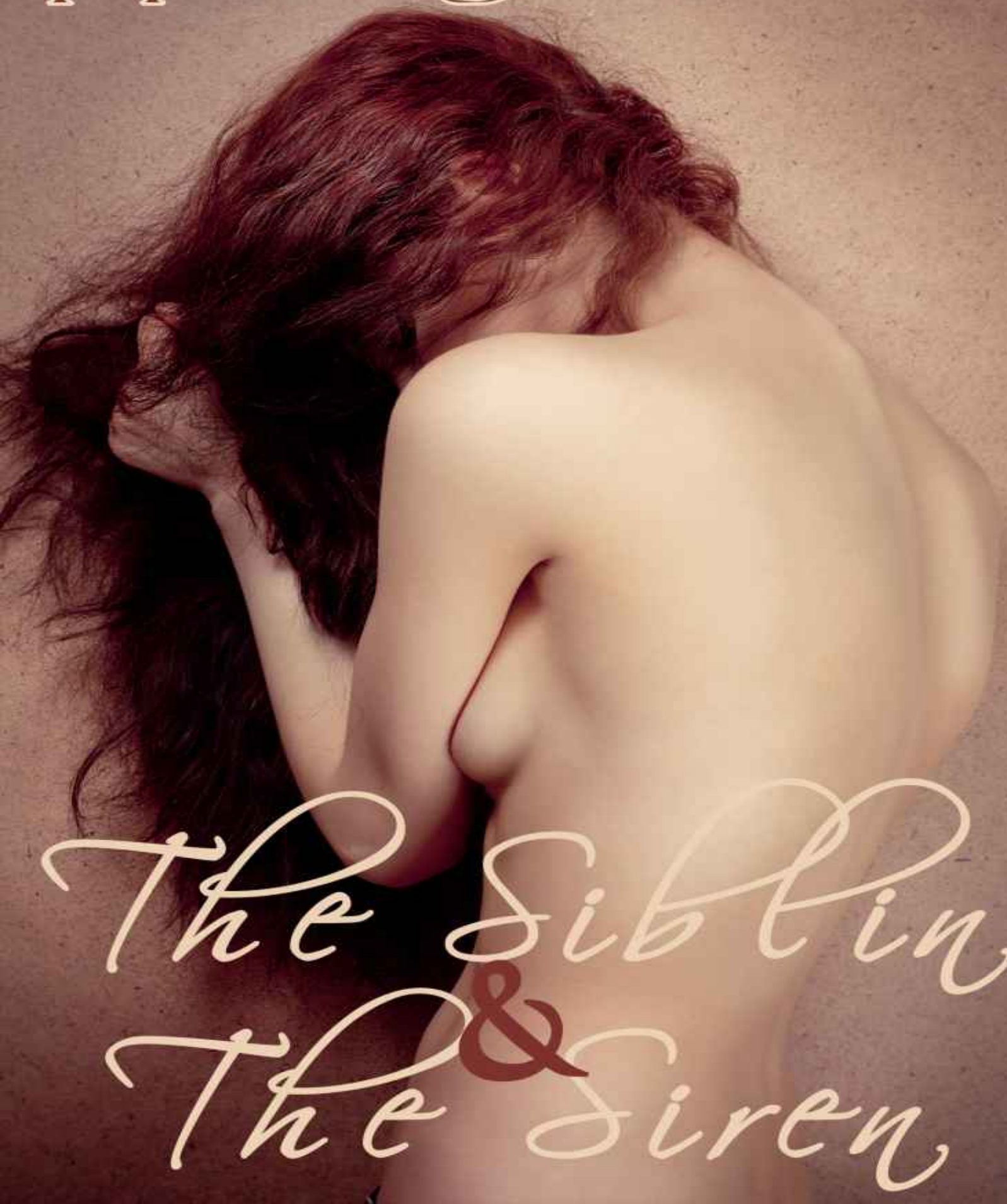


HARP STRATHE



*The Siblin
& The Siren*

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The Sibling and the Siren
A Luterian World Novel

By

Harp Strathe

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First to DL, for everything and all of it, and also—

To my very good friend Sarah H., a brainstorming genius and a talented, dedicated writer.

Chapter One

"Whoever in ignorance draws near to them and hears the Sirens' voice...the Sirens beguile him with their clear-toned song...and about them is a great heap of bones of moldering men, and round the bones the skin is shriveling."

- Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 12

Winter walked up the gangplank and swung aboard *The Singsong*. He was in a mood, a wine skin in his hand. Dorsa was a small southern port, not much to look at, but the wine was good. They had eleven barrels in the hold to trade.

Isidor had gone chasing a Dorsa skirt hours ago. The dark-haired, plump women were difficult to lure to a casual encounter, with their strict religion and their stricter mothers. Winter hadn't bothered.

Winter had no doubts his younger brother Isidor—
younger by moments, although it mattered to Siblin—would persuade one. The two brothers didn't look alike. They were both well made, both good-looking, big, broad shoulders and strong arms, large rough hands.

But Isidor was openly handsome, tall, light brown wavy hair to his shoulders that showed streaks of blonde in the summer months, warm hazel eyes and a flashing smile. Winter was more intense, deep set dark brown eyes and a strong jaw, black hair to his shoulders, his face brooding, serious, little of the ready charm of his brother.

He and his brother shared their cabin as all Siblin brothers did, as they would share it with their *anthata*, with the woman they would claim together eventually. Winter wandered a little in the straight line between here and there. It was late, the stars clear, early summer. He heard them before he got to the door and opened it anyway, leaning against it, crossing his arms.

The Dorsan was on the bed, on her knees, naked. Her hands were tied together, stretched in front of her, looped to the hook there. There were more hooks in the cabin at various points. He and Isidor had put them in years ago. Her

shoulders were down on the mattress, her ass in the air, her legs spread. Isidor had his hands on her hips, kneeling behind her. He was taking her slowly and she was begging behind the gag.

"Ti v'enh avel nu desh," Isidor said in Dorsan, reaching under her.

Don't you come until I say.

She shut her eyes, crying out as he stroked her clit, still fucking her slowly. In any port, Isidor could find them, the ones who liked rough pleasure. He could see it in their eyes, he said, the gentle ones. Winter had said he was full of *tsatil*, but Isidor did seem to know. Siblin desires were specific.

The little Dorsan began to hitch with pleasure and Isidor withdrew his hand, smacking her ass, her flesh jiggling. Isidor turned and met Winter's eyes, thrusting into her, a knowing look before Winter shut the door, now wandering a little in the straight line from here to there and up the stairs to the forecastle deck of *The Singsong*, passing the lamp hanging on its hook by the wheel.

Winter was restless, drunk. Aroused. He would find a woman in the next port. He sat down and took off his tarred wool felt top hat, setting it on the deck next to him, leaning forward a little and taking off his traditional Siblin waistcoat jacket, dark blue with gold buttons. He removed his black boots, leaning back, lying down flat, looking at the stars.

Siblin were wanderers, traders, speaking many languages, their ships, brightly painted, roaming the world. Minsk, just north of Dorsa, was the closest they came to a permanent port, their arrangement with the Luterians a thousand years old.

Raising his head briefly to tilt the wine skin, Winter let it pour into his mouth, swallowing. He listened as the little Dorsan voiced her pleasure, a series of high cries. Winter found the familiar patterns in the stars above him. She

wouldn't truly satisfy Isidor, their requirements different than other men. They were Siblin.

#

It was still too hot, even at night. Winter stood up and pulled it all off—his white linen shirt, open at the neck, tan linen drawstring pants with wide-turned black cuffs—sitting again, collapsing on his back, blowing. He hated heat, hated summer in the southern waters. He looked at the stars again, his hand resting on his thigh, his other leg crooked.

He and Isidor were both still relatively young, only thirty-seven. But they weren't *that* young. Like all the Elder Races—Siblin, Veshtan, and Luterians included—they would live about three hundred years.

He heard the cabin door open and close, voices, Isidor speaking, the Dorsan's higher tones. They couldn't see Winter from this angle so Winter ignored them. He heard their steps on the gangplank. Isidor was as talented in getting the women he collected to go away after they were done as he was in getting them to come here in the first place. Isidor would see her safe and then return.

Winter's hand shifted, touching his cock. It was getting difficult for him, difficult for Isidor, their pleasure dull, muffled until they found her. They tried to be patient. Winter closed his eyes, the woman faceless, nameless. He stroked his cock lightly, squeezing, hardening in his hand.

Sometimes she was a tall, dark-skinned Southron with full lips in Winter's mind, sometimes a light-skinned Caskian woman with a creamy ass for spanking. Winter worked himself, swirling his hand over the head of his cock, large and thick, pumping his fist faster. Maybe she would be a plump little brown Dorsan with straight black hair that brushed her butt, large nipples, and a sweet nature.

Winter's breath released as he opened his eyes and raised his head, looking down at himself, at the head of his cock, engorged, appearing and disappearing in his fist. He closed his eyes again, leaning his head back, imagining

being in his anthata's mouth, imagined his hand in her hair, fucking her throat. For Siblin tusks, the pleasure before release was more intense. They learned to draw it out, to take their time.

There was finally a surge, that frustrating moment, so much under it he couldn't reach, his hips thrusting, his cock convulsing, spilling onto his belly. He pulsed a final time, grunting. He felt a sense of dim, faraway pleasure, more relief than anything. Winter stilled, his breathing a little fast, leaving his hand there. Raising the wine, he took a drink, swallowing, and reached for his handkerchief, pulling it out of his coat pocket, cleaning himself.

Isidor appeared at the top of the stairs, leaning against the rail, crossing his arms as Winter had. He smirked. Isidor was in his top hat, linen drawstring pants and shirt open at the top, no collar. He had shed his waistcoat in the heat. Isidor was a little taller, although Winter was bigger. Siblin tended to be large in all sorts of ways, and neither one of them was an exception.

#

All Siblin were born male, all twins. There were no girls born to their people. Those twins, brothers, would find a woman when they were grown. It didn't matter who she was when they met her. Once he and Isidor took that woman together, once she was their anthata, once their seed mingled in her, she would be Siblin like them. Their pleasure would be awakened and she would be theirs for their lives.

Eventually, that woman would bear them one set of twins, two boys. Their sons.

And so it went.

They could find their anthata at any time, in any port. But it hadn't happened yet. Until he and Isidor found her, they were *tusks*, the Siblin slang word for a pair of brothers with no anthata. And until they found her, they took women singly in the ports for what muffled pleasure they could get, separate from each other.

"I told you, you won't find a woman in a wine skin," Isidor said.

"I'm not charming like you, brother," Winter answered.

"And now you're on the forecastle deck pleasuring yourself."

"It's not that much different," Winter muttered.

Isidor shrugged easily, walking to take the wine Winter offered and upending it, letting it pour in his mouth.

"Remember that woman in Skale?" Isidor said, swallowing, grinning at him.

"Which one?"

"You know," Isidor said impatiently.

Winter sent him a look, remembering, his mouth quirking lightly, sitting up.

"I don't think I've ever seen you so drunk, Isidor."

"Leline," Isidor said, his fingers coming up, snapping.

"Her name was Leline. A great big round ass for smacking. I was convinced she was our anthata. Remember I dragged you out of that dice game?"

"I threw twenty hecs, of course I remember," Winter said wryly.

"And then you couldn't—," Isidor said.

"And you were so drunk you couldn't either," Winter finished for him.

"Remember how disappointed she was?" Isidor said, laughing now, Winter's mouth quirking. "Remember the names she called us?"

Isidor's laughter trailed away. He offered Winter the wine skin.

"She was pretty enough," Winter muttered, taking it.

"You know how it is."

It was a natural constraint, but they still found it funny. It kept Sibling brothers from performing the ritual with the wrong woman. If the other brother tried to join, he simply wouldn't be able. You'd be looking at a woman, ready to bed her, and all of the sudden you just didn't want to anymore.

“We’ll find her,” Isidor said. “You always get morose when you’re drunk. Come to bed.”

Winter got up, gathering his clothes, swiping for his boots. They went down the stairs and into their cabin, putting things away, Winter tossing the handkerchief in the laundry to wash. The bed was big, taking up a good portion of the room, a Siblin bed designed for three.

Isidor took off his clothes and blew out the lamp as Winter lay down on his back, lacing his hands behind his head. Isidor joined him after a moment, sleeping with him as they had all their lives.

“How was she?” Winter said in the dark.

“Plump and tight,” Isidor answered, already sounding sleepy.

#

Winter came out of the cabin in the morning, pulling his shirt on, opening and going down the hatch, clattering down the stairs to the galley. He came up with cavash steaming in his hand, too much sun in the world, his eyes feeling grainy and his head full of batting, the cavash burning his tongue a little but it tasted good.

Generations in Minsk had given Siblin a liking for the Luterian brew. Isidor was already whistling, winding rope, his light brown hair wavy and whipping a little in the gusts, his alert hazel eyes full of energetic good cheer. Winter came and sat on the stairs, his own long straight black hair blowing across his eyes.

“I want to stab you when you are so happy in the mornings,” Winter said.

“Yes, I should never smile,” Isidor said, smiling at him.

Winter eyed him. He pulled out his stone, his knife, beginning to sharpen it.

“I smile,” Winter said, not smiling. “I want to go to the islands again.”

Winter pushed the edge of the blade against the stone. Isidor shrugged lightly, coiling the end of the rope.

"We've been all over those islands."

"Not Nanine," Winter said, his hands stilling.

Isidor's smile faded. He suddenly looked as serious as his brother, Isidor's face falling into lines that made him look different, older. Isidor heaved the rope onto the pegs, lacing it down the line, turning his head to peer at Winter.

"Because it's in the mouth of the Brecca Straight," Isidor said. "We've always said it's not worth the risk."

Winter returned to sharpening.

"The coordinates say Maren is on one of those islands," Winter said. "It's the last place to look."

"We don't even know if Maren is alive, Winter," Isidor said, straightening. "We've been looking for him for twenty years."

"He wanted us to find him," Winter said stubbornly. "He sent the message."

"Nine years ago. Why doesn't he just come to us?" Isidor retorted, gesturing.

Winter shrugged. It was an old conversation between them, although he had never proposed braving the Brecca Straight before. Isidor came and passed him, sitting two steps up. Winter turned his head, looking at his brother.

"Don't you want to know?" Winter asked him. "After all this time?"

Isidor studied him and then looked away, his eyes on the horizon, searching it.

"Yeah," Isidor finally said, releasing his breath. "Yeah. Let's go to Nanine."

#

It was eleven days to the Brecca Islands, another three to Nanine. On the third day they would actually enter the mouth of the Brecca Straight, Nanine not far. Isidor was at the helm. Winter was busy ensuring they captured the wind, his mind on the tasks, trying not to think about where they were going. They had both been quiet all day. Tense.

It was afternoon before they began to see the black Brecca rocks jutting out of the sea on their starboard side, going carefully, the shoals treacherous. Winter eyed the rocks uneasily, something he'd seen in illustrations in books, heard in their tales. Land appeared. Caves slowly rose behind the rocks, rows of tall and thin perfect arches opening in the black cliffs. Nobody knew who'd carved them or where the openings led.

And a siren could come out of any one of them at any moment.

Siblin didn't come near the Brecca Straight, not even this far out. He and Isidor would only be going into its mouth a small ways, but that was no guarantee.

Sirens came out of the openings to stand on the black rocks of the Brecca Straight and sing sailors to lust until men sailed their ships straight into the rocks. They sang to men until they despaired with longing and threw themselves into the sea, sang them to madness. It didn't matter how far away you were or what you stuffed into your ears.

Paintings and lithographs showed the sirens taking the form of beautiful women. There was lore throughout the world, art showing sirens who looked like women but were monsters, mostly naked, peaked ears, sharp pointed teeth, mindless pale blank eyes, long hair that drifted in the sea winds, beautiful and cruel, hunters who ate the flesh of the men they lured whether they were dead yet or not.

Some illustrations showed that too, gruesome images. Sometimes the women were part fish, sometimes part bird, always with their mouths open, singing.

Siblin weaved them into their own tales, terrifying stories he and Isidor had heard since they were boys. Tales of the sirens had used to give Winter nightmares. But regardless of legend and myth, regardless of what common sailors believed, Siblin knew the sirens were real and that their song was deadly. He and Winter would never go near the Brecca Straight under any other circumstances.

#

Winter thought he saw movement in one of the tall arches in the cliff. He got the glass, Isidor at the helm. Winter scoured the nearest rocks off the starboard bow. He didn't see anything on a fast pass, coming back slower.

"Winter," Isidor said low, pointing to the rocks ahead on the same side.

Winter advanced the glass, seeing long boards cracked on the rocks, fresh wreckage, a broken hull rising, smaller items floating strewn in the surf. The ship that was in pieces there had been taken in the last few months, maybe, the colors of the paint on the wood still vivid under a hot sun.

He saw another wreckage, this one older. Through the glass Winter focused on a skeleton flung on a small shore on its back, arched, its mouth gaping open, eye sockets empty and staring. Winter felt a wave of pity and horror, moving on. Shattered crates, their contents spilled, barrels. More dead bodies. So many bodies, although they decayed fast here, mere weeks before they were skeletons wrapped in tattered cloth.

In Siblin, the phrase *on the black rocks*, meaning a very bad turn of events, referred to the idea of being abandoned here.

More black rocks appeared off the port bow now on the other side of the ship, more wreckage, ragged strips of canvas, a ship's wheel on its side. So many crates. Over two hundred years of wealth shattered on these shoals, every kind of merchandise and bauble imaginable, and there wasn't a thief stupid enough in this world to try for them.

They were in the worst of it, Isidor guiding them through. The silence was stark, only the raucous voices of the sea birds squabbling, nesting among the crags. The dead were silent, their bleached bones peeking out among the rocks.

Winter focused on movement, finding it. A sea dragon, as long as a man's leg, slithered down between two jutting rocks, surging into the shoals, hunting.

Winter walked across the deck to the port side, lifting the glass again, scanning the rocks, the cliffs. Now they were in a long thin channel. If a siren came, there wouldn't be anything they could do about it. They would join the dead men on the black rocks, *The Singsong's* hull broken, their kegs of Dorsan wine claimed by the sirens as so much had been before. Luck was all they had to see them through, and nobody sane liked to rely on luck.

"Where do they live?" Isidor asked from the wheel in a low voice, his eyes roaming the cliffs.

"Through the arches, I guess," Winter replied as quietly, crossing again, a crawling sensation in his gut, focusing the glass on one of the tall, thin, perfect openings, black shadows just past its entrance.

One illustration that had especially terrified him as a boy had shown a writhing nest of sirens just past the entrance to those same openings, beautiful figures draped over one another, some asleep, others fighting over the entrails of a man not quite dead yet, trying desperately to crawl away, madness on his face. Winter lowered the glass, the black rocks abruptly much farther away, all the detail gone.

#

They hadn't wanted to risk coming here, but they had searched for Maren for years. It was the last place to look. Maren had been the *twain* who had taken them in, raising them after their parents were killed in a storm when they were seven. It was traditional for a Siblin who had lost his brother to adopt Siblin orphans. Maren's brother Dane had been killed in a port accident. Maren had been everything to them, like a father, all the family they had left.

But twenty years ago, when he and Winter were seventeen, Maren had disappeared. The brothers had been stuck in Dorsa in port on a job. Maren had taken his Siblin ship, the *Wandering Eye*, out alone. Maren hadn't told them where he was going, but he'd always come back before.

So the brothers had waited, getting a room on land. The days had turned into weeks. They hadn't worried until the weeks had turned into months, and the months had turned into the more solid creeping certainty that something terrible had happened and Maren wasn't coming back. They hadn't even known where to look for him.

By the time five years had passed, both Winter and Isidor had resigned themselves to the idea that Maren was dead. By then, they had gotten their own ship, Siblin-made, *The Singsong*. Four more years had gone by, both of them busy establishing trade and taking cargo, building relations with different port authorities.

And then one day, eight years ago, the Siblin ship *The Mockery* had hailed them, slipping beside them into port at Minsk. Leet and Havish, two of the roughest tusks they knew, had boarded. The captains of *The Mockery* said they had picked up a letter addressed to Isidor and Winter from the Siblin ship *The Farshore*. *The Farshore* had picked it up in Dorsa where it had been left for four months before the ship came through to trade. It had taken the letter almost a year to reach them.

"I'm afraid it's been damaged, Winter," Havish had said regretfully, pointing to the water stain on the bottom of the envelope. "It came to us like this."

Winter had looked down at the thick parchment with a sense of shock, recognizing Maren's handwriting.

#

"You're making me nervous," Isidor said.

Winter snorted, raising the glass again, following the silhouette of the black rocks with the glass, stopping, going back, moving on.

"You should be," Winter replied. "If a screecher shows, we're dead."

"It's going to happen or not, Winter. Stop being a *tsutsul*."

“Fuck you, Isidor,” Winter retorted, his mouth twitching at the childhood joke, a *tsutsul* a creature whose face resembled an asshole.

#

He and Winter had both sat, looking at the letter. Isidor had finally reached and opened it, Winter looking over his shoulder. They unfolded the paper inside. No greeting, no explanation regarding where he’d been for the past eleven years. Just a set of coordinates.

Regardless, those coordinates said Maren was alive. He was alive, and he wanted them to find him. But the crease where the paper touched the bottom of the envelope had gotten wet. The ink was smeared. The final two numbers were illegible. They had no way to determine exactly where Maren had meant to send them.

They had an idea. The coordinates they could read covered roughly a total of five islands and a part of a sixth, the Brecca Islands, and for the next eight years he and Winter had searched each island, coming whenever they could. They hadn’t found any sign of Maren.

Except for the last island. They’d never been there.

Nanine.

#

“How far out are we?” Winter said.

“Not far. The cove is ahead.”

Winter came and took the wheel. Isidor blew out some of his tension as they left the black rocks behind. Their luck had held, although neither one of them forgot they’d have to come through the same black rocks to get back to open water.

The sea was choppy here, green with whitecaps, a good wind. Isidor took out the glass, aiming it at the cove.

“Winter.”

Isidor came to Winter’s side, pointing, taking the wheel.

Winter brought it to the bow, bracing his leg, scanning. He passed it, a dark blur in the glass, and then returned,

adjusting.

The *Wandering Eye* filled the sight. Winter's gut tightened. Maren's ship. She was there, in the cove, anchored, as she must have been since Maren had sent that message nine years ago. This is where Maren had meant to send them.

Winter felt a surge, hope and then doubt, the ship's familiar lines tugging at him, colorful paint, colorful canvas, his whole world when he and Isidor were ten. Maren was here, one way or another. Winter almost couldn't believe it. They'd found him.

#

By the time they anchored, it was evening, but they didn't want to wait until morning. They went down the ladder to the dinghy, Winter holding a lantern. Isidor rowed them to *The Wandering Eye*. Winter came off the ladder and stepped onto the deck on which they had spent their youth and that he hadn't walked in twenty years.

They had already tried hailing him, could already tell Maren wasn't here. Winter opened the cabin, the door swollen, sticking. Nobody had been on her for awhile, the deck a filthy mess, sea birds using her to rest. Her innards were cleaned out, dusty, motes hanging in the lamplight.

There were still two beds, one larger where he and Isidor had slept and that Maren had built when he adopted them. Both the beds had been stripped. Winter searched all the drawers, the cabinets and closets. Isidor came in.

"Any sign of his journal?" Isidor asked.

Winter shook his head. There was hardly anything here. They explored the whole ship together with one lantern.

"I'll go through supplies in the morning, see what we'll need to search the island," Winter said.

They boarded *The Singsong* again, Winter leaning against the rail. The lantern's light was lonely in the surrounding darkness, a beacon that could be seen from land if there were anyone to see it. Winter was looking toward the dim

outline of the shore. Isidor came and leaned next to him, both of them listening to the lap of water against the hull. Both of them thinking about Maren.

Isidor suddenly straightened.

"Do you hear something?" Isidor said, sounding wary.

Winter tilted his head. Singing? He straightened as well, realizing, his neck prickling. Then the wind shifted. He strained, listening. Nothing.

"It's gone," Isidor said.

He and Isidor looked around uneasily. Isidor grabbed the lantern as Winter moved away from the rail. They went into their cabin, shutting the door. Better to be prudent so near the straight. There were legends of sirens boarding a ship from the water, hunting that way. They doused the lantern, laying back, neither of them able to sleep yet, but not talking, either.

Winter looked out the porthole. He felt it in his heart that Maren was gone. He had for awhile. But now he wondered. Coming to Nanine had been the last task before grieving him. Neither of them had actually expected to find him here.

#

Winter picked up a pebble and tossed it irritably off the low cliff into the sea below as he walked. It was their fourth day on Nanine and all the anticipation had faded and disappointment had replaced it. Nanine was just like all the other islands they had searched. They had found no sign of Maren. Maren never would have made it this difficult. He was probably gone from here or dead.

The low cliff they walked found a bottom at the same level as the sea and they began clambering up and down huge rocks on the edges of the shoreline to the west of the cove, having explored all the shore and quite a bit inland east of it. They had started with the reasonable assumption that if Maren settled on an island he would stay near the cove, that being the only way off of it, the only viable landing spot.

But they had found nothing. Island and more island. Trees. Birds. Big green leaves. More trees. Winter hated islands, hated being sticky. If he never saw another island, that would be fine. Insects. Snakes. Heat. Winter had packed things to camp that they carried, their next step to search inland in this direction. They'd sleep rough tonight in the forest, the day getting late. Isidor remained annoyingly cheerful.

The surf crashed to their left, that endless sound, Sága's fingers playing on everything it found, the sea's rhythms. They climbed up and down the huge rocks that jutted from the shore and out of the sea in towering forms, great sprays of water crashing that he and Isidor avoided, sometimes timing it, the shoals alive with creatures you found wherever the sea met the land. Seasquirts. Mussels, fanworms. Five-finger fish. Barnacles. More rocks, more waves. A woman.

Winter stopped, Isidor walking up beside him. Winter put his arm out quickly, hitting Isidor's chest, pointing. Isidor looked.

There was a woman sitting on the rocks far ahead and higher, on a natural shelf, massive waves breaking at her feet. She was looking out to sea, perched on the overhanging cliff in profile, her legs off the edge, her feet on the rock face under her, her toes pointed down. Her feet were bare. From here all he could see was that she had red hair, a long fall that obscured her face, wavy.

What was a woman doing on Nanine?

Winter was trying to see her, peering, walking forward, Isidor doing the same. She was very still. It was like she had just appeared out of nowhere. They crossed a patch of sand onto the higher rocks, climbing, getting closer, keeping their balance on the uneven surface.

She suddenly turned her head. She must have spotted them, although she was still too far away to see her face well.

They moved toward her quickly as she got to her feet, pivoting in their direction, the wind coming up and stirring her red hair, lifting it, very long. She was wearing some sort of shapeless dress that came just below her knees. She began backing away. Winter stopped, Isidor doing the same beside him. She went still again. Winter slowly walked forward, the woman staying where she was now, watching them. They got closer. He could almost see her.

The tide sucked out, withdrawing from the rocks below to their left, rolling and gathering again. A great wave crested the cliff, crashing between where they walked and the woman, obscuring her, a spray of froth and seawater that rose high and then fell to crash onto the rocks, scattering and withdrawing.

She was gone.

“What—?” Isidor said next to him, looking around, and Winter spotted her.

“There,” Winter said, pointing, setting off after her, the rocks slowing them.

She seemed to have little difficulty, going lightly. Then she was running ahead through the sand straight for the tree line and the dense forest, huge leaves and undergrowth, her red hair a beacon. She looked back once. He still couldn’t make her out. Winter jumped from the rocks to the sand, pounding after her, Isidor behind. She disappeared into the forest.

They followed her straight in, going fast, slapping away leaves, trailing vines. They ran for awhile in that direction, not seeing her. Winter finally slowed, breathing hard.

“Where is she?” Isidor panted behind him.

They’d lost her. Winter turned around in a circle and froze, Isidor seeing and turning as well. She was standing not far, very still again, looking at them.

#

Winter stared, almost not believing what he was looking at. The whole of her struck him first. Beautiful. Her hair was

red, a true red, deep and dark and rich. Redheads were unusual, sometimes seen in Alveria, even more rarely in Caska. She had that coloring redheads sometimes did, her skin seeming almost translucent, the blood close to the surface.

Her cheeks were flushed a delicate pink from running, contrast to the red of her hair, freckles across her nose, her lips full, also pink. Her features were delicate, large eyes under sweeping dark red brows. Winter blinked, peering at her. The irises of her eyes were so strange, not brown, too pale, the color of honey. She was delicate all over, wrists and ankles, her jaw fragile. Winter was still staring at her, Isidor was. She didn't look real.

Then Winter saw the necklace she wore. A small rectangular *Tal*, sitting vertically on her neck, a Siblin necklace. All Siblin wore one. He did. Isidor did. Winter's gut sank. Maren.

"I'm going to try to grab her," Winter said to Isidor in a low voice.

She wouldn't speak Siblin. He didn't know what language she would speak. Nobody lived here.

Winter stepped carefully toward her, his hand out, a staying motion. He took another. She was still motionless. He stepped again, a branch breaking under his boot. At the small crack, with no warning, she bolted.

Winter cursed and ran after her, Isidor right behind him. He could see her smaller form darting ahead of them, going through things easily they had to clamber over. She'd taken this way deliberately. Their size was slowing them.

He burst out of a particularly dense patch, Isidor right behind him, and they'd lost her again. Winter turned in a quick circle, catching her out of the corner of his eyes on the half-turn, a flash of red hair in sunlight. Almost, but not quite fast enough. Winter sprang after her, catching sight of her. She looked back once and veered sharply ahead of them toward the side of the cliff, beginning to climb nimbly,

lighter than they were. But they were faster and stronger and Winter had her in his sight now.

She suddenly disappeared. Gone. Winter slowed, panting, staring. Then he kept running, going to where she had been before she wasn't there anymore. There was a fissure, tall and thin, reminding him, for an uneasy moment, of the openings in the cliffs on the black rocks where the sirens lived. The angle coming up had obscured it. She'd gone underground.

Winter plunged into the fissure, Isidor right behind him, quickly slowing to a walk and running his hand along the wall as they lost all the light, black as night in here, not knowing what they would run into, how deep it was. They couldn't hear her in front of them. Winter's mind chose that moment to offer the memory of the singing they'd heard, thoughts of sirens and nests having him wishing they had a lantern.

But sunlight showed up again not far, not a cave but a tunnel, to his surprise, opening up on the other side.

It went straight through this part of the mountain. When he came to the plateau on the other side, below the opening stretched a small sweet valley, sheltered from the worst of the weather and warm with sunshine. Hidden. This was a place you could keep secret.

It was ringed in mountains. Winter didn't see any sign of the woman, but she couldn't be far. He could see a long way from here, above the tree line. He scanned and then spotted it. A dwelling in the trees, the grass roof just visible and not far.

She'd brought them home.

Winter ran down the path, the way easy to follow, making straight for the cabin. Someone obviously used it a great deal, the path worn and clear. They were faster than she was and he knew where she was going, Isidor at his heels.

Maren wouldn't take that necklace off. If it were Maren's mark on the necklace she wore, Maren was dead. She might at least know where his body was, how he'd died.

They caught up with her before she got there. He signaled Isidor, who stayed on the path. Winter made a wide arc, going fast, getting in front of her and backtracking on the trail, slowing around a corner. He heard her light footsteps on the trail, her quick breathing, directly before she ran right into his arms. He caught her, turning with her momentum, getting behind her and wrapping his arms around her and holding her.

She immediately began struggling wildly to escape him, throwing herself forward, pushing against his arms with her hands, her hair whipping all around her face and his face as she landed a glancing blow with her head, cracking on his cheek.

"Hold still," Winter grunted in Dorsan, rearing his head back, trying not to get hit again. "We're not going to hurt you."

Dorsa was the nearest settlement, the language she would be most likely to speak, although she certainly didn't look Dorsan. She didn't look anything. He'd never seen a woman who looked like her. She didn't seem like she understood what he said at all, struggling as hard, just not able to move as much as he got a better hold of her. She wanted away from him. Winter just intended to keep her until she calmed down, until they could figure out how to talk to her.

Isidor arrived, breathing hard. They all were. The woman's heart was hammering against him. Scared, she was scared. He felt badly to frighten her, but they wouldn't hurt her. Siblin didn't hurt women. She knew what had happened to Maren. He just wanted to ask her questions. Isidor slowed and then stopped, staring at her.

"Winter—," he said.

“Let’s get her to the cabin and see what language she speaks. It’s not Dorsan,” Winter said to him.

“Winter—,” Isidor said, his eyes fixed on her, Winter finally noticing his expression.

“What?”

Isidor stepped forward, hesitated, and then reached with both hands gingerly, capturing her head, forcing her to tilt, pulling her hair back and exposing her ear.

Winter looked down at the peaked tip, a delicate blunt point, everything about her coming together in his head in a moment, all the tales and legends. Her strange beauty. The color of her eyes, their shining, blank quality. Her crude dress. Where they found her, on the cliffs staring out to sea. That strange stillness.

She’d been waiting for a ship. She’d been hungry, hunting. If they’d brought *The Singsong* to Nanine just a few days later, she would have stood on that cliff edge and—.

Winter clapped his hand over her mouth. Isidor jerked his hands off her, his face reflecting disgust.

“She’s a fucking siren, Winter.”

Chapter Two

Winter froze, not breathing, his skin crawling. A siren. The broken bodies in the straight flashed through his mind, their bones picked over. He wanted very badly to push it away from himself, didn't want to be touching it, but he didn't dare release his hand from her mouth.

His heart began to pound, remembering all the pictures of their sharp teeth, the palm of his hand itching with anticipation. He tightened his arms anyway, pulling her against himself and upward so her toes left the ground, nothing for it, stretching her neck back.

Isidor's hand settled on his knife, all traces of his good nature gone, his eyes cold.

"Keep it still, brother," Isidor breathed, walking back toward him, drawing his knife.

"I've got her," Winter said, very much so hoping he did, keeping his voice calm. "Get something for a gag. We'll need rope. Check the cabin, see what's there."

"We should just—."

"Not yet," Winter interrupted him, breathing slowly, steady.

Isidor's eyes shifted and narrowed at him. Isidor finally replaced the knife.

"Be careful," Isidor said, leaving at a run toward the cabin.

#

Winter was left holding it. He felt like he had a poisonous snake by the back of the head. Her breathing was shallow and quick, his face near her hair. Her smell was distracting. He looked down.

He could see Maren's necklace, his mark. A wave of sadness went through him, the grief more dull, tinged with an older acceptance, but now it held all the sting of failed hope.

After twenty years, they'd finally found him, but Maren was dead. Killed by a siren on Nanine. There was no other

way she'd have the necklace. They'd never learn where their father's body was now, wouldn't be able to launch him to *Sága* to be with his brother, Dane. The disappointment was bitter.

He looked down at the necklace again. Evidently it had liked it. Winter felt another wave of revulsion, the back of his neck tingling. Its hair was all over him, sweaty, clinging to him, making his skin crawl again, no way for him to brush it off, a strand sticking on his chest, another on his wrist, even his neck. He didn't want to imagine what else it had done with Maren's body, gruesome visions going through his head.

Isidor was right. They should kill it. But nobody had ever gotten this close to one. They were deadly. He'd certainly never imagined touching one.

Winter realized he was angry. He wasn't ready to kill it yet. This thing had given Maren a terrible death, madness and possibly worse. He doubted it could talk, but he wanted to find out. He became aware of the quiet, birds and the rustling of wind through leaves, the sound of her fast breaths. Winter had lifted the screecher's body, his left arm a bar around its waist and arms above the elbow, his right arm tucked, his hand across its mouth tight, its neck stretched back and its head almost on his shoulder, entirely off its feet.

As more time passed and it didn't bite him, didn't struggle, he began to notice the desperation in its breathing, how hard its heart was going. He relaxed his hold, allowing its head to come forward a little. She didn't seem particularly strong. He eased up a little more, as much as he dared, and she drew a long breath in through her nose. He realized that she—*it*, really, but that was difficult when she looked like she did, smelled like she did, felt like she did—was having trouble breathing.

They did breathe. He'd been holding it tight. He eased up more, cautiously. She took a longer breath, and another. It

still hadn't made any sound under his hand. Waiting, he imagined.

Isidor came back, to his relief. His brother was panting.

"Gag first," Winter said.

He hoped that would be enough, that the siren couldn't sing around it. It couldn't possibly understand, but this still seemed to awaken it. Winter tightened his hold until its struggles were confined, Isidor watching grimly. Winter met his brother's eyes and moved very slowly, saying a prayer to *Sága* about its teeth, rotating his hand so he could pinch its nose closed as well. It renewed its struggles, unable to breathe. He finally met Isidor's eyes again and uncovered its nose and mouth in one motion.

The siren opened its mouth to draw a great breath of air and Isidor put the gag in. She was pulling for air around the cloth. Isidor walked to stand beside Winter to tie the gag behind her tight, her mouth stretched back around it. Winter looked. Its teeth were like theirs. No sharp points. He flexed his hand, still feeling the imagined threat.

"Tie its hands in front," Winter said.

Isidor quickly wrapped her hands in rope and tied them tight.

"Why are we doing this?" Isidor said in a low voice, tying the last loop, obviously trying not to touch it too much, leaving a lead that he put in his fist as he stepped back, his face showing disgust again. "It's a screecher. There may be more on the island. Let's kill it, see if we can find Maren's journal, and get out of here."

"I want to question her."

Isidor made a face at him.

"How can we question a siren, Winter? It's mindless, a killer. I doubt it reasons or talks, and the moment it opens its mouth we're dead."

"With a knife to its throat."

Isidor looked at him doubtfully. Winter was doubtful himself. It was a risk. It probably wouldn't work. The anger

swept through him again. They deserved to know after they'd searched for so long. And the thing he held in his arms had killed Maren. He wanted to try.

He held Isidor's eyes, letting him know that.

"You're so stubborn, Winter," Isidor accused, agreeing to it.

"Here we go," Winter muttered.

Winter simultaneously pushed the siren away and grasped her upper arm tightly, his fingers practically touching around her limb, bringing her up short. He hauled her up onto her feet, his hand gripping her hard.

They both stared at her. He could see it clearly now, didn't know how he could have missed it. No sharp teeth, but otherwise she looked like the legends described. A siren. She was strange, strange and so beautiful. Everything desirable. It looked like a woman, smelled like one. Felt like one under the dress.

In all the lore, sirens were mimics. They were predators, always hungry, hollow and mindless shapes of women that drew men and drove them mad and then ate their flesh, sometimes not in that order. They boarded ships and left vessels drifting empty, dragging their victims into the sea, down to the depths. Winter set his eyes away, trying not to look at it too much.

They brought it to the small bamboo cabin, set high, a tall, sharply sloped grass roof almost touching the ground on either side, a porch with stairs leading up, crude hacked poles and lashing. There was a river not far, a sagging line with a blanket hanging on it, a garden. In front of the stairs leading to the door of the cabin there was a pit for fire, a great tree with low hanging branches, an arbor built into it for shelter from the weather, now failing, shell chimes and feathers hanging from it that twirled in the wind, making a pleasant sound.

This remote cabin had most likely been Maren's home. Somebody had lived here recently. Not the siren, obviously.

There was a garden, not much, but someone was tending it. Signs of a recent fire in the pit.

“Nobody was here?” Winter said, puzzled.

“I yelled, but I was in a hurry,” Isidor answered, his eyes also scanning the camp, uneasy.

They would look around in awhile. Winter brought it under the tree as Isidor tossed the excess rope over a low limb. Isidor stepped back, pulling. Her arms rose above her head. Soon the siren was hanging, on her tiptoes, swinging. Isidor tied the rope off as Winter came around, both of them staring at it.

She was trying to find her balance, losing it again. Winter looked at her face. It was difficult to see past her beauty, difficult not to feel badly for her. He didn’t doubt its fear was real. Winter drew his knife. The siren made a sharp noise, straining away from him, its strange pale eyes going to his face.

Winter approached it cautiously, still nervous even with it bound and gagged. He reached with his other hand for her hair, digging in and getting a good handful. It was silky and thick. What he and Isidor used to call *grabbing hair* when they were young and being crude. He brought himself closer, getting control of her. She even smelled good, somehow clean and under that the sweetest musk.

Winter made his fingers snug, wary, pulling its head back, holding the siren steady. He put the knife to its throat. They wouldn’t take the gag off yet. He wanted to see if it spoke any language before they risked that.

“Do you understand me?” he said in the Dorsan language.

Isidor made a small scoffing noise. Winter did feel a little stupid for trying to talk to it, but he was determined to know anyway.

It looked at him blankly. He tried again, cycling through all the languages he knew, watching its eyes carefully. Beautiful eyes, uptilted, the color like amber, like light

through thick honey, long tangled lashes, her brows sweeping and high. Winter blinked, feeling himself becoming fascinated, clenching his teeth, his skin crawling again, trying another language. It took awhile.

No sign of recognition, no sign she knew any language. Just blank. A mindless hunter, eyes as flat as a shark, just existing to eat. Winter felt a stab of disappointment, although he wasn't surprised. He hadn't really expected it to talk. He felt another wave of disgust. There was no reason to keep it alive then. It had killed Maren. His hand tightened on the knife.

"Maybe it only speaks siren," Isidor said, making a joke, because Isidor was never serious at important times.

Its eyes shifted to Isidor when he spoke, the spark Winter had been looking for.

It had done that when he and Isidor were talking before, reacting like it knew what they said. He could swear it understood Isidor. That wasn't possible, never mind that she was a siren. All Siblin learned multiple languages, but they didn't teach their language to those who weren't Siblin.

"I'm going to kill it now," Winter said in Siblin, on impulse, flat and casual, the same inflection in his voice Isidor had just given.

Its eyes went straight to his, widening, the siren struggling again.

"You understand Siblin?" Winter said incredulously.

He tightened his grip on her hair. He must be wrong.

"My brother is going to take the gag off so you can answer my questions," Winter said slowly in Siblin, watching its eyes. "If you sing, if you even hum, I'll cut your throat."

He looked at its face. No change. He was wrong.

"Nod if you understand me," Winter said, waiting, feeling stupid again.

It made a brief motion, nodding. Winter stared.

"It understands?" Isidor exclaimed beside him, Winter feeling the same sense of shock.

It knew language? Winter stared at it more, looking into its eyes carefully. He finally turned his head, glancing at his brother. Isidor came and slowly loosened the knot on the gag behind its head. Winter felt his back tense. Isidor slowly drew the cloth away from its mouth, both of them ready. Winter held the blade. One swipe and he'd open the siren's throat, silencing her forever.

"Where did you get that necklace?" Winter said to it when the gag was off, still feeling a little foolish talking to it, asking it questions. "Where is Maren?"

Her lips parted. Winter tightened his hand on the knife at her throat. She closed her mouth.

"Answer!" he demanded.

Nothing. It probably couldn't. They'd know before they were done. Winter's eyes went to her fragile jaw, her collarbone, lower.

"Do it," Winter said.

Winter held her hair tightly, held the knife steady at her throat as Isidor stepped forward and cut the top of the dress straight down, cutting the sleeves. The whole garment fell to her feet, revealing her body, naked under it, no undergarments. Winter kept the knife to her throat, surprised, looking down at her, a surge of hot lust going through his lower belly.

Sirens were always represented mostly naked, or in sheer veils or white rags, indifferent to clothing. This one was no different, the dress a shapeless lump of cloth. But under it.

She was delicate in her shoulders and wrists, yes, she was also curvy. Her breasts were full and firm and high, jutting, her large nipples a dark, dusky red color. Winter's eyes traveled down. She was a little thin, her belly sweet, tiny waist, rounded hips under that, so pleasing, squirming to keep her balance, a small patch of dark red hair. Beautiful legs. She certainly wasn't part bird or fish, unless she had another form.