

Chapter 1

Jenny Ackerly kicked a loose rock on the path leading down to the narrow beach not far from where she used to live. She had moved a year and a half ago from the small coastal community Yachats, Oregon, in an effort to move on with her life. So far, she had to admit she wasn't doing a very good job of it. Unzipping her dark blue nylon jacket, she released a heavy sigh.

It had been two years since her best friend, Carly, had disappeared, two long years, and not a clue as to what happened to the beautiful, cheerful girl that she had known since kindergarten. Jenny tucked her hands into the pockets and scowled. If she ever found out who hurt Carly, she would dice them into tiny cubes, pour soy sauce on the chopped up pieces, and stir fry their asses. Yes, it sounded gross, but Jenny didn't care. Anyone who could hurt someone as awesome as Carly deserved that and more.

Today was the second anniversary of Carly's disappearance. A strange, nagging feeling had pulled at Jenny for the past two weeks. She had planned to ignore it until last night. A low grumble of discontent escaped her as she stepped out of the wooded area and onto the rocky shore. Not far offshore a small outcropping of rocks rose from the Pacific Ocean. Even with the unexpected sun streaming down, the air still held a slight chill to it. A reluctant, sad smile curved Jenny's lips when she remembered Carly's distaste for the cold water.

"Oh, Carly, I miss you," Jenny whispered, staring out at the rocks. "Please, wherever you are, I hope you are happy."

Releasing a deep breath, Jenny turned to the left and started walking. She paused twenty feet down the beach to pick up an unusual stone. Straightening, she gazed down at the colorful swirls embedded in the surface. She rolled the smooth, cold rock in her hand, studying the vibrant lines running through it. Her fingers slowly tightened around the sea-polished stone as she gazed out at the ocean.

Closing her eyes, Jenny muttered a silent wish as she opened her senses to the sounds of the waves, the birds, and the wind. She loved the ocean, it was the thing she missed the most besides Carly. She had spent just about every weekend coming here to swim, surf, or just enjoy the sounds of it. Carly had thought she was nuts and suggested they move to someplace like Florida or Hawaii, where the water was warmer, but Jenny hadn't minded the cold. A dry suit and vigorous exercise were enough to keep you warm, even on a chilly day like today.

Jenny drew in a deep breath, enjoying the smell of the moist, chilly air as it coursed down into her lungs. A frown furrowed her brow when an unusual, foreign sound rose

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above the natural cadence of the waves. Her lips twisted in irritation when the sound of a child's laugh pulled her out of her reverie.

Opening her eyes, she turned in time to see a young boy, no more than seven or eight, running toward the water. She frowned when he didn't stop at the edge of it, but plod forward into the rolling waves. She started forward in concern, scanning the beach for his parents or another adult, but the area was empty.

"Hey! Stop!" Jenny yelled, starting to walk quickly down the rocky beach. "Hey, you! Boy! Kid! Stop!"

The boy glanced at her with wide, startled eyes before he grinned and dove forward under the next wave. Jenny didn't stop to think. She kept her eyes glued on the tousled, white-blond head. Her summers as a lifeguard kicked in. Shrugging out of her jacket, she let it fall to the ground behind her as she started running. Her tennis shoes would be a problem. She could kick them off once she hit the water. A part of her was concerned that her shirt and jeans would hinder her, but she didn't have time to strip out of them if she was going to reach the boy in time. Fear added to her adrenaline as she hit the water. At the same time as the water closed in around her thighs, she saw a flash of brightly colored hair close to the surface. The boy turned to look at her, amusement and something else in his eyes. He smiled at her one more time before he slipped beneath the surface.

Jenny dove beneath the wave as it rolled over her. Kicking her legs out, she swept her arms out and cupped her hands to pull her forward. She caught a glimpse of green when the sun broke through a cloud and shone down. The boy had been wearing green trousers and nothing else. Hope built inside her as she swam harder than she had ever swum before. She ignored the burning in her lungs as long as she could, afraid that if she surfaced for air she would lose sight of the boy.

Frustration rose in her when the boy remained just out of reach. Unable to continue, Jenny rose to the surface and drew in a deep breath. She ignored the freezing water. Panic began to sweep through her when she realized that the boy had not come up for air. Diving down, she struck out in the direction that she had last seen him.

The water was deeper here, well over her head and she knew there was little chance the boy would survive even if he knew how to swim. Already, Jenny could feel the cold threatening to pull her down into the inky darkness. If not for the adrenaline and fear for the boy, she would have given up and returned to shore while she still could. Ignoring the stiffness in her limbs, she pushed downward. Her eyes caught sight of the boy a short distance in front of her. A sense of renewed determination filled her. She would NOT let him drown!

Just a little more, Jenny whispered to herself as she frantically kicked her legs. *You can do it.*

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Jenny reached out her right arm, trying to grab the boy's foot. She didn't know how the kid could hold his breath so long or swim so fast. Her fingers skimmed the tips of his toes, startling him. She jerked her hand back when he suddenly turned and looked at her. Blinking, she paused when he pointed at a dark recess in a rocky surface. Her eyes involuntarily followed his arm before darting back to him. A small stream of bubbles escaped past her lips when he motioned for her to follow him.

Shaking her head, she started to reach for him when he twisted away. A low cry of dismay resonated through her when she saw him disappear into the hole in the rock. Surging forward, she frantically grabbed at his foot again, missing it by just less than a finger's width. Jenny gripped the rough edge of the rock and pulled herself forward until her head was just inside the narrow opening.

Her eyes widened when she saw a colorful kaleidoscope of water swirling in front of her. She barely caught a glimpse of the boy as he passed through it and disappeared. Unsure of what was going on, she gripped the rocky entrance to the cave with one hand while she reached out with the other to touch the colorful abnormality. The moment her fingers skimmed across the surface, she felt her body being pulled forward. A silent scream ripped from her as she was sucked forward into the whirlpool of color.

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"What is she?" A husky voice asked, reaching out to touch the dark auburn hair spread across the pale skin. "Her hair looks like the fire coral."

"She's mine," a softly accented voice whispered. "I captured her."

"Father—"

"I don't care what he says," the young boy said stubbornly. "I captured her. She is ours."

Jenny decided she had heard enough. She awoke when she felt the small fingers on her hair. In her minds-eye, she replayed what had happened after she had been pulled through the funnel of water. Her body groaned in protest at the twisting and turning. Her lungs had felt like they were on fire as she struggled through the powerful currents. Just when she thought that she would lose the battle, a surge of water had propelled her upward into a glittering cavern.

The gentle lapping of waves had pulled her toward a small beach filled with shimmering pink sand. She had struggled forward on shaky limbs until reaching the bottom where she could stand. Once she reached the shallow water near the shore, she had fallen to her knees and crawled the rest of the way out of the water. Exhausted from the physical exertion, stress, and cold, she collapsed on the warm sand and closed her eyes.

Jenny knew she had fallen asleep, she just didn't know for how long. The feel of small fingers touching her hair and the low murmur of children's voices finally pulled

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her from her slumber. Drawing in a deep breath, she rolled slowly over onto her back and blinked up at the ceiling.

"Where...," she started to say before she cleared her raw throat. "Where am I?"

Her voice was hoarse from the salt water she had swallowed. She struggled to sit up when she heard the sounds of the boys scooting quickly backwards. Pulling her shoulder-length hair out of her face, she blinked several times to clear her vision.

"Where am I?" She demanded again in a thick voice before it faded in stunned disbelief as she looked around the vast cavern she found herself in.

Jenny stared in amazement up at the ceiling. It was rock, but it was glittering like a million stars had been captured in a huge net. Her eyes ran down the sides, stopping at a shallow ledge where a dozen small creatures with dark green scales and huge black eyes stared back at her. It looked like a cross between a seahorse and a frog. Several of the creatures dove off the narrow shelf and disappeared beneath the water. Turning her head, she stared into the vivid green eyes of the little boy she'd seen back on the beach.

"Where in the *hel*- heck am I?" Jenny growled in a low voice filled with anger brought on by fear. "What are those things?"

The little boy she had followed into the water stood up. She studied him for the first time more closely. His hair was white-blonde and cut short. He had bright, vivid green eyes with flakes of a dark forest green in them. She had never seen such a beautiful shade of green before. Her eyes slowly ran down over him. He was wearing a brown shirt now that hung down over his dark green trousers. Both were made of some kind of material that she had never seen before and looked as if they might be water repellent. His feet were still bare. He had long toes that curled in the sand when she stared at them.

Was that webbing between them? She wondered as she returned her gaze to his thin face.

"They are young sea dragons," the boy replied with a shrug. "You are on the Isle of the Sea Serpent."

The boy's voice was polite, but there was a hint of steel in it as well. She could tell by the way his jaw was thrust forward that he was used to getting his own way. Personally, she didn't give a damn. She dealt with twenty-four third graders in one of the toughest schools in Portland. Raising an eyebrow, she stared back at him in silence.

It took a few seconds longer than it normally did, but she saw a shadow of doubt come into his eyes and he glanced at the boy next to him. Jenny waited as they appeared to be in a silent argument of some kind. Finally, the second boy shook his head and shifted uneasily in the sand.

"We are going to be in so much trouble this time," the boy muttered, glancing at Jenny again. "So very much trouble when father finds out what we have done."

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Jenny couldn't quite stop the reluctant smile that tugged at her lips. The boy looked so despondent, that she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He was several years younger than the boy from the beach, but he had the same white-blond hair and piercing green eyes. Jenny shook her head and released a deep sigh as she shifted until she was sitting cross-legged in the sand. She reached down and cupped a handful of the pink granules in her left hand. Tilting her hand, she watched as they flowed back down to the ground to form a small pile.

"Isle of the Sea Serpent, huh?" She asked, looking up at the boys with a crooked smile. "Do you boys at least have a name?" She continued when they both gave her a sharp nod.

The boy that she had followed stepped closer and bent forward in a stiff bow before straightening. He gave her a mischievous smile before answering her. Jenny couldn't help but be enchanted by his debonaire behavior.

"I am Dolph," the boy said in a voice that belied his age. "And this is my brother, Juno."

Jenny's lips twitched when the other boy imitated Dolph. "I'm Jenny," she replied, glancing back and forth between them. "I'm not sure what happened, but something tells me I'm really not supposed to be here, am I?"

The flash of guilt crossed both of the boys' faces, which was answer enough. "No," Juno muttered before he grinned. "But, I'm glad you are. How did you get hair the color of the fire coral? Did the Sea Witch cast a spell on you? When I touched it, it did not burn me. How can that be?"

Jenny reached up and touched her hair. "I was born with red hair. Haven't you ever seen anyone with red hair before?" She asked, shifting so she could stand up. A wrinkle of surprise creased her brow when she noticed that instead of being sandy like she normally was after a visit to the beach, the pink crystals fell away from her damp clothes. A shiver shook her and she wrapped her arms around her waist. "Listen, I need to get back home." She paused to look back at the water. "Is that the only way?"

"You can't go back!" Juno exclaimed with a vigorous shake of his head as he stepped forward and grabbed her hand as if to make sure she didn't suddenly disappear..

Jenny raised her eyebrow again at the note of panic in Juno's voice. "Of course, I can," she stated patiently. "I don't belong here. I have to go back home."

"Dolph!" Juno whispered, looking at his older brother. "You said..."

Jenny looked back and forth between the brothers when Juno's voice faded. The grip on her hand tightened. A wave of compassion swept through her at the feel of the small fingers wrapped so tightly around her own. Tears glittered in Juno's eyes for a

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moment before he furiously blinked them back. Jenny turned to look down at Dolph who was staring back at his brother with that same determined look he had before.

"Dolph, what is going on? Where am I, really?" Jenny asked in a calm voice that hid the feeling of panic that was beginning to sink in. Her gaze swept over the vast cavern once again. Her left hand dropped to her side and she carefully pinched her leg to see if she was really awake. The sharp sting told her that she was, that this wasn't a dream. "What did he say to you, Juno?" She demanded in a husky voice.

The small boy looked up at her with pleading eyes. His chin trembled for a moment before he pursed his lips together in a look that was so like his big brother that Jenny had a feeling it was hereditary. Something deep inside her told her she wasn't going to like what she was about to hear.

"He promised to find us a new mother," Juno said with a look filled with hope. "Father isn't doing a very good job. We don't like the ones he has brought home."

"Dolph! Juno!" A woman's voice echoed frantically in the distance. "Dolph!"

Jenny turned to look toward the sound. It took a moment for her to notice the shadowed opening in one section of the cavern. She started when she felt Juno pulling anxiously on her hand. Stumbling, she followed him even as she cast a glance at the large pool of water behind her. The sea dragons were crawling up the far wall again and settling back on the dozens of narrow shelves. For a brief second, Jenny could have sworn they were watching her with gleeful eyes. Unable to resist, she stuck her tongue out at them before turning back to watch where she was going. Never in her life had she expected to go on a fantastical and bizarre journey when she woke up this morning. She stumbled again when it suddenly dawned on her that maybe Carly hadn't been killed by a serial killer like the police thought after all. Maybe, just maybe, she had been swept away to a magical world as well. After all, Carly had been in the park when she disappeared. If it was possible for her to find a way to a different world, perhaps Carly had too.

Jenny jerked to a stop as they emerged from the narrow tunnel and into a lush, thick garden. Her eyes swept over the brilliantly colored plants that looked very much like the corals under the sea, only these were above ground. Her eyes followed one stunning orange plant that rose up toward the....

"Oh, my!" Jenny whispered, staring up at the large, crystal clear dome covering the ceiling. Sunlight filtered through the lavender colored water on the other side of the dome. Large fish, some the size of a blue whale, swam over her head. "This is unbelievable."

"Dolph! Where have you been?! I've been looking all over for y... ou." The voice of the woman who had been calling out for the boys just moments before faded as she

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stared at Jenny in stunned disbelief. "What have you done? Oh, Dolph, your father will..."

Chapter 2

Orion swung the staff in his hand and fired a burst of energy from it. The force of the powerful charge hit the twenty foot Megatooth shark in the side, forcing it to veer off to the left and disappear down over the edge of the drop-off. Adjusting his grip on the staff, he kept a wary eye on the beast to make sure it didn't reappear. His other arm was wrapped tightly around the limp body of the warrior that had been injured during their mission. With a growl of frustration, he turned and watched as a group of his men appeared out of the deep purple depths; his stag, an enormous sea dragon, in the lead.

"My Lord," his Captain of Arms called as he drew near. "We have been successful in our quest," he added, holding up a bag before his eyes shifted to the unconscious warrior in Orion's arms. "How bad is Cyrus?"

Orion swung his leg over the back of his stag, SeaFire. "He will live," he replied, pulling back on the reins, even as he settled Cyrus across his thighs. "He needs medical attention, though. The shark took us by surprise."

"Why would it attack you?" Kapiian asked with a frown. "The beasts normally do not come up from the depths."

"I suspect the Sea Witch has enchanted it," Orion replied with a shrug as he surged forward, heading back to the Isle of the Sea Serpent. "She has become too bold. I will have to deal with her."

Kapiian pulled his light yellow and orange stag up beside Orion's. "She knows the time grows closer when the period given to you for grieving is over. Juno's fifth year of birth is just a few days away, if you have not taken another bride, she will challenge the law and press her claim to the throne. You must choose another bride soon. If the Sea Witch is successful with her claim, she will take control and declare war again on the other kingdoms."

Orion shot Kapiian an impatient look, but didn't reply. Instead, he pressed his knees against the side of his stag and pulled ahead of his Captain of the Guard and friend. He knew what was at stake; he didn't need Kapiian's constant reminders or his friend's suggestions as to who he should choose as his bride. His first bride had been chosen for him by his father. Shamill's death during the birth of their youngest son, Juno, had been unfortunate.

He had hoped that with two sons, he would be immune to the need for a bride, but even as the powerful ruler of the sea people, he was not. The laws stated that to have balance, a King needed a Queen by his side. He also knew that both of his sons wished to have a mother. So far, he had resisted, including the demand by the Sea Witch to take her as his mate. The problem was the emptiness he felt deep inside. None of the women

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that had come forth had whetted his curiosity, much less his loins. Only Dolph and Juno's presence kept the dark void of loneliness at bay.

Orion reined Sea Fire through the long, clear tunnel leading into the underwater city. The city of the Isle of the Sea Serpent was unique in that it covered both below the water and above. The Isle rose up out of the ocean with steep, traitorous cliffs circling the entire island. Sharp, jagged rocks from the extinct volcano that formed the island stood as deadly barricades against attacks. Even if an enemy could penetrate the barrier, the smooth, steep walls of the cliffs were impossible to climb.

Sea Fire broke through the shields holding back the water from the underground city, settling on his four webbed feet once he was on the entry platform. Orion handed Cyrus off to a group of medics before climbing off the back of Sea Fire. Handing the reins to an attendant, he glanced around with a frown wondering where Dolph and Juno were. They were usually close by, waiting for his return.

Turning, Orion looked at his old nursemaid who normally kept an eye on the boys. She was the only one they would listen to any more. He had dismissed almost a dozen other nursemaids after finding they could not control the two boys. The worried look on Kelia's face did not bode well for her lasting much longer. He had feared her advanced age would hinder her ability to watch over his sons.

"Where are they?" He asked in a gruff voice as he walked toward her.

Kelia gave him a reassuring smile, even as she shook her head. "They are at the palace," she said in a low voice, glancing at the other men who were still entering the city. "I need to speak with you, my Lord."

Orion gave Kelia a suspicious glance before nodding. Waving his hand for her to walk beside him, he glowered down when she took a slight step to the left and behind him. Old habits died hard. He released a tired sigh when Kapiian called out for him.

"My Lord," Kapiian said with a short bow before he held out his hand. "The item you requested."

Orion's mouth tightened at his forgetfulness. Reaching out his right hand, he took the light brown bag from Kapiian. He quickly tugged at the bindings holding it closed and looked inside. Satisfied with the contents, he gave Kapiian a piercing look that warned him to keep what was found a secret.

"Meet with me later this evening," Orion ordered, turning back toward the palace. "Kelia, tell me what mischief my sons have been in while I was away."

"More than usual, my Lord," Kelia informed him with a hint of worry and a touch of amusement. "They have outdone themselves this time."

Orion shook his head. "I find that hard to believe," he muttered with a shake of his head as he climbed the steps leading up to the entrance.

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"This time is different, my Lord," Kelia replied in a quiet, serious voice as she stared up into his vivid, dark green eyes.

"What is it?" Orion asked, drawing in a deep breath as the sinking feeling in his stomach grew.

"They have found a mother for themselves," Kelia informed him with a smile. "One unlike any I have seen before."

Chapter 3

"Dolph!" Orion yelled as he burst through the door to his living quarters. "Are you out of your mind, boy?!"

Orion stumbled to a stop, frozen in mid-stride, and swallowed when a delicate face lifted to stare up at him. A cascade of dark red waves fell around the woman's bemused face as she stared back at him as if caught in a trap she didn't know how to escape. His eyes slowly tore away from her's, unsure of the color because they appeared to capture fragments of different colored sea glass in them. He vaguely noted the faint trace of dots across her nose before his gaze fastened on her parted lips.

A surge of need, unlike anything he had felt before, struck him hard and fast. The pull of it so strong, so unexpected that he took several more steps before he realized it. He clenched his fists at his side, his left hand clutching the bag in his hand, in an effort to keep from grabbing the woman as she pushed up off the floor where she had been playing a game with Juno.

"Who...? Where...?" He mumbled incoherently before he drew in a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "Who are you and where did you come from?"

A silent moan escaped him when the woman tilted her head and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. He swore he could feel the heat inside him increase into a full blown inferno, much like the fire of Drag, the dragon. A low growl escaped him at the thought of comparing anything to the snarly beast that lived on Dragon Isle, one of the Seven Kingdoms of the Serpent Islands. Pushing away the thought of his ancient enemy, he forced himself to focus back on where his son found the unusual woman.

"Father," Dolph started to say, looking anxiously between Jenny and his father.

"Go," Orion ordered in a gruff voice, not looking at his oldest son. "I will speak with you later."

"But, father," Juno said, standing to hold onto Jenny's hand. "She's ours. She can be our new mother. She likes to play games with me."

Orion's face softened as he looked into the pleading eyes of his young son. Where Dolph found such a beautiful woman he had no idea. The one thing he did know was that she was not from the Isle of the Sea Serpents. She must have come from one of the other kingdoms, which made her a danger to his people.

"Go with your brother, Juno," Orion ordered in a gentler voice. "Kelia is waiting for you both."

Juno reluctantly released the hand he was clutching and bowed his head as he started to follow Dolph out of the room. Orion turned to watch the boys as they paused

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in the entrance to the door that still stood open. His eyes locked with Dolph's suddenly stony expression.

"She's the one, father," Dolph said stubbornly. "I know she is."

Orion watched in silence as the boys left, closing the door quietly behind them. Drawing in a deep breath, he turned to face the woman. She was watching him with a look of sympathy and bemusement. He raised his right hand and ran it over the back of his neck.

"Who are you and which kingdom did you come from?" He demanded in a gruff voice as he dropped his hand back to his side.

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Jenny had spent the past three hours chatting with Kelia and playing games with the boys. She was teaching Juno how to play tic-tac-toe using rocks and shells when the door had burst open and a very sexy, but very furious, man had stormed in. It had taken less than five seconds to figure out that this was the boys' father. She would have been intimidated by the six feet plus of muscled fury if she hadn't first noticed the blatant look of shock on his face when he saw her and second, the way he looked at Juno. This was a man who knew how to love and wasn't afraid to show it. Jenny knew she was doomed the minute she realized that. This was a man who could take her heart prisoner any time he wanted as far as she was concerned.

"I'm Jenny. Jenny Ackerly," she replied with a slight grin. "I'm from, well, I was from Yachats, Oregon, but I moved to Portland a year and a half ago." Tucking a wayward strand of hair back behind her ear, Jenny felt like kicking herself when she kept talking. A silent groan escaped her. She always made a fool of herself when she was nervous. "I teach third grade there. I got the job after moving to Portland because I couldn't live in Yachat any more after my best friend, Carly, disappeared. Carly and I were roommates. We had known each other since kindergarten, and well, except for some distant aunts, uncles, cousins, and two no-show dads. My mom died three years ago from cancer and Carly's mom was done with raising her when she turned eighteen. Well, before that really, but she kicked Carly out at eighteen and Carly came to live with me and mom until we left for college. I'm talking too much, aren't I? I always do that when I'm nervous. I'm making a total ass out of myself. I'm shutting up now. Really, I am. I'm from Portland."

Jenny closed her eyes and groaned. She finally met a freaking god of a guy who she thought was actually cute and she had to screw it up by running her mouth. Bowing her head, she let her hair hide her face, which was the same color of her hair, and wished for the ground to open up and swallow her.

A low groan escaped her when she felt the slide of rough fingertips along her jaw, slowly lifting her chin upward until she was forced to open her eyes. Gazing into the

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intense green eyes, she felt her insides melt again. A slow, goofy smile curved her lips when she saw him staring down at her with an intensity that took her breath away.

This, she thought, is someone I could wake up next to for the rest of my life.

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Orion gazed down at the beautiful face he held tenderly in the palm of his hand. He had listened intently to her as she explained who she was and where she came from. He did not recognize either Yachats, Oregon or this Portland. One thing he did know, neither place were part of the Seven Kingdoms. He had met each of the other species from the different Isles and Jenny Ackerly was unlike each and every one of them.

This, he thought as he lowered his head, is someone I could wake up next to for the rest of my life.

Brushing his lips against the softly parted ones, he quickly became lost. A wave of fiery passion exploded inside him when she opened and returned his kiss with the same fire that colored her hair. A low moan escaped them both as they became lost in each other. Astonishment washed through Orion when he felt the slender threads binding his heart inside a cocoon unravel. He swore he could feel them stretching outward and tangling with Jenny's in a bond that made him feel invincible.

Sliding his fingers into her hair, he wrapped his left hand around her waist, pulling her closer, even as he clutched the bag in it. Pleasure burst through him when she wrapped her arms around his neck and continued to kiss him just as desperately as he was kissing her. They were both panting by the time she finally pulled back enough to look up at him with wide, wondrous eyes.

"Wow!" She whispered. "That was just– Wow!"

Orion's lips pulled up at the corner. "I do not know this word you use, but I think it means you felt the same thing that I did."

Jenny tilted her head to the side and grinned. "Did you feel the ground tremble and shake?" She asked with a teasing grin.

An unexpected chuckle escaped Orion. Yes, he had felt the ground tremble and shake when she kissed him, and more. Running his fingers through her hair, he stared in amazement at the silk of red fire.

"I am Orion," he murmured in a soft voice. "I rule this kingdom."

"I know," she replied with a sigh. "The boys told me. They also told me that they wanted a mother and that you needed a bride. I'm not from your world. I don't even know where your world is," she whispered, looking over his shoulder toward the glittering garden and the dome covering the city. "I was just walking along the beach when I saw Dolph run into the water. I was afraid he would drown and went after him. The next thing I knew, I was here."

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Orion's mouth tightened and a worried frown pulled at his brow. There was only one other person that he knew that was powerful enough to open the portals between their world and another. He also knew that without the stone Kapiian had returned with, her powers would be greatly diminished.

The knock on the door pulled his attention back to the present. His arms tightened for a fraction of a moment before he reluctantly released Jenny. Stepping back, he protectively placed his body between the door and Jenny before he called out for the person to enter.

Orion turned as Kapiian opened the door and entered. "What is it?" He demanded. "I said we would meet later."

Orion watched as Kapiian's eyes widened in surprise when his Captain of the Guard caught a glimpse of Jenny standing behind him. His hand instinctively moved out to pull Jenny further behind him. He didn't miss the sudden look of worry on Kapiian's face.

"You have a visitor," Kapiian replied, glancing again at Jenny. "The Sea Witch has arrived."

Orion's face darkened. He had expected her visit, but not so soon. Juno's fifth year celebration was not for another two days. He expected the Sea Witch to make her demands then, as he would have no choice but to agree to accept her as his bride or choose another before midnight.

"Take her to the throne room. I will be there shortly," Orion ordered with a dark look.

Kapiian glanced at Jenny before turning his own dark gaze back to Orion. "The Sea Witch demanded that you bring Dolph with you. She says he owes her payment and she has come to collect," he added.

The dread Orion felt earlier returned. When Kelia told him what Dolph had done, he feared his son had made a costly deal that would change his life forever. What he had not expected was the possibility of his son finding someone like Jenny.

His mind swirled even as he nodded to Kapiian. He started to take a step when he felt a slender hand on his arm. Turning, he looked back at Jenny.

"This has to do with me being here, doesn't it?" She asked in a quiet voice, noticing the look of worry in Orion's eyes. "It has to do with Dolph being on the beach."

"Yes," Orion responded with a short nod. "And, more. The Sea Witch is a powerful opponent, only she could have granted Dolph his wish."

"Can't you just tell her to go away?" Jenny asked anxiously.

Orion wished it was that simple, but it wasn't. The Sea Witch lived in the deepest recesses of the ocean, banned to spend her days in the dark void for her part in inciting the war between the different kingdoms. While he wished his father could have done

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more, the Sea Witch had invoked an ancient law preventing his father, a blood heir of the throne, from killing another blood heir.

"I must find out what Dolph has done," Orion explained. "If he gave a blood oath, then I have no choice but to listen to her demands."

"May I come?" Jenny asked. "If it has to do with me, I think I should be there. I also think it would help Dolph to know that we will both be there for him."

Orion paused for a moment, his mind racing through possible scenarios. Jenny was right, it might be better if she was there. The kiss they had shared just moments before pierced him. Yes, he had just met Jenny, but something told him that she was destined to be here, to be with him, as his bride.

"Jenny," he said, turning to face her. Raising his hand, he gently touched her cheek and looked at her with an intense focused stare. "If what I suspect has happened, I need you to say yes when I ask you a question. It is imperative to not only Dolph's future, but the future of my people as well. What I will ask of you will change your life from this day forth."

He watched as a crooked, uneasy smile lifted the corner of Jenny's mouth. He liked that she didn't automatically agree, but thought carefully about his words. He had much to learn about her, just as she did about him and his people, but something told him that she would not shy away from such a challenge.

"I think that happened about three hours ago," she replied. "What is it that I have to say 'yes' to?"

Orion turned his head when a soft knock sounded on the door before it opened. Kelia, Dolph, and Kapiian stood waiting for them at the door. He nodded before he reached out to tightly grip Jenny's hand. Pulling her close to his side, he bent slightly toward her so he could whisper in her ear. He felt her stiffen in surprise and shock at his softly spoken words, but she didn't resist as he pulled her out through the door.

Chapter 4

Jenny quietly stood just inside the throne room. Orion had instructed her to stay in a small alcove not far from the entrance. A wry smile curved her lips. The guy was not only sexy as all get-out, but smart too. He didn't want to show all his cards up front.

She'd watched as he'd talked quietly with Dolph shortly before they came in. The tight look of concern on his face and the fear in Dolph's eyes made her want to reach out to both of them and wrap her arms around them.

The look in both their eyes helped push away the doubt she had and gave her more confidence in her decision to accept what she was about to do. She swallowed and raised a slightly trembling hand to her brow to push away a strand of hair that was tickling her. When Orion said her life would be different from this day forward, he hadn't been joking.

Her eyes wandered over Orion again. A shiver went through her body as she did. She could feel heat course through her as she studied him. There was definitely a physical reaction inside her. From the side, she could see his jaw tighten when the large outer doors that were blocked from her view opened. A slight coating of green, yellow, and silver ran up the side of his throat, catching her attention. She could see a very thin, three inch line, almost like a scar, running along the column. She saw Orion's broad shoulders stiffen when she heard the faint sound of steps entering the throne room. Her mouth tightened when she heard Dolph's whimper of pain.

"Stop!" Orion demanded, glaring at whoever had entered.

A soft, menacing chuckle echoed loudly in the room. Jenny clenched her fists. She couldn't see the woman's face, but the sound of her enjoyment of Dolph's pain was enough to make her want to do a fist-plant against the woman's mouth.

"He is mine, Orion," the woman replied.

"Never, Magna!" Orion replied with a low growl. "Even you should have more honor than to trick a child."

Jenny scooted just far enough so that she could see the bottom of the throne platform between the pillars concealing her. For a moment, her stomach twisted in pain at the sight of the beautiful woman standing in front of Orion. The woman's rich black hair hung like a curtain down to her waist. Her skin was pale, almost the color of a shimmering white pearl. Her lips were painted as black as her hair, making them stand out. She was taller than Jenny by at least a foot and was slender to the point of being almost too thin. A stark white gown encased her lithe form, making Jenny's T-shirt and jean clad figure look painfully underdressed.

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"You should have taught him to be more careful, Orion," Magna replied. "He is reckless, like his father. That will change when I become his mother."

"*Never!*" Orion snapped, taking a step forward. "Release him, Magna. I warn you, I won't let you take my son."

Magna smirked up at Orion. "You can't stop me," she replied in a soft, confident voice. "I have his signature in blood. I control his destiny, and now yours. Accept me back into the kingdom as your bride, Orion, or I will take him as my own. Time is running out. If you have not claimed a bride in less than two days time, I will challenge you for the Kingdom. Accept me as your bride and you can keep both your son and the kingdom, deny me and you will lose both, Orion."

"I have a bride," Orion stated in a cold voice. "Your claim on my son will be voided."

Magna's eyes flashed with rage before they cleared. The nasty smile that Jenny was really beginning to hate, pulled at the woman's lips again. The witch with a capital 'B' might be beautiful on the outside, but she was about as nasty as it came on the inside.

"That is not the way it works, Orion," Magna informed him, slowly climbing the steps. "If you take a bride other than me, you will keep your place as king, but lose your son," she explained with a cold smile as she waved her left hand and the contract with Dolph's scribbled first name signed in blood on it appeared. "Read the fine print."

Orion held out his right hand and waited as the contract floated through the air to him. Jenny watched as he carefully unrolled the scroll and read it. His face darkened at first before a small, cold smile curved his lips and he closed it. Hope filled Jenny when he looked back at Magna with a look of triumph.

"Both Dolph and the Kingdom will remain mine, Magna. Go back to the depths of the sea where you belong and give up your hope of ever taking control of the Isle of the Serpent," Orion ordered.

"The fine print..." Magna began with an angry snarl.

"States that Dolph must return with a bride for me, a mother for him and Juno, or he forfeits his life to you if he fails," Orion stated.

Magna shook her head. "Read the very, very fine print," she interrupted with a glimmer of malicious glee in her eyes. "To be specific, Dolph was to return with a female from another world with hair the color of fire. The female must come of her own free will and agree to be your bride before midnight of Juno's fifth year of life. You are good, Orion, but not even you can save your son. The only way to do so is to accept me as your bride."

"I did read the very, very fine print, Magna. Jenny," Orion called out, never taking his eyes off of Magna. "Come stand at my side."

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Jenny swallowed and straightened her shoulders. Smoothing her hand over her hair, she stepped out from behind the pillar and pasted a smile on her lips. A surge of glee swept through Jenny when she saw Magna turn and stare at her in stunned disbelief.

Tossing her head, she grinned at Dolph when his eyes lit up. A sense of calm settled over her as she walked closer to where he was standing next to Orion. The door they had entered was on the same level as the throne. Her chin lifted when Orion reached out his hand to her. Jenny threaded her fingers through his and squeezed Orion's hand to let him know that he needn't worry about what she would do. Turning to face Magna, she locked gazes with the other woman.

"Hi, I'm the fire-haired woman from another world that came of her own free will to say yes to being Orion's bride before Juno's fifth birthday," Jenny said with a raised eyebrow. "I think that just about covered all the 'very, very fine print', doesn't it, Orion?"

A smothered chuckle escaped Kapiian who was standing to the side at the bottom of the steps. Jenny knew her eyes were twinkling with amusement when she glanced up at Orion. She couldn't resist taking the woman down a peg. She had always lived up to the reputation of being a redhead; make her mad and she just got even.

"Yes, I think it does," he replied with a low chuckle and pulled her closer before he turned a hard gaze to where Magna stood with her fists clenched.

"This isn't over," Magna snarled in rage, glaring at Jenny before turning her eyes back to Orion. "As long as the eyes of the Serpent are missing, I will fight for control of the Isle of the Serpent."

Orion reached into the pocket of his black trousers and pulled a brown bag out. Jenny released his hand when he pulled away to open it. She watched as he tilted the bag and pulled a familiar looking stone out of it. Her eyes widened when he held it up. If she thought Magna was furious before, it was nothing like she was now.

"You!" Magna roared, trying to reach out and snatch the smooth stone out of Orion's hand. "You stole that from my treasure."

"No, I had my men recover it," Orion stated in a cold, hard voice. "You are banished back to the depths, Magna. If you do not go now, I will ignore the law that states I cannot take your life."

"You do not need to do that, my Lord," Kapiian said with a wry grin, fingering the sword at his side. "I would be happy to take care of her for you."

"You may have one, but the other is still lost," Magna whispered, staring at the stone in his hand and backing slowly down the steps. "I will locate it and when I do, I will make sure that they are never together. I will rule all of the Isle of the Serpent one

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day," she declared before closing her eyes and softly muttering a string of words, too faint for Jenny to hear.

Jenny's eyes widened and she gasped when a swirl of bubbles suddenly formed where Magna had been before she disappeared. She glanced down when she felt a small hand slide into hers. A tender smile curved her lips at Dolph's bright eyes.

"You will stay?" Dolph asked with a growing smile. "You'll be mine and Juno's mother?"

Jenny kneeled down next to Dolph and pulled him into her arms. A moment later, a low squeal of happiness and another small body pressed against her as Juno's arms wrapped around her from behind. She glanced over her shoulder at the bright green eyes.

"Yes," Jenny replied, looking up at Orion. "Yes, I'll be your mother."

Rising when Juno released her, she turned to look at Orion. Reaching into the pocket of her jeans, she pulled out the unusual rock she had found on the beach. Holding it out to Orion, she grinned.

"You asked me if I would agree to be your bride to save your world," she whispered. "I want it to be more than that."

She watched as Orion's eyes lifted from the matching stone in her hand to her eyes. The look in them promised her a future different than she ever hoped to have. One filled with love and laughter, of hope and magic, one where she fit in.

A happy sigh escaped her when he pulled her into his arms and sealed his lips over hers in a passionate kiss filled with promise. The sound of giggles filled the throne room as Dolph and Juno watched them. Wrapping her arms tightly around Orion's neck, Jenny deepened the kiss.

Yep, the man definitely knew how to ignite her insides, she thought with a burst of pleasure. If only Carly were here, too, then life would be perfect.

Epilogue

Three months later:

Jenny emerged from the sea, curling her toes in the sand. She glanced nervously behind her. She could feel Orion's frustration, anger, and fear pulling at her. Pushing her wet hair away from her face, she turned back to look up at the palace high above her.

Her fingers ran down along the light line along her neck. She still couldn't believe that she could swim like a mermaid underwater. It was a dream come true that happened after she and Orion made love the first time. The last three months had been incredible. While Orion had taken her as his bride shortly after Magna disappeared, he had given her time to get to know both him and the boys.

He had shown her all over the city of the Serpent before taking her above to the villages that littered the huge island kingdom. After a month of the intense awareness between them growing, he had taken her in a night of passion that still made her knees shake. The next morning, he had introduced her to the world beneath the waves.

Jenny thought she would have been frightened at first, but with Orion's guidance and Dolph and Juno's playful teasing, she had found she was a natural. The only dark spot had been the fact that Carly had not been there. She enjoyed Kelia's company, but she missed her best friend and surrogate sister more and more each day. It wasn't until Kelia had offhandedly mentioned the day before that life was much easier since the Dragon King had taken a bride, that hope had blossomed once again inside Jenny.

"He was one of the few who could attack the upper villages," Kelia had explained with a sigh. "For centuries, it made life difficult. Then, he slept. I heard some of the warriors say that he was spotted again two years ago, but he was not alone this time."

Jenny had listened as Kelia talked about the unusual female the warriors had seen and how thankful she was that the Dragon King was finally happy. Two things immediately caught Jenny's attention. First, that the Dragon King had found his bride two years ago; and second, the description sounded an awful lot like Carly. When she had approached Orion about going to see if it could be her friend, he had been adamant that it was too dangerous. Unable to ignore the growing certainty that the woman Kelia described had to be Carly, Jenny had struck out on her own for the first time on the sea dragon stag that Orion had given her as a wedding gift.

Orion had discovered her disappearance shortly after she left and wasn't far behind her. Pushing through the waves, Jenny raised her face again to the path leading up the steep cliff. Carly loved dragons just as much as Jenny loved the ocean, if anyone could steal the heart of one, it would be Carly.

Jenny had only taken a few steps onto the beach when she heard Orion call out to her to stop. Turning, she watched as he rose up out of the waves to join her on the beach. She waited for him as he strode toward her.

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"Jenny, come away," Orion ordered in a low, husky voice filled with worry. "Go back to the sea. I will confront the Dragon King and ask him. This is too dangerous for you."

"I know it has to be Carly, Orion," Jenny replied in a pleading voice. "I can feel it."

"Who dares to come onto my kingdom?" A low voice roared.

"Drag!" Orion snarled as a large, terrifying dragon landed just feet from where they were standing. Sand flew up as he dug his front legs into it. Jenny stumbled backwards when Orion roughly pulled her behind him. "I come in peace."

Jenny's eyes widened when a smaller dragon landed beside Drag. She could tell the large male was unhappy about her being there from the way he was trying to shield her with his massive wings. The female ignored him, locking her eyes on where Jenny stood.

"Jenny?" The female dragon whispered before she drew in a deep breath and transformed. "Jenny, is that really you?"

"Oh, Carly," Jenny cried out, surging forward before Orion could stop her. "I knew it had to be you."

..*

Orion stood watching as Jenny hugged Drag's mate. His eyes flickered to Drag who had transformed. The Dragon King stood scowling at his mate who was laughing, crying, and talking to Jenny. He carefully stepped closer and gave him an uneasy smile.

"I suspect you have heard of my Jenny," Orion stated in a calm voice, studying the two women.

Drag glanced at Orion and grunted. "Non-stop," he admitted reluctantly. "She wished to return to her world, but the passage had sealed."

"Daddy," several voices called out from behind a bush. "Can we come out?"

"You have children?" Orion asked with a raised eyebrow.

Drag flushed as three young dragons peeked out from under a nearby bush. He growled low under his breath as they squealed and bounced toward Carly and Jenny. With an exasperated sigh, Drag folded his arms across his chest and nodded.

"Yes, and they listen about as good as my mate does," he grumbled. "How are your sons?"

Orion grinned and chuckled as he watched the women sink down to the sand to play with the excited baby dragons. The youngest one released a low cry when it fell face first in the soft sand. His heart swelled with pride when Jenny tenderly picked the little girl up in her arms and rubbed her cheek against the child's head.

"Good," Orion replied with an amused grin. "You know that this means the end of our feud, don't you? All Jenny talked about was her friend Carly. Now that she knows she is here, I have a feeling we are going to be frequent visitors."

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"Bring the boys," Drag shrugged in resignation. "My two would love to have someone to play with other than me, and little Jenny would enjoy having someone else to pick on besides her two older brothers."

Orion nodded with another low chuckle. His eyes returned to Jenny's glowing face. Love surged through him as he watched her tilt her head back and laugh at something Carly said. He was happy that she had found her friend. With the new alliance between his kingdom and Drag's, the Seven Kingdoms were once again on a path to peace.

His mind briefly flashed to Magna. She was unaware that he now had both stones that contained the power of the Sea Serpent. Jenny had shocked him when she held it out after Magna disappeared. She said she had found it on the beach right before she heard Dolph. It would not stop Magna, but it would definitely slow her down. He would have to talk with Drag about reaching out to the other kingdoms.

"Orion, Carly asked us to stay for dinner," Jenny called out to him with a happy grin.

"It has begun," Drag groaned, wincing when Orion slapped him on the shoulder.

"Yes, Drag, I do believe it has," Orion said, scooping little Jenny up in his arms when she toddled over to him and held her arms up. "I do believe it has."

Seven Kingdoms... Seven Loves... **The Witch's Touch**