

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

from
Dance of Devils and Daylight
by Indiana Rose

As told by Hex

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The siren rose in front of Hex, ruby eyes sparking with mischief as it taunted him. Distantly, he could hear a song being hummed. Beautiful and lilting, drifting in and out of high, wavering notes only a woman could conjure.

The siren faded, and he was treading water. Salty warmth lapped against his shoulders, odd considering he was in the sea. Night was all around him, the stars reflected on the surface, burning twice as bright above him.

The water rippled as a face rose from beneath. A woman's face, but not just any woman.

Freya.

Her blonde hair was slick against her scalp, pale eyes fringed by dark, wet lashes. Her lips were full of colour, glistening as she smiled beneath the water, then rose to reveal bare shoulders. His eyes trailed down her neck, along her collarbone, then dropped to the waterline. Her bare breasts were weightless in the water, the bud of her nipples firm and peaked.

He dared to draw the shallowest of breaths. He had never seen a woman so beautiful. His legs treaded the water, keeping him afloat, but they felt like jelly.

Freya's skin wore the water like a nightgown of glistening crystal. She drifted closer to him. He felt his leg brush against hers, and he looked down. Her pale skin wavered beneath the surface.

She was completely naked.

She reached out, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders, entangling with the hair that curled against his neck.

“My love,” she murmured.

He felt like he might drown.

With her hands around his neck, she drew herself against him. His body quivered, his legs going still as he released his breath. His body burned, but he didn’t dare to touch her. He was afraid that this was all in his head. That touching her would shatter this moment, and he would find himself alone in the water. Alone in the dark.

“Don’t you long to be with us?” she murmured.

Hex wasn’t sure who ‘us’ was, but his heart squeezed.

She drew closer still. Now her breasts pushed against his chest. Her skin was like silk, her legs tangling with his beneath the water.

“Don’t you long to claim us? To make sweet, wild love in the throes of the sea.”

Yes, he wanted to say, his body aching with desire. *Yes*. But his tongue wouldn’t move. Couldn’t seem to form the words as his breath became unsteady, and heat blazed through him, pooling in his groin.

He felt her legs wrap around his waist. Felt her hips rise, then fall, her stomach sliding against his own as she ground against him.

He *felt* as though he was going to implode.

Her lips came against his neck, painting kisses across his shoulder as her hips continued to coax him into action.

“Hex,” she moaned.

His name on her tongue, delivered in a moan, was going to be his undoing.

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Couldn't resist.

He was surely going to drown. And he would gladly die if this was all he remembered. If *she* was all he remembered.

A wave crashed over him, dragging him back – down into the depths of the sea. He scrambled, arms and legs kicking.

No!

Above him, out of reach, Freya drifted against the surface. Her hands grasped for him, her golden hair floating around her shoulders as he sank away from her.

Then, blood blossomed in the water. Thick and cloudy, obscuring her from view.

She screamed.

Or maybe he screamed.

He couldn't tell. The sound was waterlogged, distant.

He thrashed, lungs burning, feeling like they might erupt from his chest.

And then he crashed against something.

He blinked, a sickening, jolting feeling washing over him, making his heart stammer. There was wood beneath his legs. Something warm beneath his back.

He looked around. He was on land. Or rather, he was on deck. Lying across the threshold of his quarters. The sky was dark and full of stars, and through a distant ringing in his ears, he could hear shouts.

Beneath him, someone squirmed.

He sat up. Something cold and sharp rolled from his chest and hit the deck with a thud. His eyes followed it.

A hand. With claws.

He looked down to where a body sprawled on the deck. Not just a body – but that of a siren. Its head lay on the ground beside it, ruby red eyes staring up at him, mouth stretched into a gaping sneer.

What the fuck...?

He blinked, the feeling of cold water rushing through his veins, dousing the heat that had consumed only moments before.

It took him a second for reality to come flooding back. Half that to spot the sword embedded in the doorframe, the hilt still quivering.

And then he saw Freya.

She was bent over, chest heaving. Strands of loose hair fell across her face, which was scratched and splattered with blood. There was blood on her shirt, too. Smearred across her chest and neck.

Was that her blood? Was she hurt?

Suddenly, Hex couldn't breathe again. He leapt to his feet, even as his legs trembled.

"It's not mine," Freya said, her eyes softening as if she could see his impending panic.

Not hers. Good. This was good. But...

Holy shit. In the next second he realized she was standing. On a fucking broken knee.

Sweet, merciless seas. The way she'd screamed when the surgeon had begun his examination the day before had almost driven Hex to punch the daylight from his eyes.

How was she not screaming right now?

Her eyes hardened again, as if sensing the direction of those thoughts, too.

“That’s fine, too,” she said, her words sharper. “I can’t feel a thing.”

Hells, was he that transparent? He wanted to shout, to demand she return to her bed, to rest, but something about the way she stiffened, as if bristling for a fight, told him she would not heed him.

An elbow found the back of his ribs, cutting off any words he’d been trying to form.

“No, really,” snapped a woman’s voice. “No need to thank me. Even though you almost crushed me to death.”

He turned, still confused about what the fuck was going on.

Hetty stood behind him, her face pinched as she smoothed her clothes.

“I...” He didn’t know what to say. “What? Thank you?”

Hetty *hmpbed*.

Frowning, he turned back to Freya. He felt like he’d been shaken awake from a deep and vivid dream. He could still feel her lips on his shoulder. Her legs wrapped around his waist. Her breasts brushing against his skin.

His still body ached in response.

But...

A pit opened inside him as he realized none of that had been real.

The siren. The red, wicked eyes still staring at him. The taloned hand outstretched, as if it had had a hold on him...as if it *still* had a hold on him.

He'd been here before, in this stupor where reality and fantasy seemed tangled together. Years ago, when he'd defied death and earned the scars that raked his arm and shoulder. When he'd almost fallen prey to the sirens beneath the waves. Then, he'd felt a flicker of the disposition he felt now. Like he belonged in the sea, with the sirens, beneath the waves, but like he was not yet ready to drown.

Now, he felt...he felt grief. And guilt. And shame. He felt as if all his greatest desires had been laid out before him, and just as he'd stepped forward to reach for them, they'd been snatched away. As if someone had been toying with him, exploiting him, teasing him with everything he wanted but could never have.

The pit inside him deepened, and his stomach rolled.

"There's no time for gratitude," Freya said, her voice sharp. "In case you hadn't noticed, your ship is under attack."