.

I very carefully picked my way around the cave and sat. "Hello."

He jerked upwards with a gasp. His eyes darted towards the pool.

"I didn't mean to startle you," I continued. "I just thought I'd come and sit in the cave a while."

"Well, don't." The rough edge of the boy's voice was not helped any by his tone. "No one asked you to come here." He sat up to glare at me. "Did you hear me? You're not welcome."

Hearing the King's words echoed by this boy gave me pause. "This is my cave," I said. "I discovered it, about fourteen years ago. I played here every summer for seven years."

“So?” He lacked Myrhydion’s trick of making scrubbing his nose look regal. “That doesn’t mean you *own* it.”

“No,” I agreed. “But Myrhydion shared it with me. I think that means we can share it, too.” I paused, praying to God that I wasn’t going to mangle his name too badly. “Duhywynt.”

He glared at me. “You might have my name, Witch-son, but it will do you no good. You may not command me by it!”

“I don’t want to command you by it.”

“Liar!” Duhywynt warmed to his subject enthusiastically. “You want to win my trust with pretty stories. Then you will steal from me my name and other secrets. And finally you will bewitch me so that I forget my people and leave these waters and never, ever get to go back to our underwater gardens.”

“I already know your name.”

Duhywynt paused, mouth twisting as he considered that. His expression cleared. “Only because you seduced my brother,” he decided.

I choked. “Who told you that?”

“I have been warned against your tricks. You will not deceive me.” Duhywynt’s triumphant flourish would have been more dramatic if he’d pointed a sword instead of a finger and if his arms hadn’t been so short, but it was otherwise perfect. “I will avenge Myrhydion’s honour.”

I considered him thoughtfully as I settled more comfortably on the sand. “You’re that seal.”

He drew himself up indignantly. “I was no such thing.”

“You saved my life.”

“I would sooner swim into the heart of Hell’s Mouth in a storm with the north wind blowing its hardest and the rocks cruel and jagged then lift a single flipper to help surface-scum such as you!”

I smirked at him. “Flipper?”

“You tricked me!” I thought Duhywynt might choke in his eagerness to get his words out. “You have proved already you are without honour! Not that I had any doubt, but you are a perfidious liar, with no scruples! You vile—” He broke off, coughing.

“Not used to talking?”

He glared at me. “Keep your fake sympathy for the half-minded fools who believe you!”

The hoarseness of his voice answered my question. I settled my arms around myself as I thought. If Myrhydion had been lonely, this child must be lonelier still. “My name’s Oliver Evans.”

“Do not attempt to placate me! I will not—what?”

“My name,” I said. “So that if I try to command you, you can command me back.”

He stared at me. “Are you a simpleton?”

“My friends call me ‘Olly.’”

“You are a fool and an idiot to give your name so freely! Have you no mind for the risk?” Having hit his stride, Duhywynt was working himself up to his new subject wholeheartedly. “It is no wonder that my soft-hearted brother made me give my promise to protect you! He knew that you would be unable to resist endangering yourself—”

“Myrhydion said that?”

“And more besides!” Duhywynt was vocal on the subject of my shortcomings. “He said that you were no real man, and a blight upon the landscape, and that he wished that you had long gone back from whence you came—”

I stopped listening. Myrhydion had asked his brother to protect me. Had he known I would return? “When was this?”

“It is churlish to interrupt when another is speaking—”

“Calling me names doesn’t count as conversation. And I’m pretty sure that you made up most of those yourself. When?”

Duhywynt pouted. “When was what?”

“When did Myrhydion make you promise?”

Duhywynt frowned. “It was,” he said slowly, “the season in which the sweet-tempered grey seal that shares with me the best places to fish brought forth her third pup.”

“What season was that exactly?”

“He is grown now, with a pup of his own.”

“Are we talking years? Months?”

“I remember because she let me play with the pup, even when he was only this big.” Duhywynt held out his hands. “Myrhydion was never allowed to play with the pups so small, even though he is older. The King says it is because we were born on land and it spoiled him. He is always in the shallows, and he prefers to be by himself to being with the dolphins or the seals or with me.” His hands balled into fists, and he looked up at me fiercely. “I do not see why he should have preferred your company to that of his own brother! You’re not even a real knight!”

“No,” I agreed. “I’m not.”

My agreement gave Duhywynt pause. Braced for argument, he had no idea what to do with meekness. He slid moodily into the water. “I was perfectly satisfied in this cave before you came,” he said. “And since I was here first, you should go.”

I shook my head. “I came here for a reason. You dislike my company so much, you go.” Even at the lowest tide, there was still water in the tunnel that connected the cave pool to the wider ocean.

Duhywynt leant sullenly across the stone. “I am not going to be chased out of my cave by a knight who is not really a knight,” he told me.

“That suits me.” I gave him a smile. “I’d like to get to know Myrhydion’s brother better.”

“Again! You tricked me! You know that is not what I want!” A wet tendril of kelp smacked me in the face. I pulled it back to see Duhywynt searching for more projectiles. “I will not be your friend, false knight! I refuse!”

“It was you!” I clutched the kelp tightly. “You threw the tin at me!”

Duhywynt flinched back and then rallied magnificently. “Would that I possessed more tins! I would throw them all at you! Every last one!”

I knelt by the edge of the water so that I could catch his eye. “I’m not angry, Duhywynt.”

“That is a lie.”

“I’m not,” I persisted. “Actually, I’d like to say thank you.”

His mouth worked soundlessly for a few moments before he snorted. “Those two words must hold a different meaning to surface-scum.”

“I’m grateful. If you hadn’t thrown the tin, I might not have remembered Myrhydion at all. Before that, I had flashes of memory but nothing concrete. With the tin, I knew he was real.”

“Of course he is real.” Duhywynt was obviously dubious. “Are you daft?”

But I was more interested in that ‘is.’ “Duhywynt. Is Myrhydion alive?”

The boy’s startled expression quickly faded to cunning. “I do not see that you need to know.”

“Please. I have to know. I have to find him.”

“If he has taken himself away, it is surely because he does not wish to see you,” Duhywynt told me. “And I have to applaud his unusual good sense, however, late it came. I suppose my brother has at long last come to his senses.”

“I think he might be in trouble.” I forced myself to be calm, not alarm Duhywynt further. “If the King was wearing his shape, then something had to have happened to him.”

“I am his brother. If he is in trouble, it is my place to help him. You are nothing to us.”

There was certainly nothing wrong with his voice now. I snorted as Duhywynt veered off on a diatribe against sons of witches who didn’t even know the first thing about the Deep magic or have the sense not to fall off boats. Liking the sound of their own voice seemed to be a trait shared by Myrhydion’s family. The thought sounded familiar. I paused, trying to place it.

“And since you are no longer even listening to my suggestions for your self-improvement, I do not see why you even remain.” Duhywynt rumbled to a halt. “Unless it is only to bring your presence like a pox to those less fortunate than yourself.”

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me,” I told him. “In the meantime, are you all right?”

Duhywynt bristled. “How dare—”

I held out my hand. “I ask because I’ve got more bruises on me now than the participants of an entire judo tournament.”

Duhywynt casually draped his long hair over his shoulder. “I am not weak surface-scum who cry and take to their beds after a few bumps.”

Before he’d covered it with his hair, I’d seen an ugly bruise. There could easily be more on the part of him that lay beneath the water. “That’s a relief,” I said. “But I’m not just talking about injuries. Do you have anyone to go to?”

“Anyone?” Duhywynt fidgeted with his hair.

“Besides the King.”

“Of our people, the only three that remain are myself, the King and the Prisoner. And the Prisoner does not really count as he is a traitor and besides he does not go anywhere, say anything or even do anything.”

“That is the point of being a prisoner.”

“He is dull,” Duhywynt corrected me. “And as he is the enemy of our people, I do not care to know him.”

I bit my lip. Duhywynt had a missing brother and a King who had cast him out and that was it. “What about friends?”

“You will not make yourself popular with my friends,” Duhywynt said smugly. “So do not think of trying to win their trust. They will not aid you, and you will have wasted your time.”

“But you do have friends? Where are they?”

Duhywynt shrugged, affecting nonchalance. “In this insipid weather, they prefer the calmer waters. They will not return to these shores today.”

I had a horrible suspicion. “Are your friends seals?”

“Do not speak so slightingly of my friends! They are noble creatures, undeserving of your mockery!”

“But they’re seals! They can’t—feed you or see that you’re looked after—”

“I am not some suckling infant that I need a wet-nurse!” Thoroughly insulted now, Duhywynt dived under the water.

I breathed out slowly. The child bristled more than a hedgehog. Or should that be sea urchin? But for all his blatant dislike, there was still something of Myrhydion about him. I did not like the idea of him roaming the sea on his own.

All the more reason to find Myrhydion.

I dusted the sand off my knees and found myself a place to sit right at the back of the cave. Still and silent. I leant my head against the rock. I tried to tune my ears to the sound of the water, but if I was going to catch words from it, I had a way to go.

My eyelids drifted lower. It was peaceful in the cave, even if it wasn’t the most comfortable. I would just rest my eyes for a minute—

The splash could have been gunshot for how loudly it echoed through the cave. I sprang to my feet, narrowly avoiding catching my head on the cave ceiling.

Duhywynt stared at me in consternation, half out of the pool. “Do you not even have the decency to leave when you have driven away your victim? You are no knight, you are a nuisance!”

“You left! Why are you complaining—” I paused. Duhywynt’s return jarred with his earlier tantrum, as did his preference for the company of seals over me. “You can’t leave, can you?”

“Insolence!” Duhywynt reacted energetically. “You dare—”

“Duhywynt, are you trapped here?”

He looked away. “I am... disposed to keep to the shore,” he admitted, netting his fingers through his thick hair. “If I go to the Deep, I will be punished, and I do not wish that. I may not walk on the shore, and besides, I would not be away from the sea over-long. Myrhydion told me if ever I was in trouble with the King there was a place I would be safe from him, and that I could sing to the Witch, and she would aid me, but I am too proud to ask for help from our enemy, and besides, she is dead, and you are no substitute, even for an enemy. Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving you to your cave.” I carefully made my way up the stairs. “If I’d realised how greatly I was intruding, I would have excused myself sooner.”

The climb back up the cliff was slow, and by the time I reached the house, I was ready to collapse on my bed. I could not allow myself the rest, however. Duhywynt had named three remaining *morgen*. The King who wished us harm, a prisoner who didn’t speak, and himself. None of whom could have produced the song that Mr Jones had heard. There was a fourth nearby, and I was sure I knew who he was.

“*Bore—*”

“Who has moved here in the last five years?”

Harry snorted. “Don’t waste any time getting to the point, do you?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s important.”

“The last five years? Hang on, I’ll ask Taid.”

I peered out the window at the cloud, but the day remained as implacably gloomy as before. Good old Welsh rain. Nothing like it for lowering the spirits. At that moment, I found its obscuring cover a relief. If I couldn't see out, nothing could see in.

"You there?" Harry was ready to report back. "There's that couple from Bristol, bought the cottage on Pritchard's place, done it up as a B&B. We don't talk to them, and they're not here outside the tourist season anyway. And the holiday homes—"

"Not weekend people," I said. "Village people who came in after the exchange student left."

"Well, William's son moved back to help his Da with their farm, and he brought his girlfriend with him. And then, there's the conservationist that rents from Llewellyn, and the new director up at *Felin Uchaf*. And the curate, of course."

"Rhys?"

"How many curates you think we have? That's just the village. You want Y Rhiw and the rest, too?"

"No, that's enough. *Diolch*, Harry."

"You're welcome. What's this about—"

I replaced the phone receiver feeling strangely disconcerted. I'd thought Rhys had been in Aberdaron longer. Why—?

The plaintive whine of the wind reminded me of Duhywynt, alone in the cave.

Some kind soul had bought me groceries while I was recovering. I went through my pantry, wondering what would appeal to aquatic taste buds. Myrhydion had liked baking, I remembered. He'd liked Nan's biscuits so much that she'd ended up teaching me how to make them.

I picked up the tin. Did I still remember...?

"I do not know why you bother coming back. There is no one here who wishes to see you, and I will not tell you anything about Myrhydion."

I rolled my eyes and knelt by the pool. "Nice to see you too, Duhywynt."

He watched from the extreme end of the pool as I unloaded my small backpack. “What have you there? I will not be bribed by you, so you may as well remove your gifts.”

Strangling him would be counterproductive. “Did Myrhydion get all the manners in your family? I told you already I wanted to thank you. This is it.”

Duhywynt stayed where he was. “I am underwhelmed.”

“This is a hot water bottle.” Duhywynt showed no signs of hypothermia, but I imagined that he was more used to being in motion underwater than still on the surface. “I have filled this tin, which you so kindly found for me—”

“I will throw it at you!”

“—with the biscuits that Myrhydion liked best. And there is tea in this thermos.” I stood, dusting the sand off my jeans as I considered the sullen child, lurking as far from me as he could get. Was I helping? Or was I simply setting myself up to get brained with the biscuit tin a second time? “I’ll be back to refill them tomorrow.”

I trudged up the path to the cottage, projectile-less, but bone tired. I didn’t even bother pouring a cup of tea for myself, just hung my jacket by the door and fell onto my bed. If nothing else, Duhywynt was giving me a proper workout.

“Hey, Siri,” I said. “What muscles do steps work?”

There was no response. Patting myself down, I realised that my phone, once my ever-present companion, was not on me. I didn’t remember where it was. I couldn’t even remember when I’d used it last. I smiled tiredly at the pillow. Had I maybe gained something of the old Olly back?

A storm had come up suddenly, battering against the front door. I shivered in my bed, pulling the blankets around me, even though I was perfectly warm in my cocoon. I relaxed. There was no better place to spend a storm than curled up in a warm bed, knowing that there was no reason for you to leave it.

The wind banged against the front door.

“Lazy wretch! Is this how you treat all guests?”

I froze.

Now that I noticed it, the banging against the door was too regular to be the wind.

“Or was it your plan to leave me out here to die of cold? I shall tell Myrhydion of your cruelty!”

I almost fell out of my bed in my haste. I pulled on a sweatshirt and shorts, and ran down the stairs.

“Duhywynt!” The wind nearly flung the door back in my face. I pushed it open, scanning the garden for him. He wasn’t there. A trick of the King’s?

Something shifted at my feet, and I recoiled. A large mass of weed was creeping past my feet and into the house. It was hideous, pale spider-like forearms protruding while it dragged its dead mass forward—

“This is the dwelling of the Witch on the Cliffs? I do not think much of it.”

I breathed out. “Duhywynt.” I’d watched too many horror movies. Had I really thought that Sadako was crawling into my cottage? “What are you doing on the floor?”

“I am inviting myself in since it appears my host has forgotten his duty.” Duhywynt wriggled further down the hall before pausing to assess the living room and kitchen. He left a trail of damp and grit behind him on the carpet.

“You can’t stand, can you? I forgot.” I squinted past him, into the dark. There was a trail of puddles coming up the garden path. “Did you crawl the entire way up here?”

“I do not see that is any business of yours.”

The wind was cold. I shut the door. “What are you doing here?”

“The bottle of hot water you offered lost its heat and the amount of biscuits you provided was insufficient. I came to inform you of the short comings of your gifts and to allow you to make restitutions for your lack of fore-thought.”

“How kind.” I paused. “But you liked the tea?”

“I could not discover the workings of the ‘ther-mos’ so I disposed of it.”

“Disposed of it! That was a Stanley—” I caught myself. Duhywynt had flattened himself against the floor. If all he knew of anger was the King’s outbursts, then I must have frightened him. I kept my tone calm. “Are you tired?”

“I am not.”

“But?” I prompted gently.

Duhywynt hesitated. “Your cottage *is* inconveniently far from the shore,” he allowed. “So a good host would offer me accommodations for the night and refreshments for my arduous journey. And I would accept them.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let me get right on that.”

Half an hour later, I leant in the kitchen doorway, wondering if I was still asleep. When Old Mr Jones had sent me his wheelchair, he’d had no idea that it would end up being used by a *morgen*. Duhywynt had refused all help getting into it, but had finally consented to letting me wrap him in towels and then a blanket. He had a new hot water bottle on his lap and a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich in hand. Most of his attention, however, was focused on my laptop.

I smirked. I’d gone upstairs to change into some real clothes, realising that I was not going to get any sleep. I left Duhywynt loudly insisting that I was wasting my time trying to beguile him with cheap foolery and that he did not have any interest in the nonsense performed by my ‘lap-top.’ Now? His face was alight with interest, focused entirely on the penguin and seal cavorting on screen. His mouth was half open, revealing that he’d forgotten even to chew. “I take it that the chronicles of Pingu meet your approval then, Duhywynt?”

His mouth snapped shut like a trap. “It is somewhat diverting.” He scowled. “And I must allow that this Pingu has made a good choice in companions.”

I hid my smile by crossing to retrieve my cup of tea from the bench. Score one for plasticine seals! Or, more realistically, for kids shows without dialogue.

My smile faded as I studied my guest. With how much he decried humanity, specifically me, I couldn’t imagine Duhywynt making friends easily. Pingu had been an inspired guess, but even when watching the cartoon, Duhywynt’s face had a sullen, wary air. It was hard to place his age. He talked like an adult, but I couldn’t imagine that the King had any patience for children. Duhywynt’s behaviour veered between the blatant selfishness of a much younger child and a cunning that I didn’t know how to interpret. I’d made a big mistake letting him see I didn’t know where Myrhydion was. He would withhold the information, simply because he could.

And as much as I would have liked to hold his rudeness and the loss of my Stanley thermos against him, I had to admit Duhywynt had got a raw deal. With the grey seals that lived in the harbour his only constant friends, Myrhydion absent, and the King consumed with hatred, it was a hard life for a child.

A hard life for Myrhydion, too. Watching Duhywynt with an adult's awareness, I could see hints of Myrhydion's sorrow.

How had I missed it? I'd simply accepted Myrhydion's odd moods as part of him, never thought to question it—and ended up hurting him more badly than even the bitter King? There was no excuse for my blindness—

Duhywynt yawned loudly. His form was sinking lower. A few minutes more and he would be face down on my laptop.

I stood. "Would you care to see your accommodations?"

I could not undo the past. But I could make sure I didn't repeat my mistakes.

"And so by intermingling the water from this hot tap with the cold water provided by its fellow here, I may adjust the temperature of my bed to suit?"

I nodded. "Of course, if you would prefer a more mundane bed—"

"No. I feel this should be adequate." Duhywynt settled back against the back of the bath. "I may have been hasty when I dismissed the witch's house as uninteresting. It possesses some marvels."

Was that an apology? "Thank you, Duhywynt." Absently, I lifted his hair free of where it was stuck to the side of the bath.

"I am not saying it is of above average notice," Duhywynt cautioned me. "Do not think that I praise you."

"Of course not." Myrhydion's hair had always been smooth and neat, but Duhywynt's was tangled. I smoothed it down gently with my fingers, discovering kelp fronds and the occasional hermit crab. Belatedly, I realised that Duhywynt was still. "I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"Mother touched my hair like that." Duhywynt swallowed. He held the edge of the bathtub tightly, not looking at me. "I do not remember her, but Myrhydion told me all that the years had not taken from him. He thought it right that I should remember her, so he would sit with me at nights, untangling my hair and teaching me the songs of her people." His voice caught thickly in his throat. "Since he has been gone, no one touched my hair at all—" He crumpled abruptly. "I want him to come back!" he wailed. "It is not fair of him to be gone so long and make me miss him!"

I did not think it possible that Duhywynt could be more alarming, but I was wrong. "We'll find Myrhydion. I know we will."

Duhywynt turned his back on me and sobbed wholeheartedly against the tub. “We will never find him! It is not like before when he had his own shape and could come and sit with me by the water’s edge! He traded his shape for something stolen by the King, and the conditions laid on him are such he might not even speak to me! He is lost, forever lost, and I might not even go home again or see the only friends I have left in this world!”

I rubbed his back. “That’s just what the King wants you to think. We’ll find a way, Duhywynt. I promise.”

Gradually his sobs turned into hiccups and then deep sighs. When I removed my hand, he didn’t stir, fast asleep. Exhausted.

I smiled, tiredly. Duhywynt was an ordeal, but I could not fault him for caring about his brother.

Chapter Eleven

Myrhydion

The cottage smelled of fish.

Old fish.

I scrubbed at the hall carpet with energy. Duhywynt's talent for causing me inconvenience was remarkable. If only it could be channelled for his benefit. A Guinness World Record for causing the most trouble in the least amount of time, maybe? Then again, *morgen* were probably in a category of their own.

As I was considering the possibility of introducing Duhywynt to Loch Ness (did they have seals there?), the washing machine beeped. I dragged a full load of damp towels, blankets and a dressing gown into Nan's laundry basket and heaved that onto the wheelchair. Old Mr Jones's present was working overtime.

Perhaps I was too harsh on Duhywynt. If he'd truly been out to get me, it would have rained, adding soggy laundry to the smells currently filling the cottage. The scattering of cloud in the sky, however, posed no threat to my washing.

Was it possible that all he needed was some kindness and a bit of time? I flung one wet sheet over Nan's drooping clothesline and began to tug it straight. No, I decided reluctantly. It was more likely that what I'd seen in the bathroom had been a momentary fluke. My current good luck was due entirely to the fact that Duhywynt was asleep.

Laundry hung, I lingered a moment in the garden.

It was early enough that clouds still clung to the horizon, giving the morning a pleasantly out of focus glow, like viewing the day through an Instagram filter. The distant call of grazing sheep echoed down the hills without disturbing the fairy-tale dreaminess of the morning.

And yet.

"I must be losing my mind. What happened at the pond was nothing—a lucky guess! If I had any magical powers, I'd have known better than to get on that bloody boat!"

But I still couldn't shake the feeling that there was something I was meant to find.

“Fine. I’ll take a look. But I’m telling you now, I’m not going to—” I should have known better than to make my protest so vocal. I stared down at the yellowed patch of grass. My heart started to beat faster.

The withered grass was all in a patch, starting from the hedge where a folded piece of newspaper was just visible. I retrieved a stick from the scrap woodpile to turn it over, revealing the blackbird.

In the nine days since I’d first seen the dead bird lying on the living room floor, the newspaper Mrs Griffith had wrapped it in had decayed, stained a horrible rusty colour and speckled with mould. The bird had not changed at all.

I looked around wildly. Where to get rid of it? With a second branch I gingerly lifted it, carrying it chopstick style over the hedge. No sooner was it out of the garden, however, than my conscience caught up to me. I had to get rid of it entirely so that it would not harm anything else.

I’d seen driftwood in the lean-to and I’d picked up matches and fire-starters before I’d left Bangor. Crouched carefully in the garden I made a bonfire. The bird hissed and spat as if damp, but eventually it caught.

I let out a sigh of relief as the bird burnt, taking with it some of the King’s power. Unable to walk on land or enter the house through the blocked pipes, he’d taken control of the bird, forced it to fly into the window. Its presence within the house allowed him temporary access to search for the book. I was suddenly glad that Joanne and her caravan had returned to Cardiff. If the King had decided to dispose of her the same way—

“Early in the day for a bonfire.”

I jumped. “Even earlier in the day to be creeping around!”

Rhys looked at me mildly from the other side of the fence. “On the contrary. Many find the early morning an ideal time to exercise.” He wore his habitual black shirt with the white collar, a jacket thrown over it as a concession to the slight chill.

“Exercise what exactly? Your ability to make me jump?”

“That would surely be exercise for you.” Rhys raised an eyebrow. “And I am not sure it is wise for you to overtire yourself.”

He was being bland on purpose, I knew it. I frowned, trying again to find what it was in his mild, ecclesiastical appearance that frustrated me so much, only to come up grasping at echoes of—what?

A hiss drew our attention back to the fire. Rhys's eyes glittered as he noticed the bird.

“Is this a funerary pyre?”

“The bird was in the house when I arrived,” I said shortly. “Found it in the garden. It was turning the grass yellow, so—” I shrugged. “I decided to kill it with fire.”

The priest was not up to date on his Internet memes. “An interesting choice. Fire has long been favoured as a purifying agent, and it is one that the King has no guard against. Was it your thought?”

His phrasing. It was the same old-fashioned way of speaking favoured by the *morgen*. “More like an impulse.”

Rhys smiled his sharp, secretive smile at me. “Perhaps we’ll make a cunning man of you yet.”

I didn’t return his smile. My chest had squeezed uncomfortably tight, my heart beating hard.

The priest’s smile faded, and for once he looked what he was—an old man, with sad eyes. “Perhaps I presume too much. I will leave you to the cleansing of your garden.”

I stayed where I was, unmoving, until his form disappeared around the bend in the road. Then I ran for the kitchen door.

“Come on, come on!” I flipped through the yellow pages. “Churches—Bangor—There’s got to be something!” Harry had said that the priest had come to Aberdaron after I’d left for Australia, but Rhys had told me we’d met before. “Here!” I dialled the number, glancing at the clock. Would anyone even be awake to answer?

“Hello?”

“Who is the curate in Aberdaron?”

“Excuse me?”

“The curate. Aberdaron. I need his name.”

If the speaker on the other end of the line was surprised by my abrupt manner, he gave no sign. “Aberdaron—let me think. You know, with Jones retired, I don’t think there is a curate.”

“What?”

“We mean to replace him eventually, of course, but what with so many churches needing repairs lately, it’s never a priority. However, if you leave your name, I can promise to see that it’s addressed at our next council meeting.”

“Evans,” I said automatically. “It’s not—Rhys Hughes?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t think of anyone by that name. Perhaps if you try St. Peter’s in Pwllheli, or maybe even ask at St. Hywyn’s itself. You know, the warden there is quite the historian—”

I’d heard enough. “Thank you,” I said and hung up.

Rhys had made progress while I’d been on the phone, halfway to Bryn house and the cliffs.

“Wait!”

He glanced over his shoulder, slowing his pace slightly but making no other allowance for my company. “Have you decided to join me for some exercise after all, Oliver Evans?”

I slowed down. The use of my full name made me uncertain. All of the facts lined up. Duhywynt had complained of conditions laid that prevented him from communicating with his brother. Rhys had said that there were questions of mine he couldn’t answer. His odd concern and too familiar attitude towards me took on different dimensions if he was not really Rhys but Myrhydion placed under some sort of spell...

My throat squeezed tight as I swallowed. I had to find Myrhydion. But was my desire to see him making me desperate? Or worse—delusional? Just because the King had used magic to make himself appear to be Myrhydion didn’t mean that Myrhydion was also disguised.

I could not forget my near-escape. I’d been wrong once, and that mistake had almost cost me and Duhywynt our lives. If this was another of the King’s tricks, I might be getting us into even worse trouble. I had to be sure. “What if I have?”

Rhys shrugged. “Then I should be delighted to share your company.” The speed with which he continued to walk showed how little he meant that sentence.

I rolled my eyes. Myrhydion's manner of speaking could be faked and his appearance stolen, but who but him would carry on in so ridiculous a manner? "Look, Myrhydion. I—"

With a startled yelp the priest folded in on himself, disappearing into the ditch that ran beside the road.

For a moment I stood, frozen in horror.

Then I scrambled down the ditch after him. "I'm so sorry—I didn't mean—" A hand stretched out from the long grass, grasping blindly for support, and I reached for it. "Are you hurt?"

"Startled." It was his voice, no question about it, just as it was his eyes that met mine, and his rueful smile. "I did not expect that." He used my hand to pull himself into a sitting position. "What if I'd been standing on the edge of something? Your timing, Olly—"

He did not finish his complaint.

My hands shook as I lifted his hair back from his face. Dry, it felt impossibly soft and fine, and I noticed that even though the kelp that had threaded it through was missing, he still smelled faintly of sea and surf. The dark eyes, that had seemed so flat when worn by the King, shone like pebbles touched by the tide, and his volatile mouth wavered uncertainly before offering me a hesitant smile.

This quiet was very unlike the companion of my memories, but I didn't need a spell to know that it was really him. I stroked my fingers over his cheeks and leant in, resting my forehead against his. "Myrhydion."

His fingers settled on my arm, and he relaxed against me. "Olly. At last, you have found me."

"If you'd thought to break the spell while we were talking at the garden, then we wouldn't be having this problem." Once again, Myrhydion's voice tickled my ear and his arms threaded comfortably around my neck. "I am not ungrateful, Olly, I am merely suggesting that next time you remove the enchantment that lets someone walk on land you consider the logistics of how they are going to get home."

I grit my teeth, but even my best efforts were not enough to keep us from swaying to one side of the road. Leaning forward, I used Myrhydion's weight

to keep us pointed in the direction of the cottage. “You can talk. I’m doing all the work!”

“It is your health I am thinking of,” Myrhydion said with a piety that would not have been out of place coming from Rhys. Before I could worry that he’d taken being a priest to heart, he added, “You will tire yourself out and then be of no use to me.”

I had missed his selfishness. “Says the useless lump who needs to be carried. Have you forgotten how hard it was to get you out of the ditch?”

Myrhydion squeezed my arm. “I am merely saying that it would not be such a bad idea to leave me while you fetched your bike or some other means of conveyance—”

I paused, bracing myself firmly in the middle of the road to readjust my hold on him. After three days of bed rest, running up and down the cliff path after Duhywynt had tired me out. Carrying Myrhydion pushed my endurance to the limits. My legs shook erratically with every step. Still, I would not have given my burden up for anyone. Seeing Myrhydion or hearing his voice was nothing to holding him again. “With how hard it was to find you, do you really think I’m letting go of you so easily?”

I am sure that being jolted around on my back was not comfortable for Myrhydion, but he didn’t complain. “I suppose that in this instance the prince must obey the knight.” He pressed a kiss against my cheek, almost sending us into the ditch again. “Remember that if you strain something, you must not blame me.”

“See? It is as I warned you. You have over-taxed yourself.” Myrhydion leant over the kitchen table to take my hand. “You are as red as the crab-apples in the garden, and breathing like a beached dolphin. No, do not get up to make tea. I insist.”

“Well, if you insist...” Myrhydion’s fingers curled around mine, and I trailed off. It was fortunate that I was already red and out of breath because the simple gesture flustered me alarmingly.

There was a lot about Myrhydion that flustered me. Now that we were again face-to-face, I was discovering facets to my childhood friend that I’d never imagined. Seven years of absence had changed him, but even though I studied his face intently, I couldn’t discover the sorrow or bitterness I’d feared. The harsh lines of Rhys’s face had vanished entirely, but while Myrhydion’s mouth

no longer flickered from laughter to pouting to smiling to anger with the rapidity I remembered, his new gravity showed a self-possession that suited him. He had grown, not up, as I was now the taller of us, but inwardly. He'd always been lean to the point of skinny, but age had given him a solidity that suggested strength. Suggested many things, actually, and my heart beat in a way that had nothing to do with my previous exertion and everything to do with the way Myrhydion's gaze skimmed over me.

“You are very quiet.”

As a kid, I'd known that I liked his dark eyes and wicked mouth without considering why. As a teenager I'd realised that his specific combination of aloof distance and hidden fire did things to me that no one else did. As a man—

I swallowed. “You were just telling me to rest!”

Myrhydion's mouth rippled. “You must not rest over-long,” he said. “Or you will make me very self-conscious. Was I so great a burden?” He leant back, and I thought I saw a moment's doubt in his eyes.

I shook my head, squeezing his hand. “Of course not. You could never be a burden.”

Other changes I did not like. There were faint lines at the edges of his eyes and dark shadows around them. His smile had a tremulous quality, as if it hadn't been used very much, and he offered it to me with an uncertainty entirely at odds with his usual manner.

“What if I had spent the seven years of your absence eating bricks, Sir Knight? What then?”

“Then you'd have been a burden for the fork-lift,” I told him. “But never me.”

The discovery that I could still make him laugh sent me to giddy heights of quiet pleasure, and as Myrhydion leant forward again, I put my hand to his cheek, threading my fingers through his hair. His eyes dropped to my mouth, and he smiled an invitation. I took it, leaning over the table to—

“I suggest that if you are going to make a racket, you make it somewhere that your guests are not trying to sleep!”

We jerked apart.

Duhywynt paused to brush his hair out of his face, levering his body up on one elbow. “A host should have more thought—” He sucked in a sharp gasp of breath, his eyes round. “Ridi!”

Myrhydion's laugh was pure delight as he slid himself off the chair. "Dewey." Rhys's clothes were voluminous on him, but before he could untangle himself, his brother was scooting across the floor towards him.

"Ridiridiridiri!" Duhywynt flung himself into Myrhydion's lap. "You are so cruel to me, brother; I am not glad to see you at all!"

Myrhydion smiled down at him, his fingers stroking Duhywynt's tangled hair as if he were a cat. "You have become even rounder. Is it your plan to become a seal permanently?"

I swallowed, stepping quietly towards the door. The brothers deserved to have their reunion in peace.

Duhywynt had forgotten me entirely the moment he saw his brother, but Myrhydion looked up as I reached the door. He did not thank me, but I heard the words in his smile, bright as the summer sun reflected on the still waters of the bay, and I was momentarily dazzled.

"Get it together, Oliver Evans!"

I leant out the window of my bedroom, breathing in the cool air in the hopes that it would do something for my over-heated cheeks. "You are Oliver Evans, grown man! Not Oliver Evans, teenage girl who has just been introduced to the good-looking member of One Direction." I made myself breathe out slowly. "It's just Myrhydion."

Myrhydion. The childhood friend I had so badly injured that he'd had to spend seven years apart from his home. I had to make up for past wrongs, not repeat them!

I pressed my cheek against the window glass, hoping the chill would counteract the colour in my face, and tried to will the rest of me into respectability. "You're not Oliver Evans, horny teenager either." It was lucky Duhywynt interrupted when he did. What had I been thinking? It had been my thoughtless kisses that had ruined our friendship to start with.

I sighed. Truth was, I hadn't been thinking at all. Lulled by the readiness of Myrhydion's touch, I'd simply reacted. But he showed the same affection when greeting Duhywynt. I forced back a stab of jealousy. I needed the reminder. I'd been so focused on finding Myrhydion and helping him that I hadn't anticipated the effect he'd have on me.

I placed my hands on my cheeks, discovered that they were approaching a normal temperature. Good. I could do this. Show Myrhydion that I could be relied on now and trusted, that I too had matured. I squinted at myself in the window. I'd pulled on the first clothes available when Duhywynt pulled me out of bed, and even before I'd been scrambling through ditches, my hair had been a mess. It was a wonder that Myrhydion had spared teasing me over my rumpled appearance. I dug out my least rumpled clothes from my suitcase, and finger-combed my hair into order.

“Olly?”

I'd left the door ajar so that I would hear if they wanted anything, but I hadn't expected a summons so soon. I gave my reflection a last anxious check in the window and made my way down stairs. “Did you call?”

For aquatic creatures, it really was amazing how Myrhydion's smile resembled that of a supremely self-satisfied cat, and how Duhywynt curled in his lap, just like a contented kitten. “There you are. Up, lump.” That was addressed to Duhywynt, who stirred reluctantly as Myrhydion poked him. “Olly, I would like to sit at the table again.” He held out his arms to be lifted.

Duhywynt snorted as I carefully scooped Myrhydion up. “You are capable of climbing up there yourself,” he said. “It is a chair, not a cliff.”

“Yes,” Myrhydion said composedly, leaning on me as he arranged Rhys's clothing comfortably. “But it is much easier when Olly does it.”

“Just when did I become your pack horse?”

Duhywynt cleared his throat. I looked back to see that he had his arms held out.

“You just said—”

“Surely it is not fair for the host to favour one of his guests over the other.” Duhywynt eyed me blandly.

What had happened to refusing my help? Still, as Myrhydion chuckled softly, I decided that things could be a lot worse. At least Duhywynt did not weigh as much as a grown man, I thought as I carefully lifted him.

Not carefully enough by Duhywynt's standards. “I am not a sack to be lugged around! Mind that you do not drop me—it will go the worse for you if you do!” He did not stop complaining until he was parked in the chair beside Myrhydion, his brother's hand on his shoulder. “Have you any more biscuits?”

With two *morgen* in the house, it was a wonder I got room to talk at all. I put the shepherd's pie Mrs Griffith had made me into the oven to heat and sliced bread for sandwiches as we waited.

"I should have known you instantly," Duhwynt said with complacency. "No matter how disguised you were. You should not have had to languish for years on the shore."

"And that, Dewey, is exactly why I was forbidden the shore." Myrhydion was engrossed in weeding out the snails and tangles from his brother's hair. "The King laid conditions so that his spell might not be easily broken. I might not speak my name, nor raise certain subjects in conversation or answer certain questions honestly."

I glanced across the kitchen. Myrhydion looked down at Duhwynt, but I was sure he spoke to me.

"I knew your voice at once when I heard it in the storm. You sang as no human might sing."

"And hurt my throat in the process." Myrhydion grimaced. "It is still sore."

I put the kettle on. "I still can't get around the fact that you impersonated a priest for five years, and no one saw anything weird about that."

"Do you doubt my scholarship so much? Bring me a book, I will show you how well I read."

I snorted. "Let's hope it's better than your handwriting. But people will notice Rhys is missing, won't they?"

Myrhydion frowned. "I think not," he said slowly. "It would inconvenience the King if people became too curious about the strange things that happen on the Llŷn. Rhys was not really real. He was a rock, jutting out against the flow of the everyday, and with him gone, the river will resume its flow, and there will not even be a ripple to mark his disappearance."

"What do you mean, not real?" The kettle clicked off, and I picked it up automatically. "I didn't imagine seeing you. Mrs Griffith, Harry, even Joanne, they all spoke to you."

"It is difficult to explain," Myrhydion said slowly, pausing in his work. "Being looked at and not really seen. You will see for yourself how quickly Reverend Rhys Hughes is forgotten."

“My poor brother.” Duhywynt’s pity was a bit thick. “You have suffered much! But now you may discard this wretched sackcloth and return to the shore with me.”

Placing a cup of tea on the table in front of him, I was startled to see that Myrhydion had become a rosy pink.

“I fear it would not be seemly.”

Duhywynt asked the question for me. “Seemly? I do not understand.”

Myrhydion was looking anywhere but at me. “I have been away from the water for many years,” he said. “There has been nothing to sustain my kelp. In that time—”

“You’re naked,” I finished.

Myrhydion’s mouth worked soundlessly. It was a few seconds before he found his voice. “In a manner of speaking—”

“Truly the land is a wretched place! Oliver Evans, you have much to apologise for!”

I blinked. Why was I at the receiving end of Duhywynt’s anger? “I will have to think hard about how I can make it up to him.”

“See that you do!” He scowled at me fiercely.

Myrhydion settled a hand on his shoulder, even as he picked up his cup of tea. “I shall have to borrow something of yours if I may, Olly. If Rhys disappears but his clothes do not, it could be awkward.”

“Of course.”

“Where is my cup? I am hungry besides. Did you forget what you were doing?”

Would Myrhydion mind if I carried his brother back down the cliff? I put the plate of sandwiches down. “Here. The brown is peanut butter and the black is Vegemite.”

“What makes it so mighty?” Duhywynt picked up a sandwich. “I do not think it all that grand.”

“Peanut butter for me,” Myrhydion said. “Do you know, Olly, it is just like old times.” He reached again, for my hand. “True, our expeditions did not usually take us to your grandmother’s cottage...”

His smile had my stomach doing flips. “At least you don’t have to worry about your snack being stolen by a gull.”

Duhywynt retched loudly. Before I could process it, he’d spat his sandwich out onto the table. “What do you mean by subjecting me to this insult?”

“Are you sick?” Perhaps *morgen* needed time to acclimatise to land food.

“Sick? I certainly am! Sick of this—this poison—you have concocted!” Duhywynt retched again and succeeded in spitting out another mouthful of bread. “Water! Give me water that I might wash away this vileness!”

“A cloth, too.” Myrhydion tucked his hair behind an ear. “And something to wipe it into. No, let me do it.” He wiped Duhywynt’s mess onto the saucer I gave him then started work on cleaning up his brother. “A little warning next time, Dewey. And apologise to Olly.”

“I will do no such thing!” Duhywynt flared up like a blowfish. “It is his fault for giving me such a poison in the first place! That is not real food! I do not see him eat it.”

I picked up a slice, taking a big bite for Duhywynt’s benefit. “You were saying?”

Duhywynt’s disgust was visible in every fibre of his body. “And you—you truly enjoy it?”

Myrhydion dabbed at his brother’s face. “It is a speciality of Australia where Olly has been living these past seven years.”

“I’m surprised you don’t like it,” I admitted, reaching for my second slice. “If anything, I thought the saltiness would appeal to someone who spends so much of his life at sea.”

Duhywynt scowled. “It is tar! Wretched tar! I would not feed it to my enemy!”

“I think you will find the peanut butter much more to your liking.” Myrhydion put a slice in front of him. “Perhaps Olly will tell you of the peanut cows that produce it.”

I stared at him. How to read his tone? He did not sound annoyed, but I knew that I couldn’t be so easily forgiven. “I don’t tell stories anymore.”

“That is a shame.” Myrhydion took a bite. “I thought that one of your better talents.”

“Peanut cows?” Duhywynt scowled, not picking up the sandwich.

“They are so big.” Myrhydion held his thumb and forefinger about a centimetre apart. “The size of a nut, or the pods of the brown seaweed that grows on the cliffs below the waiting rock. Their small size makes caring for a large herd of them inexpensive but the difficulty of milking so small a beast is extreme.”

Duhywynt frowned. “I have not heard tell of these... peanut cows.”

I was pretty sure that I looked just as confused. What was Myrhydion getting at?

“There is much we do not hear of under the water,” Myrhydion continued casually. “And Australia is full of marvels. I have not seen one, but I hear they have animals that carry their young with them in pouches like the seahorse does, only it is the female, not the male, in charge of their protection.”

“Kangaroos,” I said. “You have to be careful around them. They look harmless and they’re herbivores so people make the mistake of thinking they’re safe. Actually, they’re built for jumping, so their hind legs carry one hell of a kick.” I paused. Duhywynt and Myrhydion were both watching me with expectation. “But if you want to talk about strange Australian animals, then it’s the drop bear you’re after. See—”

Duhywynt was alert and interested throughout story time, ate copious amounts of shepherd’s pie and peanut butter, rubbished my lack of courage in failing to secure a drop bear to bring back to the Llŷn, but the moment I started to talk about tidying up he discovered he was tired. “I shall retire and leave you to your errands,” he decided. “Myrhydion, you will come with me?”

“I shall follow your example, brother,” Myrhydion said. “But if I remember, the best bed in this house has only room for one.”

I gave him a sharp look from where I was busy at the sink. Just like he had with the peanut cows, Myrhydion had accepted my lie with such smoothness that Duhywynt had not picked up on anything amiss.

“I should not mind giving the best bed to you,” Duhywynt said earnestly. “Even if the rest of Oliver Evan’s accommodations are inadequate in the extreme.”

“That is very kind of you, Dewey.” Myrhydion patted his hair, and Duhywynt smirked at me. “But I have long since grown accustomed to the

inadequacy of land accommodations and so should not dream of depriving you.”

We left him happily readjusting the water in the tub and cautioning us to keep things to a reasonable volume.

“I shudder to think of your water bill,” Myrhydion said as he heaved himself back into his chair. “If you give me a tea towel, I can dry for you from here.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I should like to. It was one of the first things Sylvia taught me.”

Why should something as basic as doing the dishes together make me feel so warm? It was strange. Myrhydion talked of mundane things, such as the domestic disasters that had been his first attempts at living on his own, and I felt as warm as if I was lying on Bondi beach, admiring the bronzed lifeguards. The Llŷn had clearly skewed all my perspectives.

“We considered Reed, after Duhywynt’s nickname for me, but Sylvia preferred Rhys. She thought a Welsh name would help me blend in.”

In retrospect, I was not sure how Myrhydion had blended at all. “What I want to know is why you never told me you had a nickname. Do you remember how hard it was for me to master all those syllables?”

“A prince doesn’t have a nickname. But I was not a prince to Sylvia. She treated me kindly, as though I were her own grandson, bringing me to live in the house with her when the King’s anger at your cure made it unsafe for me to return to the waters, and finding a spell to let me walk as men do.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “It must have been hard—”

Myrhydion laughed. “If it was, it was my doing, not yours. Eventually the King grew jealous that the Witch enjoyed my company and he did not. He allowed me to return to the waves. The first thing I did was steal back Sylvia’s wedding ring for her.”

“You stole from the King?”

Myrhydion was smug. “Not a very royal action, but a prince repays the kindness done him, and Sylvia was kindness itself. Besides, as long as the King possessed the ring, she did not have her full power. His rage was a thing to behold! And that is how I was punished and my form taken from me, so you see, it is not yourself you must blame—unless it is your penchant for adventure

that gave me the idea in the first place.” Myrhydion set the last plate down. “Is this all?”

I nodded. Truth be told, I was sad that we’d run out of dishes. As I stacked them away in the pantry, silence stole over us. I am sure we were both wondering the same thing. What happens now?

“Perhaps Duhywyt’s idea was not without merit. I find myself growing tired,” Myrhydion offered apologetically. “If you do not mind, I will take myself to the spare room.”

“Sure you don’t need help?” I was disappointed when Myrhydion shook his head. “I’ll go through my clothes, see what I have to lend you.”

I dug through my suitcase, trying to remember what had been worn and what hadn’t. If only I’d had time to do a second load of laundry! I took my bundle down to the spare room.

I found the door wide open, Myrhydion sitting on the edge of the bed. Rhys’s dark shirt had been dropped on the floor as Myrhydion studied his reflection in the wardrobe mirror, fingers probing his shoulder. His mouth twisted as he saw me watching. “You must not think me vain. It has been so long since I’ve seen my own face, I did not know myself.”

“You saw Rhys too?” I couldn’t imagine seeing someone else’s face looking back at me every time I shaved.

“The King’s spell was complete.” Myrhydion pursed his lips as he considered himself severely. “Tell me truthfully, Olly. Do you think me much changed?”

I took that as invitation to join Myrhydion on the bed, resting my hands on his shoulders as I looked at us both in the mirror. “We’ve come a long way from the boys who searched the coast for a smugglers cave,” I agreed. “But looked at like this, the change doesn’t seem as great.”

Myrhydion relaxed against me, his skin cool where it brushed mine. “You have retained something of your childish charm even as a man,” he decided. “Why do you make that face? Have I offended?”

I winced at him. “Anyone else and the answer would be a yes. You say it... I suppose you must have retained something of your princely command because I don’t seem to mind enough to complain.”

Surprise flickered into a slowly curving smile. “Be very careful how you proceed, Oliver Evans. You will give me ideas, and you have seen how dangerous that can be.”

Deciding it was time that Myrhydion got some of his own medicine, I dropped my gaze from the mirror to plant a kiss on his neck. As he gasped, I added a second, travelling across his shoulder. My fingers encountered an uneven dimple in his skin. Stroking my thumb over it, I discovered the skin was rough—

“No more, Olly. You must stop.”

I let go of Myrhydion, settling back on my heels. “Did I hurt you? I’m sorry—”

Myrhydion clamped his hand over his shoulder, but not before I’d seen the rough patch for what it was, an ugly incision that had left the skin an angry red even after it healed. “It does not hurt. But I would not have you see it.”

I reached for Myrhydion’s hand. “Was that from the King?”

He shook his head. “Only indirectly. I have been on land so long even my barnacles have deserted me.”

I looked immediately to his leg. “And the one here?” I placed my hand just below his knee, but I could not feel the hard bump of the shell.

“I am afraid to look! And ashamed you see me like this. I, who you once called a prince, have become so strange.” Myrhydion’s mouth turned down. “I do not like this, Olly.”

I squeezed his hand. “Let me look at it?”

He stayed unmoving as I examined it. “You are silent long. What are you thinking?”

I stroked my fingers over the bump. “It’s not necessarily a bad thing for a prince to have a scar.”

“You make light of me.”

“I mean it,” I told him. “In stories, you know, it’s usually a princess, but she’s got some slight imperfection. A birthmark or a dimple, something a lover would remember. And that’s how her true-love recognises her and whisks her away from the wicked witch.”

Myrhydion’s mouth twitched as if it wanted to laugh, but the rest of him wasn’t sure. “I hope you do not imagine that you have rescued a princess, Sir Knight.”

I snorted. “No fear on that front.” And then I suddenly realised what I’d done. “Oh bugger me.”

“Now that is a phrase you will not find in *La Morte d’Arthur*.” Myrhydion’s smile faded as he saw I did not join his joke. “What is the matter, Olly?”

“I wanted to show you how much I’ve changed.” I looked down at the wrinkles in the duvet we sat on, suddenly feeling inadequate to the situation. “Show you that I’m not the dumb kid that hurt you, that I’ve grown, that I’m a man you can depend upon. And instead, the moment I find you again, I fall right back into our old patterns.”

The bed dipped as Myrhydion crawled over to me. “And that is why you stopped telling stories?” His fingers skimmed my cheek.

I nodded, meeting his gaze. “I’ve changed,” I said. “Honestly, I have. I know nothing I do can ever make up for everything that you’ve been through, and I’ll never forgive myself for hurting you, leaving you trapped for years in someone else’s shape. But give me the chance, and I’ll prove that I can be a true friend to you.”

Myrhydion caught his breath sharply, taking back his hand. “A friend?”

I caught both his hands in mine. “I know I can do it,” I told him. “Put my reckless impulses aside, be the friend and support that you and Duhywynt need. You can stay here as long as you need to. I’ll take care of everything.” His eyes looked back at me implacably, and I felt myself caught short. Wasn’t this, after all, another selfish impulse? “I know you’ve got no reason to trust me, to even want to trust me again, but I will do everything I can to make up for my mistake—”

“Olly.” The very gentleness of Myrhydion’s voice made my heart lurch. “I am afraid that is impossible.”

“Please! I’m different now—”

“It is as I said to you on the shore,” Myrhydion continued calmly. “We cannot be friends.”

Chapter Twelve

Princely Affection

“We cannot ever be friends again.”

I seemed to feel the slap of the waves knocking me back against the shore. The surf thundered in my ears, and I heard Nan’s voice. *There’s no dating with morgen, or changing your mind.* “Myrhydion—”

He tucked his hair behind his ear, looking to one side as he had the night of his proposal. His free hand rested on his knee. “It pains me,” he said with a gravity that took all the wind out of my protestations, “that you must know how selfish a thing you desire as friend, but that is the way of it, and perhaps it is better that you know now, that things are stated clearly between us and that we know each other’s hearts. Where you offer the noble and pure brotherly love of a Knight, I feel for you instead the covetous love of a prince who wants to possess and be first always in your heart and mind.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“I would not long be content to remain your friend, Olly. See, I have been trying, too, and yet it is no good. I must tease you. I must give you orders to feel my power over you, I must touch you—I must even tease answering responses from you, knowing that your heart is not engaged by me!” Myrhydion’s smile was sad. “You are a friend indeed to overlook these faults... and yet, I cannot be content with this much, I must have more.”

I swallowed, finding my voice at last. “How much more?”

Myrhydion’s eyes creased with a smile, even as they seemed to grow immeasurably deep. He patted my cheek. “More than is in your heart to give me. I have not forgotten your answer of seven years ago, Oliver Evans. Would that I could! But do not fear. My seven years living out of the waves has taught me much. I know now how great a thing it was I demanded of you, and I do not begrudge your refusal. It was only what I deserved. I will not ask that of you again—but.” He came to an abrupt stop.

His hair had fallen across his face again. I settled myself next to him on the bed, carefully lifting it to rest over his shoulder. “But?”

Myrhydion’s sigh was sad. “But I want it all the same. *Morgen* are not as fast to change as men are. Though we may be influenced by our proximity to them, yet our hearts remain slow, ever a beat behind.”

I let my hands rub up and down his arms, in a soothing rhythm. “Is that why you remember things that happened centuries ago but aged at the same rate I did?”

He nodded. “Your influence has done much good for me, Olly. If you had not chosen me for your friend, I would still be a sullen, lurking child, no wiser than Duhywynt.”

I snorted. “Not that bad, surely.”

“Perhaps not that bad,” Myrhydion agreed. “But it is not our nature to change unless some force acts on us.”

“I’m a force now?”

Myrhydion turned to face me, raising himself to his knees in his eagerness. “A force and more! You do not know how much you have done for me! Truly, I am undone when I think of the quiet, creeping child I was who haunted the cliffs and compare him to the man you have made me.”

“Steady on! You can’t really give me credit for—” I waved in the direction of the mirror. “—all of this, can you?”

Myrhydion gripped my arm tightly. “The King told me I was useless driftwood, Olly, unwanted by anyone and good for nothing. I believed him. But you—you saw in me a prince.” He dropped his gaze once more, but not before I’d seen that his eyes were bright. “I thought you mistaken, a fool. I did not know your power. Still, I had never had a friend, and I did not want to let go of you. So I learnt to act the part of the prince, and act it well. And the wonder of it is that it worked.”

I smiled, wrapping my arms around him, stroking over his back. “No wonder at all. I called you a prince, because you had a prince’s air—”

Myrhydion shook his head simply. “You changed me, Olly. Even when you went to school, you continued to work your spell. I commanded the seals to come, and they did. The dolphins listened to me. The currents obeyed. It even awoke an answering change in Duhywynt, and he began to take an interest in the world around him and lost some of his childishness. The King saw the change in us and it displeased him but he could not undo the work you had started. It is entirely due to you that—” Myrhydion paused. “Oliver Evans, I do not know how to tell you this, but your hands are in a most inappropriate place.”

I squeezed his arse. “Are they?”

“Yes. A most—inappropriate place for the conversation we are—having.” Myrhydion squirmed, inadvertently getting his revenge as he placed a hand on my shoulder to steady himself, bringing his bare skin tantalisingly close to me. “I do not think it at all—knightly. Or indeed, friendly—”

“Good.” I couldn’t stop myself from pressing my mouth to the cool skin of his chest. The slightest touch of my tongue and he moaned, the sound stirring in me the need to hear more, to see what other reactions I could coax out of him. I gripped his arse again through his trousers, letting the gentleness of my mouth contrast with the roughness of my hands. “I was wondering when you’d notice.”

Myrhydion’s hands tangled in my shirt. “Could it be that you—no, it is too much to hope for. You are teasing me, and I do not think this at all kind!”

I continued being unfriendly by sucking at the hollow of his collarbone. “What if I wasn’t teasing?”

Myrhydion dug his fingers into my skin. “Do not joke. It is not kind of you to joke about that—you do not understand how much I want—”

I pulled back so that I could look into his eyes. “What do you want?”

Myrhydion stared at me. He’d always been pale, but the contrast between the colour in his cheeks and the emotion glittering in his eyes, made him look luminous—a strange underwater creature pulled from the Deep, like an angler fish or a giant squid. “If I tell you,” he said with immense care, “you must know how wretched I truly am—to respond to your kindness with base lust! But maybe it is right that you know, that you despise me—”

“You’re that sure I’ll despise you?”

“You must,” Myrhydion said simply. “As children, my ignorance excused me, but adult that I am now, I know better. I know how unfair it is to put demands on you that you have not got it in you to fulfil, to place on you the burden of my wants... and yet,” his tone dropped as he looped his arms intimately around my shoulders, “I would still have you as my own.”

His possessiveness sent a shiver down my back, but I had a hard time telling if it was cold or anticipation. “Myrhydion, I’m not a scared child anymore. I’ve changed.”

“You certainly have.” Myrhydion’s fingers poked at my bicep. “You did not have this when you left the Llŷn. Australia has treated you kindly—”

I snorted. “You do a full days shearing and then see how kindly treated you feel.” But we were getting off-topic. I removed Myrhydion’s hand. “Listen to me. When you proposed, I panicked. That’s all it was. I was sixteen, and I’d never stopped and thought about marriage—never even thought about love outside of studying *Romeo and Juliet* at school. If you’d asked me a year later, the answer you got would have been different. Just like if you asked me now,” I licked my lips, feeling the full weight of Myrhydion’s gaze on me, “my answer would be very different.”

Myrhydion looked as if he did not dare breathe. “Oliver Evans, is it possible—quite possible—that you desire me? No, I do not believe it. And yet—” He reached for me.

I met him, tangling my arms around him as our mouths sought frantically for each other. His cool skin made me feel like a furnace in comparison, and I sought relief for my burn in his kisses. As I sucked at his lip, I tasted a trace of salt, faint but still there, the discovery of which sent a jolt of need through my entire body. I could have laughed. All this time, my thing for lifeguards... Had it been Myrhydion that I was looking for?

“Olly—” Myrhydion had pulled back to stare at me dazed. In all our explorations, he’d never returned from his dives beneath the waves even the slightest bit out of breath, so seeing him with his cheeks flushed, his mouth open, and his chest rising rapidly was new and extremely interesting.

I kissed his chest. “Does this answer your question?” I leant back drawing him with me so that he lay on top of me, feeling my erection press against his stomach. “Maybe this is clearer.”

He gasped, gripping my shoulders tightly as he pulled himself against my body. “Clearer, yes, but my mind—Olly, I have such wants, such jumbled thoughts—”

Myrhydion might not know what he wanted, but his body did if the hard length pressed against me was any indication. I took hold of his hips, helped him thrust against me cock to cock. “What do you want?”

Myrhydion’s mouth had fallen open, his pleasure at the sensation of bodies in contact clearly visible. It took him a moment to collect himself. “And once again it is my ignorance that will disgrace me. I do not know what I want, only that I want it! As a member of the priesthood, I heard much about sin but was not given the opportunity to practice it.”

Despite the need that threatened to overwhelm me with every movement his body made against mine, I snorted. “People do seem to prefer that their priests are not sinful, it’s true.”

“It is not fair to laugh at me, Olly! It is the truth. I would do many sinful things to you, and do them often! And in inappropriate places besides—”

I decided to make amends by digging my heels back into the mattress so that I could grind up against Myrhydion. The tightness of his hands on my shoulder and the urgency with which he thrust back proved how serious he was in his desire. He tugged at me and I let him roll us over to press him against the mattress, fumbling with the fly of his trousers. How on earth had he fooled anyone as a curate?

I got my answer a second later as I got my hand around his cock. That voice! It was almost musical. My own erection went entirely neglected as I concentrated on eliciting another moan from him. I could imagine putting up with the hard wooden pews without complaint, simply to hear him do the reading... or better yet, lead the congregation in song—

Myrhydion placed his hand over his mouth, squeezing my shoulder in warning. “Olly, you must not—The door is open and we will wake Duhywynt and I do not think it well that he see us like this.”

Looking over my shoulder I was startled to see he was right. The door had been entirely forgotten. I paused a moment to listen before I shut it, but the cottage was silent. “All clear.”

But the silence had settled between us, too. Myrhydion put his arms around me at once, but there was a hesitation in it that hadn’t been there earlier, and he was serious, even as I kissed him.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Perhaps it is a foolish worry, but it is one I cannot quite dismiss. It is true a man might change his mind in seven years, but to go from offering me friendship to treating me as a lover in so short a space as this, I worry. Olly, you had a chance to kiss me earlier and did not. Is it possible that this does not reflect your own wants, but your desire to—” he hesitated “—make up for the past?”

I leant on one elbow so that I could brush his hair back from his face and soothe out the crease in his forehead with my fingers. “I did not kiss you earlier,” I agreed. “I wanted to, and if Duhywynt had not showed up, I probably

would have. But just like I gave up stories, I thought that it would be better not to kiss you to show you that I am aware of my actions. I offered you my friendship for the same reason. I want you to trust me, Myrhydion. To rely on me. And then—” I pressed my mouth again to the hollow of his neck. “I have to admit. This knight’s motives may not be entirely pure.”

Myrhydion gasped, arching eagerly against me. “I am happy—happy beyond all measure!—to hear that. Olly—yes, kiss me more—Olly, you may remove your garments if it pleases you, I will overlook the impropriety of a knight appearing before his prince in a state of undress—”

Myrhydion was pliant. Wonderfully so. He moulded himself to my body with an eagerness that spoke not of need but of a desire to please. Even the slightest touch could evoke a muffled gasp, and I marvelled at his responsiveness even as I settled between his legs. Myrhydion’s reactions made it clear that he’d never been touched this way, never done anything like we were about to do together.

“How do you want me?”

Myrhydion’s eyes flickered open. “Want you? As a lover does, Olly—or do you mean how much?”

I held our cocks together, making him gasp at the sensation of contact. “Skin to skin, just like this?” I asked, thrusting against him leisurely. “Or would you like my mouth around you? I could be inside you or you me—”

Myrhydion’s eyes flickered closed again, his body arching into my touch seemingly of its own volition. “I do not know what I want. You must teach it to me, Olly.”

My hips jerked forward all on their own. “Anything I want?”

“Especially what you want,” Myrhydion said. “So that I might do it to you and do it better.”

I smirked at that, leaning down to kiss his mouth roughly. The idea of doing anything I wanted to his incredibly receptive body was hot beyond belief. “I’ll be right back.”

I was really, really glad I’d thought to stock up on lube before leaving Australia. True, I hadn’t expected to meet anyone in Aberdaron, but I hadn’t been able to imagine finding it in the local store—or even buying it if they did. In this case, the village grapevine was a decided disadvantage.

I'd have to ask Harry what he did, I decided as I crept carefully back down the stairs. I was especially careful to be quiet as I passed the bathroom—this was not the time for Duhywynt to wake and decide he needed attention—but made it back to Myrhydion's side without issue.

He was lying just as I'd left him, his dark hair pooled out on the duvet behind him. "It is strange indeed that after not seeing you for seven years such a short parting must yet seem so cruel. What is that you coat your fingers with, Olly?"

"Feel for yourself." I ran a teasing finger down the vein that ran the underside of his erection.

"It is cold! I do not know if I like it, Olly."

I laughed, letting my hand circle him. "And now?" I asked as I pumped him.

"Now—" Myrhydion matched my rhythm, thrusting into my hand. "That is—that is not unpleasant—"

I settled back between his legs as I continued to stroke him. With my free hand, I traced over his hole, giving him the chance to catch my intention before pressing a finger inside. Myrhydion was tight around me, and as I watched, he bit his lip. Pain or pleasure? I sought his prostate, scanning his face for any indication I'd found it, but all I got in return was a pained gasp. I let him go, wiping my hands. This was too much for the first time. I should—

"Why did you stop?"

I raised an eyebrow at Myrhydion. "It's not fun for me if you're not enjoying it. We'll try something else."

"And what if I was enjoying it?" Myrhydion sat up. "I think I should have a vote in what we do."

"You were chewing at your lip with the expression of someone getting stitches without anaesthetic—"

"To keep silent! Would you have me wake Dewey?"

"There are other ways you can show appreciation you know! You lying there like a limp fish is doing nothing for me. This is about as sexy as a rectal exam."

Myrhydion flailed, gripping my arm to haul himself upright. "Well it's okay for you with your two functioning legs! Or did you think I was dragging myself along your floor for the enjoyment of it?"

I blinked. “You crawled just before.”

“Not so. I can rest my weight on my knees, but movement is uncertain. The King’s wish was that no *morgen* may walk on the land, and the magic effects his command by making our limbs unresponsive out of the water—what do you do now?” Myrhydion clung to the headboard as I tugged the duvet out from under him. “Do you seek to upend me onto the floor? That is no way to treat a lover or a friend!”

“Wrap yourself in this.” I flung the duvet at him. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Is breaking both of our necks your plan? Because I do not think it a very good one.”

I was too busy to even roll my eyes. Navigating the path to the shore was one thing in daylight. At night, it was a totally different proposition and that even without the challenge of carrying Myrhydion, the lantern and my backpack.

“To give up a warm bed and warmer companion for this! Truly, Olly, I am not sure I want any part in this.”

“Trust me.” I very carefully felt my way down the last of the stairs. The old lantern swung erratically from one hand, alternately lighting then obscuring the path in shadow. I had to hope for the best, and it was with decided relief that I heard the crunch of pebbles underfoot.

“We have reached the shore! Take me to the waves. I would feel the water against me once more.”

“One moment.” I carefully set Myrhydion down.

He untangled himself from the duvet with complete disregard for it. Did *morgen* simply not feel the cold? “Now, Olly.”

This time I did roll my eyes. “Yes, Your Highness.” It was lucky that this was part of my plan. As hot as Myrhydion was, I didn’t think I had the energy to carry him about all night and do the things I wanted to do to him. “Is the water to Your Majesty’s liking?”

“It is strange.” The moment that the waves ran over Myrhydion’s feet, he stood free of my support. “I never felt the chill of the water like this, even in the heart of winter. Was it always so? Or am I unused to it?”

I swallowed. The light of the lantern did powerful things to the curve of Myrhydion’s back and the outline of his arse. “Only one way to find out.”

“You are right.” He gripped my arm and then released it. “I would swim a while.”

“I’ll be waiting in the cave,” I told him.

He favoured me with a glittering smile and strode purposefully into the waves. The dark sea closed over his head with barely a ripple.

My sigh was so loud I startled myself. The duvet felt extremely inadequate without its precious cargo, and I continued my way across the shore, wondering what was wrong with me. I finally had Myrhydion exactly where I wanted him—and I’d given him the chance to swim away?

I wondered even more in the scant comfort of the cave. I’d dressed hurriedly to make the journey to the shore, and as I took off my clothes for a second time that night, the cold air added another layer to my uncertainty. I sat on the edge of the pool of water, where Myrhydion had kissed me for the first time. The stone was cold and the water colder. Was I about to add hypothermia and exposure to my medical history? The ambulance people would be sick of me.

The sudden wave as Myrhydion broke the surface made me gasp. “Some warning!”

Myrhydion sized me up slowly. As his gaze took in my nakedness, I felt warmth start to pulse through me, my body reacting at once to the interest in his eyes. “This is what you had in mind?”

“You didn’t think I carried you down here just so we could go fishing?”

“Who am I to claim to decipher your odd moods? Perhaps the old urge to discover a smuggler’s cave came over you again.”

“Odd moods?” I protested. “I don’t have—” My throat was suddenly dry. Myrhydion was wading through the water towards me without any hesitation at all.

There was absolutely no uncertainty in the way he gripped my hips, and I eagerly wrapped my arms around him, bringing his body against mine. In comparison to the water he was not as cold and even the water seemed to be losing its chill as we ground against each other.

“Fuck yeah—” After being teased almost to completion then neglected entirely, my cock ached. It would have been so easy to take myself over the edge with a few strokes, but more than completion, I wanted to feel Myrhydion against me. I pulled back.

“Olly, what—”

It was high tide, the pool overflowing. I stood in the shallows. “Stand with me? I want to feel you—feel all of you—”

Myrhydion’s dark eyes glittered as he pulled himself into the shallows. “This was your intention?”

“Yeah.” I licked my lips as Myrhydion joined me, lifting his damp hair carefully over his shoulder before pressing his body against mine. Although shorter, he had longer legs than me so our erections nestled against each other happily. “You’ve never once listened to me when I told you what to do. Why should this be any different?”

Myrhydion’s laugh sent warmth crashing through my entire body. “It was always our way when children that you would lead and I would follow.” This time, it was his hand closing around my base.

“Not without considerable commentary.” I followed suit, sliding my fingers over his length before beginning to pump him. “Down here?”

“No one will hear us.” Myrhydion caught my lip with his teeth, teasing before deciding he did want to kiss me after all. “Olly, you are a marvel.”

His mouth was gloriously warm in comparison to the rest of me, but when he broke the kiss to look down at our bodies moving together, I buried my face against his neck. His mouth had made just one part of me warm, but his voice, his incredible laugh, had caught me up in a sea of heat. Deliberately I retraced my earlier progress. There was a place here that—

“Olly!” Myrhydion’s free hand gripped my shoulder, and he swayed, thrusting shallowly into my hand. “That is—yes, that is very—”

His hands, slack against my cock suddenly remembered their task, and I moaned myself, the sound muffled against his skin. I was so close—

But Myrhydion’s attention span had never been the best, and I was distracting him. We did not move as one, but as two disparate currents. Instead of feeling frustrated when Myrhydion’s rhythm fell short of the speedy finish I wanted, the teasingly erratic nature of his touch was exciting all on its own. I came, splattering across his chest and mine.

When I came back to myself, I was kneeling in front of Myrhydion as he stroked my hair. “Olly, you are magnificent! I have not seen anything I liked half as much as you just now!”

I smiled. Myrhydion's cock was pressed into my cheek telling me just how much he'd enjoyed my climax. "Surely the prince isn't about to be outdone by the knight?" I teased, discovering my voice was hoarse. "How do you want this?"

Myrhydion's response was immediate. "Find that place in me you found before."

I coated my hands with the lube with no question. Confidence had always been a turn on, and Myrhydion knew without any doubt how to check my boxes. Or was it that he'd always been the model for my mental checklist? Then he moaned, and I wasn't thinking of checklists or anything else but his voice.

The fact I'd come made no difference. Myrhydion's pleased gasp made my cock stir with need. He was vocal in his wants, and I felt every sound he made like a caress. Eager to wring more sounds from him I added a second finger to my explorations, and then, when I needed more sensations, took the tip of his cock into my mouth. He came almost at once, with a joyous cry.

His legs shook, and I had a moment's warning to stretch out my hands to catch him.

Myrhydion collapsed on me with distinct satisfaction. "Olly, that was—I am glad, so glad, that you do not want to be friends."

I smiled, stroking his hair as I gathered him against me. I didn't feel the chill of his skin, just a warmth that seemed to fill me up entirely. "Me, I'm glad that you didn't change."

I've got no idea how long we were content to sit tangled in each other. Eventually, however, I had to move. Damp sand is not a turn on.

Myrhydion laughed at my attempts to brush the sand off. "It is no use, Olly. The sand loves you too much—see, you only spread it further."

"It's all right for you, with your thick *morgen* hide," I complained. "You probably don't even notice."

"That is not true. I have spent so long from the water that my skin has grown delicate enough to be irritated by such trifles. But it is easily fixed, Olly." Myrhydion slipped back into the pool. "See? The water will wash away the sand."

“It’s cold.”

“Would a true knight complain of the chill?” Myrhydion raised an eyebrow at me. “I suppose I must offer to warm you.” His tongue darted quickly between his lips, evidently not unhappy with the thought.

That got me interested. I carefully lowered myself into the water. “Holy—how on earth are you not frozen?”

“It must be that a *morgen* is hardier than a man,” Myrhydion decided. “Or you have grown too used to Australia’s hotter climate. This is nothing.”

Once the first shock of the water faded, it was not as cold as I first thought. Not that I was telling Myrhydion that. “I’m freezing. And I think you said you were going to do something about that?”

“Yes,” Myrhydion agreed. “I did.” He pressed his mouth against my neck, starting his own exploration of my jaw. “Let me warm you, Olly.”

He managed to combine the jobs of ridding me of sand and warming me, splashing the sand away and then using his mouth to take away the chill of the water. I moaned happily as he worked his way down, doing an excellent job of getting my blood pumping. “Myrhydion, I—”

The hand tangled in his hair suddenly met the water’s surface. Looking down I discovered I could no longer see where Myrhydion’s mouth went. He’d sunk beneath the water’s surface, his hair floating up and obscuring what he did. I could feel his hands, tugging my legs further apart, but not see him—

“Oh fuck.”

Smooth warmth had enfolded my cock.

“That’s—only warming part of me—”

Myrhydion squeezed my thighs warningly, and I gripped the rocks on either side of me, holding myself back from thrusting into his mouth. “God—I, fuck. How—”

A *morgen* doesn’t need to come up to breathe, my brain helpfully supplied. My hand settled in Myrhydion’s hair, urging him to move with my shallow thrusts. He did not seem to struggle at all with my length, and the feel of his mouth working up and down over me was perfection.

And still I wanted more.

I found Myrhydion’s hand, tugged him up. He came immediately. “Was that not to your liking?”

“It was very, very much to my liking.” I kissed him bluntly. The taste of me mingled with the salt-water was distracting, and I almost lost my train of thought entirely. “But I want to have you up here with me. I want to hear you.”

Myrhydion hummed happily. “You have something in mind. Well, I am always ready to hear your plans.”

“Trust me.” Unwilling to let go of him entirely, I groped with one hand until I found the lube. “You will like this.”

I was not wrong. The cave echoed with his pleasure, every stroke I made bringing forth new crescendos. No conductor of any orchestra ever gloried in their music as much as I did the sounds Myrhydion made. He gave himself up to being pleased as enthusiastically as he did anything else, and I felt his pleasure as if it were my own. Even the feeling of being buried within him, the tremors of his climax rippling through my skin, was second to his song.

Myrhydion floated happily in the pool as I towelled myself dry. “This was definitely one of my better ideas, do you not agree?”

“Credit where credit’s due.” I flicked the towel at him. “It was my idea to try the cave.”

“It is a shame it did not occur to us to do this earlier. When you consider how much time we spent down here; that is a lot of opportunities wasted.”

I snorted as I sat down on the duvet. “I don’t know that Nan would have approved. We were young.”

“It is not the nature of elders to approve of anything the young do so the young may as well give them something to disapprove of,” Myrhydion pointed out practically, only just catching the towel I threw at him. “What is the use of giving me this? I will only get wet again.”

“I’m not *cwtfching* you until you dry off.” I settled back on the duvet.

Cuddling was an effective incentive apparently. Myrhydion wasted no time in joining me. I stroked his hair as he curled against my chest, wondering what on earth I’d done to be so stupidly happy.

“Am I to your liking, Olly?”

I poked him. “I would hope you’d know the answer to that!”

“Comparatively speaking.” Myrhydion stroked his hands over my bicep. “You are my only, and I do not want to share you, but I do not think I am your only?”

“There were others,” I agreed. “Nothing long term. Nothing serious.”

“Do you not desire that?”

“I want it.” Without the Longing standing in the way I could say it at last, and I was surprised at how true it was. “I want it very much.”

“It is strange that you had not found it then. You are, after all, passably attractive—”

“Oi! Only passably?”

The resulting discussion necessitated a full physical exam and a working demonstration of my charm. Eventually, Myrhydion was willing to concede that I had some attractive points, and we settled back down.

As I gently removed Myrhydion’s hair from where it stuck to his shoulder, I remembered his question. “I wanted to fall in love, to find someone that could keep me in one place,” I told him. “But it was never quite right. He didn’t smile in the right way, or he was too kind.”

“Too kind?” Myrhydion looked over his shoulder at me.

I flicked him. “I expect I’m too used to putting up with your nonsense.”

His smile was pleased and sought my hand to hold as he lay back on his side. “It is sweet of you to think of such stories for me, but I know well that you did not remember me, Olly.”

“I didn’t remember you, but I didn’t forget you either.” I frowned as I toyed with a strand of his hair. “I was mildly obsessed with lifeguards for a bit,” I told him. “And then there was—you know *hiraeth*?”

“Mm.” Myrhydion sounded comfortably drowsy, using me as his pillow.

“The Longing was like that, only worse. No matter where we went, it followed us, pulling us from one place to another like a fish on a hook. I’d pretty much made up my mind this was how it was going to be, being jerked from a place just as I’d settled in, until—well, until now.” I pressed my lips to his shoulder.

Where earlier Myrhydion had given way instantly to my touch, now he was hard and unyielding. I frowned. “Myrhydion? Is anything wrong?” He had become very still and cold.

“Nothing is wrong.” Myrhydion’s answer was too quick to be entirely convincing.

I sat up. “Passing up a perfectly good opportunity to tell me off? Now I know something’s not right. Come on, Myrhydion. Talk to me.”

“You wish me to talk, Olly?”

“Of course.” I stroked Myrhydion’s shoulder. “That’s one of the reasons I thought of the cave. Down here you can tell me what’s on your mind without worrying about anyone overhearing.”

“I do not think I can. It is too monstrous to think—” Myrhydion shook his head rapidly as if to clear it. “I do not like this thought that you brought me down here to hear me.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to hear you? Your voice is amazing.” Of all the things to be insecure about, why would Myrhydion fix on his voice? I tipped his chin up so that he was facing me, leaning in to kiss his mouth. “I love your voice. It’s so powerful, so magnetic, so—you. Every word you say, every time you laugh or sigh, I feel it here,” I patted my chest, “as if it was mine. So you see, you don’t have to worry about your voice at all.”

Myrhydion’s laugh had a strained edge. “Not worry? Olly—no, do not ask me again to tell you about it. I—you tire me. You must remember, I am not as used to this as you. Go to sleep so that I might do the same.”

I did not believe him, but I had to admit that he was right about being tired. The longer we lay still, the less inclined my body was to move. Cocooned comfortably in the duvet, my arms wrapped around Myrhydion, I decided that I would tackle this again in the morning. For now, we had each other. That was more than enough.

Chapter Thirteen

Fools Rush In

Someone hammered at the front door.

I jerked awake, almost braining myself on the toilet bowl. As I sat up, the damp duvet sank lower down my body. I stared at the bathroom walls without comprehending them. What had happened to the cave?

Even more disorientating than my shift in location was the fact that there was no body resting against mine. “Myrhydion?” Ignoring the evidence of my eyes, I felt for him in the limp blanket. He couldn’t have gone. Not when we’d just found each other!

The knocks sounded again. “Olly?”

“Now in a minute!” Using the edge of the tub for support, I staggered to my feet. The duvet pooled at my feet, revealing that I was naked, except for a stray piece of seaweed. I pulled it off my skin and dropped it in the tub, empty except for a scattering of sand and a small hermit crab. Left behind by Duhywynt?

I wrapped myself in the towel hanging from the bathroom rail and stepped into the hall. I had to find them.

Before I could, however, the front door opened.

I don’t know who was more surprised. Rob and Natalie to see me in my towel, or me to see them at all. It seemed like weeks not days since we’d last talked, months since I’d even thought of them.

“Oh my God! Olly, we’re so sorry! We thought—” Natalie turned around, her face a bright pink.

“Knowing you weren’t fully recovered we thought you might have fallen over or something, or even just been asleep.” Rob smirked at me. “If we’d know you were taking a bath, we’d have come right in.”

“Uh-huh.” I brushed my hair out of my eyes and tried to work out whether it was ‘good morning’ or ‘good afternoon.’ “What are you doing here?”

Rob paused, but as Natalie seemed unable to speak still, explained on her behalf. “Nat’s bus is leaving in an hour and a half. I’m taking her to the pub for a last pint and a proper send-off. We thought you’d like to join us.”

“Sure.” Was it really time for Natalie to leave? “Give me a few minutes now.”

“You’ve got time,” Rob assured me. “Why don’t we wait—”

I shut the door before he could add ‘in the kitchen.’ I took a deep breath and panicked.

Myrhydion wasn’t in the spare bedroom or even Nan’s room. I pulled on my last remaining clean clothes alone in the bedroom at the top of the stairs. Where on earth had he gone?

Rob and Natalie were leaning against the side of the *Felin Uchaf* truck, looking over the view. “You can say a lot about Aberdaron,” Rob allowed finally. “But you can’t fault the landscape. Is that yesterday’s laundry on the line?”

I looked and discovered it was. “I totally forgot about it.”

“Leave it now. It’s damp. You’ll need to dry it out again.” Rob climbed into the driver’s seat of the truck. “Let’s roll out.”

“And if you’re ever in Greymouth—”

The bus swung over the last of the two stone bridges and was lost from sight behind the cafe, taking Natalie and her invitation with it. Rob and I lowered our arms.

“And then there were three.”

I glanced at Rob. “That’s not ominous.”

He laughed. “Worried? I was just thinking. With Joanne and Nat gone, it’s just you, me and Harry.” His smile faded.

Thinking of his visa? “It’s going to be quiet in Aberdaron without you,” I said. “I may go entire days without anyone dropping in to do my garden for me.”

Rob’s face relaxed and he snorted. “You might actually have to pick up a rake. The horror.” He turned back towards the truck, and I walked with him. “What happened to travelling?”

I shrugged. “I’d forgotten how much I like it here.”

“You’re still recovering from the boat trip. Once you’ve rested up—”

I shook my head. “In a weird kind of way, I think that was good for me.”

“Good. Like a bullet to the head is good for you.” Rob’s long legs carried him swiftly up the main street after the bus.

I had to jog to keep up. “I mean it. Facing my fears, seeing the worst that could happen, it really put things into perspective.”

“I thought Harry was the strangest person I’d ever met.” Rob shook his head. “Now I’m wondering if it’s an Aberdaron trait.”

I grabbed at his elbow. “Look, slow down. I need to stop by the bakery.”

I picked up bread, milk, and a copy of both *Llanw Llŷn* and the *Denbigh Herald*. If I was going to keep Myrhydion and Duhywynt in sandwiches and baths, I needed a job.

Rob stood behind me, jingling the change in his pockets. “You can’t read that.”

“I’m going to learn.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

Rob set a fast pace up the main road to the car park, almost colliding with Mrs Owens as she stepped out of the cafe. “No one said a word to me. Did you see that?”

He could swing himself up into the driver’s seat in one fluid move, but I needed to climb into the passenger’s seat. “You didn’t say anything to them.”

“Don’t start defending that behaviour! It’s deliberate rudeness. I’ve not once been greeted in the street here, except by Harry or the people up at *Felin Uchaf*—”

“If you make a habit of charging along like you did just then, I’m not surprised. They wouldn’t have time.”

“I wasn’t charging.”

I glanced at him as I did up my seat belt. Was it really possible that someone so sensitive to the nuances of other people’s behaviour could be so blind to his own actions? “You almost collided with Mrs Owens.”

“That was her fault. Should have looked where she was going.”

The answer to my question was a clear ‘yes.’ “Through a solid wood door? I’m sorry, Rob. I think expecting Aberdaron to develop X-ray vision is a little excessive.”

We drove back to the cottage in silence. I'd never heard Rob so quiet. Natalie had mentioned that a fresh batch of volunteers had arrived at *Felin Uchaf* that morning. Was that, combined with Rob's impending departure, driving home the transitory nature of his time in the Llŷn?

I slid out of the passenger seat, wondering if I should say something.

Rob surprised me by winding down the truck window. "Booked my ticket home yesterday. I'd been putting it off. Procrastinating. Realised I needed to just face facts." He sighed.

I raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head. "It just sucks. That four and a half months is going to end like this." Rob looked across the fields at the Jones's house. "If you run into Harry, you could mention it," he said with an attempt at indifference that would not have fooled anyone. "Just in case you see him before I do."

I deserved a medal for all of the eye rolling I did not do. "No worries."

The instant that the truck rounded the bend, however, I was sliding down the path to the shore. I'd had a hard time keeping up with the conversation at the pub. My mind had followed Myrhydion into the sea. I hurried to the cave, desperate to assure myself that he was all right, that I had no reason to feel so anxious.

The still pool gave me a feeling of whiplash. I'd been so sure I'd find him there! I slowly climbed down the steps, looking for any trace of him. There was nothing. Even the sand where we'd lain was so smooth that for a moment I wondered if I had not simply imagined it all.

My eye fell on a familiar red tin, placed where it might easily be overlooked. I pulled the top free eagerly.

Myrhydion had left me a note. I smoothed the paper flat, wincing at his handwriting—how was it possible that seven years of practice had not improved it at all?—and read.

Olly,

I do not want to write this letter knowing how much it will pain you. I do not want to cause you pain at all, but it seems that I may not avoid injuring you unless I pain myself and avoid you and hard as that is, I would do much for you. In comparison to the harm I have done you this seems very little,

and yet I do not see what else I can do. I am grieved beyond measure to part from you, but part we must.

You will want to know why. You will ask ‘what harm?’ and look at me with such feeling that I will tell myself that it does not matter and I will not be able to leave at all. I am sorry, Olly, but I must leave and I must do it without meeting with you or I will not do it at all. It is selfish of me, but if I cannot have your presence beside me, I would keep my place in your heart, and if you knew I think I would lose even that, so I would not tell you why. Please do not think too harshly of me. It is not through lack of feeling that I absent myself, but an abundance of feeling for you. I would have you happy, Olly, and I would have you forget me if you can and do not walk on the shore or on the cliffs alone and be careful always as the King considers you his enemy and does not like that you have three times escaped him.

Myrhydion.

Do not look for me on the shore you will not find me and I would not like you to tire yourself out so pathetically.

And if you do find another lover, do not bring them down to the shore either as I do not wish to be made jealous and morgen have an unfortunate habit of drowning men and I would not like to find out that I inherited it so if you must fall in love, do it somewhere distant.

It took me two attempts to read the note. Once just to make out his writing and the second time to try and make sense of his message. “He’s not serious.” He couldn’t be, could he? Not when we’d just found each other? “Myrhydion!”

The sun shone still, but it had lost all its warmth. I slid and stumbled from rock to rock, following the curve of the cliffs round, just as I had in our childhood expeditions. “Myrhydion! Please—tell me what this is about!”

I clambered halfway to Porth Neigwl before my legs gave out. I slid ungracefully to my knees, clutching an outcrop of rock. He hadn’t answered me. Was he serious in his intent to leave me?

Fear gathered in my chest, squeezing it tightly. I felt like I stood in the King’s underwater throne room, the water pressure bearing down on me from

every angle. My mouth was open, but I couldn't breathe. Hurt ripped through me like never before.

I clung blindly to the rocks as the Longing broke over me, worse than it had ever been. Before I'd only been without him. Now—

I curled up on myself, but the knowledge of how alone I'd become was inescapable. Now, I felt the pain of losing him.

Gravel crunched as a foot pressed down on it. I looked up immediately. "Myrhydion!"

Myfanwy stared back, plainly just as surprised to see me. Her long plaits swayed in arrested motion as she balanced precariously on the rock she'd just scaled. "Oh. It's you."

Why on earth would the presence of someone who clearly did not want to see me lift the pressure of the Longing, make it easier for me to breathe? "Wow, Myfanwy. Don't hide how you feel." Was I masochistic in addition to everything else?

Myfanwy scowled. "I'm still mad at you for losing the book, don't forget." She wobbled, and before I could warn her, jumped, landing easily on her feet. "What happened to you?"

I realised I was still hanging on to the rocks as if I was drowning. "Nothing happened to me." I sat up, shifting into a more casual position.

Myfanwy gave me a stare that would not have looked out of place on her grandmother. "Are you having a nervous breakdown? I know all about those."

"I'm not."

"Are you sure? I can help."

"I seriously doubt that." I paused. "You're eleven. What could you possibly know about breakdowns?"

"Now you're being just like everyone else!" Myfanwy tugged at a plait. "For your information, Oliver Evans, I know a lot about breakdowns. Stress isn't age dependent, you know! And it's worse for kids than it ever is for adults because we don't get any say in what happens to us! So I bet there are lots of eleven-year-olds who have nervous breakdowns, so there!"

My mind stalled, unable to process the torrent of information I'd provoked. "I never thought of it like that."

“Adults never do! They just go and do whatever they like and say that it’s for our own good—when they could just ask us what would be good and we’d tell them! But no—and now I’m going to be spending my birthday here and everything too! And Gran’s just all ‘there’s some children in the world that don’t get birthdays at all and we’ll invite one of your friends from home down here’ but no one ever wants to come because there’s no mobile signal out here and there’s nothing to do and I can’t even take a walk without people getting in my face!”

“This is a public path!” I protested. “And as a matter of fact, I was here thinking—”

“Having a breakdown—”

“Long before you came along!” I folded my arms. “So if anyone’s intruding here, it’s you!” I paused, as my own words sparked a memory. Someone had said something very similar to me.

“I don’t see your name anywhere on these rocks!” Myfanwy scoffed. “It’s a public place.” She sat down on the rock she’d jumped off and crossed her arms, defying me to make her leave.

Duhywynt, I realised. I was acting just like Duhywynt. The ridiculousness of it hit me, and despite of the ache inside me, I smiled. Was I really arguing with a kid over who was the most miserable? “This is a good place for brooding,” I said by way of apology. “Do you come here often?”

Myfanwy eyed me suspiciously. “Sometimes. When I want to think and I don’t want to be bothered.” She paused. “If you’re angry at someone, you can yell it at the cliffs. The sound comes back all changed. It makes you feel really big.”

I looked at the cliffs. “I imagine that my name has echoed off these rocks a few times recently, then?”

Myfanwy pursed her mouth as she decided whether or not to smile. I caught her eye and she gave up. “Once or twice,” she agreed. “Though I was mad at the King more than you. I mean, you weren’t supposed to know about the King.” She paused. “Who’s Myrhydion?”

I felt sudden heat rush into my cheeks. “That’s not important. What do you mean, ‘weren’t supposed’?”

Myfanwy just looked at me. “I’ll tell you if you tell me about Myrhydion.”

Was it my imagination, or did I spend an awful lot of time getting bossed around by people younger than me? After a moment, I forced myself to shrug. I had lost Myfanwy's book, after all. "Myrhydion's my friend, my very good friend. We played together on the rocks here as kids, and he's the lost prince in Nan's letter, but that's only my—" I swallowed, throat suddenly catching as I remembered how Myrhydion had credited me with his transformation. "Only how I call him."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

"Myfanwy!"

"People do not turn white and sick looking and come out to the Sweetheart's Vigil for a quarrel with a friend," Myfanwy said. "Even a very good friend."

"You're here," I reminded her. "Did your boyfriend disappear on you?"

"Don't have one," Myfanwy said with a toss of her plaits. "And I wouldn't want one even if I did. Boys are stupid." She paused. "Disappeared?"

The worst thing was that I could only blame myself. I had walked right into it. "He's just gone. He left a note, but it doesn't explain anything. We were doing so well, and now—" I let my hands fall helplessly. "The worst part of it is that I don't know what I did wrong. So even if I could find him—"

"It wouldn't make any difference."

"Look," I started heatedly. "You don't like me, fine. But—"

Myfanwy shook her head. "It's not that. See—" She pulled her legs up, perched on her rock. "—when bad stuff happens, people don't like the feeling that things are out of their control. It frightens them. So instead, their brain tells them that if they'd done something differently, they might have changed things. You know, if you'd gone to school instead of skipping, if you'd offered to do the shopping, if you'd got a better mark on the test, then maybe things would have worked out better, when actually no matter what you did, things would have worked out the same. If not the same day, then at another time, over something different—but it would still have happened."

I swallowed, remembering that Mrs Griffith had mentioned Myfanwy's parents having some trouble. "That's very wise."

"I think it's a load of rubbish." Myfanwy flicked her plaits over her shoulder. "I got it off the child psychologist. She has big glasses that make her look like a bug, and she smelled of peppermints. I hate peppermints."

“That’s not her fault,” I pointed out, pulling myself up to sit on my rock. “Even if they are completely foul. People can’t help being born without taste.”

Myfanwy’s lips flickered up briefly. “Anyway, she didn’t know about witches or magic either. So, I think she was wrong about what she said. Ordinary people might not be able to change anything—”

“But witches can,” I finished slowly.

Myfanwy nodded, looking down. “I wouldn’t do much,” she said, tugging at one plait. “It’s limited to what you can believe in. But if Mam didn’t have so many headaches and Da found a new job that wasn’t working nights...” She sighed gustily.

“I’m really sorry about the book,” I said. “I’ll think of a way to get it back—”

Myfanwy shook her head. “You couldn’t,” she said flatly. “And it’s not the book that’s the important part anyway.”

I paused. “If you’re saying that to make me feel better, you’re doing a terrible job.”

“Who wants to make you feel better? I’m just telling you the truth, Oliver Evans. And the truth is that for all you’re a natural witch, you are far out of your depth when—”

I found myself on my feet again. “What did you call me?”

Myfanwy stared at me. “If you didn’t know by now, then there is no hope for you!”

“You’re joking. I mean—”

“You think just because you’re a boy you can’t be a witch? Don’t be old-fashioned. Girls can be doctors and lawyers and be better at it than boys, so it just makes sense that you can be a witch, too.”

I shook my head, bewildered. “I’m not a witch! I don’t know the first thing about magic, about casting spells—”

“You know stories, don’t you?” Myfanwy was unimpressed. “Don’t you think it’s weird that all the stories you came up with as a kid turned out to be true?”

“Coincidence. Really, really big coincidence.” I felt like I’d been thrown in the deep end and that I was paddling madly to keep myself afloat. “And when

you think about it, it's only natural that I would invent stories about witches, given the stuff Nan kept in her cottage." Though I did not recall seeing the herbs before I'd already decided she was the Witch on the Cliffs. "Her garden, for example. It just looks like the sort of garden a witch would have. It probably went into my subconscious and came out as a witch."

"And you just imagined that Joanne took the stone the same way?" Myfanwy shook her head at me sadly.

"There's a really big difference between a lucky guess and casting spells on people!"

"At nine years old you set a guard around your Nan's house so powerful that it still keeps the King and all of his creatures at bay," Myfanwy retorted. "The only way for him to get into the cottage is to use the pipes. And—"

"Enough." I shook the loose gravel from my arms. "Enjoy your rocks in peace. I'm done with this place."

"Don't believe me?" Myfanwy was angry enough to follow me back around the cliffs. "The first part of a spell is to start with something true. Then you add the made-up bit, the thing you want to happen—the story. The more clearly you can envision it, the more detail it gathers, the more people that know it, the bigger its influence goes. And if the person speaking it has the gift for it, then the story comes true."

The back of my neck felt very cold. "I'm not listening."

Myfanwy came to a halt. "Oliver Evans was in such a hurry that he didn't watch where he put his feet and tripped."

My toes collided with a rock. I staggered forwards, my arms pin wheeling frantically. I didn't fall, but only just.

I took a deep breath, making sure I was absolutely calm before turning back to face Myfanwy. "That's just suggestion. People have done studies on it. That doesn't prove anything."

"It's even better if you have something you can hold," Myfanwy continued as calmly as if our conversation had never been interrupted. "That's why herbs and stuff are so good for spells. You already know that they're effective, so you believe the spell part, too. And that's why Sylvia's garden was full of foxgloves and everything else. Who ever heard of a witch with a lawn?"

"Why not go whole-hog, and plant the whole thing with brambles?" But my heart was still beating hard. "If what you're saying is true, why wouldn't Nan tell me? She was a witch! She had to have noticed—"

“She noticed,” Myfanwy said darkly. “Why do you think she came up with the hints?”

“So that the two of us would get to know each other.” My reasoning sounded incredibly weak in comparison to the cliffs behind us. “Maybe even become friends.”

Myfanwy’s expression showed exactly what she thought of that idea. “There are things Sylvia couldn’t do for all that she was the greatest witch to ever live on the Llŷn.” She folded her hands in the pockets of her cardigan. “Things that only you can do.”

“Me?”

“Don’t think it’s because you’re anything special, Oliver Evans,” Myfanwy said. “I’d be able to do them, and better too, only I’ve been here too long.”

“What do you mean too long? Shouldn’t it be the opposite?”

Myfanwy rolled her eyes. “If I meant not long enough you *twp*, wouldn’t I have said it? I know what I’m talking about. It’s the King.”

I laughed, incredulously. “That sad old man?”

“You see? Everyone else on the Llŷn knows enough to be scared of him. But you don’t know any better, and that makes you a threat to him.”

“Are you literally saying that me being ignorant is a point in my favour?”

“It had to be good for something.” Myfanwy flicked her pigtailed over her shoulder as she slid down her rock. “Fools rush in and everything.”

She’d evidently decided that she’d given me enough of her time, climbing back over the rocks without even a farewell. I watched her go with a distinct feeling of unease. “That’s ridiculous. The entire thing—just ridiculous.” I hadn’t invented Nan any more than I’d invented Myrhydion. “And the King’s practically senile.”

I put my hand in my jacket pocket, feeling the edge of Myrhydion’s note. *The King considers you his enemy and does not like that you have escaped him three times.* Myrhydion believed in him; that was for sure. Was protecting me from the King the reason that Myrhydion had taken himself away?

It would be just like him to be so dramatically pointless. I felt the tightness in my gut uncurl and drew a deep breath. It made sense that Myrhydion and Duhywynt would give the King more importance than he deserved. The man had been part of their lives since childhood, he’d probably taught them to fear him. And now?

I frowned. The King's power had been enough to toss Duhywynt and myself around in the waves like flotsam, but had that power been the King's alone? Duhywynt had been afraid to enter the throne room... If the *morgen's* fear gave the King his power, then—

I drew a deep breath. Old Mr Jones had said it. There hadn't been a wreck on the Llŷn for a century. What if it hadn't been my great-great-great-grandmother, but the fact that the *morgen* had already abandoned the peninsula—

Nothing like suddenly being up to your ankles in cold water. I gasped, hastily scrambling back up the rocks. Looking down, I discovered that while I'd been lost in thought, the tide had crept up on me.

There was a hoarse bark. A pudgy seal was settled on a rock nearby, watching me with what seemed like an inordinate amount of amusement.

I undid my shoes so I could squeeze the water out of them. "Enjoying yourself, Duhywynt?"

He barked again in response and dived into the water. When he surfaced, it was to smirk at me with his own face. "I did not believe anyone so foolish as to stand in one place long enough to be caught by the tide, but once again, Oliver Evans, you have proved me wrong."

"What, you just sat there and watched?" I retied my soggy laces, glaring at Duhywynt. "Couldn't you have warned me?"

"I thought it more diverting to wait and see what happened."

"You are such a brat." I paused. "Where's Myrhydion?"

"Ah." Duhywynt's smirk grew even wider, and he grabbed a rock to pull himself half out of the water. "He said I must not tell you, even if you begged me."

"But you know where he is?" I crouched beside Duhywynt.

"Even if I told you, it would make no difference. He has gone to the Deep where neither of us can follow."

Note to self: never trust Duhywynt with anything intended to stay secret. "The Deep, huh."

"I know not what you did to offend him so greatly that he removed himself back to our abandoned city, but he said I must tell you he has no wish to see

you. I think that must be a marvel in itself. To make Ridi so angry so soon after breaking the spell on him!”

“Did he say he was angry?”

Duhywynt paused. “No,” he admitted. “Not until I asked him why we must leave so quickly and without an adequate breakfast and then his anger was more directed at me. I am sure that had you been awake, it would have been a different matter.”

I could not imagine an angry Myrhydion letting the target of his anger sleep in. The thought gave me confidence. “Duhywynt, tell me about the King.”

“The King?”

I nodded, making myself comfortable on the rocks. “Everything you know about him.”

“Well... he is old, and he is not often in a good temper. He does not often leave the great hall in which he lives, and he has got out of the habit of moving, so it is difficult for him now to swim. He does not like to be reminded of it.” Duhywynt stuck his bottom lip out as he thought. “When I was younger the hall was filled with many fish and eels, all with stories to tell to him, but the King ceased to listen and even they are gone now. He hates man still for driving him from the land. Oh, and he is the King.”

“I gathered.” I paused. What was the best way to go about insinuating doubt in Duhywynt’s mind? “What makes him King anyway?”

“He is the King. That is all of it.”

“There’s never been another King?”

“I do not see that we need two kings. The one is king enough.”

“And no one ever challenges him or stands up to him? That doesn’t sound like a king. That sounds like a tyrant.”

Duhywynt shrugged. “I do not see that there is much difference between them. Who tells a king what he may or may not do?”

“A good king would listen to his people,” I said. “Maybe even have advisors to let him know what he should do. Just selfishly punishing people... I don’t think I’d want someone like that to be king of me.” I glanced casually at Duhywynt.

His expression was abstracted, clearly mulling over something carefully. I watched, in anticipation of his next words. If Myfanwy was right, and to break the King’s power I had to break the *morgen’s* belief in him—

“That was a very odd-looking boy that you were talking to on the rocks before.”

“I—what?”

“He had two long tails of hair and a strange way of speaking. I enjoyed listening to him scold you.”

My life. “That was Myfanwy.”

“Myfanwy. That is an odd name for a boy.”

“Maybe it’s just as well that she’s not a boy then.” I was rapidly losing control of the situation. “Duhywynt, listen. What would it take for you not to follow the King?”

“What on earth happens in that thing you call a head, Oliver Evans? That is the strangest question you have asked me yet.”

“Answer it. What would have to happen for you to stop thinking of him as your king?”

Duhywynt ruminated carefully, the incoming tide lapping at his body. “There would have to be a new king,” he decided at last. “But as the old king would have to go first, I do not think there is much danger of that.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Duhywynt laughed. “Do you propose to challenge him? That is too funny. You will lose. No one has power like the King’s. Can you command the waves to rise or fall at your whim?”

“No,” I admitted. “But Myrhydion can.”

“What?”

“You said no one has power like the King, but I’ve seen Myrhydion whip the waves up into a frenzy without even trying. So someone has power like the King’s—”

“My brother, Ridi? You saw this?” Duhywynt pulled himself up out of the water to grip my arm. “Truly, you do not jest?”

I nodded. “I don’t know if it was intentional or not, but I know that he did it.”

Duhywynt let go his tight grip on me. “It should not be possible. That magic is the province of the King and the King alone.”

“The King doesn’t have a monopoly on the sea. If Myrhydion can do it, maybe the King’s not as special as you think—”

Duhywynt shook his head. “I do not know how Myrhydion came by that knowledge... but I know that the King has long been jealous of his power. When—” He glanced over his shoulder at the sea behind him. “When the wind blew over these waters with icy breath and the sky was the same cold grey as the waters,” he confided in a hushed tone, “I sometimes wondered if the King had not sought some excuse to banish Myrhydion. Perhaps when his theft was discovered, the King was secretly glad that at last he might send him away. And though I knew those thoughts were disloyal still I could not silence them. I missed my brother much.”

I swallowed. Duhywynt’s expression was as subdued as the reflection of the rocks in the water around us. “Duhywynt... if I could persuade the King to let you back in the Deep, would you help me?”

“You persuade the King to do anything? That is less likely than you defeating him! And you defeating him—”

“Is unlikely in the extreme, I know.” I took a deep breath. Believe, Myfanwy had said. “I have a plan. But for it to work, I need your and Myrhydion’s help.”

Chapter Fourteen

Vegemite

Captain Cook had never put half as much effort into gathering victuals for his round the world voyages as I did preparing for my plan. I'd made a list and taken the bus into Pwllheli to get proper groceries and clothes. Then I'd packed and repacked everything in watertight bags, rehearsing in my mind what I would say and when.

The more I went over it, the more I wondered what the hell I was doing. This was the sort of thing that only happened in stories. Fairy tales. Did I really think it would work in real life?

Then again, my real life now included a Welsh siren with whom I wanted to live happily ever after and his brother, whose best friend was a seal. "It has to work. It just has to."

There was a splash from the bathroom and I took a deep breath, steeling myself. For this to succeed at all, I had to believe.

"Better not." Myrhydion stood in the bathtub looking down at Duhywynt. "If the King does not like that I know how to do this, he will be even less pleased that I teach you to do it."

Duhywynt sulkily wrung out his curtain of hair over the edge of the bath. "His displeasure would not matter so much if I could ride the water away from his rage at once. Do you not agree with me, Oliver Evans, that my brother should share his knowledge?"

With Myrhydion's back to me, I could see the exact amount of tension that formed as he became aware of my presence. It stung. "I think that if you want to learn that particular trick, you're better off doing it after the King has let you back to the Deep, Duhywynt." My voice sounded strangely hollow against the bathroom walls. "Myrhydion."

Myrhydion winced. He turned to face me, but his gaze did not make it all the way to my face. "Duhywynt tells me that you have a plan."

I had hoped that as his letter stated, once we were together, Myrhydion would be unable to keep up a façade of distance. I shifted to catch his gaze, received a shock as he looked away. "I do. I mean—" My mouth felt dry. I

drew a deep breath. Believe! “I think you’ll find it a marked improvement on my usual plans.”

Myrhydion’s mouth didn’t smile at all. I ached to change that, to reach out to put my hand on his shoulder, but his pained frown kept me distant. “This is not at all like usual, Olly.”

“I am anxious to hear any sort of plan that might restore me to my rightful home.” Duhywynt’s interruptions had never been more welcome. “Usual or not.”

I motioned to the towels. “Dry off and join me in the kitchen. I’ve left clothes here for the two of you.”

“Clothes?” Duhywynt bristled like a sea urchin. “I am not some land dweller that needs gaudy decorations—”

“Easy, brother.” Myrhydion laid a hand on his shoulder. “Olly has a reason for the request.” His eyes had settled on me, a speculative light in them. So close to what I wanted to see and still not.

This time I turned away. “Well,” I said, with briskness I didn’t quite pull off. “I’ll leave you to it.”

I leant against the kitchen sink. This was worse than I’d ever thought possible. Worse than the King’s anger contorting Myrhydion’s face. Watching him suffer, knowing that it was my presence that caused him pain—and not knowing why or how to stop this!

I heard the bathroom door open and quickly put the jug on. Finding mugs for all three of us and rinsing out the teapot allowed me to regain my composure. I’d been determined to show Myrhydion I could treat him as a friend, I reminded myself. Now was my moment to prove myself reliable. “So,” I said, looking over my shoulder. “What do you think of the clothes?”

“Wretched,” Duhywynt said, wriggling his way into the kitchen on his stomach. “Is it your goal to rub the skin from my legs? I can think of more straightforward methods of torture!”

“They fit well,” Myrhydion cut in. He preferred to sit and scoot himself backwards with his hands. “Except for Duhywynt’s hair, we look like anyone else on the Llŷn.”

The last time I’d seen Myrhydion on the kitchen floor, he’d held his arms out to be picked up. I turned back to the tea so that I didn’t have to watch him

laboriously work his way across the floor. What on earth had I done that he didn't want my help? "I wouldn't say *anyone* else... but the King won't know the difference and that's the important thing."

I heard the chair scrape against the floor as Myrhydion heaved himself onto it. "I hope you do not think that so simple a disguise will stop him from recognising us." There was a slight mocking note in his tone.

I smiled thinly. Even now, Myrhydion could not resist teasing me. "The point is that he recognise not just you, but the terrible influence I have over you." It was bittersweet. "I think that if the two of you show up, looking like you belong on land already, the King will see the danger of exiling Duhywynt from his home and be more likely to take me up on my offer."

"I hope so. To be exiled in clothing such as this would be unbearable." Duhywynt sat on the floor, making no move to help himself into a chair.

Myrhydion nudged him with his foot. "And what is it you offer, Olly?"

I took a deep breath. "A bargain. Duhywynt gets to return home. In exchange, I leave the peninsula for good."

Duhywynt's happy intake of breath was immediate. "The King must agree to that! Don't you think so, Ridi? He will say yes and I will be allowed home!"

I thought that I heard Myrhydion gasp, though his expression was blank when I looked at him. "But this is your home, too, Olly. It is not for us to ask you to leave—unless you want to?" His mask of disinterest cracked. There was worry in Myrhydion's frown and around the edges of his mouth.

I shook my head. "The Llŷn is the only place I've ever thought of as home," I said. "Which is why my plan has a part two."

Myrhydion's eyes watched me intently. Even Duhywynt had stopped fidgeting with his hated jeans to listen. Feeling myself in full command of my audience, I began my make-believe. "You see, in stories, whenever kings make important agreements, there's usually a dinner to celebrate, right? So, I thought we'd celebrate..."

A cormorant wheeled slowly over head. Not exactly an unusual occurrence, but ever since finding the blackbird in the hedge, I was unfairly suspicious of all kinds of birds.

"Just because there is a cormorant above you as you walk back from the chippy doesn't mean it's the same cormorant flying above you when you

went,” I told myself firmly. “And even if it was, that doesn’t mean it’s spying on you. It might just be after a bit of cod and some chips to take home to the wife.”

It would certainly do gulls a world of PR good if it turned out that the food they stole from unsuspecting beach-goers was then redistributed to the deserving. Were seagulls really the Robin Hoods of the Welsh coast? I pondered this as I made my way up the path.

Sir Spikesalot nodded in the breeze as I made my way up the path. I frowned as I opened the door. Leaving the Llŷn meant selling the cottage, and I couldn’t imagine anyone besides Nan willing to humour me and leave the thistle there. This had to work.

“I do not like this, Ridi.” Duhywynt’s voice sounded from the kitchen.

I took my shoes off in the hall, wondering if they’d heard me enter.

“It is only hair, Dewey. It will grow back.” There was no distance in Myrhydion’s voice as he spoke to his brother. “Besides, I would have had to cut most of it anyway. I am sorry, but in so many days I was not able to make any progress with that tangle. It is better to start again from fresh.”

Duhywynt sighed. “I do not mind this as much as I mind not being free to swim as I please. Do you really think this idea of Oliver Evans’s will work?”

I paused, my knuckles raised to knock against the door.

“There is merit in it,” Myrhydion admitted. “I was slow to show myself before the King. Without my weed, I felt most improper. My barnacles...” He sighed. “But I saw that it did not give the King joy to see me so changed.” Underlying Myrhydion’s words was a regular metallic click. “And that made me reflect. If there is any shame in my appearance now, it is his shame for forcing me from my home. Sent to live among the men, it must change me and change me it has. As it will change you if he drives you away. Showing yourself before him in the garb of those of the land... It will not be pleasant for the King to see his greatest supporter so. And I think that he will not be anxious to drive you further from your rightful home.”

“I hope you are right, Ridi. I have no wish to be banished any longer. But the rest of it? It is a great risk.”

“If anyone can make it work, it is Olly,” Myrhydion said. “He has a knack for these things. A gift. Besides, knights were meant to take great risks.”

I rapped on the door before Duhywynt could remind his brother that I wasn't a real knight. "Special delivery. Fish and chips for three."

"You might have saved yourself the trouble," Duhywynt said. "I only want fish. I don't eat chips."

I snorted. "Just wait and see. Right, Myrhydion?"

Myrhydion did not look at me. "They are not unpleasant," he admitted. "I hope you do not mind that I borrowed your scissors, Olly."

As the kitchen floor was already littered with weed and hair, it was a little too late for me to mind. I put my bundle of fish and chips on the table. "I'll get the broom."

Everything he didn't do hurt as much as what he did. I took the broom and dustpan out of the pantry wondering how long I could keep this up.

Without his curtain of hair, Duhywynt looked ridiculously young. He kept stroking his hair, distressed at the lack of things to hide behind. "And you promise me that I do not look absurd?"

"Knight's honour," I assured him.

Duhywynt stopped patting his hair. "That is as good as saying I do look absurd!"

"No one who didn't already know you would be able to tell you apart from one of the village kids."

"Ridi, Oliver Evans is insulting me!"

"From the perspective of the land, that is no insult, Dewey." Myrhydion brushed his brother's shorn hair from his clothes. "Please try to consider those other than yourself."

Duhywynt scowled. "I am not unconvinced that this is a private game you made at my expense," he said. "I am going to look for clothes I like better than these."

"You won't find any," I told him, getting to work on sweeping up his debris. "I only bought you the one outfit each."

Duhywynt didn't respond, worming his way out the door.

Leaving Myrhydion and I alone. I shut the door, my mouth suddenly dry. How was I to start?

“You are good with Dewey,” Myrhydion said before I could. “He has not had many friends and he is prickly. To be teased is good for him. As it was me.”

He’d hunched in on himself, knees up against his chest as if he needed something between us. I looked down at the broom. “We’re old friends. To act like this, as though we’re strangers. It doesn’t feel right.”

“It is our worst piece of make-believe,” Myrhydion agreed. “But I do not see what else we may do.”

His unhappiness was too real. His head and shoulders were bowed under the weight of it. His letter had been truthful in that regard—this hurt him as much as it did me.

I put my broom aside to rest my hand on his shoulder. “Look. Tell me what it is that has you so miserable? I might see something you don’t.”

Myrhydion sighed and sank lower. “It is because you do not see it that we can speak now! And I am selfish enough to not want to lose that before I must.”

“You’re not making any sense.” I bit my lip. I hated to press him when he was so obviously upset, but at the same time, I had to know. “Was it something I did? Something I didn’t do?”

“No, no, it is not you Olly.” Myrhydion placed his hand over my own. “The problem could never be you.”

I felt one fear ease and immediately be replaced by a second one. If it was not something I’d done, how could I change his mind? “What is it? The King? Duhwynt?” I hesitated. It was absurd, but he had spent several years impersonating a priest. “Your faith?”

“Why do you sound so doubtful?” Myrhydion flicked his head up fiercely. “I am extremely faithful! I am a *morgen*! We do not change our loves with the tide, Oliver Evans! It is you and it has only ever been you!”

With Myrhydion glaring at me, eyes shining, it was impossible to say that was not the faith I’d meant. Instead, I knelt to be level with him. “If there’s no one else—for either of us—then why?”

“It is precisely this reason—no, do not look at me so gently!” Myrhydion looked down, his hair hiding his face. “It is impossible for me to hide anything from you when you do, and I would not have you know this for the world.”

“Myrhydion, nothing you could tell me would change how I think about you,” I told him, squeezing his hand. “Was it something you did?”

Myrhydion's hand lay limp and unresponsive in mine. "Olly, I do not want to tell you."

"So instead you'll just decide what is best on your own? I did that, and you know how well that worked out. Please, Myrhydion! If treating you as a stranger is necessary to rebuilding your faith in me I'll do it, but I would much rather be your—"

"Do not. It is painful to hear you say it." Myrhydion lifted his hand from my own. "It is hard to keep this distance from you, but it is necessary. You would thank me for it if you knew."

"But I don't know," I reminded him. "And I don't want you making my decisions for me."

Myrhydion's mouth twisted painfully. "That is the heart of it! Olly—you would not forgive anyone who made you act against your wishes, would you?"

"Act against my wishes? Myrhydion, I was out before I kissed you—that's what led to me kissing you! So if you imagine that anything that happened between us in the cave was against my will—"

There was a loud thump from Nan's bedroom.

"Duhywynt," Myrhydion said. He was extremely pale. "He may have injured himself. It is faster for you to check than I—"

I squeezed his shoulder as I stood, finding his skin clammy. "This isn't over," I promised him. One way or another I was determined to find out what was causing Myrhydion such distress.

"What trouble have you caused now—" I came to a halt, watching Duhywynt squirm on the floor before Nan's wardrobe. "You're not serious."

"Who are you"—Duhywynt paused to gather energy as he wriggled—"to tell me what I may or may not be?" He succeeded in freeing himself from his jeans, kicking them in my direction. "Begone sackcloth!"

I looked down at him in bemusement. Before removing the jeans and T-shirt, Duhywynt had replaced them with clothes of his own choosing. "You can't wear that!"

"I like it much better. It does not cling so overly much, and I have increased freedom to move."

"But it's a dress!"

Duhywynt's chin jutted out fiercely as he folded his arms across the dress (white and gold daisies on a navy background). "And why not Oliver Evans?"

"Because it's a dress! And you're—" I looked over my shoulder to see that Myrhydion had appropriate Old Mr Jones's wheelchair to follow me. "You tell him, Myrhydion."

"Because crawling around in a dress is a lot more difficult than trousers," Myrhydion said promptly. "It will ride up and leave your skin exposed."

I stopped. Was that the objection of someone who had experience crawling around in dresses?

"Perhaps I prefer that to having my skin rubbed off my body entirely by this... denim monstrosity!"

"It is your choice," Myrhydion allowed. "But I would suggest, perhaps, a more sombre choice. We want the King to know how grieved we are—this black perhaps?"

Would Nan be outraged by this? I stood in the doorway, trying to picture how she would take this pillaging of her wardrobe. I couldn't help it. I smirked. She'd take it in stride, of course. The same way she'd taken all my flights of fancy and ridiculous make-believe—with fondness, humour and practicality. "If Duhywynt wants to borrow a belt for his dress, that might help stop it from riding up once we're in the water."

Myrhydion looked up at me then quickly looked away. It was too late—I'd already seen the start of what might have been a smile. This was as difficult for him as it was me. I swallowed. The fact that he'd stuck to it this long when I knew too well how bad he was at self-restraint...

Belief, I reminded myself. I was going to see him smiling again if it took all the belief I had.

My second journey to the Deep was much less eventful. Myrhydion had called forth a current that carried the three of us and my supplies all the way down to the Deep as easily as if we rode some sort of magical underwater escalator.

Even Duhywynt was subdued, either by the coolness between his brother and myself, or the thought of what was before us. He held Myrhydion's hand without prompting, looking, with his short-cropped hair and Nan's black dress,

like some sort of medieval refugee. “I do not know that the way to the city has ever seemed so long or so short before. Myrhydion, do you really think Oliver Evan’s plan will work?”

“Only if you cease asking such questions.” Myrhydion squeezed his hand in warning. “You do not chase after a fish thinking ‘I probably shall not catch it,’ do you?”

“I feel for any fisherman unlucky enough to find the King on the end of his line,” I said and Duhywynt barked with laughter.

“And I would not like to be the seal that made that catch!”

It was soon after that the crystal city came into view. This time, I had leisure to study the buildings. At first they’d seemed a single mass, but now that I looked I could see individuality in the arrangement of the windows and the amount of spirals on the roofs. The anemones that grew over the dulled crystal wall must have been arranged in patterns once, and had belonged to homeowners that were very proud of them. I looked up at the buildings as we passed. Which one of these had been Myrhydion and Duhywynt’s home?

“This was where we lived when we first came to the city, was it not, Duhywynt?” Myrhydion paused in front of square shaped building, slightly less neglected than its neighbours. “She that lived here was an old friend of our father’s and was kind to us for his sake.”

If we hadn’t been underwater, I would have caught my breath.

“I did not know that.” Duhywynt looked up at the house. “I did not know that anyone knew our father.”

“You were very young, Duhywynt. It does not surprise me that you do not remember.”

“I remember that this city was half-full, once. And that we used to make a game of picking a house and claiming it as our own. And then the city was entirely empty, and that game ceased to be fun... This is the house we lived in then, brother. See how nicely I have kept it?”

Myrhydion paused in front of the crumbling cottage, but I was not sure how much he saw of it. Was he wondering if he was about to be separated from his brother a second time? “You have done well, Duhywynt. Let us go to the King.”

I drifted alongside them, outwardly no different. Inwardly, I danced. It was a simple thing, but the knowledge that Myrhydion’s and my thoughts had

aligned so closely made me feel that it was possible to bring him back to my side.

First things first, however. The King.

The great doors of the grand reception hall hung crookedly. The King had not cared enough to repair them and the reminder of his capacity for violence made us silent as we climbed carefully through the gap between the torn wood. Inside, the trophies he'd taken from sunken ships were still scattered, left where they had fallen.

Duhywynt was first to enter, floating over to the throne and its covering of corals. "He is always on his throne. I do not know that I have ever seen him absent... Ridi, what does it mean? Has he gone?"

"You know the King better than that, Dewey." Myrhydion looked around the throne room. "He is not far away. In fact, I very much think he watches us now."

An unamused laugh broke like thunder over our heads. "Is it awareness of your king or guilty knowledge of your trespass that makes you speak so, Myrhydion?" I looked up, but all I saw was a small eddy, spinning in the water above us. "I have been aware of your movements ever since you passed the kelp forest, and your companions revealed your plans. You are here on some errand of villainy. Well, I am not so easily fooled! I have removed myself, so you may as well abandon your scheme."

"You do us wrong to assign such motives to us," Myrhydion protested. "Truly, liege—"

"Am I wrong?" The water spun faster, attracted a floating piece of weed. "You demonstrate your defiance by your very presence here! It does not please me to see Duhywynt here, in blatant contempt of my wishes and that is not the worst of your crimes! How dare you bring the Witch-son here!"

Duhywynt flinched back, pressing himself against the floor as if expecting a maelstrom.

I was perhaps fortunate in the fact that unable to manoeuvre myself through the water as the *morgen* did I could not control where I floated and so my start was not as noticeable. "I don't—"

Myrhydion held up a hand, giving me a warning look.

I fell silent. We'd agreed that Myrhydion would do most of the talking.

He placed a hand around Duhywynt's shoulders and bowed his head, not looking directly at the swirling water. "The full blame for the intrusion is mine," he said. "When the Witch-son told me of his wishes, I should have first sought your permission for the meeting, but I was so eager that my impatience got the better of me. I must beg your pardon."

There was silence as the water churned in on itself. I felt the current tug at my hair and reached for an outcrop of mussels growing on the wall to hold on to. Duhywynt's hand closed on the shirt Myrhydion wore.

Finally, the King spoke. "What is so urgent that you must forgo the respect due your king?"

No wonder the *morgen* had such a complex about the man. He would not shut up!

"The Witch-son tires of the dispute between his house and you. He would propose an end to it."

"Ha!" the King's loud bark echoed even underwater. "There is only one thing that could end our enmity, and that is his removal, forever, from this peninsula!"

"Fortunate then," Myrhydion said with quiet triumph, "that the Witch-son offers exactly that."

There was a long moment's silence. Then the spinning circle of water expanded. I clung grimly to the wall and my bag as the water whipped past me, threatening to scoop me up in its churning grasp—

—and felt a calm settle around me, the water as still as if I was submerged in a pool. Looking over my shoulder, I saw that although the water raged around them, neither Duhywynt's dress or Myrhydion's hair was tugged by the whirling currents.

I felt something lift within me. Myrhydion did not appear to have changed his stance one bit, still standing with his head bowed. But even though I hadn't seen him look my way, this was proof that he'd been paying attention, proof that he looked out for me even now.

Wrapping myself in this knowledge, I let go of the wall and turned to face the King.

The swirling water built to a crescendo in the middle of the hall and then died away. Left in its wake was what at first glance looked like one of the

figureheads from the wrecks—until he moved. The King did not speak or acknowledge our presence. Instead, he levered himself across the hall to his throne. He leant heavily on a staff of driftwood, dragging his legs forward one deliberate step at a time as if they were made of the rock they so closely resembled.

“Speak,” he said, when seated. “The Witch-son has conditions for his offer, does he not?”

Myrhydion took this as permission to approach the throne. “The Witch-son has become aware of Duhywynt’s plight. In return for allowing my brother to return to the Deep, the Witch-son will give his word to depart from the Llŷn altogether.”

“That is all he asks?” The King stroked his beard. “I wonder that you would agree to treat for such a bargain, Myrhydion.” His smile was a drawn sword. “It seems against your interests.”

“It is in my interests that Oliver Evans is out of the sphere of your conniving,” Myrhydion said shortly.

“You would follow him, no doubt.” The King sneered as his gaze fell on me, then travelled thoughtfully back to Duhywynt, fidgeting with the sleeves of Nan’s dress, and plainly nervous. “I must think on what you ask.”

“Think?” Duhywynt’s distress was evident. “But—”

“It is not much that he asks,” Myrhydion said, promptly. “You may restore Duhywynt to the Deep as easily as you banished him.”

“A king does not easily change his mind, Myrhydion. It would do you well to consider that.” The King leant back in his chair, letting the weight of his words settle over the hall.

Duhywynt glanced unhappily at Myrhydion. His thoughts were clear. Had we fallen at the first hurdle? But even before I saw Myrhydion squeeze his hand, I knew that the King did not intend to turn us away.

“What is it that the Witch-son carries?”

Myrhydion glanced back at me as if he’d entirely forgotten that we’d brought gifts. “In the old days, it was our custom to mark such an exchange with a meal, was it not?” Myrhydion tucked his hair behind his ear, tone so demure that red flags must have been raised in anyone who knew him. “Since this exchange may well be the last exchange between the King beneath the Cliffs and the Witch-family that lived on the cliffs, I ordered Oliver Evans to

obtain a meal suitable for a King. Duhywynt is here because you cannot have a banquet with just three people and besides, if he is to be exiled he might be allowed just one night in his home first.”

The King leered at me. “You are that eager to obey what Myrhydion orders?” he said at last. “An ardent suitor indeed!”

I saw Myrhydion’s shoulders tense. “The suggestion was a good one,” I cut in quickly. “And it seemed to me that this was an occasion that should be marked somehow. Besides, the King beneath the Cliffs sitting down for a meal with the grandson of the Witch on the Cliffs is an occasion in itself.”

The King snorted, amusement obvious on his face. “And have you prepared a feast fit for a king?”

I looked down at my bag. “It’s not much,” I said. “I don’t know your tastes, but knowing how strongly you feel about the Llŷn, I thought you might enjoy its bounty.”

“Bounty?”

“Apples, picked from the trees of Bardsey. Bread, baked just this morning in the bakery of Aberdaron. Damson jam from Nan’s pantry. Cheese—”

The King raised a hand. The water before him began to warp, expanding outwards. I watched the strange bubble start to expand, trapping Myrhydion and Duhywynt within then stretching out to fill the entire hall. I stood still as Myrhydion and Duhywynt did as the strange pressure slid over me. Only when I was inside it, did I understand. The King had created a pocket of air to force the water out.

Time for part two of the plan.

“Duhywynt, help me make a table of this.” Myrhydion patted a smooth section of plank, not waiting for the King’s permission.

I watched the two of them lift the plank across two figureheads lain on their sides. I’d seen evidence that *morgen* possessed unusual strength, but never actually seen either of them use it. Very lucky, I decided, that Duhywynt hadn’t been using it when he’d chosen to pitch the tin at my head.

Meanwhile, I had an unexpected problem. While surrounded with water, the wetness of my clothes had not been a problem, but in the presence of air they clung to me like sandpaper. I wrung them out the best I could, but I was still irrevocably damp. One of the disadvantages of dating a *morgen*? I could live

with this, I decided. Invest in a few quick drying shirts and keep a healthy supply of Echinacea on hand to ward off colds.

Looking up, I found the King staring at me. “Have you such strength, Oliver Evans?” His lip curled in an echo of the man I’d almost followed off the cliff.

What was his game? “You know I don’t.”

“Living in these waters have forced our people to grow strong, fighting the currents. These cold, cruel depths taught us to be hardy against the elements. No human could have survived what we were forced to endure. Driven from our land into the unforgiving sea.”

“It’s such a shame,” I said, blandly. “That the city built between shore and sea was claimed by the waves, otherwise you could have lived there.”

“And shared it with our oppressors?”

I bit my lip to keep from replying that the King had been the oppressor in that case. “Some land is better than no land. History is full of conquered people living with their conquerors and both people mingling and taking on the customs of their new neighbours—”

“Olly, I should like your opinion over here.” Myrhydion waited until I was at his side to hiss at me. “What are you thinking? Do not argue with the King, it will annoy him.”

“I’m just being logical—”

“You cannot be logical with him. He is too old, his mind too set in its established furrows, his heart chilled to coldest ice. Set the table, and do not talk to him again until we’re ready.”

We’d borrowed Nan’s best tablecloth, and the multiple zip-lock bags, tins and shopping bags we’d employed had done a fantastic job keeping our banquet dry. Working in tandem with Myrhydion to set the table reminded me of the evening we’d shared doing the dishes together in Nan’s kitchen. As much as the memory hurt, the knowledge that we worked so well together still made me even more determined to succeed. This time, I would not fail him.

The King’s scowl did not relent at all, but as his eyes fell on the freshly baked bread from the bakery, his mouth softened slightly and his eyes took on a distant look. Thinking back? I reigned in my hope. If we seemed too eager, the King was bound to refuse.

“There. I think we are ready.” Myrhydion beckoned Duhywynt and I to sit. I took the foot of the table, with the head facing the King, scowling down at us

from his throne. Duhywynt and Myrhydion sat either side of the table. “With the King’s permission, I shall start.”

The King waved his hand. “Permission granted.”

Myrhydion sliced the loaf of bread and carved slices of chicken in silence. Duhywynt took the time to readjust his dress, pulling the skirt straight and shifting the belt. Myrhydion handed him the King’s plate, loaded with the fresh fruit I’d bought in Pwllheli and Duhywynt carried it to the throne, still picking at his skirt.

The King did not immediately take the plate. “I almost did not know you, Duhywynt. You look like a human urchin.”

Duhywynt scowled. “If I am to be banished, this is how I must look,” he said. “I do not choose to live among the humans, I am made to.” He thrust the plate towards the King angrily.

The King’s scowl did not relent as he took it, but I noticed that his eyes followed Duhywynt back to his place at the table.

Myrhydion elbowed me. “Your meal, Oliver Evans.”

“Thank you.” All the manners that Nan had drilled into me insisted that I should wait for Duhywynt and Myrhydion to have their meals before starting, but Myrhydion had drilled me on *morgen* etiquette beforehand. ‘The King will wait to see you eat. You must not be offended. Banquets in the past were often an excuse for treachery.’

I raised my glass of wine to the King, taking a sip once I received his nod. Putting my glass down, I started to eat, my reply to Myrhydion flashing through my mind. ‘I’ve seen Game of Thrones,’ I’d told him. ‘I know how this goes.’ Suddenly, the joke seemed extremely flat. I did not feel easy in the grand hall.

Duhywynt, at least, did not seem to share any of my hesitation, picking up the slices of fresh fruit that Myrhydion had put on his plate happily. “This one is good. The apple.”

“You will like the pear, too, I think. And the strawberry.” Myrhydion wiped his brother’s cheek. “You do not have to eat it all immediately, Dewey.”

With the King so distant, it felt less like we were having dinner, more like we were his entertainment. I was mostly silent, listening as Duhywynt prattled and Myrhydion scolded, wondering what impact they made on the King. I tried to avoid looking too much at him.

“More wine!” the King said suddenly.

As Myrhydion stood to refill his glass, I risked glancing at the King again. Was it my imagination, or had his stony face relaxed? “Are you enjoying the meal?”

“It is a bitter reminder of what we lost, but the food of the land is sweet nonetheless. Leave the bottle, Myrhydion. I would finish it.”

It was a good thing that Duhywynt had inured me to *morgen* rudeness. I accepted the King’s statement without even a slight smirk, and the meal continued.

“And now, dessert.”

The cake had not made the trip to the Deep well. I unpacked it, reflecting that it only had to taste good—and Myrhydion had considered the fruit more important. “The King spoke often of our lost orchards,” he explained. “I think that he will appreciate the familiar tastes much more than the new.”

Myrhydion set the packets of biscuits, Vegemite and ice cream on the table. “Duhywynt, wipe your hands before you take this. You are serving a King.”

The King did not wait for us to eat first this time. His cheeks were slightly red. “You play the part of page well, Duhywynt. It would be a shame indeed to lose so willing a servant.”

I did not think Duhywynt would tolerate that, but I’d forgotten how greatly he revered the King.

“You do not have to banish me,” Duhywynt began earnestly. “I have learnt to rue your anger, and I would be a most willing subject. I would happily shun the Witch-son.”

I looked up from my cake. After everything I’d done for Duhywynt—

Myrhydion nudged me with his knee. “It is not for us to decide the will of a king. We have spoken to him of our desires, and now we must wait for the King, in his wisdom, to inform us of his decision,” he said with complacent certainty, thinly spreading a slice of bread with Vegemite. “Besides, Duhywynt, you may find much to like, living in the human world. You will have companions your own age, for one. Human children have many games. You will learn to ride a bike, or to skateboard, or even the fine art of ringing the doorbell, then running away before you are seen.”

Duhywynt’s grimace as he took his seat to find the Vegemite sandwich waiting for him could easily be attributed to a reluctance to return to the land.

“That is no comfort when I would rather be here, below the waves, with the friends of my own making!”

“Do not hound the King, Dewey,” Myrhydion said, spreading his own piece of bread. “He has much to consider.”

I took a much more generous serving of Vegemite. “I’ll buy you a season pass to an aquarium,” I told him. “You can go and watch the seals as much as you’d like.” Maybe he could transform into a seal and simply live in the aquarium? That’d solve a lot of problems...

“What is that you have there?” The King’s question was sudden.

“The biscuits?” Myrhydion tucked his hair out of his face. “These are chocolate digestives, much better than their name implies. I have given you some—”

“What you are putting on your bread?”

Duhywynt abruptly stuffed his chocolate digestive in his mouth whole.

I wished I could follow his example. It would be much easier to keep my expression composed if I was eating. “The Vegemite? You wouldn’t like it.”

“It is not for you to decide what I like and what I don’t,” the King said.

“Oliver Evans did not mean any disrespect, my King,” Myrhydion said quickly. “He speaks the truth. The Vegemite is a delicacy from Australia, a far distant land where he has spent seven years sojourning. It is not to everyone’s taste. In fact, it took Duhywynt and myself some time to appreciate it. Many people never do.”

If the King had seen Duhywynt’s face just then, our plan would have been all over.

“Of course, there are equally those who love it immediately,” I said, quickly. “But given the nature of Vegemite, I would be unwilling to serve it to the King beneath the Cliffs on an occasion such as this.”

The King hesitated.

Myrhydion took a careless bite of his Vegemite sandwich, nudging me beneath the table. I did the same.

“I will eat it,” the King decided. “And you will not deny me.”

I lifted up the jar of Vegemite. “I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“If you do not give me the Vegemite, I will not agree to your bargain at all!”

I wavered.

Duhywynt joined in the discussion easily. “Meaning he will agree if you give it to him! Please, Oliver Evans, it takes a lot for a King to change his mind—”

“Vegemite is Vegemite,” I protested. “And he hasn’t said he agrees—”

“It does us no credit to argue like this,” Myrhydion said. “How about a wager?”

I blinked. “A wager?”

“Many great Kings of the past have been known to indulge in a challenge with their guests,” Myrhydion continued smoothly, tucking his hair behind his ear. “Making a wager was not considered a breach of a King’s rule, even if the wager went against the King’s previously stated command, as all parties stood to gain.”

The King frowned. “The terms of your wager?”

Myrhydion screwed up his mouth as he pretended to think about it. “Well— if you are able to eat the jar of Vegemite, Oliver Evans will leave the Peninsula as previously stated and Duhywynt will remain banished.”

“Ridi! Do not be so cruel! I have been banished long enough—” Duhywynt’s wail of protest was immediate.

“It was just an example, Dewey. But if the King does not finish the jar, you will return to the Deep and Oliver Evans will stay where he is.”

I did my best to look as though the terms hadn’t been my own idea. Imagining the cliff-top cottage as the property of someone else was a very grim thought, and I chewed my lip with real concern. “I don’t know. It will be a long time before I can acquire more Vegemite. That is my last jar—”

“It is not the potency of the food but his own greed that holds him from sharing it? Ha!” The King’s snort was derisive. “I saw through your trick, Witch-son. You have not fooled me.”

“Test the potency of Vegemite yourself then!” I returned angrily. “I agree to the wager.”

“Oliver Evans agrees! What do you say, my King?” Myrhydion was smoothness personified.

The King paused. “Before I agree, I would see him attempt it.”

I swallowed. “I only have the one jar...!”

“A spoonful then? That will allow you to see that there are no tricks on our end while still allowing you enough of the jar to be a challenge.”

The King leant back in his throne. “I would see him eat a teaspoon of it.”

All three *morgen* watched me as I reached for a spoon. On my part, I was apprehensive. I liked Vegemite just fine, thinly spread on toast, the salty taste mixing with the melting butter. But I’d never attempted to eat it straight. Already, I could smell its distinctive yeasty scent.

I caught Myrhydion’s eyes on me. This wager was our best chance at remaining together. I had to do it, for no other reason than that. “Here goes.”

I dug the spoon into the Vegemite and stuck it into my mouth before I could rethink this.

It wasn’t too bad—at first. The smoothness of it was unexpected, the silky texture of margarine sitting in my mouth. I could do this easily, I decided, as the salty flavour started to hit my taste buds. It wasn’t that bad.

And then the salt kept coming. I fought to keep my face straight. It wasn’t just the salt, it was the darker, umami like flavour of the paste, overpoweringly strong. I blinked quickly to clear my watering eyes, staring fixedly at the brightly coloured label on the jar. ‘Concentrated Yeast extract’ it said. It was concentrated all right. Concentrated on destroying my mouth!

Myrhydion’s hand found mine beneath the table. I smiled, even despite the horribleness happening inside my mouth, forcing my tongue to swirl through the Vegemite, break up the paste enough to swallow it. Myrhydion might say that he did not wish to be with me, but everything he did proved otherwise.

Finally the burning sensation in my mouth subsided. I licked my lips. “Well, King beneath the Cliffs?”

“I agree to the wager. Myrhydion, bring me the food and a spoon.”

I reached with relief for a slice of apple and discovered that Duhywynt stared at me. “Do I have something on my face?”

“You are not natural,” Duhywynt told me. “It must be your Witch-grandmother. No ordinary person could eat that as you have done!”

“Take my advice. Never lose a bet to an Australian,” I told him. Inwardly, I hoped he was right. The King had taken the jar in hand and was helping himself

to a spoonful. My presence on the Peninsula rested entirely on the King's reaction to the spread.

Myrhydion resumed his seat beside me. I reached for his hand at once. If this failed—

The King coughed, spitting the spoonful of Vegemite out onto his plate. "What is this?"

"Vegemite. The same that you saw all three of us eat."

The King's grimace made the harsh lines of his face even starker. "Foul! It is the foulest slop I have ever tasted—this cannot be food meant for men!"

"I told you it was an acquired taste," I reminded him.

"Water! I must have water—"

"Oliver Evans did not need water to finish his spoonful," Duhywynt pointed out suddenly. "And you have not even managed that."

The King looked down at the jar before him.

"If you forfeit the challenge, then you must abide by the terms we made," Myrhydion reminded him.

"This was your plan all along! You cunning wretch! You have sunk low in your time among the humans, Myrhydion, you have become little more than a despicable blackguard, a villain, a miscreant—"

"Be it as that may, you must eat the Vegemite or agree to our terms. You have given us your word, and the word of a king is not to be trifled with." Myrhydion stood, meeting the King's insult with triumph.

I'd never seen him look more regal. I did not wonder at all that my younger self had so quickly believed him a prince, only that no one had seen it before me.

The King grimly reached again for the jar. I stood beside Myrhydion, Duhywynt leaning against his brother's side as we waited in silence for the result of the King's second attempt.

He grimaced, swallowing it down as quickly as he could, and digging in the jar for another spoonful. Going through it too quickly to taste? It was a tactic we hadn't anticipated—

The King raised the jar and threw it across the door. "You tricked me! You set this up—the three of you conniving—"

Wind sent the food still set out on the makeshift table flying. The three of us were forced back by its sudden strength, pushed almost to the edge of the bubble of air.

“You will pay for this outrage!” With a loud crash, the plank that was the table fell to the ground then whipped up into the air, spinning rapidly towards us.

“For any man to break the laws of hospitality is a crime!” Myrhydion let go of my hand. He stepped forward, hands out in front of him. “For a King to do it is injustice indeed!” The wooden board came to a halt, spinning in the air before us. “If you harm a single one of the three of us, you allow us to claim what justice we see fit! Is that what you want, King beneath the Cliffs?”

The King stood before his throne, fists clenched. The anger on his face was so great I half thought he would crack under the strain of containing it. “And it is my conniving that you wish to protect the Witch-son from? Better he knows the truth of his heart’s companion!”

Myrhydion flinched. The wooden board dropped to the ground as his hands shook.

“Myrhydion!” I placed my hand on his arm. His paleness alarmed me. How had the King managed to rob him of his confidence so entirely? “I’m here,” I reminded him. “Whatever the King says, it won’t change that.”

Myrhydion took a low breath that sounded almost like a sob. He put his hand to his mouth, bending his head so that his hair hid his expression from my view. I felt a lurching sense of fear. Was this it? What Myrhydion was so afraid of me learning that he had taken himself away from me?

“Such tender care,” the King gloated. “You should be proud, Myrhydion, that your song resulted in such lasting affection.”

“His song?” What had that to do with anything?

“As did that of the sirens of old, our song has an irrevocable effect on those who hear it,” the King said. “You have heard Myrhydion sing, and you will not escape his song, even should you travel to the ends of the earth! Not that you will want to leave his side. You are compelled to stay, your affections forced from you.”

“Are you saying Myrhydion made me fall in love with him?” The accusation was absurd. “And you think I’ll believe that? It’s stupid—Myrhydion would never do that!”

“I thought only of saving your life.” Myrhydion’s quiet words might have been shouted. They echoed in my ears like a storm. “I gave no thought of the consequences. I did not even know that the consequence might be this...”

“But the price of the hearing *morgen* song directly is going mad,” I said. “And you cured me of that—look at me, Myrhydion, this isn’t true. I won’t believe it.”

“Did he cure it? You have been driven from one place to another by a restlessness that has no cure, have you not?”

My heart squeezed in fear. I’d never talked about the Longing to anyone besides Bethan and Myrhydion. To hear the King describe it—

“It is soothed when you are with Myrhydion, but in his absence it pains you again. Do not be deceived, Oliver Evans. You have not found love—unless it is love to feel yourself bound against your will to serve another. No matter how much that other regrets his decision, you must grow to resent the loss of your freedom, as it will slowly destroy him that he may never know if the caresses he receives from you are truly meant or merely the means of soothing that all-encompassing yearning—”

“No more!” The water churned again, but this time Myrhydion was at its centre. “I will not hear it—I cannot!”

Duhywynt dived towards me, and I grabbed hold of him as the rushing current threw open the doors of the hall, sending the ancient timber flying off their hinges.

“With time the echoes of my song will fade. Olly will find something to fill the gap—he is much too good to be caught in your trap!”

“It is not my trap but yours!” the King crowed from his throne. “Every word you speak seals his fate even more strongly—look at his face! He knows it to be true.”

I swallowed. My heart protested that it was impossible, but my mind—my mind was stuck on the fact that the Longing had never been as bad until I’d felt Myrhydion’s absence...

Myrhydion looked at me. What he saw in my face decided him. His mouth pressed together so tightly that the lips were almost completely colourless, and he brought his hands together once more.

“I did not want this for you, Olly.”

I felt the current of water like a kick in the stomach. Next thing I knew I was gasping for air in the bathtub, Duhywynt sprawled on top of me. As he wriggled, freeing himself from the confined space, I shut my eyes. Worse than the kick, or Duhywynt's knee in my ribs, was the betrayal. But worse, even than that, was the Longing, threading through every fibre of my body with razor-like pain.

Chapter Fifteen

The Ceffyl Dŵr

“How the King rages! I am not sorry now that Myrhydion sent me away.” Duhywynt had worked a chair across the kitchen floor and was now draped over its back, looking out the window at the storm. “The King is wonderfully cross. I hope he exhausts himself soon, I am more anxious than ever to see my friends.”

I watched him from my seat at the table. Duhywynt’s words should have provoked—something. Annoyance at his thoughtlessness, or envy of his carelessness and his simple, childlike desire to see his beloved seals.

“I wonder if they will know me, dressed so strangely and with my hair shorn? But I suppose it will not much matter to them what I look like.”

The only thing I felt was Myrhydion’s absence. The pain of the night had become a dull ache that settled over everything. Even the sight of the tea towel, draped over the back of a chair to dry, gave me a fresh stab of pain. We’d been so happy that night in the kitchen...

Or had we? Thinking back now, I had to wonder how much of my enjoyment then was due to the pleasure of hearing Myrhydion’s laugh or the softness of his voice. Was that the natural attraction of lovers? Or was I trapped, caught by a force no man could resist? I couldn’t deny that I’d gone to extremes, carrying Myrhydion down to the shore in the dark so that I could hear his voice... And God, his *voice*.

“No matter what, they will be better company than you, Oliver Evans.” Duhywynt still wore Nan’s black dress, but the sight of it no longer struck me as funny. “You have not said five words to me all day.”

Had it been a day? I thought back. If it hadn’t been Duhywynt hounding me for breakfast I might not have got out of bed at all. And there had been lunch, too. “I don’t have anything to say.”

Duhywynt looked back over his shoulder at me. Confusion flickered briefly over his face. Then he looked quickly away. “No,” he said slowly, and I saw his frown reflected in the window. “I suppose you don’t.” He hesitated. “I thought that you talked far too much, most of it nonsense, and I would prefer that you were quiet. But now I find that I do not like your silence at all.”

Was this the moment when Duhywynt discovered empathy? I smiled tiredly, a reflexive movement of my mouth that had no joy in it. “Is the King telling the truth, Duhywynt?”

His mouth drooped unhappily. “That, I cannot say. He would not hesitate to lie if he could make you believe it. But Myrhydion would not.”

That was the most damning evidence. Myrhydion believed it. Myrhydion believed that his presence compelled me to act against my wishes and had removed himself to prevent influencing me further. I’d seen for myself how much that decision hurt him. He wouldn’t do that to himself—to me—unless he believed he had no other choice.

Duhywynt looked back up at the sky. “The rain is slowing. I believe it will stop soon.” He carefully slid onto the floor.

I put my cup of tea down. “Like a lift?”

Duhywynt tilted his head. “I would have thought you would prefer to avoid the associations of the sea. I was not going to mention what a long time it takes to reach the shore when you are not able to walk on land at all.”

“Very thoughtful,” I assured Duhywynt. “But the Longing has been making my life miserable for seven years now. Looking at the waves is not going to change that.”

Duhywynt’s weight on my back as he told me all the places he wished to visit now that he could help somehow. The child’s prattle was a wall between me and the thoughts that I did not want to hear. To think that I would find Duhywynt’s rambling a source of comfort! Nan was right, the Llŷn was strange indeed.

“Place me on my feet.” As soon as Duhywynt’s feet touched the damp sand of the intertidal he was off and running, whooping with delight. I watched him take off towards the waves, splashing madly through the rock pools—no one had ever said *morgen* were graceful—and tried to remember that I had once been that young, that carefree.

Past happiness just made me more keenly aware of my current bereft state. I watched the water close over Duhywynt’s head with a sense of finality. He had not looked back once. I would be quickly forgotten, I decided. And perhaps it was better that way.

I turned, starting to climb the path to the top of the cliffs.

A siren rent the air. Its eerie howl froze me in my tracks, and I turned, scanning the waves for its source. It was only when it cracked and broke that I realised. No siren, but a voice.

“Duhywynt!”

I nearly lost my footing, scrambling back down the path. Ignoring the twinge in my ankle, I made my way over the rocks in the direction of the cry, reciting my first-aid training in my head as I did. “Duhywynt, where are you? Call back if you can hear me!”

An unrestrained sob called my attention to an outcrop of rocks, on the village side of the shore. Duhywynt’s small form was just visible, bent over as he wailed.

A shudder of fear went through me. Was that dark mass on the rocks weed or—or had the King taken his anger out on Myrhydion? I plunged through the water to reach Duhywynt.

“Duhywynt, is he—”

Duhywynt’s voice cracked mid-wail. “Look, Oliver Evans! Look on what the King in his anger has done.”

I didn’t see it at first. Expecting to see Myrhydion I was confused by the grey. It was the patch of silver so fine that it was almost white, that made me realise that what I looked at wasn’t rock, but a sad, badly battered shape. “A seal?”

“My seal!” Duhywynt’s sob drew my attention back to him. “She was my best friend! And now—now she is dead!”

This was the sweet-tempered grey seal that Duhywynt had praised so highly? I knelt beside the animal.

The seal moved slightly. It took putting my hand to its cold body to understand. The waves and wind battered it even after death. I carefully smoothed down its fur, pausing when I came to a sharp piece of wood implanted fully into the seal’s chest.

I drew in my breath. There was only one place in the bay that had an ample amount of wood fragments.

“He did not have to kill her.” Duhywynt’s voice was thick with his grief. “She was heavy with cub, and she could not have swum fast!” His round face crumpled, and he rounded on me. “Oliver Evans, this is your fault! You should

never have fed the King Vegemite, it would have been better that you left the Peninsula, and it is your fault—yours! Do not look at me as if you are sorry for me! It must be your fault because if it is not—” He broke off.

“It’s not your fault,” I told him. “There is no way that this is your fault.” As Duhywynt’s face crumpled again, I set my hands on his shoulders. “You could not have known the King would choose this revenge. None of us could have.”

Duhywynt looked down. “I have been witness to his cruelty, and yet that he would hurt so sweet a creature simply because he could... It is a bad thing to anger a king.”

“A real king would never hurt an animal to get revenge on a child,” I said. “This isn’t right, Duhywynt. We’ll come up with a plan. This won’t happen again.”

Duhywynt did not appear to be listening. Removing my hands from his shoulder, he carefully scooted himself to the seal’s side. With extreme care, he smoothed down her fur. Finally, he sighed. “This will not happen again because I will not give the King any reason to find fault with me. You would be wise to do the same.”

Pushing aside the arm I held out in help, Duhywynt rolled off the rock and into the water. I stood, slowly, wrapping my arms around myself. The rain had stopped, but the cloud hadn’t lifted. The grey seemed to go right beneath my skin.

“There you are! I was getting worried.”

I blinked. With my head full of *morgen*, seals, and kings, it took me a moment to recognise the figure waiting on my doorstep. “Rob?”

“I thought you might have gone for a walk, but then I realised no one would walk in this weather. I was on the brink of breaking in to check that nothing had happened to you.”

“I’m—touched by your concern.” That was what I was supposed to feel right?

Rob leant over me, jiggling the change in his pockets as I searched for the keys. “Everything all right? You don’t look so good.”

I opened the door. “There was a seal on the beach. Dead.”

“That happens. Fact of living in the wild. You can’t get upset about a dead seal.”

“This one was special.”

Rob looked at me. “You don’t look so good. Sit down, Olly. I’m going to make you some tea.”

“You? Make tea?”

“First time for everything.” Rob put his hands on my shoulder to guide me to the chair. “You kick back and relax while I figure this out.”

Rob hadn’t given me a choice. I sat, wondering why this didn’t bother me. “You need to fill the kettle before you turn it on.” Was it because Rob was looking out for me? Or had days of doing Myrhydion’s bidding unconsciously numbed me to this?

Rob put my mug in front of me, tealeaves floating on the top. “I don’t know what you’ve got to look so sad about. Your visa isn’t going to expire, you’re a UK citizen!”

I smirked tiredly as I picked up my cuppa. “No, no visas to worry about. Just death, duties, taxes and finding a job out here that I could actually do. I’ve been rejected by every business in the village.”

Rob stared at me. “You never mentioned any of that before.”

I looked down at my mug. “Didn’t know how much this place meant to me,” I admitted. “Now...” Could I even bear to stay here, in such close proximity to Myrhydion?

Could I not? I needed to see him, needed him desperately. The King’s revelation could not change that.

Rob leant against the wall. “With a bit of alterations, you could turn this place into a good B&B. It’s pretty enough, got that rustic charm people can’t get enough of. Upgrade the bathroom, get a bigger TV, webpage and a Wi-Fi connection, and you’re set. You’ve got a great location. Far enough away from the village that you got clear views and a bit of privacy, but close enough that people can walk down to pick up toothpaste from the shop.” He spoke to the open window, looking at the road.

“You’ve thought about this.” I took a cautious sip of tea.

“Harry and I’ve talked about what I’d do if I stayed.” Rob shrugged. “Don’t know if you noticed but—”

“I noticed.”

“We’re kind of—ah.” Rob slowed to a halt.

I couldn't muster enough feeling to smirk. "Maybe that counts as subtle in the States, but here? Though I guess it doesn't hurt that Harry told me about you two."

"What did he tell you?"

I replaced my mug, leaning my elbow on the table. "That you'd had a fight. He didn't go into details, but with your flight booked, I can imagine—"

The Jones's truck rattled down the road. Rob turned to me. "Since you asked—"

He did not leave anything to my imagination. I got the complete history, the argument for, the argument against, and a thorough breakdown of every single thing Harry had ever said to Rob complete with critical analysis of how he'd looked as he said it.

I tried to listen. I really did. But not knowing if what I felt for Myrhydion was real or forced from me really put a damper on my ability to be interested in Rob's love life. Especially when he kept glancing out the window.

"Don't get me wrong. It's been a great four months. Didn't even want to come here, but they need people with building know-how at *Felin Uchaf* and I'm an engineer, so I figured I'd do a week—and then Harry." Rob toyed with his cup, staring moodily at his reflection. "I'm a city person, but seeing the place through his eyes—I really did fall in love with it." He sighed. "It'd be one thing if I thought he didn't care, but he does and that's what kills me—"

I nodded mechanically. Love was no guarantee of happiness. In fact, it seemed the opposite. Myrhydion and I had been happiest together before either of us had broached the subject. I remembered Bethan's opinion on marriage with a twinge of sadness. She'd be off her flight now. I'd Skype her once Rob left.

But Rob showed no signs of leaving. "And to even qualify for the visa, you have to have been together for two years! They ask for proof. I know a guy who had to ask his girlfriend's family for their Christmas photos to show they weren't faking the relationship. And they had an eighteen-month-old kid! A thousand pounds just to apply. It's a racket!"

It was dark outside now, but the sound of a truck drew his attention to the window. "You see who that was?"

"If it's dark enough that we can't see whose truck that was, then it is also dark enough that Harry is not going to see that the truck that *Felin Uchaf* lend out to their volunteers is still parked outside my cottage," I told him.

He stared at me.

“That is why you’re still here, right? I mean, I agree Harry has many good qualities, but it’s been three hours and you’ve been looking out the window the entire time.”

“I—damn.” Rob pulled his hand over his face. “I’m not normally like this. But this place—” He shook his head. “Home has its problems, but it’s not short of options. I mean, a night out with my friends, we go to a gay club, I can be certain that someone’s gonna say hello. I take care of myself, I work out—I don’t exactly go looking for attention, but it’s nice to have the affirmation, you know? Here—no one ever says anything. Four months, and I can count the number of times Harry’s complimented me on one hand!”

“Harry’s never been demonstrative,” I warned him. “Even as a kid.”

“I get that. I really do—at least, intellectually. But I still—I need to hear it from him. Instead, he told me not to drive over to see him because people had noticed the *Felin Uchaf* truck parked outside his place a lot! I figured, if maybe he thought we were spending time together, he’d be jealous and might say something—”

“That’s a storyline even Hollyoaks wouldn’t touch.”

“Maybe you’re right. I just—geez. I was never this insecure until I came to the Llŷn, and now look at me. I don’t even know what’s going to happen after I go back to the States. Is this it? Or—”

“It’s not me you should be telling this to.”

“But how can I talk to him?”

I stood up. “Follow me.”

From the back garden, the lights of Jones’s farmhouse were visible across the fields. “You look at that light,” I said. “Then you put one foot in front of the other and repeat until you are standing outside the front door. Then—”

“All right, I get it.” Rob looked across the fields. “You’re saying I’m over-complicating things. Maybe you’re right.” He took a deep breath and tried to laugh. “One foot in front of the other. I can manage that.”

“Do you want a torch?”

“A what? Flashlight? No, with the light to follow, I’ll be fine.” Rob swung himself over the fence.

I quickly lost sight of him in the dark but stayed by the fence until his footsteps had faded. I shook my head. Harry and Rob inhabited such different worlds. They had a long struggle ahead of them to make things work and no guarantee it would. And still, I envied them. “Haven’t I stood around feeling sorry for myself enough for one day?”

But I couldn’t make myself move.

My eyes fell on the Bardsey apple. Beneath its branches, I’d heard Myrhydion for the first time, little dreaming that the cry I’d heard on the wind would have such a devastating impact on my life.

If I’d known—

I breathed out. Would it have made any difference? As a child, I was friends with Harry, but as possessively proud of Myrhydion as if he’d been my own invention. I was only beginning to understand as a teenager that Myrhydion made me feel things no one else did. Things—including love?

“Don’t think that!”

But the thought uncurled like the surf over the shore, skimming along faster than my mind could contain it. It might have been love. It might have been the potential for love. It might have been neither. I would never know, now. Even the memory of that time was tainted with the knowledge of what we’d had and lost.

I swallowed, feeling the evening chill against my raw throat. Did it matter? Being with Myrhydion was enough! I had affection for him regardless—

You must grow to resent the loss of your freedom, as it will slowly destroy him that he may never know if the caresses he receives from you are truly meant.

It mattered. If knowing had already turned the memory of our youthful explorations into this painful ache, then being with him watching as my presence slowly broke him down—that was a pain I did not want to feel. For both of our sakes, we had to stay away.

It hurt. Just the thought of it, and I felt the same pressure that I’d felt standing in the ruined undersea hall of the King beneath the Cliffs—

“No.”

This was not the Longing. My heart started to beat as I became aware of the change in my surroundings.

Cloud had crept into the garden. Not the misty grey cloud that gave the hills an atmospheric covering, but a thick white cloud that rolled in from the sea. I looked around the garden and made a chilling discovery. Already the cloud had obscured the light of the Jones's farmhouse. Moments later, and I couldn't even see the fence.

I stood still. This was far too much like what I'd see on the cliffs. This had to be the work of the King—

"Calm." I took a deep breath. "The King can't hurt me."

This cloud had to have some purpose. I followed the curve of the house around to the front garden where it seemed thickest. A sound echoed dully through the night, muffled but growing louder as it approached. I squinted at the direction I thought it came from. Who drummed at night? And who drummed in the middle of a field, surrounded by cloud so thick that you couldn't even see—

"Hooves."

That wasn't drumming, that was—

I threw myself out of the way just in time.

The body of the white horse went through the hedge as immaterially as a ghost, but I heard its hooves strike the ground near my head. I rolled to my feet to see it continue its charge forward, slowing to make the turn. Thin wisps of cloud clung to it where the hedge had pierced its form, but even as I watched, the cloud settled back into one solid mass. The *Ceffyl Dŵr*, the water horse.

It turned, fixing me with eyes the same colour as the ocean depths. I ran.

I am not much of a sprinter, but the hooves of the *Ceffyl Dŵr* and the sound of the building ocean behind me was motivation and then some. I scrambled through the front door and slammed it behind me.

Big mistake! I'd just seen the horse slam through the hedge like it was nothing! I crouched on the rug before the door. If I got lucky, and the horse jumped through the door, then I might be able to escape its hooves and duck outside to escape—

There must have been magic in the house I knew nothing about. I felt the door shudder as it was hit—not by hooves, but by what sounded like an immense wave that rushed up past the house like the incoming tide. There was no answering retreat, however. Cautiously, I crawled into the living room and squinted out the window.

The wheelbarrow was upended, and the flowerbeds were a sodden, soaking mess. There were muddy hoof prints in the path and streams of water running down the windows. There were puddles everywhere but no sign of the *Ceffyl Dŵr*.

“Just like any ordinary horse, Mam?” I leant against the window, drawing in a shaky breath. That was more excitement than I needed for one night.

In the distance, I could see the lights of Jones house. Suddenly, I had a horrible thought.

“Hello?”

“Harry! It’s me. Is Rob with you?”

“Olly.” Harry’s greeting was decidedly cool. “Have you not spent enough time with him today?”

“What?” Holding the phone, I stared out the window at the Jones’s house with a feeling of disbelief. “Do you watch Hollyoaks, Harry?”

“If you’re calling this late to talk soap-operas, I’m going to—”

“It’s important!” I drew a deep breath. “Rob left here a while ago to walk to yours.”

There was a pause on the other end. “But that’s only a ten minute walk.”

“I’m afraid something’s happened.” I bit my lip. How to explain my close-encounter? “Some cloud came up. It’s gone now and I didn’t think of it immediately—”

“I’m going out to look for him.”

“I’ll help!”

“Meet in the middle and go from there. Bring a light. Got your mobile?”

“It drowned when I went off the boat.”

“Then stick to the fence and I’ll meet you in the middle. Don’t strike off alone. When the cloud comes in thick, you could lose yourself and spend a night wandering.”

I dug the old kerosene lamp out of the pantry, pulled on a waterproof jacket and climbed over the fence. The paddocks did not drip water as the cottage garden did, but here and there I saw the edge of a hoof print or a puddle.

Where was Rob?

“Olly! Over here.”

Harry had a very solid looking torch in one hand. He beckoned me over. “No sign of him. But look—put your lamp down.”

I did as I was told. Harry turned his torch off. I frowned, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the dark. This wasn’t going to help—“Well, fuck me.”

Harry nodded grimly. “Fairy lights.” Across the paddock, was the gentle glow of light, beckoning us towards a house—where no house had ever been. I turned to look back to the Jones’s house, and found that the cloud had settled in once more.

“He’ll be lost. Either wandering into circles or fallen into a ditch, or worse.”

I swallowed. I’d been trying not to think of that, but fairy lights never lured travellers to anything good. “That’s the direction of your pond.”

Grimly, we started walking.

“Stick to the fence,” Harry cautioned me. “You’ll be no use at all if you wander off, too.” He kept a fast pace, marching after the beckoning lights.

“Rob!” My voice sounded shockingly loud. I winced, hoping I wasn’t about to bring the hooves of the *Ceffyl Dŵr* down on us a second time. “Rob! Can you hear us? Rob!”

It felt like forever that we searched. As soon as we got close to the lights, they vanished, fading away into the cloud. The ground had become increasingly soggy. I bit my lip. I had no idea if Harry had seen the hoof prints left in the damp dirt.

“Rob!” He bellowed so suddenly I jumped. “You *twp* American! Where are you?”

There was a damp cough somewhere in the cloud. “Typical—”

“Rob!” Harry charged forward.

I couldn’t move. I let out my breath slowly, closing my eyes. Ever since Harry had answered the phone I’d been convinced that the price of my escape would be Rob’s death.

When I found them, Harry had Rob’s boot off and had taken off his own jacket it to wrap it tightly around Rob’s ankle. “That too tight?”

“You tell me. I’ve never even opened a first-aid kit—hello, Olly.” Rob smiled, even though beads of sweat stood out on his skin. “One foot in front of the other was a bit too complex for me.”

“He’s only gone and sprained his ankle.” Harry patted Rob’s shoulder. “Olly, between you and me, you think we can manage the fireman’s lift?”

“I can walk! Now I’ve had the chance to rest—”

“You’ll do no such thing. I’m taking care of you.” Harry coughed. “That is—I’ve got the most first-aid of us here, so—”

I raised an eyebrow. I wasn’t aware that first aid for a sprained ankle involved keeping your arm around the patient so tightly, but Rob seemed pretty happy about it. “Fireman’s lift, you said?”

“I’m telling you, I’m fine!” Harry had insisted that we settle Rob directly in the passenger seat of his truck. Rob was not convinced. “I need a good night’s sleep—not a trip to the hospital!”

“You can keep on telling me whatever you like,” Harry said. “But you’re having a professional look at your ankle and that’s final.” He patted Rob’s knee, his voice taking on a softer tone. “You really gave me a fright, you know.”

I paused, wondering if I should return to the house, but Harry glanced towards me. “You found the cold pack then?”

“And the blanket.” I handed them over to Harry and let him fuss over his patient. “And I got Mrs Griffith on the phone. She’s on her way over, told you not to worry about a thing. She’ll keep an eye on your grandfather.”

“Llewellyn’s going to be freaking out. He’ll think I’ve crashed the truck or something—”

“I’ll call him next,” I assured Rob. “Give me the keys, and I can take the truck back for you in the morning.”

“While you’re at it, call whoever owns that white horse, too.”

I flinched. Once they realised—

“White horse?”

“It’s a menace. It chased me across the paddock, deliberately tried to charge me. It’s lucky that I didn’t wind up with worse than a sprained ankle to be

honest.” Rob spoke hotly. “If I hadn’t fallen into that ditch, I’d have been trampled! That beast needs to be properly contained!”

I waited for Harry to say ‘there is no white horse,’ but all he said was, “Let’s just get you to Bangor, love.”

I blinked. Had Harry really—

Rob looked as though he might asphyxiate right there in the passenger seat, and Harry was deliberately not looking at either of us. I tried to smile. “Drive safe.”

The walk back across the fields was disproportionately long. Every time I passed a puddle, the reminder of what might have been assailed me. We could just as easily have found Rob dead as found him alive.

Oliver Evans, this is your fault! I winced but could not remove Duhywynt’s words from my mind.

“It was the King!” I protested to the indifferent night sky. “I didn’t force him to do this! He chose to attack Rob, just like he’s been bullying the people of this peninsula for years before I even got here!”

But the *Ceffyl Dŵr*...

I bit my lip. It had been decades since the *Ceffyl Dŵr* had been sighted on the peninsula. In seeking to rob the King of his power, had I only restored it? There was no question that Duhywynt believed in it utterly. And Myrhydion...

I hadn’t helped anything. I’d just made it all worse.

There was only one thing left for me to do.

Leaving my muddy boots at the door, I took down the For Sale sign from the broken window and tacked it out on the fence where it was visible from the road. That done, I staggered up the stairs and fell into bed.

Chapter Sixteen

The King's Challenge

“What’s the meaning of this?”

It was a good question. A few moments ago, I’d been at the delicious state of not asleep but the exact amount of not awake to appreciate it. Now I was jerked awake by the slamming of my bedroom door. “Myfanwy?” My sheets slid down my chest and I made a hasty grab for them. This was not how I’d anticipated starting my day.

“Answer the question!” Myfanwy brandished the sign. The red and white of the For Sale notice seemed even more inappropriate at this early hour. “What is wrong with you? You can’t sell! Mrs Evans left the house to you!”

“Did you just walk in here? To yell at me about the sign?”

“I came over to ask if you knew anything about why the *Ceffyl Dŵr* would go after that American and instead I found this!” Myfanwy threw the sign at me. “You’re running away!”

“I am not!”

“You are too! And you’re supposed to be a knight!”

“Knights have to think of other people! They’re responsible! They do what’s best for everyone, not themselves!”

“And I suppose you think that you’re responsible for the *Ceffyl Dŵr* now? And the storm that raged yesterday, that was your fault, too.”

I looked down at the sign. “Actually, Myfanwy—”

She wasn’t any more impressed after she’d heard my story. “Of all the fool things! Why would you ever provoke him! You were meant to break the King’s power by freeing the Prisoner! Instead you’ve made a mess of everything!”

“I’m sorry,” I protested. “I was only doing what I thought was best.”

“I am raging!” Myfanwy whirled around, plaits flying out behind her. “You are the biggest *twp* I’ve ever met! I’m going to have to fix this myself.”

“I’ll help,” I called as she marched through the door. “Wait!”

I stepped out of bed, only to be abruptly reminded that I slept nude. By the time I’d pulled clothes on and ran downstairs, there was no sign of her. The mist had settled in again thick and heavy.

I put the sign back. Maybe—maybe it was for the best.

There wasn't much to do around the house. I tidied but found myself feeling strangely claustrophobic. Was it the knowledge that soon I'd have to say goodbye to all this for good?

I drifted outside to the garden. Even the wild tangle of flowers seemed strangely muted. I touched the wide petals of an aster and bit my lip. Nan had loved the garden.

“Sorry, Nan. I know you wanted me to stay. I wanted me to stay, too.”

I looked around, seeing memories in all of the plants. Not just of me, Nan and Bethan but others, too. I smiled as I saw the foxgloves that had annoyed Natalie so much. Was she back in New Zealand now? And Rob...

I winced as I caught sight of the hoof print in the soil before the back fence. There'd been no word from Rob or Harry yet.

Maybe an e-mail?

I sat down at the kitchen table with my laptop to send Harry an enquiry, but halfway through my message I was interrupted by Skype's familiar trill.

“You there?”

Bethan was not one for social niceties such as ‘Hello.’ “Mam? Where even are you?”

“Arizona, love. I'll tell you one thing. It's a hell of a lot drier than old Aberdaron.” She laughed.

“Why Arizona?”

“Why do you think? The desert, Olly—the Sonoran desert!” Bethan's enthusiasm made my heart sink. “I think this could be it.”

I couldn't bear to listen. “Mam, what happened to you on the rocks?”

“What?”

“Nan said that when you were a girl, you were trapped out there once. I wondered—”

“You make it sound so needlessly dramatic, Olly. Nothing happened. Well, nothing but my own stupidity.” I could hear the tapping of Bethan's restless fingers against the keyboard. “As a girl, I lost myself in making up stories, like

you used to. My favourite was that there was a man held prisoner beneath the rocks on Sweetheart's Vigil and that only I could hear him or talk to him. He knew secrets about the waves and things, told me how to summon the *Ceffyl Dŵr* and ride them without being thrown. I loved horses, you see. Even now—but I'm getting carried away again."

"I want to hear this story, Mam."

Bethan sighed. "Long story short, lost in my make-believe I didn't notice when the tide came in. A squall blew up suddenly, one of those summer storms. I've no idea why I wasn't simply swept off the rock, but I clung on, telling stories to keep myself alert and awake. All the while the wind battered at me—I was that tired and exhausted, it sounded like the men's choir—old and hoarse but pretty in an odd way. But just as I thought I couldn't go on anymore, I noticed that the voice seemed to be cracking, getting weaker... and then gone entirely and the storm had died away and I was too tired to even move off the rocks."

I had almost entirely forgotten the Prisoner. "That was enough to put you off stories?"

"Not put me off them, Olly. Drained me of them. I never had the knack for them after that night. Never heard the voice of the Prisoner again, though I used to go out there and listen for him."

"Do you remember why he was a prisoner? How to free him?"

"Something about challenging a king... It's all fuzzy now, Olly, it's been so long. But what is all this in aid of?"

"I've got the Longing bad," I told her. "There's someone here. He's—special. I want to stay but I can't. And I can't leave."

"Oh, Olly."

"Did you ever try to fix the Longing? Ask Nan's help or anything?"

"How could Mam possibly understand? She's never been further than Cardiff in her life! No, there's two types of people in this world, Olly, settlers and wanderers and if you're not one, you're the other and there's nothing that can change that." She paused. "Sorry about your young man, Olly."

She started to describe the Arizona landscape. I listened without feeling a single twinge of interest. Was I a thwarted settler at heart? Did it matter?

No, I decided. Myrhydion mattered.

And Myrhydion was as far away from me as if all the deserts in the world stood ranged between us.

I shifted and discovered that I sat on something. Patting my jeans pocket, I found the keys to the truck. I glanced at the clock. I'd promised to return it before ten.

"Mam, I'll talk to you later. I have to go."

I kept an eye out for Myfanwy as I drove, but there was no sign of her. I did, however, have a cup of tea with the mysterious Llewellyn, a middle-aged man who made up for what he lacked in height with an excess of energy, a Jack Russell in human form. I was invited to look at what progress they'd made on the site and spent the next hour tramping around the reclaimed forest, organic vegetable garden and thatched Celtic round-houses before viewing the *pièce de résistance*, the new visitors centre, a barebones construction still in the process of being filled in.

"Hard luck that happening to Rob," Llewellyn said. "It's difficult for us to get experts out here. Most of our volunteers are in it to practice their English, surf, or the gardening side of things. But Rob, now. He's probably saved us a month on the building alone. I know his blunt talking and his sense of humour didn't win him many friends out here, but I'll miss him. Though I wouldn't be surprised if we see him again."

"What do you mean?" Had Rob and Harry become common knowledge after all?

"Well, the white horse that's supposed to have chased him in a paddock that's not had horses for years." Llewellyn shook his head. "That's no ordinary horse. And would the *Ceffyl Dŵr* make an appearance to scare off a tourist? No, I tell you, it would not. You want a ride home, Olly? I'll drop you back. I've some supplies to pick up from the post office."

I shook my head. "*Diolch*, but I'd prefer to walk."

I took my time, lingering over the view and the smell of the sea air. For all I knew, this was my last chance to walk the cliffs. I wanted to fix it in my memory.

I paused on an outcrop of rock, looking over the sea. The sky was overcast, but the view was clear all the way to Bardsey. The coastline spread out beyond, the rich green of the hills even brighter in contrast to the grey sea. I could

appreciate its beauty, even enjoy it on an intellectual level. But it no longer moved me as it had.

Was this how it was going to be from now on? Travelling, never finding what I sought? At least before I'd been able to enjoy the journey. Now, knowing as I did that every step I took away from the Llŷn was a step away from Myrhydion...

"It would have been better not to remember at all."

The cliffs echoed my words back at me flatly. I caught something odd in the echoes.

"Why should the Longing be worse after re-uniting with Myrhydion?"

If it was the leftover effect of Myrhydion's song, then that should make no difference. His voice might spark painful memories, but the Longing itself shouldn't change. If, on the other hand the pain caused by Myrhydion's absence was not caused by the Longing, but by—

"My feelings for him." My voice cracked. Was it fear or hope that had me suddenly dizzy? I slid down the rocks towards the water. I had to know. Before I left Aberdaron, I had to be certain.

The journey to the Deep was very different on my own. Clutching a large rock as a weight, I made slow progress through the silent landscape of the sea. The light filtering through from the sky above was strange and uneven, the gloomy day leaving the sea in gloomier shadow.

Well, not quite silent. The sand crunched under my feet, the sound distorted by the water that carried it. "Myrhydion? Duhywynt?" My voice sounded oddly forlorn, more Little Red Riding Hood than brave knight.

I didn't expect an answer, which was good. I didn't get one.

Duhywynt would be far away, I decided. Mourning his loss in the company of the surviving seals. Myrhydion on the other hand... I drew a deep breath. I had a very good idea where I'd find Myrhydion.

The kelp forest was thick, so dark at the base that it could have been a real forest. It swayed in unison so perfect that it made my skin crawl. I let go of my rock, using my hands to pull me from plant to plant.

What on earth could Myrhydion like about it? It was cold at the base of the forest, one murky strand looking exactly like the next. It was a maze, an unruly tangle, populated by small, sly fish that slunk away at my approach.

“Myrhydion?”

He couldn't have heard me. I couldn't hear myself. The constant movement of the kelp was such that it drowned out all other sound.

That was it! That was the reason that the kelp forest was Myrhydion's favourite place. If no one could hear him, he couldn't enchant someone against their will—

My exultation faded abruptly.

Come on, I told myself firmly. What kind of a knight are you, to be afraid of the truth? And this could be my only chance to know.

When we'd made love in the cave, I hadn't been satisfied with Myrhydion's presence or touch alone. I'd wanted to hear him. The natural desire of a lover? Or was it only the selfish desire to hear his voice?

Here, in the kelp forest, where there was no chance of hearing Myrhydion's voice I could find out once and for all if there was any truth in the King's accusation and Myrhydion's fears. I could satisfy myself of the nature of my attraction to him.

With that thought in my mind, I struck out, heading for the deepest part of the tangled forest.

There was a hollow deeper than the rest, an underwater valley where the kelp grew tightly together, competing for the slightest bit of sunlight. I swam down towards it. This was where I'd find Myrhydion, I was sure of it.

Hopefully, this was not also where I would find the conger eels Myrhydion had spoken of. They could grow up to three metres in length. The thought of one of those wrapping itself around me in the dark was not pleasant.

Something cool and smooth brushed my hand. I started.

It was Myrhydion. He took tight hold of my arm. In the dim light, I could just make out his frown. He mouthed some words at me. I thought I made out, 'It was a bad idea to come here, Oliver Evans.'

In my surprise, I'd lost my grip on the kelp. My natural buoyancy began to pull me towards the surface. I took a firm hold on Myrhydion's arm to anchor myself and stared intently at his face.

The shadows of the forest did him no favours, highlighting his inhumanly pale skin and the thin, anxious movements of his mouth. He looked haggard, his hair as tangled as the surrounding kelp. He'd discarded his human clothing

entirely, knotting a short covering of kelp around his waist, but the marks the barnacles had left on his skin were plainly visible.

He should not have been physically attractive, but my heart filled at the sight of him all the same. I brushed his hair off his forehead, smoothing away the lines I found there.

He closed his eyes. ‘You should not have come,’ he mouthed. ‘I fear—’ His hands clutched reflexively at me.

His old fear of drowning me? I smiled, pressing my lips to his. Myrhydion wouldn’t hurt me. Not when he’d chosen to avoid me rather than risk influencing me to do anything that I would not have chosen to do myself.

Myrhydion was slow to kiss back. Even in our first teenaged fumbblings, we’d never been this hesitant or slow, this careful of each other. Then it had been embarrassment, the fear of the unknown that held us back. Now we knew exactly what we stood to lose.

Myrhydion broke the kiss to pull me against him. I wrapped my arms around him eagerly, finding the answer I sought in the peace that settled through me the moment he laid his head on my shoulder. It was this. I shut my eyes for confirmation, revelled in the rightness of my discovery. I didn’t need to hear or see him, I had to hold him. It was Myrhydion’s presence, just like it had always been Myrhydion.

I was so utterly content, that I could have stayed that way for hours. Myrhydion, for once, was the practical one. Brushing my cheek with his fingers in apology, he set about untangling himself from me with gentle care. He pointed above us, where the kelp fronds churned on the surface of the water.

I squeezed his hand. ‘Come with me?’ I mouthed. I mimed speech with my free hand. ‘I have to talk to you.’

Myrhydion snatched his hand back, shaking his head. He placed both hands over his ears, glaring, and then poked me in the chest with his finger. The inference was clear. ‘What, and enchant you further? Not happening!’

I smiled. With how rapidly Myrhydion’s moods shifted and how little he tried to regulate them, the fact that he cared about me enough to show it so often and in such a variety of ways meant a lot. But how to communicate my understanding to him?

‘Here,’ I mouthed, pointing at the sea floor below us. I had to pause to wrap my leg around one strand of kelp as an anchor (without Myrhydion to hold on

to, I was being pulled upwards again). ‘Can’t hear.’ I placed my hands over my ears. ‘You...’ I reached out placing Myrhydion’s hand on my chest. ‘See for yourself how I feel.’

I am not sure how much of what I wanted to say came through. Myrhydion floated up to be level with my face. He patted his own chest then mine, searching for confirmation in my eyes.

I nodded. He was free to explore, see the evidence of my attraction to him for himself.

Myrhydion drifted up. I looked up, intending to follow, but instead I felt his hand on my shoulder, keeping me in place. I reached out for the kelp around me, holding on as Myrhydion settled behind me, his fingers stroking up, under my T-shirt to explore my bare skin.

When we’d lain together in the cottage, he’d seemed cold in comparison to everything else. In the underwater forest, his skin felt warm, the touch of his mouth lighting fires beneath my skin. Clearly the chill of the water was not going to be an impediment to Myrhydion’s explorations. I was not going to wonder if this was another effect of Nan’s protection, I decided. I was not going to think at all—

Myrhydion tugged at my T-shirt, and I obediently held up my arms for him to remove it. I watched it sink towards the ocean floor, hoping it didn’t drift too far. Myrhydion’s hand at the base of my spine indicated that he had designs on my jeans, too.

Duhywynt was right about jeans. The soaked denim had an unfortunate tendency to cling to me that meant it took Myrhydion and my combined efforts to get them off me. I grabbed at the kelp to pull myself back down to where Myrhydion carefully placed a stone to hold my clothes in place, feeling the water on my bare legs.

I must have looked ridiculous, as graceful as a whale on a bicycle, but Myrhydion smiled. He floated up to gather me into a kiss, his hair floating around us like the fronds of kelp. Screened from the rest of the world, I relaxed into his kiss. The hesitation of before was gone, replaced by something with more certainty, even as it felt more intimate. Or was the feeling flooding through my veins assigning meanings all on its own?

Myrhydion let go of me to float upwards, and I grasped again for my kelp anchor.

Knowing that Myrhydion was above where I couldn't see him, made me extremely aware of every inch of my exposed skin. My legs drifted above my head, almost of their own volition. I felt vulnerable, but not scared. And as Myrhydion's hand settled on the seldom touched skin of my inside legs, I discovered that I liked that feeling a lot.

Not knowing whether I would feel Myrhydion's mouth or his fingers made his exploration two-fold. I discovered myself as he did. When Myrhydion's fingers settled on the elasticised waist of my boxers, I let go of one of the kelp to help him push them up and off my legs. One final kick sent them drifting away into the kelp forest. I watched them go, my hard cock further sensitised by the ripples of cool water enveloping it.

Myrhydion's hand reached for it at once. I hummed happily as he stroked me, hoping the vibrations would carry, even if the sound did not. Was he relieved by the evidence that he excited me, even when I did not hear his voice?

I could not see his face, only his legs, tangled in mine. I watched his hand slide leisurely up and down my cock, even as his other hand slid unseen over my arse. An enquiring touch at my entrance caused me to start, twisting my body to catch Myrhydion's gaze.

"No." I shook my head. I hadn't thought to bring anything with me. I couldn't.

Almost immediately, I regretted my choice. It was Myrhydion, and any intimacy with him was welcome.

I did not have time to regret my decision. The knowledge that I could and would say no to him seemed to have eased Myrhydion's mind. If he'd been interested before, now he was positively greedy, working over my skin in a way that would have left me breathless, had there been air to breathe.

"Myrhydion!"

It was all I could do to keep my hold on the kelp. With an effort that should have got me a gold medal in something, I managed to pull my body back to upright, winding my legs around the kelp. I was momentarily dizzy as blood rushed back to my head, and I clung to the plants on pure reflex, knowing that if I relaxed the two of us would be sent floating away to who knew where.

"Fuck! That is—fuck!"

Myrhydion had pulled back to study my actions, but he quickly saw my intentions. Another strand of kelp was made to loop around my waist. Just as

well. Myrhydion's renewed explorations were made with such vigour that I needed the extra help.

If his skin had felt warmer beneath the sea, his mouth was an oven. I moaned, losing track of what I was saying. I think I begged. I know I liked it. Me, Oliver Evans, who never liked giving up control, was vulnerable and loving every second of it.

Loving it so much I ached to show it. As Myrhydion pushed my legs back so that he floated between them, I grabbed his ankle, pulling him sideways towards me. As he peered down at me, I smiled, nodding my head towards his makeshift garment. With a smirk, Myrhydion hooked a leg around the kelp then divested himself of his covering of seaweed in one dramatic sweep.

"Show-off." I reached eagerly for his hip. I did not need to wonder if he was enjoying this, the evidence of that was right before my eyes. Pulling myself closer to him, I planted a gentle kiss on his stomach before working my way up. Below me, Myrhydion amused himself by copying whatever I did to him.

I did not last long. Being reunited with Myrhydion would have been enough without the underwater stimuli, and he took cruel pleasure in teasing every last after shock he could from me. I did my best to return the favour, and we floated, wrapped as tightly together as the kelp surrounding us.

I could stay down here forever, I decided. The muted greens and blues of the kelp forest were soothing once you adjusted to the dim light. And the churning sound of the water rushing through the weed was not unlike white noise. Soon I wouldn't even notice it. In fact, it was strange I'd never thought to come down here until now.

Myrhydion had other plans. He stirred, unwinding himself from me. As I protested, he took my hand and squeezed it, pointing up.

"Now you want to talk?" I smirked, even as I swam up to the surface.

"Olly, tell me plainly—my heart, my mind, I am all a whirl." Myrhydion did not waste any time, launching into his questions the moment he broke the surface. "Does you coming to me beneath the waves, does it mean...?"

"That what I feel for you isn't dependent on hearing your voice?" I grinned, setting a hand on his shoulders as we tread water together. "Yes. Myrhydion, it's not magic, it's not your voice. It's you."

"I am glad—glad beyond words! Olly, it was clever to think of this experiment, to think of a place where we might not hear each other at all and

see what our reaction was.” Myrhydion smiled at me, a pleased glow spreading over his face. Then at once, he frowned. “You promise me that you do not pretend this to win me back to your side that you might hear me speak whenever you desire?”

I snorted. “I think that if my aim had been mere seduction the encounter would have been very different.”

“You would not have refused me anything,” Myrhydion agreed, but the pleased flicker of his mouth did not remain long. “Unless you thought I might doubt your sincerity and decided to prove it by refusing me—”

“Myrhydion. The King hates me and has a lot of reasons to resent you. Why is it harder to believe that he would lie to you than that I would?”

“You mean to tell me I am being foolish.” Myrhydion reached over to pat my cheek. He did not have any trouble keeping his head above water, making me feel like the ugly duckling in comparison to his graceful swan. “Before you think too poorly of me, I must tell you that you did not see yourself raving and crying with the effect of the *morgen* song upon you. It is not something I ever want to see again, Olly. The thought of it terrifies me—”

“If anyone here needs to be thought poorly of, it’s me,” I said. “You didn’t have any insecurities about me hearing you until I brought up your voice. I still don’t remember what happened after your song—”

“It is well you do not! Truly, Olly, it was the worst time of my life—”

“But I should have figured out what was going on sooner. And I should have told you. When the King spoke with your appearance and your voice, I recognized him as familiar—and wrong. Rhys did not even sound like you, but I was drawn to him all the same.”

Myrhydion’s hand closed around mine. “I did not think I could ever be happy again. This is so good that I fear it cannot possibly be true. Will you stay with me in my kelp forest, Olly? Without you beside me, I must come to doubt the truth of my own thoughts.”

I squeezed his hands. “Of course,” I told him. “As long as it takes.”

“But if this is not love—”

“Then I don’t think I want love.” I spoke above Myrhydion’s protest. “Seeing you in the forest was enough. Putting my arms around you, I felt more content in that moment than I did the entire time I was in Australia.”

“You interrupted me, Olly.”

“I’m sorry. I just—”

“If you were truly slave to my voice, I think you would want to hear it always. I do not think you would be able to talk as you did now.” Myrhydion tangled himself around me. In a few moments we would be underwater again, and I did not mind. “Olly, I begin to believe—”

The howl seemed to spring up from the ocean itself.

“Bloody hell, Duhywynt! A moment’s peace—” I floundered to a halt. The sound was too big for Duhywynt.

“That is the coastguard siren,” Myrhydion said. “Something has happened. I do not like this, Olly.”

“I am not happy about it either.” Just when Myrhydion and I had sorted out our feelings for each other?

“A search. Someone is missing.”

I felt again the tug of fingers in the wave that pulled me over the edge of the Bardsey ferry. “The King. This is his revenge.”

“I must go to Duhywynt. Olly, you will be safer out of the water.”

“I’m not—”

I surfaced in the bathtub.

Just as well, I thought, wrapping a towel around my waist. My jeans and T-shirt were somewhere in Myrhydion’s kelp forest. Knowing my luck, I’d have pulled myself out of the water only to come face-to-face with Mrs Griffith.

The phone rang.

I left a trail of puddles behind me as I made my way into the kitchen to answer it. “Hello?”

“Olly, I am glad to hear your voice. I’ve been so worried when you didn’t answer your phone!”

Mrs Griffith. I tightened my hold on the towel reflexively. “Sorry about that. I didn’t hear it.”

“Is Myfanwy with you?”

“No. No, she’s not.” The siren howled again, and I felt sick. “Is she missing?”

“Worse than that. Gavin found her cardigan down on the rocks at Sweetheart’s Vigil. It was folded up all nicely like she meant to come back to it, with a rock holding it down. She hasn’t been at school all day. The coast guard’s out now, looking for her in the water. I don’t know what to think.”

I swallowed. I did.

The rest of Mrs Griffith’s words rushed over me.

I listened numbly. “The garden? Of course. I’ll check now. No, I don’t mind.”

I pulled on some clothes before heading outside. It didn’t matter. I already knew I wouldn’t find her there. Myfanwy was gone, gone after telling me she intended to fix my mistakes! No, the cardigan left on the rocks meant only one thing. Myfanwy wasn’t missing. She was taken.

I groaned, seeing again the forlorn body of Duhywynt’s seal. Taken by someone with no compunctions about hurting innocents. The King had killed the seal. He’d tried to kill Rob. He would not hesitate to hurt Myfanwy, any more than he’d hesitated to drown Old Mr Jones’s cousin.

Was she already dead? Or was the reason that we hadn’t found her body the fact that the King wanted something? My departure? But he thought he’d already secured that in driving Myrhydion and I apart. What more was there to demand from me?

As I made my way back around the house, I noticed again the hoof prints of the *Ceffyl Dŵr*. With an almost unwilling sense of fascination, I tracked the prints, feeling again the clammy chill of the night air on my skin. The prints were clearly visible, deep where the *Ceffyl Dŵr* had jumped the fence, charging at full speed towards the door. And then—

“It’s not possible!”

The hooves came to a stop a metre before the door, shying away from some barrier. And there, standing proudly amongst the water swept vegetation of the front floral beds, was Sir Spikesalot, bobbing victoriously in the breeze as if ready to do battle even now.

At nine years old you set a guard around your Nan’s house so powerful that it still keeps the King and all of his creatures at bay.

I stretched out a hand as if to assure myself of the reality of the thistle. Was this what Nan had intended from me? “The Peninsula needs a Knight more than

ever.” I’d tried to be clever, and that hadn’t worked. Perhaps... perhaps I just needed to be brave?

“Blunder in not knowing what you’re doing, you mean.” I took a deep breath. That, at least, I knew I could do.

With that knowledge came another thought. The King had tried three times to kill me and not succeeded. Whether because of Nan’s protection or another cause, the fact remained that my survival was a great source of annoyance for him. He hadn’t taken Myfanwy to kill her. He’d taken Myfanwy to get at me. And that meant there was a chance to save her.

The bathtub was still half-full of salty water. I knelt beside it, drawing a deep breath.

Would this even work? I gave myself no time to think, plunging my head underwater. “Myrhydion! I need you.”

I wiped my hands on my jeans. Before when I’d faced the King, I’d been cocky, over-confident. Now that I knew what he was capable of, I’d lost the ignorance that had been my only defence.

But was I more afraid of the King... or of Myrhydion learning I intended to go to him?

There was loud splash, and Myrhydion’s head and shoulders appeared above the rim of the bath. “What is it, Olly? I can see from your face it is bad.”

“Myfanwy’s gone. We found her cardigan on the rocks with a stone from the city on it. The King must have her.”

“Only her cardigan?” Myrhydion frowned. “Olly, I do not like this. You know he aims at you.”

“And I don’t like that he’s killed Duhywynt’s friend, set the *Ceffyl Dŵr* on Rob, and kidnapped a child! I’m going to stop this, Myrhydion.”

Myrhydion drew a sharp breath. “You mean to visit him again.” His hand gripped my arm. “Olly, you cannot, must not!”

“We have to,” I told him. “It’s Myfanwy’s life at stake.”

“We?” Myrhydion stopped frowning to study my face. “You are that sure that I will join you in your mad-doings?”

Despite the circumstances, I could still smile. “Are you going to tell me that I am wrong?”

Myrhydion shook his head. “You know me well, Olly. Perhaps, too well. But tell me, what is my knight’s plan?”

The abandoned city of the *morgen* was eeriest alone. Without Duhywynt or Myrhydion with me, I was extremely conscious of the small, button eyes of the conger eels, watching from the cracks of the buildings as I made my way through the city.

I passed the house where a particularly big one was coiled. It flicked its gigantic tail, stirring up a cloud of silt. When the water cleared, it floated behind me, just on the edge of my field of vision.

I regretted telling Myrhydion to arrive after me. ‘We have so few advantages,’ I’d said. ‘Let’s keep the fact that we’ve made peace to ourselves. It’s the only weapon we have.’ Famous last words?

With any luck, Myrhydion had given my advice the amount of attention he usually did and was not far behind me. As a second, third, and fourth eel joined my cortege, I felt even that was too far. I quickened my pace.

The eels stayed on the steps leading up to the grand hall, eyes fixed on me as I climbed to the hall. The combined pressure of their beady glare was such that I almost dropped the rock I carried as a weight. I was rapidly developing a dislike of eels.

“I’m here.”

The King leant back in his throne, exactly as I’d seen him last. “You are a brave man—or a foolish one—to enter my hall a third time, Oliver Evans.”

If it hadn’t been for Myfanwy’s abduction, I would have doubted that he’d moved at all since I’d left. “I believe you called me here.” Without putting the rock I used as a weight down, I freed the stone found with Myfanwy’s clothes from my pocket.

The King smiled sardonically. “So you are capable of taking a hint.”

“For the record, I don’t think stealing Myrhydion’s appearance and telling me to ‘get out’ is much of a hint.”

“Would that you had taken it. A girl’s life might have been spared.”

A chill ran down my spine. “You haven’t killed her,” I said. “You’ve nothing to bargain with if you do.”

“A king does not bargain.” The King’s disdain echoed throughout the hall. Shadows began to loom in the corners, warping and twisting with the water. “Bargaining is for fish-wives or Witch-sons.” He sneered, raising his hand to trace a deliberate circle. “The girl was only bait. I have called you here to kill you, Oliver Evans, and this time I will not be denied.”

The water in the great hall began to spin. Sluggishly at first, as if it encountered resistance, but irrevocably. I threw up an arm to ward off a peppering of driftwood and pebbles. Rocks would be next, followed by the great pieces of wreckage. I would be caught up, crushed and then battered about with the wreckages of the King’s trophies until I was a bleeding, broken shell, to be tossed ashore like Duhywynt’s seal.

Or that’s what the King intended me to believe.

I willed my feet firmly on the floor of his throne room as the room began to churn around me. “You’ve tried three times to kill me now and not succeeded.”

“Luck runs out.” The King stood, adding his height to the pressure bearing down on me. “You are alone now, neither Myrhydion nor Duhywynt will save you—”

“They do not need to save me. It is not luck that protects me, King beneath the Cliffs.” I felt every beat of my heart like a kick in my chest, but the danger made me bold. “I am a knight, after all.”

“You are a foolish child who never grew up!” roared the King. “A knight? Do not make me laugh! Where is your steed, your armour—” he grinned unpleasantly “—your liege?”

The thought of Myrhydion gave me new courage. “I don’t need a steed!” I shouted to be heard over the racing water. “All the armour I need is right here!” The whirling water tugged at the sleeves of my clothing and sent my hair into my eyes, but did not succeed in moving me. “My liege has told me about the rules of hospitality—enough to know that a king attacking a guest he summoned is a betrayal worthy of retribution! Want to find out what I’ll do with the right of retribution, King?”

“Yapping dog!” The King raised his hand. “You do not threaten me.”

Instantly the churning whirl of debris around me froze. The water did not simply stop. It was held in place, the maelstrom of debris still within it.

“See the power of a king, Witch-son? To hold the water against its natural inclination to move, objects their inclination to fall—that is power indeed.” The King returned to his seat. “Does it impress you?”

It was hard to breathe. The stillness of the water had a constricting effect on my throat and lungs. “I am not sure that the power to turn things from how they should be is anything to brag about. The power to foster hate instead of healing hasn’t made you happy. It’s made you the king of an empty kingdom—”

There was a crack that seemed to echo inside my skull. The water around me shook as if it was jelly. Below me, the marble floor of the hall had split.

“Hold your insolence.” The old man took a deep breath. “You speak to a King.” With effort, he unclenched his hands from around the arms of his throne and grimaced at me. “It is more—much more!—than you deserve, Oliver Evans, but I have brought you here to make you an offer. Not a bargain. An offer.”

A stream of bubbles began to trickle up from the cracked floor. They collected halfway between myself and the King, at eye-level, forming one bubble. At first, all I can see was a dark smear within the tadpole-like cluster, but as it grew, the shadow became clear enough to recognise.

“Myfanwy!”

“She cannot hear you. What you see is a reflection only.”

I bit my lip, scanning Myfanwy’s form for injury. Although extremely pale, the rise and fall of her chest was regular. She lay on her side, her arm at an unnatural angle. Broken? I didn’t know whether I was angry or relieved. She might have been killed! “What have you done to her?”

“The girl is spelled to sleep. She is safe, but she will not be discovered until I choose it.”

“And what will it take for you to choose it?” Now that my initial fears over Myfanwy had been soothed, I looked beyond her for any clue as to where she lay. It was a cave, narrow, with clusters of mussels on the wall. Although she lay on sand and breathed air, I suspected that the air pocket had been created by the King and was not natural, meaning that this was not a cave I’d ever explored. “Me leaving the peninsula?”

“That was your suggestion, so clearly you have a motive in wishing that. No, I would strike an entirely new deal.” The King settled back in his chair, resting his fingertips together. “Since you are so fond of games, I have a new

one for you. The girl mentioned that you sought the Prisoner of the Deep. If you can find and free him within one day and one night, I will allow you and the girl free passage back to the land.”

“I am not playing hide and seek with Myfanwy’s life!”

“You do not enjoy being toyed with? You should have thought of that earlier before you played with a king.”

I grit my teeth. Grating as his repetitive refrain was, I was only going to make things worse by snapping. Turning back to the bubbles, I saw a grimace on Myfanwy’s mouth. Pain?

“I did not think it possible for a knight to be so cowardly, but since that appears to be your wish, I will make you an offer of trade. If you agree to it, the girl will be returned safely to her people, but if you don’t...” He raised bony shoulders indifferently. “There will be an end to witches on the peninsula.”

Win-win for the King, lose-lose for everyone else. I glanced at Myfanwy, saw her lip curl. “And what would I trade for Myfanwy’s safety?”

“That you join the Prisoner and remain forever in the Deep, Oliver Evans.”

I drew a deep breath and turned away from the bubbles. I didn’t want the King to see what I’d spotted—a brown leather corner protruding from beneath Myfanwy’s body. “You give your word that she will be returned to the shore safely?”

“I will give you the word of a king.” He clapped his hands. “There must be witnesses to our agreement.”

I had thought the hall was free of eels, so I was not thrilled to see two rise up from behind the King’s throne and glide past me.

The King smirked. “The prison is dark. All manner of creatures may dwell in its shadows.”

Had he seen me shudder? I folded my arms. “Good. I’d hate to be lonely.”

The King was still brooding over my reply when Myrhydion appeared.

“I was on my way to see you already,” he started. “I do not see that I need to be hounded—” He stopped at the sight of me. “Oliver Evans.”

“Myrhydion.” It was easy enough to sound constricted. Even without the force of the King’s personality filling the hall like gravitational pressure, I did not look forward to Myrhydion finding out what I’d agreed to.

“I do not see I have a reason to stay here—”

The King raised his hand, immediately silencing Myrhydion. “I summoned you here to act as a witness to an agreement between myself and the Witch-son.”

“An agreement?”

“I should think we’d had enough of those,” Duhywynt observed at my other shoulder. “We meet again, Oliver Evans.”

I glanced at him, wondering if the pomposity of his tone concealed his anger or his pleasure at seeing me, and blinked. Myrhydion had ditched human clothing at the first opportunity but Duhywynt had stuck to his dress. Had he not discovered how zips worked?

“In exchange for me restoring the human thief to her people, Oliver Evans has agreed to take her place as my prisoner—”

“Unthinkable! He does not agree!”

“On the contrary, Myrhydion.” The King’s smile had the surety of a slowly dawning trap. I felt a twinge of alarm. Could I be certain that his threat was aimed at me? “He has already turned down my very reasonable challenge. I had offered to free the girl if he found and freed the Prisoner and even generously allowed him a night and day in which to do so, but he is not knight enough to take the challenge.”

“Not with Myfanwy’s life at stake,” I said.

Myrhydion’s neck muscles clenched tightly. His mouth was a thin, pale line, and his fingers twitched as if wanting to seize something. “I absolutely forbid it.”

“Forbid him?” the King crowed. “And you said you did not wish to command him! See how quick your beloved is to change his tune, Witch-son!”

“Talking of changed tunes, it’s a long way from ‘leave at once,’ to ‘stay forever,’” I shot back at the King.

Myrhydion pulled me back. “You are not seriously considering this bargain, Olly! You have more sense than that, surely.”

“What option do I have? He will kill Myfanwy. You can’t tell me he won’t.”

“Myfanwy,” Duhywynt repeated suddenly. “That is the strange looking boy you met on the rocks.”

“She’s not a boy, Duhywynt.” Myrhydion took firm hold of my arm. “Think of what you are agreeing to. You cannot throw your life away to be spent in some underwater prison, Olly!”

“The King has something up his sleeve, you must see that.” I dropped my tone to a determined whisper. “That’s why I have to accept the exchange. That way we know the King will keep his word and return her—”

“You have given up hope in yourself! I believe you are a match for him—do you not believe in yourself?” Myrhydion searched my face earnestly.

“I can’t. Not with Myfanwy’s life at stake—”

“You will throw away all our happiness, you mean! I do not allow it.” Myrhydion released my arm. “Oliver Evans must find and free the Prisoner? Those are the terms of your challenge?”

“Those are the terms,” the King agreed with a satisfied sneer.

“I add mine to them.” Myrhydion stepped towards the crack in the floor. Before anyone could stop him he had slipped through it. “He must find me as well, or it will go the worse for him.”

“Myrhydion!”

“Ridi!”

Duhywynt and I rushed towards the crack, but we were too late even to see him disappear. The water was a murky black in which even darker shadows drifted.

“It must be Oliver Evans who finds and frees the Prisoner. You may not help, only guide, ere you void the challenge,” the King warned him. “Any magic you use is Oliver Evans’s instant defeat.” The King grinned viciously. “And your voice is his instant undoing. You! Stay where you are.”

Duhywynt flinched back from the side of the chasm. “But I only wanted to see—”

“I have need of you here, Duhywynt. Well, brave knight? Your answer? As if your liege has not answered for you.”

I bowed my head. “I accept the challenge.”

“You are brave enough when you are compelled so against your will! One night and one day, Oliver Evans.”

I had never wanted to punch an old man in the face so much.

I used my anger to make the jump into the Deep. The dark came up to meet me, an enormous, overpowering whole. We'd practiced descending as part of my dive certification, but it was a whole different experience without equipment, wetsuit or light. Was it the cold that penetrated my skin, making me feel frozen through, or the absence of sound?

Finally, my feet touched soft, silty sea floor. One direction looking like any other, I started to walk.

This deep, no light penetrated far enough for seaweed to grow. Nothing blocked my path but the pressure of the deep ocean. I leant forward, adding downwards momentum to my strength, but against the traction of the water that too was lacking. I would get tired out before I reached my destination. Kicking off the floor, I tried swimming, but that was even worse. I struggled to float while holding on to my anchor.

Where was Myrhydion? Had the darkness concealed two different passages, and the King's trick been whisking him somewhere else entirely?

No, I decided. More likely in his vaunted faith in me he had assumed that I was right behind him and swum off, imagining me in his wake.

The reminder of Myrhydion's confidence in me should not have made me feel as good as it did in the dark confines of the ocean, but it did. Instead of worrying about what the water pressure should be doing to me, unprotected by helmet or oxygen tank, I trusted Nan's protection and thought back carefully. Bethan had talked to the Prisoner from Sweetheart's Vigil. And that meant—

I listened carefully. Was that the crash of waves against a shore? I started towards the distant sounds.

Was I going in the right direction? How would I even know? With no light, no landmarks, nothing to mark distance, I could be going in circles! Better to stay put, wait for Myrhydion to find me.

How would he find me? I paused.

Neither brother had complained about sensitivity to daylight. They might be better accustomed to the murky underwater than I was, but they weren't anglerfish, equipped with their own lights. If Myrhydion had talked to the Prisoner, then he'd found him in his own shape, and that meant he'd found directions using... what?

I stayed absolutely still, letting the water shift over me. Although I was surrounded by dark, I shut my eyes, hoping I would concentrate better without

imagining shapes moving in the shadow. And as I breathed in slowly, I found my answer. Hidden in the uniform depth of the dark were alternating patches of water. Some curled icy cold, the remnants of a deep moving current that followed the ocean floor. Others were of varying coolnesses, tugging this way and that, echoes of movements of tides or currents above. And one... one was positively warm.

I grinned. September in the Llŷn was not exactly beach weather, but in contrast to the temperature this deep, the water from the shore felt like the Gold Coast. I followed the faint traces. Was it my imagination, or was the crash of water on rock getting closer? And that steady pulsing beat, that sounded a lot like the passage of the water through the channels that stayed wet even at low tide—

“Ow!” I rubbed my nose, feeling the rock outcrop I had all but walked into. Well, at least I’d found something. Feeling with my hands, I discovered a solid wall of rock, the end of my underwater plateau.

And the start of the cliffs? I looked up, but all I could see overhead was the same dark nothing that categorised the entire Deep. I hesitated. If I let go of my weight-rock, I would have a hard time getting back down here. Then again, just because the King had sent me to the Deep was no guarantee I’d find the Prisoner here.

A ripple reached me through the water. Something stirred in the shadow. I reacted instinctively, dropping the rock and using my hands to guide myself up the rocky wall. I could just imagine the eel sinking its teeth into me, or the slimy curve of its tail, choking me.

The silence of the Deep was suddenly broken. A low sound stilled my ascent, an invitation to lower my guard and let myself sink lower and lower into the enveloping darkness. Cease to worry, the sound said. Cease to fear. Cease to *be*.

My hand stilled on the rock. *Morgen* song. Instantly, the fear rose. I did not want to be made mad—

The water distorts it, I reminded myself. That’s why Myrhydion singing the waves calm after I went overboard did not break my mind. I listened. Was he singing to still the waters now? No, there was some other meaning to this song. A summons?

Myrhydion would not lead me into the dark without good reason, I told myself firmly. He has trusted you. Why can’t you trust him?

But I still could not make myself relinquish my life-grip on the wall. And then, as the perfect timbre of the melody stretched thin, I realised why.

There was a roughness to the song that undid all its compelling power. It boomed magnificently, whirled up a current amid the slow moving deeps, but when it came to the softer moments it scraped, revealing the sharp edges of the rocks waiting below.

The hoarseness reminded me of the rough edges in Rhys's voice after the storm, the after-effects of *morgen* song forced from a human throat. But Myrhydion's song had never sounded this strained. Even when he'd forced himself to sing while we were tossed by the ocean, his voice had been pure and sharp as finely tempered steel.

"Yeah. That's not happening, King beneath the Cliffs. I know it's you." I pulled myself up, following the wall.

The snarl seemed to come from all around me at once. The water picked up, and I sought for anything I could cling to in the rock. A protruding rock, a bed of seaweed, anything! But my hands slid vainly over the rock as I was dragged backwards by the tug of the water. I kicked frantically, fighting against the icy grip of the Deep, but found myself in the dark, clutching at empty water, being pulled who knew where by the current.

Instantly a clear note sliced through the churning water. The water around me slowed, losing its momentum, and with a few more kicks, I was spiralling towards it, feeling no hesitation as I followed its glorious sound. The warmth of the surface current welcomed me, and I could see light, murky still but enough to let me know that I was headed in the right direction.

Behind me, rocks crashed and waves groaned in horrid disharmony, but I ignored them. The King could delay, but he could not deny me.

Myrhydion waited beside the entrance to a large underground cave. He smiled as he saw me, swimming over to greet me. "Olly! Do you yet have all of your senses?"

"What do you think? A bit of dark is going to scare me stupid?" I reached for his hand, squeezing it.

"You know it is not the dark that worries me, but my song—"

"Your song worries the King. That's why he's trying so hard to scare you out of using it." If the sky was light, it must be gone dawn. Being with Myrhydion gave me new energy, but I knew better than to think that would last. "Is this it?"

“The Prisoner’s Cave. But we still have much to do. You will see for yourself, Olly.”

A short way inside, the cave was sealed off by a wall of rock. Myrhydion watched as I ran my fingers over the iron bars to peer within. “No door?”

“I remember when the Prisoner still spoke. He told me this himself. The King did not ever intend to free him, so there is no door.”

“What do you mean, ‘when the Prisoner still spoke?’”

Myrhydion twisted his hands. “I did not think of it in the hall as I was too annoyed with the King and with you for letting him cow you, but it has been a very long time now since the Prisoner has spoken. It may be that it is too late to free him.”

“Making the challenge void,” I said. “The King would not risk that—would he?”

“But all those who know it void are you and I and the King. He may fool Duhwynt if we do not return in time. Should we return and tell the King we know his ruse?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Myrhydion, the last time you were here, you were quite small, weren’t you?”

“I was younger than I am now, but that is inevitable,” Myrhydion said. “What do you—Olly! You are a marvel indeed.”

I grinned at his surprise and tossed the metal bar aside. “The only marvel here is that I was the first to spot that rust.” Myrhydion had probably made one attempt at the metal bars with his child strength and given up, not noticing that they were rusted through. I set aside the bar I’d snapped off and started on a second. “It’s going to be a tight fit, but we might just be able to make it.”

Myrhydion caressed my arm. “Do you think we can find you sheep to shear here on the Llŷn? I do like this firmness to you, Olly, I would not like you to lose it.”

“Distracting me right now may not be the best plan.” But I chose my next bar with the consciousness that Myrhydion was watching me very closely. “There.”

“I shall be first to enter,” Myrhydion decided. “That is not helping, that is just being there.”

And if anything was silly enough to attack him, that was their look out. “Be careful,” I said, watching as Myrhydion climbed into the darkness beyond the bars.

A sudden shiver went through me. I glanced over my shoulder.

“What do you see, Olly?”

“Nothing. It’s this dim light playing tricks on me.”

“Now that you mention it, there is an absence of light.” Myrhydion hummed in concentration.

Just like the King had done, he called up a stream of bubbles, only instead of displaying Myfanwy’s form, Myrhydion’s bubbles showed the light of the sun on the sea above us. We studied it in silence, its position in the sky reminding us that we had limited time. “Well, Olly?”

“You’re sure that isn’t using magic?”

“The light is for my convenience, not yours. I may better guide you if I can see you.”

I decided that made sense and wriggled through the gap between the bars. “Does this seem too easy to you?”

“We have not seen what lies beyond.”

“That’s true...” We’d just have to be extra careful as we proceeded, I decided, floating free of the bars. “Let’s check this prison out.”

The cave extended back another thirty metres or so, curving round so that we had to follow it to see the entire thing. Not that there was anything to see. No seaweed, no fish, no eels... no prisoner.

“Could the King have moved him?”

“It is the only explanation. Unless this is him here.” Myrhydion stood before a large rock placed in the centre of the cave. “It is somewhat like Mother Rock, don’t you think? It might be possible—”

A thundering crash cut his sentence off, the resulting wave knocking both of us back. I floundered helplessly in the dark, catching hold of the rock just in time to keep from being thrown into the wall. Myrhydion collided with me and I grabbed him, clinging to the rock as the aftershocks faded.

“What was that—a rock slide?”

“Part of the cliff has given way above us. I caught a glimpse. The opening is entirely sealed,” Myrhydion reported.

“You have the *Ceffyl Dŵr*’s trick, you can get out of here.”

“But if I take you with me Olly, the challenge is void—”

A low laugh echoed up from below. “You have found the Prisoner. Now must you stay with him, Oliver Evans. Rue the day you ever thought to challenge a king.”

Chapter Seventeen

Edenvert

“Olly, I do not know how many times you must look to see that there is no way out, but you tire me. Come and sit down.”

“We have to get out of here.” I searched with my hands as well as my eyes, probing the rock for anything out of place or weakened by age. It had been hours, and I’d had no success, but I wasn’t giving up. “We’re running out of time.”

“You will not find more time looking there.” Myrhydion had made his own search of the cave and given up, sitting at the base of the large stone and watching me. “Let us employ our time more suitably.”

I turned around to look at him. “What could be more suitable than finding the way out?”

“Since you are not finding the way out, any number of things. I thought, specifically, that you might tell me a story.”

If the small space had not made it impossible, I would have thought I misheard him. “You want a story now?”

“You said that you gave them up because you wanted to show me that I might rely on you,” Myrhydion said. “Enclosed in this prison space, I have none but you on which to rely, so you might as well.”

I rubbed my forehead. How was it possible that he could have lived seven years on land and still not get how people worked? “Myrhydion. Myfanwy’s life is in danger. It’s not the time to tell stories.”

“On the contrary. We have no other means of escape left to us.” Myrhydion looked down, twisting his hair into one tail.

I stared at him, wondering how we could mean so much to each other and still not understand each other. When I was on the brink of fear and panic, Myrhydion was interested in diversions—

His mouth twisted.

No, I realised. He felt just as keenly as I did, but in a different way. Maybe in order to process his fear he needed the barrier of the story between it and him? Two different reactions, but we came from the same place.

And since he'd spoken, the edge had gone from my frantic search. "A story, huh." Could our differences be our strength? I sat down beside him. "I guess it couldn't hurt to try. If nothing else, a fresh perspective might give us some new ideas on getting out of here." Unreasonably optimistic? Not when Myrhydion smiled like he smiled then.

"It has been a very long time since you told me a story, Olly."

I settled back against the base of the rock and began. "Once upon a time, there was a *morgen* who fell in love with a human—"

Myrhydion hummed. "I do like this story, Olly, but I know how it goes." He cuddled up to me. "Though, if you wanted to re-enact—"

"A human *woman*," I said, feeling the bulk of the stone against my back. "They were married and lived on the Llŷn. He was a fisherman, she a midwife, and they had two sons, who—well, one of them was tolerable at least."

"Which? Which son was tolerable?"

"But they were not happy long, for their marriage had angered the King beneath the Cliffs, the ruler of the *morgen*. Jealous of their happiness and the fact that the *morgen* had defied his ruling to live and walk on land, he sought a suitable revenge. Because it was not just that the *morgen* was happy living on the land, it was that the others of their people would see and might follow his example. The King was already old and conscious that many *morgen* resented his rule. The punishment must, therefore, alienate the *morgen* entirely from his friends, and that meant a betrayal.

"The King brooded many long years in his dark and lonely hall until he came to a suitable punishment for his son—"

"His son?"

"It makes sense," I told Myrhydion. "Anyone else, their marriage is their business no matter how great a control freak their ruler is. But a prince's marriage is political. So if the King doesn't like it, he can claim it is a political attack, making the prince a traitor and meaning, like it or not, the other *morgen* had to sing him back to the sea."

Myrhydion hummed thoughtfully. This time the sound, solemn and deep seemed to resonate through the cavern. Like a tuning fork. "Maybe—no, go on with the story Olly."

"If you go on humming. I think it adds—something." Frowning, I picked up the strands of my story. "Anyway, as a political prisoner, the King could do

what he liked with his son, and he chose imprisonment so that his son would be aware of the King's actions against his family but unable to prevent them. It was a hard punishment. The Prisoner-prince suffered terribly, alone and knowing his family were driven apart by the King's malice. He could not even take solace in the fact that the King's actions disgusted his people so that they deserted him in droves. As the *morgen* left, the people on the Llŷn aged and there was no one to tell his own sons about their father, and the Prisoner was forgotten, even by those dearest to him."

Myrhydion's humming broke shifted into a keening cry, like a wounded gull.

I felt the sadness of the sounds as if they were mine. "There was little he could do but wait. Until one day, the currents carried him news of a human woman who sat amongst them, listening until she heard their names and the Prisoner-prince remembered the Witch of the Cliffs."

Myrhydion's hum of approval filled the cavern with anticipatory interest. He did not need to say 'and then?' It was in his face, his eyes fixed on me.

It had been a long time since I'd felt so much relish in the role of storyteller. "The Prisoner-prince made a plan. He sent out messages of his own on the waves. It took many years and many witches, but they were found—and heard—by the daughter of the Witch of the Cliffs, a powerful witch in her own right. The Prisoner-prince taught her the trick of summoning the *Ceffyl Dŵr*, and in return, she promised to help free him. Only, before she was ready to challenge the King, he learnt of their plans. He caught the Witch's daughter on the rocks, and they battled for an entire night. The Prisoner-prince had taught the Witch-daughter how to turn back the waves, but he could not protect her against the *morgen's* greatest weapon—their voice."

The water of our prison rippled, growing choppy in echo of my story. "The King's voice was old, failing. This was why he'd ordered his people to sing on his behalf. As he sang, his voice cracked, until it was hoarse and raw and finally, in the dawning hours, it exhausted entirely. The King sank beneath the waves, knowing his song was gone, but he had left an exhausted opponent. The Witch-daughter survived, her mind intact thanks to the aid of the Prisoner-prince, but like the King she'd used up the entirety of her stock of magic. She left the Llŷn, to return only as a visitor, and soon, she, too, started to forget."

Myrhydion's sigh was the soothing calm that settled over the sea after a storm.

“The Witch on the Cliffs did not forget. She saw the change in her daughter and was determined to find its source. She was not young, not as able to scabble around over rocks as her daughter, so it took her many years, but eventually she found the messages of the Prisoner-prince and sent back replies of her own. The Witch saw in the Prisoner-prince a way to free the peninsula from the King, because who but a prince may rightfully challenge a king? But as it happened, the Prisoner-prince’s sons were princes, too.” I grinned, feeling the tug of the water as it began to shift again. “The King had forbidden anyone from acknowledging the Prisoner as his son, not from hurt as his people imagined, but from fear his children would one day avenge him. All was well as long as they remained children, but as the Witch on the Cliffs and the Prisoner-prince brooded, unable to find a solution, something entirely unexpected happened.”

“You found me.” Myrhydion pulled me to stand with him. “And made me a prince.”

“I found you,” I said. “And put a name to what was always there.” The water spun around us, picking up smaller-sized rocks as it gathered speed, but this time I felt entirely safe. “The eldest prince grew rapidly into his power. This was what the King had dreaded more than anything else. He could not drive the Prince away to leave the King himself forgotten and alone, so he kept him close, telling him he was helpless and coming up with schemes to bring him down, all the while fearing the day the Prince would wake to the injustices done to his family and the power denied him.”

Myrhydion flung his hands wide. All around us rock cracked and water surged, the rockslide giving way against the brutal force of Myrhydion’s attack. “Come, Olly! I would let the King know I have awoken to his misconduct!”

I stayed where I was. “There is one with greater right to challenge the King,” I said. “It is a crime, to take a father away from a son, but a greater crime to take wife, children and freedom, especially from those who revere you as family—”

There was another crack, this time from right behind me. I felt gravel on the back of my neck.

Myrhydion’s expression was drawn tight as if he hoped so much he was afraid to show it. He reached out his hand and pulled me to stand beside him. “Olly, is it possible—”

“The King has lied many times,” I reminded him. “He would tell any lie that benefited him. Even tell you that Edenvert was dead when all the time he has been waiting, very much alive—”

The rock cracked again. This time, I saw it happen, the thin lines travelling up and spreading out along the surface of the rock before beginning to crumble, slating off. And in their wake were two grey arms, trembling as they pushed aside the heavy slabs that covered them. The water whipped up around him, helping shed the outer covering of the rock to reveal the frail form within.

“Yes. Edenvert—that was my name.” His voice was the dry whisper of sand escaping an hourglass. “I had forgotten. I traded that memory for the promise of the wind to howl so loudly the Witch-daughter would not hear the full song of the King. I have forgotten many things.” He stretched out a hand. “Myrhydion, my son. I did not forget you.”

Myrhydion stepped forward hesitantly. I felt a sympathetic pang. Quite apart from the shock of meeting a half-forgotten father, Edenvert looked like he might dissolve on being touched. His rough tunic hung in loose folds around his skeletal form, and his boots were cracked, only held together by their laces. His beard was white, like the strange seaweed that sprung up in the shallow rock pools, and his eyes shone with a milky hue as they took in Myrhydion.

“You have become a man in my absence.” Edenvert’s hand shook erratically as he settled it around Myrhydion. “It does my heart good to see you. And Duhywynt? Where is little Dewey?”

“He is not so little as you remember him.” Myrhydion’s laugh was half sob. “He will not know what to make of you.”

“And I must learn him anew. After so long, we must not keep him waiting.” Edenvert’s eyes settled on me. “So you have found me at last, Oliver Evans. I am an old man, not used to journeying. I may have need of your strength. Will you lend it me?”

“Of course.” I took his other arm, wondering who’d told him about me—Nan?

I could ask him later, I decided as the current started to move us. Now, we had other concerns.

Beyond the cave, the sea was whipped up into a storm, the water pulling this way and that. Thunder growled in the sky above; its threatening vibrations even more ominous under the water.

A wall of water rushed at us, so dense it was visible, a sheet of glass moving at high speed. Just as I thought it would smash us back against the rocks, Edenvert paused, releasing his hold on my arm to extend a hand. The current was cast aside harmlessly.

I gaped. “Borrow my strength?”

Edenvert laid his hand on my arm again. “Perhaps there is a bit of rock still in me,” he said, but I thought that he had gained strength since leaving his prison. The balance of power had suddenly shifted.

The King was becoming desperate. He threw at us everything he had. Boulders, schools of fish, even a shipwreck. Seeing a hulking metal hull travelling towards you, vacant windows gaping like dull, shark eyes, would make anyone pause.

Anyone except Edenvert and Myrhydion. They threw the ship back before it met us, callously disregarding the screech of the twisted steel as they ripped it in two.

As the silt cloud whipped up by the sinking wreck faded, we could see the spires of the *morgen* city catching the sunlight.

“At last,” Edenvert said.

The King stood before his throne. “The challenge is void! Myrhydion, you helped him—this is not allowed! If you do not want the girl to die—”

Edenvert let go of my arm. “The girl?”

“The hostage I mentioned, father.” Myrhydion watched his father approach the throne with an expression of calm. I looked after Edenvert, wondering what Myrhydion saw that I didn’t. We were in the hall, the centre of the King’s power. Although the King was older, he had not spent the last few centuries trapped in a cave. Of the two, he appeared more robust.

But with every step Edenvert took towards him, the King diminished. He slid from the throne, as if lacking the strength to hold himself up. “Stop! Stop where you are—look! The girl lives only on my command! If I do not hold the water back she will drown ere you can reach her!”

Edenvert glanced towards the bubbles in which Myfanwy’s reflection still floated. He laughed, a quick, hoarse bark. “I do not think that girl will drown!” He continued his measured approach towards the throne.

“Myfanwy!” I started towards the bubble. I could see her still form, curled on her side, her plaits stretched out behind her, tugged by the water rushing in

all around her. In answer to my shout, she stirred, shaking off her clothes and revealing herself to be a stout seal draped in seaweed that dived quickly into the water and vanished from sight.

“Duhwynt?”

Myrhydion laughed in delight. “He learnt that trick from watching your laptop, I am sure!”

“I am undone by children’s tricks!” The King cowered at the base of his throne. “I am deserted—betrayed—will no one come to my aid?”

“All that would aid you have been driven away by your cruelty.” Edenvert continued his remorseless approach. “I warned you, Father. I said that if you did not lay aside your obsession with the loss of the peninsula, it would be your undoing.”

“I thought only of our people, of our loss! Do you not remember—we lived so happily on the land.”

“I remember,” Edenvert said. “And I will live happily on the land again, with my sons.” He stood over the King, looking down.

The King threw up his hand. Backed up against the edge of his throne, he had nowhere else to go. “Do not hurt me, Edenvert, please! Remember what I am to you!”

“I remember what you are better than you do.” Edenvert reached down, taking the brittle crown from the King’s head. “No king would drive his people from their home so completely.” He placed the coil of barnacle-crust metal on his head. “I relinquish you of your power, Gurcant. In the presence of my sons, Princes Myrhydion and Duhwynt, and the emissary of the land, Oliver Evans, representative of the Witch on the Cliffs, I name myself King beneath the Cliffs, holder of all powers to which the title attains.”

His words echoed more grandly than even the proportions of the hall should have allowed.

Suddenly, I realised that we were not alone. The hall had filled with a variety of marine life, from small silver fishes to eels, to Duhwynt’s friends. A touch at my elbow made me jump. Looking down, I saw that Duhwynt had worked his way over to me unnoticed. “What does that man mean, ‘sons’?”

“He means ‘sons,’” I said.

“Our father did not leave us,” Myrhydion’s pride was evident. “He was here the whole time, as the King’s prisoner. But Olly has freed him, and we are free at last of the King’s cruel treatment.”

Duhywynt’s breath caught. “He will not hurt the seals?”

Edenvert looked down at the form at his feet.

Gurcant’s head was in his hands, and he rocked backwards and forwards, looking exactly what he was—a sad, powerless old man.

“He will not hurt the seals,” Edenvert said. “He will not hurt anything, I think.” He turned back to the surrounding sea creatures. “Go. Find our people no matter where they are. Let them know that the city is theirs to reclaim if they wish.”

Silently the audience of fish slid away, leaving us alone in the hall. Myrhydion took Edenvert’s arm in support as we followed them towards the doorway, leaving the grand hall silent and still behind us. “What is your will now, King beneath the Cliffs?”

Edenvert smiled at him. “I like it better when you call me Father,” he said, looking around at the three of us. “I should like to go home.”

Edenvert leant heavily on me as we stood in at the edge of the intertidal stretch, the waves tugging at the sand beneath our feet. “After so long,” he said, his bony fingers digging into my arm, “to see the cliffs instead of hearing them...”

I squinted dubiously at the cliffs. Anywhere else in the world, a centuries old prisoner would be greeted by sunshine and blue skies. Not in Wales. Edenvert was welcomed by cloud so thick I wasn’t sure if it was afternoon or evening.

“Beautiful,” he finished hoarsely.

Were those tears in his eyes? Maybe we were better off with overcast. The sun on the coast might have overwhelmed him.

Duhywynt’s hand clutched my free arm. “Where did Ridi go? I do not like to be without him.”

I glanced down at him. He sounded unnaturally subdued. Shy when confronted by the father he did not remember? “If I know Myrhydion, he’s gone ahead.”

“Yes,” Edenvert said with quiet satisfaction. “The land is his birthright and yours, too, Duhywynt. You may walk with confidence on these shores.”

Duhywynt didn't budge. I squeezed his hand. “Try it out.”

He wobbled forward, ending up on his knees on the sand. “I do not think I can.”

“Your brother has no such problems.” Edenvert's hoarse voice was softened by its obvious pride. “Look. You must know at once he was born on the land—as were you.”

Looking up, we saw Myrhydion making his way down the cliff path, carefully pushing Old Mr Jones's wheelchair before him. “What are you waiting for? Dewey, you lump, give me a hand.”

There was no hesitation this time as Duhywynt scrambled to his feet.

I snorted. “Didn't take him long to change his mind.”

“Belief is a powerful thing,” Edenvert said. “And the habit of a lifetime a hard one to break. We owe you much, Oliver Evans.”

“I don't really feel I did a lot,” I said awkwardly. “It was your power. Yours and Myrhydion's.”

“And without you, we neither of us would have had any power at all. What manner of a contraption is this? I have never seen its like.”

“Father,” Myrhydion greeted us. “Your transport has arrived.”

Edenvert had been hiding his exhaustion, but he did not mind as we lifted him into the wheelchair. Duhywynt scampered ahead up the path, some of his usual buoyancy returning in the excitement of being able to walk and run on the land. Myrhydion guided the chair from the front, using one hand to pull it over rocks and up steps, talking to Edenvert and myself at high speed. Me, I got the unglamorous task of bringing up the rear, pushing the chair up the cliff. Typical *morgen!* Leaving me the hard work.

Still, as we cleared the top of the hill and Myrhydion fell into step beside me, his hand resting on my arm, I discovered that I did not mind.

I did not mind later that night as Myrhydion sat down beside me at the kitchen table with two cups of tea. “You are thinking what you are to do with us. Do not deny it. I can tell. You have been brooding over it since we ate.”

“I wouldn’t call it brooding,” I protested as I took the mug of tea. “It’s not like we’re dealing with the King—the old King, I mean. The fact that the three of you are staying, that’s a good thing.”

“You are kind, Olly. But it is not so easy to find money to feed four as it is to feed one,” Myrhydion continued, letting me settle my arm around him. “I have been thinking of it, too. It is a lot to ask of you—”

I cut that off at the start. “You’re not a burden,” I said firmly. “None of you are.” I squeezed his hand. “Duhywynt might as well be my little brother for as much as he teases me. And Edenvert... Well, you know I’ve never met my father. I’d like him to feel welcome here. And I hope I don’t have to tell you how important you are to me.”

Myrhydion smiled faintly, some of the tension around his eyes fading. “You said you wished to be a true friend. This is more than friendship.”

I considered that. Myrhydion was right. It felt like we’d crossed that boundary into something else. “Family?” I bit my lip. Myrhydion’s expression was hard to read. Had I, with my only child, only parent existence assumed too much? “I mean—”

“Sylvia said the same thing.” Myrhydion bowed his head. I could see his pleased smile, but his hair hid his eyes. “It will mean much to my father, and Duhywynt will not say it, but I think he will be pleased.”

Acting on a sudden understanding, I tipped his head up. “No tears. No matter what happens from now on, we’re going to be facing it together. We’ll work it out.”

“It is easier to command than to do it,” Myrhydion complained. “And I think that since it is you who have made my heart so confused it knows not whether it is happy or sad, it is you who must amend your behaviour. Talk of ordinary things, Olly, that I might be allowed to keep my composure.”

I snorted—even that was my fault?—and squeezed his hand. “I’m pretty confident I can find a job in Bangor. It’ll probably be easier to live there rather than commute, but I’ll come back on my days off.”

“I will come with you,” Myrhydion said. “I lived among man for five years, I am sure that I can work as well as you.”

I grinned. “I have to admit, I was hoping you’d say that, but Duhywynt and Edenvert will need you here, at least at first, as they adjust to living on land.”

“Shall Duhywynt have to attend school? I think he will refuse. And he will be behind, besides, and his teachers and classmates will grow suspicious.”

“Mrs Griffith will help us,” I said. “She was a teacher before she retired, remember. I bet she could get Duhywynt literate.” And if he thought he would be able to attend school with Myfanwy, Duhywynt might actually want to learn. “The people of the village... I think they’ll know that something is different. But I don’t think they’ll ask. As long as we come up with a halfway decent cover story—”

“It will be just as if I was an exchange student here again,” Myrhydion finished. “I hope you are right, Olly. And as long as Duhywynt and I are content, I do not think my father will want for anything more.”

“Do you think you’ll be content?”

“What a question to ask me!” Myrhydion’s scolding was undercut by the fact that his eyes smiled instead of frowning with his mouth. “I was content merely to see you again, and here I am, able to live by your side, as though—” He elbowed me. “Are you trying to provoke me to tears of impatience? Because if I cry, it will be your task to stop me.”

I snorted, elbowing him back. “Good thing I’ve had so much practice with sulking *morgen*.” I took a sip of my tea, wondering how Myrhydion had intended to finish his sentence. As though—what? We were family? He’d grown up on the Llŷn?

“There is one more matter I must bring to your attention, Olly.”

I put down my cup of tea. “What is it?”

“You have not kissed me for upwards of six hours.”

That problem, at least, was easily solved. I tangled my fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck as we kissed. This was a new experience, kissing Myrhydion with the knowledge that this time I did not need to fear that he would be called away and vanish on me. “You better not have thought I’d forgotten you in six hours! My memory—”

“I was worried the knight was already thinking of his next adventure,” Myrhydion said, and I could feel his mouth smile. “Those in stories, you read of them adventuring, you read of them courting, but you do not so often read of them settling down.”

Was he smiling at his joke or did he feel there was something different about this kiss too? I lingered over his lips, enjoying again their coolness. After

kissing Myrhydion, would kissing someone with body heat feel wrong? I discovered it would, pulling away reluctantly. “Some knights stay put. Look at Sir Spikesalot.”

“As he is rooted firmly in the ground, I do not think you can use him as your example,” Myrhydion warned. “Not unless you would like to find yourself planted in the garden someday.”

I could think of worse things.

“I do not think I want to wear shoes.”

“You will want them once you have walked more than an hour on the road, Dewey. But do not take my word for it. Here. I will tie the laces together and you may wear them around your neck until you feel you need them.”

I looked up from the pages of the *Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald* to see Myrhydion was indeed draping shoes over Duhywynt’s head. I snickered.

“Oliver Evans is laughing at me!” Duhywynt pointed an accusing finger. “If you make me ridiculous, brother...!”

“You do that well enough on your own!” Myrhydion tried to finish knotting the laces as Duhywynt ducked away from him. “I do not know why Olly laughs, but I am certain it is not you.”

“I was just reminded. There’s this fence in New Zealand where they tie shoes up as a sort of unofficial tourist attraction.”

Duhywynt immediately ducked out of his brother’s range. “I do not wish to become a tourist attraction!”

“I do not think there is any danger of that—Duhywynt! Come back!”

But Duhywynt had escaped into the living room. “Father! Tell Myrhydion he may not use me as a tourist attraction!”

“Now look what you’ve done!” Myrhydion waved the shoes at me. “What am I to do with these? This is nothing to laugh about Oliver Ev—” He could not hold back his own laugh.

It was hard to feel contrite when Myrhydion’s laugh made my heart swell with joy. I put down the paper and held open my arms. “You can tie them to the back of your father’s chair.”

Myrhydion took my invitation, leaning against me. “Always the practical one.”

I settled my arms around him comfortably. “Do you think Duhywynt will be more or less annoyed when he learns what a tourist attraction is?”

“I do not know. I suggest you come with us and find out.”

“Don’t tempt me. Job-hunting’s bad enough without being invited on walks. But no. The three of you should have some family time.”

Myrhydion tucked his hair out of his face to look down at me where I sat at the kitchen table. “You know you are welcome to join us. That none of us would begrudge your presence in our... family time.”

“I know. But that’s also why I want to find a job as quickly as possible. There will be other walks.”

“Other walks,” Myrhydion repeated, brushing my cheek. “How is it possible that two such ordinary words could make me so happy? It must be your grandmother’s magic.”

There was a twinge of pain in my chest, but I smiled. “Get used to them,” I warned him. “Because you’ll be hearing them a lot.” Myrhydion did not need to know how much it rankled that he didn’t seem able to believe we had a future together.

“As long as there are many other walks, I do not think—” Myrhydion halted at the sound of a truck pulling up outside. “Visitors?” He slipped off my lap.

Mentally cursing whoever it was disturbing us, I looked out the window. “It’s only Harry and Rob.”

Myrhydion frowned, smoothing down his hair as he studied his reflection in the hall mirror. “I thought we would have more time!”

About to open the door, I looked back at him. “Time for what?”

“For many things! Not the least of which is deciding what you will call me.”

I leant against the door, folding my hands across my chest as I tried to figure this out. “What’s wrong with Myrhydion?”

“What you call me when you introduce me to people. I am no longer a boy and I am more than your friend, so I would not be your boyfriend, and yet I do not know what that leaves.”

I reached out to stop his hand where he fidgeted with his hair. "I'll agree that you're not a boy and more than a friend, but boyfriend is more than the sum of its parts. Still... partner?"

"You do not like partner. I can tell by your face."

My grimace was rueful. "Partner has always sounded so... dry to me. That's what Bethan has, partners."

"Sweetheart is not used now, is it? A pity, as I could be very sweet to you."

I laughed. "Are you hoping I'll say lover?"

"You know that I must ask for a demonstration if you do."

"How many demonstrations do you need, Myrhydion?" The knocking at the door cut us off before Myrhydion could reply. A pity. It had occurred to me that a demonstration would not be a bad thing.

"*Bore da*, Olly. We—" Rob blinked. "You have a guest?"

"Myrhydion's not a guest," I said firmly, putting my arm around Myrhydion. "He's my partner. Myrhydion, this is—"

"Harry and Rob," Myrhydion said, holding out his hand. "I recognize them at once from all you have told me about them, Olly. In fact, I feel in a way that we have already met."

I felt that was going too far, but Rob shook Myrhydion's hand with no sign of recognition.

"Olly didn't mention you at all. I'm surprised. I had no idea that he was such a dark horse." Rob nudged me. "What else have you been keeping secret, eh?"

I refused to be rattled. "How is your foot? I'm surprised. I expected to see you on crutches."

"Handed them in yesterday," Rob said promptly. "Just as well. They were never going to fit in the overhead luggage compartment. And who wants to deal with crutches on a plane?"

I blinked. With everything else that had happened, I'd entirely forgotten that Rob had booked his flight. "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow," Rob said. "Harry's driving me down to London tonight. He thought with my foot still recovering it'd be a smarter idea than trying to

navigate train stations and buses. Besides, it'll be a good dress rehearsal for when he does it himself."

I raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like I wasn't the only one with a secret up my sleeve."

Harry had been content to let Rob do the talking so far, but now he interrupted. "Matter of fact, that's why we stopped by. So you could say goodbye to Rob."

"That's not the only reason." Rob nudged him.

"It's a lot to ask Olly." Harry stood firm. "And with Myrhydion staying—" He stopped to frown at Myrhydion. "You were here before, weren't you?"

"It was a long time ago," Myrhydion said. "I'm surprised you remember."

"Ridi! We're ready—" Duhywynt came down the hall, saw the gathered guests and promptly turned back the way he'd come.

"My brother." Myrhydion said unnecessarily. "He is not yet house-trained."

"If we're intruding—" Harry started.

"Not at all. The three of them were just about to head out for a walk." I patted Myrhydion's hand. "If you don't hurry they might leave without you."

Myrhydion favoured me with an ironic smile. "That is not a joke but the truth," he said, nodding to Harry and Rob. "I am sure you will excuse me. It is not easy having a younger brother."

"Brother? That kid was wearing a dress—"

"He likes them," I told Rob, crossing my arms. "Got a problem with that?"

He blinked. "No, I guess I don't."

"Good." And now that was settled, I motioned my guests towards the kitchen. "You have time for a cuppa?"

As I put the kettle on, it occurred to me that the last time Rob and I had sat down in this kitchen was just before his near escape from the *Ceffyl Dŵr*. I looked up, wondering if the same thought had occurred to him, but Rob was peering out the window at the departing walkers.

"Who's the old guy in the wheelchair?"

"Myrhydion's father." I fought hard not to blush. Even Harry had raised an eyebrow at that.

“Serious then?” Harry paused. “When you said that you’d once had the chance for something special—”

I nodded, sitting down with him at the table. “I was not the only one who regretted my decision.”

“How on earth did you get a wheelchair out here? We’d have seen a car...” Rob was still staring out the window.

My mind went blank. I had not thought that I’d be put on the spot so soon.

“Sit down, Rob. We’re not here to ask Olly about his transport.” Harry looked down at his mug of tea. From the set of his shoulders, he was building up to something.

I decided to help pave the way. “So. You’re going to America then?”

“His passport arrived the day after I sprained my ankle.” Rob picked up his mug without complaining about its contents. “Turns out he’d applied for one ages ago and just never told me about it.”

“Didn’t want you getting your hopes up,” Harry protested. “I wasn’t sure. But I’ve got a flight next week and—”

“He’s going to meet my family,” Rob said. “I’ll show him around, introduce him to how the other half lives.” His grin was wide enough for both of them, but Harry was quietly pleased.

“Me. Going to L.A. It doesn’t seem real, does it?”

“I’m going to want photographic proof,” I warned him. “Who is going to be minding the farm while you’re gone?”

“Actually,” Harry said. “That’s what we came to talk to you about.” He peered at me anxiously. “It wouldn’t have occurred to me to ask—I know you said you weren’t staying—but I heard in the village you were looking for work and Taid says he could make a farmer out of you. I’ve got a week to go over the basics with you—”

“Hold up. You want me to mind the farm?”

“It was Robert at the fish and chip mentioning that you had experience shearing on your C.V. that made me think of it,” Harry continued. “If you know sheep—”

“There is a big difference between shearing and running a farm—”

“Taid will tell you what to do, and if there’s any questions, I’ll only be an e-mail away. We’ll pay you, of course. Not well, but well enough.”

I had to smile at that. Had Rob told him of my problems? “And you’ll teach me the ropes before you go?”

Harry’s smile was relieved. “You’re thinking about it?”

I nodded. Having some local experience wouldn’t hurt my job-hunt any. “I’m keen. Let’s talk more when you get back from dropping this one at the airport.”

“This one—what am I, unaccompanied luggage now?” Rob’s complaint lacked any actual complaint. Happiness looked good on him, and I waved goodbye to them reflecting on how much had changed in a short time.

“Not bad,” Harry had said as he dropped me off outside the house. “Taid says we’ll make a farmer of you yet.”

I grinned at him. “He’d say that no matter what I did. You’re happy, though?”

Harry nodded. “You can shift the yearlings from the hill paddock to the house tomorrow entirely on your own, I’ll be happy.”

That was harder than it sounded. Sheep had a decided tendency to go everywhere except where you wanted them, and I didn’t have Harry’s superior knowledge of their personalities or his knack with the dogs. Still, the fact that Harry was even willing to let me attempt it said much.

Whether it said much about my talents as a shepherd or Harry’s desperation for a farm sitter while he went off gallivanting around the States was up to interpretation, but I chose to take the positive view.

“No one’s home,” a voice called before I reached the front door. Looking around, I found Edenvert seated in the wheelchair in the garden. He held up his hand. “No, stay where you are.”

A moment’s glance revealed a cluster of sparrows pecking at the crumbs he’d thrown for them. I leant an arm against the house to watch. It was only feeding birds, but Edenvert looked entirely happy.

“Where are Myrhydion and Duhywynt? They just go off and leave you here or did you send them away?”

Edenvert was still painful to look at, but his smile no longer stretched his skin so thin his bones were visible. “A little bit of both. You’ll find them on the shore, Olly.”

I looked up, startled at the adoption of my nickname, and received a benediction-like nod. Had I officially been adopted? I made my way down the cliff path full of my happiness.

As I scrambled over the rocks, I startled a colony of sunbathing seals. Before I could blink, the animals had dived into the water, leaving behind nothing but a ripple in the water and two forms on the rocks.

“Hello, Duhywynt.” I sat beside him and nodded to the seal seated on his far side. “Who’s this? A new friend?”

The seal gave me a vacant stare. It was not at all attractive, moon-faced with an uninteresting pattern of grey speckles on its fur.

Duhywynt snorted. “This one’s too stupid to know that he should be afraid of man,” he confided, patting the seal’s mottled fur. “So I have to put up with him.”

“That right?” I grinned.

“It is a charitable duty,” Duhywynt informed me. “I have named him Evans Oliver. It suits him, don’t you think?”

As I pondered what sort of a response to make to that, the seal barked and dived into the water. A dark-haired figure was coming down the stairs.

“Myfanwy.” I stood up to wave. “I haven’t seen her since we freed her from the King. It’ll be good to know how she’s getting on.” Looking down, I discovered that I was alone on the rock. “You’re not serious.”

The slap of the kelp against the rocks indicated that Duhywynt was.

“You already met Myfanwy! You rescued her from the King—you’re still shy of her?” I peered into the water. “You have to meet people sometime!”

Myfanwy waved to me from the shore. She had one arm cradled against her chest in a sling. “Come over here!” she called. “I’ve got something for you, and I don’t want to drop it.”

I waved in acknowledgement and started to climb back to shore.

“Ask her if she likes seals!” Duhywynt hissed urgently from a thick cluster of kelp.

I gave him a withering look, but he didn't have the shame to feel affronted. "Fine."

"You took your time. I could have done that in half the time, even with this." Myfanwy jerked her head towards her cast.

"No need to wish you a speedy recovery. I can see you're already on your way." I hesitated.

"I'm fine," Myfanwy said. "Gran says I've no business to be so healthy after an experience like mine, and Mam and Dad even came down from Cardiff to see me. They're staying here. I'm allowed to go back with them if I want, but I've decided to stay. I think it's about to get interesting on the Llŷn."

Myfanwy was probably right, I decided. "How do you feel about seals?"

"Seals?" She pursed her lips, considering them. "They're all right. Much better than dolphins. Everyone goes on about dolphins and you know what they are? Big bullies."

Things were looking up for Duhywynt.

"So." Myfanwy took a deep breath. "I don't know how, but I know that you saved me. So I brought you something as a thank you."

"You don't have to thank me for that—I'm just glad you're all right." I bit my lip. "What happened?"

"I was stupid," Myfanwy said. "I knew the King was tricky, but I thought I was trickier. Anyway, here." She reached into her sling.

Nan's book was still in one piece. It was damp and the ink of the original text was smudged, but all the additions were intact. I turned the pages over, discovering that they didn't even stick. "This is incredible!"

"Score one for cunning women." Myfanwy's smile was rueful. "It was my fault anyway. I really, really wanted the book. So when I saw it on the rocks, I knew it was a trap, but I thought that maybe the King had laid it for you, that he didn't know I was learning to be a witch, and that I could do what you couldn't. Obviously, I was wrong."

"Myfanwy—"

She shook her head. "It wasn't that bad. I mean, I got to miss school and Mam and Dad came up to see me. And you've got the book back."

I looked down at the book I held and at the girl. "Myfanwy, I can't accept this—it's yours."

“Mrs Evans said only if you didn’t—”

“Nan wanted me to solve her puzzles,” I told her. “She could have written them down for me and left them in the post box. I’m pretty sure that the reason she didn’t was so that I’d have a reason to talk to you—and she gave me your book so that you’d have a reason to talk to me.” I held the book out. “She wanted us to work together—to make friends. And now that we have, I see no reason why you shouldn’t have your book. You’re her successor after all, the new Witch on the Cliffs.”

Myfanwy looked at the book. Her expression was pained. “You’re a witch and her grandson. And I’m only good at spells, not stories.”

“You’ve got time to practice.” I pushed the book into her hands. “In her letter to me, Nan didn’t tell me that the Llŷn needed a witch. She said it needed a knight. Why? Because she knew we already had a witch.”

Myfanwy was silent a long moment. Then she took the book. “Thank you, Oliver—Olly. I’m going to be a great witch.”

“A legendary witch,” I assured her.

“Be careful,” Myfanwy told me. “I might decide to get my practice in by working on you.” She grinned at me. “Do you want your present from Mrs Evans now or later?”

“Now! You would really make me wait?”

Myfanwy smirked and took a much-crumpled envelope from her pocket. “Ta-dah! The knight’s reward for answering all three questions.”

About to open it, I caught her watching me with a strange expression. “You know I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

“Just open it already, Oliver Evans.”

It was a good thing I was too happy to mind being bossed.

Two small objects slid out of the envelope and into my hand. I gasped as I recognised the gold bands. Nan and grandfather’s wedding rings. This—

My hands clutched reflexively around the rings. I seemed to feel the warmth of her touch on my shoulders. “Nan.” Was this her way of reminding me she loved me? Or had Nan intended—

“You know,” Myfanwy said, tucking a plait behind her ear. “I’ve always thought I would make an excellent flower girl.”

“You don’t know he’ll say yes,” I told her. My cheeks burned as I realised my mistake. “Or that I’m even going to ask him.”

Myfanwy just smirked at me. “He’s coming round the cliffs now,” she said. “Why don’t you find out?” As I turned to look she walked past me, pausing to chat with Myrhydion a moment before following the path round the cliffs.

Myrhydion shared a bemused smile with me as he joined me. “What an odd child Myfanwy is. I do not see why it matters to her that I know she likes purple but will not wear pink! Does she have a birthday coming up, do you think?”

“I think she is expecting a wedding,” I told him, hastily slipping the hand holding the rings into my jean pockets.

“A wedding? Surely not. She is much too young!” Myrhydion turned to watch Myfanwy’s progress across the shore. “Or—Oliver Evans, are you stealing hearts again?”

I could feel the rings against my skin. They felt like a promise. “With any luck.” I took his hand. “Come on. It’s been a while since we’ve watched the sunset from the cliffs.”

Myrhydion was perfectly willing to follow me up the path. “We’ve never watched the sunset from the cliffs, Olly.”

I laughed. A future spread out before me, one in which watching the sunset with Myrhydion was a regular occurrence. “Then we should start now.”

The End

Author Bio

I realised I wanted to be an author when as a teenager, I found myself getting annoyed that the characters in the books I read weren't doing what I wanted them to do. Now that I'm a writer, they still don't.

Since the 2014 DRitC event I have been working on a paranormal romance, that I hope to publish this year, and am currently working on my second DRitC story for this year. In my non-writing life, I live on a cliff top with a commanding view of the ocean, only instead of Wales, I look out at rural Japan, and the lights of the horizon aren't the Twylweth Teg, they're squid boats.

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