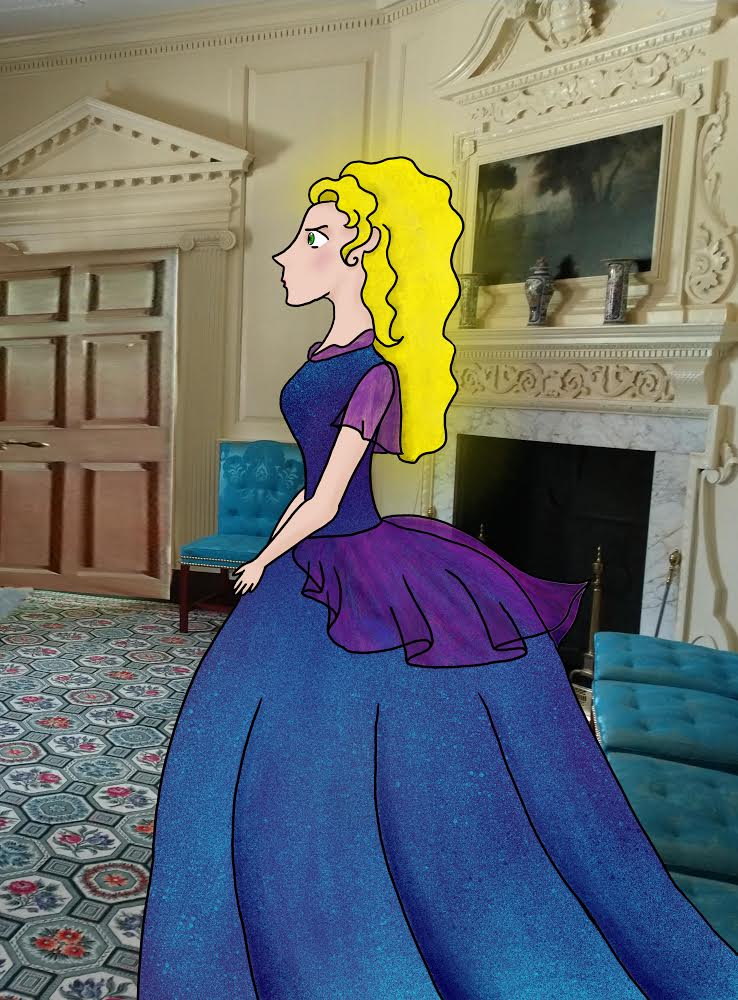
**The Dresses of the Mermaid**

**Or**

**The Mermaid’s Dresses**

By Emmalisa Horlacher



**CH 1 The Sea**

The sea has a charm to it that is unlike anything in this world. It holds secrets and histories. It can be the most threatening monster to even the biggest ship yet home to the smallest fish. Some find it frightening. Others find it beautiful. It stands as a community for all manner of creatures, fish, whales, and even mermaids. Yes, this beautiful force of nature holds the key to a mythical and magical world. The merpeople have a special connection to manipulate magic forces and create all kinds of magic items and potions.

King Posiedon, master of all the ocean, wielder of the sacred golden trident, was said to be the greatest king of them all. On this Fall day, deep in at the bottom of the ocean, among the city of Atlantis, he dwelt, in complete reverence and awe. In all this fantasmic surroundings, King Posiedon himself, could only appreciate a much more natural kind of magic. He is with his family at the birth of his youngest daughter.

The physician, Merrywhether, handles the baby while Flora and Fauna take care of the baby’s mother. Merrywhether gives the baby to her father. He gasps as he sees that the baby has the same Golden-Blonde Hair that shines like a thousand suns as her mother. He feels tears come to his eyes. Little hands tug at him.

“Let us see her Father!” says his second eldest daughter Gillian.

He introduces the other seven mersisters to their newest baby addition.

“She looks just like momma!” Says Coral, one of the twins. She was quick to notice appearance but this was obvious. The stark Golden-Blonde Hair that shines like a thousand suns was solely their mother’s trait, until now.

“She’s ugly!” Says the three year old Ursula. Only the five year old Searella found this to be funny and the rest of the family gave her disapproving looks.

It was true, however, the new baby was mushy, squishy and scaley, as all newborn merbabies are.

“What are you going to name her?” Pearl asks. As eldest daughter she felt it to be her responsibility to know.

“Areyla.” The King responds.

The castle is full of an excited atmosphere over the next few weeks but as such excitement does, it dies down and everyone settles into a new normal. Each member in the family adores the new baby. The Eldest girls take turns holding her. The twins, Coral and Shelbey, make her homemade dresses. Searella tries to read her the dark family history accounts she got from their grandfather while Eelan fusses over having the youngest spot and the attention that comes with it, be taken from her. After just a few visits Ursula just falls in love with the little girl and has to always be with her. Wherever Areyla is, that is where you will find Ursula. Areyla in turn adores Ursula. If Ursula is not in the room, she cries. The twins joke that Ursula and Areyla have more of a psychic connection than they do.

When visitors come to the palace, they are welcomed by the cute merprincess. She smiles and giggles at them, capturing their hearts with her sweet temperament. Second time visitors are sure to return with gifts for the mergirl and she responds with jumping joy and excited hugs, it doesn't matter if it is the most exquisite shell or most rare seaweed. If ever she found a frown on her walks through the palace she would be sure to cheer the merfellow up. Many merpeople call her the most beautiful merchild. Never has she tasted sadness, never has she felt a pain more than a bruise, she was a merchild unlike any other.

With all the love and attention given to Areyla, none could love the darling child more than her family, and in the eyes of her Sister Ursula, none could have more love for the girl than what she felt in her own heart. Ursula made a vow to herself that she would never let any other thing hurt her dearest precious sister. She rehearsed it in her mind, picturing fighting sharks and evil mer-witches to protect her sister. One day her vow is put in question as she proves herself by threatening to pound a group of merboys into the sand when they attempt to tease the little princess. Ursula loves Areyla as only a sister can.

To prepare herself to be able to greater protect Areyla from sharks, evil sea-witches, and merboys, she asks the palace doctors Flora, Fauna and Merrywether to mentor her in the ways of magic. The three ladies laugh and starting that moment they consider this adorable specimen their new apprentice. With their help Ursula learns how to make potions and perform simple spells using magical objects. She now feels like she knows enough to protect her Sister if needs be.

Four years after the birth of Areyla,on the third full-moon of Fall, the queen visits the surface for an excursion. It was not unheard of as the queen often took ventures to the surface in hopes of creating a link between ocean and land, however, this trip ends different than all the others. She quickly gets sick. Ursula and Areyla help take their mother the medicine from the doctors, Flora, Fauna and Merrywether. Even with the three mermaid’s expertise, they could not keep the great Queen Aurora from her deathbed.

As she lay sick in bed, the night of a new moon, the tide is high, and the current strong, the Queen gathers her family and for the last time, she tells each of them that she loves them. She holds Areyla tighter and longer than any of the others. Then she turns to the King. She demands that if he were to ever remarry he could only choose someone with the same Golden-Blonde Hair that shines like a thousand suns. King Posiedon’s face was so hurt and grief stricken. He agrees.

Many wonder why they did that. Why did he agree? Why did she ask that? Some suppose that The King was in such devastation that it didn’t matter what she asked, he would have agreed. Some assume the Queen was vain, especially about her unique hair. Others give her the benefit of the doubt though, maybe it was to avoid someone remarrying King Posiedon with the intent to take over the merkingdom. Who knows?

After that day going to the surface was banned by decree of the king, stamped with Posiedon’s seal. Areyla was far too curious however, and at the age of about twelve, Ursula saw her staring at the surface as it was speckled by Summer rain. She knew that Areyla wanted to breach the surface but she’s too much of a jelly-fish to go alone. Ursula told her that if see was going up to the surface she’s has to tow her elder Sister up there with her. No way she was letting her go alone. So together they went, Areyla to explore, Ursula with ulterior motives to see if she could figure out what it was that caused the Queen’s illness. It was then that they see the sky for the first time in their lives. Even though it just rained, the air is so dry to the mermaids who have only ever been surrounded by water. They can hardly breathe. The sky is covered with puffy grey and white clouds with the blue sky peering through in hidden spots. It is more beautiful than anything they have seen. They see a boat in the distance. Ursula immediately takes Areyla back down. She does what she can to decontaminate themselves with sea sponges and then she holds her sister tight. She loves her sister and does not know what she would do without her. She may be the pampered favorite but she’s Ursula’s pampered favorite.

That night Ursula catches Areyla sneaking out to go visit the surface again. She follows her and they see the big full-moon with a semi-cloudy sky dotted with stars. On a boat they hear music and see some form of people with a very strange lower half.

“What are those two-stick things. Where are their fish-tails?” Ursula asks.

“I don’t know.” Areyla responds.

“This is the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.” Ursula says.

Some few hours later the boat is hit with a huge storm. It capsizes. The Princesses have to help, contamination or not, these people are in danger. They Two-sticked people can’t survive in the water, that much is obvious. Ursula helps fix the lifecraft while Areyla goes to help a woman floating on a piece of burning driftwood. The woman is pointing to a young boy. She is yelling, “Help my son!” Areyla helps the young boy get on the lifecraft but when she goes back for the woman, she is gone. With no more time, the two mermaids pull the boat to shore. It is their first time touching dry sand. Then, as the light of dawn broke through the sky, they leave.

After that night Ursula thinks for sure they will be contaminated and get sick like the Queen. They never do. Since that time Areyla has been completely enamoured by anything involving the surface world. Together her and Ursula have spent countless hours exploring sunken ships, finding hidden treasures and spying on the surface people. They set up for themselves a secret surface hideaway: A sunken ship just a short distance from land. There they store their treasures and any of their other secrets. It is where Ursula keeps her experiments with surface materials as she tries to a find a material that would harm merpeople. Of course, next to all the experiments is Gillian’s annoying blow conch which Searella stole after Gillian had awoken all the sisters in the middle of the night. Searella then asked Ursula to keep it out of Gillian’s hands and she gladly agreed. Areyla keeps all of her sister’s birthday presents for their next three years in her special room, all except Ursula’s gifts. Those are hidden with Pearl so that way they can still be a surprise. In all their searching and experimenting Ursula never did find out what had made their mother sick.

The years following the death of the queen become marked as a dark time in the kingdom; Exploration stops, magic is banned, crime increases. Many feel that the loss of the Queen is the loss of the empire and none feel that way more than the King. The Princesses however continue with life, hopeful than ever. Each Princess does what she can to help their Father. Coral and Shelby, the twins, try to cheer their father by putting on a skit Coral wrote. He says he doesn't have time to watch. Gillian, with little Eelan, just a year older than Areyla, always following, purposefully mixes his shaving cream with seafoam. When he discovers her prank he does not respond is jest, as he usually did, he became angry and yelled at his second eldest daughter. That is when she decides never to prank Him again. Even Searella, the daughter born between the twins and Ursula, tries to help by showing Him her dark, sad drawings. He tells her to do something more productive. Ursula helps in the physician's office to make medicine. She and Areyla take it to him. It seems to be the only thing that helps him feel better. Pearl, the Eldest, feels the most betrayed by her Father's actions. Not only does he leave her wedding early to attend to "personal" duties, but he misses the birth of his first Grandchild. The King can think of nothing more than his grief.

As much as the princesses did to help him, he only got worse. He starts losing his mind, babbling weird things and convicting random servants over petty things. It was all harmless until he makes an announcement to remarry. The only person he can marry with the same Golden-Blonde Hair that shines with like a Thousand Suns, is Areyla, his daughter. All the Kingdom begs and demands that it stop but there was no reasoning with the most powerful merman in all the ocean.

The merpeople are mortified from the king's decree. Many panic with words such as these.

"Our King is a mad… This is against the laws of sky, land and water… He will doom us all… What is to become of the darling Princess… no good will come… I wish someone would stop him."

Even with such alarm spread throughout the kingdom, none were more afraid than the young Princess Areylal herself. Ursula feels she must protect her sister. Together they plott to give their father an impossible task that will keep him occupied while they try to find a lasting solution. Areyla will only marry the King if he procures her with these objects: One; a dress made of Bright Stardust, two; a dress made of Silvery Moonbeams, three; a dress made of Golden Sun-Rays, adding to the list she requires a mantel made of a ten-thousand scales, each one coming from a different type of fish in the sea. The girls hope this plan to work.

The night before Areyla turned 18, King Posiedon returns home and appears before Areyla in the throne room. He puts the mantel of a ten thousand scales around her and announces that the next day would be a wedding for he has accomplished the impossible task. With no time Ursula goes to the physician’s chambers and grabs the potion she had been developing with Flora, Fauna and Merrywether’s help to turn mermaids into humans. Then Ursula meets Areyla near their surface hideaway. Looking around Ursula wonders how many adventures she and Areyla had started here. Now they are starting an entirely new adventure. Areyla arrives and Ursula gives her the potion. It works. She became human and gained legs, losing her fin.]

Areyla’s thoughts at the time are clouded with emotion. She is clutching the bag filled with her dresses, shaking. It is the only thing she is taking. Her expression is blank and she is pail, “Ursula, why can't all the bad just leave me alone?”

Ursula is caught off guard. She did not think now was the time for deep thinking but her sister is in panic mode. What is she supposed to say? She does not have the answers.

“Because dear,” She says, “The bad needs you to teach it how to be good.”

Areyla gives Ursula one last hug.

“You always know what to say.”

As Areyla is escaping their Father finds them. Father curses Areyla and tells her that if she were to ever wear one of the three magicly spun dresses, he will find her. Ursula tells Areyla that she will be right behind her, then she does what she can to hold him back. She would not be able to keep that promise.

**CH 2 The Mantel of Ten-Thousand Scales**

Areyla puts her two new stick-legs on the sand. It is her first steps. The sensation is soft and squishy. Behind her is the ocean, infront, she faces the unknown territory of the human forest. Knowing she cannot turn back, she stumbles into the forest. The sun is barely hitting the horizon as the half-moon fades over the Spring sky.

Areyla sees a fallen branch. Her foot meets the branch and she trips. She gets back up and continues forward. A fallen tree blocks her way. She tries to roll over it but lands on her face. She gets back up. This pattern of falling down continues as she meets sticks and becomes distracted by birds. Her new legs become scarred by small scratches. She shivers as the waking day has not taken off the blanket of cold. Areyla reaches in her bag and pulls out the mantel of ten-thousand scales. She puts it on and pulls the hood over her hair. She hears the leaves rustle together and watches as they dance. It seems to her that there is a living thing in the leaves.

Something comes at her, barely missing her and hitting a tree. She looks at it. It is a stick with a sharp end, an arrow. She realizes that if the arrow had hit her she could have been hurt. A cunning man with a scar sneaks around and reaches into her bag. When Areylan sees him she screams and jerks the bag away from him. The backward force makes her fall to the ground. The man with the scar is holding the dress of Golden Sun-Rays and then he disappears. She hears rustling all around her and then she finds that she is surrounded by bandits.

Another noise is heard. Pounding thunderous stomps on the ground. Through the trees comes galloping horses.

“Stop in the name of the royal family!” Calls a voice.

The remaining bandits disappear as two horsemen come to the rescue of Areyla.

“Oh my! Prince James, what is that?” Says the fatter one.

The second rider hops off the horse. He is tall, handsome, and rouged. He is buff and muscly. He has a chiseled jaw and friendly eyes that melt hearts.

“It seems like some sort of creature.” The Prince observes.

“Don’t get close it it, my Lord!”

Areyla lifts her head, meeting the eyes of the Prince.

“It is a maiden!” The Prince proclaims. “Are you alright dear?”

Tears come streaming out of her eyes. “Help me.”

“What can I do for you?” The Prince asks reaching his hand out to her. “Do you need a place to stay?”

She nods.

“How about you come to my castle. How does that sound?”

She nods. She takes his hand and helps her stand.

“Sir Diddle, carry this woman’s bag for her! We’ll take her back to the castle.”

“Yes your highness.” Says the plump figure. Then he hops off his horse and reaches for the bag. “I’ll take the bag, and the mantel too, it seems so unmanageable.” She growls at him then and backs away glaring.

“Sire...” Sir Diddle complains.

“It seems she won’t let you have it.” The Prince says as he helps her over to his horse. “Then let her keep it. She will ride with me. It is obvious she doesn't trust you.”

The Prince helps Areyla onto his horse. The task is made much harder as he must maneuver around the massive scales in order to position her so that she will not fall off. She looks like a dragon riding a horse.

“Sire! This is unprecedented!”

The Prince jumps on his horse and instructs Areyla to hold on. Then he says to his companion, “Let it be so Sir Diddle. There are things we each must sacrifice for the good of the people. Maybe you can help her find a room to stay. If she needs a job provide her with that as well. Everyone deserves to have a place in the kingdom’s castle.”

The Prince takes Areyla to the castle. With help from Sir Diddle she is given a small servant’s room and a job working as a kitchen maid. The cook takes one look at her and shakes his head. He compares her to some kitchen ware as he does to help himself classify most people. This girl was like a dirty dishrag.

“What is this?!?” The cook asks, gesturing towards the girl.

“The Prince found it.” Sir Diddle says as if she were an animal and not a person. He doesn’t feel comfortable addressing the poor thing as human when she looks and acts like a wild creature.

“Hm. Leave her here. I’ll see if there is something it can do.”

Sir Diddle leaves.

“What’s your name miss? Let me help you with this big mantel.”

Areyla started crying, huffing out big sobs as the cook tries to remove it. The cook, who knows more about leaking water than leaking people just pats her.

“You’ll feel better once you get a bath, cleaned up, and have a job to do. Doing something will take your mind off of… everything, you’ll see. Not sure what you can do though. I could have you clean, sweep, garden, and help cook too I suppose.”

Areyla smiles at the man’s kindness, “I’d like that.”

“Course that big coat of yours is going to have to come off. Can’t have scales in the soup you know.” He says trying to make a joke.

She starts crying again.

“Oh, now, don’t do that. Fine you can keep the mantel on.”

Areyla starts calming down.

“This thousand scaled mantel of yours. You’ll get tired of it eventually I’m sure.”

“Thank you.” Areyla says.

“You’re welcome Thousand-Scales.” The cook says.

From that moment on Areyla is known around the castle as Thousand-Scales because of the big scaley mantel that she is always wearing, regardless of rain, sun, heat, or cold. Accordingly, no one has ever seen her without it or without the hood. No one has ever seen her beautiful Golden-Blonde Hair that shines like a thousand suns.

Areyla is under the water. She’s in a coral reef, the colors are green like the leaves in the forest. Arrows are being shot through the water. She starts running but the water is keeping her from getting away. The bandits drop into the water and are coming after her. Areyla starts to drown in the water. The bandits grab her and they all fall into black nothingness. Then she hears the voice of her father say, “Areyla dear! It’s time for our wedding.” Areyla turns and sees her father with a crazed look in her eyes.

Areyla wakes up screaming.

Over the course of a fortnight, Areyla has been waking up to nightmares similar to this. She looks out the window of her tiny one-person servant’s room. Disappointed, she doesn’t see the sun. She wonders when the morning will come so she does not have to go back to sleep. She knows that the only thing that awaits her in that small bed is horrible images and feelings.

During the day it is different. Just as the cook said, she enjoys her time when she's working. Her mind is far from her past when she is busy sweeping out the fireplace hearth or giving scraps to the chickens. One of her most common chores is to keep the water tank for the kitchen full, which means she has to go out to the castle courtyard to get water from the well. As the day rolls on and the sun nears noon, Areyla is coming back to the kitchen after giving a message to the stable boy. Her focus is on filling the kitchen water tank.

Awaiting in the kitchen are two gossiping maids scrub busily at the dishes. They have already gone over the daily gossip, the Prince is still single, the King has enemies after his throne, and the Fall Festival is still not for another few weeks. No new or exciting gosip was available about the highest standing officials so they were looking for something else to occupy their time.

Thousand-Scales faithfully hurries past them to go and draw water from the well. Out of courtesy, they wait till she leaves before talking about her.

“Going to get water again? What is that, the twelfth time today?” Says the one with long dark hair.

“Getting water is the only thing she can do right.” Says the other. She is remembering the time Thousand-Scales mixed up sugar with salt in the pastry recipe and when the visiting Duke who had the honor to taste the freshly baked pie demanded retribution and the Head Cook took the punishment.

“I feel bad for her. The other night, Randolph heard screaming coming from her room. He was passing by on a night bread run, as he does, you know he does. She must have some terribly traumatic memories. Just awful.”

“She probably ran away from an abusive husband.”

The dark haired one gasps, “You don’t think that could be true.”

She shrugs, neither accepting or rejecting it.

“No wonder she’s so quiet. Did you know the first time I met her I asked her about her family. She wouldn’t answer me.”

“An ice statue, that’s what she is. She gets so focused on what she’s doing she doesn’t notice anything else around her, or anyone. It’s like she’s trying to avoid something or someone.” Says the more assertive leader. She is as quick to jump to conclusions as a rabbit jumps into a rabbit’s hole.

The Cook comes down, “Have you seen Thousand-Scales?” He asks the maids.

They point at the door to the courtyard. He rolls his eyes and storms out.

The maid continues her gossiping, “The Cook has such a soft spot for her. If it were me I would have thrown her out of the castle weeks ago.”

Meanwhile, as the maids have been gossiping, Thousand-Scales has been in the courtyard with her pail. Blinking away the morning rays of sun, she hears the beautiful sound of a melancholy piccolo. Following the sound she sees the Prince sitting on the bench playing the instrument. She takes a moment to watch him.

"Do you know the song?" The Prince asks when he finally notices her. His voice startles her just a bit.

"Oh, I," She stutters, "Just a little. It's new to me but I've heard the royal musicians playing it. It is a wonderful song."

"I think so too. Do you sing?" He asks.

"Oh, I… just a bit." She says modestly.

"I bet your voice is lovely." The Prince says, then he puts the piccolo to his lips and plays the song. The music flows within Areyla and she begins to sing. The notes are crisp and clear. Areyla has always had the most beautiful voice of all the mermaid Sisters. Its round and vibrant quality never fails to haunt all those that hear it. She gets that from her mother as well.

As the first verse ends and the second starts Areyla stops singing. Prince James puts the Piccolo down and the music falls away.

"I don't remember the words to the second verse. Sorry.” She says.

“What was your name?” The Prince asks.

The cook comes out to the courtyard.

“Thousand-Scales! How long are you planning on leaving me waiting!” Then the cook sees the Prince, “Prince James! Forgive my little kitchen maid your highness. She’s an odd one. If she troubled you at all please punish me, not her, she doesn’t deserve it. She’s still so new and all. Don’t worry, though, I’ll give her a stern talking to and make sure it won’t happen again.”

“She was no trouble. I quite enjoyed her company.”

“Glad to hear it, however she does have chores to do. What’s this, the bucket hasn’t even been filled! Thousand-Scales have you been slacking?”

“My fault Sir Cook. Let me help.”

Under the cooks protests, Prince James fills a water bucket from the well and carries it to the kitchen. It is a task that he has never done before and it was a pleasure for him to perform. He doesn’t even notice the shocked maids doing the dishes when he pours out the water. Then he leaves to go about doing his princely duties.

Later that day the Cook introduces the staff to a new servant boy. His name is Hunter. The Cook points to Thousand-Scales and says, “Show this boy the ropes, will you?” Her eyes get wide as insecurities seem to hit her like a tidal wave.

“You’ll do fine. Start by feeding the chickens will you?” The Cook assures her.

Thousand-Scales nods, having trust in the Cooks words of confidence in her.

After the servant meeting Thousand-Scales walks out the door and waits for Hunter to follow. She does not say anything to him as they walk together to the chickens.

Hunter steals a glance at Thousand-Scales.

“My name is Hunter, what’s yours?” Hunter asks.

She doesn’t answer.

Hunter looks away trying to find something to start a conversation with. He looks back to her and realizes she is a conversation.

“That is quite the mantel you wear.” He says.

She doesn't reply.

“What’s it made of? Scales?” Hunter asks touching it to examine it closer. “Is that why they call you Thousand-Scales?”

Thousand-Scales pulls away, out of reach. Her eyes are wide and she is ready to run at any minute.

“Calm down, I’m not going to hurt you.” Hunter says as if approaching a wild animal. “I just wanted to touch your mantel.”

Thousand-Scales glares at him but continues walking to the chicken coop. She feels a hand stroke her back and she jerks turns on it growling. “Stop that!” She says.

“It spoke! The walking fish-creature spoke!” Hunter says triumphantly.

“That’s not nice.” Thousand-Scales says.

“Neither is ignoring people.” Hunter says.

Thousand-Scales puts on a pouty face and turns away from him to head back towards the task at hand.

“I had a cat like you once.” Hunter says, “Meanest little furball, whenever I would pet the thing it would bite me and scratch my arms. I still slightly wince whenever I hear a cat hiss.”

Thousand-Scales looks at Hunter oddly. She says, “Why did you pet it if it only would scratch you?”

“After a while it warmed up to me and stopped scratching. Then I got to cuddle and snuggle with it. I loved that cat.”

“What happened to it?” Thousand-Scales asks.

Hunter says, “It died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It happens.” Hunter shrugs, “Is this the chicken coop?”

Hunter and Thousand-Scales stop in front of a small wooden box where they watch chickens walk in and out of the small entrance.

Thousand-Scales rubs her hands together. She says, “Yes… And I’m also sorry that I ignored you. I don’t mean to be rude.”

“Don’t ever do it again and we’ll call it good.” Hunter says with a wink.

“And one more thing… my name is Areyla.”

“Alright Areyla, the girl of a Thousand-Scales, shall we get started? Where’s the chicken feed?” Hunter asks.

Thousand-Scales’s head drops. “I forgot it. We keep it back at the kitchen…”

Hunter laughs, “Shall we head back then?”

Thousand-Scales nods.

The two walk back to the kitchen.

As the moon changes from Crescent to New and completes the week, Areyla finds herself back at her home in Atlantis. She is together with her sisters, there is the twins doting on their niece while Pearl and her husband watch a little ways away. Searella in the corner glaring at everyone as she does. Gillian and Eelen are setting up a prank for whoever swims into the room next. Suddenly everyone stops and all eyes turn to Areyla. The light in the room grows ominously dark. Eelen asks, “Where’s Ursula?”

“Where’s Ursula?” Searella asks.

“Where’s Ursula?” The twins ask.

“Where’s Ursula?” Gillian asks.

“Where’s Father?” Pearl asks.

Areyla quickly escapes and swims out into the hall but the hall has turned into the dungeon. On both sides she sees her sisters locked in cages. She swims ahead faster. At the end of the hall she sees King Poseidon holding Ursula by the neck pointing his golden trident at her.

He turns to her and smiles wickedly.

“There you are.”

Areyla wakes up from her dream screaming. She looks out the window to find the night is over. Even so, Areyla can’t help but wonder what has happened to her watery home. Where was Ursula? Would her father find her? She has never had to deal with these stresses before and she is faced with the fact that they are consuming her. She is grateful when she wakes up and even more grateful when she gets to spend the day with Hunter. Not only does he know what he is doing when it comes to chores but he is also a great companion to talk to.

Hunter greets Thousand scales with a simple, “Looking as fishy as always.” And she greets him back with a simple, “It is a fine day, isn’t it!”

Then they go about doing the day’s work. Thousand-Scales and Hunter are washing windows.

“That can’t be so!” Thousand-Scales declares, their conversation is becoming irrationally heated. “If the fly were evil it would do something really bad, like hurt people or steal something.”

“On the contrary, flies torture their victims through incessant buzzing, landing on our food. Those are crimes punishable by death.” Hunter counters.

“Hardly!” Thousand-Scales says.

A fly comes and drifts past Hunter. It lands on the window. He prepares to swat it.

“No!” Thousand-Scales says alarmed. She grabs Hunter’s hand and holds it back so that the fly gets away safely.

Hunter notices a man passing in the hallway. This was, in fact, one of the King’s own personal advisers and Hunter thought this the perfect time to test the man’s advice.

“Good sir, we have a dilemma.”

The King’s Adviser is startled out of thoughts of his own greatness only to be addressed by low ranking nothings. He did not hear the prerequisite to this conversation, which, had he heard, he would probably continue strolling by. He was, however, in a charitable mood so he addressed the two warmly.

“What may I do for you?”

“It is justice to destroy that which is evil, correct?”

The Man nods, “Indeed, by doing so there is no allowance for evil to spread. Gone untouched the evil may multiply and take over the good.” The man is not understanding where this is going.

Hunter continues, “Tell me, what does it take to judge upon the evil of a subject? Would you say, a fly for instance, is evil?”

“A Fly? A fly has no consequence to anything in this life. Their existence is so meaningless that it has no relevance upon the claim for good or evil.” The man smartly answers.

His words are like bubbles to Thousand-Scales as she has no idea what he means. She says with an unsure voice, “So… they deserve to live?”

The Fly returns.

BAM! Thousand-Scales is too slow and Hunter draws back his hand from the window to show a squashed fly.

Thousand-Scales looks at the fly sadly, “Why did you come back?!”

“Evil shall always be punished!” Hunter declares.

“You two are Insufferable!” Says the King’s Advisor. These servants were giving more attention to a fly than to one of the King’s Advisors. His perfectly good mood of self importance has now been ruined.

As the King’s Advisor returns to his duties so too does the servants. The day continues on, minutes passing on to hours and the Servants move around performing different duties.

Each servant has their own tasks and each day they get the opportunity to do different chores. It helps to keep the work from becoming mundane. When the servants do not want to work they can often be found in the second floor hallway near the window to the courtyard. Rarely did people travel this inconvenient hallway and it was a great place to lounge about, as two such servants are doing at this moment. One servant is small and feels his presence goes unnoticed while the other has an inner struggle regarding his self-worth hinging a large nose. They look out the window and see Hunter walking with Thousand-Scales carrying buckets to draw water from the courtyard well. This is the fifth time this day that those two have been seen together. The first was mopping, then the dishes, then washing windows, then placing fresh flowers in the hallway.

“Those two can’t seem to get enough of each other.” Says the tall one who scratches his nose as if to hide it.

The smaller one nods sadly. He had developed a small fancy for the Thousand-Scales girl but she never noticed him.

At the start of the day, the beginning of the cycle of the moon, the Cook catches Hunter before he runs out into the garden. The Cook says, “Hunter, come help me in the kitchen.”

“Can’t,” Hunter says, “Thousand-Scales needs me in the garden and if I don’t help her weed I’m afraid she’ll pull up more plants than weeds.”

“She knows how to weed.” The Cook defends.

Hunter rolls his eyes, “Just like how she knew how to feed the animals, and cook, and scrub, and dust, and sew, and sweep, and mop. Last time I left her to do something herself she accidentally poured the soap bucket on the head of one of the King’s advisors. When she came down to help him she slipped on the water she had just dumped out. Do you want another one of those incidents?”

The Cook's Assistant, who is always looking for a good joke, laughs while the Cook sighs. He says, “Get out there before it is too late.”

Hunter is already out the door.

“Your attempts to get his help are in vain Cook, those two are inseparable.” Says the Assistant.

The Cook brings out a hearty laugh. He remembers how fragile and fearful Thousand-Scales seemed when she first came to the castle. Now she was smiling and laughing with the rest of the castle servants. He thought that maybe it was not so bad they spent so much time together.

On the month anniversary since Areyla has come to land, Hunter and Thousand-Scales are found weeding in the royal garden. Prince James, Sir Diddle and a few other men of high standing have just returned from a hunting trip, the Grand Duke included. Their haul was not plentiful and they seemed to be disappointed. They pass by the royal garden on their way to the stable. The Grand Duke notices some sort of giant scaly creature eating the garden. Perhaps it is a dragon! There is a boy out there too. The dragon will attack the boy! The Duke aims for the dragon.

"Wait!!!" The Prince exclaims.

The Duke misses as an arrow whirls past the dragon.

A girl's face peeks through the hood of the dragon creature. The girl looks around and sees the arrow. She screams. The servant boy runs over to her and the Prince rides to her. She immediately answers the Prince's question of her safety and forgets Hunter exists.

The Prince explains to Thousand-Scales and Hunter that the arrow is just a misunderstanding while the rest of the men ride over.

"My deepest apologies my dear." The Duke says kissing her hand.

Areyla immediately forgives the man saying, "Oh, it was all just a mistake. No harm done."

Hunter folds his arms, "Says you."

"Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? A new mantel perhaps?" The Duke suggests. He felt his folly was to be blamed upon that hideous monstrosity she wore.

"You could help her weed." Hunter suggests with a snicker at the thought of the high and mighty getting down and dirty.

"What an idea!" The Prince says curious at the challenge. "I never have been to weed before."

“It’s called weeding.” Hunter explains. This small error on the Prince’s part makes Hunter judge the man as being an idiot. At least Thousand-Scales has more smarts than him. Hunter suddenly imagines having to supervise a herd of puffed-up show-off men who have no idea how to do the job at hand. When teaching Thousand-Scales at least she wasn’t obsessed with a high status. His face takes on a look of horror as he realizes what he would be up against if they accept the challenge. Hunter firmly resolves that teaching a bunch of nobles how to weed would not be worth the effort. He says, "On second thought, there is no need to act so humble to some servants like us."

"Yes your highness, it would not be appropriate to be at that… level." Sir Diddle says. He does not want to learn how to week as badly as Hunter does not want to teach him.

"Nonsense. As the future King I need to be versed in all aspects of life. Tell me, how is it done?"

"Oh, you just find the weed, don’t touch the plants or you’ll get yelled at. Then you grab it close to the dirt and pull. It's so simple. Hunter did a great job at teaching me how, maybe I can now teach you how." Thousand-Scales says bravely.

"What a good thing. Let's all try it!" The Prince announces.

"Sire!" Sir Diddle says.

The Prince leads everyone into helping weed and it doesn't take long before the band of good Lord's are down on hands and knees pulling plants from the ground. This new activity is so foreign to them that they gleam charm from this simple lifes chore. They discuss among themselves.

“This is not so hard… I feel so relaxed… Is this a tomato... Servants make weeding seem so hard… Look at the color of my plant… Where should I put my weeds… This is actually quite fun…” and such are the conversations between the highlords.

Hunter however, feels quite the opposite. He has to babysit grown men who do not know the difference between a weed and a plant.

“No, that’s a weed… Yes, all those are weeds… The pile is over here… No, don't pull that one… Get it by the root… That’s the leaf, not the root…” Hunter says.

Meanwhile Thousand-Scales gives the Prince personal tutoring. She tells him suggestions to improve, the same tactics Hunter taught her, and he greatly enjoys himself.

“If you pull here then the weed will come out easier.” Thousand-Scales suggests. She remembers when Hunter had taken the time to point out the exact spot for her. She felt honored that she had the chance to teach it to someone else.

“I see.” The Prince says as he tries her technique. He finds that the weed slides out easily.

“And you see those ones,” Thousand-Scales points to some small sproutlings, “Those are all plants even though they are small. Those are the weeds.”

She points to some plants with sharp leaves. Prince James nods and starts on the area. Prince James's hand accidentally bumps into Thousand-Scales's hand. She blushes.

“Care… careful on these plants." Thousand-Scales stutteringly warns, as she is referencing the weeds she is currently working on. "It's hard to tell what is plant and what is weed in this area. I already pulled out some plants I wasn't supposed to. Not on purpose though. We had to replant them.”

The Prince seizes the opportunity to show his greatness by he resting his hand on hers. He comforts her saying, "We all make mistakes. Even me at times. The fact that you learn from it that is what is important."

Thousand-Scales pulls away, hiding her red face under her hood.

"You're right. Thank you." She says.

Thousand-Scales notices that the Prince's weed pile is becoming bulky. He impresses her by his swiftness and efficient work style.

“I do feel I am getting the hang of this!” Prince James exclaims.

The other Lord's notice and begin to take Thousand-Scales's advice as well. She is more patient than Hunter and she enjoys sharing what she knows. She is much more reserved and gives gentle nudges in the right direction to help the Lord's on their path in becoming expert weeders.

Her vocal cues are as such, "Make sure to be gentle… this one is the weed, that one is a plant… if we don't get the weeds then they will suffocate the good plants… I love the flower buds on this plant… this one is almost ready to harvest…"

"You are quite the maiden." The Prince says. "It has been an absolute pleasure to be around you."

Thousand-Scales feels like her heart is going to burst as she hides her red face again.

The Cook comes out and sees a group of highlords, the prince included, on their hands and knees weeding. He almost has a heart attack.

Hunter laughs at seeing the Cook's face. He says, "Cook! Take a look, these Lord's decided to give us a hand."

The Prince rises to meet the Cook. He says, "What an honorable thing this weeding is. Do not worry Cook, it was our own decisions to participate and I think it has been very beneficial to us men. Don't you all think so?"

All the men nod in enthusiastic agreement.

The Cook's stumbles with his words, blabbering until he finally says, "I'll go make lunch…"

Within minutes the Cook comes back with trays piled with sandwiches. The group decide they have finished the job. Hunter looks at their work and knows that he will have to come back and fix everything they have done once they leave. The only upside is that the highlords seem to have enjoyed themselves.

The men assume a reward is in order and they leave the task to start munching on the Cook’s make-shift meal.

Prince James and the younger Lords carry on conversation asking Areyla about the chores of a servant while the older men turn to Hunter for entertainment.

"Show us something funny." The Duke demands.

"I'm not your jester. " Hunter retorts. The Duke and his colleagues laugh.

One of the men, who has taken a curiosity to common life, badgers Hunter forward. He says, "Come on, you servants must have some form to entertain yourselves."

Hunter pauses, considering the man's words. He shrugs, "Well, I do know one trick…"

"Do show us." Sir Diddle says.

Hunter pulls out a coin from his pocket. "See this coin? Watch it very carefully." Hunter says. He walks around the men. Then he covers the coin with a cloth. He says magic words, “Switcheroo!” and whips the cloth off, revealing a beautifully hand-crafted ornate blade, "Does this look familiar to you?"

"That's my knife!" The man checks his pocket where the knife should be. He pulls out a coin. It was the same coin Hunter had shown them. "Remarkable! He's magically switched the coin with my knife right before our very eyes!"

The men laugh, intermingling exclamations with that of awe.

"Again!" The Duke demands and Hunter is forced to repeat the magic trick several times over. Each time the High Lord's become more and more intrigued.

"Anymore hidden talents or magic spells?" Sir Diddle asks. The rest of the men wait on with anticipation.

"No more." Hunter says. "That's all I've got."

"I feel I now see servants in a new light." Says one man as he finishes his sandwich. While weeding he could not help but think of his own servants back at his mansion. Though they often complain they always performed a thorough job. He has developed an immense respect and appreciation for the work that goes on behind the scenes. He determines that he will tell his servants of his new appreciation when he returns home after the Fall festival.

"I as well." Says Sir Diddle, who is himself a servant, though he always considered himself above other servants. He continues saying, "I feel like pulling out the weeds has helped me pull out some flaws in my own self character. This has been very valuable, the things I learned this day."

"My men, would you say you had a good deal of fun?" Prince James asks.

The men all agree.

"I did too. Thank you for the experience." Prince James says to the servants and each of the men follow suit, thanking the Cook, Hunter and Thousand-Scales.

The Duke notices how Hunter dotes on Thousand-Scales. He asks her if she needs anything, offering to get her water. The Duke thinks it must be common for this young man be so attentive towards such a kindly maiden. He comments to the Prince saying, "What an adorable budding romance between those two servants."

Prince James snaps up in alarm. He says, "Those two? Absurd. I do not see it."

The Duke feels animosity coming from the Prince as a reaction to his previously made comments. He decides not to press the subject and the men leave.

Life then returns to normal and soon everyone is lost in the hustle and bustle.

The trees surrounding the castle and town begin changing color. The blazing heat is blown away and is being replaced by a shivering nip of crisp cold air. The castle garden goes into an abundant harvest as the Cook brings out his canning materials. The frequency of bugs begin to dissipate and the furry animals begin growing thicker pelts. Never has Thousand-Scales seen such a scene and Hunter often catches her admiring the little colors on a fallen leaf. He gives her time to admire because he likes the look on her face when she explores the phenomenon of a changing season.

Early in the Fall season, before the Cook starts his first round of canning and the leaves have a small hint of color, a servant meeting is held where the Cook gives the details of the most important events to be held during the season. During the meeting the Cook announces the usual castle duties and tells how there has been too much free-loader time with gossiping and not enough work. He then goes through the duties and the plan for the Harvest as the garden has done extremely well. Then he announces that the annual Fall Festival is approaching, which means that for three weeks Lords and Ladies will be coming to and from the castle. The highlight of the festival is the three end of each week grand balls where the Prince will choose his future wife. As exciting it was for the Kingdom, it means ten times the work for the castle staff. Everyone except Areyla groans. Assignments are made, the meeting adjourns and everyone goes to work.

Thousand-Scales and Hunter are put to mopping duty. Thousand-Scales hums and sways as she mops the marble floor.

“You’re in a good mood.” Hunter notices.

“I’ve never been to a ball before.” Thousand-Scales sighs.

“What, do you think you’re invited?” Hunter asks. He puts on an atmosphere of teasing as he takes his character pretending to be Thousand-Scales at the Ball.

“Here I am one and all, just finished mucking out the pig’s stall, don’t mind the smell. I washed hands! Duke, you want to dance with me, oh yes. Don’t slip on my Big Scaley Mantel!”

His little game highlights exactly how ridiculous it is and he buckles over laughing.

Thousand-Scales continues her thoughts, “I know I’m just a servant. There's no way I could go. Besides, I don’t even know how to dance.”

“You’d probably end up looking like this!” Hunter says as he wobbles on his feet and moves his spine in a way that looks like a flailing fish on land. Thousand-Scales is not amused. She jabs at him with the mop and he falls over laughing.

Thousand-Scales pouts as Hunter recovers from his laugh, “Don’t take it so seriously. There’s no shame in not knowing how to dance, it’s common for folks like us.”

“Yes, I know but it seems like such fun. Moving on legs to the music. How romantic.” She sighs.

Hunter is quiet for a second. A thought is plotting in his brain.

“Well, if it means that much to you, I could teach you how to dance.” Hunter suggests.

“You know how to dance?” Thousand-Scales asks in surprises.

“I do. I learned from a traveling gypsy.” Hunter tells her.

Thousand-Scales has no reservations about the truth of his words. It is per the norm for her to be so trusting, “Will you teach me?”

He stands and holds out his hand, as if he were asking her to join him for a waltz.

“It would be my pleasure.” He says bowing. She takes his hand and over the next few days Hunter starts to teach her how to dance. They practise in their freetime, which isn’t often but they make the most of the time they are given. Hunter is a good teacher but even with his estoot tutelage, Thousand-Scales is hopelessly uncoordinated. She is constantly stepping on his feet for which he punishes her by doing unplanned twirls. She complains that he sometimes holds her too tight and he complains that she avoids looking him in the eyes, nevertheless they both enjoy their time together and by the time someone comes to interrupt them, they are both smiling. Hunter comments on how she can now go an entire dance without stepping on his foot once. She does a happy celebratory fish-spine wobble to make Hunter laugh. It works.

A certain castle guard, who recently had his heart rejected by an attractive noble maiden, feels like everywhere he goes he runs into the servant love-birds. He is bitter and jealous whenever he sees the two together. He wishes they would just disappear.

The time passes quickly and the quarter moon marks the beginning of the Fall Festival. Areyla is in awe as she watches the castle turns into a Fall wonderland. The windows are decorated daily with newly fallen leaves. The vases are full of Fall flowers and colors. All in preparation for the arriving guests. Lords and Ladies from all over the kingdom arrive, adorning their finest cloths. The most juicy gossip is that of the foreign Princes and Princesses who traveled very far to be at this event. Everyone casts lots on who they think it will be that Prince James will choose as a wife.

As each guest arrives they admire the delicate effort of decor and thought put into this high class event. They comment on what a good King it is to host them. What they do not realize is that it is the servants, not the King, that has been working tirelessly to create the most magical atmosphere. They spend hours to prepare the most excellent food. They rub their hands raw cleaning, washing, and mending. Hunter spends time readying guest rooms, taking care of the extra horses, and greeting guests, while Thousand-Scales gets assigned to do more jobs in the kitchen, stables, and fireplace. The Cook tries to keep her away from any of the Lords and Ladies, as he knows they could only criticize and judge the poor girl. Everyone works in harmony to ensure that all the arriving guests will feel the exquisite joy of the Kingdom’s castle.

The week before the Fall Festival, the King calls his son to his chamber. He has just finished lunch where he ate goose and cranberries, a rare treat which is his favorite. Even such, he was not able to enjoy it as much as he had hoped. His mind was preoccupied with a matter concerning the future of his son, as is common with most parents.

“You needed me Father?” Prince James asks.

The King gets right to the point. “I’m not getting any younger James. This Kingdom needs a new King. I’ve done my time. I’m afraid I’ve failed many of my subjects.”

“No Father. Everyone thinks you are a great King.”

The King sighs, “There is a lot you do not know about my reign my son. But I have great hopes for you. You are not like me. You are bright and kind, just like your mother. Gah, how I miss her.”

“I miss her too Father.”

The King’s eyes rest on the painting of his wife hanging on the wall. “I long to join her. I was never the same man after she passed away.” The King turns to his son, “My greatest hope is that you too, will find someone who you long to be with. Someone you can share your life and share this kingdom with.”

“Father, how am I to know if I’ve found the right one?”

The King puts his hand over his son’s heart.

“There comes a moment when everything you want is right in front of your eyes. And there she is. Standing before you.”

“But what if she doesn’t feel the same way. What if she loves another?”

“Do not dwell on the ‘what if’s’ my boy! Have faith! This world was made for people like you and me. Now buck up. I want you to use the Grand Balls over the next few weeks to find her and sweep her off her feet. I dare say I want to see you engaged before the Fall Festival is through.”

“Yes Father.”

“Now, off with you!”

Prince James had not even considered something that rash. Under his Father’s advice however, he did consider.

**CH 3 The Dress of Bright Stardust**

Twas the night before the first ball, and before going bedward Areyla watches the leaves on the trees fall in the starry moon-less night. She is looking out the window in her small servant’s room. She turns to her bag and opens it to see her beautiful dresses. She ponders whether or not she really should go to the ball. Is it safe for her to wear the dress? For once, she is not afraid. She feels she might be willing to take the chance. Areyla notices that she has changed since first coming to the Kingdom. She tries to pinpoint when it first started. She realizes that it all started to change after she had talked to the Prince that one day. It was that realization which drove her to make the definite decision to attend the ball.

Thousand-Scales stands alone outside of the doors to the ballroom. The servants have the night off from work. Most of the castle crew are going to the market and invited Thousand-Scales but she’s chosen to be by herself rather than joining the servants in their jaunt. She is secretly plotting to join the party in the ballroom with the Lords and Ladies. Having planned that, she spent the first few hours of the ball in her servant’s room gaining the courage to go to the doors. Now she is standing in front of the doors gaining the courage to go through them. She hears the music playing inside. Her heart is pounding. Underneath the mantel is the dress of Bright Stardust. She's not sure if she can do this. She thinks about leaving. She thinks that it would be easier to walk through this door if her sister Ursula was to lead the way. Ursula is always leads the way. She knows how to handle all circumstances and she ensures that Areyla is taken care of. But Ursula isn’t here. Areyla wishes she were. Then she feels in her heart what Ursula would say if she were here.

Areyla pictures Ursula standing infront of her saying, “You can do this. You can lead your own path, open your own doors. It’s your time to stand on your feet.”

Areyla takes off the mantel, puts it in a safe space, then she enters the dance hall. All eyes look to her.

Feeling the attention, Areyla takes a deep breath and immortalized her surroundings into her memory. The music is being played by the best musicians in all the kingdom and has a quality of solemn elegance. On decorated tables rest the simple snacks that she herself had helped put together with Hunter. The room is lined with colored leaves and has the smell of pumpkin spice. She loves everything she sees. Glorious, is the word she thinks of to describe it. She makes her way into the center of the room and the guests part to make way for her.

To the many and mighty guests, in walks the most beautiful maiden ever seen in all the kingdom. The dress casts a mystical spell over the wearer. It turns her into the physical embodiment of a shooting star blasting through the night sky. Wearing such a dress it is as if she were surrounded by great clouds of the softest material which hugs the body the same way constellations hold to their individual stars. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that this woman, this queen of the heavenly realm, is royalty.

Prince James approaches her. Everything he wants is before his eyes. It is just as his Father described the moment to be, only more wonderful.

He asks Areyla to dance. He is stunning with a clean shave, robe flowing over his shoulders and appealing physique. Seeing the handsome Prince, looking more majestic than King Poseidon himself, she eagerly accepts.

“May I be graced with the honor to know your name?” The Prince asks.

“Call me Lady Aurora.” Areyla says.

A certain attractive noble maiden watches in envy as Prince James sweeps Lady Aurora off her feet. She notes how they stare into each other’s eyes as if no one else has ever felt that way. As if there weren’t other couples in the world who had loved. Of course they could only think of what was happening right now. She watches as Prince James says something witty enough to make Lady Aurora laugh. The noble maiden remembers laughing like that. She remembers how her simple castle guard had looked at her like how the Prince looks at Lady Aurora. It was a look that made one to feel special, to feel loved. Though her setting had not been a ballroom, it been a simple sunset over the sea, and though their titles had not been Prince and Princess, when she was with him, she felt royal. But she is reminded that it is a forbidden love which entertains her memory. She again thinks bitter thoughts towards the frolicking couple who can, with ease, fall in love. She feels this scene has gone on long enough. Luckily, Prince James takes Lady Aurora out to the veranda for some privacy and out of the sight of jealous onlookers.

In the open air, under the magnificent stars, Prince James says, “Close your eyes and hold out your hand.” He puts something in her hand. “Open your eyes.”

She opens them to see a ring her her palm.

“You are everything I have ever wanted. Will you marry me?” The Prince asks.

A ring. A ring is what her father wanted to put on her finger the day she ran away. A flood of memories come as a tidal wave into the front of her mind. She hears the voice of her father cursing the dresses, saying that if she were to wear them, he would find her. Pictures of her sisters in cages, of her father’s terror finding her becomes so vivid that she runs out crying without giving the prince an answer. She takes the ring with her.

Thousand-Scales runs past Hunter, making her way to her small servant’s room. She is crying as she darts into solitude, shutting the door behind her.

Hunter has just gotten back from the market. He left early, having felt it was a little dry without Thousand-Scales to tease. Seeing her crying worries Hunter and he softly knocks on her door.

She doesn’t answer.

Hunter softly calls through the door, saying, “I’m here for you. I’ll be waiting right outside this door, ok?”

Lying in her bed Areyla hears tapping on the window. She gets up and looks out the window. She comes face to face with her father.

“I found you.” He reaches through the window to grab her. She screams.

She awakens with her heart beating furiously.

She sits up and looks around. She is still in her bed in her small servant’s room. She lays back down. She tries not to think about it but tears full of fear escape her eyes. She hears her door open, she turns and sees Hunter peeking his head through the open door.

“Are you ok?”

Areyla feels so relieved. She rushes to him but the door begins getting further and further away. Suddenly she is separated from the door, from Hunter, by a vast distance. Running towards Hunter, Areyla slowly realizes that she feels weightless and she begins falling. She looks down and sees the beach below her with sharp rocks. She screams.

Then she wakes up. She is still in her bed in her small servant’s room.

She begins to sob, not sure if she’s awake or asleep. She prays for the night to end.

As the first rays of sunlight peer through her little window, Thousand-Scales prepares herself for the day. She puts on a simple day dress and covers herself with the mantel. She walks into the hallway. Sitting there, asleep against the wall is Hunter. He’s been standing guard by her door all night. He awakes.

“How are you feeling?” He asks.

Areyla shakes her head, “Not too well.”

“What happened?”

Tears came to Areyla’s eyes. Hunter gives her a hug to comfort her. “I remembered something scary; My Father. When I was little, he was so kind. Now he… he… he’s a horrible man.”

She cannot continue as sobs take control.

“Why do bad things happen?” She cries.

Hunter holds her and when she calms down a bit he says, “Good. Bad. Pain helps us to understand the difference between the two. You can experience great joy because you can feel such great sadness. It proves you are alive.”

The words wash over her like a calm tide washing away the impurities on the sand. Areyla’s heart feels full of comfort. She thanks him and then they turn to the day’s work. Areyla takes her bucket out to the well to fill it with fresh water.

She hears the sweet sound of a piccolo echoing in the courtyard. Prince James is sitting near the fountain. Areyla wonders if he has realized that Thousand-Scales is Lady Aurora. He stops playing.

"Thousand-Scales girl. Am I in the way?"

Thousand-Scales nods and he moves a bit to the side.

As she does her work she notices the Prince’s sad countenance. He sighs.

"Are you ok my Prince?" She asks.

He sighs again. "I have the weight of the kingdom resting on my shoulders. It is my duty to take over the kingdom one day as king with a wonderful queen beside me. Just as I think I found the perfect woman, she runs away from me. Is there something wrong with me?"

"There is nothing wrong with you." Areyla says.

"Then why did she run? Why must all this be so?"

"When we go through something hard we can feel really bad. But you have to feel really bad so that way you can appreciate the good. It proves you are alive." Areyla explains as if it wasn't a concept she has just learned.

"That is beautiful, thank you. I'm sure I'll figure out something." He takes her hand in his and stares into her eyes. "I really feel like I can talk to you as a wonderful confidant. Thank you."

Then he helps her fill her bucket and escorts her inside. Hunter is waiting at the door. He glares the Prince down. The Prince feels a bit uncomfortable as he is not used to having his subjects look at with with anything less than respect and admiration. Prince James bids his farewell and declares that he must leave.

Areyla notices she's feeling much better now. She blushes at the thought of when the Prince took her hand. She thinks she must be feeling more at peace because the Prince was so open with her. Hunter is glad to see her smiling again.

**CH 4 The Dress of Silvery Moonbeams**

The King could not talk to the Prince the day after the Ball as He had been swamped by incoming reports about the state of the kingdom. Most specifically a natural disaster had hit the north side of the Kingdom. The King told the messengers to let the people fend for themselves and make sure that the shipments for the Fall Festival would not be damaged or delayed. He then quickly sent them away to make sure the messengers did not spread rumors.

The King has just finished lunch, the day being the second day of the second week of the Fall Festival. Finally, the King is able to sit down with His son. They sit on chairs in the King’s personal balcony outside his room that overlooks the town.

“How was the Ball?” The King asks watching the fishman sell his fish.

“Father, what is this I hear about a north village struck by a terrible flood?” The Prince heard the news this morning and has been questioning every passing messenger he finds. None so far has been able to tell him any concrete information on how the people are doing.

“Don’t worry about it my son. It is being taken care of.”

The King does not seem to be understanding Prince James’s urgency. He says, “Father, there is something wrong, I can feel it. They need our help.”

“I told you not to worry my son, believe my words. It is being taken care of.”

Prince James stands up. “Father, if I don’t hear something soon I will ride there myself to asses the damage.”

“Who is King?” The King’s voice is full of his authority.

Prince James swallows. He sits down, realizing he overstood his boundaries. He says, “You are.”

“Very good.” The King says, “You are such a good son, very obedient, you will make a great king, legendary even. Now tell me, how was the ball?”

“It was nice. I met a wonderful woman. When I was with her it was exactly as you described.” Prince James says dryly.

“Wonderful. Did you propose? Or did you chicken out?” The King says smiling warmly.

“I proposed.”

“Then we have a wedding to plan!” The King says joyously.

“She didn’t say yes.”

“What?!”

“She did not give me an answer. She ran out when I asked her.”

“How come I haven’t heard of this! This is the type of news I need to be informed of. Tell me James, my boy, who is this girl. A girl who would run from a Prince, I have never heard of this.”

“No one knows who she is or where she came from. But it doesn’t matter. All of these things are just a part of life. They help us grow. If she is meant to be mine, it will work out.”

The King sees that his son is in no mood to discuss his rejection.

“Exactly my boy. You know, in these situations it is best to move on. Rebound, find someone else to devote your time and attention to.”

Prince James doesn’t say anything, he just watches the fishman sell his fish.

In his attempt to comfort his son, the King suggests, “What you need is to clear your head. How about you go on another Hunting trip.”

“Father…” Prince James says in a complaining voice.

“As King, I command you to go take a break hunting. I feel this is best for you son.”

Prince James stands and bows himself to his Father, “Yes, my King.”

Then he leaves before his Father makes another suggestion.

That is how Prince James finds himself at the noon-sun gallivanting in the forest with his band of high Lords. His hands tighten on the ropes and he considers journeying towards the northern town immediately. Doing so would declare open rebellion against the King. He can not do that. He is the crown Prince. How can he ask his subjects to be loyal to him if he is not loyal to his own superior? Prince James will ask nothing that he himself would not do. What he needs is just as his Father said. He needs a distraction.

As he rides, Prince James lets his mind clear and he finds himself getting lost in the moment, using the moment as a distraction from the rest of his troubles. It has just been the start of their hunting trip and the men are full of adrenaline for the hunt. Prince James lags behind. He rides into a beautiful meadow of flowers. He sees a woman: dark haired, beautiful, mysterious. She wears a green dress with a style and shine that he has never seen before. It seemed almost magical. He gets off his horse, brushes his hand through the flowers, pulling some with him on his way to approach the majestic woman.

“Madam, what is a flower like you doing in this part of the woods?”

The woman turns to find a well-toned peacock of a man kneeling on one knee extending a bouquet of fresh flowers, some still have the roots attached. She looks around, noticing the beautiful scenery, the smell of flowers, the sparkle of the sun. It is the perfect place for a romantic encounter which is exactly what the Prince is trying to turn his meeting into. The woman thinks he’s handsome alright but this whole cheesy-pick up thing is not her style.

“I’m lost. Do you know where I can find the nearest town?” She says. She does not take the bouquet.

“That would be my castle.” He says, still extending the bouquet, “Do you need an escort?"

“Yes! Thank you!” She says. Feeling guilty she takes one flower and put it in her hair. Then the couple walk to his horse. She trips, as she is still not used to her new feet, and of course Prince James swoops around and catches the fair maiden.

"Sorry, I'm not used to… all this." She says.

He gives her a charming smile. It seems he is running on adrenaline more than logic as he says, "No need to apologize. It's not unusual that a woman should fall for me."

"You could have just let me fall." She tells him. He seems confused, not getting the hint that she is not interested in him.

He looks closely at the woman’s face. She backs away a bit.

"You look familiar. Only your hair, it is different." He says.

"My hair…?" She connects the dots, "Have you seen another woman who looks like me?"

"I think perhaps yes."

"Can you describe her?"

"She has the same beautiful deep sea-blue eyes. The same peachy coral skin and your lips are…" he leans in to her face, being overcome with emotion and environment.

"Her hair! Tell me about her hair.”

"Oh," he coughs and backs away. He had almost kissed this stranger. Had he completely forgotten about the woman who had stolen his heart just days before? He says, "Her hair is the most magnificent thing I have ever seen. It is vibrant and voluminous, it has a glow that shines like a thousand suns."

"That's her!"

"Her? Do you know Lady Aurora?"

"Lady Aurora? Her name is…" The woman realizes Areyla is in danger and so she might be hiding her identity. Areyla can sometimes be a lot smarter than the woman gives her credit for. "Yes, I know her. Can you take me to her?"

"Alas, I cannot. I do not know where she is. I met her and I am madly in love with her-"

"You are?" She interrupts. She is having a hard time believing that. Not because Areyla isn't great, it just seems like the Prince is a little… as it would be said under the sea, full of bubbles.

He continues, "But just as I proposed to her, she ran away."

The woman is glad to hear it. Her first impression of this guy tells her he is not good enough for her sister.

"I see," She says, "Maybe I can help you find her. Where did you first meet her?"

"I met her on the night of the first Fall Ball."

"First, does that mean there will be a second?"

"Of course, you are here for the Fall festival are you not?" He asks.

"Of course!" She lies. She is not familiar with all these two-stick customs. "If she came once she'll probably come again."

"Are you sure?" The Prince looks like a lost puppy. She nods, giving him an assurance of what he wants. She really has no idea if Areyla will be there but she hopes it to be true. She really needs to find her sister.

"Do you already have a room at the castle, do you need me to take you there?" The Prince asks kindly.

"I have not been given a room yet but a ride would be wonderful." She says.

“I’ll help you with both.” The Prince helps her onto his horse, "Tell me, what is your name?"

"Call me Ursula."

The Prince rides to one of his colleagues and explains that he is going to take Ursula back to the castle. The colleague nods and the hunting party proceed.

Within the hour Prince James and Ursula arrive to the castle. Prince James arranges with the Cook for Ursula to have a room. Then he arranges for a servant to take her to her room while he goes on his own. Prince James proceeds to find ask Sir Diddle to go behind the King’s back and check on the people in the north.

The servant leads Ursula to her room up the stairs. They are passing the carpeted hallway when Ursula trips on the floor’s carpet and falls flat on her face. Her escort servant laughs at her. She looks up and the servant is holding out his hand to help her up.

"I thought Lords and Ladies were supposed to be graceful." The servant reminds her.

Ursula is caught off guard. What an impudent thing to say. For a servant he is very outspoken. She takes another look at the servant as he helps her up. He is not as beefy as the prince but he is defined and has a unique sort of charismatic charm. He leaves a good impression on her.

"I thought servants were supposed to keep their thoughts to themselves." She reminds him.

"Well I'm not your typical servant." He tells her.

"And I'm not your typical Princess." She tells him.

He laughs, "You're almost as bad as Thousand-Scales."

"Thousand-Scales? What's that?"

"It's a servant girl. She's known as Thousand-Scales because of the big mantel she always wears. It has all different types of scales. Something like that has got to be worth a ton of money. I’ve always wondered how she got it."

Did he just say a mantel of many scales? Ursula’s interest is peaked.

"What is her name?" Ursula asks. She suspects this Thousand-Scales might be her sister.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Thousand-Scales can't be her name, what is it?"

"I don't know, nobody’s really asked."

"Do you all have fish brains?" Ursula is dumbfounded. Then she realizes that if Areyla truly is going as this Thousand-Scales disguise than she is smart to keep her identity a secret. It will help to keep enemies from finding her. Thousand-Scales and Lady Aurora, Ursula wonders how many alternative disguises Areyla is using. Ursula recovers saying, "You know what, it's for the best. What color is her hair?"

"Don't know, I've never seen it."

At this point she is shocked. "Do you have any information about her aside from she's got a mantel and it's made out of scales?"

"Why does it matter to you?"

She rolls her eyes, "I'm looking for someone. You all must treat this poor girl like dead seaweed the way you talk about her."

"Thousand-Scales is the most beautiful amazing kind woman you will ever meet. She is loved by everyone who knows her and she does everything she can to help others. She is caring and sweet and wonderful."

The confident way the boy defends Thousand-Scales confirms Ursula’s suspicions. One only talks like that when they are defending a certain Golden-Haired merprinces. Thousand-Scales is Areyla and this boy has obviously fallen for her charm.

"Alright, don't get too defensive, lover boy." She teases him. "Though, if she means that much to you, you really should try to get her name."

"What about you?" He turns the conversation to Ursula.

"What about me?" She contends.

"What's your name?" He asks.

"Ursula." She says.

Hunter furrows his brow, “What? No title? No, princess, dutchess, rich bachelorette?”

“No need. I show my title in the way I live, and you?"

"Hunter." He says through a charming smile.

By this time they have come to the door. He leaves Ursula and she enters the room. She sees a black mist but thinks nothing of it. Her mind is focused on how she has found Areyla! Little did she know that she got out of one mess only to be thrown into another one.

As the second week of the Festival comes to a close the castle is in chaos preparing for the second ball. It is an unspoken requirement that each ball be better and more fancy than the last. The servants feel overloaded already but when the King demands a swan ice sculpture, that’s when half the castle staff crack.

The Cook is among the only to remain level headed as he sends one server boy to find the town sculpture. Really it was just an excuse to get the boy out of the castle as his anxiety has overcome him. The Cook, in the meantime, spends all day slaving over tiny horderves and cracker-like finger foods. His assistant has gotten snappy with the stress and was sent outside to pick and cut vegetables because no one wanted to be around her. Areyla has been putting the tiny horderves on plates and afterwards she was asked to mop the floor. The Cook sent Hunter to go help escort Lords and Ladies around the castle as he is among one of the only people who can still remain calm.

In all the hustle and bustle Areyla and Hunter have had very little time together and no time to practise dancing. This makes Areyla sad but her consolation comes when she thinks of going to the ball and seeing the Prince look at her with the same eyes full of love that he did at the first ball.

A little bit before the day Hunter, who is busy attending snotty Lords and Ladies, finally catches Areyla as she finishes mopping the grand ballroom. The floor needs to be perfect for the second Fall Festival ball the following day. It will not be long till the sun sets for the day. Hunter is acting quiet and paranoid.

Hunter says, “You need to leave. You need to run away.”

“Why are you saying this Hunter?”

“Please, just trust me.”

Normally Areyla would trust, but she is changing. She is becoming more assertive and independent. She says, “No. I’m staying and there is nothing you can do to convince me otherwise.”

The two best friends part on angry terms.

The Moon crosses the sky and the sun rises again only to set in the evening, indicating the time for Lords and Ladies to arrive for the second Fall Festival grand ball. In her servant's room, Areyla dresses herself in the most magnificent gown, the dress of Silvery Moonbeams. A flash of her father passes through her mind but it is replaced by her consuming frustration at her friend. She puts on her mantel to cover her dress and sneaks into the empty halls. The servants had the day off, except two lazy gossiping maids who were being punished with dusting duty. Every other castle servant, Hunter included, had gone again to the market. With the maids busy dusting, Areyla was sure she could again sneak into the Ball without arousing suspicion. This time, Areyla will arrive on time.

She walks into the grand hall. She is met with a similar reaction as to the first time she went to a ball. All eyes turn to admire her. Her form fitting dress flows like a cascading river in the light of the moon. The whispery silver gives off the impression that she is an unreachable angel come to grace the earth with her presence for just a moment. On the fabric is if the texture were following the effortless pattern of the moon, smooth and silky. Areyla looks around the room, heedless to the wonder and amazement of the crowd.

The Prince is nowhere to be found. She buys her time dancing with a few other men. Hunter, dressed in a sharp Lord’s suit and hair combed in a fashion similar to that of the popular status, asks her to dance. Shock and surprise registers in her body but she accepts. As she admires him she thinks that this look quite suits him. She also feels a bit awkward and she doesn't know how to act.

“So, Lady Aurora, do you enjoy the castle?” He says starting up casual conversation.

She loses concentration and accidentally steps on one of his feet.

“Sorry.” She says.

“I knew we should have practised a little more before the ball.” Hunter sighs.

Lady Aurora gasps, “Hunter, do you know it’s me?”

“How could I not?”

Their eyes meet for a second. All frustration is wiped out of her heart when she sees the concern and care in his eyes. She looks down, ashamed to meet his gaze.

“Look at me when we dance.” He says pulling her closer.

“Don’t hold me so tight.” She says frustratedly.

He twirls her.

“Don’t do that.” She says feeling off balance.

They dance in silent for a moment. Lady Aurora wishes she could be somewhere else.

Finally, he puts his hand on her chin and lifts her face up to his, "Areyla, I love you."

If Areyla could predict the next ten years of her life she would not be able to predict this. As obvious as it is, she is equally oblivious.

"Why?" Is all she is able to say.

“A long time ago there was a boy who went out to sea with his family. Their ship got caught in a terrible storm and was destroyed. Just before the boy drowned he was saved by a sea creature. Can you guess what saved him?”

“I don’t know.” She says.

“Think.” Hunter says, “Have you ever been caught in a storm?”

Areyla thinks of the night on the surface during the storm when Ursula and her saved people on that boat. Areyla had pulled a boy out of the water and helped him onto the lifeboat. She makes the connection.

Areyla asks hunter, “Are you the boy that was saved?”

“Can you guess what kind of *creature* rescued that boy?” Hunter asks stressing the word creature.

“A mermaid.” Areyla says.

Hunter smiles.

“That was you. You saved my life and I have never forgotten it. Ever since I was young I’ve wanted to thank that girl. The girl whose hair which shines brighter than a thousand suns. I’ve loved you since that first moment.”

“You are that boy?” Areyla can not believe it.

“I am. And now I want to save your life. Please, if my friendship, if my love means anything to you, please, leave now.” His eyes hold a sincere and desperate quality to them.

If it was anyone else, they would take him that instant and elope but this is Areyla and she is a very odd child. She says, "Hunter, I'm sorry. I can’t. I love the prince."

Hunter stops leading the dance.

“I understand. You’ve made your choice.” He kisses her on the cheek.

The music is still going. Hunter leaves her on the dance floor in the middle of the song.

Meanwhile, on the veranda, Ursula is taking her sweet time enjoying her evening with the Prince. The half-moon glows in the night as it slowly rises to take its place in the sky.

"Do you think she'll show up?" The Prince asks.

She batters her eyelashes, "I have a confession." She says to him. She takes his hand. He looks at her. This has all been much too easy.

"I am Lady Aurora."

He gasps.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier. I didn't know if you would believe me. I had to change my hair color. It was too dangerous for me."

"Lady Aurora!" He takes her in his arms. "It makes so much sense. I am so sorry I couldn't recognize you."

"All is forgiven." She says as she puts one hand behind his neck. He leans in for a kiss.

"We should start planning our wedding." She says as she reaches to meet his lips.

He pulls back, "Our wedding! You'll marry me?"

She laughs, "Of course silly!"

He twirls me around then dips her, "You've made me the happiest man in the world!"

Ursula laughs, "Maybe we should go announce this happy news to the rest of the kingdom."

"Of course." He takes her hand, like a little boy in the candy store he drags her into the ballroom.

Areyla stands against a wall. She keeps looking up to avoid tears from falling down. She ignores those that come up to talk with her or ask her to dance. Why would Hunter toy with her like that? She looks towards the door. It was time to leave.

Clapping from the front of the room calls for attention. Areyla turns and sees the Prince standing near the spot where the King is. He was looking so handsome. He was the reason she was here. She can’t believe she had forgotten that.

Prince James says, "I'd like to make an announcement! I would like to introduce my future wife and future queen of the kingdom, Lady Aurora!"

The King is so happy he says, “Finally, I can die happy now.”

Areyla is very confused. She hadn’t told the prince she agreed to his marriage proposal and it was a bit presumptuous for him to assume that she did. However, she did love the Prince so she began to walk towards the front of the room. Then she sees Ursula and freezes. With two human legs, Ursula walks next to Prince James and waves to the crowd like she owns the room.

How is this possible? How can Ursula be here right now? And why is she with Prince James?

Areyla makes eye contact with her sister. She expected to be greeted by her sister’s warm smile. Instead, it was like she was looking up at a viper who only wanted to slither to the top of the world. Ursula scoffs when she sees Areyla and looks away.

Perhaps it is a mistake.

Ursula walks and meet the Prince at his side in front of everyone. From her vantage point she has a great view of the entire room. She spots Areyla, her eyes are wide and shocked. She always has been such a dunce. The Prince hasn't seen her yet. Ursula feels that is good, the longer she can keep them apart the better. She waves to the crowd. The look on Areyla's face as she sees is priceless. Ursula thinks, ‘Don't worry Princess Spoiled, we'll talk later.’

"Wait, but I'm Lady Aurora!" Areyla called.

Ursula notices that her sister has gotten to be so brazen. She points directly at her, "You are an imposter! You are a servant dressed as royalty. Guards, get her!"

Areyla runs out. Ursula turn to face the Prince. He was watching her leave, he was ready to chase after her. Ursula push against him and says, "Don't go. I'm scared."

He holds her shoulders. "Who are you?" He asks.

"I'm Lady Aurora." She tells him.

"Then who is she?" He asks.

"That's my ungrateful servant that ran away and stole my dresses." Ursula is thoroughly enjoying this little game. All the pieces fit neatly together.

"She's a thief?" He says bewildered.

"I have so much to explain. Let's go talk." She says.

"No. I need to go talk to her." The Prince runs out. Ursula stamps her foot in frustration.

The Prince goes after the beautiful woman, running down carpeted halls. He sees a flash of Golden turn the corner. He runs but when he rounds the corner she is gone. He walks through the hallway looking down each connecting hallway. The woman is nowhere. He moves down the stairs. He passes by the Thousand-Scales servant then meets some maids at the bottom of the stairs.

“Have you women seen a Lady come through here? She has Golden-Blonde Hair that Shines like a Thousand Suns.”

“No, Sire, we haven’t seen anyone like that.” Says the one with dark long hair.

“We’ll keep a lookout though.” Says the more assertive one.

“Thank you.”

The Prince goes back up to try a different hallway. He doesn’t even notice passing the Thousand-Scales servant who now has tears coming down her face.

At the ball, as the moon gets high in the sky, things take a terrible turn. Unknown men wearing black masks come flooding into the ballroom. They guard the doors, not allowing anyone to leave. Panic in the room rises. The intruders fight off the royal guards and approach the king. Their leader, who is clad in a black mask, holds a knife up the king. He is not a large man but is neatly defined and has a unique sort of charismatic charm.

The King glares at him. The King feels he is entitled to know about the circumstances defining his death. He asks, “Why are you doing this?”

“It’s better for you to die than for villages to continually suffer under your rule.” The masked man says.

“Fair enough.” The King says. Then, with a movement of a desperate man and with a strength beyond his age, he kicks his attacker away. He runs to the middle of the room, directly under a chandelier. A masked lackie with a scar on his face, is guarding a door. Next to the door is the rope holding up the chandelier. With one quick movement he cuts the rope and the chandelier falls on the King. Women scream, men start attacking, the King is pronounced as dead. The assassins out match the men in the room and they all escape using the same veranda they arrived on.

Late that evening, as the half-moon sets, Prince James is still awake. He has not retired to bed. He wanders the halls with no defined direction. A Duke stops him in the hall outside his bedchamber. The Duke is the bearer of bad news and explains to the Prince the details of his Father’s fate. The Prince remains steadfast throughout the explanation. The Prince listens in solemn silence. Not judging his father, not judging the murderers. Never has the Duke seen such a young man with inner strength and control.

The funeral is on the following day, the beginning of the third week of the Fall Festival. The King is buried in the cemetery outside the town, next to all the other Kings. The sky is overcast and the morning sun is hidden by clouds. People all seem to have an opinion on how Prince James should act.

They say, “Finally, the tyrant is dead… The Prince will seek revenge… He is too young and inexperienced to rule… Give the boy some space…”

With clenched fists, Prince James did feel to retaliate but that desire quickly faded. He has seen how anger turns too many people to do horrible things. He instead moves on to feel an intense grief.

The funeral ends and he shuts himself away. People he once called friends come knocking on his door. He doesn’t answer. They wouldn’t understand. They’d all try to give their opinions, none would listen. The kingdom expected him to become king now. He should have a wife by now. He should have been there to fight for his father. Now he sits alone in his room, with the weight of responsibility being permanently placed upon his shoulders.

The Fall Festival continues on. “It’s what the king would have wanted” The King’s advisor tells the lords, servants, and townsfolk. The air of the castle town has a hostile atmosphere. Many peasants are celebrating. Many Lords and Ladies are weeping. When they pass each other on the street the townsfolk dare to look their highlords in the face, as if to say, “Your reign of tyranny is over”. The aristocrats know that the peasant’s joy is short lived. They will take back their power again, and they will make the peasants pay when they do.

Areyla watches the window that leads to the Prince’s chamber. It has been days since the King’s passing and Hunter has gone missing along with Areyla’s bag of dresses.

She’s become a useless slug around the castle and has been yelled at by the cook’s assistant more than once for staring off into the distance instead of doing chores. She’s become more clumsy than ever as her fingers can’t seem to be focused enough to hold anything. When people round the corner, when she sees a shadow, when a sudden movement or loud sound occurs, she often jumps. The cook has been worried about her and has been giving her extra food, hoping it will help.

In all the blur, Areyla did not know how to feel. All she knows is that she needed to find her sister.

**CH 5 The Dress of Golden Sun-Rays**

In the morning hours before most of the Lords and Ladies awake, the Prince can be found hiding in his place of solitude, the courtyard. The hour, however, is it not too early for the busy castle workers.

The Prince does not realize he is not alone, unaware of her watching. He is holding his piccolo. He plays a wrong note, then another and another. He then sits down on the bench and fights tears. Thousand-Scales girl drops the bucket of water she had just filled.

"My Prince, what has happened? I know I'm just a servant but you can talk to me."

The Prince tells her about his trouble with Lady Aurora. He tells her about his Father. He cries. She cries with him. He explains his tender feelings, raw and powerful. She listens.

She offers him this advice, "Go after what makes you happy."

"Right now I don't know who that is."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be a person." She puts her hand on his piccolo. "Your piccolo makes me happy. Please play it."

He's not sure he can. He puts it up to his mouth.

"Thousand-Scales,” A large nosed servant came into the courtyard moments before. “Lady Aurora is looking for you.”

Thousand-Scales says, "I must go but even if I'm not here, play it for me."

"I’m sorry your highness but Lady Aurora was very persistent. Thousand-Scales, we must go." The servant says apologetically.

"Thousand-Scales isn't your name, is it. What is your name?" The Prince wonders why he has never asked her that before. If he has, he didn't remember it.

"Areyla." She says.

"That is beautiful."

She blushes, smiles and follows the servant with the big nose away.

The Prince plays the song and as he does he lets his mind think clearly. The Thousand-Scales girl, Areyla, has always been there. Just a servant he found in the woods. His meeting with her is similar to his meeting with Ursula. Both women are so mysterious. It's almost as if they are related. Finally his mind connects dots and he has an epiphany. Areyla is the servant who pretended to be Lady Aurora. He realizes that he loves her, whether she is a servant or not, she makes him happy. That was all he could ask for.

He runs after Areyla.

Areyla is quiet on their walk to Ursula's room.

Ursula open the door and addresses the servant. She says, "Thanks for bringing her. You may go."

He leaves and Areyla goes inside. The sisters hug and Ursula tells her to take off the big scaley mantel. She does. They sit down. Areyla is thinking about how Ursula is now engaged to the Prince. Ursula is thinking about how the lie she will spin for Areyla. The atmosphere between them is awkward.

"Ursula! What has happened?" Areyla asks.

Ursula gives a great huff, "It has been terrible without you sister. Just as I was leaving the kingdom our Father, of course, he caught me and accused me of treason. He's turned Atlantis into a living land of horror. With help from our sisters I escaped and came to find you."

"Then why are you messing around with Prince James? He's not your type!" Areyla is mad. Ursula wonders if she actually has feeling for the idiot.

"Once we're married I can get his help for the ocean." Ursula says.

"None of this makes sense."

"Just trust me." She says, "I love you sis."

"Why did you call me an imposter!" Areyla remembers.

"I had to! You don't understand. Areyla, I need you to return to the ocean and help me stop our Father."

"No!" She says stubbornly. "I won't."

"Why." Ursula demands to know.

"Your not acting like you. I think your lying. You've changed Ursula. You're not the same."

"I am Ursula you spoiled brat. You are just too blind to see your 'doting big sister' as anything but benevolent. Not all of us like playing second fiddle to our Mother's favorite." Ursula yells.

Tears well in Areyla’s eyes. Ursula pretends not to care.

"You won't go home, fine then. I’ll just say that you caught the same illness as our stupid mother. It’ll be easier this time, I won’t have to poison you by degrees.”

“What?”

“You heard me, I had access to our mother’s medicine. I slipped in poison on my way to her bed. Same with our insane father. Although his medicine made him crazy, crazy enough to remarry. Only because of mother’s stupid promise he had to marry you.”

“It was all you?!”

“Of course fish-brain. I got bored ruling over the ocean so now I'm going to take over your little piece of paradise. You had your chance, now we'll do it the hard way."

Ursula begins to pull something out of a bag while Areyla looks around, trying to find an exit. Ursula is blocking the door to the hall. Areyla runs to the balcony but sees the figure of a man on the other side. On his face is a big scar. It is the same man who murdered the king. Areyla looks for another door and opens it only to be disappointed to find a closet. She gasps, having seen something in the closet she never thought she would ever see again. Hanging inside the closet is the dress Golden Sun-Rays.

"Do you like it? It's my wedding dress." Ursula laughs.

"How did you get that?"

"It was easy. I hired bandits to kill you but that Prince of thieves Hunter failed.”

“Hunter?”

“Oh yes, that nice little kitchen boy was my spy the entire time.” Ursula loved the face of complete torture that Areyla wore.

“That stupid prince of yours got in the way. Then Hunter decided to wait to kill you and never seemed to get around to it. He wasn’t completely useless though. I mean, they did manage to kill the King like I asked,” Ursula turns to the man with the scar, “Take her to the prison, outside the castle please. I might still need her."

The man with the scar puts Areyla in a bag and carries her out using the balcony. He never has been one to the most common entrances and exits to rooms. Areyla is crying and begging for help.

The Prince barges into Ursula’s bed chamber, moments after Arelya has already left.

"Where is Areyla?"

"Why?" She demands to know. She wonders how he has learned her name.

"I love her."

Ursula feels jealous that everyone is in love with Areyla and not her!

“She's a servant." Ursula says skeptically.

"It doesn't matter to me anymore. Lady Aurora, I'm calling off the wedding."

"I did hope it wouldn't have to come to this." She says as she opens a vile. She prides herself on how prepared she is. She did think of everything. She turns and throws the contents of the vile at Prince James's eyes. He stumbles back. He blinks and as the love potion kicks in, the first person he sees is Ursula.

"Lady Aurora, I love you! Marry me!"

"The wedding still on?"

"Of course, why would it be any other way?"

"Good, I'm so glad you came to your senses."

Hunter enters the small fortune tellers shack located in the shady side of the town surrounding the castle. He is carrying a large bag and a confident attitude. This meeting is the most important event of his day and he was glad it is happening towards the beginning of the day rather than later. He wants this to be over with as soon as possible. He’s been using this small shack to meet with his employer through a crystal ball. Never has he seen the face of his employer, only blurred smoke and a voice. Today however, is different. As he enters the shack he stands face to face with Ursula.

“I must thank you for getting rid of the King for me.”

“You were right about the dresses. They will be worth enough to pay our cost.” Hunter says as he puts his bag down.

“I am very disappointed in your actions regarding that Lady Aurora. I was surprised to arrive on land to find out she is still alive.”

“I was surprised to see you with a body.” Hunter says. “The crystal ball you sent to us to communicate does not do you justice.”

“This, of course, is not my true form but I find that I enjoy this vitality quiet nicely. Anyway, I think you have grown weak Hunter. I think you have developed a soft spot for the girl.” Ursula sighs.

“Why does that matter to you?” Hunter asks, gadge-ing what her motives are.

“Your emotions will compromise my plans.”

“And what are you planning on doing about it?”

Ursula snaps and the men in hiding uncover their themselves. One man enters the room from the roof, another from behind the wall. Two come through the doors and three reveal their places under a rug, in a box and under the table. They are each holding a weapon pointing at Hunter.

“After all we’ve been through, you guys would betray me? Frank, even you?”

The man with the scar shrugs, “She promised us our own lands to rule. That more than you’d ever give us.”

Hunter says, “Curse your ambition.”

They begin to take Hunter to their prison outside the castle.

Before leaving Frank turns to Ursula, “Anything else we can do for you?”

"I have to leave for a bit. A prisoner escaped from the place I came from and I need to deal with that. I'll return in time for the wedding. I trust you can take care of everything?"

"We will." The man says.

Then the evil witch leaves to deal with the escaped prisoner while Hunter’s own men take him to the prison outside of town.

Ursula wakes up in a dark dungeon. She has no idea what happened or how much time has passed. The last thing she remembers is being in the room at the castle, and seeing black mist. Then nothing.

The door to the dungeon opens and a girl with Golden-Blonde Hair that shines like a thousand suns is thrown in. She has not had the best day as she just spent the last few minutes being kidnapped.

“Areyla!” Ursula runs up to her and gives her sister a fierce hug.

Areyla pushes her away, “Get away!”

Ursula is confused as to why she would do that. “Areyla, it’s me, it’s Ursula.”

Areyla is crying, sobbing.

“Dear, tell me what happened. What’s going on?” Ursula slowly approach her and pats her head.

“Is it really you?”

Ursula nod and smile at her. Areyla hugs Ursula and cries. Ursula has pity on the poor girl, and wonders about what has she gone through.

Apreyla says, “You were awful! You took my prince from me then tried to have me imprisoned. You told me you poisoned mother, and you tried to poison father but made him crazy instead. You hired bandits, you hired bandits to kill me! You're the worst.”

“That’s impossible. I have no memory of that. Areyla, I would never do that. Whoever told you so is a liar.” Ursula says.

“You were the one who told me!”

“Than I lied! Or it was an imposter. It couldn’t have been me. There is no way I would do something like that.”

“How did you even get here?” Areyla asks.

Ursula takes a deep breath and begins her story.

“I saw that you were safe on land and I was about to take the potion to come join you but father captured me. He accused me of treason and set a date for my execution. Searella, Gillian, and the twins helped me escape, while Fauna, Flora and Merryweather attacked Father. Because of them distracting him, I was able to get away. I don’t know what happened to our sisters and the doctors after that. I came to our hideout and made a new potion so that I could escape to land. The last thing I remember is meeting some buff prince in the forest and then a servant escorting me to a room. After that I found myself here, waking up in this cage.”

Areyla gives Ursula a huge hug. The sisters hold eachother for a while.

“We should try to escape!” Areyla says.

“I like the enthusiasm but let’s not. We have no idea where we are. We have no idea where we would go. I have no idea how to even open locks like these and I can’t go very far as I just got my human legs… not that long ago.” Ursula responds.

Areyla nods sadly, “Then we wait then.”

“Then we wait.” Ursula says as silence falls over the dungeon.

“Tell me about your time on land.” Ursula says.

(Needs an in between break scene??? Or just continue it?)

Areyla tells her sister about meeting the Prince, their time in the courtyard, the garden, and the first grand ball. She tells her about her mantel of Ten Thousand-Scales and the dresses. She tells her about Hunter and how evil Ursula claimed that he had tried to kill her. Areyla assumes that is a lie because evil Ursula was the one who said it. Actual Ursula is more skeptical and assumes Hunter is evil.

Areyla ends her story by talking about all the fun she had with Hunter. The mornings of doing servant chores together, his teaching her to dance and even the teasings. That is why there is no way he would do such horrible things.

Ursula immediately recognizes that Areyla is in love with Hunter. She marvels that Areyla does not see it. She worries that Hunter may have some involvement in their capture so she doesn’t mention her thoughts.

(Needs more show not tell in this scene)

Through a small dungeon window the girls watch the moon rise and fall twice. According to the pattern, tonight will be the night of the full moon. Sometime during day, A man comes into the dungeon. He throws another man into the cell.

“See you later!” says the man who was thrown into the cell.

The man who threw him in solutes then leaves.

“Hunter?!?” Areyla immediately recognizes him. Areyla runs over to him but stops herself, remembering that he might be a part of the reason she is in this mess. “What happened to you?”

“You’re... Hunter?” Ursula says incredulously.

“Yes, I’m Areyla’s friend and I’m here to save you.” He says.

“You tried to kill her.” Ursula says.

“I can explain but we don’t have much time.”

“Start now. You’ll make time.” Ursula demands.

Hunter sighs, “Where do you want me to start?”

“A servant that has mastery in all aspects of castle life. A servant that knows how to dance. A servant that can blend into royal crowds. Maybe my sister knows who you are but I don’t. Who are you?”

Hunter nods, thinking of his response.

“My name is Hunter, and Ursula is right. I’m not a servant. I’m a thief, some people call me the Prince of Thieves. My band of men found a crystal ball and it started talking to us. Turns out it was a rich and powerful witch who lived on the other side of the ocean. She hired us to kill you.As payment, I was promised the most magnificent dresses in the world, which I got to say, looks way better on the wearer.”

“You tried to kill me?” Areyla says heartbroken.

Hunter says, “I can’t deny it.”

The sweet darling Areyla who would never hurt anyone for any reason, slaps Hunter.

“That is for the Prince.” She says.

She slaps him again. “That is for Ursula.”

She slaps him again. “That is for me.”

The blows did not really hurt and they don’t have any lasting impact.

“I’m sorry.” Hunter says.

Areyla nods rubs her hands, they are stinging and red from hitting him.

“I’ll think about forgiving you. You may continue your story.” Areyla says.

Hunter takes a deep breath and looks at the ground, “The crystal ball lady seemed evil so we were weary. The job turned out to be you Areyla.” Hunter stops talking and stares into Areyla’s eyes. Then he remembers that he got rejected. He continues, “Anyway, it didn’t take my men long to realize the witch was straight up crazy and so we’ve been plotting to take her down ever since.”

“What about the King? Was it your men that killed him?” Ursula asks.

Hunter shakes his fist, “That man was a tyrant and his subjects are happier now that he is gone. Maybe everything looks dandy from the castle but in the outskirts the people are taxed to the point they have nothing. The King uses the earnings of hardworking peasants to fund his three-week long party and incessant hunting trips with high-horse aristocrats. While he sits in his cushy castle children are starving. Prince James may be an airhead but he cares about his people. He will be a Great King.”

“I had no idea…” Areyla says.

“You’re both not from here. There is no way you would know the inner workings of this kingdom.”

Ursula nods rehearsing his words in her mind. “What happened next?”

Hunter continues, “After the King died the witch mistook our motives. She thought we killed the king to help her become queen. She suspected I had ulterior motives after seeing my affection towards Areyla. So she started hatching a plot to turn my men against me. She targeted their ambition and promised them ruling positions if they helped her.”

“Did it work?” Areyla asks.

Hunter laughs, “Not at all. As soon as she approached my men they came told me everything.”

“Then how did you end up here?” Ursula asks.

“To make the witch believe my men have betrayed me. We’re pulling a double betrayal betrayal situation. This is about the fifth time we’ve done this, you don’t have anything to worry about. My men are pros at this.”

Both girls are in quiet shock trying to soak everything in.

Finally, Ursula turns to Areyla and says, “Areyla, I want you to forget everything about the Prince and marry this man.”

Areyla baffles out of her mouth some kind of response indicating her disagreement.

“I wouldn’t mind.” Hunter shrugs.

Areyla looks like she might start crying, “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“I know.” Hunter says feeling bad to have baited her.

“So what’s the plan now?” Ursula asks Hunter.

“We take her down at the Ball. We’ll get the townsfolk and out number her. Taking on a witch is unknown territory to me.”

“Sounds good to me.” Areyla says. Ursula is doubtful.

Areyla and Hunter run to the town market where all the common folk are moping. They use their extreme persuasiveness to get the common folk to ban together to save the Prince.

“He doesn’t care about us… he’s going to be just like the tyrant king… what do you know about how we feel…” The commoners all complain.

“The Prince would not do anything like that.” Areyla says. “Prince James is king and nobel. He loves his people. He would do anything for them.

“And he’s under a spell.” Hunter says.

“How do you know?” A man calls out.

“You all know the Prince. Does his current actions match his personality. No. They do not. He’s under a spell and I’ve seen the witch who did it. Now he needs our help.” Areyla says.

“Don’t listen to him. The Prince is just going to turn out exactly same as his father.” A common musician says.

Hunter speaks up, “I have been among the worst of all entitled Lords and Ladies. I used to be one until my parents died and I was left with nothing. There is nothing high society hates more than an outcast and so I was treated worse than the dust beneath their feet. Among all the crooks I have met, the Prince is nothing like them. As much as I hate to admit it, she’s right. He is a bit naive but that will change as he grows. I have tried to find fault in the man. I cannot. He loves his people.”

“Why us?” Says a man with a long beard and nice shoes.

“Because you’re the ones who will do something.” Hunter says.

“What can we do?” asks a lady who makes bonets.

Hunter smiles, “Crash a party.”

The beach at the end of Fall, on the last day is beautiful. The sun has just begun setting. Carpenters from the village have built a temporary dance floor that covers the sand. Those Carpenters who spent the extra time sanding out the wood while dreaming of dancing on it, will not be allowed to join the party. The music is being played by the Royal musicians, all of which had hoped to be joined by the rest of the town's talent. One of their favorite nights of the year was having music competitions with the local players yet the local players are not invited, which meant their hopes had all been in vain. Light refreshments are provided by the Royal cook and staff as well. The castle staff sits with the rest of the villagers, servants, and commoners at the market. All who gathered in the town's market had planned to go to the festival. Now they all be groaned their unfortunate circumstances. They all thought Prince James will be a much better ruler, now they are not sure.

Areyla, Hunter, and all the common folk barge in. Areyla takes off the mantel and reveals her Golden hair that shines like a Thousand suns. Everything happens very quickly.

Seeing Areyla breaks the Prince’s curse. He runs to her side, confused about his circumstances as if he wakes up from a dream. The man with the scar detains Ursula in ropes.

Prince, "what happened?"

Hunter, "you were under a spell. She broke it."

He points to Areyla.

"Thank you Areyla my dear."

The commoners all cheer, "The Prince's spell is broken!"

"What is the situation?" Prince James asks.

"Well, you were engaged to Ursula who was really the evil sea witch Fauna and she put you under the spell so that you would be in love with her. Then she demanded that there be no commoners at the 3rd Ball but we all broke in to rescue you."

The Prince's heart is touched. He turns to the commoners.

"I have a word to say unto these, ye common folk. Ye great courageous band. Ye holy honored loyalists. There is a past which is stained by sickened pride. I could not move forward if I did not acknowledge where we have been. I have come to understand only a miniscule fraction of your plight and even this much showed me not only the horrors, but the strength that lies within you. You have a station in life that is honored. You have potential that is untapped. I believe it is upon your backs that this mighty kingdom is built. It is not upon I, that dictates laws and institutions, of which this kingdom relies, it is upon you, the one who carry out the fulfillers of the laws and institutions. I have heard some say what you do is meaningless and of no lasting consequence. I reject this only to assert that YOU are the lasting consequence. When a King dies, the people live on. Though armies and empires rise and fall, the people live on. You are that mighty, eternal people and you shall live on. Each of you have a purpose, each of you have been given a life and a job to fulfill. How proud I am to see each of you faithfully fulfill that task. I am just a man of little consequence but I am honored to stand in front of you today. Just as you have been my servant, I hope to be yours. May we start this moment on as new people with a value of life and freedom. May each of us lift were we stand!"

The crowd cheers.

Unseen by the rest of everyone else, Ursula has hidden away a knife and uses it to break free.

"You underestimated me!" Ursula says.

Hunter jumps on her and detains Ursula, holding a knife around her neck. Fauna throws a potion down which catches Hunter off guard, attacking him. Out of trained muscle memory Hunter accidentally stabs Ursula’s body with Fauna in it. Though he was defending himself, he had not meant to hurt the princess. The dress of whitest white becomes stained with red blood. Fauna screams and Ursula breathes out black smoke. The black smoke becomes a figure and materializes into Fauna. People scream and start running. Fauna attacks Hunter, throwing a potion at him that burns his skin away. She is yelling about betrayal and stuff not worth mentioning. Hunter fights back, giving her a scar but being left himself in a burnt bloody heap. The Prince brings out his sword against the witch. The witch throws something at Areyla and when it hits her she turns into a mermaid. Prince James rushes to Areyla’s side.

Ursula is fading in and out of consciousness. She sees Areyla with her fin.

“Get her to safety. Get her to the water!” She yells feebly to Prince James.

“Protect the Prince!” Hunter says, giving his last command.

Prince James picks up Areyla and runs to the ocean. Luckily it is not too far away. Fauna chases after them, followed by all the common folk.

He places her in the water. The tide washes in with great force. She doesn’t want to go. Then, from the water, comes King Posiedon. He rises from the water holding his trident.

“Impossible!!!” Fauna yells. “We trapped you! I went back to keep you in prison.”

King Posiedon spits on her. He locks her in a water cage.

“Where is your Sister?” King Posiedon asks.

“She’s hurt.”

“Bring her to me.” He looks at Hunter’s men. “NOW!”

The men scramble off in the presence of such a powerful being.

They come back with both Hunter and Areyla.

He touches Areyla with his trident. She can feel her wound healing. Her feet turn into fins. He moves his way to Areyla.

“Dear, I am so sorry for everything that I have done. As your father, I have failed. What else can I do for you?”

“Hunter!” She points to the bloody mess of Hunter. Hunter is surrounded by a group of worried men. King Posiedon takes his trident and touches Hunter with it. His wounds start healing but as a side effect of the magic his legs turn into fins and he becomes a merman.

King Posiedon watches his daughter flounder as a mermaid in the arms of the Prince.

“Do you love him?” King Posiedon asks.

Areyla looks into the Prince’s loving gaze. She has never been seen to be happier.

“I do.”

“Do you love her?” The king asks Prince James.

“More than life itself.” Prince James declares.

“Take care of her. All I want is for your happiness. You have my blessing.” With the trident King Posiedon touches Areyla’s fin and it is replaced with two-stick legs.

Then he comes over to Hunter.

“You, your name is Hunter?”

Hunter nods.

“I can see you have a good heart. I bequeath this trident to you with the task to give it to my eldest Daughter, Pearl. Take Ursula home. The trident will only work for you if you use it to protect her. Can you do this?”

“Sir, I’m really not your best choice.” Hunter says flipping his fin.

“I can take the trident back myself!” Ursula tells him.

“I’ve made my choice. Once the task is done you may use the trident to turn back human or to stay a merman.”

King Posiedon gives Hunter the trident, the most powerful weapon in all the sea. Then water recedes taking with it King Posiedon and Fauna, whom are never heard from again.

**CH 6 End**

Prince James stands in front of the crowd of commoners and guests.

“Each of you spent weeks dreaming of this night. Yes, some unplanned events happened, he for one has a fish tail,” -He points at Hunter- “But a night like this doesn’t come everyday and either we can let what has happened spoil our great joy, or we can get on with it and have the party we intended to have. No more evil doers. No more leaving at midnight. Who among you will join with me to make tonight a night to last generations!”

Everyone is quiet for a moment. No one quite knows what to do.

Hunter picks up a cup full of festive liquids. He lifts his drink in the air and with a mighty cheer hails, “For tonight!”

“For tonight!” The crowd responds.

The band picks up playing. Castle musicians are joined by the town musicians. Commoners and nobles are gossiping and laughing together. Many compliment the castle staff for the excellent food. The carpenters do their jigs on the dance floor they themselves crafted. A certain castle guard and an attractive noble maiden enjoy a slow love ballad together. They decide their love can withstand the ranks of society and so, that very night, they become engaged. For this night no one is labeled by rank or class, all men are equal.

Under the stars the common folk admire the tails of Ursula and Hunter. Ursula, who is not a big fan of all the human attention tells Hunter that they should leave as soon as possible.

Hunter is in front of his men. They all look solemn and morbid.

“I won’t be gone long… probably.”

One man wipes a tear from his eye. Each man comes to Hunter to give him a heartfelt goodbye.

“We’re going to miss you… come back with more hot-mermaids, one for each of us preferably… be safe… don’t get caught and don’t go after fish-bait… we’ll never forget you… I can’t believe you’ve been turned into a fish… I’ll do everything I can to keep up your memory… I’m never going to eat fish again… We’ll make you proud.”

Hunter tries to comfort them, “It’s not like I’m dying... I’m not a fish… You’ll be fine... I leave Frank in charge…I am NOT a fish!... I’ll be back... Do all you can to raise the moral of Prince James.”

Finally Hunter gives his men one last direction, “If this kingdom is not having a party every weekend by the time I get back, I will claim to have never known you men.”

Frank pounds Hunter in the chest, “If you come back without saving an entire mermaid race, we will claim never to have known you.”

Their fists clasp together in a fierce grab.

“Count on it.” Hunter says.

Areyla is waiting with Prince James a short distance off. She stands on the land where the sea crashes against the bank of the land. Ursula and Hunter join her and Prince James under the stars.

Hunter looks at Areyla beside Prince James. He says, “I’m happy for you.”

Ursula can tell by the way his hands are clenched into fists that he is not happy.

“Thank you,” Areyla says, “Hunter, you are like family. You are so important to me. Truly. I cannot imagine my life without you and the way you’ve helped me grow. I can only say thank you.”

Areyla steps closer to him and kisses his cheek. Hunter watches as Prince James takes Areyla’s hand, assuring her that he is still present.

Hunter smiles but turns away. This has been more painful than he originally thought it would be. “Apparently not important enough.” Hunter mutters as he leaves.

Areyla’s heart hurt as she watches Hunter swim away.

Ursula watches her sister.

“Areyla, are you ok with this?” Ursula asks.

She can’t answer that question immediately. “... I’m fine.”

Prince James takes Areyla into his arms, “I’m here for you my dear.”

Areyla smiles as her heart fills with passion for the Prince.

“Areyla, you love Hunter.” Ursula tells her sister who is in the arms of the Prince.

Prince James lets go and snaps at Ursula, “She loves me. Don’t get her confused.”

Ursula immediately rises to the challenge to put this pompous Prince in his place, “This woman is my sister whom I have loved and protected my entire life. If you want any say in her future you will let me speak my mind.”

Looking into Ursula’s eyes he sees a wave of overwhelming dedication to family that he could never even compare to. Prince James finds himself shrinking and shriveling as if he were a submissive tiny sea-bubble. He takes a step back but remains within earshot.

“Come, sit next to me.” Ursula says and Areyla sits next to her as the water brushes up against their feet and tail.

“You’re wrong Ursula. I love Prince James.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just feel so alive when I’m with him. I feel so happy.”

“That’s just hormones.” Ursula rationalizes.

“You wouldn’t understand Ursula, you’ve never been in love.” Areyla says.

Ursula’s eye’s narrow. That was a low blow. “In five years who do you see staying your life? Hunter or Prince James?”

“... Both.”

“Who did you think of first?”

“I’ve made my decision. Can’t you just be happy for me?”

“Are you sure Areyla. You won’t regret this?”

“I won’t.” Areyla says, sure of herself.

“Fine, do what you want. I’m happy for you. You will probably live happily ever after.”

Areyla stands up. “I will be happy. Thank you very much.”

“I love you Areyla… I’ll come visit sometimes. Will you look for me?” Ursula says.

Areyla’s attitude softens as she realizes it may be a very long time until she sees her sister again. She gives her sister a hug.

“Everyday. I love you too Ursula.” Areyla says.

Ursula jumps in the water as Areyla joins the prince at his side.

(Meantion Servants…? Ursula and Hunter have a conversation?)

The Fall Festival has ended and it is the first day of winter. Ursula and Hunter have left to the sea. The future Queen Areyla stands on the beach, Prince James has left with Hunter’s band of thieves to go solve a problem in the north of the kingdom. Their wedding is planned for the Spring, only a few short months ahead. Areyla could not be any happier… is what she thought she should feel.

Her feelings are more like that of the silently falling first snow. Beautiful yet cold. It will not be long until the snow covers the land leaving blankets of white. The trees will be barren. The animals will all be asleep and yet, time will still continue onwards.

The End