

Tales from Mako Island
A H₂O Fanfic

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Chapter 1

Crossing The Line

Cleo could feel the blood rushing into her head as she bent further over to see what blocked the filter of the dolphin's basin. Some moron had thrown in the plastic-wrapping from his Twinkie-bar, which was now blocking the filters. Cleo asked herself if people threw their waste into their living room too. 'Damned, Phil and the other dolphins live here', she thought angrily.

Beside the summer heat, she was struggling to pull the plastic from the filter, while trying to neither fall over nor touch the water at the same time. She had used her water-shaping-powers to punch a hole into the water surface, that allowed her to reach down dryly, but strains of hair always slipped out of the knot she tied them into, and got dangerously close to the rippling waves. She had no idea whether getting her hair wet would trigger metamorphosis, but she surly didn't want to find out.

Just as she grabbed the junk, she heard a voice behind her. "One of these days you're gonna fall in." Cleo was so surprised she almost lost balance, but Rikki had already grabbed her by the shirt, and pulled her back.

"Ow, there's no need to be so tough, I wouldn't have fallen", she cried.

"Sure.", said Rikki. "But if you fell in broad daylight, they're gonna nail you to a lab table, right here in this institute."

There was real concern in her voice. Cleo looked up to her friend, and sighed. Rikki was right, there were too many people knowing about their identity already. Even though they managed to convince most of them, they'd become human again, that Denman woman was still snooping around, ogling at everyone who was involved in the affair, especially at Lewis.

'God', she thought to herself, 'are you jealous of someone who's old enough to be Lewis' mom? That's pathetic.'

She allowed Rikki to help her up. "Are you joining us at Wilfred's?", the blond girl asked. Wilfred's was of course the "JuiceNet café", the place most of the youth in town met. "Anytime", Cleo said.

"But get changed first", Rikki smirked into the direction of Cleo's fish bucket, "You smell like dead fish".

Half an hour later, Cleo arrived at the “JuiceNet café”. She steered directly to the table where she had spotted her friends. “Hi guys!”, she said, beaming at Lewis, who sat on the table over some papers that looked mind-bogglingly complicated. Lewis didn’t look up from his studies. “Cleo’s here, hey Cleo!”, Emma said with her voiced raised. “And she doesn’t smell like fish anymore”, Rikki added.

“Lewis!”, Emma cried.

“Forget it”, Rikki shrugged, “The only way to get a welcome kiss from your boyfriend is when he needs a saliva sample.”

“What?” Lewis looked around. “Oh, hi Cleo!” Cleo sighed and sat on the free seat beside Lewis. Why did she have to fall in love with the uber-geek? She looked over to Emma, and asked herself, if it was easier with her and Byron. As far as she knew, the two of them hadn’t seen each other lately. Mostly because Byron insisted on taking Emma to the beach when he went surfing, what she obviously couldn’t do. They had some fights about it.

Emma now spoke: “Tomorrow’s the full moon, we need to figure out what we’re gonna do about it”.

“Ask it to skip and go on with the next new moon?”, Rikki asked sarcastically.

“Come on, you know what I mean, we really should avoid being outside.”

“I’m going to lock myself up in the cellar”, Rikki stated, obviously serious. “Your mom will love it”, Emma smiled. But she new why Rikki was concerned. Of all the full-moon-maladies, Rikki’s was the worst. She did not simply do stupid things, she lost control over her powers, which were dangerous enough, even if she was in control. She felt great sympathy towards the other girl, but resisted the urge to lay her hand on the blonde’s shoulder. Rikki wouldn’t want that sort of sympathy.

She looked over to Cleo and Lewis. “I need to get out of the house”, said Cleo. “Lil’ ’sis would get suspicious. So I said we’d have a sleepover night”.

“OK, Rikki’s cellar it is then.”

Lewis, finally packed up is studies. “Right then. I’ll pick you up at five Cleo.”

“Lewis, you’re not gonna come!”, Emma cried, “It’s strictly a girls thing.”

“And who’s gonna make sure that you’re not peeking at the moon again?”, Lewis responded.

“Lewis, we’re gonna be fine! Rikki’s cellar is 8 feet underground. No Windows and a fireproof door. No moonlight gets into there”, Cleo looked into Lewis’ eyes. “But it’s really sweet of you, to care for us so much.” She gave him a kiss on the lips, leaving him with a blank expression on his face as she rose from her seat. “Anyone in for a Strawberry-Fizz?”, she asked, walking over to the counter to get herself another drink. Emma couldn’t

help laughing at the sight of Lewis, who gazed after his girlfriend with a look of total bewilderment on his face, as if he was still trying to grasp what just happened. “Lewis,” she said with a stern expression, “some day Cleo has to fill you in, on the facts of life.” Lewis startled “What facts?” It was obvious that he completely missed Emma’s statement. “And so Lewis Casanova took another heart by storm.”, Rikki said in a storyteller’s voice. That was too much for Emma, who burst into laughter, leaning herself on Rikki’s shoulder, burying her face in her friend’s neck. The tingling sensation, and the sudden physical contact to her friend made Rikki feel confused, who decided, that she should pat Emma’s back and otherwise ignore her.

Looking around the room, she saw something, that spoiled her mood immediately. Miriam and a bunch of her disciples just entered the room. “Oh look, it’s the bimbo squad”, she said, loud enough that everyone at her could hear. The others turned their heads and Cleo, returning from the counter with a drink in her hand, snorted. Emma let go of Rikki’s shoulder, and stopped giggling. Miriam however had already spotted them, and walked right over to the table next to them. She placed herself in such a way, that she could see Emma and Rikki, and -after her disciples gathered around her- raised her voice, to make sure that the three girls and Lewis could overhear her conversation.

“Of course not everyone is able to wear a Prada costume. See Emma over there for example. She’s wearing Cole’s’ summer sale collection, and it suits her OK.” Her friends giggled.

Emma looked bemused, but Rikki felt rage rising up in her. “What a bitch!” she exclaimed. Emma just shook her head, taking on her best science-teacher imitation: “She’s so much of an airhead, that her overall density is close enough to the surrounding air, that one can easily ignore her.”. This joke made Lewis burst into laughter, while the two girls stared at her mystified.

Miriam however, was far from done. “See, to fit into such an amazing piece of clothing such as I’m wearing, you need female forms”, she made a gesture, as if she was following her body shape with her hands to show what she meant. “Emma however probably doesn’t wear a bra. Not that she needs one anyway.”

Emma acted as if she didn’t hear anything, but Rikki saw she was hurt. Cleo grabbed her friend’s hand, but Rikki stood up from her seat and walked over to Miriam. “Oh, Miriam! Nice dress!” she said with twiddled enthusiasm. “I really think it is amazing!”

Miriam, expecting the upcoming insult, didn’t respond. “You know,” Rikki went on in a conversational tone. “The amazing thing is: This dress probably costs the annual wage of the average worker, and yet, you manage to make it look cheap! That’s true mastery!”

Smiling victoriously, she turned on her heels, and walked out of the room, before the other girl could answer. Cleo and Lewis stared after her.

“Miaow!” Cleo imitated scratching claws with her hands. Emma left a few quid on the desk to pay for her drink, and went after Rikki. She caught up with her on the boardwalk.

“Thanks for your help in there, but what’s with all the rage?” she asked. “Sometimes Miriam just crosses the line”, Rikki simply replied.

“Yes, but you needn’t to jump up to her like that. Now she’s gonna turn her grudge on you”.

“Don’t worry, I can handle that”, answered Rikki, but she was grateful for Emma’s sympathy. Emma looked down herself. “She’s right about one thing, you know: I am flat.”

Rocket-mouthed as she was, Rikki said the first thing that came to her mind. “Nah, I wouldn’t want you any different.” She instantly blushed, realising how that came out. Emma looked at her bewildered. “That sounded much more raunchy, than it was intended.”, Rikki said. “But you really kicked Miriam’s ass”, Emma tried to change the subject. “I can’t remember having seen her so lost for words. Looking at it, I think I never have seen her shutting up at all, before” Rikki laughed, and the two girls walked along the boardwalk together.

The next day, on her way home from school Rikki was going through the list of things, she needed to do before the girls could lock up in the cellar. As if the full-moon wasn’t bad enough, the forecast had predicted heavy rain for the late afternoon, so time was running short. She had all the food and drinks already, and she only needed to get some DVDs. She tried to think of the movies to rent. She was in for “28 Days Later”, but with that one, she knew that Emma would jump on her lap 10 seconds after the opener, and Cleo would probably spent the night in the closet. So she decided to go on to romantic comedies, and ended up with ‘10 Things I Hate About You’, just as she reached the front gate of her house.

A movement in the shadow over by the bushes behind the house pulled her out of her thoughts. She stopped and listened. She heard a noise of something moving in the undergrowth, and sighed. “Zane, come out of there, it’s pathetic!”, she shouted.

A few seconds later, Zane appeared from the bushes. “Why the hell are you lurking in my garden? Didn’t anyone tell you that modern girls think stalking is uncool?”

“We need to talk”, Zane stated.

“No Zane, we don’t. Everything is said.”

“Yeah, as if it was that easy! I thought we had a thing!”

“Yes, we had a thing. Emphasis on had, Zane. I wish I could say

something else, but really: I'm sorry, Whatever it was between us, it's gone."

"You don't understand! I love you!", Zane cried desperately. "Zane, I'm sorry.", Rikki felt really uncomfortable. She still liked Zane enough, that she didn't want to hurt him, but this couldn't go on, they'd broke up weeks ago, and they agreed on not seeing each other. "I do like you, Zane, I really do. But I don't love you. We broke up weeks ago. I didn't want to hurt you I swear, but it's better this way. We agreed on this", she went on rambling

Zane stepped closer and grabbed her arm. "That's what you think now, but you will see!"

"Zane, you're hurting me!", she cried, struggling to get her arm free. Only as some passers-by approached on the sidewalk, he let go of her arm. Rikki turned, made ran for the house, and slammed the door behind her. "Get away, or I call the police, I swear!", she shouted through the locked door. She went inside, and peered through the living room window, but Zane was gone.

Shaking and with tears dwelling, she sank into the sofa.

Two hours later, she had called Cleo, asking her to bring the DVDs, because she didn't dare leaving the house. She hadn't told her what happened in the garden though. Her mum had come home from work meanwhile, but she only gave a concerned look to her daughter, not asking her any questions. Outside the sky looked as if judgement day was about to break loose, and she could hear the rolling of thunder in the distance. 'If they don't hurry, they'll have to swim here', Rikki thought, imaging how it would look like, if her two friends rode in on a wave, fully transformed to mermaids. She caught herself picturing Emma on the terrace, asking for a towel to dry herself. She smirked. Ever since yesterday's incident in the "JuiceNet café", she had thought about Emma more often than usual. Her heavy reaction to Miriam's insults, puzzled her. Miriam was a stupid cow, and she knew that, but she had felt to defend her friend's honour anyhow. Why was that? Standing in for your friends is all right, but she had been overprotective. She shook her head to chase away these thoughts. Instead, she checked, if she didn't forget anything in the cellar. When she came back upstairs, it had started to pour. The rain was like a curtain, and there was no sign of the other so far. Alarmed, she grabbed her mobile, but it rang just as she touched it.

"Sorry, I couldn't make it", she heard Cleo's voice on the other end of the line.

"Where are you?", she asked.

"Halfway to your place."

“Damn. Are you dry?”

“Soaked. But I’m OK. No one is on the streets anymore, and Lewis is here”

“Great. What you’re gonna do?”

“I’m going to Lewis’. He’s actually carrying me.”

Rikki couldn’t help but smile “How romantic! Say hi for me!”

She heard Cleo say “Rikki says hi!”, and some uttering in a stressed out voice, indicating that Lewis obviously found this less romantic than Cleo.

“So you’re taken care of?”, Rikki asked.

“Absolutely. I call you later.”

“Bye.”

She pressed the hang-up button, and instantly dialled Emma’s number.

“Hi.” Emma’s voice was scarcely audible. The humming of a motor indicated she was in a car.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m in mums car. She’s giving me a lift. And I have an extra big umbrella.”

“When will you be here?”

“Maybe half an hour, mum wants to stop at the mall. I could convince her, that I better stay in the car.”

“OK, but hurry up. Moonrise is in”, she checked her watch, “36 Minutes.”

“I won’t forget that. See you!”

“Bye.”

About half an hour later, Rikki stared out of the window nervously. The rain had nearly stopped, but it was already after moonrise. She looked out for the car, and she also somehow expected to see Zane lurking in the garden again. Finally, she saw a car approaching, that steered directly towards the front yard. She saw how the door opened, and some enormous umbrella was held out of the passenger side. Following the umbrella came Emma, dressed in a raincoat. Rikki could hear Emma’s mum shout something like “Have fun!”, and then the car headed off again.

Rikki grabbed a stack of towels, she had prepared, and opened the door. Emma was already there, folding the umbrella carefully, then leaving it outside.

“Need a towel?” Rikki asked her.

“No, thanks.”, the other girl replied. “You’re really late. Did you see the moon?”, Rikki asked, with a stern look on her face. “No, I’m fine.” Emma replied. “So where’s Cleo?”

“She couldn’t make it. She is at Lewis’ place. He carried her on his own hands!” Rikki tried not to laugh at the thought of this.

Emma blinked at her friend. “He did what?”

“Carried her, after she transformed in the rain.”

“Who said romance is dead?” Emma smiled.

“I just hope they can behave themselves.” Rikki added, then she turned around. “Mum, we’re downstairs then!”, she called in the direction of the kitchen, where her mum did whatever she did in the kitchen (which was not cooking, because in the Chadwick household noone actually knew how to cook). The answer was some grunt, that sounded like an approval. The two girls went downstairs in the cellar room, that Rikki had turned into a comfy living space. An old sofa stood opposite to a TV, and in one corner three mattresses and sleeping bags had been prepared for the girls to sleep in later.

Drinks were carefully filled into sporting bottles, so none of them could accidentally spill themselves with water. Fruits cheese and candy were arranged on plates. Rikki had wanted to be as good a host Emma always was, and she thought that such thoroughness might impress her friends. The more she felt the disappointment, when Emma walked over to the candy-plates, without a single word. Instead she just grabbed some chocolate covered raisins, and stuffed them into her mouth. “Like the arrangement?”, Rikki asked. “Yeah, whatever.” Emma answered in a bored voice. “You’ve got something to drink?”

“Over there.” Rikki pointed at the bottles. Then she went to the TV to prepare the movies. “I asked Cleo to bring ’10 Things I Hate About You’, but since she’s not here, we have to stick to my collection, which sort of narrows the selection.”, she flipped through the DVDs she had, looking for a movie, that Emma might like. Emma stood behind her, and pointed towards one movie. “That one looks good.”

Rikki stared at the cover of “The Exorcist”, and frowned. “I don’t know, hon. It’s a horror movie. Usually you can’t sleep after seeing them, right?”

“Oh, come on. I don’t want to sleep anyway. Don’t you have a real drink down here?”

“What’s wrong with them?”, Rikki asked, puzzled. She was sure that the juices she selected were Emma’s taste. “Well, something a bit stronger.”

“Emma, you never drink alcohol!”, Rikki stated, suddenly alarmed over her friend’s odd behaviour. Emma grabbed her phone. “Let’s see if I can call Byron”, she mumbled, trying to speed-dial. Rikki leapt forward, ripping the phone from Emma’s hands. “This is the last thing you want to do, right?”

“Party pooper”, Emma looked back at her. “It’s just because your moping about Zane, so you don’t want me to have fun too!”

Rikki’s heart sank. “No, I’m not.” she cried, “And Zane is history. He kicked himself out of the game all by himself.” Her voice sank to a whisper. “He was here today. He attacked me”

Emma shrugged. "And? Maybe he thought you like it tough."

Rikki stared at her friend in disbelief. "Emma?", she was close to tears now. "Did you get me. He attacked me. This is not fun! Please!" Suddenly she realised what was going on.

"No, no, no, no! You you've been looking at the moon!"

"God, what's the deal?" Emma started to walk towards the door, but Rikki went after her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Partying. When you won't let me invite Byron, I'll go to him."

"It's a full moon outside, and it's raining. You would change immediately, and not be able to change back. I can't let you go out there."

"What would you do? Tie me up?" Emma looked at Rikki expectantly.

"If I have to." Rikki whispered.

"And you would like that, would you?", Emma gave her friend a frivolous look.

"Emma, please. Don't make this harder.", Rikki's voice was trembling.

"What?", Emma retorted. "Did you think, I didn't notice? The way you look at me, the way you defend my honour? I'm surprised I didn't figure out earlier."

She moved herself so close to Rikki, their cheeks brushed. "I know you like to be on top.", she whispered into the other girl's ear.

Rikki tried to speak, but Emma laid a finger over her lips. "Shh", she hissed.

Rikki's mouth went dry, she tried to speak, tried to move, but she couldn't. She felt a tingling sensation in her stomach, and her knees got wobbly. She closed her eyes. "You don't want Zane, right? You want me.", Emma mumbled, then pressed her lips onto Rikki's.

Rikki felt herself trembling under her friend's touch. She wanted to push the other girl away, but something held her back. She liked the feeling of Emma's lips on hers, and she liked what Emma's hands were doing, working their downwards over her belly. She felt Emma's tongue pressing against her lips, and opened her mouth slightly to let her in. The sweetness of that sensation was making the room spin around her. "Let her go on." an evil voice in her head said. "It's what you wanted all the time, and she won't remember any of it by tomorrow!"

Applying all her strength, she pushed Emma away. "No! Emma, that's not you!"

Emma grinned. "But you liked it, didn't you?"

Rikki now felt hot tears running over her face. "Why are you doing this to me? Especially since you know what I feel for you." Emma approached her again. "You're getting hot on this, eh?", she smirked. "Don't do this!", Rikki begged. Then evaded her friend, turned, darted up the stairs and slammed the door shut behind her. On the outside, a key was in the lock. She turned it. Emma was rattling the doorknob behind her "Come back in!

You bitch!", she cried. "Open the fucking door the door!" Emma hammered against the door.

Rikki backed away. "I,.. I can't", she said, more to herself than to Emma. "I'm sorry."

She fled up the stairs towards the kitchen: "Mom?". Her mother seemed to have left again, Rikki turned into the living room; and immediately found out that she had made a mistake. Although her gaze was blurred by tears, she noticed that the skies had cleared eventually, and a bright full moon shone through the living room window, right into her face. She could feel the effects immediately. Because she was so emotionally overwhelmed, she had no means of defence. The temperature in the room sprung by 5 degrees within seconds, and steam rose from the flower vase on the table. She knew she wouldn't be able to stop her powers, and that she would burn the house to cinders, if she didn't get out. She bolted for the door, and ran for it.

Meanwhile, in Lewis' room, Cleo had managed to rub herself dry, and her fishtail had grown back into normal legs. She was lying on Lewis' bed, while he darkened the room, by using duct tape to close the gaps between the shutters and the window frame.

"Odd, isn't it?", she asked him. "Us, locked in here tonight."

"Well, we can hardly let you go outside, can we?", Lewis answered. "Do you still have the movie?"

"Yes, it's in my handbag. You don't actually wanna watch it, would you? It's a girls flick. No flying star ships, no aliens, no Captain Picard.", she mocked him.

"Oh, that's alright. I'd like to watch it with you", Lewis said, carelessly grabbing her handbag, looking for the DVD. Clumsily, he let the bag topple over, and it's contents shattered on the floor. "Oh god, I'm sorry!" he claimed, trying to gather everything together, while Cleo was bursting with laughter.

When he picked up a small wrapper, he froze. As he realised what he was holding, he instantly turned pink. The blank expression on his face made Cleo laugh even harder. "Facts of life, Lewis!", she exclaimed under her laughter. "That is a condom."

Lewis almost dropped it, when she said this. "I, I know what a condom is.", he defended himself. "I just didn't expect you to, you know, walk around with one."

Cleo became serious again. "Eternal mystery of women's handbags.", she explained. "You'd be surprised, what girls carry around. You didn't expect me to come around unprepared when I end up lying in your bed half

naked, did you?"

If it was possible, Lewis' head turned even redder. "Err, but you have been lying on my bed many times before, we know each other since the fifth grade", he muttered.

"Times change Lewis. I don't say something will happen right away. But I prefer to be prepared. We're not kids anymore, and we definitely have a thing going here."

"Err, I think so." Lewis still didn't know where to look, so he pretended to be busy with packing a lip gloss back into Cleo's bag, sitting down on the bedside. She sat up, and put her arms around his shoulders.

"Found it?", she asked.

"What?", Lewis almost jumped up.

"The DVD, stupid".

"Oh, sure." He grabbed the DVD, went over to his computer, and put it in, starting the movie. He looked uncomfortably around the room, when Cleo patted on the free space in the bed, beside her. He went back to the bed, lying down next to her, just to find himself in a tight embrace. She kissed him, then rested her head on his shoulders, and stroked his chest with one hand, while they both looked over to the screen, where the movie opened with a flight over a majestically old building, accompanied by rock-music.

Rikki had been running non-stop all the way down to the marina. Several people were still outside, and she tried to avoid them. A shadowy figure came up the road, and she wanted to get past it, but it blocked her way. She realised it was Zane. "Rikki," he said, with an obvious lack of control over his voice. "I want to apologise. I'm sorry about earlier." He was clearly drunk.

"Zane, this is not the best time.", she said warningly.

"Please, just let me apologise. I leave you alone then", he pleaded, stretching out his hands towards her.

Rikki panicked. She raised her arms in defence, grabbing his wrists to push them away. He screamed in pain, and broke free from her grip immediately. Where her fingers had touched him, he had red burn marks on his arms. He stared at her for a moment, then turned around, and tumbled away as fast as he could in his drunken state.

Rikki started running again, down the road, over the pier, and jumped into the water, without caring if anyone had seen her. She felt the strange prickle of the transformation, when she dived into the water. The cool water brought her back to senses, and she decided to head to the only place she felt safe right now: Mako Island.

Cleo woke up a little disoriented, and needed a moment, to find out where she was. She felt around for a light switch, found it, and turned the light on. Lewis was sleeping beside her, his hands resting on the pillow, and his eyes twitching from time to time. She remembered last night and smiled. They didn't do "it", but took it on slowly. Lewis was, as it turned out, not so clumsy after all. She still felt a little embarrassment, when she thought ways he had touched her, but she also felt a wave of happiness flushing through her body, when she thought of it.

She looked around for her watch, and found that it was past eight in the morning. The moon had set, and she could go out safely. She suddenly remembered, that she had promised Rikki to call her, grabbed her bag, took out the mobile, and speed-dialed Rikki's number. There was no answer. She tried Emma's phone, but only got a mechanical voice that explained that "The person you have called is temporarily not available".

Alarmed, she woke up Lewis. "Something's wrong with the others", she explained, darting out of bed. Lewis stared at her, and she stared back. Then she realised that she was naked, and hastily started to grab her clothes from the floor. 'That's ridiculous!' she thought, 'He's seen me like this all night'.

They got dressed and sneaked out of the room, to try and get past Lewis' mum, who was preparing breakfast in the kitchen.

"Lewis, is that you?", she asked.

"Yes, mom. I'm just going out!" He rushed Cleo to the door.

"Don't you want some breakfast?"

"Ah, no mum. Cleo's already waiting outside for me!", he lied.

"Well, she can come in anytime. Ask her if she had some breakfast. There's enough for everyone." his mum answered from the kitchen.

"Thanks mum, but I don't think so. See you!" They rushed outside, and immediately started running.

The Chadwick house was still quiet, Rikki's mom either still asleep or at her boyfriends place, but the front door was open. The two went in, and headed for the cellar. The door was locked locked from the outside. Cleo turned the key, and cautiously opened the door.

"Rikki? Emma?", she asked into the darkness.

They heard a mumbled response from the backside of the room, and as Lewis finally turned on the light, they found Emma crawled up in one of the mattresses, looking as if she had a terrible hangover.

"Emma, you're OK?", Cleo asked "What happened?"

"I have no idea. I can't remember anything from the moment, I got

down here”, Emma replied. “When I woke up, the door was locked, and Rikki was gone. She also took my phone. Thank heavens, you came.”

Lewis looked concerned. “Did you look at the moon last night?”

“I have no idea”, Emma replied. “Oh my god! I hope I haven’t done anything to Rikki!”

“I’m going to check her room”, Cleo said, and went upstairs, while Lewis helped Emma up to her feet.

“And what happened to you?”, she asked. “You’re virtually glowing!”

“Um, well, ask Cleo”, Lewis said, hastily looking away. Emma smiled knowingly.

Cleo came back downstairs. “She’s not in her room”, she told the others.

Emma started to get nervous. “We have to find her!”

“When she walked out in the moonlight, she probably lost control over her powers again.”, Lewis stated. “That’s why she ran away last time.”

“Then she is probably on Mako Island!”, Emma stated.

“I’ll get the boat ready!”, Lewis exclaimed.

“No boat, we swim, that’s faster.”

The two girls ran down the street towards the pier, leaving Lewis behind. By the pier, they looked around to see if they were alone, and then jumped into the water.

On Mako Island the girls went on land, close to the underwater entrance to the moon pool. After some nerve-wrecking minutes of waiting to get dry enough to have their human legs back, they went into the forest. They immediately saw the burnt grass and leaves, and followed that trail, to find Rikki, not far from the beach, staring at a burned log. Cleo wanted to rush to her, but Emma held her back. “Swim back and tell Lewis, we found her. Let me talk to her.”

Cleo didn’t understand exactly what was going on between her two best friends, but she knew that it was better to let them sort it out alone. She headed back to the beach, while Emma walked over to her friend.

“You should look out for a new secret hiding spot. This one isn’t so secret anymore.”, she said in a friendly, mocking voice. Rikki turned her head and tried to crack a smile, but didn’t actually succeed. Emma set beside her, and looked at her friend. Rikki had been crying. “What’s wrong, honey?”, she asked the blond girl.

“I ran into Zane again”, she simply said.

“God, why doesn’t he simply leave you!”, Emma got angry.

“I think I hurt him. Physically.”, Rikki looked up to her friend. “I didn’t mean to.”

“What happened? From the beginning”, Emma demanded.

“I tried to tell you yesterday, but you were, well, I think you were not yourself.” Rikki sighed. “Yesterday, he was lurking in my garden, watching me or something. I confronted him, and he threatened me. He grabbed my arm and shook me, and I got scared. I ran into the house, and stayed there until you came.”

“I’m sorry.” Emma said, putting an arm around her friend’s shoulder.

“When I was out last night, I ran into him again. He was drunk, I think. He tried to apologize, but I panicked and grabbed his wrists to push him away. I think I burned him. He screamed and ran away.”

She started sobbing. “I don’t want to hurt people!”, she muttered.

“It’s not that bad.”, Emma tried to comfort her.

“I could have killed him!”, she cried out.

Emma held her friend for a moment, until she gathered herself again. Then she asked: “What were you doing out there anyway. What happened that you left me?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t run away for nothing, and I know that I can’t remember the night, what means that I got moon-whacked. I must have done something bad, that caused you to lock me in.”

“It’s nothing really. It... it was me.” That was true, it hadn’t been so much Emma’s behaviour, than her own reaction to it, that made her freak out.

“Rikki, I must have done something to you, to make you freak out, and I need to know what it was. Even if it is something terrible.”, she begged, “I cannot stand knowing I hurt you, and not knowing what I’ve done. I would not be able to look into a mirror ever again. Rikki, please?” For a moment, Rikki said nothing. “You kissed me.”, she simply said.

Emma stared at her in disbelief: “What?”

Rikki’s voice was nothing more than a whisper now. “You kissed me”, she repeated, “And I liked it.”

There was an awkward silence between the two girls, as Emma was petrified by the confession.

“Wow!”, she finally said. “That’s something I didn’t expect.”

“I had to leave you”, Rikki said depressed. “I didn’t want to take advantage of you. And”, she paused, “I would have, if I stayed.”

After a while Emma stood up. “Do you fancy me?” Rikki nodded. “Wow, that’s a lot to digest”, the smaller girl said.

“Are you mad at me?”, Rikki asked cautiously.

“What? No, No!” Emma cried. “It’s just that I don’t know if I should be shocked or happy about it. And I cannot even go to my best friend and talk about it with her. That’s weird!”

“Indeed.” Rikki managed a smile, which was partly caused by the notion that Emma hadn’t outright ruled the possibility, that her feelings towards her

might be of a similar kind than Rikki's own.

Emma looked at Rikki. "I know, it's a lot to ask, but would you be angry, if I told Cleo? I think I need someone to talk this over, and I can't think of no one else."

Now Rikki really smiled. "I can't stop you, can I?"

"She's your friend too. And if you don't want me to tell her, I will not do it."

"I'll think about it.", promised Rikki.

Emma smiled "She will eventually find out anyway, will she?. How about breakfast?"

She marched towards the shore, leaving Rikki behind, mystified about what these words meant. Rikki shook her head, and went after Emma.

Chapter 2

A Cry In The Wilderness

The flickering of the neon lights reflected on white glazed tiles, giving the room an eerie glow. The woman in the lab coat looked through her microscope, scribbling notes on a notepad, without lifting her eyes from the ocular. She was an attractive woman in her mid-thirties, or at least she would have been, if she replaced the stern and slightly arrogant expression on her face with a smile, once in a while.

The door flew open, and a young lab assistant stormed into the lab. He saw the woman and immediately slowed down, obviously regretting his wild entrance. “Um, Dr. Denman?”, he asked, his voice trembling a bit.

“What?”, the woman shot at him, without looking up from her work.

“I . . . I think you should see this”, the man answered, “It might be important.”

Dr. Denman gave him a look as if he was a disgusting insect. “Alright, then”, she said with a tone, that didn’t leave any doubt, that she did not believe the young man would recognize something important, when it poked him right on the nose. Anyway she went after him through the door.

In the next room, the man had his own lab table. He gestured towards his microscope, urging Denman to take a look. She looked into the microscope and shrugged. “And? It’s a hair, human I guess”, she stated with an impression that said “How dare you interrupting my work for this?”.

“A hair indeed, but not an ordinary one. Have a look”, the assistant took a pipette and dropped some water onto the slide. There hair seemed to vanish for a split-second, and then changed color into a bright coppery red.

“Mmh, interesting.”, Denman’s curiosity was now awakened. “Where did you get this from?”

The assistant looked over his notes. “It is from the cave on Mako Island. Where we tried to recover the mermaid girls.”

Denman looked at the assistant, obviously pondering the situation. “But if this is from the girls”, she said, more to herself than the assistant, “they

must have tricked us!”

“There is something else”, the assistant said. “I’ve analyzed the hair. It’s color is artificial. Fera Red, to be accurate.”

“So we’re looking for a mermaid with a taste for Boots? Right. And I think I know exactly the place to look for her.”

Rikki went around the corner on school grounds, to see her friends waiting for her outside the school yard. Emma was standing beside Cleo and Lewis, who had put an arm around Cleo’s waist. Rikki looked at the slender silhouette and immediately felt butterflies swirling around in her belly. She always had this strange affection towards Emma, but ever since Emma had kissed her, in that fateful night during the last full moon, Rikki couldn’t deny that it was more than friendship, she felt for blonde girl. She didn’t know how Emma was feeling about this, she had neither rejected her, nor had she shown any sign, that the feeling was mutual. In fact, ever since her mysterious remark about Cleo finding out “what was going on”, she hadn’t mentioned any of what happened between them on Mako Island at all. Anyway, she was a bit awkward towards Rikki, but she never dismissed her, nor was she evasive. Rikki decided she would not figure it out this morning, and walked over to her friends.

“Hi Rikki”, Cleo hugged her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheeks. Lewis tried to play it cool, as he greeted her “Hey, Ricks”. Rikki tried hard not to laugh. Lewis was a lovely boy, and probably the most loyal boyfriend a girl could have, but coolness was not his thing. She returned his greeting with a “Hi” and a pat on his shoulder, then turned towards Emma.

Emma didn’t say anything, but smiled this cute smile, that made Rikki feel weak in the knees everytime. She hoped she didn’t blush, when she hugged Emma.

After having their usual welcome, and the daily update of gossip, Emma suddenly turned serious: “Weather forecast 3:30pm, moist with streaks of rain”, she announced. “What’s the plan for getting home unseen?”

“I’d say we wait until everyone’s gone, head to the beach, and swim”, Cleo suggested. “We can meet up at my place, without being seen”

“If Mrs. Dorset is still sick, I’ll be off an hour early”, Emma announced. “So mum and dad expect me home”.

“You could call them, and say Mrs. Dorset is back at work, then come with us”, Rikki replied, grinning.

Emma blushed. “You know that I don’t like to lie to my parents, it’s bad enough I can’t tell them about you-know-what.”

“Relax Emma. It’s not that you have to tell your folks about everything you’re about. You’re a grown woman. Well OK, almost a grown woman”, Rikki winked. “I just don’t want to keep secrets from them” Emma sighed.

Rikki rolled her eyes. It wasn’t that Emma’s folks were control freaks.

It was more a bit of the other way around. Emma kept a tight schedule of everything she did, always going according to the plan. Normally this reliability was one of the things that Rikki liked about her friend, but at times it was just getting on her nerves. They were teenagers after all; they were obliged to disobey and be rebellious. But she knew she wouldn't change her friend, so she dropped it.

The school bell ended their planning, and they headed off for class. Neither of the four noticed the figure, lurking in the shadow of the trees just outside the gate to the school grounds, watching them walk away.

Twenty minutes later, the doorbell of the Gilbert house rang. Mrs. Gilbert was just getting ready for work, when she answered the door. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Gilbert?", the woman outside the door was none other than Dr. Denman, showing the of her institute badge only for a second, so that it looked official, but Mrs. Gilbert had no chance to read it.

"I'm with the school board, my name is Dr. Denman. Do you have a second to spare?", Denman smiled sweetly.

"What is it about?", Mrs. Gilbert was confused.

"Well, since this concerns your daughter, it would be nice if she could join us."

"What?", Mrs. Gilbert looked puzzled. "Emma is at school, you should know that, since your from, you know... the school."

"I was afraid you would say that, I was hoping she might be here, and all of this was just a misunderstanding." Denman sighed melodramatically. "Emma hasn't been at school very often lately. She has been cutting class regularly for the past three month."

"Are you sure, that's my daughter you're talking about? Emma has never cut class in her entire life, and she is reliable as a clockwork!"

"Well, Mrs. Gilbert, I know it's hard to understand, especially because your daughter has been an exceptionally good student, but she is sixteen, and at that age, kids sometimes try to be rebellious."

"Not my child, no. She is, sometimes, more grown-up than me. She never forgets anything, and she has never been late!"

"Did you notice any changes in her behaviour, lately?"

"Um, well, she gave up swimming, that was startling. It was always her favourite thing, and then, she suddenly stopped going."

"Any new friends?"

"Well, basically there is Cleo and Lewis, but they have been friends since Kindergarten. And I think they are hanging out with that Chadwick girl; her family is new to the neighborhood"

"Ah, yes. Rikki Chadwick. That girl has quite a reputation.", Denman gave a troubled look to Mrs. Gilbert.

“Has she? I always thought she was very nice. What is she accused of?”, Emma’s mother looked quizzically at her opponent.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Gilbert, but I’m not at the liberty to discuss the details of other students files.”, Denman answered, with an expression of regret on her face, which was as honest as her fraudulent smile. “I can only tell you, that Rikki’s family has a history of troubles, and Rikki has been expelled from school before.” That was a straightforward lie, but it didn’t fail it’s indented effect.

“Is it drugs?”, Emma’s mom asked.

“Please, Mrs. Gilbert, don’t get upset. It’s too early to jump into conclusions. Maybe your daughter is just trying out her borders, and wants to play the rebel without a cause for a while. Just look for the signs, and have a chat with your daughter.” Denman answered in a false friendly tone.

“But that Chadwick girl is doing drugs?”, Mrs. Gilbert panicked.

“I am sorry, but I am not at the liberty to discuss that, Mrs. Gilbert. Please, talk to your daughter, and try to work this out. If you need any help at all, give me a call, any time of day. I really wish to help you, so don’t hesitate!” Dr. Denman handed Mrs. Gilbert a card, which read:

Dr. Alice Denman
Family Counselor and Child Psychiatrist

and a mobile phone number. It looked very official, and Denman’s assistant had worked for about an hour and a half, to make it look real. Emma

came home an hour early, because Mrs. Dorset had still been ill, so the last two classes were dropped. It had the advantage, that she could get home comfortably, before the rain set in.

Even more was she astonished to see her mom at home at this time of day. Her mother was wearing a stern expression, and looked quite angrily.

“Hi, mom”, Emma hopped over into the kitchen, to give her mother a quick kiss, but stopped on the look in her eyes. “Everything OK?”, she asked.

“I should ask you that!”, her mother replied in a grave voice. “Where have to been?”

Emma looked puzzled “School of course, where else? Mrs. Dorset is still sick, so I came in early.”

“Do you really think I believe that? The school was here today, young lady, informing me, that you’ve been cutting class, and that you’re about to flunk out! I have been worried sick all day!”

Emma stared back in disbelief.

“Mum, I never cut class! Ever!”

“You could really show some respect, and admit it, now that you’ve been caught!” Mrs. Gilbert said.

“Mum, I swear that I did not cut class! I can show you”, Emma pulled her Filofax from her backpack. “I never...” Emma fell silent under her mother gaze. “To your room! Now!” Mrs. Gilbert demanded. Emma was too shocked to protest, so she went upstairs to her room. Her brother Elliot stood at the top of the stairs, grinning.

“Not a word!”, Emma gave him such a dark look, that his smile faded in an instant, and he retreated to his room.

In her own room, Emma threw herself on the bed, still too shocked to cry. She grabbed her phone, and dialed the first number, she could think of.

“Hi Rikki!”, she said flatly into the receiver.

The moment she heard Emma’s voice, Rikki knew something was wrong.

“What’s wrong, honey?”, she asked, biting her lips after she said the last word.

“I don’t know, mum’s just told me, I am about to flunk out of school.”

“Huh?”, Rikki wondered, “You’re the best student in class!”

Emma told Rikki, what happened between her and her mother.

Rikki was flabbergasted. “So, someone came to your door, and told your mom you’re cutting class, and she simply believed it?”

“I guess she had credentials of some sort.” Emma was fighting tears. “Rikki, who would do something like that?”

“I don’t know, but sure as hell, I’m gonna find out. Until then, don’t worry. The school knows you’re not cutting class, this will be clarified soon. We’ll talk to the headmistress tomorrow morning. Someone is just playing a mean joke on you.”

The next morning, Mrs. Gilbert drove both her kids to school. She dropped off Elliot, before she and Emma went on to see the headmistress.

They hadn’t been talking much, since the fight last night, and Emma knew her mum was not in the mood for any further debate.

They reached the headmistress’ office, and Emma never felt so small before. Her heart was racing, and her hands were sweaty. Even though she had nothing to fear, she felt guilty.

She was told to wait in the hall, while her mother entered. The following 20 Minutes, where the longest in Emma’s life. When her mother finally got out, Emma’s heart sank. Her mother didn’t look satisfied or relieved, but rather upset.

Her mother came up to her. “I am so disappointed in you.”, she said.

“What did she tell you?”, Emma asked. “Well, it seems they have a computer problem, so she couldn’t get your current grades. But Mrs. Dorset left a note, that you were cutting class, and some teachers think, you’re

general behaviour is, well... odd. I think you're in for counseling. When I'm at the office, I'll make an appointment for you, young lady. Off to class now!"

Emma just sat there, watching her life floating down the drain. She said nothing.

"Counseling!" Cleo cried, "She's not serious!"

"She is, believe me", Emma said flatly.

"How can it be though", Lewis chipped in, "that they have a computer problem, and Emma's file goes missing, right on the day, she needs it."

"Miriam?", Cleo asked.

Rikki shook her head. "If this is a set up, it's far to elaborate for Miriam to pull it. Someone went through some length to pull this stunt."

"If it is a setup", Emma chipped in, "and it still can be a very stupid twist of fate, who would do such a thing. And why do it to me?"

Rikki couldn't help but putting her arm around Emma's shoulders, pulling her near. "I don't know, but we'll see through this. Promise."

Emma leaned against Rikki and sighed. Rikki however felt the blood rush to her face, as she felt the warmth of Emma's body.

"Erm, yes. So what do we do?". She pulled back her arm a bit too hasty. Emma looked at her as if she was disappointed. Rikki felt her spine tingling, and couldn't help the feeling her face grew even hotter. Strange enough, the other two didn't seem to notice.

"Well, not so much at all", Emma cut in. "It isn't that serious yet. I mean, mum only wants me to see that counselor for now. I'm not sure, she's even convinced that all this cutting class talk is true. And if Mrs. Dorset comes back, she will surly resolve this. I don't think she wants to put me into trouble."

Cleo laughed. "Keep up that spirit!"

Emma's spirits weren't that high, when she sat alone in her bedroom later that night. Her mother had set up a counselling session for her the next day, and Emma really didn't know what to tell the counsellor. After all, her behaviour had been unusual, and she did lie to her parents. She felt guilty, although the accusations against her were wrong.

For a moment she considered going downstairs, and telling her mum and dad the truth, but she was too scared to do so. Instead she pulled out her cell phone and dialled Rikki's number.

"Hi Rikki, me again."

"Hey! How are you?", Rikki's voice on the other end of the receiver was calming her down. Happy to hear her friends voice, she told her about her concerns. "Ok, I'm coming over.", Rikki decided.

"Now? Mum and Dad will not allow that."

“Who said, we’ll ask them for permission?”, Emma thought she could hear the grin in Rikki’s face. “Or what do you think that tree in your garden is for?” Rikki sneaked up from behind the Gilbert house, trying

to stick to the shadows. She felt the blood rushing through her veins, and she felt every heartbeat. Never had she felt so alive before. She had spent nights away from home without permission before, and it always was a kick, but this time there was also the prospect of seeing Emma, that made her heart pound even faster. “It’s like a secret date”, she thought, although she was aware, that Emma might not see it as one. She reached the tree in the garden and glanced over to the house. There was light in the living room, but the shutters were closed. The bluish flickering of the television sparkled through the cracks between the window frame and the shutters.

“Easy as pie”, she thought, reaching for the lowest branch. While she was pulling herself up the branch, she was, only for a moment, in the full light from the window. But no one saw her.

The higher she climbed up, the easier it got, and within moments, she was on a level with Emma’s bedroom window.

She reached into her pocket, finding a handfull of m&m’s she had put there a while ago, took one out, and threw it against the window pane.

CLACK!

The window opened almost immediately. “Rikki?”, Emma whispered.

“Yes, it’s me. Can I come in?”

“Sure. Mom and Dad are downstairs, and the little twat is in bed already”, Emma replied.

“Ok, I’ll come over” Rikki replied.

Getting from the tree onto the roof was trickier than she had thought, however. She tried to reach over, but it was too far. So she balanced on the branch she had been sitting on, and prepared herself to jump. When she rose up, Emma realized what she was about to do. “Don’t!”, she cried out, a little too loud for Rikki’s taste. She closed her eyes and jumped. It was only a few feet, but from here, and in the darkness, it looked damn high, and she knew she would break her legs if she fell.

She felt herself flying through the air, the blood rushing in her ears more than ever. With a loud thud, she landed on the roof, immediately grasping for hold. She got hold of the window sill, when she heard someone in the house stirring. “What’s going on up there?”, Mrs. Gilberts voice echoed from downstairs.

Emma looked panicked, but got herself under control again, when she saw that Rikki was beginning to climb through the window. Emma went to the door, opened it just a little, and cried “There’s a cat on our roof mum, nothing to worry, I just got a little spooked, when I heard it!”

“Oh, Ok.” Mrs. Gilberts voice replied. “Are you coming downstairs?”.

“No mum, I’m going to do some homework, and then to bed. Good night!”

“Good night, honey!”

Emma closed the door, and turned the key. “Phew. That was close.”

Rikki sat on Emma’s bed, panting.

Chapter 3

Into the woods

Emma stepped over to the bed, and slumped down where her friend was sitting, still catching her breath.

“That was quite a stunt, you just pulled! I really thought you’d fall!”, Emma said.

The other girl grinned. “It felt really great!”, she answered breathlessly. So great actually, that her heart was still pumping the excitement through her veins, and she felt the rush of adrenaline sharpening her senses. She couldn’t say, whether it was from the jump, the risk of being caught, or the closeness of the blonde girl beside her, but she felt great, excited and daring.

“Next time, give me a warning, will you?”, Emma tried to sound stern, but Rikki could see her own excitement mirrored in her friends eyes. Their glances locked, and for a long moment, they looked deep into each others eyes. Rikki felt the tingling sensation in her stomach intensify, until Emma began to blush, and broke their stare. Rikki acted on impulse, still high on adrenaline, she grabbed Emma’s shoulders, pulled her closer and placed her lips on the blonde girls mouth. Emma’s eyes widened in surprise but she didn’t pull back. Rikki enjoyed the softness and sweetness of the girls lips. Gradually, she opened her lips, and began to explore with her tongue. To her surprise, when Emma felt her lips part, she opened her mouth to let Rikki in. After what seemed minutes, they parted to catch for breath.

Emma blushed again, and pressed two fingers onto her mouth, as if to check, that what she just felt was real. “What was that?”, she whispered.

“A kiss”, Rikki answered. “And a great one.”

Emma looked at her friend for a long while. Eventually, she spoke again: “Are you in love with me?”, she asked.

Rikki couldn’t answer. There was a big lump in her throat, and she felt weak. So she just nodded. Emma’s hand now reached out to her face, gently touching her cheek, slowly, and insecurely guiding Rikki’s face towards hers, and back into a kiss.

This time, it was Emma who took initiative, and Rikki answered the kiss

eagerly.

Rikki's hands tenderly worked their way down Emma's back, pulling up the hem of her shirt, and then, very slowly, working their way back up over the bare skin of her belly. She could feel Emma's body begin to tremble, and pulled her into a tight embrace.

"What will happen now?", Emma broke the kiss.

"Guess, that's up to us", Rikki smiled, as she gently pushed her girlfriend into the pillows.

The rest of the night went by in a blur. Both Rikki and Emma couldn't say, when they finally fell asleep, but when Rikki woke up, it was already dawn. She felt the warmth and softness of Emma's body and fought the urge to snuggle back into her embrace and fall asleep again. Tempting as it was, she heard the sound of dishes being put up in the kitchen, so Emma's parents were already up. And under the circumstances Rikki thought it would be best, if Mrs. Gilbert did not find her eldest daughter in bed with a naked girl on a school days morning.

She gently kissed Emma, got out of bed slowly and started to collect her clothes. With the bed empty, Emma stirred in her sleep, beginning to wake. "Rikki? Where are you going?", she asked sleepily.

"School I guess", Rikki answered. "Do you think you'll make it out of bed, to get there too?"

Rikki smiled at her girlfriend. "I need to get home first, so that mum doesn't freak out. Normally she doesn't care, if I'm staying out at night, but one never knows."

"What about breakfast?" Emma asked, while she watched Rikki dress.

"Nah. Your mom's going to have kittens, if she finds me here; plus technically you're still grounded."

Emma frowned "You can't go to school without a decent breakfast."

Rikki couldn't help but smile. That was Emma, always caring. "I'll be fine. But I'd be ever grateful if you'd bring me sandwich."

Emma grinned. "How grateful."

Rikki's smile broadened. "Come by my place tonight, and I'll show you."

Emma grabbed her girlfriend by the arm and pulled back into the bed. Their lips met once more.

"Something like this?" Emma mocked.

"That's just the preview." Rikki whispered. Then she got serious. "We need to talk about this."

"About what?" Emma was puzzled.

"Us. Are we going to tell anyone?"

"Should we?"

Rikki thought for a moment. "I'm not talking YouTube here, but I guess it would be a bit hard, to keep this from our friends."

Emma was silent for a while. "They won't freak, right?"

"Why would they? Are you freaked?"

"To be honest, a bit. But in a good way." Emma replied. "I still don't get, that we actually did this!"

"Yeah, it was really something." Rikki stated. "But it was good. And I definitely want to do it again."

The noise downstairs got louder, and Mrs. Gilbert's voice sounded upstairs. She was saying something to Mr. Gilbert about waking the kids. Rikki got up again. "I guess this is my call"

She walked over to the window, opened it as silently as she could and climbed over the sill.

Emma got up, wrapped herself in her sheets, and got towards the window.

When Rikki was over the sill, she turned around, leaned into the window, and kissed Emma. "See you at school", she said tenderly, and then more quietly: "I love you."

Then she turned around, jumped back onto the tree, climbed down the branch, and let herself fall the last few feet.

Once on the ground, she got up, showed Emma the thumbs up to indicate that she was alright, and disappeared into the foggy morning.

Rikki hurried across the school-yard towards her friends. Her mother was home, but she hadn't realized that Rikki hadn't been sleeping in her own bed. She hadn't been asking many questions on Rikki's whereabouts ever since dad left, and when she did, she was content when Rikki told her she'll be sleeping over at Emma's or Cleo's. Mrs. Chadwick had met both girls, and considered them a good influence on her daughter. Rikki wondered whether she would this indifferent, if she knew that Rikki slept with one of them.

She finally caught up with her friends. "Hi guys!" Her gaze met Emma's and the other girl looked down, but smiled shyly, then handed her an enormous tuna sandwich wrapped in paper. "I thought you'd be hungry."

"How could you have guessed?" Rikki grinned sheepishly and took the sandwich. She unwrapped the snack and buried her teeth in it.

"You have wings, baby" she said through a mouthful. Emma blushed.

Cleo and Lewis stood by and watched the scene in utter bewilderment. "Did I miss something here?" she asked.

"Um, no.", Rikki tried to sound casual. "Emma and I have been talking earlier this morning and she was so sweet to bring me a sandwich. You know my mom, not a crumb of bread in the house."

The school bell rang, and the four headed for class. Lewis had put an arm around Cleo's shoulder while they walked ahead. Rikki felt the urge to do the same with Emma, but didn't dare. She looked into Emma's face.

“Tell them?”, she mouthed silently. Emma blushed again, and shook her head. “Later” was the silent answer. Although Rikki had a feeling as if she needed to tell the whole world she was in love, she shared some of Emma’s concern. She had little doubt that their friends would accept their love, but it was another thing outing yourself on a school yard in the middle of a host of 16-year-olds.

So they trailed off behind their friends, each of them yearning to hold the other girls hand.

After class they had planned to meet at Wilfred’s as they usually did after school, and it angered Rikki that Emma wouldn’t be there. She just had 3 classes without her, and was already missing the girl. But Emma had to go to her counseling session so Rikki caught her outside school grounds to say “Later!”

“Hey, honey!” Emma smiled back as she heard Rikki’s voice. “Hi!” she replied smiling. “I didn’t expect to see you before my counselling.”

“What did you expect me to head off without a goodbye kiss?” Rikki drew closer to her friend. “You don’t know me very well, do you?”

“I plan to change that.” Emma looked around to make sure no one who knew them watched before she put her arms around Rikki. “I missed you”, she whispered. Instead of an answer, Rikki kissed her girlfriend.

After a while they broke the kiss for breath and Emma checked her watch. “Damn. I have to go or I’ll be late.”

“Let me walk you there” Rikki offered.

“No. We’d better not been seen together. I don’t want that counselor telling mom that I’m kissing you. Mom already thinks you’re trouble. She’ll have kittens, if she knew that we’ve snogged.”

“Among other things, we snogged yes.” Rikki grinned. The thought of last night’s events rose desire in her again, and she tried to slow her breath. Standing this close to Emma didn’t make it an easy task. She couldn’t help but touch Emma’s arm, and a second later they were kissing again.

“Now I really need to hurry” Emma whispered when they finally broke their embrace.

“I know. Don’t be frightened. Everything will be fine, you’ll see.”

Emma sighed and gave her lover a last hug. “See you tonight?”

“Your window it is.” Rikki confirmed. Emma looked at her, and then headed off.

Emma hurried down the streets, hoping she would make it in time. She didn’t really want to have this counselling session, but if she was late, she’d be in even more trouble, than she was already in. At the address her mother had given her, she found a small white house. It did not look exactly like she had imagined a psychiatrists office to look like. The house was shabby

and in desperate need of paint. The garden looked as if no one had been looking after it for a very long while. “Is this the right address?” Emma asked herself. But the number was correct, so she straightened her back and entered.

The paving stone were loose under her feet, and the creepy feeling got more intense. At the house, she rang the doorbell. Almost to her surprise, it worked. She heard steps from inside, and prepared herself for a friendly “Hi!” When the door opened, her words stuck in her throat as she stared into the face of Dr. Alice Denman. “Hello Emma!”, Denman greeted her with a fraudulent smile. Emma turned to run, but Denman had been prepared. She grabbed Emma by the shoulder and pulled her back with one hand. With the other, she produced a water pistol and sprayed Emma’s head. Emma tried to pull free and was struggling to evade the water jet, but it was in vain. She could feel metamorphosis coming, and the moment she turned to water, Denman let go of her and shrieked in surprise. Only an instant later, she was in her mermaid form, unable to stand for the lack of legs, she fell backwards and hit her head at the doorstep.

Denman was looking down on the girl’s mermaid-shaped body and raised a brow. “Fascinating.” She grabbed the unconscious girl by the arms and dragged her inside.

BETTER NOT COME 'ROUND. MOM'S WATCHING ME LIKE A
PRISON GUARD. LOVE, EMMA

Rikki stared at the text message on her mobile. She had tried to call Emma for the past hour repeatedly and sent over 20 texts. No reply so far. Something wasn’t right here, that was sure.

I'M COMING OVER NOW

She pressed the *Send*-Button on her phone. This time she got a response. When she read it, her heart sank.

DON'T

Rikki let herself fall into her cushions. All the happy whirling inside her had gone. It had solidified to a lump, that set in her belly like stone. What did she do wrong? Why wouldn’t Emma talk to her? And what had happened with that counsellor? Rikki had the odd feeling something must have happened that afternoon, but she couldn’t figure out what it was. Part of her was angry, and part of her was incredibly worried. She pulled the sheets over her head and lost the fight against her tears.

The next morning Rikki strode towards school. She hadn’t have much sleep and she was late. She also was determined to find out what Emma’s

strange behaviour meant. Her tears had dried and she was mostly upset now. If Emma had changed her mind, she could bloody well talk to her face and make it a clean break-up. When she arrived at school however, Emma wasn't there. She looked around, and didn't find her friend. She found Cleo and Lewis snogging in a corner, but neither of them had seen her.

By the end of the second period it was clear that she wouldn't show up anymore. Emma had cut her classes for real this time. Rikki's anger was long gone, instead fear had taken a cold harsh grip on her. Maybe Emma was uncertain of what to make of the two of them, but cutting classes because she was heartbroken was so way out of league for Emma, that her absence could only mean one thing: Something had happened. Rikki tried to call, but Emma's phone was off-line. She left message after message on her girlfriend's voicemail. But no answer. During lunchbreak she met with the others, as they usually did.

"Did any of you hear from Emma?", she asked even before they had the chance to say "Hi!"

"I thought she called in sick?", Cleo was puzzled.

"Did you talk to her?"

"No. I just assumed."

"She's not answering her mobile. I rang her house, but there seems to be nobody home." Rikki explained in a grave voice. "The last time I spoke to her was last night. She was very upset. I thought it was because, um," she blushed, "not important."

"Something is not right here." Rikki heard Cleo's concern reflecting her own fears. "Lewis. Tell her what you've found."

Rikki looked curiously at Lewis. The blond boy sighed. "It's nothing conclusive yet."

Rikki gave him a look that said "Spill it out!"

"Alright," he replied to her silent stare. "I have reason to believe, that someone meddled with the schools computer system. It seems some student's profiles have been altered."

Now it was Rikki's turn to be bewildered. "Wait, you have access to the schools computer system?"

"It wasn't that hard, their database is linked with the school's WLAN," he said casually. "Someone has to keep a watchful eye on our private data."

"Obviously." Rikki stated. "What did you find?"

"Not much so far, I know that some files were altered by someone who is not a teacher, or a sleepless teacher working at 2am. Emma's file is one of them."

"Could this have to do with the accusations against her?" Rikki wondered.

"Likely. I can tell you, when I manage to access the data."

"Get on with it then!" Rikki was quite bossy, but Lewis didn't care. Even under normal circumstances no one had to tell him to hack into a

computer, and he knew what was at stake. Emma was his friend too.

Rikki checked her watch. "I head to Emma's place, the moment they let us out of this darn school. You two check the records?"

Cleo grinned and gave Rikki a salute. "Yes, Ma'am!"

Lewis just patted Rikki's shoulder. "I call you, if I have something."

Emma had been wandering around town for half the day. She had been on her way to school, but the idea of facing Rikki now was too much for her.

After Denman had knocked her out yesterday, she had found herself strapped to a metal table, still in her mermaid form. One of Denman's assistants had been spraying her with water constantly, to keep it that way, while Denman had taken blood samples, cut out tiny bit's of her skin, and broken off some scales from her mermaid's tail, which was especially painful. She remembered she had been crying and begging, but Denman had been utterly unimpressed. After what seemed hours, she had been allowed to dry herself and go home. Before she left, Denman had demanded her to come back to their next session the other day. If she refused, Denman threatened, she would tell the world what she knew about the girls. Emma was instructed to never speak of what happened, or she and her friends would suffer. After she got home, she had locked herself into her room and cried. There was nothing she wished for more than Rikki's arms around her, but she knew if Rikki was here, she would tell her everything. And then Denman would go after Rikki.

Why was everything so fucked up? Rikki was now probably very pissed with her, and she didn't have the power to face that. So, for the first time in her life, she had cut school entirely. She had thought about swimming to Mako Island, but she was too afraid to get into the water. The idea of changing into her mermaid form suddenly scared her very much. So she just walked around, torturing her mind to find out what to do now. If she didn't show up to her appointment with Denman, the doctor would certainly go after her. But she didn't want to go there. Maybe she could run, head south for Canberra maybe.

The Decision was taken from her, by Denman's assistants. They had been observing her, and quite suddenly two men caught up with her. "I believe you have an appointment Miss Gilbert!"

The man wore an ugly 70's style leather jacket, and as he pulled one hand halfway from the pocket, she could see he carried a handgun. Adrenaline shot through Emma's veins, for a moment she thought about running, but the firm grip the second man closed around her arm made clear, that running wasn't an option. Emma went with her captors.

"Today," the man said "Doctor Denman needs you a while longer..."

Chapter 4

Seeing Red

It was already dusk when Rikki finally was on the way to the Gilbert's house. Just today, her mom had been home and shown a sudden interest in her daughters whereabouts. Usually she enjoyed these mother/daughter nights, since it showed that after all her mom did care. But tonight it was different. So she told her mom she'd be on a sleepover with Emma to get away. This was why she was carrying a shoulder bag with pyjamas and a toothbrush.

Emma still didn't get back to her, and she was anxiously waiting for her mobile to ring. She was almost at the corner to Emma's street, when she felt the pricking sensation of the vibration alarm on her leg. She hastily reached for her pocket and tried to pull the phone out, almost dropping it in the process. On the fourth ring she got it out, and disappointment washed through her as she saw the name on the display: *Lewis*

She picked up, and sighed. "Hi, Lewis", she said flatly.

"Wow," Lewis' voice sounded from the other end of the line, "I might have expected a bit more enthusiasm."

"Sorry, I was hoping it was Emma. Did you find her?"

"Err, no", Lewis admitted. "But I found something quite intriguing" Lewis loved highbrow talk, and he was really enjoying it, when he found something geeky to talk about. So she braced herself for some geek-speak. Lewis didn't disappoint her.

"I did a database dump, and guess what I found. Someone was not just meddling with the data, they planted a stored procedure and manipulated the database table."

Rikki rolled her eyes. "In English, please!"

Lewis cleared his throat. "Urm, sorry. Someone planted a bit of code in the school database, that shows different entries in the class register, depending on who is using it. In Emma's case, it shows a lot of absence, except for the classes the logged-in teacher gives. For them, it shows the correct values. Cool, eh?"

Rikki was taken aback. “Why didn’t anyone notice that. I mean, Emma was at school, so the teachers should have noticed, something was wrong.”

“That’s the elegance in it, Rikki.” Lewis seemed to be quite impressed by what he found. “Most teachers tend to look at their own data more closely than to others.”

“But someone must have noticed, that she’s noted absent only in other classes.”

“Sure they did. But people have a tendency not to question things that flatter them. And believing you are the one teacher who’s classes visited by a notorious class-cutter is quite flattering. They have been shown what they wanted to see!”

Rikki had to give Lewis credit for his excellent deductions. “Makes sense. This is quite an elaborate prank. Any clue who pulled this?”

“Working on it. They must have left some traces. We have to be careful though, this is not your average practical joke.”

Rikki had arrived at the Gilbert’s house now. “Thank you, Lewis. I’m at Emma’s now. I call back when I know more.”

She hung up, and wondered what to do next.

Officially Emma was still grounded. Mrs. Gilbert didn’t want her daughter to have contact with Rikki anymore, so maybe Emma was staying at home, because she was sick. And maybe her mother had found the texts on her mobile, and had taken away the phone.

For a moment Rikki stared at the huge tree in the Gilbert’s garden. The wind was rustling in it’s leaves, and in the fading light she could make out the huge trunk she had used to climb up to Emma’s bedroom window. She pondered whether to climb in through the window, but decided against it.

This time she would confront the Gilbert’s to find out why they were so resentful.

She walked up to the front door and rang the bell. A few seconds passed before Mrs. Gilbert opened the door. Rikki was appalled by the woman’s appearance. Her hair was untidy, her dress crumpled and her eyes were red and swollen. When she saw Rikki, her face fell. Obviously she had expected someone else. Something in Rikki’s chest formed painful knot. Mrs. Gilbert’s appearance seemed to confirm her worst fear. Yet she tried not to jump to conclusions.

“What do you want?”, Mrs. Gilbert hissed. There was no kindness in her voice. Rikki straightened her back. “I want to see Emma, please. And before you say she doesn’t want to see me, I want to hear that from her in person.”

To her total surprise Mrs. Gilbert did not yell at her, instead she began to sob.

The knot in Rikki's tightened. "She is not here, is she?" Rikki's voice trembled.

"As if you didn't know!" Mrs. Gilbert snapped between her sobs. "All of this is your fault. All of it!"

Rikki tried to fight the rising panic, as she felt the temperature around her rise. She had never been good at keeping her super-powers under control and now her fear mixed with anger. Anger towards whoever wanted to hurt Emma, but also anger towards Mrs. Gilbert, who stood there and blamed her for Emma's disappearance. Why should she take the blame, just because she liked Emma so much. It wasn't her fault after all, that Mrs. Gilbert couldn't cope with the reality that her daughter was dating a girl. Rikki could not explain the woman's rage against her with anything but this. She knew it was probably unfair, but she couldn't help herself, "And why should that be? It wasn't me who believed all that crap they made up at school! It wasn't me who locked her in the house for days! And it wasn't me who barred her from seeing her friends, just because you can't accept that she is a bit different!"

"How dare you, litte twerp!" Mrs. Gilbert shot back. "Don't you ever insult me in my own house! All of this began when you turned up! She's been a good girl until you came! And then you changed her, you tempted her, twisted her mind, and now you dare to call yourself her friend? You are her worst enemy, nothing less!"

Tears shot to Rikki's eyes, but she stubbornly fought them down. "Emma was right to fear your reaction. I didn't expect you to be happy about finding out about us, but I thought you'd be enlightened enough to at least accept it! And talk about it over a cup of tea or something!"

Mrs. Gilbert stared at her in disbelief. "You actually think that doing drugs is something we could discuss over a cup of tea? How stupid are you?"

This literally knocked the wind out off Rikki. Her anger seemed to evaporate. "Wait, what?" She blinked.

Mrs. Gilbert yelled: "I said; Are you stupid?"

Rikki ignored the insult. "No, before that. Did you really think we were doing drugs?" For a moment Rikki felt the impulse to laugh out loud. This was, after all, the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

"I don't think this is funny, young lady! What else would you have done with my daughter, if you weren't doing drugs?" Mrs. Gilbert snapped.

The next words involuntarily burst out of Rikki's mouth. "Her," she said. "I was doing her." When she realized, what she just said, she blushed.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Mrs. Gilbert breathed, now less sure of herself.

Rikki took a deep breath. In the end, it was much easier to say, than she had imagined. "Emma and I aren't just friends. We... , we've been sleeping together." Saying it loud felt as if a heavy weight was lifted from her shoulders.

Mrs. Gilbert's blinked in surprise. "But, the school counsellor said, in situations like this, it's usually drugs."

"Yeah," Rikki retorted, finding back to her snippy self. "And I bet that counsellor stood under the bedroom window and watched us. Did she show you the video?"

"But," the anger was building up again, "why didn't she tell me anything? She never had secrets from me before."

"I wonder why" Rikki thought, but aloud she said. "Would you have listened?"

Instead of an answer, Mrs. Gilbert started crying again. "Why did she have to run away?"

Rikki put a hand on the older woman's arm. "She didn't. I don't know if you believe any of the things I just told you, and honestly, I don't care. But believe one thing: If Emma would plan something like running away from home, there would be exactly one person she would tell. And that's me."

Mrs. Gilbert seemed to calm down a little. "Do you have any idea where she is?", she asked weakly. Sad, Rikki shook her head. "No."

"When she didn't come home for dinner I called Dr. Denman, and she said that Emma didn't show up for her counselling. I thought she might be with Cleo, or even with you!"

Rikki was alerted. "Wait, who?"

"Dr. Denman her therapist."

Rikki felt the lump inside her cramp painfully. She should have known this. "Dr. Alice Denman?" She asked.

"Yes, why. Do you know her?"

Rikki nodded gravely. "That woman is not a therapist. She's a psychopath. . . . A dangerous psychopath."

"What? I've been talking to her, she's with the school."

"Do you know where she is?"

Mrs. Gilbert was very confused now, but Rikki had no time to explain. Rage was brewing up inside her, and she felt the temperature around her rise. She didn't know how long she could keep herself in control, and worse, she didn't know whether she wanted to.

"Her office is somewhere in Mermaid Waters", Mrs. Gilbert went inside to pick up a card from the kitchen table. She went back to the door, and handed it to Rikki.

"Mermaid Waters. What a coincidence", Rikki thought. Although she was slightly impressed. Mermaid Waters was one of the rising suburbs along the Gold Coast. Real estate prices were on the rise there, but on the other hand, it was pretty much what she had expected from Denman. And she could be there in a couple of minutes.

"I can call her again", Mrs. Gilbert suggested.

“No!” Rikki cried. “She’d be warned! Call Cleo, she will explain everything!” Rikki was slightly afraid Mrs. Gilbert wanted to join her. “Someone has to be here, in case Emma comes back!”

“Yes, yes you’re right. I call my husband, He’s in town, looking for her.”

Before Mrs. Gilbert could do or say anything else, Rikki had turned and ran out onto the streets. The moment Mrs. Gilbert realized that all this meant, Denman had kidnapped Emma, she would undoubtedly call the police. Rikki planned to be there first. It would not do any good if the police stormed in, and found a teenage mermaid swimming around in a tank. Rikki was quite sure, that Denman had forced Emma into her mermaid form. For the reason, that it was easier to hold her captive that way. Rikki tried not to imagine what sick experiments the crazy Doctor would perform on her girlfriend. Her face was unmoved, but inside her a storm was raging.

She walked faster, unaware that she was leaving a trail of singed leaves on the hedges she went past.

Cleo picked up the mobile immediately when she saw the Gilbert’s house number.

“Emma?”

“Oh, hi Mrs. Gilbert.”

Lewis looked up from his computer. “Something new?”, his face said.

“Yes. She is what?”

“Yes, I know that woman, she has been harassing me earlier. No, she’s not a psychiatrist, she’s a marine biologist. And she has had some funny ideas, I believe she’s unstable.”

“What? You let Rikki go there alone? Yes, I’m coming. And call the police, for god’s sake!”

She hung up. Lewis looked at her expectantly. “Rikki was at Emma’s place. Emma didn’t come home from her therapist. Guess who that is: Denman!”

“Oh!” Lewis seemed to understand, what he had been looking at all day. “That explains a lot.” “We have to do something!”

Cleo nodded. “Rikki went to face Denman alone, she’s in big trouble.” Although, after Rikki’s odd behaviour, and the incidents with her super-powers, Cleo wasn’t sure whether it was Denman, she should be worried about.

“What do we do?”

“Take a risk.” Cleo got up and hurried out of her room, calling: “Dad?”

Rikki arrived at the Denman address shortly after. The place was a rather big estate, but looked a little out of place. The dense and unkempt vegetation was very much unlike the rest of the town, and everything looked as if someone moved here in a hurry. Rikki entered the estate and marched

toward the house. The front door was locked. Rikki didn't bother ringing the bell. She pressed her hands against the door, and let her rage flow through her. The wood of the door splintered under the wave of heat that shot through it. She kicked in the smoking charred door and entered the house. The place was furnished like a middle class household, with light wooden chairs, armchairs and a couch. But it looked more like a home-centre ad, than a space anyone lived in. Rikki looked around the house. The only place that looked in use, was the small office. Rikki entered and flipped through some of the folders. One of them raised her interest. It contained full dossiers on Emma, Cleo and herself, and there was even something on Lewis. There were photographs of all four of them. Some pictures showed their families, and one, that had been taken from quite far away, showed Emma and Rikki at the school gate, kissing. It must have been taken yesterday. On the backside was a handwritten note, that said: "Might be dangerous, separate them".

In a flare of anger Rikki threw the photo to the ground. It burst into flames before it landed on the floor.

Rikki stuffed the dossiers in her backpack, and grabbed the next folder. She opened it, and stumbled back. The first page was a picture of Emma, who was strapped to a table. She was in her mermaid form, while Dr. Denman cut with a scalpel into her fishtail. Emma's face was grimaced in pain. Rikki felt the heat flowing out of her, and the bookshelf to her right caught fire. Denman had obviously used her time with Emma effectively, there were tons of data. The last page caught her eye. It had an address on it, from a nearby business park. Seemingly Denman rented a lab there. Since Denman had full access to the labs at the research facility she worked at, there could only be one reason for this.

Rikki ripped out the page with the address and threw the rest of the folder into the burning bookshelf. Then she turned around, and left the house, leaving a trail of flames behind her, that set everything alight that it touched. She headed straight towards Mermaid Beach, and jumped into the sea, taking the fast lane towards the business park.

The Satory's car stopped at the house in Mermaid Waters. The road was blocked by two fire engines, and the firefighters were on the estate trying to extinguish the flames that still shot from the charred remains of the house.

Cleo immediately knew what had happened. "Oh my god!" She jumped out of the car, and ran up to the one of the firefighters who was trying to direct the jet of water from his fire hose into the flames, stopping them from spreading through the dry wood in the garden.

"Was anyone in there?" She asked.

"Not now girl." The firefighter said through gritted teeth, trying to keep

the jet on the flames. Cleo looked at the jet and -using her powers- massed the water over the flames, and let the whole body of water shoot into the base of the fire at once. A thick cloud of steam rose, and the flames were taken out in an instant.

“Was there anyone in the house?” She repeated her question.

The firefighter stared at the place where the flames had been licking up the trees a moment ago. Bedazzled, he just shook his head. “No, it was empty.”

“Thanks!” Cleo left the puzzled firefighter and headed back to the car. Inside, she looked at Lewis. “She was here, but she wasn’t in the fire.”

Lewis looked at his girlfriend. Cleo could be a real chick sometimes, but he loved how she took initiative when things really mattered.

“What now?” He asked. They weren’t a step closer to finding Emma, and Lewis had no illusions about who set the fire. They had a rogue mermaid to deal with too.

Cleo sighed. “I guess we follow the trail of flames.”

The minutes it took Rikki to dry enough to transform back into her human shape were painstakingly long. She had landed on the beach near the business park, and it was only a few minutes walk to the labs where Denman was.

She tried to use the heat she generated to speed up the process. It worked, but she burned her trousers. It bewildered her, that her own fire was so harmless to herself. Her trousers were set on fire, and the skin on her legs wasn’t even reddened. As soon as she was on human feet again, she bolted towards the lab. She cursed herself for not having her pepper spray with her. Might have been handy. She left her bag at Mermaid Beach, hidden behind some rocks. While most of what she was wearing magically disappeared, when she transformed (Lewis had mused about other dimensions, when he was wondering where the stuff went), her backpack stayed where it was, and it wasn’t waterproof.

So she had to rely on what she had. She didn’t bother finding a way to sneak in. She spotted two security cameras on her way to the front entrance. They exploded into tiny fireballs. The front door was an automatic glass door. It was locked. Rikki was in rage, but never before she had more control over her powers. She directed the heat towards the automatic doors, and the sudden change in temperature made the glass shatter into thousands of small pieces. An alarm went off, but Rikki ignored that.

She walked in. The concierge-desk was abandoned, and the place looked as if it was mostly empty. But on the desk, she found what lab-rooms were occupied. She stepped into the elevator and made her way up to the labs on the third floor.

When the lift doors opened, she blasted another security camera, which

was mounted opposite to the elevator doors. A man came running towards her. Her entry had not gone unnoticed then. The man held an electrical Taser weapon in his right, but when he saw that the intruder was a teenage girl, he hesitated to use it. Rikki didn't waste a second. A blaze of heat rushed over the man, scorching the tips of his hair. The heat accumulated in the plastic handle of his weapon, making it melt.

Screaming the man let go of his weapon and staggered backwards. Rikki stepped towards him, grabbed him by the throat and pushed him into the wall.

"There is a woman in here. A scientist. She brought a blonde girl with her. Where is she?"

The man muttered something incomprehensible, that sounded a bit like an insult. The wallpaper left and right of his face caught fire.

"Where are they?" Rikki repeated in a cold voice. The man just pointed to his right towards the entrance of a lab.

Rikki let go of him, and walked towards the lab door, not even turning around to see how the guard slid down the wall, and sat on the ground, gasping for air, while the fire began to spread along the wallpapers.

Rikki kicked the lab door. It was unlocked and swung open. From one of the rooms a tall guy in an ugly leather jacket appeared. Unknown to Rikki, it was the man who had helped kidnapping Emma. And he held a gun.

"Stop right there!" He snarled. Rikki knew he would shoot, and she wasn't sure if she could act fast enough.

She turned towards him. "Where is Emma?" She asked. Her voice quivered with anger, but the man seemed to mistake that for fear. Rikki wasn't afraid of the gun, the thing part of her feared more, was, that she could hardly stop herself. She was not under the influence of a full moon, but yet. Her aggression was real, and she was ready to do almost anything.

The man with the gun waved her toward a door, and she entered. Behind the door was Denman. She wore a white lab coat and latex gloves, with stains on them, that looked like blood. Rikki felt the air around her heat up again. If this was Emma's blood. . .

"Where is Emma?" She asked again.

"Oh, your friend is quite fine. She's in her preferred element. I didn't think you would come to join her."

"Let her go."

"And why would I do that? If this story goes public, you'll all end up in a place like this. Or in a zoo."

"I doubt that. You have nothing." Rikki wasn't so sure, if that was the truth, but she tried to play it cool for now. Inside her, things were different. If Denman had harmed Emma, Rikki would let go of her powers. And then all hell would break loose.

"Let her go or I'll. . ."

“Or you what?” Denman turned around and pointed a water-gun in Rikki’s direction. “You’ll grow a tail?”

Denman continued. “I don’t wish any of you harm. If you would come to me, all three of you, we could achieve great things. Aren’t you curious what you actually are?”

“You had your chance to ask, the very first time we met. Now it’s too late. I’d rather die, than be your prisoner!” Rikki shot back.

“To bad! I thought you’d be more cooperative. But maybe that changes over time.” Denman pulled the trigger of the water-gun and the jet hit Rikki right in the face. Rikki tried to dart out of the way, but the man with the gun blocked her way. She stood there, soaked and shaking with rage.

“Wait ’til she transforms, then take her to the other one.” Denman ordered. “And turn off that damn alarm!”

Rikki felt the transformation, and then stumbled and fell over. The lackey caught her and then dragged her through a second door. Rikki had never felt so helpless before. In the room stood a glass tank, about for times the size of an ordinary tub filled with water. Inside it was Emma. She had several bandages around her arms. Otherwise she seemed unharmed. Emma pushed her head up through the water. “Rikki!” She called.

Rikki had seemingly given up. All she did was to look wearily into Emma’s direction. The man was now dragging her up a small staircase that led to the top of the tank, and lifted her up.

“Stand back in there!” He ordered Emma, then plunged Rikki’s body into the water head first.

That was the moment Rikki had been waiting for. She grabbed the man around the waist, while letting her mermaid tail fall backwards, behind her. This made the man lose his balance, and he toppled over the rim of the water tank and into the water.

Rikki’s tail hit the opposite wall of the tank painfully, but she had no time to think about that. She had lost her grip around the man’s waist, and he was already getting towards the rim again to pull himself out of the tank.

But he was only human, and also fully dressed; and both made him a bad swimmer. He might be stronger and faster than the two teenage girls on land. But this was their element. Rikki had turned around and surfaced behind the man only seconds after their fall. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she submerged almost effortlessly dragging the man down. He tried to hit her, tried to fight his way up, but two strokes of the mermaid tail brought him to the floor of the tank. Only several seconds later Rikki let go of him, and he shot back to the surface. The water was just too deep for him to stand with his head out of the water. He broke the surface and took a deep breath. Rikki was over him again, arms around his neck.

“Welcome to my world!” She said. “Can you hold your breath?”

“Fuck you!” The man managed to say.

“Bad answer.” Rikki dived again. This time she held him under water for about thirty seconds. He was in complete panic, when she let him get up for air.

Emma surfaced beside her friend. “Oh my god! You’re killing him!”

“That’s the plan, yeah.” Rikki was still so pissed, she wasn’t sure if she was actually serious about it.

“Please Rikki, don’t!” Emma was in real panic now. Strangely, that soothed Rikki. She let go of the man, but blocked his way out of the water.

Rikki stretched her arms out to her girlfriend. “It’s OK, sweetie” she said. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Are you here to get me out?”

Rikki nodded and began to answer, when the door opened and Denman stormed in. “What the hell is going on here, Walter?” She cried.

Walter, the man she had pulled into the tank, tried to pull himself out of the tank once more, but Rikki knocked him back into the water, with a blow of her tail.

“Congratulations, Walter.” She told him. “You just got promoted to hostage.”

Emma understood what her friend was planning, and grabbed Walter by the collar, and pulled him under again. She was a bit more insecure in her actions, but in her mermaid form, she was a lot stronger than him. After all, the same force that allowed her to out swim a boat, could easily be used to knock down a man.

“Let him go!” Denman commanded.

“How long do you think he can hold his breath?” Rikki asked. “Longer than Emma? You surly have data on that!”

“You cannot actually believe that this impresses me.”

“Do you know what to do with his body, when he drowns? A lot of people will ask questions, when one of your employees drowns in a closed down lab facility.”

Denman’s voice was quivering. “Emma’s not a killer!”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

The self-confident smile had gone from her face. She was afraid. The situation has gotten out of control. Emma released Walter, and he came up panic-stricken, gasping for air.

Rikki’s patience was wearing thin. She pulled herself out of the tank, and slid down the stairs. “Towel!” She commanded.

Denman turned around, and headed for her lab. A blaze of heat singed her hair, and the door handle began to glow, just as she grabbed it.

She screamed in pain, as her flesh was burned by the intense heat.

“You will let us walk out of here, and you will never, ever talk about us again!” Rikki told her in a threatening tone.

“You haven’t the faintest idea, what we are, and what we’re capable of. You’d better not mess with us anymore!”

“You can’t get away with this, they will find out about you. I have proof!” Denman held her injured hand in her armpit.

The heat in the room was so intense, that the water on Rikki’s body evaporated into steam. Dry now, she turned back into her human form and stood up.

Emma had released Walter, and climbed out of the tank. Rikki grabbed a towel from the shelf that was mounted right to the lab door. She wrapped it around Emma’s body, trying to avoid getting wet again.

She ignored Walter’s attempts to climb out of the water tank. A few seconds later, Emma morphed into her human shape, naked under the towel. Rikki put her arms around her girlfriend and went for the door.

Denman was still standing there blocking the way, but only glaring in disbelief. Rikki stood before her, looking into her eyes.

“You haven’t got the faintest idea about who and what we are, and what we’re capable of.” She told the older woman. “Next time you get near my friends. I’ll burn you to ashes!”

Denman swallowed hard, but said nothing. She let the two girls pass. From behind Walter was still struggling to get out of the tank. “Dr. Denman, can you give me a hand here, please?”

On their way through the lab, everything made of paper magically burst into flames as the girls went past it, and as they went outside they saw that part of the building was on fire. A firetruck was parked on the road, and several police cars. Rikki spotted Mr. Satory’s car and looked around for her friends. She spotted Cleo and Lewis, arm in arm, anxiously waiting for their safe return. She wanted to run to them, but firefighters and policemen were heading towards Emma and her, leading them away.

Later that evening the girls sat in the Gilbert’s living room. Everyone was there, Cleo, her parents and even Rikki’s mum, who told everyone how proud she was of her daughter, and how happy to have her back safe and sound. Rikki hadn’t had that many hugs from her mum in years.

Mr. Gilbert was still in disbelief over the story, his daughter told her. “So that crazy woman actually believes my daughter is some fairy tale creature?”

“Yep.” Emma told him. “And Rikki can throw flames from her hands!”

Rikki grinned. “That would be rocking!” The three mermaids exchanged a conspiratorial look.

After everyone had said their things, Mrs. Gilbert brought Emma to bed. After being pushed up by adrenaline all evening, the shock was slowly setting in, and the doctors at the hospital had said, she needed to rest.

“Can I stay with her?” Rikki asked Mrs. Gilbert.

Mrs. Gilbert looked at her daughter through the open door, then nodded. “She needs you, doesn’t she?” There was a tone of sadness in her voice.

“She needs her mum too.” Rikki replied. Mrs. Gilbert sighed. “They grow up so fast.”

Then she turned to Rikki. “I owe you an apology.”

“No, you don’t.” Rikki said. “You feared for her. I’ve been there myself. It’s a pretty dark place.”

Mrs. Gilbert pulled Rikki into an embrace. “You really the best friend my daughter could find.”

When they parted Rikki walked into Emma’s room. “Care if I join you?”

Emma smiled in the darkness. “Not at all. I’m cold, maybe you can come and warm me a little?”

Rikki smiled, closed the door, and dropped her clothes to the floor. Then she slipped between the sheets and curled up in Emma’s arms.

Emma kissed her temples. “Thank you for coming and saving me.” She said. “My knight in shining armor.”

“Not so shining.” Rikki sighed. “I was really scared.”

“But you came!”

“It’s not what I meant” Rikki sat up, and looked at Emma’s pale features in the twilight of the room. “When I saw Denman with those blood-stained gloves, I thought she’d hurt you. I really was ready to kill her!”

Emma smiled. “But you didn’t. That’s what makes you the good guy!”

“Maybe. I don’t know. That’s the whole point! I shouldn’t be in a position where I actually can consider killing someone. It would have been easy!”

Emma began caressing Rikki’s head. “You are not a killer. I know that. You would never harm anyone willingly.”

“It just... It made me think. I always believed that our conversion to mermaids was some kind of magical fairy-tale thing. Maybe some sort of natural phenomenon.”

Emma nodded. This is what she thought too. But Rikki wasn’t finished.

“What if there is a more sinister purpose behind it?”

“What purpose?” Emma sounded surprised.

“What if someone, or something, did this to us. All these super-powers? It may well be that we are, you know, some kind of weapon?”

That idea frightened Emma deeply. She pulled her girlfriend closer. “I don’t want to believe, you’re a weapon. You’re just very special.”

Rikki decided, that it might be a good idea to drop the topic for tonight, and leaned into the embrace.

“What are you wearing?” Emma just now noticed, that Rikki was naked.

“Not a thing.” Rikki murmured, kissing Emma’s soft lips.

“I’m two parts behind. You think you can give me a hand?”

“I can give you more than just a hand, honey!” Rikki grinned sheepishly, and dived under the sheets.