

The tide was coming in. As she lay on the dock and peered over its edge, tendrils of her long dark hair fell and were gently pulled by the inlet's ebb and flow. The planks felt cold against her skin, and she could make out every imperfection of the old half rotted wood through the thin human homespun dress she wore. It was a welcome discomfort. It was just one more small way she could punish herself for her failings.

"Ondine! Come in, girl! You'll catch your death out there," the old fishwife called from the stilted little shack tucked in between the dry reeds and cattails.

"I'm well, Memie," she called back to the woman. She hated the endearment that her host had foisted upon her. It was way too close to what Madam Avril made the girls call her at the brothel. Funny how she knew all these new terms now...brothel... It was a human word that felt so close to her home tongue, but there was nothing in her language that could describe the horrors that place held. She shivered, scrunched her eyes tight, and bit her lip hard to ward off the flashes of memories she had tried desperately to seal off. Thankfully, the blue drink they forced down her throat to keep her pliable also took away her clarity. She could almost pretend her memories were dreams. Almost.

She had been so weak. She had let her father take her skin and turn her away; she had let the Skalds take her baby, and she had let these city people take the last little sacred bit of who she had been. She had once been a selkie, the daughter of the Elder. She was one of the fastest and bravest, even winning the love of a prince. A human named Tarren. Their love had been fierce and something to behold. She had felt like a storm goddess in his arms. What was she now? Unworthy.

She focused back on the water. Her people had so many words for it. Humans rarely looked below the surface. There was so much more to her world. The pale surface of the water's skin ... *oolau* and then the surface at first full light when the sun turns it into a blanket of brilliant stars.. *aurel*. *Keeda*...the sheltering murky hidden places... The frantic byways of the riptides...*su-ang*. They even had a word for her favorite place...the small pocket of power packed in a wave right before it crashes against the rocks...*hunashti*. She ached for her home, but she hadn't had the heart to go into the waters since her banishment. She longed to hear her people again, but even thinking the words of her native tongue felt like a trespass.

Perhaps she would die here in this little inlet, inside the walls of this horrid human city, where the water was made brackish and silty from the refuse of the great river as it met the sea. It seemed fitting. She would never know the taste of the seas again, She would live out her days in this little cottage perched above the marsh on its weathered pilings. She wasn't ungrateful to Memie. She had woken in the old woman's cot one morning, bleary and wrung out from the magic of the blue water. She had no idea how she had gotten there but knew it was safe. She tried pressing the woman for information, but Memie just shook her head and patted her back. Her host had cleaned her up and tended her while her head cleared. Memie had fed her and, most importantly, hid her from those that would try and reclaim their "property." Memie was

taking a risk. Ondine had been a sought-after commodity. She was the kind of rare dish wealthy johns desired. The people who had snatched her from the streets of Arabar, with promises of shelter, food, and assistance, turned out to be ruthless folk. They were unrelenting in their desire to trade flesh for gold.

“You can wander the marsh and sit out on the dock but don’t go any further,” Memie had warned. Memie didn’t have to say it again. The terror of the relentless degradation at the hands of the traffickers froze her to the core. And for the last four weeks, despite the turn in the weather, the dock was her only solace. It was a strange old lopsided pier that held no boat, however, she was sure there was a story to it. Memie was old, yes, but strong, and Ondine couldn’t miss the wistful look in her eyes whenever she gazed out towards it. There were stories here, but Ondine was too deep in her own tragedy to ask.

Ondine watched as tides came in and went out. On clear days, she watched the distant boats ply the waters. Occasionally, a sailboat would tack too close to their swampy little cove and she would rush for the cover of the shack, but that was rare. Most days, she lay on her belly with her hands folded underneath her chin, gazing out at the blue expanse replaying all the missteps of the last year.

In her mind, she would say and do all the right things. She would defend her love for Tarren to her father. She would sue for peace with the Skalds and win! She wouldn’t stand mutely as her father stripped her of her pelt, trapping her in human form. In her daydreams she would stand up to the Skaldic chieftain, She would force Tarren’s father to recognize their unborn child as a sign that their two peoples could live side by side. She would make his people see that the child was a product of love, not witchery. She would never let them drive her away from her own baby. In her wildest moments of fancy, she even reworked her journey to Arabar to find Tarren. Her story turned from one of hapless and abused immigrant to a mighty warrior come to rally the troops and reclaim her heart’s desire. The selkie girl knew these fantasies were feckless visitors, but she entertained them nonetheless. At the end of the day, when she had finished chores for Memie, she lay in her cot and knew she had done none of these things. She had just been weak, a piece of driftwood, storm-tossed and useless.

If Memie’s gossip from the Blind Isle was to be believed, Tarren was out in the world somewhere with emissaries of all the Realms. They had cleared their names. They had purged the land of a great evil. They were heroes. The fall out was felt in Arabar already. The war galleys had disappeared from the harbor waters and Memie said the curfew had been lifted in the city. Ondine was not surprised. Tarren had always seemed to her like something from the legends. When they sat on the rocks and he spoke of how he saw problems, how he navigated his life, she realized there was nothing he couldn’t achieve. She should have told him her secret heritage. They would have figured it out. He was utter confidence. He was easy with the world and their love was easy. They would have found a way. That was the past though, he would despise her now. How could he still feel anything but pity for the wretch she had become? He fought for the world; she couldn’t even fight for their son.

Ondine's sea stone eyes had gone hazy with unshed tears. Perhaps that is why she hadn't seen the galley cutting through the waters towards the inlet earlier. When she did, her breath caught in her chest. It was a large galley, still far away, but definitely rowing towards her, definitely closing fast. Staying low, she scrambled back the walkway to the shack. "Memie, hurry! We have to hide. Somewhere...maybe the marsh. Come Memie, we have just enough time." Ondine was rummaging through Memie's meager belongings. She grabbed an old blanket and a shucking knife. "We'll be okay, We'll hide. We'll be okay," she whispered over and over as she grabbed the old woman by the arm and hustled her towards the door. Once out of the door, she dropped into the marshy reeds and reached up. "Come on, Memie. It'll be okay. Come, I've got you." She motioned for her desperately, but Memie just stood with her hands to her eyes, staring off towards the dock. "Please Memie..." she whispered. She jumped back up to the walkway and was about to forcibly lift the old woman when she stopped dead. The old woman was grinning.

"Well, it's about damn time. Took him fucking long enough!" She said without taking her eyes from the boat. Ondine shook her head in dismay. Why was she smiling? They were coming for her... and Memie was smiling? Was she part of some plot to torture her further? Was it all a ruse? To what ends?

"I don't...Memie?" was all her frantic brain could formulate to say. Memie turned to her and motioned to the boat. When Ondine didn't move, Memie clutched her shoulder and turned her towards its direction. The galley was close now. Ondine's mind began to process what she was seeing. It wasn't a galley. It was a long boat. A Skaldian long boat. A long boat flying the three headed dragon of the Lor clan. Tarren's clan. She waited breathlessly as the figures came into view. He was there. He was standing with one hand on the carved dragon head prow. Twenty men pulled at the oars. He called to them and the pace picked up. These were his men. Wide-eyed and unbelieving she looked to Memie.

"I'm sorry child, I had gotten word that he was on his way, but, the world being what it is, I didn't want to get your hopes up." She put a gentle hand on her arm. "You've been through enough, Ondine. I hope you'll forgive me for not telling you."

She moved her mouth to formulate words, but she couldn't. He had found her, and he had come for her. The world seemed to narrow and freeze for a moment... and then she was running! She was down the walkway and off the end of the dock before Memie could say another word. The sea washed by her in an icy cold blast. She pushed through the water and laughed into the waves. With an instinct born of two worlds, she realized she had closed the distance and popped up not an arms-length from the prow. The crew had stopped and were looking over the gunnel at her, but Tarren was no longer among them.

An arm wrapped around her from behind and pulled her close. She turned to find him in the water. She searched his eyes. There was no denial, no shame, only longing and love. They sunk under the waves together to the cheers of his men.

Later, huddled together under a thick fur blanket on edge of her rickety little dock, they found the words.

"I thought you would never want to see me again," she whispered. Her throat was tight with the gravity of it all that she could manage little else.

"Ondine..." He drew her head to his chest attempting to comfort her, but she pulled away.

"No, it must be said. You must hear me say it Tarren." She swallowed and continued. "I am so Sorry Tarren. I failed you. I failed us. I failed our child." Her confession began to tumble forth, "There is so much. I should have told you who I was. I should have found a way to let you know about the baby. I should have stood up for us...for him. I should have never let them turn me away. I should have fought. If I had fought them, I would have never ended up here." She sat back from him now, so he could take her full measure. She wanted him to see her clearly, all of her. "I have been used by many here. They filled me with their drugs and did whatever they..." All the despair and rage poured forth. She could manage no more, and she folded into herself. He put a warm hand on her back and let her cry until there was nothing left.

"Ondine..." he said softly into her ear, "none of this is your fault." He lifted her chin with a gentle finger. "You *have* to know that. You were the victim of a twisted world."

"So were you Tarren, and yet you fought. Look at all you have done. All you have set right."

"But not alone, Ondine. I had my clan. I had resources. I had allies by my side, and they are among the most powerful people in the world. You were alone. You were ripped from your home and cast into an unfamiliar world. A cruel world. And you survived it. You stayed alive!" His eyes shone so intensely, there could be no doubt he believed the words he was saying. Ondine began to shake her head, but he continued. "You traveled almost the entire coast to get here...to find me. You had nothing...no gold...no aid. Your only crime was believing that our world was a safe place. Was trusting.." He put both of her hands in his. "I should have been here Ondine. I should have been by your side. I am the one who is sorry."

She couldn't bear to hear him say anymore so she silenced him with a kiss.