



STILL  
WATERS

ALEX GABRIEL

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## STILL WATERS

**By Alex Gabriel**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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# STILL WATERS

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## Photo Description

A redheaded, muscular young man with a short beard stands in a lake, a scraggly stand of seaweed-draped deadwood behind him and mountains in the distance. He looks directly at the viewer, wearing a neutral expression. The water comes up to just above his waist, and he is lifting a sturdy white net from the water with both hands.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I only have two words for you: ginger merman! Everything else is up to you.*

I would really appreciate it, though, if you would skip dub/non-con, 'cause I really hate that.

*Have fun,*

*Kathleen*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy, paranormal

**Tags:** merman, mythical creatures, shifters, fairytale/folklore, 2 alpha males, enemies to lovers, interspecies, violence

**Content Warnings:** brief reference to suicide, deaths of non-MC, descriptions of drowning, HFN

**Word Count:** 24,427

*Acknowledgement*

First of all, thank you, Kathleen, for the lovely and inspiring prompt—and for leaving so much space for the prompt to grow into a story in my mind.

“Still Waters” was betaed by Sonja Cameron and Anna, both of whom helped me very much. I also owe a big debt of gratitude to my long-suffering editor Elizabetta—who patiently endured torture by semicolon—my proofreaders, and all of the organizers and participants of this event.

Last but by no means least: S.J. Eller saved my cover and turned it into something that perfectly captures the mood of the story.

Thank you again, everyone!

# STILL WATERS

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The beavers had multiplied again and were busy building yet another secondary dam a few fathoms farther down the river. They'd also dragged a corpse to the top of their primary dam and covered it up in twigs and mud. Drakjan didn't understand why beavers deposited carcasses on top of dams—it made no sense. Quite apart from the fouling of the water, a human corpse was large enough to attract dangerous predators. The beavers could just as easily have dragged the thing onto dry land and buried it there.

But that was beavers for you: extremely useful—impossibly stubborn.

At least this time, none of them had migrated to the tributary that fed into his lake. He wasn't about to put up with a dam changing the pleasant currents and energies of his lake and getting in the way of fish, and he was glad he wouldn't have to spend weeks chasing off stubborn beavers to prevent just that.

With a long-suffering sigh, Drakjan expelled the water from his lungs, shrugged on legs, and climbed painstakingly up the bank as close to the dam as he could get. The air was unpleasantly thin when he inhaled a breath of it, and the lack of substance against his body gave him goose bumps. A nearby beaver kit floated on the other side of the dam, almost completely submerged except for its small, suspicious eyes. It didn't retreat into its lodge, clearly used to his scent and presence.

The waterlogged branches of the dam bit painfully into the soles of his feet as he made his way to the obscured heap of the corpse. At least it hadn't been dead for long, so Drakjan could drag it onto dry land without much of a mess.

He grumbled to himself as he tugged the body through the thick brambles at the water's edge, dry twigs and thorns catching on its clothes and Drakjan's skin.

*"The water rushed, the water swelled, a fisherman sat nigh,"* he sang, rather than dwelling on the feeling of mossy forest mulch underneath his feet. It had been a while since he'd been out of water, and it always took some time to get used to breathing and walking. *"Tempt not this river's glassy blue, so crystal, clear and bright?"*



He hadn't remembered how soft and vulnerable legs were. Maybe he should have taken the time to go back for his clothes, but it hadn't occurred to him and seemed too much of a bother now. Oh well, it wasn't that big a deal. The scratches would heal when he took back his scales.

*"To him she said, to him she sung, the river's guileful queen..."* Singing, at least, was pure pleasure; nothing made him as happy as raising his voice and filling the empty air with sound and beauty. The way a melody could lift and carry in this element, the way his voice rang and resonated, deep and powerful and clear... this was the one thing he truly loved about breathing air. *"Half in he fell, half in he sprung, and never more was seen."*

Two hundred fathoms or so should definitely be a safe distance from the river. Still, Drakjan was already wearing legs and scratching them up by crashing through the undergrowth, so he might as well make entirely certain nothing dragged the corpse back to contaminate his water.

Another couple of hundred fathoms, and he dumped the corpse out in the open for the carrion-eaters. He caught a small flicker of white and motion from the corner of an eye as he straightened. By the time he looked, though, whatever it was had fled and there was nothing left to see. Nothing but moss and trees and underbrush, at any rate.

The walk back to the river was far more pleasant, now that he didn't have the unwieldy shape of a hefty dead human weighing him down and catching on every twig. He slowed a bit so he could concentrate on singing. He'd moved on to another old favorite, a sailor's song. *"We love the storms, the roiling swells, the roughness of the freezing gales."* Drakjan had a vague memory of hearing this one from the deck of a ship passing by on the river's surface, a shadow of motion and mammalian warmth. *"We drive our prey with surging sails, hunt them across the endless sea..."*

Next, Drakjan sang a boisterous drinking song full of raised glasses and barrels of rum, and then something sweeter and sadder—a more recent tune he'd heard last summer, when someone had staged their drunken revels in the woods not far from here. Drakjan had gotten out of the water to listen to the music they were playing, and spent most of the night dodging clumsy teenagers stumbling off into the trees to grope each other. (Later, when the night paled with approaching dawn, five of the groping teenagers made their way to the lake to take a dip. It always happened, with this kind of party. It had been fine—Drakjan just concentrated on the synthetic heartbeat of the music, letting it drown out the real, living heartbeats in his water.)

He allowed the last, melancholy notes of his song to die away as he found a comfortable rock by the river to sit on. His hair was falling into his face, snagging on his fingers in tangles and knots when he tried to brush it back. Another annoyance of walking on dry land—his hair always snarled when it dried in air, its texture growing unmanageable and rough.

If he'd stopped for his clothes, he would have had a comb. He made do by tugging his fingers through the auburn-streaked mess as best he could, working out the worst of the tangles.

The pleasant summer day turned into evening while he sang ballads, arias, shanties, pop, and rock. The forest's birds joined him in song as dusk descended. Then, he sang the oldest song he knew, wordless and eternal: a song of death, and rebirth, and the silent comfort of the depths' embrace.

When dusk darkened into night, the beavers emerged from their lodge and headed out to work on their various projects. One of the new ones startled on catching Drakjan's scent, slapping the water with its tail as it dove from sight. The sharp clapping sound echoed through the evening's stillness, and every other beaver in sight immediately submerged, diving for safety.

Drakjan cast off his legs and slipped beneath the surface of the river without a splash, gratefully filling his lungs with water.

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He might have paid more attention to his surroundings if he hadn't been hungry and focused on the small movements of fish gliding through the night-dark waters. He might have—but then again, probably not. It had been a long time since he'd been constantly on guard, always anticipating an attack. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to live with every sense stretched to vibrant fullness, to thrill to every heartbeat drawing near, to every ripple meeting his silent, waiting skin.

Back then, Drakjan would have said that that constant, steel-cold alertness wasn't something you could unlearn.

Now, though... now, one moment he was lazily drifting towards his lake, languid with song, the remembered thrum and flex of melodies running through him like a joyful current. He was looking forward to the sweet cold blood of his dinner, the catch of scales against his lips, the desperate struggle of a small life winking out in his grasp—

The next instant, something unseen brushed against him.

He was caught off guard, couldn't stop his immediate, instinctive twist to evade and push away. That single powerful flex of his body was enough to trap his caudal fin in mesh and draw the net tight around his body, crushing his pelvic fins against his stomach and ensnaring his arm and shoulder.

He froze in the water, still as a stone, his hair drifting around him in an obscuring cloud. He could make out the gossamer threads of the entrapping net now, visible only in glimpses where the current and the glimmer of light from the surface caught them at exactly the right angle. They were woven of bast and wax and a faint whisper of enchantment, faded but sharp against his skin. There had to be anchors somewhere, too, weighed down with rocks or tied to submerged roots. And on the surface, there would be a bell or swimmer of some kind to make it obvious that something larger than a river trout had swum into the trap.

A trout would thrash and try to tear loose. It was the natural response—Drakjan felt the same urge, wanted to fight free of the net, or twist to cut through its cords with the sharp edges of his fins. The instinctual, panicked response was exactly what nets like this were built for, though. He didn't dare move more than necessary to prevent the current and his weight from pushing him forward, farther into the net; anything else would only ensnare him further. Worse, he had to have set off the alarm the instant he'd swum into the trap. He was already out of time.

But Drakjan was old, and his blood ran colder than meltwater. And attacking him in his own water... no. No matter what, that was always a mistake.

Wreathed in netting and his own hair, he drew in a deep breath of water, opened his mouth, and sang. Under water, his voice lacked the rich resonance it held in air; every note was narrowed and refined, whittled down to its essential power. Even so, his song was clear and sharp as crystal to any ear that could hear.

The currents of the lake around him swirled in sudden agitation, and rough fur brushed his side. Two deceptively plump bodies curved around him, sleek and graceful... three. Drakjan sang to them, and the beavers heard, paddling close to tear with strong, sharp teeth at the netting that trapped him.

In a single night, one beaver could fell a tree that had grown for a hundred years. This netting was less than nothing to them. They might well fear him after this, flee his presence for a month or a season, but they would calm down

eventually—and even if they didn't, time would solve the problem. Their kits would not remember.

Within moments, the confining pressure of the net fell away. Drakjan wrapped his fingers in the loose threads as the beavers darted off. Sparks of enchantment stung sharply against his palms as he pulled on the net enough to keep the lines to the surface drawn tight, jostling it a little for added realism.

After so long, the wild, feral grin felt almost unfamiliar on his face.

There was no betraying warmth of flesh in the water—no jagged currents caused by someone moving awkwardly, out of their natural element. The only warning Drakjan had was a flash of motion, blurring into silver and black. It was enough. He'd been waiting for this, every muscle and nerve tense and ready.

Steel-scented motion piercing the water. A burst of heat. The wild drumbeat of a heart.

Drakjan shot to the side, twisting to avoid the spear and whipping the tattered remains of the net around the weapon's shaft as it flashed by. He caught a hard blow to the side as he doubled back. His attacker had adjusted mid-strike, quick as a striking moray eel. Still not fast enough, because Drakjan caught hold of the spear with one hand as he surged upwards, caudal fin flared.

He erupted into air in a burst of spray, lifting almost entirely out of the water. The human had let go of the spear in time to prevent himself from being thrown off balance. He was crouching on a makeshift construction of logs and planks that stretched out over the mouth of the river—high enough it didn't touch the water, not massive enough to catch attention from below, in the dark. It had to have been constructed in a very short amount of time, and it was exactly the kind of thing Drakjan wouldn't notice until it was too late.

The hunter was fast, too. He'd already scrambled back far enough on his construction that Drakjan couldn't grab him, couldn't reach him even with the spear. In another instant Drakjan would fall back into the water, giving the hunter time to reach the safety of dry land.

Or not.

Drakjan laughed as he threw himself forwards, crashing down on the wooden construction with the full force of his considerable weight and momentum. The pain of impact was negligible, and entirely worth it. Because the structure collapsed instantly, and the human slipped right off into the water, and then...

Then, he was Drakjan's.

Everything slowed and stilled around him, long-dormant instincts coming alive with a rush. A warm body in his water, a driving heartbeat resonating through the clear depths. The flailing motions of a creature unsuited to this element, pushing against the water with no rhythm, no traction.

He came up below the human like a wave, inexorable and swift. He twisted into the familiar spiral without thought, graceful and smooth; caught up the human tightly in his grip, locking his arms securely to his sides even as Drakjan flipped them over in the water. He rolled to his back so the human faced up towards the receding surface, now dark with night, but other times alive with the play of sunlight on the surface.

Nothing else felt like this—the dark, welcoming deep beckoning from beneath, the heaving struggles of the blood-hot creature burning in his arms. So alive, so frantic. Quick staccato heartbeat, strong with fear.

Eternal moments passed as he slipped deeper down, the human held tight and close in his arms. Against the night-dark cloud of his hair billowing around them, the human's last escaping breath gleamed like the rarest and most precious of diamonds.

And that—the moment the human fell back against him, no longer struggling, surrendering to Drakjan, to the deep; the moment his heartbeat stuttered erratically, falling into the most exquisite, fluttering rhythm of them all...

That was when Drakjan remembered, with a sharp wrench that tasted of bitter regret, cut with sorrow: he didn't do this anymore.

He rose through the water so quickly that his hair blinded him when he broke the surface, and he had to shake it away from his face. The man in his grip didn't move, wouldn't breathe, but his heart beat still. Weakly, yes, but it would do.

Drakjan threw the half-drowned human against the muddy ground of the shore with enough force to expel some of the water from his lungs—drew air into his own lungs to exhale it into the hunter's. It took several more moments, but then he began to retch weakly, heartbeat strengthening and speeding as he began to breathe again.

Drakjan was shivering when he found his legs and dragged the limp shape of the human fully onto dry land. He was shaken, and there were too many

possible reasons for it. Was it the frustrated need to finish what he'd started, or relief that he'd caught himself in time? Or was it perhaps simple grief, the pain of everything he had lost...

Except that he hadn't lost anything—he had decided to give something up. It was his choice, it always had been. He reminded himself of this as he turned the human who'd tried to kill him to his side, waiting for the man's heartbeat to steady and his breathing to even out into shallow rasps. Drakjan had chosen this life, and that made all the difference.

He walked backwards into the water, watching the semiconscious hunter, and refused to call the wrenching tug at his center longing.

Drakjan spent the night in the deepest part of his lake, curled into a bed of silt cushioned with soft tendrils of waterweed and moss. He did not sing, and he did not sleep.

When dawn turned the lake's surface silver, gray, and gold, the hunter was gone.

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The yearning never truly went away. There were hours when he forgot to notice it—days, sometimes. It was always there, just the same. He'd come close to succumbing many times, but this was the first time he'd been close enough to feel the currents of the weakening struggle against his skin, breathe in the water curling temptingly around a drowning body.

It was a horrible thing to face the prospect of never again experiencing the unique thrill, the absolute rightness and beauty of that last, faltering heartbeat... that last exhaled breath dancing towards the distant surface like a shoal of silvery fish. The coolness of the water seeping into mammalian warmth as life stilled.

He'd never been able to give it up, and never would be. Not truly. But he'd taught himself to delay giving in to the need, just for one more day... one more hour. One more drunken teenager bathing in his lake, laughing and fearless. One more squealing child splashing through the shallows of his river. One more soft, warm air-breather thinking nothing of wandering along the shores of the waters Drakjan claimed as his.

No, the yearning never went away. It wasn't the most important thing in his life anymore, though.

Drakjan loved this lake—so large and deep and lush with life. He loved this river, warm and sparkling with sunlight in summer, cooled into crystal shades of gray and white in winter. He even loved the wide blue sky above the water and the forest that surrounded it. Loved that all of this was his, undisputed and easy. Most of the time, he even liked the safety and routine of his life here, the way every day blurred into the next, seasons slipping by in a haze of uneventful tranquility.

He wanted this; he wanted to keep it. Wanted to stay. And if he had to give up part of himself to do it...

Drakjan shook his head and opened his eyes, the water swirling with the vivid red of his hair.

It was going to get easier again. He only ached like this now because the hunter's attack had brought every one of his old instincts raging back to life. As soon as they calmed once more, Drakjan would be fine.

He was still trying to make himself believe this when he jerked around, every sense on full alert, straining. What was that? He'd felt something—

There it was again, and this time he knew exactly what it was. Flesh, blood, and bone. Mammalian warmth dipping into his lake.

Drakjan threw himself towards the intruder without thought. He sliced through the distance from the depths to the shore in less than a heartbeat and broke the surface in a shower of water, already flexing into a lethal forward arc towards the intruder, who—

Who was entirely familiar and crouched casually on the old pier, one hand dipped into the water with no spear or net in sight.

Drakjan flipped out every fin he possessed to slow his momentum, twisting to fall backwards into the lake with a graceless splash, no more than an arm's length from his visitor.

The sheriff?

The expression on Drakjan's face just then could not have been remotely suitable. It was a good thing the sheriff was occupied with scrambling back from the splash, cursing and fruitlessly trying to brush water from her uniform. Too late, too slow, whispered Drakjan's instincts. It would have been an easy thing to reach her before she made it safely back to the shore. The pier was low to the water, and—

But it was only a moment. In the next instant he had himself back under control, and was dragging up the mild, friendly curiosity that he thought an early-morning visit by the wolves' protector warranted.

He breathed out water and inhaled air for the second time in as many days. "Sheriff," he said, as neutrally as he could.

"Julian." She nodded to him in the usual careless way of her people. Her smile was not the usual one, though—it was a thin, gray thing instead, and entirely failed to reach her eyes. "I'm afraid I have disturbing news."

All things considered, Drakjan seriously doubted this. He managed a concerned look anyway.

"There's been an—accident." She hesitated over the word just long enough to make it obvious. "Thomas Baker died late last night. I don't want to go into the details now, but he most definitely did not die of natural causes, and the circumstances are unsettling."

Judging by the sheriff's expression, he was expected to show some kind of reaction. Drakjan cast about for an appropriate response before settling on shock and dismay—presumably the suspicious death of a member of her clan warranted as much. Accordingly, he opened his eyes wide and sank deeper into the water, as though recoiling from the news.

It appeared to be the correct response. The sheriff nodded grimly, mouth set. "We're calling an emergency meeting. Everyone needs to be in on this. Tonight at eight, down in the council hall."

Silence stretched for slightly too long as Drakjan parsed this in his mind. Leaving aside the fact that this amount of drama seemed like an overreaction to him... hadn't that sounded suspiciously like an invitation?

"You want me to join you at this meeting."

She gave him a steady look. "Yes, Julian, we do. You know me, so you know I'm not prone to running scared, but this? This is bad. All the freeholders need to be there because everyone needs to be made aware, and also because we have to pool our knowledge and resources. Even Marian's coming down from the mountains, and you know how cougars hate crowds."

Drakjan stared at the sheriff blankly for a long moment before managing to dig up an appropriate response. "I'll be there."



The sheriff nodded brusque acknowledgment and took a step back from the end of the pier. She hesitated before turning to leave, though. “You know you can come down to town anytime. You’re always welcome.”

To this, Drakjan truly had no response.

“It’s just that you seem—” but she broke off with an impatient shake of the head. In Drakjan’s previous encounters with the sheriff, she’d been gruff, but good-tempered and energetic. Now, she seemed oddly diminished. “Never mind. I’ll see you tonight. Be careful.”

“I’m never careful,” Drakjan said, too confused and distracted to stop himself. The halfhearted snort the sheriff gave indicated she hadn’t taken him seriously, anyway.

By the time the true absurdity of the situation hit him, Drakjan was back in deeper water, with only the fish to hear his incredulous bark of laughter.

When he’d first arrived, he’d gained his territory by simply taking it. Nobody had been here to defend these waters. As incredible as it seemed, they appeared to have been essentially unclaimed, merely tagged onto the adjoining dry territories. There was some grumbling from air-breathers who wanted to swim or fish or use boats, but nobody ever outright challenged him. Over the years, Drakjan worked out the conditions of coexisting with the people whose territories bordered on his... and as far as he was concerned, that had been that.

But not only was his claim to the lake and river unchallenged—no. No, far more than that, he’d actually become an acknowledged freeholder while he wasn’t paying attention, merely by turning up and sticking around. His claim was now officially recognized and respected by the other freeholders in the area. Respected to the extent that he’d actually become a member of the joint council of leaders.

He laughed until his stomach hurt and his fins trembled. Then, he got ready to walk in the air.

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The key to the old boathouse had rusted in the water by the base of the pier’s farthest pillar, but it still opened the door. His clothes were where he’d left them, draped over the hull of the canoe that sat rotting in the shack’s musty gloom. Drakjan grabbed them quickly, eager to get out of the stale air. He was already half out of the door when he remembered his backpack, and had to turn back briefly. A moment later he’d finally escaped out into the sun, sneezing as old dust bit into his sinuses.

He balanced carefully on his legs as he pulled on his jeans and T-shirt. His sneakers were battered and discolored, feeling uncomfortably stiff when he jammed his feet into them. They softened a little when they grew wet, but he'd get a new pair when he got to town. Shoes were unpleasant enough when they weren't moldy.

Which reminded him. The bears sometimes paid him with money when they came to fish in his river. Unless one of the wolves who came to his lake to splash around on the surface had stolen it, he should still have some left... And he did, as he found when he checked the backpack. It should be enough. He didn't need much.

With his feet and legs encased in shoes and jeans, the overgrown trail leading from the boathouse to the road was comfortable enough to walk. It was a warm day, and it didn't take long for the water to dry on his skin. He sang a boisterous drinking song he remembered from an inn by his first stream, and the cheerful tune took his mind right off the various niggling annoyances of walking on dry land and breathing air.

Drakjan could probably have hitched a ride to town once he reached the road. He didn't, though, and not just because he'd never liked cars. He had no need to hurry, and a lot to think about.

Such as: A hunter had attacked him here, in this land, in his own lake, where Drakjan had believed himself safe. He'd attacked in a way that showed he knew exactly what he was doing. And now the wolves were upset that one of their kind had been murdered. It seemed likely these two events were linked, considering. Come to think of it, Drakjan had found a dead body, too. Another first, and something it now occurred to him the sheriff might find interesting. He'd have to remember to mention it to her.

Drakjan had been telling the truth when he said he was never careful. It wasn't in his nature to float about speculating about potential threats or to twist himself out of shape trying to steer clear of hypothetical dangers. Nor did he generally spend much time musing on things that did not concern him, or how they might possibly come to concern him in the future. Still, this might be one of those times when the stream of events rushing by was too torrential to ignore.

It took him several hours to reach the town by foot, traversing a distance he could have crossed in minutes in the water. He didn't mind, especially since he found that after he'd once again gotten used to the way everything felt and worked on dry land, he felt calmer... more settled. The yearning was still there,

of course. It always was. It was far less immediate in its urgency when there was no way for Drakjan to give in, though.

He saw something moving off in the woods once or twice as he walked, along with flashes of white fur or fabric. He never spotted anyone, though, and didn't feel like going out of his way to check. It might just have been a bird or a deer, anyway.

Some wolf children were chasing each other through an orchard at the edge of town. They scattered when they caught sight of him, melting away into the trees. On land, they were almost graceful.

The barbershop was still every bit as jarringly bright and artificial as he remembered. Drakjan had forgotten about the giant image of an arctic wolf on the far wall, but he remembered the faux-fur chairs grouped around a table full of fashion magazines. He also remembered the way people stared when he came in. Both the plastic-draped man in one of the chairs and the barber himself—a broad-shouldered wolf with a weathered face and a short white beard—actually froze in place to gape at him.

When he checked his reflection in the mirrors, Drakjan could see why they were surprised. His hair and beard had grown long when he hadn't been paying attention, turning into a heavy copper mass streaked with bright, sun-bleached bronze and blood-dark strands tinted by the depths of his lake. In water, his hair spread into a concealing cloud when he floated quietly in the shallows, looking up into the sky beyond... it streaked back smoothly behind him when he swam, with no drag to slow him down.

In air, his hair dried into a tangled mess, coarse and unsightly. It sat on his head like a nest of dried-out red algae tossed up on the shore, conspiring with his equally unsightly beard to all but entirely obscure his face.

Recently, the days and seasons had begun to blur into each other with sameness. Really, it was a good thing that something out-of-the-ordinary was happening. He could do with a change.

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The council hall was a wooden single-story building surrounded by a park. The park featured pleasingly arranged clusters of trees, well-tended stretches of lawn, and small, shallow bodies of water. Drakjan lingered by a burbling brook for a while, trying to soothe his growing unease. It felt wrong to be away from water. No water meant no escape, no retreat. All of his natural weapons involved water—on dry land, he was relatively easy prey.

While the shallow brook didn't help much, the quiet did. Drakjan took off his new shoes—far more comfortable than the old ones, even soaked through—and found a place to sit for a while, dangling his feet into the pleasantly cool water. He sang a mournful ballad about a woman waiting by the shore, hoping for the return of her lover who was lost at sea.

By the time dusk began to darken the sky, he felt considerably more at ease.

Several chatting wolves were standing around the council hall when he arrived. They fell silent as he walked past, but he didn't know any of them, and nobody moved to stop him. Inside, the hall was spacious and airy. The door opened directly into a single long room, which was empty except for a large table set up at its other end. Intricate patterns of polished woods made up the floor, flooded with patches of evening light falling in through the windows.

Drakjan looked up, expecting to see shields and flags—the sigils of the houses and clans that made up this community. Instead, the carved wooden rafters of the high ceiling were adorned only with the elaborate silver threads of a decorative lighting arrangement.

“Julian!” The sheriff detached from a group of wolves halfway down the hall and came to greet him. “You're just in time. Let me introduce you to some of the others before the meeting starts.”

Jennifer, he remembered abruptly. The sheriff's name was Jennifer.

“Jennifer,” he said, and nodded acquiescence.

She shot him a sideways look as they walked down the hall together. She seemed more relaxed in her own territory—her smile was still a thin, pale thing, but something had softened in her demeanor. “You look good.”

Cropped short to his skull, his hair was an unremarkable shade of deep auburn, touched with the lighter shades of the red and orange autumn leaves that floated on his water's surface. Drakjan liked the way it made him look—young and almost vulnerable, his face open and soft, all smooth skin and even, clean lines of bone and flesh. Even his eyes fit the image—large and clear enough to seem innocent, for all that they mirrored the murky darkness of the depths of his lake.

“It was time.” Drakjan would miss the camouflaging drift of his hair in the water, but if he was going to be spending time on land, this was much more practical. He hadn't needed concealment for a long time, anyway. Although... perhaps he could have used it now, for the first time since he'd come to this place. The hunter still lived, after all, and was likely to try again.

Oh, right... that reminded him. "I found a body at the beavers' primary dam," he said.

He got more of a reaction than he'd anticipated. The sheriff actually stopped in her tracks to stare at him, wide-eyed. "You found what?"

"A human corpse," Drakjan explained. "A man. He must have been in the river."

Several of the others were drifting over, no doubt drawn by the sheriff's shocked exclamation. All of them seemed highly interested in his tidings, and Drakjan found himself repeatedly detailing when he'd found the body, that he'd never seen the man before and had no idea who he was, and where—to the best of his knowledge—the body was now.

"How did he die?" The sheriff was still staring at him, as were her compatriots.

Drakjan very carefully did not roll his eyes or sigh. Really, what did it matter? Dead was dead, after all. Still, faced with so many fearful, anxious gazes, he did his best to cast back his mind and dredge up as many details as he could. The man had been clothed, he knew that much—wearing something relatively sturdy, too, something that had allowed Drakjan to get a good grip, even when brambles caught and tugged at his burden. There hadn't been any blood, but Drakjan couldn't recall whether it had washed away before he'd found the body, or whether there hadn't been any open wounds in the first place.

In the end, he shrugged, offering up the only thing he could say with certainty. "He didn't drown."

Nobody seemed satisfied with this, but Drakjan couldn't help that. After another round of questions, the sheriff selected several of her police officers to go look for the body. Since the woods were bear territory, the bears sitting at the table were asked for permission. One of them decided to come along, and then someone else wanted to be part of the excitement, too. There was such a ruckus surrounding the entire thing that Drakjan was glad the sheriff insisted he stay for the meeting, and so couldn't join the body-hunting team.

When the meeting finally began there were about twenty people left, all gathered around one end of the too-long table. Most of the gathered clan leaders and freeholders seemed to know each other already, but there was a round of introductions even so. Over half of the people present were wolves. The others

were mostly bears, but there were also two cougars—a muscular, stocky woman named Marian and her teenage son. Apparently, their clan held the mountains Drakjan’s river sprang from. He’d never met a werecougar before, and studied them with enough interest that he missed the rest of the introductions. They seemed rather ill at ease, sitting very straight and still.

Drakjan was dragged from his observations by a sudden silence, and found that everyone was looking at him. He smiled winningly and swept a gaze around the table. “I am Julian. I hold the lake and river. If you want to swim or fish in either, ask me first.”

With the introductions over, they proceeded to the actual reason for the meeting at long last. It transpired that late last night a wolf living in the outskirts of town had found her husband sprawled in the middle of the flowers in their front yard, stone cold dead in the truest sense of the word. Investigation brought to light that he had frozen to death on a balmy summer night. He had, in fact, frozen to death so thoroughly that he was frozen solid all the way through, and still hadn’t thawed even now.

Unsurprisingly, everyone’s reaction to this tale consisted of shock, horror, disbelief, and helplessness, various blends of which were expressed at great and unnecessary length.

Drakjan watched it all without much interest until it occurred to him, with a sudden shock of white-hot realization, that clearly none of these people had ever so much as heard of a death of this kind.

Off the top of his head, Drakjan could think of three different creatures that killed with cold. He’d be able to come up with at least as many again if he gave it a moment of thought. But the people here had never heard of a single one.

Drakjan straightened in his chair, heart thudding into overtime. A hunter who knew how to attack Drakjan. A dead man in the river. And a wolf killed by something that had never walked this land before. There really was only one possible conclusion: the rip had opened again, and something had come through.

During his first seasons in this place, Drakjan had guarded the westernmost reaches of the lake obsessively. He’d been certain that the rip might open again at any moment. He was constantly on guard, ready to meet what would come through, eager to catch it while it was disoriented and vulnerable. But nothing ever had come through, and eventually, he stopped expecting it.

Even now, nothing had come through into the lake. He would have known—he was too attuned to his waters to have missed it. But what if the rip didn't always open in exactly the same place?

The deep water had been exactly what Drakjan needed—exactly what he'd been desperately, hopelessly yearning for as his life's blood spilled freely onto dry dirt. He'd theorized before that the rip had opened in response to his dying wish. Death magic was wild and powerful, and if something in the vicinity had responded to Drakjan's need...

He caught himself pressing a hand to his stomach where his T-shirt concealed the scar he would always carry.

Only a water creature would wish for the safety of the depths when facing death. Maybe this time, the rip had responded to a different need and opened on dry land—in the woods, or on the banks of the river.

Right on cue, a small commotion by the door announced the return of the delegation that had been sent to look for the corpse in the woods. They'd found it, as one of the wolves reported breathlessly—it had taken them a bit of time to locate the spot Drakjan had described, but eventually they'd found the body right where he'd said it would be. They'd then brought the corpse straight to the medical examiner, and though the results of the autopsy wouldn't be in until morning, the examiner's first impression was that the man had died of multiple stab wounds made with a large knife, or something of the kind.

A silver-plated dagger, thought Drakjan. A thrice-folded cold-iron sword... or a spear.

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The sheriff caught up with him by the door. "A minute, Julian—We need to talk."

Drakjan's mind was crowded with too many memories and old thoughts, caught in a world he'd left long ago. It took him a long moment to even understand the wolf was talking to him, because she was using the wrong name.

"I spoke to my cousin the other day," the sheriff was saying. She captured his gaze and held it, direct, hard, and even. Her voice was just as steady and deliberate, and she was balancing her entire body lightly on the balls of her feet. "You know, the one who lives up north, by the ocean."

Several heartbeats passed before Drakjan recalled himself enough to lower his eyes. He'd conceived of "Julian" as a harmless and retiring man, not someone who would willingly get into a dominance battle with one of the top

wolves. Not unless she challenged his territory, at any rate. But what on earth was she talking about? What did the sheriff's cousin have to do with stabbed or frozen corpses?

The sheriff's mouth tightened at his lack of response, her eyes narrowing. "We talked about merpeople."

From one instant to the next, the sheriff held every last drop of Drakjan's attention. He wasn't sure what kind of expression was on his face, but it was sure to be far too dramatic a reaction. It was clear his response hadn't escaped her notice; she'd been expecting it, watching for it.

He'd underestimated her. The knowledge clenched in his gut, drawing him up cold and tight.

"Turns out they don't swim up rivers more than a few hundred meters or so because of the water. They only live in saltwater." Her voice was measured and cool, giving away just as little as her watchful gaze. Drakjan couldn't believe he'd never seen this in her before—this hidden hardness, the glint of tempered steel. "They also live in pods. They're like wolves that way. My cousin's never even heard of a merman who lived alone."

Air rasped in his lungs like dust, but he'd caught himself now. She'd taken him by surprise, that was all. "Sounds like your cousin needs to check his facts." His tone was perhaps a touch too cold, but even Julian could be forgiven for taking exception to such nonsensical suspicions. "I'm doing very well in my lake, thanks. And I enjoy being on my own. People get on my nerves."

She didn't respond and didn't look away, just held his gaze. He couldn't tell what she was thinking at all. Everything seemed possible, and his breathing slowed, his body relaxing into readiness as everything around him grew as clear and sharp-edged as ice.

"Julian," she said then, low and hard. "I'm not blind. Do you think I can't recognize a lone wolf just because he has fins instead of paws?"

Drakjan blinked, thrown off-balance all over again. A lone wolf...? He was certain he'd heard that right, but it made no sense.

"Whatever happened with your pod, it doesn't matter." The sheriff was still staring at him, all steely no-nonsense intensity, but he had no idea what to make of her expression anymore. "What matters is the present. What matters is that you're here now. You belong with us now. So come into town more often, Julian. It isn't good for a social creature to be alone."



Drakjan didn't know what to say. He was suddenly very aware of his wet feet and the damp climbing up the legs of his jeans. For a wild, reckless moment all he wanted was for the sheriff to look down and notice, just so he could find out what bizarre explanation she might come up with.

"Stay in town for the night," she went on, with a hint of gruff warmth. "Just tell Donna at the White Hart that I sent you. We're meeting again in the morning, once the second autopsy is in. Also, I'm going to get a phone with a solar charger you can take back to the lake with you. We need a way to keep in touch."

"I see," he managed at last. It came out sounding mostly neutral, if maybe a bit bemused. He counted it a definite win.

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By the time he reached his lake's shore it was almost midday, and Drakjan was done with dry land and all who dwelled upon it. These people were still strange to Drakjan in many ways, and he was growing more and more certain that he would never truly understand them.

Good. He didn't want to understand them too well. Thinking the way they did had to be highly unpleasant, considering that two corpses had kicked off this amount of general panic and dismay. He had no idea what the actual point of the meetings had been. To him they seemed like a pointless exercise in wolves and bears assuring each other that swift measures of an unspecified nature would be taken, while cougars looked on in fidgety silence and wished themselves a thousand fathoms away.

Drakjan's feet hurt. His eyes were itchy and hot, his tongue dry. The taste of dust clung to the back of his throat, and he felt sticky with sweat, heat, and dirt. The feeling was not unfamiliar, even though he couldn't remember the last time he'd spent this much time on dry land. He didn't try to remember very hard, truth be told. It hadn't been in this place, and Drakjan was content to let the distant past blur into obscurity, the veil of time blunting the sharpness of steel, blood, and dead, brackish water.

He dropped the backpack and kicked off his sodden shoes with relief, his eyes already locked on the clear depths that awaited him. Apart from everything else, he was so hungry. He'd barely been able to force down two mouthfuls of the coarse, bloodless fare the wolves considered breakfast. Where Drakjan came from, werewolves did not eat bread and hard-boiled eggs. Not that he'd ever met one, up close and personal... not that he'd ever wanted to.

He sighed as he tossed his T-shirt on top of the wet sneakers and unbuttoned his jeans, skimming them down his thighs. He'd put his clothes away properly later, once he'd spent some sorely needed time in the soothing embrace of the—

“No! Stop!”

Drakjan turned too quickly and almost lost his balance, his jeans tangled around his knees. The low bushes right next to him erupted with the form of a man, and in the next instant a hard shoulder plowed into his stomach, folding him over and stealing the air from his lungs.

He staggered back, barely managing to stay on his feet and not fall over his own jeans. His instincts were screaming at him to batter with his tail, slice with his fins, but he couldn't. Even his useless legs were constricted, and the attacker had gotten a firm grip around his middle and was pushing him over the uneven ground, forcing him to stumble backwards and off-balance, away—

Away from the lake. Away from the water.

Desperation shot through Drakjan in a wave of ice-cold determination and clarity. The world slowed and stilled as though it had dipped underwater. He stopped trying to resist the hunter's force and gave in, stepped back to buy a moment of balance. It worked, and it was enough to let him twist to the side and bring down an elbow on the back of the hunter's head. The blow failed to connect properly, but the glancing impact made the hunter falter briefly and gave Drakjan another small opening. He seized it without hesitation, throwing himself further to the side and twisting in the hunter's grasp like an eel, gaining just enough space to aim a vicious knee at the hunter's face.

He missed—damn those jeans—but the hunter's grip loosened further. Drakjan expected a dagger to the gut at any second, but it never came.

He kicked at the hunter's knees this time, brought his hands together to punch down on the back of the man's neck, and then finally tore free of his weakened grasp.

The hunter was blocking his way to the water. Drakjan retreated quickly, backing down the path that led away from the lake even as he hastily pulled his jeans back up. He needed an alternate route to the water. The underbrush here was too thick to break through quickly, but just a little farther on, the shrubs gave way to grasses and low brambles. Maybe he could dodge—

Surprisingly, the hunter was following him fairly slowly, making no move to lunge at him again. Perhaps he was content with driving him farther away

from the water for now. Drakjan took him in with a single glance: Sharp steady gaze, sturdy hunter's clothing, and a sheathed silver dagger at his belt. Tall and well muscled, no visible wounds, healthy and quick, every move smooth and purposeful. Young but clearly experienced, and with no hint of uncertainty about him, not the slightest flicker of anger or fear. His hands were raised in readiness, but he wasn't holding a weapon, and even so, Drakjan knew that rushing this hunter would be a fool's choice.

Should have drowned him when he had the chance. Should have held him tight and taken him to the bottom of the lake, held him until he sighed out his last breath into the water and stilled, cooled—

"Idiot," the hunter spat. He'd stopped now, staying barely two arm's lengths out of reach. "There's a nix in the lake. Stay away from the water!"

Drakjan took another step back, and another again before he could stop himself. When he struggled to pull in breath, the thin, insubstantial element he inhaled was so alien that for a moment, he felt like he was suffocating.

It had been so long since he'd heard that word. It was a word that didn't belong here, in this peaceful land where a single dead body could cause such shock and horror. Not here, where young wolves swam in his lake, bears fished in his river, and he went to meet with the land-dwellers in their hall, respected, not feared.

The word *nix* belonged to a different world. Like Drakjan himself. Like this hunter.

"You don't belong here," Drakjan said, lips numb. "You need to leave."

That got him a snort. "Didn't you hear me? You have a nix. If you'd gone swimming in there, you'd be dead by now."

Drakjan laughed; he couldn't help it. The hunter misunderstood, of course, eyes narrowing in what looked like a mixture of disbelief and disgust. Maybe he was wondering if he should just have left the foolhardy civilian to his fate... perhaps it was what such stupidity deserved.

It had been so long since anyone had recognized Drakjan for what he was. Drakjan almost wanted to tell him—at least he would be able to understand, unlike anyone else in this place.

"You're not from around here, are you," he said instead.

The hunter was definitely not from around here. He'd made himself right at home, though. He'd set up camp in the woods, just out of sight of both the river and the lake. Drakjan didn't venture into the forest unless he had to, so he would likely never have found the hunter here. Even the bears probably wouldn't have come across him. They were lax about marking and patrolling their territory and usually only came to this stretch of the woods when they wanted to fish.

Even in the midst of the bears' woods, the small camp was unmistakably the hunter's territory. Drakjan lingered at its edges, reluctant to step inside. There was a low, mottled-brown tent that faded into the forest landscape to a surprising degree. There was also a small portable stove with the scent of cooking rabbit curling from it, half a dozen self-made wooden spears, and a stack of arrow shafts waiting for fletching.

Clearly, this hunter was not a problem that would go away on its own.

"Hraban," said the hunter and held out an arm, palm up. His gaze was unswerving and direct.

His eyes were the murky blue-green of sunlight filtering through the topmost layers of water. Drakjan hadn't noticed this when he'd left the man in a near-drowned bundle on the shores of his lake—hadn't noticed it just before, either, when he'd thought he was fighting for his life. It wasn't just the eyes, either. The hunter was a perfect blend of even-featured good looks and the rough-edged hint of danger. In another time and place, Drakjan would have sung to him across a crowded waterfront tavern and followed up with a drink and an invitation. It'd probably have been the last mistake Drakjan would ever have made.

In this time and place, Drakjan stared at the hunter's extended forearm for half a beat too long before he recalled himself and reached out to grasp it in greeting. "I'm Julian."

He found that he was humming beneath his breath and broke off quickly, covering with a cough. At least the water was at his back now, with no hunter to block the way. He was wearing his shoes again, too, so he'd be faster if he had to run.

The hunter—Hraban—found two metal cups and what looked like a kettle, and set about making some kind of hot drink. It actually took Drakjan a moment to catch on. He hadn't forgotten the old rules, but they'd never been

relevant here before. Still, he knew what Hraban was doing. Inviting a stranger into your home and sharing food or drink with them invoked the laws of hospitality—a quick and effective way to establish an official truce between humans.

Drakjan found the man's proper, traditional ways strangely settling. He didn't hesitate when Hraban offered him both cups, choosing one at random and satisfying his part in the ritual by taking a sip of something too pungent and far too hot.

"How long have you been here?" It was too abrupt, and he knew it. He should have found some kind of lead-in, or at least waited until Hraban lowered his own cup.

The hunter took his lack of polite restraint in stride, though, and didn't pretend to be confused about the meaning of the question. "Four days."

Four days in which two violent deaths had occurred. Hardly a coincidence.

Hraban didn't ask anything in return, didn't do anything except stand there and calmly sip his drink, his attention steady on Drakjan over the rim of his cup.

Drakjan was many things, but he had never been patient. If Hraban wasn't going to ask for information, Drakjan would simply provide it for him and consider the debt repaid. "We found a corpse by the river two days ago. The medical examiner says it was stabbed multiple times in some kind of violent altercation." Belatedly, it occurred to him he should have said "he," not "it." Oh well.

Hraban raised his eyebrows slightly, cool and still as the deep waters, and still did not speak.

If that's how he was going to play this, that was fine by Drakjan. Even leaving aside the obvious next question—to which he didn't actually need an answer anymore—he had plenty of things left to ask. "What was it?"

"Werewolf," Hraban said, and nothing more.

Drakjan choked on an involuntary bark of laughter, because of course it had been a werewolf—of course it had. He wasn't surprised that the reaction made the hunter's gaze sharpen, a slight vertical line appearing between his brows.

This time, he didn't have to wait for Hraban's question. "What made you say I'm not from around here?"

“Just that—you don’t belong here.” Drakjan paused, reaching for the right words to describe something he’d never fully understood. “You don’t fit this place, and I know there’s a rip somewhere near. A rip that things from elsewhere come through sometimes.” Two times that he knew of, so far. “I haven’t been able to find it from here. I don’t know how it works. But I do know it’s there, and it’s obvious you’re from the other side.”

Hraban’s brows seemed to be the most expressive part of his face. Without additional cues from the rest of his features or body, it was hard to say what their slight upward quirk meant. It could have been simple acknowledgment just as easily as a request to elaborate, or even an expression of disbelief. “And you know this because you came through the same way.”

Not a question—but then, it wasn’t Hraban’s turn to ask. He was just angling for free additional information.

It occurred to Drakjan then—quite without warning—that this kind of thing might well be more common than he knew. There were rumors about the secrets hunters kept. “What do you know about rips?”

“Not much.” Hraban turned his cup in one hand, idly shifting his weight. Drakjan tried not to tense too obviously at the motion. “I’ve heard of them as portals. They’re very rare.”

That was hardly anything at all, really, but Drakjan didn’t push. Not yet. Instead, he did his best to look friendly and harmless as he took another careful sip of the beverage Hraban had given him. Now that it had cooled down a little, it was almost palatable.

Hraban swept his cup around in a wide arc, indicating everything around them—the forest, the river and lake, the valley and mountains beyond. “What is this place?”

How could he even begin to answer a question like that? It would take hours to adequately describe the strangeness of the sheriff and her wolves, never mind the bears and the cougars, and the way the were clans had divided everything up into territories they ruled in a joint council.

On the other hand, at its core, the matter really was quite simple. “It’s different. Safe.” Soft, he thought, but didn’t say. Strange, like the unrealistic dream of a world that could never be—except that somehow, it was. “Peaceful. There have been two violent deaths since you arrived, but before that, there was

nothing. It's not—It's like a reflection in a clouded mirror. There's no edges, no... The people here are just different." Soft, yes. Strange and naive. But also...

Hraban scoffed, his face hardening into disbelief. "There's a nix in the lake. Its singing was practically the first thing I heard when I got here, and it nearly drowned me when I tried to kill it. Tell me again how different, safe, and peaceful this place is."

"You're still breathing air, aren't you?" Drakjan snapped, and then caught himself. Too late.

Suspicion flashed over the hunter's face like quicksilver, and in the next instant, his gaze snapped down. Drakjan couldn't help but follow his gaze to his own sneakered feet, standing on old brown leaves and soil... the hems of his jeans, dark and dripping with moisture.

If he'd hesitated for even a second longer before bolting, the hunter would have caught him. He was right behind Drakjan when he splashed gracelessly into the shallows of the river, belly flopping with no more elegance than one of the wolves.

A spear whirred by next to Drakjan's ear as he submerged. He was still wearing legs, and a second wooden shaft sliced through the water by his side as he dove hastily for the safety of deep water, slow and clumsy without his fins.

He was struggling out of the damn jeans so he could finally shrug off the legs when he felt the splashing. In the lake out by the pier, blood-warm mammalian bodies were moving awkwardly through the water, irregular ripples racing outwards like a signal. Wolves had been swimming in his lake regularly ever since spring passed into summer. Drakjan had assumed all the drama over corpses might keep them away, but it seemed he'd underestimated their resilience.

The idea sprang into his head fully formed—he didn't stop to think.

He surfaced a safe distance from the shore to find Hraban standing on the bank, watching for him with another spear in hand. For a long moment, they stared at each other in silence, neither of them moving. At this range, hurling a spear would be nothing but the waste of a weapon. It would be more foolish than that to try to drag down an armed and alert hunter who stood a full two steps back from the water.

On the other side of the rip, this could only have ended with death. But then... back there Hraban would have drowned when they first met, and Drakjan would have bled out on dry land long ago.

“There’s people bathing in the lake,” Drakjan shouted. “Thought you might want to know.” He flipped his caudal fin showily into air as he dived, just to be obnoxious.

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Drakjan usually stayed as far away from bathers as he could. When they turned up to spread their blankets on the open, grassy patch of ground by the pier, Drakjan swam towards the snow-capped mountains that bordered the far reaches of the lake. Sometimes he went all the way into the cliff-edged valley that split off from the main body of the lake, drinking in the deep, rock-edged silence. There were caves down here, some large enough for him to enter, others too small to serve as anything but a home for tiny fish that darted around him in silver swarms when he got too close.

Now, he headed for the warm bodies in his water at full speed, cutting through the distance between them in an instant. He surfaced with a showy splash that made the smaller wolves shriek and giggle. He knew these particular bathers... They’d asked his permission to swim some seasons back, and returned regularly. Three of them were on the shore, lounging on two large blankets, while one older and four younger ones paddled around in the water.

By the time the hunter caught up, Drakjan had exchanged friendly inanities with the parents on the shore, declined the offer of a pastry, assured them he’d let them know if the kids got too noisy, and discovered that the wolves in the water thought it was funny when he scooped water on them with his fins. He considered grabbing the littlest one and dragging her along the surface of the water at speed. She would have loved it, but he chose to stay put in the end—she was shrieking more than loudly enough to lead the hunter here, anyway.

His timing could not have been better. The hunter was just bursting onto the scene when Drakjan took on legs to stand in the waist-high water, the littlest wolf clinging to him with a wide, gap-toothed smile on her face.

Hraban froze. His gaze darted from Drakjan to the people in the water to the three sitting on their blankets. Everyone turned in surprise at his sudden appearance and several of the wolves exclaimed at the spears in his hand.

Drakjan had thought there might be shouting, or threats, or other such useless and annoying things. There weren’t, though. The hunter merely prowled



closer, ignoring the recoiling wolves. He was all focus and tightly wound power waiting to be unleashed. He walked like a stalking predator. Ironically enough, the sight reminded Drakjan of nothing so much as a werewolf he'd once seen in his own world, prowling along a river in his search for prey.

“What do you want?” Hraban had come so close he didn't need to shout. The cold depths of his gaze were very steady and very calm.

Drakjan wondered whether the hunter would step into the lake in exchange for the little girl, if Drakjan told him to. The self-sacrificing thing always seemed like rank stupidity to Drakjan. Once someone sacrificed themselves, after all, they had no further influence over what would happen. And really... he didn't think Hraban would be so foolish.

He hoisted the girl into his arms, tickling her to make her squirm and giggle. There wasn't a drop of caution or apprehension in her. Her parents were definitely alarmed, but they weren't afraid of what Drakjan might do. It was Hraban they watched, distressed by his menacing air and the weapons he carried.

“I want you to listen, and to watch closely, and to think,” Drakjan said, low and vicious. “These people have been here to swim three times this season. Late last summer, they were here almost every day... and so were many others. Some evenings, packs of young people come to grill meat and drink by the lake.”

The hunter was definitely listening, and he was watching closely enough to flay Drakjan's skin with the sharpness of his gaze. As for whether or not he was thinking... Well, they'd soon find out.

There was a wild, vindictive kind of joy in this, and the smile on Drakjan's face felt vicious. That wasn't why he was doing this, though. It was simply better to do this all at once. Better to show Hraban exactly how different this place was, and not leave him to find out on his own in a way that might blow up in everybody's face... including Drakjan's.

“Little pup,” Drakjan said, and tugged carefully at the girl's ear. “Will you change for me? Let me see how far you can turn back your ears.”

She didn't hesitate. One moment, he was holding a girl; the next, her shape stretched and twisted, and a wolf cub blinked up at him with laughing eyes, tongue lolling between tiny, needle-sharp teeth. Her ears twitched crazily, as though she were trying to chase off flies.

Drakjan tickled her again before putting her down into the water. She paddled with clumsy enthusiasm and gave him a quick, friendly snuffle before turning to make her laborious way back to her parents.

On the shore, the hunter had turned white as snow, eyes wide and disbelieving.

Once on dry land, the tiny sodden wolf shook the water from her fur to loud complaints from her parents. By the time she'd bounced over to be cuddled and stick her nose in the picnic basket, Hraban had faded back into the shrubs and disappeared.

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Fresh blood in the water didn't always draw Drakjan's attention, but it did when it was human.

The hunter was waiting just upstream of the beavers' dam, a prudent three steps back from the water. He glanced up when Drakjan surfaced but then immediately went back to dressing the small cut on his arm. His dagger hung at his belt, and the hilt of a sword protruded over his left shoulder. No spears or other long-range weapons were in sight.

Drakjan hadn't given Hraban the greatest odds of actually bothering to think before going after the wolves. Granted, adaptability was part of what made hunters good at what they did, but it didn't seem likely that extended to open-mindedness. Still, what did Drakjan know? It wasn't as though he'd known many hunters. Not to talk to, at any rate.

Out of nowhere, the question of what odds Drakjan would have given himself popped into his head. What were the chances a wounded nix on the run would settle in well here, as opposed to leading to a slew of deaths and shattered worldviews?

He diverted himself by looking for the beavers, but none were in sight. Perhaps they'd fled into their lodges when they noticed him.

"How did the second person die?" The hunter had finished bandaging his arm. Now, he was staring at Drakjan as though he wanted to suck his soul out through his face. "You said there'd been two violent deaths since I arrived. I know what happened to the werewolf, so what was the other death?" If Drakjan hadn't been listening for it, he might not even have heard the tiny hitch over the word *werewolf*.

By rights, Drakjan should have bargained for the information, but he was too curious. He wanted to see where this was going. “One of the wolves was found frozen solid in his own front yard.” He tried to remember any additional details the hunter might like to know but couldn’t think of any. After the first two or three minutes, he hadn’t paid much attention to the medical examiner’s long-winded speech. “Nobody has a theory so far.”

The hunter nodded, mouth set in a grim line. “I need to see the body.”

Drakjan laughed. “Yeah, good luck.” Not even these wolves would open their morgue to every random stranger. And this particular random stranger... well. Even if he got rid of the weapons, the predatory economy of the way he moved would remain, as would the look in his eye. Hraban had made himself into a blade in a place much harsher than this one. In this world, he stuck out like a bloody harpoon.

“You can get me in.” Hraban’s smile was a sharp, vicious thing. “After all, you’re a freeholder and a member of the council, aren’t you, Julian?”

He must have gone back to talk to the bathing wolves. Drakjan was surprised, and even somewhat impressed.

Once, Drakjan had lived right by a bustling harbor town, in a river so wide only a single bridge led across it. Drakjan remembered the taverns with fondness. Every evening they were full of sailors, merchants, and assorted rabble, all of them drinking, whoring, and singing with no thought of caution. Nobody remarked on one more stranger who sang with them.

It was a rare morning that didn’t find a wash of blood on cobbles, dead bodies crumpled in alleys or tumbled in with the day’s refuse. That much was normal and expected. But there’d been a long stretch of days and weeks in which the harbor had run wild with fear. People on street corners shouted of evil and repentance; every night, torch-bearing mobs roamed the streets, sharpened silver glinting in their hands. And once during that stretch of time, Drakjan had floated in the river and watched a rangy shape creep along the mooring ropes towards a ship. He’d watched the boneless way it moved, the muscles corded on elongated and twisted limbs... the claws and fangs and the wild, mindless blood-thirst burning in sulfur-yellow eyes. He’d watched, and not swum closer.

That creature was to the wolves here as Drakjan was to a minnow in the stream. But the thought that a hunter who’d just killed one of those real wolves would turn around and sit down for an amiable chat with a family of wolves on this side of the rip...

Unless, of course, the wolf family was dead now... But looking at the hunter's cool, steady lake-green gaze, Drakjan couldn't imagine it.

The silence had grown long between them by the time Drakjan drifted a bit closer to the shore, the better to watch the subtle play of expression on the hunter's face. "Why would I help you?" It was a genuine question, and his curiosity was perhaps a bit too open in the tone. He couldn't help it. It had been a long time since he'd felt this interested in anything but his lake.

"Because it is different, safe, and peaceful here." The hunter quirked an eyebrow at him, the words almost—but not quite—mocking. "Because you have made a place for yourself in this world. Because something may have come through the portal with me, and whatever it is, it must be stopped."

Drakjan considered this and decided those were good reasons. Even so, he wasn't about to take the risk that this was all some elaborate scheme to lure him onto dry land. "Give me metal, then. I'm not taking your word alone."

The hunter's face twisted. "You still have my spear."

Except that the spear hadn't been freely given in any sense of the word. Drakjan stared at the hunter in disgust until he grimaced and pulled out his money pouch.

He tossed a half copper into the river in a showy high arc that only narrowly missed hitting Drakjan in the chest. "I am Hraban, and I give this metal to you freely. I shall not harm you, so long as you do not harm me in turn."

In truth, Drakjan had no idea whether there was anything more binding to this ritual than a mix of superstition and tradition. The hunter might know, of course, but asking him would rather defeat the purpose. "I am Drakjan, and I freely accept your gift of metal. There will be peace between us until the sun sinks into darkness."

Hraban wore an odd look as Drakjan swam to the shallows and stood on his legs to climb to dry land. He didn't attack, though, not even when Drakjan walked right up to him. Either the ritual was binding, or the hunter wanted his help more than his death. Either worked, so Drakjan put the matter out of his head for now and led the way to the boathouse to get his clothes.

"Drowner, is it?" Hraban said a bit later when they were walking along the road leading to town. "Drakjan suits you much better than Julian."

He shrugged. Julian had been one of the first male names he'd come across here, and all he'd needed was something that wouldn't stand out. Which

reminded him... “I hope Ben suits you, because nobody’s called Hraban here. You’re going to stand out enough in other ways. You don’t need your name to advertise that you don’t fit.”

Hraban thought about this for a moment before nodding once, curtly. “Ben suits me perfectly, Julian.”

He really was a quick study, wasn’t he.

Hraban went on to prove the point by spending the better part of the walk into town asking about this world, especially the wolves they were going to see. It was only when the town grew visible in the distance that he finally asked the question Drakjan had been expecting all along. “How long have you been here?”

Drakjan hadn’t had an answer for every question Hraban had asked. He didn’t have an answer for this one, either. In the end, he simply shrugged. “Many seasons. Why should I count them?”

“You never tried to go back?”

“No.” In the beginning, he’d been wounded, and this had simply been a safe place to recover, away from hunters and other nix. Then, he’d started to wonder if he could just stop—if he could pretend to be weak and harmless like the people who lived here. He’d never held a territory this large, nor one this untouched and clean, full of fish, frogs, beavers and all manner of thriving animals and plants. After a life spent fighting tooth and fin for small pockets of water wrested from the territories of others, perpetually on guard against all who would take it from him...

He remembered the grating, unsettling feeling of another nix in his water. Remembered the unmoored hollowness of not having territory at all, darting through hostile waters or forced to walk over land. “No, I never tried to go back. I did want to keep an eye on the rip, but I couldn’t find it again. It moves around—You didn’t come through where I did.”

“Did anything else come through with you?”

Drakjan bared his teeth in an expression that had nothing in common with a smile. “Oh yes. A human... A hunter.”

Hraban didn’t ask. It wasn’t necessary. “The theory is that it’s death magic.” His lips were a thin white line, and he didn’t look at Drakjan. “Sometimes, when the border between life and death thins, a creature will

refuse to cross and end up stepping through into a different world. The portal is never open for long, but there is a moment when others can pass through.”

He didn't ask any more questions after that. It was just as well. They were walking through the suburbs by then. The people here lacked many things, but all wolves had good ears.

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Thomas Baker was no longer frozen solid, but the thawing process hadn't made him any more interesting. Drakjan looked him over once, took note of the grayish-blue cast of the dead flesh and its odd consistency—not pale and bloated like a corpse floating in water, but still noticeable—and then found his mind wandering.

“He's still frozen at the core,” the medical examiner said. He was handing Hraban a gleaming instrument that Hraban promptly used to poke around in the body. He felt around the dead man's sparse hair, inspected his eyes, ears and mouth, and then asked the examiner for help in turning him over.

The back view was no more inspiring than the front, in Drakjan's opinion. He suppressed a sigh and turned aimlessly, casting about the white room for something—anything—of interest.

The sheriff left the other two to their examining and came over to him, pulling him aside to stand between a massive sink and a clear-fronted refrigeration unit. “Who exactly is he?”

“That's Ben,” Drakjan repeated. Judging by the sheriff's expression, she did not consider this a satisfactory reply. There wasn't much else he could say, though, so he just gave her a small shrug. “I told you, this is what he does. He's a policeman too, where he comes from.”

“Where you both come from.”

“Yeah. We go way back.” In a way, that was even true.

Emotions flew over her face too quickly for Drakjan to catch. After a moment, she snorted and rocked back on her heels, crossing her arms over her chest to give him an oddly appraising look. “Julian. In all the years I have known you, you have never once—”

“What's this?” The sharp note in Hraban's voice caught Drakjan's attention, drawing him back over to the laid-out corpse. The hunter was examining the

dead man's hand, turning the spotlight over the table to provide an even more blinding brightness. "Andrew, look at his fingers."

The medical examiner—who was presumably named Andrew—bent forward to look. "Oh yes, the burns. Good eye there, I almost missed them at first. They're only first degree, very light, and inflicted antemortem. He probably burned himself lighting up his cigarette."

Hraban stiffened almost unnoticeably, the lines of his back and shoulders straightening. "Are there photos of how he was found?"

There were. They showed the frozen wolf in a well-tended front yard, looking like a statue that had toppled sideways into a flowerbed. He'd been frozen solid while standing up, hands cupped in front of his face. In the close-up his mouth was puckered, lips pursed slightly in a way that made him resemble a startled trout. It looked rather amusing, but Drakjan politely refrained from smiling.

Hraban turned abruptly, and Drakjan found himself struck all over again by the way the color of his eyes evoked the lake, even here in this mercilessly bright, white-and-steel room.

The dead man's belongings were laid out on a second table. There were clothes, shoes, a wallet, a set of keys, and a crumpled tissue. Nothing looked remarkable in any way—certainly not remarkable enough to account for the spark that lit in Hraban's eye as he surveyed the collection. Drakjan found himself caught not so much by the puzzle of what trail the hunter had found, but more by the way the thrill of the chase sharpened his gaze and tightened his stance.

"Sheriff Smith, would it be possible for me to see where he was found?"

The sheriff looked to Drakjan. He wasn't certain what she wanted from him, so he simply smiled and nodded to indicate that this was all perfectly normal, and Hraban knew what he was doing.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't comment and simply led them out of the building. The medical examiner tagged along, probably because he had nothing better to do. Hanging around in his sterile white room waiting for interesting deaths to occur had to be a pretty boring job around here.

They didn't have to go far. The sheriff led them to a small two-story house several blocks from the station. It was indistinguishable from every other house on its street, right down to its neat wooden fence and carefully tended lawn and

flowers. Hraban strode into the front yard with no hesitation, pushing open the low, wooden garden gate with enough force to make it rebound. By the time the rest of them followed, he was already kneeling in the middle of the flowerbeds, patting over the soil methodically with flat hands.

Whatever he was looking for, he found it almost instantly. His hands stilled over a certain spot and his mouth thinned into a grim line, eyes narrowing dangerously.

Drakjan knelt beside him, curious. Even before he touched the soil next to Hraban's spread fingers, he could feel the cold radiating from it—beneath a thin layer of loose dark earth, the ground was frozen solid. Now that he knew, he could see that the plants rooted in the patch in question were beginning to droop.

The two wolves took their turn feeling the unseasonal coldness of the ground. Hraban ignored them in favor of the woman who had just opened the front door, peering out hesitantly with red-rimmed eyes.

“He came out to smoke, didn't he?”

The woman nodded, and her entire face twisted up. It took a number of long, shallow breaths before she finally spoke, and even then her voice came out thin and unsteady. “He was trying to quit, but he... and he always—I made him go outside to smoke. I didn't want the scent to seep into the curtains and the sofa. I was already asleep, and he must have popped out for one last cigarette—”

His nose wasn't as good as a wolf's, but now that Drakjan was alerted to it, he could smell an acrid hint of cigarette ash in the air. It was coming from the front porch, and in another instant Drakjan spotted the ashtray standing next to a small, exceptionally ugly metal wolf.

He lost track of the conversation for a bit as he stared at the wolf statue. Truly, the ways of these people were beyond comprehension.

“Very well, Ben,” the sheriff was saying when he tuned back in. “What's your theory?”

Hraban dusted the remains of soil from his hands and stood, fixing an even, lake-green look on the sheriff. “Unfortunately, I don't have one yet. I'll have to get back to you.”



Hraban didn't say a single word to him after they'd taken their leave of the wolves. He stopped at a restaurant, and Drakjan sat across from him in silence, watching as he methodically worked his way through various grilled animal parts. Drakjan was hungry too, but nothing about the thought of choking down dead, bloodless things appealed to him. He could wait until he was back in his lake.

The silence held as they walked out of town and through the suburbs. Drakjan's feet hurt again, but he'd be rid of them soon enough.

He sang a drinking song that reminded him of harbor inns and whorehouses. It was meant to be sung in canon, and Drakjan chose it partly to see whether Hraban would join in. It seemed relatively unlikely, but you never knew.

Next, he chose a ballad, something haunting and sweet. He was just contemplating his next choice when Hraban finally spoke. "It's a matchgirl."

The name evoked only the most distant of memories in Drakjan. He'd never met a matchgirl, could barely recall having heard of them. Hraban had suspected as soon as he saw the burns on the victim's hand, though; it had been as clear as the nose on his face. The frozen ground had just confirmed his theory.

And yet, Hraban hadn't told the sheriff a thing about the threat her clan faced. Surely he didn't intend to sabotage her efforts to protect her wolves? It didn't seem like something a hunter would do. Neither could it be simple lack of trust. He didn't trust Drakjan either, but he'd told him.

"Are there matchgirls here, too?" Hraban's lip curled. "What do they do, I wonder... Sell refreshing drinks? Cool you down on a hot summer day?"

"Why didn't you tell them?"

The answer was so long in coming that Drakjan didn't think he'd get one at all. They were almost at the last crossroads before Hraban spoke again, and his voice was so low that Drakjan had to strain to understand. "I was called to investigate a hag-sighting once. By the time I arrived, half the village had burned down, and farmers were lynching their neighbors in the streets. Not a single woman over the age of twenty was left alive." His smile was a thing of hard edges, sharp enough to draw blood. Judging by the pained twist to his mouth, it cut Hraban himself most of all. "I couldn't find any sign that a hag had ever been there. There are always signs with hags... killing fields, stripped trees, nests. But there was nothing. No hag had set foot in that village, and yet it was destroyed as completely and horribly as any creature could have."

It was a good reason. A single matchgirl could not hope to cause as much devastation as the awareness of her existence would—the knowledge that there were creatures like her out there, destructive and powerful and completely, inexplicably alien to everything these people knew.

“There are no monsters here,” Hraban said softly and turned his head to give Drakjan a hard, even look. “It needs to stay that way.”

No monsters except me, thought Drakjan.

Abruptly, he realized that the sun was dipping dangerously close to the horizon. They’d have to hurry to make it back to his lake before dusk.

The truce of metal only lasted a single day. For the first time, Drakjan wondered why Hraban hadn’t opted to stay in town for the night... whether he’d had ulterior motives in going to the restaurant when he could just have gotten something to eat on the way.

He studied the hunter’s profile as they walked, their shadows stretching against the pavement. Short dark hair, high brow and cheekbones, a strong jaw dark with the stubble of the day... He was handsome, yes, but his superficial good looks paled before the fierce intensity of the soul blazing behind his eyes. It had been a long time since Drakjan had met another soul like his. He hadn’t realized he’d missed that spark of recognition, that frisson of danger—not until Hraban caught his gaze, and the only thing written in his eyes was death.

Drakjan recognized another predator when he saw one.

He was tired, and he ached from long hours of walking in the air and dust and heat. None of that mattered as he took in a deep breath, throwing back his head to sing of the death of light, a song as wordless and ancient as the world.

In the deepening dusk, their shadows were as long and sharp as spears. Night was falling by the time they turned onto the unpaved path leading to the lake, dry grass crunching beneath their feet like delicate bones. Drakjan remembered feeling this alive. He’d almost forgotten it was possible for every instant to be so vivid, for every sensation to be vibrant and essential. The thin bite of cool air against his skin. The near-silent slap of the wet hems of his pants against his shoes as he walked. The chirping of crickets hiding in the grass, and the first salvos of birdsong starting up all around. The scent of earth and shrubs and forest, and the promise of water.

The threat of a prowling hunter next to him, a heavy presence with a light, near-silent step.

Hraban stopped with the boathouse rising to their right and the pier beyond stretching out onto still, dark water. Drakjan took one more step before turning. Nobody stood between him and his lake, but he'd have to cross at least ten fathoms to reach it—maybe twenty.

The last hint of gray leached from the sky. Their truce dissolved with the last of the day's light, slipping away without fanfare.

Hraban's eyes were black as the lightless depths, his face and body stripped down to their essential hardness. He didn't have his spear, but Drakjan hadn't missed the shape of the dagger against his backpack's side. No doubt it was in some kind of special sheath that would drop the weapon into the hunter's hand in the blink of an eye. In truth, he probably wouldn't even need it. This was his element, not Drakjan's—and Hraban had killed a werewolf with a silver blade, and walked away with nothing but a few scratches.

Fear was the wrong word for the tension that built in Drakjan as they stood in darkness, entirely focused on each other. It was a low, thrumming energy in his gut and chest and throat, vibrantly alive, sparking with promise. The future was wide open and full of every possibility, branching out from this instant—waiting breathless and charged.

Hraban moved.

Afterwards, Drakjan could never decide whether or not he'd moved to attack. It didn't matter, because Drakjan moved in the same instant, and then there were hard, solid shoulders beneath his hands and hot breath against his mouth as his lips crashed down too hard on Hraban's.

The taste of blood exploded on his tongue. He shifted to grab Hraban's head, turning it forcefully so he could slant their mouths together. The hunter was stiff and still against him for the space of a heartbeat, lips cool and unresponsive; in the next instant, he clenched rough fingers in Drakjan's hair and dragged him in with a grip like cold iron.

Drakjan laughed his triumph into Hraban's mouth. There was a hand at his back now, sliding immediately lower to grab his ass and crush him close. Drakjan lunged into the kiss, trying to knock Hraban off balance and gain the advantage. Instead, the hunter widened his stance to absorb the momentum and almost lifted him entirely off his feet.

The bright pain of teeth digging into his lip shot molten need straight to his cock. Hraban's low growl vibrated against his mouth. His blood-warm body pressed against Drakjan all along his front, solid with muscle and aggression.

Hraban was hard—he could feel the hot length of his arousal pushing against his hip. Drakjan groaned into the kiss, rusty iron on his tongue as he fought to take control, only to be met with just as wild and ferocious a force.

Their teeth clashed briefly, noses bumping, and Drakjan drew back to catch his breath. He felt almost light-headed from the heat of a body pressed so close. Hraban was staring at him, eyes black and gleaming in the darkness. There was blood on his mouth. It suited him.

Slowly, Drakjan took a step back. Hraban's grip tightened for only a moment before he let go. The delay was hardly noticeable.

Hraban's gaze never wavered as Drakjan backed away, stripping off his T-shirt and toeing out of his sneakers. Neither of them spoke and neither of them looked away as he crossed the expanse of dry land that separated him from his lake. He didn't look down even when he was skimming his jeans down his legs, kicking them heedlessly into the grass by the foot of the pier. The old wood creaked under his weight when he stepped back onto it, finding his way by memory.

Above water, darkness softened the edges of things, sapping away details and drabbing the world down into muted tones and outlines. But Hraban looked clearer this way, stripped down to essentials—all sleek, sharp lines of muscle and bone. Shadows fell harshly over his face, picking out the stark shapes of cheekbones, jaw, nose, and brow. And all the while, he watched, motionlessly, unblinking—waiting.

*Predator*, whispered Drakjan's instincts, the same way they had whispered to him that day long ago when a wolf had crawled along the mooring cables of a ship, passing right above his water.

It took Drakjan a moment to realize that he was grinning, wild and fierce and free.

When he came to the far edge of the pier, Drakjan paused. They stared at each other in silence for another moment, weighing and considering. Then, Drakjan threw himself backwards, casting off his legs as he slipped into the water and dove deep.

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Morning dawned pearl gray and hazy, heavy with the promise of coming heat. When Drakjan swam down the river to the beavers' dam and walked out into the hunter's camp, Hraban was already gone, as were his stove, his spears, and his arrows. He was not back that night, or the next morning.

Drakjan considered the newly drawn perimeter of ash, salt, and sulfur, and then stepped over it carefully so as not to drip on it and break the circle. He felt nothing at all, not even a tingle. He never had from barriers of this kind. Nix were not spectral beings.

He circled the tent twice, drawn by undefined curiosity. He'd never been in a hunter's camp, unless you counted his brief previous visit to this one. It seemed like there should be more to protect it than a circle that could easily be broken by a passing animal, or even a little rain. And why would Hraban leave his tent? Clearly it was highly portable, or he wouldn't have come through the rip with it in the first place. He must have been carrying it in his backpack back then, so why...

"Looking for something?" Hraban looked dusty, tired, and alert. He was right outside the circle; Drakjan hadn't heard him approach at all.

"Yes. You," Drakjan said. It was mostly true.

The hunter's gaze flicked down his body so quickly it was almost unnoticeable. "I put your things back in the boathouse."

Drakjan shrugged. "I didn't look for them." He'd have had to walk the long way around if he'd gotten dressed.

For a moment, Hraban just stared at him. Then, he snorted and shook his head, stepping over the camp's perimeter. "I guess it's true what they say about nix."

Drakjan raised his eyebrows inquiringly, but no explanation was forthcoming. Instead, Hraban let his backpack slide to the ground to pull out a bulky bundle, shaking it out into a stiff, foil-lined blanket. "What do you know about matchgirls?"

Very little—he'd never been interested enough to seek out tales of the creatures that walked on dry land, and matchgirls were too rare to crop up frequently in casual conversation. "They are to be avoided." Very few additional details were relevant for Drakjan, anyway. If in doubt, he'd simply go to water.

Hraban snorted again and went to unzip the tent. When he straightened, he tossed something at Drakjan. Drakjan caught it automatically and didn't have time to curse himself before he saw it was merely an empty pot. "If you get water, I'll make tea."

Not phrased as a question, not quite a request; very carefully put as a bargain that was complete in itself, rather than a more open-ended kind of favor.

Drakjan grinned as he got water from the river, humming a lively marching song while he went.

Tea turned out to be a concoction of hot water infused by a variety of plants evidently gathered in the forest. Once he'd let it cool, it wasn't bad at all. Hraban settled on a low rock and waited until they'd both drunk, his gaze alternately on Drakjan and the surrounding forest. He devoted the same kind of focused, sharp-edged watchfulness to both.

Not unexpectedly, Drakjan found the attention woke a low, sparking hunger deep in his gut. He shifted a little where he sat in the dry leaves, crossing his legs more comfortably.

"They're creatures of fire," Hraban said abruptly. "They freeze their victims to feed their own flame, sucking all heat from the living things around them. They're attracted by need, yearning, craving... no matter what the object of the feeling in question. The stronger the need, the greater the attraction."

Drakjan sipped his cooled tea and watched the play of light and shadow on Hraban's features as the pieces fell into place in his mind. "No wonder she followed you through the portal, then."

What could be more powerful than the craving of a dying creature for life? For the matchgirl, the werewolf's need must have felt like a bonfire raging in the midst of a world of feeble, flickering candles. Why the new beavers had followed the wolf and Hraban through the rip, on the other hand... that was more of a puzzle. Fleeing from territorial disputes, perhaps? Drakjan had never truly understood the ways of beavers. It might just as well have been the draw of a good dam, or something else entirely.

"Yes, no wonder." A shadow clouded Hraban's expression, darkening his gaze to the murky shade of a still pond. "Matchgirls are almost impossible to find unless they're actively hunting. Fortunately, they can't attack at will. They need an opening... There must be a bargain, an agreement to an exchange between them and the victim. Any kind of taking or giving is agreement enough to satisfy a matchgirl's requirements. One matchgirl I heard of liked to pose as a rich merchant and prey on pickpockets."

In Drakjan's experience, humans made things far more complicated than they needed to be. "I assume she breathes air."

The hunter took a measured sip from his cup, his eyes steady on Drakjan above the rim. “As far as I know,” he said then, very evenly. “However, earth has natural barriers that water does not.”

Drakjan turned the implications over in his mind. No doubt trying to take this matchgirl’s life—or her air—would be enough of an agreement for her to cut loose. He didn’t mind the winter, didn’t mind natural cold and ice, but this was a different thing altogether. If water could not limit the reach of her powers, his entire lake might freeze through... and nothing would survive that kind of unnatural cold. Not the beavers, not the fish. Not the frogs or plants or insects. Not Drakjan himself.

Looked like Hraban would be handling this little problem on his own.

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Light worked differently in the depths. It was never more obvious than in the small, craggy caves and crevices that riddled the rocky walls of the valley dug deep into the outlying mountains. Here, in one of the farthest and deepest reaches of the lake, the water was cold and clear and fresh, carrying the flavor of rock and snow and sky throughout all seasons. Drakjan sank to the lowest opening in the rocky wall—a jagged tear that cut through the rock in the shape of a water snake whipping over the surface, sharp edges softened by lichen and algae. The light filtering down was dim and remote, hardly more than a hint of distant color in the vibrant shades of deep water.

The spear’s shaft hadn’t swollen from moisture, and no fuzz of plant life had settled on the wood. The sharp metal tip was untarnished, hard steel layered with silver. The torn remains of the net wrapped around the wooden shaft still stung his fingertips with the same faded tingle of enchantment.

Steel, silver, ash, and enchantment. Not many things could stand against such a powerful combination.

Drakjan breathed air just long enough to deposit the spear inside the protective circle that enclosed the hunter’s camp, and left without having seen him. The depths welcomed him back with still silence and strength, enclosing him in their familiar embrace.

He caught a dappled river trout and feasted on its cold, succulent flesh, its blood bursting fresh and sweet into his mouth. Then, he lay back in the currents, looked up at the distant shimmer of the surface, and thought about the flashes of white and motion he’d been seeing in the woods ever since the rip had opened again. He thought about the hopeless, fruitless yearning so deeply

sunk within that he almost fooled himself into believing he had forgotten, sometimes. Forgotten what it was like to feel the slowing of a living creature's struggles in his arms, to feel a heart fall into an ever-weaker, erratic beat, and stop. Forgotten the wild, ageless surge of power flooding his veins as something born of earth and air surrendered to him.

No creature could change its nature. Drakjan was a nix and always would be. He could live as a harmless freshwater merman until the mountains wore down to hills and his streams ran dry, and it still wouldn't make him anything but what he was. But he was not an animal. He wasn't helplessly bound to follow his instincts. He could choose his path regardless of the need singing in his blood. He *had* chosen his path, regardless.

Drakjan had long since swum past the rapids of youth. He bore the scars of many battles, and he was tired. So he had made his choice, and every day since, he had paid the price.

He surfaced slowly, choosing a remote spot near the shore most distant from the town and road. Dry land fell steeply into water here, forest and lake meeting in a jagged line of rock and hanging tangles of washed-out roots. A flash of white showed between the gnarled trunks of the trees, and Drakjan watched without surprise as a slight figure stepped into view on a rocky outcropping. She stayed carefully out of reach but was close enough for him to make out every detail of her dress and features.

Lank hair the color of straw straggled raggedly about her shoulders. Her face was thin and pale, all sharp bones and starved blue shadows. Her dress of nettle cloth was ragged, a grayish beige rather than white. It hung loosely on her frame, as though made for someone older and better fed. When she moved, her bare feet showed frail and white against the rock.

Her gaze was sky blue and ancient, heavy with the kind of ice-cold calm that came only from power. There was recognition in her look, in the slight lowering of her pointy little-girl chin. She recognized him the same way he recognized her: for all their differences, they were the same. They shared the same nature, the same hunger. The same deep well of darkness... the same ruthless predator's soul.

"Nix," she said. Her voice was thin and reedy, almost quavering. "Is this your water?"

A question... and one that needed no answer, at that. A transparent ploy. Drakjan did not reply, giving her nothing.



She smiled at him then, the expression thin, but genuine. “Nix. I will not take from you unless you take from me.”

It was a truce that would not cost her anything. She had no interest in his water. But then, it was also a truce that should cost him nothing. What interest did he have in the dry land she was claiming as her hunting ground?

He expelled the water from his lungs, took a breath of air, and spoke. “Matchgirl, I will not take from you unless you take from me.” His voice echoed over the surface of his water, catching in the trees.

When Drakjan dove beneath the surface again, he felt strange—almost unsettled. He wanted to sing, but he didn’t know what song to choose, so in the end, he remained silent.

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Long ago, Drakjan had lain in wait by the side of a different pier, lower to the water and sturdier in construction. The stench of offal and rotting fish guts was vivid in his memory even now. The strident cries of the harbor gulls as they swooped and squabbled, the constantly changing currents that tugged at him as ships passed...

But the seasons that lay between then and now blurred into an indistinct haze in Drakjan’s mind. He couldn’t even recall what he had been waiting for, that day. Someone his size and build, perhaps, if he’d needed clothes. A likely ship to board in the guise of a human, if he’d wanted to cross someone else’s water without a fight, or just because. Something else entirely, or nothing at all except curiosity.

So many things had changed since then. Drakjan suspected he’d barely recognize that other nix, if he met him today. But he did know that that nix would also have waited in the shadow of the pier, hidden first by darkness and then by sunlight glancing off the water’s surface.

It wasn’t as effective a concealment as he would have liked, and fleetingly, he wished for his long hair. Just as well that Hraban wasn’t paying attention to the lake.

The old pier was an odd choice of venue. Drakjan supposed it did offer the advantage of leaving the matchgirl only a single avenue of approach, though. She was hardly going to come through the water, so Hraban could not be caught by surprise.

Nothing happened. The sun climbed high into the sky, and the water around Drakjan warmed more and more as the day progressed, yet the matchgirl did not appear. No wolves intent on bathing appeared either, which was actually more of a surprise.

Late in the afternoon, Drakjan realized that Hraban hadn't been eating or drinking. He was just sitting at the end of the pier, nearly motionless, shifting slightly every so often to keep his limbs limber in the way that guards did. His head was lowered, his breathing regular and even. Drakjan suspected that his eyes were closed, although he couldn't be sure from his position. So was that the plan, then—to attract the matchgirl by means of hunger and thirst? Not exactly subtle. Maybe there was something more to the trap, though... something only a matchgirl would see.

The shadow the pier cast onto the lake stretched and faded, and the heat of the day dissolved as night fell. Still, Hraban did not move, and Drakjan floated in calm and silent waters with no offal, no shrieking gulls, and no human-made currents to tug at him.

He felt the matchgirl before he saw her. Her presence caused a stirring not in the lake, but in the subtler, larger streams of energy it was bound into. Drakjan was so startled by the feeling that he almost missed the moment she set foot on the pier.

She stopped when she was just over the water, her dingy dress shining unnaturally bright in the darkness. Minutes passed with no sound or movement from either the prey or the hunter. Then—just when Drakjan began to think she would never advance farther—she inched a tiny, hesitant step forward. Another pause, shorter this time, and she proceeded down the pier with a slow, halting gait, almost as though she were feeling her way.

“Sir, please,” she said. Her voice was still quivering and thin, but now there was a sweetness woven through it that hadn't been there for Drakjan—the tremulous, hopeful appeal of a child. “Sir, please, can you help me? I'm lost and all alone. If you could show me to the road...”

Hraban did not reply. Drakjan sank a little farther below the surface, hardly daring to flex his tail for fear of attracting her attention. How strange that she would try this approach. Surely she had to know that this was a trap. She couldn't really believe that a man so hungry and thirsty was spending his time sitting on the end of a pier for no particular reason, could she? Why was she playing the part of an innocent girl?

The matchgirl's steps were soundless on the worn planks of the pier. She was almost luminous in the night, her bare feet flashing bone-white as she glided closer to Hraban's still form. "Sir, I'm so cold. Could you lend me your—"

One instant, Hraban was sitting on the pier, motionless as a statue carved in marble. The next, he was a crouched blur of motion. The matchgirl had been several steps away, but now she was right in front of him, close enough to touch. She shone so bright with power that Drakjan could hardly make out her features in the glare. Her slight build had lost the illusion of frailty and acquired the lean, compact viciousness of a barracuda.

The pier was blocking too much of Drakjan's view. He reared out of the water to see Hraban lunging past the matchgirl with something in his arms—something he was swinging around in a powerful, blindingly fast sweep. Something that had, in the next instant, entirely enveloped the small shape of the matchgirl, extinguishing the glow of her power.

Was that the blanket? Yes, it had to be—the odd, foil-lined thing Hraban had drummed up somewhere. It seemed like a laughably inadequate defense against a creature like this, but somehow, it was working. Hraban was grappling with the matchgirl through the blanket, and she had not yet frozen him solid.

A flash of metal—where had the spear come from?—and for a single, breathless moment it truly did seem like this was working. For half an instant, Drakjan thought that this was it, that the matchgirl was beaten, as unlikely though it seemed that she could be struck down so easily given all of the fierce, wild power Drakjan had seen mirrored in her eyes.

By a trick of angles and motion, Drakjan saw exactly when things went wrong. The hunter had pinned the matchgirl's arms through the blanket, and her legs were too swaddled in stiff fabric for her to kick him. But there was nothing underneath her feet but wood. In the immeasurably short space of time between the instant Hraban thrust his spear forward and when it should have connected, a small, pale foot flashed down, fast as a striking snake. The sharp punch of power as it connected with the pier made Drakjan jerk and gasp.

Drakjan had never heard wood shriek before. The planks exploded as every molecule of water soaked into them froze instantaneously. Hraban stumbled back as the pier beneath him buckled, an entire section of boards crumbling away. The blanket fell open around the matchgirl, and her power blazed forth violently as she reached out, as merciless as the winter sun.

One more moment, shorter than a minnow's racing heartbeat, shorter than a note never sung. One more moment, and her pale hand would catch the hunter. And then—

The rage tore Drakjan under with no warning, and he submerged instantly. It was blinding, consuming, absolute.

No. No, the matchgirl could not have Hraban. Everything Drakjan was, everything he had ever been—every cell of his body, every note and syllable of his soul—rebelled against it, rushing into a massive wave of irresistible, raging force. His instincts were screaming for blood, drowning, and death. He was moving, surging up with every fin flared and every fang bared.

How dare she. This was his territory, his prey. *His*. How dare this creature presume to take what belonged to him. *How dare she*—

He lunged over the pier in a low arc, catching the power-hazed form of the matchgirl around the waist before she could touch Hraban. She never had the chance to react before Drakjan was back in the water, dragging her down to the depths.

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She did not struggle in his grasp. Even suicides struggled, as did half-drowned sailors who were already nearly dead. Even soldiers whose lifeblood was draining into the water struggled as he dragged them down, death coming as a race between the depths and their wounds.

Not so the matchgirl. He held her wrapped securely in his arms, looking up towards the surface. She lay completely still against him, so light and bony it was almost like drowning a bundle of twigs.

Strangely enough, it was the sluggishness of his own movements that alerted him, rather than the cold. He wasn't nearly as sensitive to cold as humans and couldn't be leached of his own heat in the same way. His heat—his energy—was not merely his own; he shared it with the water he held. But there was no denying the odd languorous edge to his movements, or that they'd stopped descending and were floating in mid-water. They would be drifting back towards the surface in another moment if he didn't start swimming again.

Drakjan growled in annoyance. He spread out his caudal fin to its full extent, flexing to push against the water—

Something stung his fin, his tail; his back and shoulders and neck. Crystals of ice were forming around him—delicate filigree lattices and webs that broke when he moved, only to form again immediately.

Not good. Not good at all. Maybe if he could get the matchgirl to the bottom of the lake, wedge her underneath a rock and get clear—but there wasn't time for that. The ice was already harder to break, and his body was growing sluggish. Even his thoughts were becoming disjointed. How long had they been underwater? Surely she would soon begin to weaken from lack of air. But they were drifting upwards again now, and every motion required almost impossible effort.

Rapidly thickening ice turned the water around him to slush as the pervasive cold began to seep into his bones. He was too cold to panic and too stubborn to let go. She couldn't freeze his entire lake before she drowned. Surely not. They'd see who broke first. They would just see.

There was someone in his lake. Nothing else could have caught Drakjan's attention at that moment but the living body of a warm-blooded creature in his water, moving about clumsily, jerkily...

Drakjan twisted sluggishly, blinking up through the thickening sludge of congealing water. He knew the feeling of this heartbeat, the rhythm of this blood. Hraban. It was Hraban, and he was shouting something down into the water, chopped-off air sounds burbling out incomprehensible and muffled.

When a bulky shape detached from Hraban's shadowy form and began to float down, Drakjan understood.

He tore free of the matchgirl, slapping her down with as powerful a stroke of the tail as he could manage, and threw himself upwards. The ice in the water splintered and pushed against him, resisting him, and he was beginning to have trouble breathing as the freezing water became too thick to inhale. He ignored the burn of cold, ignored everything to grab the folded blanket Hraban had tossed down to him. It was unwieldy and almost impossibly difficult to unfold in the ice, but it didn't matter. He simply did it. He couldn't feel his hands or fins anymore, but that didn't matter either.

The matchgirl clawed at him when he reached for her, raking upwards with her fingers bent into claws of ice. Her eyes were blue as the sky, rimed with frost; her lips were purple and open wide as though screaming or gasping for air that wasn't there.

"You tried to take from me what is mine, matchgirl," Drakjan rasped. "Now I will take from you." He bundled her up mercilessly in the blanket, making sure to wrap the fabric tightly around her head and feet. Then, he clutched her against his chest and dove as far and as deep as he could, away from the slushy

field of ice. The cold did not follow him, and he swam until the prickling numbness of his scales and skin turned into burning pain and faded. He swam until the slight body in his grasp bucked and heaved against him, struggling at long last.

There was such power in this. Nothing else felt like it. Nothing else was so natural and right. The bitter battle that had gone before only made this moment more potent. He had fought something immensely powerful and come out the victor. He had pitted himself against a being nobody else had been able to stand against, and here she was in his grasp with her heart stuttering, sighing out her last breath into his water.

Drakjan laughed in sheer delight and sank down to rest among soft green rocks and sand, holding the matchgirl's blanket-swathed form tightly until—finally—he felt the shudder of her last breath of air escaping her. He could have done anything in that moment. It was so many things, all at once. It was everything: fulfillment and euphoria and the bone-deep certainty that everything was as it should be.

Ideally, he would have liked to bask in the bliss and peace for a while, soaking it in and allowing it to settle into the deepest parts of him. He'd only been relaxing for a handful of moments, though, when the still bundle in his arms began to grow uncomfortably warm.

At first, he thought he was imagining it, but... no, he really wasn't. Inside her insulating layer of blanket, the dead matchgirl was heating up like a furnace. In the time it took Drakjan to realize what was happening, she'd already turned nearly too hot to hold.

He swam back to the field of ice and corkscrewed to its center with an elegant flip of his fins. The cold didn't bother Drakjan much now that nothing was actively leeching his heat and he'd had the chance to warm up. It didn't last long, anyway. He simply deposited the still-wrapped overheating corpse at the center of the ice and withdrew to watch the near-solid slush thaw back to water in a matter of minutes.

Briefly, he worried that the matchgirl had gathered too much heat and would end up boiling his lake instead of freezing it. The scales balanced perfectly, though. When the blanket sagged in on itself around an empty space, the water was left no warmer or colder than it should have been.

Drakjan unwrapped the bundle to find nothing left inside but several handfuls of ashes. They drifted apart in the currents, forever lost to the lake.

Drakjan came up under Hraban like the tide. He was attuned to his heartbeat before he reached him; the fast but controlled rhythm of his breathing, his heat and solid presence in Drakjan's water... He should have gotten out of the lake. Should have gotten onto dry land while he could, fled back to his own world, back in his own element. Because now... Now, it was too late.

"You drowned her? The blanket insulated her under water, too?"

The air sounds made no real sense to Drakjan's ears. He exhaled water as he caught and turned Hraban, lifting him half out of the water before slamming him up against the pier's closest supporting pillar. The wood was warm and slick beneath his palms. The hunter's body pressed hot and solid along his front, right down to his groin and pelvic fins.

The lungful of air Drakjan took in brought with it the scent of ice and ashes. Hraban's hands were on his shoulders but did not push him away; his focus on Drakjan was steady and absolute, and no hint of fear was written in his expression.

It had been so long since Drakjan had felt like this. It had been forever since he'd reveled in the rush that now raged through his blood, the fierce whitewater joy and power and triumph. So long... And there was a sharp, wild edge to this rush, a piercing exultation that he might never have felt before. Not quite like this. Not the way it lit him up all the way to the tips of his fins, stirring in his chest and gut and sex.

A powerful challenger had encroached on his territory, threatening to take what belonged to him. He'd defeated her; he'd dragged her down to the bottom of his lake until she breathed her last. He'd defended what was his.

"Drakjan," Hraban said. He said other things besides, but Drakjan didn't pay attention to those. And then he couldn't say anything anymore because Drakjan took his mouth in a fierce, plundering kiss.

He tasted of blood, lust, and victory. Drakjan could not remember when he had last kissed someone who responded with such hunger or who fought him so aggressively for control. Maybe he never had. All he knew was that it made him growl into Hraban's mouth—made him flex his fins to push the hunter more firmly against the pillar, pinning him securely so he was pressed against Drakjan's body all the way down.

Hraban was hard, his erection a long heated line against Drakjan's hip. Drakjan could feel himself swelling in response, the tip of his cock slipping from its protective sheath with a burst of sensation that made him shiver and his

hands tighten on Hraban's hips. One of Hraban's hands had wandered to the nape of his neck, holding him steady as Hraban slowed the kiss into something no less deep and hungry but more purposeful—less out of control.

In another moment, Drakjan had to break free to gasp in a deeper breath, the air too thin in his lungs to satisfy his need. Hraban stroked down to the small of his back. Drakjan shivered and remembered too late that he should warn him... but the hunter only stroked light, teasing fingers along the base of his dorsal fin, avoiding the sharp edges. The touch went straight to Drakjan's cock, little hooks of need twisting into his gut.

"I've heard of hunters who try to capture nix alive," Hraban rasped, eyes dark and drowning deep. "They take them far away from water and promise to let them live if they let the hunter have their way with them."

Drakjan's laugh came out low and dark. "And how many of those hunters live to see the next dawn?"

"Not many, I'd say." Hraban now had both hands on his fin, stroking firmly upwards along the sensitive spines. The touch speared through Drakjan in flashes of quicksilver pleasure, and he arched his back and gasped, pushing his now fully emerged erection against the hunter. "I've also heard that some nix promise not to drown you if you let them take you in a different way."

Drakjan had never heard this, although that didn't mean it wasn't true. He hadn't spent much time with others of his kind. Generally, he'd only met them when he'd been too slow or clumsy while passing through someone else's waters, or had wanted to challenge, or someone had trespassed onto his territory.

A slow, deliciously firm drag of fingertips back down to the base of his fin made him growl, the sound harsh in his own ears. He pushed himself against Hraban again, thrusting him back against the pillar with more force.

The glint of triumph in the hunter's eyes made Drakjan laugh. When he leaned in close, holding lake-dark eyes with his own, the touch on his fin slowed, stilled. He brushed his lips against the corner of Hraban's mouth and along the angle of his cheekbone, bit gently at the edge of his jaw and the side of his throat. Hraban shuddered against him, his heart racing fast enough to belie his pretense of control.

"I will not drown you," he rasped into Hraban's ear and set careful teeth into the soft flesh of his lobe. It wasn't an oath and could not bind him, but it was the truth. Hraban was already his—hot and hard and willing in his water.



The touch on his dorsal fin slid lower, a large, hot hand spreading over the scales covering his backside to press him closer and push their erections together in a drawn-out, lingering tease. “I know.”

He didn't quite understand it, but those simple words cut through Drakjan like a spear. He groaned against the curve of Hraban's neck, pelvic fins flexing helplessly where they were trapped between the press of their bodies, trying to curl forward, to hold Hraban in place. Drakjan's cock was too sensitive for this, but he was so greedy for the feeling of the hot, heavy ridge of the hunter's erection against his own that he rubbed against him anyway, never mind the rough fabric of his pants.

Hraban's shirt was too robust to tear off, but once Hraban caught on to what he was trying to do, he pushed Drakjan's hands away and quickly shrugged it off, letting it drift heedlessly away. Drakjan dropped below the water's surface to seize Hraban's pants, dragging them down a bare instant after Hraban worked open the button. He'd forgotten about the shoes, but that was a minor setback. An instant later he was hooking a hand into the scrap of thin, clinging white fabric Hraban wore underneath the pants, yanking it down to join the rest of his clothes in the current.

Underneath all the clothes humans wore, Hraban was lean and strong, heating Drakjan's skin to blood-warmth as Drakjan skimmed greedy palms up the side of his legs. His body was that of the most versatile kind of predator—sleek and muscular, but not bulky, built for endurance and speed as well as strength. Drakjan found him beautiful—broad-shouldered and slim-hipped, every part of him perfectly honed to hunt and kill. His cock was long and thick, a heavy weight of balls underneath. It was even warmer than the rest of him, thrumming in Drakjan's curious grip with the rapid rhythm of Hraban's heart.

He shifted forward to take the tip in his mouth. He'd seen a human woman do this in an alleyway once, and the man had made sounds he'd never before heard from anyone who wasn't dying. He liked the feeling of Hraban's cock lying against his tongue, solid and pulsing with blood... moss-soft skin over steel-and-silver hardness. He liked how tight Hraban's hands were on his shoulders, liked the tension in his thighs—how restlessly he shifted against the pillar.

With a bit of experimentation, Drakjan found a good way to seal his lips around the shaft and suck. He could only fit part of Hraban's erection into his mouth, so he wrapped one hand around the base as he started up a driving rhythm, working him hard and fast from the first moment.

Even beneath the water's surface, the choked, cut-off sounds Hraban made were clearly audible. His reactions quickly grew less controlled; soon he was grabbing at Drakjan's shoulders and the back of his head to pull him in closer, make him go faster. His hips moved in time with Drakjan's rhythm, his abs bunching. When Drakjan slid his free hand down to cup his balls and stroke behind them with careful fingertips, Hraban opened his thighs immediately, willingly.

Drakjan broke upwards into air to immediately be trapped in a steel grip and hauled close. Hraban caught his mouth in a rough, punishing kiss that wasn't hungry so much as devouring. His hands slid down Drakjan's body to settle on his lower back and haul him in close, thighs coming up to clasp Drakjan's hips between them. He arched his back and threw back his head, exposing the long line of his throat, and Drakjan could not imagine refusing what was so clearly offered—couldn't imagine wanting to. His own erection was curving up towards his belly, the sheath closed tight around the base in readiness and the flared head fully exposed. Drakjan had held back long enough; had already waited too long. He would not wait any longer.

Hraban was gasping something that sounded like words, but Drakjan couldn't understand what he was saying. It didn't matter. All that mattered now was the feeling of Hraban's body against his—how he shivered at Drakjan's touch. All that mattered was the whitewater lust that cascaded through Drakjan when he pressed at the base of his own erection, forcing his fingers down into his sheath to coat them in slick. He spread it over his cock as quickly as possible and couldn't keep in a moan when he dipped into his sheath again before reaching to rub the lubricant into Hraban's opening.

The hunter twisted in the water, lifting his hips wantonly. His eyes were fever-bright, and his grip on Drakjan's shoulders was almost painful. Drakjan lifted him a bit higher until his shoulders were braced against the pillar and his legs open around Drakjan's hips—the perfect angle to slide inside him.

Hraban made a punched-out little gasp at the first touch of Drakjan's cock against his hole, and then froze into stillness when Drakjan drove inside with a flex of the fins, pushing past initial resistance into tight heat. He gave a choked-off, harsh little cry as Drakjan thrust deep with one more flip of his caudal fin, seating himself in raging, dizzying sensation from tip to root. And he moaned helplessly when Drakjan pulled out and drove back in as deep and hard as he could.

The sounds he made... the way he looked, all wild eyes and hard glittering stare, drawing in desperate, unsteady gulps of air in between harsh grunts that sounded as though they were being torn from him...

Drakjan leaned in close to brace himself against the pillar just above Hraban's shoulder, sliding his other hand down to hitch up his thigh. On his next thrust, he angled his hips a little more... and Hraban's mouth fell open on a stuttering gust of air that sounded almost like a sob, his body lifting towards Drakjan in a tight, taut bow.

"Scream for me, hunter," Drakjan growled, driven by the dark wave of need and lust and greed that gathered within him, rising higher with each thrust of his hips, each delicious slide of his cock inside the hot grip of Hraban's body. "I hear nix like it when you scream while they have you spitted on their cock, writhing and arching like you're dying for it."

Hraban's harsh gasps grew more breathless and desperate when Drakjan increased his pace further, but he didn't scream.

Drakjan let go of the pillar and shifted back, pulling entirely free of Hraban's body. A shock of what almost looked like rage flew over Hraban's features. He reared up to lunge for Drakjan—but the water offered him no leverage, and in the next moment Drakjan had spun him around and pressed up behind him.

Hraban didn't wait to be prompted. He reached for the pier's pillar to brace himself as Drakjan bent him over, spread his cheeks, and pushed back inside him with a shuddering groan of relief. This position made it easier for Drakjan to take him as hard and fast as he needed to—though he now felt like he couldn't ever go hard and fast enough. The need climbed higher and higher until it eclipsed nearly everything else. Before long, the water around them was churning from the wild flex of his fins, both hands locked tight around Hraban's hips.

Hraban was saying something, the words coming out as a low growl. Drakjan couldn't understand them until he bent forward, plastering his chest against Hraban's back. "You," Hraban gasped, each word punched out separately by the force of Drakjan's cock thrusting into his body. "You. Should. Scream for *me*, nix."

He sounded like a man being fucked to within an inch of his life. He sounded fierce and triumphant. He sounded...

Drakjan set his teeth in the curve between Hraban's neck and shoulder and bit down, reaching around to strip his cock. Hraban arched wildly beneath him and threw back his head, every muscle straining. The sound he made was more like a sob than a scream, but it was harsh and guttural and entirely irresistible.

And then it was right there for Drakjan, too. It hit him like a wall, everything coming together in a flash flood, seizing him with crushing force in a torrent of ecstasy that broke him apart, bowed his spine and tore a shout from his throat.

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*"The faint air cools in the gloaming, and peaceful flows the Rhine,"* Drakjan sang. His voice cut neatly through the cool air of early morning, every note clear as water and imbued with deep, sweet melancholy. *"The loveliest maiden is sitting high-throned in yon blue air. Her golden jewels are shining, she combs her golden hair."*

Though still short, his hair had managed to dry into rough tangles that he couldn't easily smooth down with his fingers. He leaned forward on his rock to catch a glimpse of his reflection in the river. It looked fine, and his beard was still short enough to be neat by default. Still, he had to start remembering to fetch his comb if he was going to be spending any appreciable amount of time out of water. *"She combs with a comb that is golden, and sings a weird refrain, that steeps in a deadly enchantment the listener's ravished brain."*

Birdsong was starting up all around as the sky lightened, melding with the quiet sounds of the river and forest to form a pleasing backdrop to his voice. The beavers were returning to their lodge, ready to turn in for the day. They gave him no more than the usual respectful berth. It seemed their memory for all things unrelated to their dams was short.

He smiled as he took in another lungful of air. *"The doomed in his drifting shallop, is tranced with the sad sweet tone."* His voice carried easily over the water, resonant and rich. *"He sees not the yawning breakers, he sees but the maid alone."*

When he turned, Hraban was right there, only a few steps onto dry land. He leaned casually against the trunk of a tree, watching Drakjan sing with complete focus. He hadn't made any sound to alert Drakjan to his presence. There'd been no betraying motion for Drakjan to catch from the corner of an eye, either. Drakjan had known he was there all the same. He wouldn't have lived to see this day if he'd been unable to tell when a hunter was watching him.

Drakjan drew in a deep breath of air and soared into the dramatic finish with full-throated passion. *“The pitiless billows engulf him! So perish sailor and bark... and this, with her baleful singing, is the Lorelei’s gruesome work.”*

In the dawning light, Hraban’s eyes were the color of sea grass directly beneath the water’s surface. “You’re very good.”

This was nothing more than the truth. “People would come to listen to me, sometimes.” They always kept their distance from the water, and were frequently armed, but he’d liked that, too. Was there a better compliment than someone knowingly risking death to listen to him sing?

The silence that fell between them was a comfortable one, and Drakjan used it to study Hraban. He seemed none the worse for wear for his long vigil on the pier, or the trip to town he’d embarked on immediately after. He hadn’t shaved, but Drakjan liked the way the shadow of dark stubble brought out the strong lines of his features, adding a hint of hardness and danger. It suited him—made him look like the lethal hunter he was.

Though really, there was no mistaking him for anything else anyway, pretty lake-deep eyes or no.

Hraban’s gaze on him was steady and cool, his attention a near-tangible force. Drakjan didn’t have to wonder what he saw; he knew. Hraban saw him for what he really was. Everything he was—what he had been, what he would always be, and what he had chosen to become. He was the only one who saw it all: the depths, the hunger, Julian, and the song.

“I spoke to Linda Tailor about permission to remain in her territory and inquired what she would ask in return,” Hraban said abruptly.

It took Drakjan a moment to remember that the leaders of the clan of bears who held the forest were called Linda and... something. David, maybe. He would have remembered sooner if he hadn’t been distracted by the news that Hraban had asked for guest right. Considering that Hraban was a stranger here, guest right was bound to involve major concessions. Whether or not the bears granted it, the mere fact that he had asked...

“She offered to relinquish several square kilometers of forest with access to the river to me if I agree to act as the clan’s gamekeeper.” There was a definite undercurrent of disbelief running through Hraban’s tone now. “It seems that none of them enjoys the work.”

Seriously, the bears were giving away part of their territory to a stranger, as though it were of no more consequence than a handful of air? Drakjan snorted

out a bark of incredulous laughter, shaking his head. He didn't even know why he was surprised.

This was the moment when it occurred to him that if Hraban had been a water creature, he could have stayed in Drakjan's lake. It wouldn't have felt like he was encroaching on his territory. He couldn't—he had become a part of it himself. Hraban was a human, a hunter; he'd tried to kill Drakjan, and Drakjan had tried to kill him. But somehow, those were exactly the reasons why Hraban was more real to him than anyone else in this place. Everything here was so blurred and dulled—no fangs, no claws. Everything except Hraban. Hraban was sharp and real, as hard and inexorable as silver, cold iron, and ash.

For the first time since he'd arrived here, Drakjan felt fully alive. He'd woken up. Hraban had woken him up.

"Her husband told me to talk to you because you hold the river," Hraban was saying. "Apparently I can fish in it if I ask nicely and give you a little money from time to time."

When Drakjan looked at him, Hraban's lips were quirked into the slightest hint of a smile. He found himself wanting to smile back without knowing why. "You're claiming territory, then? You're not going to look for a way back?"

Hraban's gaze swept off to the side, lingering on the other side of the dam where he must have followed his prey into this world. "Even if there is one, it doesn't matter," he said at last, far more quietly than before. "These people are defenseless."

They were—and it was a good reason to stay if you were a hunter who'd made it his life's work to protect people from dangers like the matchgirl, or the real werewolf, or Drakjan. Even if the portal only opened once every score of seasons. Even if—against all the laws of probability—the next five or ten or twenty things to come through it were sweet and harmless and pretty enough to charm the fins off anyone. One day there'd be another little girl in rags, and if there were nobody here to see her for what she was, she would burn this world to the ground.

But there was more to it than that. Drakjan recognized the expression on Hraban's face. In truth, he didn't want to return. He couldn't yet believe that everything was truly as it seemed here, that nothing dark lay hidden in the depths of these still waters. But even so, the promise of this peaceful world was too much to resist. Hraban was tired—worn down by the constant battle of survival and weary to the bone.

Drakjan didn't remember passing through the rip. Occupied as he had been by rage, agony, terror, and the consuming need to survive, he hadn't noticed the actual transition at all—only that one moment, he was facing certain death, trapped in air and fighting for his life, and the next he was cradled in the cool, silent depths of an unfamiliar lake.

“You should stay,” Drakjan said. “Stay and guard this place against other things like the matchgirl. Or me.”

Hraban quirked up a corner of his mouth, the slightest hint of crinkles creasing the corners of his eyes. “There are no other things like you.”

He'd slipped away before Drakjan could reply, melting soundlessly into the trees. Drakjan smiled as he turned back to face the river. He'd been thinking about a ballad earlier, but maybe the shanty about men with beards would serve better.

**The End**

## **Bibliography of Songs**

The lyrics Drakjan sings in the story are listed (in order):

- “Der Fischer” [The Fisherman] by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1779), trans. Matthew Gregory Lewis (1796).
- “Piratenlied” [Pirate Song], traditional, author unknown, trans. Alex Gabriel (2015).
- “Die Loreley” [An ancient legend of the Rhine] by Heinrich Heine (1824), trans. Mark Twain (1880).



## Author Bio

*It all began when Alex learned to decipher the alphabet and found that the world was full of wonderful stories—but not all of them were being told. In self-defense, Alex began to write and hasn't stopped since.*

*In between a busy schedule of reading and writing, Alex has worked as a copywriter, a translator, an English teacher, a linguistics tutor, an alibi S.O., a soap maker, a cloakroom attendant, a bartender, and other such things. Only the jobs that involve writing have stuck.*

*Alex writes about socially awkward gay superheroes in love with smart-ass dudebro minions, cops undercover in gay bars (or rather gay BDSM clubs run by the Mafia), Japanese pop stars blindsided by their inconvenient attraction to irritating, punning dorks, and more. Stay tuned for demigods, devils, yet more mafiosi... and many other things besides.*

## Contact & Media Info

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*You can find information about Alex's other books as well as free chapters and Alex's musings on writing, reading, and other matters at: [alexgabriel.net](http://alexgabriel.net)*

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