

LADY OF  
THE ICY  
SHORES

THE SELKIE QUEEN: PROLOGUE

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## *Chapter 1*

The rich darkness, the kind only found at the bottom of the sea, wrapped around the walls and houses of the fasthold. Svanhild drifted along silently, her red curls twisting in the gentle currents. She should have long since been in bed, but she had been unable to resist the bright crescent sliver of the new moon above the water. Such a night was worth any punishment - but she would rather her uncle didn't catch her sneaking back into her room.

The hall had usually fallen quiet by this time of night, everyone asleep or in their private quarters. If anyone spotted her, she could claim the desire for a midnight snack. But getting into the hall in the first place might prove more difficult. Creeping through her secret gap in the magical nets that surrounded the fasthold had been hard enough. The well-defended walls of her fortress home kept almost everyone out.

She slipped in through the side door of the hall, keeping close to the wall so that the green glow of the witch-lights didn't fall on her. Tantalisingly close, the curtain that led to her sleeping-room hung on the other side of the hall.

“You shouldn't make such a fuss.”

The voice, harsh and cutting, slid telepathically into her brain and she froze. Selkies like her, seal shape-shifters, communicated telepathically underwater. One-on-one communication drained energy quickly, though, so even private conversations were often broadcast. Still, the hushed sound of this thought suggested that Klaus did not want to be heard. Who was her uncle talking to?

Casting a longing glimpse at her sleeping-room curtain, she turned in the opposite direction, hugging the shadows as she moved towards the screen separating Klaus's sitting-room from the main hall. As the Lord of the Icy Shores, he had a little more privacy than all the other selkies who dwelt in his fasthold, with an entire suite of rooms reserved for his private use.

“Someone has to be cautious.”

This was a woman's voice, although it sounded nothing like Margit, Svanhild's aunt. It must be Katrina. Klaus's beautiful young mistress had never liked Svanhild in the slightest. The slight clicking of her knitting needles drifted from behind the screen, the metal hitting together as she knitted the traditional magic nets of the selkie people.

“I kept this a secret for years before I even met you. Don't worry about what doesn't

concern you.”

“If she finds out that you murdered her father, I'll suffer for it too. Of course this concerns me.”

“You're not my wife. Don't act like it. My niece doesn't have the brains to work out what happened to her father. And even if she did, who would believe her? She may be an adult under the law, but I'm still her guardian. Don't let a ridiculous thing like her twentieth birthday fluster you so much.”

Svanhild froze in the shadows, her heart pounding so hard it might wake the rest of the hall. Surely he could not mean what she thought? Her uncle Klaus, stern but loving, could not have murdered his own brother - her father.

But already, her shock was hardening into anger. Klaus had as good as admitted it himself. She would learn the truth, and then she would make him pay. After all, she had as good a claim to the Icy Shores as he did. She would have her vengeance, and her inheritance, whatever the cost.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears so loudly that she could barely hear anything else. She wrapped her arms protectively around her chest and then let go with a hiss of fury, carelessly hitting against the wall. The thick rope cuffs around her wrists made a louder noise than she would have expected.

“Who's there?”

Klaus broadcast the thought wide, slamming into the heads of everyone around him. Svanhild heard the selkies across the hall begin to murmur as they came awake, their tie to their lord alerting them even in deep sleep. She shot forwards, sliding back behind her curtain in time - she hoped - to avoid being seen.

Could Klaus really be a murderer? Since her father's death before her tenth birthday, Svanhild had lived under the guardianship of her uncle. He was strict, sometimes a little cruel, and certainly not affectionate, but she had always believed that he loved her. He nodded approvingly when the poets sang tales of her father's deeds, and he helped Svanhild to sacrifice in her parents' memories every year. Could he act like that if he had killed his own brother?

She thought about the warm childhood days when Klaus and Margit had taken her onto the shore, laughing as she tested out her human form for the first time. They were no longer loving towards each other, it was true, but could everything have been a facade?

Klaus had admitted it in his own words. Questioning and worrying would not benefit anyone. She needed vengeance. And she knew who could help her get it.

She left her room as soon as the first light of dawn began to filter down through the water, turning everything an icy shade of pale blue.

Aleksander, head of Klaus's guard, stood exactly where she expected to find him. He hovered in one corner of the training cube, watching as the men worked through their morning exercises. He raised a hand to her in greeting, then turned back to his men, swimming gently around the cube to watch them from all angles.

She waited, hoping that the men were almost finished. It would be better if no one else heard her - at least, not yet. She had known Aleksander her entire life, as he rose through the ranks of first her father's guard, then Klaus's. They had never been close, but she had a strange feeling that Aleksander was one of the few men who truly respected her. The atmosphere of Klaus's court did not encourage men who believed in the worth of women.

"I need to talk to you," she said, slipping the thought privately into Aleksander's mind as the first group of men left the training cube.

His eyebrows raised slightly, but his handsome face otherwise remained blank.

"I am at your service, my lady," he replied.

"I need to learn how to fight," she told him. His surprise was so strong that she felt it physically ripple through the water.

"You know that your uncle disapproves of women engaging in fighting," he said, his emotions now under tight control.

"You said you were at my service. I want you to teach me how to fight."

His expression didn't change as he gazed at the next group of men to enter the training cube, but she could imagine the conflict behind his stormy blue eyes. He lifted one hand to his head, shifting gently in the water as he thought. Svanhild tried not to admire him too much. A handsome man, yes, but first and foremost a tool to get what she wanted. Vengeance.

"You were my father's man, were you not?"

“I was. I owe my career to him.”

“Then do this in his memory.”

He sighed, so faintly that she wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't been listening for it.

“As you command, my lady.”

“We begin tomorrow,” Svanhild told him.

“Why not now?” Aleksander asked. His voice held a mocking challenge that she couldn't resist.

“Now it is.”

She swam up to the training cube, feeling a little light-headed as Aleksander dismissed the warriors waiting inside. He ordered everyone away from the cube, and held the ropes open for Svanhild to enter.

She drifted inside, her heart beating fast. She had never really expected to see the inside of the cube - only warriors ever entered. Women, even the daughters of warrior lords, certainly did not.

“Which weapon do you wish to learn?”

“Sword.” The answer came quickly and easily. The sword had been her father's weapon.

“I thought that might be your answer,” Aleksander said. Was that a touch of gentle humour in his voice? His face still showed no expression. Perhaps she had imagined it.

He pulled a lightweight training sword out of the floating storage barrel and sent it spinning through the water towards her. She caught it eagerly, waiting for Aleksander to climb into the training cube and face her.

“What under waves is going on here?”

Klaus's voice boomed across the training area, his telepathic force making Svanhild wince. Why could her uncle not have stayed busy with his gold coins and his pretty mistress? Part of her wanted to scream in his face that she knew what he had done, who he really was. But the time had not yet come.

“Apologies, uncle,” she said, keeping her voice light. “I always thought that sword fighting looked like such fun. Aleksander here warned me that it isn't for ladies, but I'm afraid I pushed him into it. Can I not try even a little?”

Klaus chuckled indulgently, but his smile held a dark edge, and his jaw looked tense. She felt a rush of fury at the sight of his jewelled silver circlet and the silver rings stacked up his arms. That wealth should have been her father's.

“Always looking for some silly new adventure, Svanhild. Go inside now and help your aunt with the rope-making, before you get hurt. Aleksander, I don't expect to see this again.”

Aleksander bowed low in the water - although perhaps not quite as low as he might have - and murmured an apology. Svanhild smiled sweetly at her uncle and skimmed past him, tossing the sword back to Aleksander.

For one brief, beautiful moment, she imagined a true steel sword in her hands, flashing down to slice through Klaus's neck. The adrenalin rush felt real, even if the image was fantasy. She could almost taste the sweetness of revenge.

“We will continue tomorrow. In secret,” she said, sending the thought privately to Aleksander, drawing on their long acquaintance to keep it hidden from everyone else around them. She felt his agreement flow back along the same thought channel.

Let Klaus imagine her a silly little girl as she swam back towards the hall, skirting around the nasty black seaweed that seemed to grow everywhere in the fasthold. He would not realise his misjudgement until it was far too late.

He had reminded her of the precariousness of her situation, however. With her guardian dead, who would protect an orphaned young woman? She could not kill Klaus until she had prepared to protect herself.

## *Chapter 2*

The noise and bustle of the hall swirled all around, but Svanhild sat silently, like the still water at the centre of the storm. She felt poised and ready, her muscles tight and her heartbeat quick. The time had not yet come, but every moment gave her a chance to get closer to Klaus. She wanted to learn more about her father's death - to eliminate the last of the doubts, and to expose all of her uncle's secrets.

When Margit swam up beside her, reaching for an oyster from the women's table, Svanhild spotted an opportunity.

"I've been meaning to talk to you," she said, sending the softest whisper of a thought across the distance between them. Was she imagining the nervous expression on Margit's face?

"I've been very busy," Margit said, one hand smoothing along the rope netting that separated off the women's corner of the hall. She didn't meet Svanhild's eyes. How much did she know?

Svanhild kept her thoughts careful and controlled.

"I need to ask you about my father. About how he died."

"We all know how he died." Margit's thoughts were flat and unemotional. "There's nothing else to tell you."

"Please, be honest with me, Margit."

"I've told you everything I have to say. Stop asking."

Margit swung around and swam away, the oyster still in her hand. She squeezed herself into another group of women, leaving Svanhild alone. What was she hiding?

Once upon a time, Margit and Svanhild's mother had been the closest of friends. When Svanhild found herself an orphan, Margit had cared for her and loved her. Safe and secure, Svanhild had adored her new mother.

But, over time, things had changed. Klaus became colder, more distant. Margit became sadder. And then Katrina arrived, taking Margit's place as Klaus's lover, if not his wife. Klaus was not foolish enough to throw away the political connections that came with a woman like Margit. And poor Margit was not foolish enough to expect that her

own clan would take back a childless middle-aged woman.

Klaus had hurt all the people he should have loved the most. How dare he sit there in the hall and hand out food like a good lord? He was as false as the so-called rubies that dripped from his fingers. Svanhild almost felt sick just looking at him across the length of the hall.

When Klaus left his place at the table and drifted up into the rafters of the hall, high above everyone else, Svanhild frowned. What was going on?

“Good people of the Icy Shores!”

Klaus's words boomed around the hall, echoing through the minds of everyone there. Chatter stopped and the music died away as everyone looked upwards, turning their attention to their lord. Svanhild studied each face. Who else might suspect what he had done?

“I have exciting news this evening,” Klaus continued, catching Svanhild's attention again.

“We are honoured with a visit by Lerritz of the Endless Deeps, here on behalf of his lord, Harald of the Endless Deeps.”

A murmur of interest spread across the hall. Svanhild's frown deepened. What business did Klaus have with the southern selkie lords? She didn't like this.

The envoy, a large, muscled man, covered in battle tattoos, swam up to hover just a little below Klaus. His eyes swept the hall, dismissing Svanhild with a glance - and then freezing on a point just behind her. Slowly, almost afraid, she looked over her shoulder.

Aleksander hovered in the far corner of the hall, alone and half-hidden by the shadows. He met the envoy's gaze unblinkingly, his hands relaxed as he held the remains of a fish.

“I will not discuss our alliance while that man sits in your hall,” the envoy said, his words ringing clear and true through the water. He never looked away from Aleksander.

“He is a traitor, a murderer, and a desecrater,” the envoy continued, his words burning with power as they slammed into each mind. “He killed my uncle, and my honour will not let me feast alongside him.”

Klaus sank a little in the water, resting one hand on the man's shoulder. The gesture looked fatherly, but Svanhild could almost feel the falseness radiating from him.



“Lerritz, I understand your anger,” Klaus said, his tone conciliatory. ”But we cannot make peace if we hold on to grudges from past generations. Aleksander is my man now, and he carries out my orders. He will do no more harm to your family - but I will not hear any word spoken against him in my hall.”

The tension drifting through the water was so thick that Svanhild could hardly breathe, her magic frozen in place as she waited for what would happen next.

The envoy gazed at Klaus, his lips pressed hard together. Did words pass between them? Svanhild looked across the hall at Margit, who had gone white. Her aunt had always heard thoughts more clearly than others.

The tension dragged out for a moment longer until, at last, the envoy inclined his head.

“As you wish, my lord. I will do no harm to this man in your hall. I promise nothing if I ever encounter him outside the borders of the Icy Shores. But for now, I bring only peace.”

Svanhild shivered. The envoy's words sounded too much like a threat - perhaps even a promise. She glanced over at Aleksander, who still waited alone, in the shadows.

“Don't even look at him,” Margit said quietly, inches away from Svanhild's ear. How had she returned so quietly?

“Who?” Svanhild asked, but Margit just shook her head.

“He's dangerous, that man. I won't say any more, but I want you to stay away from him.”

She swam away again, her thoughts too tightly hidden for Svanhild to probe further. What did she mean? What unspeakable thing could quiet, serious Aleksander possibly have done? A dark, unwelcome thought flickered into her brain. Handsome or not, Aleksander was Klaus's man now. What might he have done to earn that place? Would he have killed his former master? She didn't know Aleksander at all.

“And now, we come to the true reason for this feast,” Klaus called, and Svanhild jerked out of her unpleasant thoughts. She didn't look back at Aleksander, focusing on Klaus instead.

“As you all know, these are dangerous times for all selkies. If the Icy Shores are to

prosper, we need allies. So I am delighted to announce that we have sealed an alliance with the Endless Deeps.”

Svanhild joined everyone in applauding politely. What did a faraway southern lordship have to do with the Icy Shores? The Endless Deeps lay hundreds of miles away and had their own problems, with the fearsome Dolphin People battering at their borders.

“Svanhild?”

Klaus appeared beside her, addressing her directly. She had missed something.

“My lord?” she asked politely. He smiled, his teeth unsettlingly sharp.

“I am delighted to announce the betrothal of my niece, the Lady Svanhild of the Icy Shores, to the great Earl Harald of the Endless Deeps.”

A gasp of surprise rippled around the hall, followed almost instantly by a wave of applause. It was a sensible alliance, the rational part of Svanhild's mind told her. The Endless Deeps were rich and powerful, Harald one of the wealthiest selkie lords. These newcomer southerners, their territory carved out of the Dolphin People's land, would consider it a coup to marry into an ancient house like Icy Shores.

But her anger was not rational.

“I have agreed to nothing,” she announced, sending the words out as loudly as she could, feeling extra magic spark in her veins from the effort. “I will marry when I choose to marry, and I have not chosen Harald of the Endless Deeps.”

Against her will, she let her eyes flick to Aleksander. He leaned forward, his gaze intent on her face. She looked away.

Silence filled the hall. No doubt everyone spoke amongst themselves, but Svanhild heard nothing.

Klaus burst into laughter, the sound loud and abrasive in Svanhild's mind.

“A true lady of the Icy Shores!” he said, wrapping one arm around Svanhild's shoulder and smiling down at her. “She knows her own value! But please don't worry, my dear. Earl Harald is a powerful man, well deserving of a lady like yourself. And you will, of course, have time to meet him before you are officially bound.”

The hall filled with murmurs of agreement, and even a little laughter. Svanhild's

hands began to shake from the effort of holding in her furious response. Not here. Not in front of everyone.

“Don't make a scene like that again,” Klaus said, speaking to her alone. “If you humiliate me in front of the Endless Deeps men, you'll regret it. And I will tell you this: you will be marrying Harald. Whether you agree to it or not. Do your duty.”

He pulled out of her mind so sharply that it left her dizzy. What kind of strength did her uncle have that he could creep past all her walls and straight into her mind? She shook her head and made the mistake of looking up. Aleksander still watched her, his eyes dark and blank. She felt a tingle of warmth as she gazed back. Had he always been so handsome?

“Drink with the envoy,” Klaus said, pushing her forwards. Svanhild took the drinking bubble he offered, breaking the seal and sucking in a quick gasp of human whiskey before passing it over to the envoy. Her body seemed to move without her mind intervening at all. Whether Klaus had enspelled her or not no longer mattered. She was just a pawn to him - a foolish, weak woman to be married off when he chose. Just one of many women to use as necessary.

She smiled at the envoy, hating every inch of his face.

What help would the men of the Endless Deeps be to her? How could she learn about her father if she travelled hundreds of miles from his home? West, to the Firelands, she could have learnt to live with. That had been her mother's home, on the rocky shores where the land spat liquid fire. But the south? That could never be her home?

A smile on her face and twisted panic in her heart, Svanhild hovered beside her uncle, drinking everything he gave her, and barely taking her eyes off Aleksander. So much for revenge - she couldn't even manage her own fate.

### *Chapter 3*

Svanhild arrived late to the hall that morning, rushing back from a morning swim around the edges of the fasthold's palisade, and so she found herself at the only free loom - between Margit and Katrina. No wonder all the other women avoided this space. They sat in awkward silence, Svanhild not quite daring to look to either side. She focused on the fabric in front of her, quietly wishing that women were allowed to do anything except weave cloth and twist rope. At least that would provide an excuse to be somewhere else. The enmity leaking from the two women either side of her practically turned the water black.

A loud noise cut through the silence of the hall - a clang of metal, only partly muffled by the seawater, and then the sound of men shouting, both physically and mentally. Svanhild shot up, swooping down the length of the hall and out of the door before Margit had time to forbid her.

Busy men and their loud voices filled the square outside, clustering around the door to Klaus's strongroom, a small building set apart from the hall.

“What's happening?” Svanhild asked Aleksander, drifting up beside him, close enough to communicate privately, but not so close that they were touching. Uncertainty still interfered with her trust for him.

“Klaus found the old crown,” Aleksander said, not bothering to make his words entirely private. “It appears that it was lost, not destroyed when your father died. Klaus intends to offer it as a sacrifice at the full moon.”

Svanhild cut him off there, shooting through the crowd to confront her uncle.

“You intend to destroy the crown, uncle? When you've only just found it?”

“Destroy is rather a strong word for a sacrifice,” Klaus said soothingly, his most patronising expression firmly in place. “This is what your father would have wanted. Such a crown has no place in our time. It is better off dedicated to the spirits and bringing us all good fortune.”

What her father would have wanted? That was the biggest lie he'd told so far. Svanhild's father had dreamed of one day seeing a new king wearing the crown and uniting the warring tribes into one kingdom again.

There and then, staring into her uncle's eyes, Svanhild made a decision. She would

save that crown from destruction before the full moon, in just two days time. And she wouldn't stop there. Avenging her father wasn't enough. She would build a legacy for him, using that crown to rally the selkie lords together. That kingdom her father had dreamed of would be reborn, or she would die trying.

As Klaus smiled gently and turned away, dismissing her, Svanhild realised that she needed help. Determination alone would not get her into Klaus's strongroom, not with all the magical ropes bound across the door and the constant rotation of guards.

She looked sidelong at Aleksander.

“No,” he said immediately, speaking silently this time. “I know what you're going to ask, and I won't help you to steal that crown from your uncle.”

“Come with me,” Svanhild told him. “I need to talk to you.”

She drifted across the square and around the side of the hall, where a small overgrown seaweed garden sat almost forgotten. Half-hidden among the deepest fronds of seaweed, she waited.

Aleksander came a few moments after her, his expression alert and his body tense. At least it didn't look as if anyone had followed him. He spotted her instantly and followed her into the darkness of the seaweed cloud. They both moved deeper into the foliage, away from prying eyes. He came a little too close and it took Svanhild a moment before she could breathe normally.

“I don't know what you want, but this has to stop,” Aleksander said, his voice low and dangerous inside her head. “I can't keep risking my position with Klaus just because you're bored and spoiled.”

Svanhild swung her hand to slap him, but he moved too fast, ducking out of reach.

“This isn't about me,” she told him, letting the anger radiate from her thoughts. “Klaus killed my father. Or did you already know that?”

The shock on his face told her straightaway not to worry. He hadn't known.

“Are you sure?” he asked. His thoughts had a rough edge to them. “He admitted it himself. He just didn't realise I was listening.”

Aleksander shook his head, his eyes distant, dark seaweed fronds stroking against his

cheek.

“How could I have not known? I knew that Klaus was capable of terrible things - but I didn't imagine this.”

“He's kept it a close secret. I only found out through luck. Or perhaps the spirits guided me. It doesn't matter. I want revenge.”

Aleksander's expression was cold and hard.

“I'll help you. I imagine that you intend to start with that crown?”

Svanhild nodded.

“We steal it tonight.”

At last, her father's dream could be realised. He might never see it himself, but perhaps his spirit might still wander the selkie lands and see his people united once more.

What was now dozens of fragmented, ever-shifting tribal lands had once been a single kingdom, united and powerful. Its capital, far to the west, had ruled over an empire half of the land and half of the sea, selkies living peacefully alongside other shifters and creatures of both earth and water. But the city had been destroyed, by earth, water, and fire, and its people had scattered. The great empire had collapsed, as people gathered around their own leaders and stopped trusting their neighbours.

For some people, like Klaus, the ancient empire represented a threat. An overlord would take power away from the petty lords who now governed each province like kings. But as far as Svanhild could see, unity meant strength. And she wanted that for her people.

She and Aleksander met in the garden again at dusk, their plans all in place.

“We need to begin with the ropes,” Aleksander said. “Did you find a way to get past them?”

Svanhild nodded, her guilt turning to a sick feeling. “I stole Margit's shears. They can open any rope in the fastness.”

“Good.”

Aleksander didn't seem to have time for guilt.

Everyone had left the square between the safehouse and the hall, its darkness lying empty. Svanhild didn't ask how Aleksander had managed that. She cut through the ropes quickly and efficiently, the magical shears slicing easily through the fibres, as they were intended to do. Margit would be heartbroken when she learnt that Svanhild had betrayed her.

Aleksander picked the lock just as quickly, then shouldered the door open. It juddered slightly on the threshold, making a little more noise than Svanhild would have liked, but no movement came from the hall.

“I'll keep watch,” Aleksander said. Svanhild hesitated. This was the moment she had to decide whether to trust him.

She nodded sharply and slipped into the room, the bubbles of her breath rippling through the still, dark water. She scanned around quickly, casting out a faint thread of magic to feel her way in the darkness.

There it was. A heavy metal chest, larger than anything Klaus kept in the strongroom usually. She illuminated it with a soft flash of magic, casting a green glow around the room. Shark decorations, Klaus's favourite symbol, curved around the chest, ropes tying it shut. Svanhild touched one gently and smiled at the familiar texture. Margit's ropes. The shears would slice through them even more easily than the ones outside.

She made quick work of the ropes, leaving them floating loosely in the water, and pulled the chest open, grabbing at the crown inside.

A blaring, howling magic burst into her brain, so loud that she collapsed to the floor, the crown wrapped in her arms.

“Get up!” Aleksander shouted at her. “We have to go!”

She weakly swam upwards, trying to block out the chaos inside her head, fumbling for the door. Damn Klaus. He must have attached some kind of curse to the crown. Could everyone else hear?

“Aleksander,” she began to ask, but he grabbed her arm and pushed her through the door before she could finish.

“It's an alarm,” he told her tersely. “We have to get out of here.”

Hardly able to think through the noise in her head, she nodded and headed towards

the edge of the compound, away from the hall.

“Stop! Thief!”

Someone had heard the alarm. Too late. Svanhild span round, ready to fight with all the magic she had, but she moved too slowly. Blood streamed through the water, bright red, curling around the gently floating body of a selkie warrior. Aleksander tucked his knife back into his belt, his face expressionless.

“We need to leave,” he told her again.

She nodded, the noise in her head almost overwhelmed by the pounding of her heartbeat and the panicked roaring of her lungs. He was right. She made for her gap in the fasthold netting, Aleksander close behind her. They flew past the defences in moments, both changing into their seal forms as they went. Sleek and fast, they sped through the kelp forest that carpeted the depths west of the Icy Shores. Svanhild didn't know this forest, which would have terrified her at any other time, but the excitement and adrenaline flowing through her veins left her close to laughing for joy.

After a few moments, Aleksander slowed down, and Svanhild followed suit. It didn't seem as if anyone had followed them. Had they made it? She changed back into her human form, pulling the crown off her arm, where it had awkwardly balanced. Here, in the soft light of a breaking dawn, it looked tarnished and old.

Seal-Aleksander, his tool belt still around his waist, shifted back as well. Their loose-fitting clothes, tied on with the traditional ropes, still hung in loose drapes around them, but Svanhild blushed as she rearranged hers slightly. She had never shifted in front of a man before.

“We should find somewhere to hide,” Aleksander said softly. “It isn't safe here.”

“Perhaps a cave,” Svanhild began, and froze. Ripples spread through the kelp, far stronger than any natural wave in the water. They were not alone.

Aleksander saw them at the same time she did. He frantically gestured her down, and they both sank onto their bellies, covered by the kelp. Where were the ripples coming from? Svanhild shivered with tension.

And then they came, pushing through the kelp. Heavy figures, tattooed in red, almost like selkies, but subtly different. Knives hung at their belts, while gold ringed their arms and glinted in their braided hair as it flew out behind them. Svanhild shrank back even further as the group passed, so close that she could have reached out to touch their bare



feet through the undergrowth.

Then they vanished as suddenly as they had come, the last of the ripples fading behind them.

“Twenty Wildlings,” Aleksander said, his face grim. “They've not come this close to the Icy Shores in decades.”

The Wildlings hadn't terrorised these waters since before Svanhild was born. Some people said they were extinct. Clearly, they were wrong.

“Should we warn the others?”

Aleksander hesitated.

“They can defend themselves. We need to find somewhere sheltered for the night. I'm worried that a storm's drawing in.”

Much as she hated to abandon the Icy Shores to defend itself, Svanhild knew he spoke the truth.

“Do you know of anywhere we could go, Aleksander?”

“There's a place not too far from here that might do. And you can call me Aleks.”

He held out a hand to her and she took it gingerly, letting him guide her through the kelp forest as she clutched the crown in her other hand.

They drifted at last into a small clearing, where blocks of carved stone protruded through the weeds.

“This bit is still enough of a shelter,” Aleks said, tugging her into a small room built halfway into the rocky hillside. Its paved floor was cracked and worn, but Svanhild could still see colourful patterns sprinkled across the slabs.

“What is this place?” she asked. Aleks just shrugged.

“No idea. Just try to get some sleep.”

She would have to trust him that this place was safe. Hesitantly, she curled up beside him, feeling her body gently settle down to the floor, the weight of the water warm around her, Aleks almost close enough to touch.

She had the crown. But what good could it do here, out in the wilderness? The Wildlings had wiped out entire selkie tribes before. How could she protect the Icy Shores from hiding?

## *Chapter 4*

Hiding out and hoping for the best had never appealed to Svanhild. Tapping her fingers on the rough stone of the wall, she watched as Aleks neatened his clothes up as best he could and smoothed down his blond curls even as a rogue current lifted them up again.

“You're sure about this?” he asked her, his blue eyes worried.

She looked down at the floor, scanning the faded dolphin mosaics that still leaped from corner to corner under all the dirt. Perhaps one day those dolphins would be bright and shining again. Watching the ancient ruins come to life once more would be beautiful.

“These men are my family,” she said, making her voice as strong as she could manage. “My mother was kin to almost all of the western lords. They will at least grant me an audience.”

“If Klaus has already spoken to them-”

“No other lord is beholden to Klaus. He has no kin here.”

“Then we will try,” Aleks said, but the worry had not left his eyes. He gestured her out of the door as they began their long trek to the stronghold of the Long Moon selkies. Two days in the wilderness had been long enough for Svanhild to plan. The time had come for her to rally support against Klaus - and to begin pulling the selkies together under the authority of the crown that she clutched in one hand.

But they met their first problem at the very borders of the Long Moon lands, three sentries slipping silently from the seaweed to hover before them. Aleks's hand went straight to his knife, but Svanhild caught his arm.

She introduced herself, using every title she could claim, but the sentries barely blinked.

“I am here to see Lord Per,” she told them.

“Lord Per meets with the Lords of the West today,” one guard told her. “No one else is to be admitted.”

“I am here to join that meeting,” Svanhild said, her head held high, her gaze unwavering.

“No one is to be admitted,” the guard repeated.

Svanhild drew in a deep breath, letting her magic settle around her skin like a cloak, the power glowing softly in the water.

“I am the last child of the house of kings, cousin of every lord who sits in your hall. I hold the crown of the greatest kingdom our ocean has ever seen, and I am kin to this house. You will grant me access.”

The sentries all exchanged glances, and then drifted to one side.

Triumphant, Svanhild shot forwards, crossing the border into Long Moon territory. She pulled Aleks along with her, his arm still warm under her hand, but the guards thrust out their spears.

“Not him,” one said. “You go alone.”

She paused, turning to look at Aleks. Leaving him behind felt like a betrayal after everything he had done to support and serve her. But, looking into his unnecessarily handsome face, she wondered if leaving him behind might be best after all. She could not risk distraction and her life held no room for romantic relationships. Independence meant never marrying.

Nodding at Aleks to remain, she removed her hand, rubbing her fingers against her palm as it cooled back down to water temperature. Then she followed the guards towards the great palace of the Long Moons.

Her mother had grown up in this palace, on the edge of the Firelands. Here, her father had first met the beautiful young woman and fallen madly in love. Svanhild had never visited, but she had dreamed of it often. This palace had once been home to the great kings of the sea, and now her cousin Per held it as his crumbling fortress, its glory almost gone. Svanhild wondered if Per looked like her mother. She would probably never know; her mother had died when she was barely weeks old, and no one ever spoke of her.

They swam through the main gates, tumbledown white stone walls rising around them, topped with tall turrets and a soaring stone keep. No other fortress like this could be found in the whole of the Atlantic, everyone said.

The guards led her through the main courtyard, past curious crowds of selkies dressed in the traditional colours of the Long Moons and some of the other western lordships, and into the hall. No dark, wooden, warm place like the hall of the Icy Shores, this great

stone room lay in the heart of the old palace. Rings of columns around its edges towered up so high that Svanhild could barely make out the dolphin mosaics cascading across the top of the columns. Faded and dirty, they looked like those she had seen that morning, in the much smaller ancient palace.

A group of men hovered in a loose circle in the middle of the room, but they all broke away as she entered, turning to look at her. She lifted her chin again, looking each man in the eye in turn.

“And who is this?” one man asked, swimming towards her. By the dark green of his clothing ropes and the gold that glittered at his wrists, Svanhild guessed he must be Lord Per of the Long Moons.

“Greeting, cousin,” she said. “I am Svanhild of the Icy Shore. I have come to ask for your support.”

“Greeting, cousin,” he replied. “I am Per, lord of these lands. We had not expected to see you here.”

“Are the stories true?” another man, a little older and overweight, asked as he swam forwards. What a miracle he could even stay afloat with all the gold heaped around his neck and arms.

“Manners, Lord Harald,” Per chided, and Svanhild flushed bright red. What an unpleasant surprise to meet Harald, the lord she had snubbed so publicly. What was he doing here in the west?

“I come to seek justice,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. What stories had they already heard?

“I have heard it from Klaus's own thoughts that he killed my father, the true Lord of the Icy Shores. I call on the western lords, my last kin, to help me take my vengeance and see justice done.”

They responded with a moment of total silence. What thoughts were they sharing in private? Then Harald burst out laughing, turning away with a shake of his head. Per leaned forwards, his eyes piercing.

“Is this true?” he asked her.

“I swear it,” Svanhild said, her thoughts no louder than a whisper.

Per looked troubled. “This is a great injustice indeed,” he said slowly. “And made worse by the fact that you, my cousin, should have rightly inherited, if Klaus is the criminal you claim. I would certainly like to see the Icy Shores in friendly hands.”

“The Icy Shores are at least in secure hands,” another lord pointed out, not even looking at Svanhild. “I'd take any man, whatever he's done, over a woman. Ladies belong at the weaving loom, not in council.”

“I am as wise as any man of my years,” Svanhild said, holding back the rage that built in her stomach and threatened to force its way up her throat.

“And they aren't enough years,” another man said, his eyes friendlier. “We want justice to be done, of course, but Klaus is a man of good experience. An unstable Icy Shores would be a risk to all of us.”

“If Klaus could even be removed,” yet another lord pointed out. “I won't risk a single man of mine on someone else's problems.”

“I will stand with Per,” one said. “We help our own. Svanhild is kin.”

“This still isn't our problem,” the last one said, or was it the one before? Svanhild's head swam, and the faces all seemed to merge into one. Each lord looked the same, another terrified man unsure of how to lead his people through all the fear and mistrust. They spoke the same language, worshipped the same gods, and yet they saw the differences above the similarities.

“This is your problem as well,” she said softly. “This is more than just Klaus.”

She held the crown out in front of her, a soft cyclone of magic swirling around her and setting the emerald gemstones winking beneath their coating of dirt. The lords all fell silent, gathering around her in the shape of a half-moon.

“The Wildlings are here,” she told them. “They walked across Icy Shores land just three days ago. They have crossed your territory already, and they will do it again.”

From the shock and horror in Per's eyes, he had not even imagined this.

“The Wildlings would never dare enter selkie land,” one lord said, but his fear tinged the taste of the water around him.

“We must work together to defeat them,” she told him. “Klaus cannot be trusted. Let me hold the Icy Shores and we will all work together to secure the land against the

Wildlings.”

“You would trust us when you won't trust your own uncle?” Harald asked. “You're a fool if you think this will get you the power you want. But Klaus already told us you'd been stupid enough to run away with that berserker guard. I'll warn you, girl: don't trust him. The man's a murderer, and completely insane.”

“I trust Aleksander,” Svanhild said steadily. “But I do not trust Klaus, the man who murdered my father. He will do whatever it takes to seize power.”

“Don't rush into these accusations,” Harald warned. “What evidence do you really have? Are you sure enough to stake your uncle's life on it?”

“I heard the words myself,” Svanhild said, but the doubt began to blossom. Why would Klaus have said something like that where anyone could hear it?

“Don't leave again with your pet berserker,” Harald said. “He's dangerous. Come back with me. The proposal still stands. Or I'll take you back to Klaus, if you aren't ready for marriage yet. He's a good man, and he'll take care of you. This can all be forgotten.”

Svanhild stared at him, blackness creeping in at the edge of her vision. This nightmare had begun the night she overheard Klaus, and it still continued to darken.

“If there are Wildlings, we need to prepare,” another lord was saying, his thoughts faded, as if they came from a great distance. “We must postpone this meeting, Per. Each of us has people to protect.”

“You are all fools!” Svanhild screamed, her words ripping loose along with her magic, flying through the hall in a great whirlpool, sending the wall-hangings flying and overturning the benches.

“How can you not understand? You will be stronger together. Hold your borders together, and support each other! You claim to care about your people, but you're risking their safety for the sake of your independence. What is the point of councils like this if you are not willing to actually do anything?”

A group of selkie lords shot forward, looming over her as she tried not to shrink down towards the floor, their power already pressing against her.

“Not in my hall,” Per said, his calming magic slipping in to form a shield around her. “Cousin Svanhild, I think it would be best if you left now.”

She took his advice, flying back out of the hall and past the surprised sentries, who threw the gates open to let her out. What a fool, to expect a group of self-centred men to treat her like an equal. Well, she would save them from themselves, whether they wanted saving or not. If no one else could see how weak the selkies had become, then she would have to act by herself.

“We have to leave,” she told Aleks, still hovering anxiously on the border as she swam towards him. He grabbed her arms, holding her a little closer than was comfortable. She shook herself loose and swam past him, knowing that he would follow.

“There won't be any help here. But I am more sure than ever of what I must do.”



## *Chapter 5*

Svanhild woke suddenly, and for a moment saw only blackness. She fought free, and realised with relief that she saw the darkness of Aleks's tunic. She'd somehow ended up sleeping with her face pressed against his chest. Fighting back a red flush of embarrassment she pulled herself away from him and sat up against the wall.

He began to stir a moment later, his eyelids flickering open to give her a glimpse of those bright blue eyes.

A sudden noise came from outside, soft but distinct. Someone else must be in the old palace with them. The noise must have woken her up, and surely Aleks too. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, afraid to move. He raised one finger to his lips and slipped towards the doorway, his movements as fluid as the water around him. Shaking the last of the sleep from her eyes, Svanhild followed him.

They crossed the threshold of their temporary sleep room and scanned the expanse that had once been the main hall of the palace. Empty. Aleks jerked his head towards the tumbledown wall separating them from the seaweed forest. He and Svanhild moved slowly towards it, keeping close together. Whether a shark or a Wildling, Svanhild would not let anything hurt her – or Aleks.

Aleks slipped around the remains of the old wall first, his knife in his hand. Svanhild pulled her own tiny knife from her belt, wishing there had been more time for sword lessons. Her heart boomed so loudly in her ears that she could barely hear the rustling of the water through the seaweed.

“Stop right there!” Aleks shouted, leaping forward, slashing a path through the dense seaweed. Svanhild flew after him, fronds of weed battering her in the face, her hair tangling in the plants all around her.

She caught up with Aleks as he pinned another man to the ground, both of them breathing hard.

“Who are you?” Svanhild demanded, standing close to Aleks's shoulder to look down at the other man. He tried to gasp out an answer, but Aleks had him too tightly by the throat.

“Let him speak, Aleks,” Svanhild said, laying one hand lightly on Aleks's shoulder. He looked up at her, meeting her eyes for a moment, then nodded and eased his grip on the man beneath him.

“I mean no harm, I swear,” the man said. “I’ve come from Per, to bring you a message. He thought you would probably be here.”

“I’m not sure I trust you,” Aleks growled, his knife now held to the man's throat.

“He reminds you that he is no friend of Harald and says that, if sides are to be chosen, he chooses yours.”

Of course. That was the half-forgotten undercurrent that had unsettled her in the presence of both Harald and Per. It was no secret that Per had inherited only because his older brother had been killed in a duel – with Harald. Not a warlike man, despite his high status, Per had no doubt tried to settle the matter peacefully. But no selkie under the sea would reject an opportunity for revenge that drifted through their own doorway.

“We may be willing to work with your lord,” Svanhild said. “But you will need to tell us more.”

The envoy shook his head. “I will only speak to you alone,” he said.

Aleks shook his head firmly, brandishing the knife again. “You think I’ll trust her alone with you, just because you claim to come from her cousin?”

“I mean what I say.” The envoy's face was as set and determined as Aleks's.

“Tie him up so he can't hurt me,” Svanhild suggested. Aleks paused for a moment, looking at her, his eyes unreadable. Finally, he nodded. He unravelled some of the ropes wrapped around his waist, and tied the envoy's hands and feet firmly. The knots looked a little too tight, but they would hold the man even if he shifted into his seal shape.

Aleks left them alone, but he didn't go far, and Svanhild could feel his eyes on her through the thickness of the seaweed forest.

“You can talk now,” she said to the envoy.

“My lord offers you a deal,” the envoy said. “He sees the opportunity to right more than one wrong.”

“I know he wants revenge on Harald,” said Svanhild. “What else?”

“Your guard. Years ago, your people raided into our lands. That blond madman killed the captain of our guard. Per wants him dead.”

Svanhild felt a little dizzy, strange shapes dancing at the edge of her vision. “He can hardly claim vengeance from a man who was acting on someone else's orders.” Her voice seemed to be coming from a very long way away.

The envoy shrugged as much as his ropes let him.

“Klaus will be your vengeance. Per wants his own.”

In one fluid movement, Svanhild launched herself forward, her knife flashing in her hand. She cut through the ropes as quickly as she could, the rough fibres burning the skin of her palms.

“Leave,” she told the envoy, hating the shake in her voice. “Aleks is my man now, and I will defend him. If my cousin will not accept that, then I will find my allies elsewhere.”

The envoy didn't move, just looking up at her in bewilderment.

“Leave!” Svanhild screamed, throwing the full force of her magic behind the command. The man shot backwards, scrabbling at the sandy soil beneath him. Throwing one terrified glance back at her, he swam away, crashing through the seaweed so loudly that Svanhild half worried he would bring the Wildlings down upon them.

“What happened?”

Aleks appeared beside her, his arms around her shoulders for a brief second before he pulled away.

Svanhild told him what the envoy had said, her words short and sharp.

Aleks looked away, wiping one hand across his forehead. She tried to read his face, but shadows lay deeply across him.

“I'll leave now,” he said after a moment. “Per seems like a man who would at least give me a fair fight.”

No.

“You're not going. I need you here. Alive.”

“Don't be a fool. You need Per's support more than you need me. I can keep you

alive. He could make you a queen.”

“You're exaggerating,” Svanhild snapped. “If you're my man, you do as I tell you. I won't just hand you over to someone else, however wealthy and powerful they are.”

“You're sacrificing your cause for nothing!” Aleks shouted, his face dangerously close to hers. “I deserve whatever punishment they want to give me - Per, Harald, the lot of them. I earned it. I don't deserve your protection.”

“I don't care what you think you deserve!” Svanhild shouted back, feeling her hair swirl and crackle with magic. “I won't sacrifice you for anything, Aleks, no matter what you say!”

She pushed past him, sending the water rippling madly as she shoved her way back through the seaweed towards their temporary home. Just the thought of Aleks gone - dead - felt so sickening that she couldn't look at him. Her whole body ached with the thought of losing him.

How could she find an ally when everyone wanted her to abandon Aleks? Would they spend the rest of their lives living in these dark, sea-swirled ruins?

## *Chapter 6*

Once again, Svanhild woke suddenly. But this time, she found herself alone. And she already knew the cause of the noise. She crept out of the small room, keeping close to the rough stonework as she slipped out into what had once been the main hall of the palace.

“What are you doing, Aleks?”

His hands still tied the ropes around his tunic as he turned to look at her. The second she looked into his eyes, her suspicions hardened into truth.

“Don't do it,” she said. “I'm not going to stop protecting you. I don't care about the cost.”

“I intercepted a second messenger during the night. Another selkie lord who wants me dead. This is getting bigger than just me. Or even just you,” Aleks said, looking away.

“What do you mean?” Svanhild demanded, a rush of panicked adrenalin making her dizzy.

“This is your cause. Your birthright. I'm not going to let you throw it away for me. I deserve whatever I get.”

“Don't you dare say things like that!”

Svanhild grabbed him hard by the shoulders, forcing him to look into her eyes.

“I'm not going to let you do this,” she said fiercely. His eyes burned into hers, full of emotion – fear? After so many years surviving the worst of the selkie world, why would he do something so reckless now?

“You could do so much for all selkies,” he said, his eyes pleading. “There are other people who need you more than I do.”

“I don't care. I need you. There's no way I can do any of this if I don't have you with me.”

He moved so fast that Svanhild hardly saw it. But then his arms wrapped tightly around her, his face close to hers. His lips touched hers, hard and demanding.

For one brief, incredible second, Svanhild relished the taste of him, the warmth of his skin, the safe strength of his arms. But then she pushed him away, shoving hard at his chest.

“What are you doing?” she shouted at him, tears prickling in her eyes. “I need you here as my friend, Aleks. As my supporter. I need someone I can trust. Please don't ruin that.”

He let go of her as if she was red-hot, looking over her shoulder into the distance.

“Please accept my apologies,” he said, stiffly. “I don't know what came over me.”

He paused for a moment.

“Please believe that I will be your loyal servant for as long as I live. I will do my best to help you achieve your goals.”

“Good,” Svanhild said, a little shakily. “But I will tell you again: I am not going to give up your life for the sake of any goal. I want to honour my father's memory, but he is dead and you are alive. I intend to keep you that way.”

Aleks nodded, still not looking at her.

“We go to see Per,” Svanhild said in the most regal voice she could manage. “This is my problem to solve, and I will find a way to compromise with him. Get ready to leave.”

She swept back into the small sleep-room, face impassive but tears threatening to erupt if she let her concentration falter for even a second.

Why had Aleks done that? Why had he even thought to kiss her?

She thought of all the times Klaus had laughed at her flaming red hair and teased her for her dark eyes and sunken cheeks. She had never been beautifully curved and shining-eyed like Katrina, whose honey-blond hair moved gracefully with the current and settled softly around her shoulders. Even Margit, elegant and refined, couldn't compete with Katrina - and Klaus made sure she knew it.

Svanhild had been heartbroken when she realised how cruelly Klaus treated Margit, flaunting his mistress in front of her. But the law let him do as he wished, and no one would dream of criticising how the Lord of the Icy Shores lived his life. Besides, a selkie woman could suffer a far worse fate than an unfaithful husband. But Margit deserved so much better.

For the first time, Svanhild began to see Klaus as a stranger might. Cruel and manipulative, he especially mistreated the women in his life. Much as Svanhild had loved him, her uncle had never treated her well, always finding little ways to make her feel weak, helpless, unattractive, awkward, unlovable. Could Aleks be the same, just finding ways to tease and upset her?

She drew in a deep, ragged breath, wishing that she could ask Margit for advice. But she had left Margit behind. She would just have to continue with her mission and ignore the complications presented by Aleks. Her emotions did not matter when so much more was at stake.

“I’m sorry,” Aleks said, startling her. Svanhild spun round to see him hovering in the doorway, his face half-hidden by shadows. She waited, watching him, staying so still that the only movement came from her breath bubbling up around her and her hair gently tickling her cheeks in the current.

“I did not mean any disrespect,” he said, his voice more formal than she could ever remember hearing before. “I’m sorry for that. You trusted me and I broke that trust.”

He bowed low, the movement fluid and well-practised, yet somehow forced. Something deeper lay in his eyes, behind the politeness and apology. Perhaps she would eventually find it.

“There’s no need to keep apologising,” Svanhild said, brushing past him as she swam out through the palace and into the seaweed forest. “We need to discuss this with Per.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Aleks argued, kicking hard to catch up with her. It didn’t seem to leave him at all out of breath.

“Don’t get caught up in problems that I made myself,” he continued, a note of pleading in his voice. Svanhild ignored him, swimming steadily onward in the direction of Per’s palace. Aleks finally seemed to understand that she wouldn’t be swayed. He followed her silently, each stroke so smooth and controlled that Svanhild could barely tell anyone swam behind her.

It was not until the high white walls came into view ahead that Svanhild began to feel the tingle of nerves. To her surprise, the guards pulled the doors open and ushered her through without a word. How did Per know to expect them? They permitted even Aleks to swim straight through the towering archway and into the darkness of the hall beyond.

“Cousin Svanhild,” Per said wearily, looking up from the intricately carved runestick

he held in his hands. “I was expecting you to visit.”

“Every single one of us is threatened by the Wildlings,” Svanhild told him, drawing her magic around her in a protective cloak. “We need to act together. All of us.”

Per nodded, his eyes tired. “You're right, and I offer you my apologies. I acted in anger. It's time for that to change.”

“You're willing to drop the grudge you hold against Aleks?” Svanhild demanded.

“I am.”

With those two simple words, Svanhild felt her entire world change. She didn't have to choose between her father's memory and Aleks's life.

“What changed your mind?” she asked.

“You aren't the only person to bring the rumours of the Wildlings,” Per said. “We can't deny the danger any longer. You're right. We have to work together.”

Svanhild and Aleks exchanged a glance, and she saw the same stunned disbelief that she felt, lurking deep behind his almost-emotional eyes. New hope began to grow.

“Then you're willing to work with us? Both of us?”

Per nodded again, but his eyes were still troubled.

“I need to warn you, though. There will be others who will not drop their grudges. And Klaus has a long reach.”

The sick feeling settled back into Svanhild's stomach. Klaus. Always there to ruin her opportunities and destroy her confidence.

Aleks's voice came from beside her, confident but somehow distant.

“I can handle Klaus.”

“No,” Svanhild said, the word bursting out before she had even formed the thought. “I will handle Klaus myself.”

“Leave Klaus to the politicians and the warriors,” Per said, his voice kind. Every nerve in Svanhild's body flared bright and alive.



“I will be the one who defeats Klaus!” she shouted, magic erupting from her in visible flames, curling through the water and licking at her fiery curls. “He has murdered my father, stolen my birthright, and denied my independence. I am as strong and capable as any warrior or politician, and you will listen when I speak.”

Per and Aleks both froze, their eyes wide and terrified, the last of the flames still dancing along their silhouettes.

“I will follow and obey you,” Aleks said, bowing his head.

Per went further. He slumped to his knees, and then pressed his face flat against the rough matting of the hall floor.

“My Queen,” he said, the words floating from his mind to hang pure and clear in the water.

It had begun.

“Klaus will pay,” she vowed, feeling the magic twist her words into a promise more binding than all the ropes she had ever woven. “But I will not stop here. I will right all that is wrong with our people, and I will bring us back together. United, we will survive.”

## *Chapter 7*

The knock on her door came so softly that she barely heard it.

“Svanhild? We need to talk.”

She got up from the pile of luxurious blankets and cushions that she'd enjoyed so much and opened the door to let Aleks in.

“What's so urgent that you had to disturb me?”

“Per has news. Klaus has called a secret meeting of selkie lords at the Icy Shores. It looks like he's trying to build a rival alliance.”

“I'd hardly call it rival when we hardly have any allies yet,” Svanhild pointed out. Aleks just shrugged.

She pretended to stretch and surreptitiously rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Aleks didn't need to know that he'd woken her from a nap.

“We need to find out what happens in that meeting,” she said, exhausted just at the thought. “Defeating Klaus will be impossible if we have no idea what he's doing.”

Aleks's nodded grimly.

“I knew you'd say that, but it's going to be difficult.”

The first attempt saw them sneaking around the edges of the Icy Shore fasthold, already tired from the long, hard swim through Per's lands and across the forests of the Icy Shores.

As Svanhild had feared, more guards than she had ever seen before watched the log palisade and magical net that surrounded the fasthold. Aleks looked up at the walls with a frown, and she wondered if he remembered all the times he had stood guard up there. Icy Shores had been home to both of them for so long.

Following Aleks's lead, she crept through the kelp forest that stretched almost up to the palisade itself, seaweed fingers stretching out towards the wood. How could they possibly swim up and through the net without being spotted? From the look on Aleks's face, he had the same thoughts.

“Who goes there?”

The magical cry rang out through the murky water. They could not know if it was directed at them, but Svanhild instinctively shrank back against the palisade. What if they were spotted? Klaus had never been a merciful man.

“We need a better plan,” Aleks said, the words for her only. She nodded, then jerked her head towards the seaweed forest. He slipped off immediately, fading into a dark shadow behind layers of black plants. She paused for a second to calm her racing heart, then went after him.

She spotted Aleks up ahead, lurking in the shadows and made straight for him. Her senses tingled suddenly and she froze, desperately hoping that the depths of the black seaweed concealed her well. Could her hair still be seen? Curse that red shade- always more trouble than it was worth.

Moving slowly and carefully, she rotated her head, poised to flee - and held back a gasp as a shark slid through the weeds, barely an arm's length away from her. It swam past, vanishing into the darkness, and she almost collapsed with relief.

“Per is waiting on the border for us,” Aleks said, coming up beside her. He did not touch her, but his presence still warmed the water around her, safe and comforting. “We should listen to his ideas.”

If Per had no ideas, this plan might fall apart before it began. When Svanhild's father was alive, comfort and laughter had filled the Icy Shores fasthold, its hall always a welcoming place. Back then, the defences had made her feel safe. But with Klaus, those defences felt like a trap - and now they kept her out of her own home. Her father would have been heartbroken.

Thankfully, Per did have another idea, although it did not immediately win Svanhild's approval.

“Are you absolutely sure that no one there knows your cousin?” she asked. “What if he turns up after all?”

Per sighed and spread his arms wide. “What else can we do? But yes, I am sure.”

Svanhild bit her lip, taking another moment to consider. Such a bold and risky plan could easily go wrong. But Per was right - what else could they do?

“Besides,” Per said, “Klaus won't want to confront me directly. He knows that could

lead to trouble. You should be safe enough with me.”

“I just don't see why I have to pretend to be Aleks's wife,” Svanhild said.

“Klaus knows I'm not married,” Per said, exasperated. “It will cause too much of a fuss if I suddenly appear with a wife.”

“I suppose,” Svanhild said. Walking back into the Icy Shores hall would be bad enough. Imagining herself as Aleks's wife added an unwelcome extra layer of pain.

Aleks rested one hand on her shoulder, lightly squeezing, and she almost smiled at the warmth and comfort spreading from his hand. She couldn't be selfish. He faced the same difficulties.

On their second attempt, they swam straight up to the front gate of the fasthold, Per's men surrounding them. Svanhild's fiery hair lay tucked under a tight-fitting wimple, and she kept her eyes downcast. With any luck, no one would recognise her in such an unexpected place. After all, they thought her an outcast.

As they approached the guards, her fear surely showed on her face. What a terrible idea. But the guards waved her straight through, barely casting a glance at her as they greeted Per. Aleks managed to slip through as well, half hidden under a helmet and hood. The familiar sights of the fastness greeted them, the gates slamming shut behind them.

Svanhild gazed about the hall, just as she remembered; warm, comforting, and a little dirty, draped about with ropes and covered in faded wall paintings. The familiar smells of fish stew and unwashed pet dolphins mingled with the fancy perfume of the visiting selkie lords and ladies.

They had arrived late, unsurprisingly, given the time it had taken to disguise Svanhild and Aleks. It appeared that everyone else had been waiting for them, so Per stepped forward to attract all the attention. He greeted Klaus elaborately, and bowed low to kiss Margit's hand. Katrina stood just beside her, glowering. What a shame that woman hadn't disappeared.

The lords settled into a rough arc around Klaus, their followers and ladies massing behind them. Everyone stood silently, waiting.

“First,” Klaus said, an expression of excessive concern on his face, “I need to confirm the rumours you have no doubt already heard about my niece.”

Svanhild stiffened. Aleks lay one hand on her arm, sending her a silent warning. This

might be even harder than she had expected.

“Unfortunately, while I am of course fond of her, my niece has turned out to be as treacherous and foolish as her father,” Klaus said, shaking his head in mock concern. “I had hoped to fix her with a good marriage, but it appears that she was beyond redemption. Please, join me in ending this foolishness that she has started – this ridiculous notion of bringing all selkies together. I know that none of you wish to be the inferior of any man, and that is exactly how it should be. We are independent people, and may we always be so! No power hungry woman will change that!”

Svanhild's mouth opened as she pushed forward, but Aleks wrapped her in a blanket of magic so thick that she almost collapsed. A few surrounding selkies looked at her oddly, but no thoughts left her mind.

“Don't be a fool,” Aleks said silently. “You expected these kind of lies.”

“Not about my father,” Svanhild said, feeling the prickle of tears in her eyes. How dare Klaus betray his own brother, and then make accusations of treachery?

When Klaus began to talk again, she could hardly bear to listen to him. Instead, she let her attention drift around the hall. Few familiar faces remained. Had Klaus got rid of everyone who had once supported her father?

She glanced towards the corner of the hall, and met the eyes of Gunnar. Her father's old court magician stared back steadily, his dark eyes never wavering. He recognised her. She sent an urgent nudge to Aleks, already beginning to move back towards the door of the hall. They needed to leave right now.

Klaus kept talking, lies and nonsense, but Svanhild knew she couldn't let the rage get the better of her. The main doors to the hall were shut now, guards barring them. She needed to go through the back door, but that meant passing Klaus.

“I propose an alliance of free lords,” Klaus said, throwing his arms theatrically into the air, just Svanhild tried to slip past him unnoticed. She kept her head down and swam straight ahead, never looking at his face. She felt the heat of his eyes on the back of her head, but then the first handful of Lords began to swear friendship and agreement to his pointless, empty alliance, distracting him at the perfect time. She and Aleks made it to the back door unnoticed, and out into the empty lane beyond. Per appeared a moment later, shaking his head.

“If everyone in there believes Klaus, then you don't have a chance of finding allies,” he said. “He's a persuasive man.”

“I don't care what he says, or how many friends he makes,” Svanhild said fiercely. “He is a filthy, murdering, traitor, and I will see to it that he faces his punishment.”

Per shrugged. “I won't argue that he doesn't deserve it, but these are terrible odds. I don't know what else I can do for you.”

“You can't abandon us now,” Svanhild said. Did the words sound like an order, or a plea? “I'm the only person who can rebuild the old kingdom, and you know it.”

“It's a very big kingdom for a very small woman,” a voice said behind her.

Svanhild turned, and looked straight into the eyes of Gunnar.

## *Chapter 8*

“It's impossible to have a woman as a leader,” Gunnar said, banging his fist hard on Pers council table. They had argued with him all morning.

“It's not that she's a bad girl,” he continued. “She certainly has her strengths, and her father was a great man. But a woman just can't be a leader.”

Svanhild hissed in yet another breath, wondering if he even noticed that she sat beside him. She'd never liked her father's magician. It seemed that very little separated human men from selkie men when it came to women.

“I suggest we choose Per as a new leader,” Gunnar said, apparently warming to his subject. “Perhaps you could marry the girl, Per. That might make things easier.”

Beside her, Svanhild felt Aleks stiffen.

Why had she ever thought that Gunnar would help them? Such a narrow-minded and foolish man could do nothing for her. She could find more supporters without his help.

“That isn't going to happen,” Per said calmly. “Svanhild will be my queen, not my wife.”

How could he stay so calm when Gunnar spoke such nonsense? Svanhild barely held in a scream of frustration.

“She is our leader if you say she is,” Garner said, his voice a little sulky. “I still don't think it's right for a woman to lead, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep the Wildlings out.”

As a little girl, Svanhild had loved watching Gunnar performing his magic tricks. Amazingly, this human had magic far stronger than almost any selkie. But with no family, he had always depended on a patron to protect him. No one really knew where he came from, or how he had made his way into the sea, but he had always seemed a grateful and loyal servant to Svanhild's father. What a shame that he disliked and distrusted women so much.

“Svanhild isn't the problem, anyway,” Per said. “The problem is that we need more support. Selkies are cautious. No one wants to risk being the first to swear allegiance.”

“I don't know what else to do,” Svanhild said, then immediately regretted how

defeated she sounded. "I've tried before," she said defensively. "No one else listens to me then, so why should they now?"

"Don't assume that everyone you saw yesterday actually supports Klaus," Gunnar said. "Many of them supported your father, and can well believe that he was wrongfully murdered. You may find more supporters than you expect."

"But how can I get them to work with me?" Svanhild asked. "If I march straight into their palaces, like I did here, there is a risk that they'll just turn me straight over to Klaus."

"It's a risk that you have to be willing to take," Per said. "If you want to be our Queen, you have to be prepared to trust us all equally."

Svanhild looked around the room, meeting the anxious eyes of everyone staring back at her. These people had committed to her cause. They depended on her now, as she depended on them.

"I will do whatever it takes," she said. "Prepare a list of lords for me to meet with. I will leave tomorrow."

She swept out of the room, setting the water swirling dramatically in her wake. Aleks followed at her elbow.

They made their way through the tumbledown corridors of Per's palace, until at last Svanhild found a quiet spot beneath a set of half-collapsed stairs.

"What do you think?" she asked Aleks, boldly meeting his eyes.

He shook his head slowly. "I appreciate that Per has a point, but this is foolish. You're putting yourself in too much danger."

"My mind is made up."

"At least agree that you'll take me with you to each meeting."

He leaned so close that Svanhild could feel the rough stone of the wall against her back as she edged away from his heat.

"Per's men can come with me," she pointed out. "I don't need you every moment of every day."



Aleks's eyes almost shot sparks as he moved even closer, his hand flat on the wall beside her head.

“I don't trust anyone else to guard you,” he said, his thoughts sharp and clear. “I could not live with myself if something happened because I wasn't there for you.”

Gazing up at his face, Svanhild watched with rapt attention as his lips moved closer. Pure adrenalin shot through her veins, as vivid and powerful as magic. She stood frozen, torn between fear and desire. One hand reached out towards his cheek, desperate for a touch, but the other shoved hard at his chest, pushing him aside.

“I'll let you know if I need you,” she said, sliding past him without meeting his eyes. “I have a lot to sort out.”

“Don't go without me,” Aleks called out to her, his thoughts rough and a little hoarse. “No plan is good enough to risk losing you.”

## *Chapter 9*

The memories of the dream vanished in a fraction of a second, but the idea still hovered bright and clear in her mind. It might just work.

Svanhild threw off the pile of blankets that tangled around her arms and legs, rising up in the water as the weight lifted. She flew out into the corridor, her feet trailing behind her as she banged on the other sleeping-room doors.

“Wake up!” she broadcast with all the power she could manage.

How could she have overlooked such a brilliant way to spread the truth? The time had come for everyone to understand Klaus’s crimes and lies.

“You’re mad,” Gunnar said flatly, after she had outlined the plan to a confused, sleepy group of men around Per’s council table. “That’s the most ridiculous idea I’ve ever heard.”

“You don’t have to like it,” Svanhild shot back. “Just provide me with the power I need.”

Gunnar shook his head. “Find someone else to help with your wild fantasies. I won’t get involved in this sort of nonsense.”

Svanhild stared at him, feeling her own magic burn into his cold, light blue eyes.

“I don’t know exactly what my father did for you,” she said slowly. “But I know that you owe him. It’s time to repay that debt.”

Gunnar held her eyes for a moment, a flicker of anger flaring and then disappearing before he lowered his head.

“I will serve you as I would have served your father, my lady. My powers are at your command.”

Unfortunately, Gunnar told the truth. But aren’t the most brilliant ideas often a little mad?

Selkies drew their power from the life of the ocean itself, from each rock, plant, animal, and spirit that lived beneath the waves. Every spark of life was connected, in a giant net that stretched from shore to shore and around the entire expanse of the world.

So Svanhild's mother had taught her, as every selkie woman taught her child.

But Svanhild had hungered to learn more. From her father, she had learnt about the places of power, where many threads of the net gathered in one place and the magic was strongest. From Margit, she had learnt to use her own magic, her aunt's gentle hands teaching her to spin the net into magic just as she span thread into rope. And from the ancient songs of the bards and the whispers of half-drunk selkies, she had learnt about the crystals.

They set out almost immediately, pausing only to pack some basic supplies and gather a few more men. Dawn had not broken above the waves, it seemed, because no light yet filtered through the water to where their little group travelled along the ocean floor.

The site was one that everyone knew of, but only talked about in whispers. Svanhild had never been before, although every detail felt so familiar that she almost recognised it.

A cluster of sparkling purple crystals rose from the sandy ground, kept clean by the same strange currents that spun the sand into spirals all around them. At the edge of this clearing in the kelp forest, tiny offerings of jewelry and rope hung from the black seaweed. Svanhild gently lifted one golden chain with her fingertip, marvelling at how old it looked. No one ever stole from the crystals.

Gunnar carefully directed them all into place, frowning heavily.

“I've never done this before,” he told Svanhild. “For all I know, it's nothing but myths and stories. Don't expect too much.”

Svanhild just shook her head, unable to explain her faith. “It will work,” she said.

She laid her hands gently on the crystals, feeling the prickly warmth spread through her skin and sparkle along her veins. Closing her eyes, she waited patiently as Gunnar set his own hands on her shoulders and began to chant, his incredible power flowing through her and into the crystals.

The water started to swirl around them in ever-tightening circles, flowing in first one direction and then another. The heat reached vicious intensity, flowing through Svanhild with such force that she could hear herself screaming, her agony bubbling up through the water that sprayed past her face.

The network flew open, the mesh of magic and life that made up the ocean laying itself bare to her. Beside her, someone was crying, but she couldn't pay attention.

“Tell them,” Gunnar said, his voice painfully loud in her head, shouting through the chaos of the magic. “Open your heart and tell them the truth.”

So she did.

It all came out: Klaus's lies, her father's love, the fierce faces of the Wildlings. Her father's dreams of the future, the dirty splendour of the half-forgotten crown, Katrina's petty cruelty, Aleks's hopeful eyes. All of her most powerful memories and thoughts unfurled themselves into the web of magic, spreading across an entire world of ocean before Svanhild could focus a single thought.

Memories came in return. Other images of Wildlings, some from the present, and some coming to her from the ancient past when all selkies had lived in fear of the foreign raiders. She saw Klaus stab her father in the back, his hands covered in blood and his face grim. She saw her parents together, hands touching, and Klaus's anger as he watched them.

And then more images came, drifting to her from the network of many futures that crisscrossed the ocean. She watched the Wildlings rampage through selkie lands, leaving chaos and bloodshed as they swam on past. She saw herself, sat on a great stone throne, her face pale and serious. Aleks strapped on a silver sword, his face streaked with blood. A giant golden net closed around Klaus.

“Tell them,” Gunnar said again, his voice fainter now.

“I am Svanhild of the Icy Shores,” she said, feeling her words burst into the minds of every selkie alive. “I call for justice and I call for unity. Join me. United, we survive. Divided, we die. I will be your queen and leader, helping you to stand together, just as the old kings did. Let there be no more selkie bloodshed. We must be prepared to fight the Wildlings together.”

And then she collapsed, the magical connection ended abruptly as she fell to the ground, the purple lights of the crystals still glowing, just inches from her face.

“That was too much!” an angry voice said. “You've half-killed her!”

It was Aleks, grabbing at her shoulder to pull her towards him.

“Not yet,” Gunnar said sharply, lifting her hand and touching it to the crystal again.

“We stand with you,” she heard, echoing from every corner of the ocean. “We want no ruler, but we will stand behind you as leader.”

“We have Klaus, ready to be wrapped in the ropes he deserves,” one voice said, clearer and sharper than the rest. Svanhild could almost hear the chaos and fury erupting in the hall of the Icy Shores.

“He's gone!” the voice screamed in fury, and Svanhild abruptly shot back to reality again, scrambling to sit up on the sandy ground and staring at her men in horror.

“Klaus escaped,” she told them. “We have to go after him. Enough talking. Now is the time for action. This will be a new moon - a new dawn.”

## *Chapter 10*

Svanhild slid the gloves onto her hands, feeling the unfamiliar tightness of the metal armour that wrapped around her arms. Per's smiths had nothing ready-built for a woman. They had spent the past few hours reshaping some boys' armour to fit her, and she couldn't quite feel comfortable in it. She brushed her hair back over her shoulders and slid the helmet into place, her vision narrowing to two circles ahead of her. Klaus would be found, and he would face justice, as he deserved. Time to hunt.

“Are you ready?” Aleks asked, stepping up beside her, his own helmet under his arm.

“This cannot come soon enough.”

He nodded solemnly and raised a hand to gesture Per's men forward. He pulled his own helmet on, his familiar face becoming a smooth expanse of expressionless metal. Svanhild looked away, focusing on the open water ahead of them.

“He will be hiding in the forest. There is nowhere else for him to go. Spread out, men, but remain in small groups. We will try to flush him towards the lords still waiting for him at the Icy Shores fasthold.”

A murmur of agreement came from behind her.

Gunnar, appearing on her other side, sniffed at the water, an eerie blue light glowing around his head. The human magician seemed to be a gifted tracker as well as a powerful sorcerer. What a relief that he supported her, not Klaus.

They set off through the undergrowth, slowly at first, and then faster, as Gunnar sped off towards a scent that caught his nose. The excited hunting sharks sprang off behind him so quickly that their handlers could barely keep hold of them.

Svanhild kept as close to Gunnar as she could manage, ignoring the kelp that caught in her hair and tangled around her arms. The armour felt heavy and awkward, far harder to swim in than her usual wrapped tunic and ropes. How did men fight in something like this?

Gunnar disappeared from view, hidden behind a thick growth of black seaweed. Svanhild put on an extra burst of speed, flying through the darkest part of the undergrowth. No Gunnar. She looked around her, suddenly realising that Aleks and the men were gone. How had she lost them so quickly? A faint cry sounded in the distance and she started towards it.

A burst of pain suddenly flew through her and she kicked out, feeling ropes wrap around her body and magic burn into her skin. Her arms were pinned to her sides, her legs trapped together, and her chest so tightly bound that she could barely breathe. Forcing herself to calm down, she sucked in a full breath. She hung in a magical net, one of the strongest she had ever felt. The magic was unmistakable - Katrina had made this.

Just like the magical net that held the ocean together, much of selkie magic was bound up in ropes and nets. The women all knew how to make them, whether for fishing, defence, or - most dangerously - for magic. Not every woman could knot a magical net; controlling that kind of power took more control and skill than most learnt in a lifetime. And if it went wrong, the consequences could be fatal. Katrina was one of the few women who had the skill naturally. Svanhild had often wondered if that endeared her to Klaus just as much as her looks did.

“Regretting all the times you neglected your netting lessons?” a voice asked from behind her, sounding almost friendly, but with a vicious undercurrent. Klaus. As if he knew anything about her abilities. He had no idea what Margit had taught her in private.

Drawing in another deep breath, Svanhild willed herself to total calm, and let her magic reach out to stroke against every single knot in the rope. Impressive power, even if she did not want to admit admiring anything Katrina did.

With one final burst of power, the net disintegrated and Svanhild span around. Klaus stood in front of her, poised and waiting in the centre of a small clearing. He smiled.

“Very impressive, my dear. You always did show such promise. It's a shame that I will have to kill you like I did your father.”

Perhaps he did not know that Katrina's nets only held men, not women. Perhaps he did not know that his lover had let him down.

“You admit it, then?” Svanhild asked, drifting almost imperceptibly towards him.

He laughed. “You watched the memory yourself, did you not? I stabbed him in the back and let the ocean wash away his blood. So poetic.”

She lunged, all thoughts of subtlety and caution gone, feeling nothing but the sword in her hand. Klaus parried easily, his own sword moving at an almost impossible speed. Svanhild struck again, as hard as she could, but he fended her off and stepped closer.

“Help me,” she called, sending the cry not out to Aleks and the men, but to the ocean

surrounding her. She felt her words catch on a thread of the great magical web, and then they vanished. Had her plea been heard?

Klaus struck first this time, his sword slamming onto her helmet and sending her reeling, the water lighting up in the colours of a bruise. Or were the colours inside her head?

“You will never win,” he screamed at her, as she raised her sword with weary arms, only just parrying his next thrust. How had she ever thought that she could take on a man who had trained for this his entire life? Another blow rained down. She knew that the next would be her last.

And then, suddenly, the magic answered. In one tiny movement, a strand of black kelp reached outward, glittering with power. It brushed against Klaus's leg as he lifted his sword for the final blow, and Svanhild felt the magic tug. Klaus stumbled, slipping sideways. It was enough. Svanhild lunged forwards, catching his sword with her own and sending it flying as he instinctively reached for balance. Unarmed, he stared up at her as she raised her sword again.

“We have him!”

Aleks and Gunnar shot past her, grabbing Klaus by each arm and forcing him to the ground on his knees. The rest of the men poured into the clearing, the hunting sharks arching and snapping around them, and Svanhild lowered her sword with shaking hands.

Klaus was wrapped up in ropes in just a few moments, powerful spells holding him still and silent. He glared at Svanhild as the men dragged him away, but he could not say anything else to hurt her.

“What on earth were you thinking?” Aleks roared, spinning Svanhild around to face him. She pulled her helmet off, dropped it to the ground, and yanked his hands off her.

“Keep your thoughts quiet,” she told him furiously.

“Don't ever do something like that again!” he shouted, ignoring her. “Why didn't you wait for me? You could have been killed!”

“I can look after myself!” Svanhild shouted back. “Who are you to tell me what to do?”

“Just someone who loves you! How could I live without you? How could I go on if I lost you? Don't you dare do that to me again!”



His words slammed into Svanhild like the wave of a tsunami. She stared up at him, the exhaustion and confusion almost too much.

“I couldn't go on without you, either,” she said finally. “You mean everything to me. How could I be strong without you? I'm sorry.”

Aleks stroked her cheek, and the world around them faded away.

“We are strongest together,” he told her.

She nodded, her thoughts too jumbled for words. He was so beautiful, gazing down at her, and so strong. They both deserved a new start - together.

She lifted up, drifting a few inches off the ground, and pressed her lips to Aleks's. He froze for a moment, and then she felt him snap. Magic flew out into the water around them as he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her against him. He kissed her back, hard and sweet, and she cried salty tears into the ocean waves.

“I love you, Aleks,” she said straight into his mind, never breaking the kiss.

His arms tightened around her, and she felt free at last.

## *Chapter 11*

The noise that echoed around Per's hall almost deafened Svanhild, music and thoughts ricocheting off the tiled walls. Her face ached from smiling at everyone who had greeted her as the new Lady of the Icy Shores.

The title still sounded strange, almost foreign. How must Margit feel, all alone in the hall of the Icy Shores? Per had organised this feast, and there had been no time for Svanhild to return home, which she knew must look uncaring. Still, it had hurt when Margit turned down her invitation to the Long Moons palace.

A familiar face would have been welcome. It drained her energy to sit among all the selkie lords who'd laughed at her and applauded Klaus. She drifted from food basket to food basket, circling around the hall. If only Aleks hadn't insisted on taking guard duty. He stood just inside the door to the hall, his hand on his sword and his eyes always on her.

Everyone was polite, perhaps overly so. She was the heroine of the moment, but could she prove herself as a leader? She scratched at her wrists, where shining new golden arm rings felt cold and odd in comparison with her old rope bracelets.

“My lady. What a pleasure.”

Svanhild's heart sank as she turned to graciously greet the selkie she had most hoped not to see. Harald, the man Klaus had tried to betroth her to, the man who had insulted her in this very hall just a few weeks earlier. She tried to politely move on past him, but he grabbed her arm. She could feel Aleks at her side in seconds.

“Leave him be,” she warned silently, and jerked her arm free.

“While we all admire your bravery, my lady, do not believe that any of us have changed our minds,” Harald said, staring into her face with burning eyes. “I am willing to acknowledge that you have the right blood and breeding to lead us. But you are a woman. You cannot rule us. Marry a good man, and I will happily follow him. My sons will obey your sons. But I will not do what a woman tells me.”

Svanhild drew in a deep breath. Harald's outburst was hardly surprising, but it was certainly not welcome.

“I will marry if I wish, my lord Harald,” she said softly. “But I will not marry on your command, or to a man chosen for me by others. Furthermore, my husband will not be my

ruler. I will lead the selkies myself, as I have earned by right of blood and right of battle. Do you challenge my authority?"

She held his gaze for a moment, watching his anger mingle with fear as her men began to gather behind her.

"No, my lady," he said, looking down at the floor. "I meant no offence."

"Will you swear allegiance to me personally, not to my husband or house?" she asked him.

He sank to his knees on the hall floor.

"Svanhild of the Icy Shores, I swear to honour you as my leader and queen as long as we both live. Please accept my pledge of allegiance."

He looked up at her, a hint of mocking anger still glinting in his eyes.

Svanhild sighed.

"I accept your pledge," she said stiffly, placing one hand on his head for a fraction of a second before sweeping past, desperate to have Harald out of her sight.

The ancient selkie bond of allegiance, sworn by a warrior to his lord and a wife to her husband, could not be broken. Harald would not betray her now, but neither would he make her life easy. No doubt he felt humiliated - by a woman, no less. Perhaps it was her imagination, but the atmosphere in the hall felt a little uneasy now, a little more tense. Everyone had heard Harald's words.

"An excellent start to the evening, my lord Harald," Per said, his words booming around the hall. "I suggest that we all follow suit and swear allegiance to the Lady Svanhild as our lady and queen. I am more than happy to begin."

He bowed his head low to Svanhild and began to recite the words of the oath. Svanhild smiled at him, but she could feel the tension building up around the hall, and almost hear the silent thoughts flitting from selkie to selkie.

One small group, who had clustered together at the back of the hall, began to move towards the door. Would they leave without swearing? She turned to watch them, her breath frozen in her throat, Per's words barely registering.

Aleks stepped forwards to stand in front of the door, a guard at each of his shoulders. He said nothing, just stared straight ahead, the light from the open door catching in his

blond hair. The group of lords stopped moving. Different expressions flitted across their faces, presumably as they argued amongst themselves.

Per had completed his oath, and Svanhild lay her hand on his head gently. He smiled up at her, then rose and stood next to her.

“Will you be next to swear allegiance to my cousin?” he called, opening his arms wide to the angry-faced selkie lords. Svanhild's vision began to blur at the edges. This could all unravel so easily.

“It would be our pleasure,” one lord said, his tone so smooth and charming that she could almost believe he hadn't intended to leave. The five lords knelt before her at once, reciting the words of the oath in quick succession. Then more joined them, and more, until every man in the hall had sworn allegiance, and - to Svanhild's delight - all of the women as well.

On the surface, she had won. But she had seen reluctance in many of those eyes. What worth did allegiance have if it was built on fear?

“You've done it,” Aleks whispered, the words for her alone. She shook her head slightly, glancing over at where he still stood in front of the door.

“There are still many challenges,” she told him.

“At least now you have a chance of leading the selkies to victory. They may be uncertain about your rule now, but they will come to trust you in time.”

“I hope you will always be with me,” Svanhild said on a sudden impulse. She felt his smile.

“I live to serve you, my lady of the Icy Shores,” he said softly. “My love.”

Thank you so much for reading!

The story continues 500 years later, when selkie princess Lisbetta runs away. She finds herself in 18th-century Scotland, where no amount of magic can guarantee safety. With selkies, pirates and sea-witches battling for control of Scotland's wild Atlantic coast, Lisbetta finds herself trapped in the middle.

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