

Leilani Perierre took a deep breath as her head broke the surface of the azure Pacific, tossing her long black hair back and letting it float behind her as she tread water. "Chazore?" She called out to the 32-foot luxury yacht rocking nearby before swimming to the red-and-white stained wood side and climbing up the steel ladder a few steps, poking her head up. "Dragon?"

No answer.

The island sea-otter sighed and pulled herself up the rest of the way, rivulets of water running down her sleek nude form as she reached for a towel hanging on the deck railing and dried her hair. "Chazore," she said as she finished drying off and padded across the spacious oak deck to a small lounge near the stern. A saber-toothed rainbow dragon reclined comfortably on her back, her face hidden behind an open Bazaar magazine she was reading. "I realize you want to rest on your vacation, but you should really moderate yourself." Leilani flipped her thick ruddertail to the side, spraying the dragon's tiger striped legs with water, earning a quick squeal.

"Lani! Watch it! That's cold!" The dragon squirmed, rubbing her legs and clawed feet together, wiping away a few drops from her white-furred calves, before returning to her magazine. "I'll take a dip in a little while. I'm reading about talkies."

"Talkies?" Leilani sat down next to her and placed the towel over her hips, letting her breasts feel the warmth of the early afternoon sun.

Chazore Ayres smiled at her companion. "Movies where the actors actually talk and you can hear them? They're becoming quite popular."

"Oh," she sighed softly and turned over onto her side to face her. "I have not seen any movies since the silents David would take me to."

"Well, maybe we can see one sometime." She had met the sea-otter a few days before, upon her arrival to Tahiti, the largest of the islands in the Polynesian Sea, and they had already grown to become fast friends. She found it very refreshing, despite being so many miles from proper civilization, to be able to converse with another girl about world issues, especially the modern Western cultures. Leilani had spent nearly a year in the big city of New York, and the dragon was pleasantly surprised that the sea-otter had taken to its cultures, classes and charm as quickly as a lady of fine upbringing like herself would have. Chazore also felt sorry for the island-girl, who had once known true love and had then lost it in a horrible accident. Leilani had been unwilling to talk too much about it, and the dragon was hesitant to press the issue, despite her knowledge of understanding others' psyches.

*Perhaps I could help her to move on,* she thought as she looked at her. *She just seems so sad somehow.*

She finally put down the magazine and got up, almost towering over the sea-otter as she looked at her and smiled. "Alright, I'm coming in." She removed her shirt, revealing a red one-piece underneath,

contrasting with the white fur around her thighs and arms. The swimsuit was designed specifically for her body type, including two large holes in the back for large golden wings.

The daughter of an ancient golden dragon, Chazore was proud of her rich, draconic heritage, but was careful not to flaunt her family's monumental success in the trading industry. While she had considered the idea of having an actual occupation one day, for now she was content to travel around the world and see the sights. When she had found out Leilani owned a few vessels, she was quick to accept an invitation for a day at sea on board her most exquisite one, *The Dream Pearl*, though she was disappointed when the sea-otter turned down a generous offer of gold coins as payment.

Leilani beamed and jumped up from the lounge, nearly a foot shorter than the dragon. "Good! Come, I just found the most marvelous reef to show you. I had never seen it before."

"Well, I doubt it can compare to the Great Barrier in Australia," she replied, following the sea-otter to the side of the yacht and watching her sit down to hyperventilate slowly. "How deep is it?" Chazore looked out at the open water around them. They were at least two miles from land. The island was a mere speck on the horizon. While she enjoyed the pleasures and beauty of the undersea world, there was still that faintest hint of concern. Her combative abilities assured that she herself could clearly match any of the carnivorous denizens of the sea, but she feared for Leilani's safety all the same.

"Maybe...14 or 15 fathoms," Leilani answered between deep breaths. "Not sure. We do not have to venture that far down if you do not want to."

Chazore nodded and sat down beside her on the deck, dangling her legs over the side. "Let's just swim for a bit, otter. If I'm feeling up to a dive later, we may."

Leilani smiled and stood up again. "Great!"

"Shouldn't you put on a swimsuit or-" The rest of her words were beyond hearing as the sea-otter dove naked into the water and disappeared. "Oh..." She looked around, feeling silly suddenly, and then sighed, pulling and tugging at her one-piece until her wings and arms could wiggle free. "Well...when in Tahiti..." she muttered, and dove in naked after her companion.

The water was perfectly clear as far as she could see below her, at least 50 feet or more. A strange sense of vertigo washed over her as she peered into the blue, sun-streaked depths, not seeing the bottom, and she quickly righted herself after her dive, swimming horizontally through myriad-colored schools of fish, flapping her wings behind her slowly.

A loud chirruping sound from the sea-otter got her attention, and she turned to see Leilani swimming towards and then zooming past her in seconds, soon lost from sight again. She started to chuckle before she remembered she was holding in her breath carefully. The sea-otter's agility and grace in the water was indeed unmatched. With her it was like a ballet; for the dragon it was a burlesque show.

Leilani swam past her again, doing several loops and twirls in front of and around the dragon's larger body, and Chazore grinned, dipping down and trying a few somersaults with her friend, immediately getting disoriented and dizzy. The sea-otter giggled a mouthful of bubbles and took Chazore's clawed hand carefully, leading her back up to the surface not too far above.

Topside, the two treaded water and Chazore caught her breath. "I can't possibly keep up with you if you're going to move like that, otter."

Leilani nodded. "Sorry, Chazore. As I said, these waters are new to me, so I am just excited. I want to look at that reef again. Come with me?"

Chazore got in a couple of deep breaths, nodding. "Alright, but wait for me!" She watched the otter take in a breath and roll forward, diving smoothly down beneath the surface, then filled her lungs and returned to the depths.

Through the blue she spotted the anchor line and followed Leilani's kicking legs and lashing rudder-like tail downwards, every so often stopping and adjusting to the new pressures on her body. While an experienced diver, and able to breath-hold for a few moments at a time, she was still mindful of the seemingly dizzying water surrounding them, and saw the anchor line as an effective guide to the bottom.

Leilani had already arrived at the sandy bottom nearly 100 feet down, floating in front of the most beautiful coral reef the dragon had ever seen. Along a row of spiked and jagged coral rocks grew numerous sponges and plant-life, surrounded by algae and tiny fishes of blues, yellows and greens. Near the bottom, she noticed several large rocks jutting up from the sand, and swam down to inspect beneath one of them. Using her strength, she was able to lift up one of the larger ones, and a large lobster scuttled out from underneath it. She grinned at the sea-otter, rubbing her stomach, and pointed at the escaping lobster. Leilani nodded, smiling, mimicking her rubbing, and the two chased after the lobster across the bottom for several feet.

Chazore stopped swimming for a moment and tapped at Leilani's tail, seeing something in the far distance to their right. She squinted sky-blue eyes to peer into the depths, then stroked forward slowly, leading the sea-otter closer to the shape, which appeared to be floating just above the bottom. An infinitesimal amount of sunlight filtered briefly into the depths and the dragon stopped again, her eyes suddenly wide. She reached out to hold the sea-otter's arm, simply staring for the moment, before looking again at Leilani, frowning. Her lungs starting to burn, she motioned towards the surface and pushed off the bottom, swimming back upwards quickly.

Leilani watched her go up and then looked again, utterly transfixed, at what they had found. Wrapped from head to foot in heavy chains, the body of a young, nude vixen was suspended, trailing long dark hair across a face filled with terror, her bright blue eyes open, mouth parted in a silent scream.

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By the time the local authorities in Papeete arrived on the scene, Leilani had managed to calm herself down, and was on the lounge with Chazore, staying close by her side. As Captain Shade Andrews and his group of tigers came on board, Leilani gave the dragon a quick kiss on the cheek and got up to greet the group, churripping softly and nuzzling the black tiger fondly. "Shade..."

"Lani, always good to see you." The tiger purred loudly and nosed her back, then cleared his throat as he realized she was dripping wet and wearing nothing but a towel. "Um...so...we got your SOS..."

Chazore looked up at Shade and then also got up, nearly his height as she approached, hugging herself. "It was quite a shock. We didn't know what else to do." Inwardly she shuddered again, trying to remind herself that as big and beautiful as the world was, sometimes, somewhere, there were hideous atrocities too. "Do you need us to show you? I would really much rather stay on board..."

Shade took the dragon's hand carefully and squeezed it. "Madam, you have been through enough for one day. Let us handle it from here, please."

"Gladly," she replied and sank back down on the lounge, looking distraught.

Shade turned to the sea-otter beside him. "You know the place? Your guidance would be appreciated." He started to get undressed with the other tigers.

Leilani nodded. "I do." She nonchalantly removed her towel and padded naked, unabashed, past the staring tigers, taking a breath before diving over the side.

Shade looked after her dreamily, thoughts of past undersea frolic coming immediately to mind, then shook his head hard and roared at the other tigers, "What are you waiting for?! Let's go!" before stripping down to his skivvies and diving in after her.

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It took several minutes for the tiger team to drag the vixen onto the deck before they and the women could huddle around her. Shade looked up, grimacing, "Anyone know this girl?"

"I do not," Leilani answered, looking away as the tigers started to pull at the chains wrapped around the vixen's body. "Whoever she is, I pray she did not suffer."

Chazore nodded, feeling ill to her stomach. Both she and Leilani were good breath-holders, experienced divers, but how long could a young girl chained like this possibly survive without air, and finally succumb to the ocean? The dragon calmly knelt, examining the body a bit more. "She has strange marks on her

wrists and ankles. Here, look..."

Shade knelt beside her, looking curious. "Are you a doctor?"

Chazore managed a smile as she looked at him. "I'm very knowledgeable about medicine and the body. I-I'm not licensed, but perhaps I can still help..."

"Those marks," one of the other tigers spoke up, "could have just been made when she was struggling with the chains, trying to get free."

The dragon shook her head, her long, dark wet hair flying. "I don't think so. They would leave imprints in her fur similar to these links. And they don't look fresh at all, here..." She touched one of the girl's wrists, pulling away some fur. "Significant bruising..."

Leilani picked up part of the trailing links of chain and studied them. "I have seen this type before." She looked up at Shade. "For shipping, right? Wrapping large crates..."

The tiger nodded and casually looked around them at the open sea. "Maybe she was chained and thrown off a ship. Yes, that's possible." He looked at Chazore and asked, "Any idea, if you can tell, how long she's been underwater?"

The dragon looked at the vixen sadly and gently closed the girl's eyes. "Her body is still well-preserved. Honestly, it can't have been too long. A day at the most."

"Well, we'll know more when we return her to the mainland. Lani, I'd like very much if you and your lovely companion would come with us and give statements?"

Chazore blushed a bit, but nodded, looking at the sea-otter. "I'm sure we'd be willing to, Captain."

The tiger smiled at her. "Please, Shade is fine. And you are?"

"Chazore Aryes. I'm actually here on an extended vacation. Leilani was kind enough to be my guide the last few days, and..." she hugged herself again, suddenly feeling cold, and looked down at the vixen on the deck. One of the tigers quickly spread a sheet from the other boat around her. "This is all just...well, it's not what I expected to see down in those depths, I'm sorry. I hope I can be of some assistance."

Shade smiled warmly, and something in his brilliant green eyes flickered. "I'm quite sure you can be, madam." She turned to Leilani, who was watching the couple curiously, "Give us a few minutes, and follow us in, okay?"

Leilani nodded, "Of course." She and the dragon watched silently, and a bit sadly, as the young vixen was lifted carefully off the *Dream Pearl*, both deep in thought.

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"Well," Dr. Frank Garon looked up from the body of the fox to address Chazore standing nearby. "I dinnae know if she suffered, but...she dinnae drown. Notta drop in 'er lungs. She was dead afore she 'it th'water, lass. Blunt force trauma to th'back o' her head right 'ere. "

The dragon looked somewhat relieved. "Did you examine the marks on her hands and feet?"

The old wolf stood up straight and cracked his back in a stretch. "Aye, those are older marks, surely. Could be a few months, even years. Mostly scarred skin under her fur."

Leilani crossed her legs under her sarong, feeling a tad uncomfortable sitting in the small room. "And you would say she has been dead as long as Chazore thought?" The smell of death was not new to her, but the autopsy was too much for her to stomach, and she resisted the curiosity to examine up close.

The doctor nodded. "Aye, less'n a day if she's a year. When you two found 'er, she must've been dumped 'ardly, hmm, 12 or 14 hours. But she was certainly alive recently."

"And maybe on the island," Leilani added. "Should we notify the missing persons office at the station? See if anyone has filed a report?"

"Lani," Chazore said gently, "if you think she may have been on a ship, it could have just been passing through. I mean, we were out pretty far. I'm sure we were close to shipping lanes."

The sea-otter nodded, looking sad. "Goddess, she could have come from anywhere."

The wolf cleared his throat and sighed. "I'm afraid yer both right. Since she dinnae drown, we can rule out suicide. Whether accident or intent, someone took this girl's life...and far too soon..."

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They sat side by side in Captain Shade's office as he hunched over his desk, examining a report. "It's going to take a while to get information on ship messages that were received in the last few days. We could get lucky though."

"Assuming the vessel even called in at all," Chazore pointed out. "If this girl was killed on board, I'm sure they would try to keep it quiet."

"They?" Leilani looked curious. "You think she was killed by more than one?"

The dragon shrugged. "Those chains were very tight around her and heavy. You saw how much trouble

the tigers were having bringing her on to your boat. It had to have taken at least a few others to do this and pitch her into the water."

"Well, most vessels are usually ordered to report in every so often to show positions to other ships in the area, you know, to prevent collisions." Shade looked at the dragon steadily. "We have the coordinates from where she was found, and I doubt the current moved her that much."

"Not in under a day, no," Leilani nodded, and then looked at Chazore thoughtfully, "Maybe he is right. We will wait for the report and then we can see-"

"Wait, hold on," the tiger waved a hand. "We? What do you two think you're doing? We can handle things from here."

Leilani looked at him reproachfully. "I think Chazore will be very helpful. She has already provided a few clues for us. I really have to insist she be included in the investigation." Then she smiled sweetly, "Or do I enjoy my moonlight swims alone for a while?"

Shade's cheeks turned an interesting shade of crimson and Chazore stared at her open-mouthed before regaining her composure and nodding to the tiger. "I...I would like to help, if I can..."

He sighed deeply before looking at the sea-otter, shaking his head and smirking. "Fine. Come back in about two days, and I should have a cable from the shipping lanes."

Leilani grinned and got up, taking the dragon's hand. "We will be back then." She hurriedly pushed Chazore out the door, closing it behind them.

Outside, Leilani walked with Chazore across the hot sand, looking up at the late-afternoon sun. "I knew he missed something already, dragon" she said, "and I think that vessel is here."

Chazore looked surprised. "It's possible?"

Leilani nodded, "Why dispose of the body in that area, so soon? If for any other reason-"

Chazore slowly smiled, "Because as soon as they made land and docked, the vessel would be inspected. They were going to be inland soon and needed to get rid of her. Lani, that's brilliant." She quickly frowned again. "But...that's a huge assumption nonetheless."

The sea-otter nodded and then gently took her hand. "The Eastern Docks, the main docks where the ships pull in, are not far. We could be there soon and at least look around."

"Lani, no one is going to let us onboard those ships to check anything..."

Leilani stopped and thought a moment, then nodded. "You are right. We will have to wait for nightfall."

Chazore protested, "Wait, I'm supposed to be on vacation. I don't mind helping out Shade, I mean, he's cute and all, but we really shouldn't be investigating this on our own."

"Chazore," Leilani replied gently, "in two days, that ship could be gone from here. I really want to find out who killed that girl, and made her suffer all those months."

"What do you mean?"

"Those marks you noticed. I saw them too. And I think I know what made them. Will you come with me, or do I go alone?"

Chazore sighed and then stroked the sea-otter's arm. "Alright, alright. I'll help."

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Two flashlight beams crisscrossed and danced amid a full moon's glow as they approached the harbor gates and trained on the thick locks.

"So much for the front door," Chazore muttered, looking around them.

Leilani smiled, "So we go in the back."

The dragon watched dubiously as the sea-otter wiggled out of her sarong. "is...the water colder at night?"

"Oh, do not be such a scaredy-dragon," she whispered loudly, and then tip-toed over to the water apart from the docks. "They are all safely anchored. We can climb up each chain and be-" She suddenly gaped as Chazore flapped her wings hard and beat the air before taking off smoothly from the ground, smiling down at her. "See you at the first boat!" she called out before flying over the gates.

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Leilani pulled herself bedraggled and exhausted over the side of the ship, gasping for breath, and fell to the deck, getting her wind back. She looked up to see Chazore smiling widely down at her. "You know," the sea-otter panted, "You could have carried me..."

Chazore laughed in delight. "Yes, I could have..." Then she turned serious as she looked around them. "How many ships are there here, otter? We'll have to check each one. And what are we even looking for?!"



Leilani got to her feet, suddenly aware she was naked, and looked around for any semblance of clothes. "Well, the doctor said the girl died on board. Maybe blood or something?" She finally spotted a warm jacket hanging on a hook near the pilot-room and slipped it around her. "Come on, I have an idea."

Chazore followed her into the pilot-room. "What's that?" She stopped as the sea-otter looked over a large book at the controls. "Oh. The log, of course..."

Leilani nodded as she read. "As soon as ships arrive they record the time and date. If we look for, ah, here, read this for yourself. This ship arrived over a week ago. It is probably in for some kind of service, scraping off barnacles, maybe getting new supplies and such."

Chazore smiled, "So we just check all the logs and see which vessels arrived yesterday or the day before."

"Right. At least we can narrow it down then." She set the log down and moved past the dragon. "Come on, we have a few ships to search."

Back on deck, the two looked off the starboard side at the small row of vessels in the distance. "Lani, this will take all night," Chazore sighed, flapping her wings. "Maybe we should just wait. We're not even sure the ship is here."

Leilani glared at her. "Where is your sense of adventure?"

"I was happier on board your boat reading my Bazaar!" She snapped back as Leilani walked past her to the other side. "What are you looking for now?"

She followed the sea-otter over to a stack of crates, heavily fastened to one another with thick chains, and watched as she started undoing some of them.

"See?" Leilani said, "same type of chains. We were right about that."

"Okay, fine, can we leave now?"

"Yes. Fly me over to the next ship please?"

Chazore sighed and reluctantly nodded, gathering the sea-otter up to her arms. "Hold on." With a few powerful beats, her wings finally fluttered quickly, and she rose up with a slight grunt, as Leilani clung timidly around her shoulders.

"Not too high!" She squealed out, curling her legs up and trying to keep them from dangling.

"Oh relax!" the dragon growled and made her way carefully to the next boat. "What were you talking

about before? You said you knew about the marks around the girl's hands."

Leilani tightened her grip on the dragon, trying not to look down. "Oh. Yes, those marks. I recognized them because Shade used to-" She went quiet and then shook her head. "They were manacles, cuffs, large links trapping her. She may have even been held prisoner somehow."

Chazore nodded. "I thought that too. Do you think she was held against her will on board a ship?"

"If that were the case, why kill her?"

The dragon set down carefully on the adjoining ship's deck and fanned out her wings briefly, stretching her arms after the sea-otter hopped off. "Maybe we'd really know more if we just waited for Shade to get back to us," she huffed, blowing a little smoke from her nostrils, and followed Leilani as she tip-toed across the deck and entered the bridge.

By the time they had checked all ten of the ship's log-books, the moon was high in the sky, and a pale, yellow glow accompanied the lackluster dock lights surrounding them. Nothing was suspicious, and the log-books confirmed dates of entry from a few days to a few weeks ago. Reluctantly, Leilani allowed Chazore to fly her back to the docks.

"Could a ship leave the dock, go out to sea and return?" the dragon asked as the two walked towards Leilani's hut near the shore of Eastern Island.

"No. What would be the point in wasting so much fuel? A smaller vessel, yes. Like, well, something similar to mine..."

"Those chains. You said they came from a ship. So maybe she wasn't killed on a ship but-"

"Yes." Leilani stopped walking. "She was not killed on the ship. She must have been killed at the docks and then dumped at sea by a smaller vessel."

"Shade's hope for answers in the shipping report will be in vain then. This isn't about some foreign fox lost at sea at all. She had to be local!"

Leilani nodded and went to her hut. "Meaning someone knows her. And I intend to find out who did..."

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The next morning Chazore and Leilani, wearing attractive floral sundresses and sandals, sat inside Captain Shade's office, waiting impatiently for him to finish a phone call.

"Yes, sir," he was saying, looking a bit uncomfortable. "No, sir. Yes, sir, I like my job...N-no, sir...thank

you, sir." He hung up and glared at the women.

"What?" they said in unison.

The tiger rolled his eyes. "That was Chief Makalroy, getting back to me about a strange sighting one of his men saw last night at the Eastern docks on Murphy's Point." He watched Leilani bite her bottom lip and then nodded. "Seems he was doing his beat when he heard a splash, and ran to the edge of the dock just in time to see, and I quote, "a very lithe, and naked sea-otter" making her way towards one of the ships. He then watched this sea-otter climb up the anchor chain until she was safely on deck."

Chazore swallowed hard and then whispered aside to Leilani. "I told you..."

Shade got up from the desk, scraping the chair on bare wood and setting their teeth on edge. "Lani, love, I know you're affected by this whole situation, and God knows I want to solve this too. But you cannot break the law like this. Chief knows you and I have...a thing between us...and he's made it quite clear that I cannot play favorites, no matter what. No more unauthorized swims, and especially on protected, and I may add, private properties."

"It will not happen again." The sea-otter looked down and sighed.

"Shade," Chazore began gently, standing up. "We came to talk to you because we believe you're not looking for a ship. The log-books are all updated, and none of the ships in the docks left or entered port at the time of the discovery of the body."

The tiger shrugged, "So she was dumped by a passing ship, like we suspected..."

"Nonetheless, have you checked with missing persons at all?"

Shade nodded, "We did, and none matched any of the current adults we have on file."

The two women looked at each other and then Chazore added quietly, "What about younger girls? Have you checked those?"

The tiger frowned. "Why?"

"Because we believe that this fox may possibly have been...um...held, for quite some time. Perhaps even a few years."

Leilani spoke up, "Shade, the marks on her wrists. They were made by handcuffs, or something like cuffs. Like what you sometimes use on me?" She ignored Chazore's look and continued, getting up. "Dr. Garon said they were older too, with scarred skin. This vixen might possibly have been kept in these cuffs for quite a long time."

Chazore asked, "Do you have any vixen girls missing, Shade?"

Shade sighed, "I'll check with children's records. Gods, if you're right..." He looked suddenly ill as he stood up and walked out of the room. The tiger had no real wish to report such a horrible ending to a loving family's hopes.

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For several moments, Chazore and Leilani helped Shade look over a number of folders, filled with pictures and documents, of missing children on Spontoon Island. Suddenly Chazore stopped at one file and her eyes widened.

"I...I found her..." she managed, and a click sounded in her throat. The three huddled around a picture of a lovely young vixen with dark hair and blue eyes, clinging happily to the back of a large male fox, smiling for the photo. "Suzanne Mason went missing on August 10, 1922. She was 10 at the time. Her birthday was the day before." She wiped at a tear in her eye and continued reading. "Last seen walking home from a friend's hut on the beach, early that evening, on Murphy's Point. She was wearing-" She suddenly stopped talking and shook her head, pushing the folder aside.

"Chazore..." Shade laid a hand gently on her shoulder and she shrugged it away.

"I'm...I'm fine, it's just...she's so young."

Leilani shook her head, looking stunned. "How does a vixen who has been missing eight years from the island end up at the bottom of the Pacific, chained up and dead...yesterday? Where has she been all this time?!"

Chazore's eyes suddenly blazed and she huffed. "We're going to find out." She looked at Shade hard. "And now that we found Suzanne, we should notify her family..."

They all looked at one another and slowly nodded.

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"We never really thought we would see her again," Mr. Lance Mason carefully poured the trio a cup of tea from a steaming kettle before slumping down across from them on a sofa, reaching for his wife's hand beside him. "We thought something had happened. Tahiti is not very big, and since we are surrounded by the sea, we decided the water had taken her from us. And now..." He sighed deeply and shook his head, running a hand through graying russet head-fur. "Now...it seems I was correct..."

"Mr. Mason," Chazore leaned forward in her chair. "I assure you, the authorities will not rest until her

kidnapper and killer are brought to justice. From the report, she was coming home from her friend's house, correct?"

"Yes, her name was Pamela Batson."

"Is there a way to reach her?"

The fox looked at them all steadily then shook his head. "No. She...went missing about six months later."

Leilani gasped, and looked at Shade. "Those files we were looking at. I saw other young girl foxes."

The tiger quickly flushed. "I never really realized there was a connection. I wasn't here eight years ago, otter. This is completely new news to me as well. The Chief would probably have more information about these cases than I do." He then frowned. "I'm sorry. You know as well as I do we're not fully equipped, nor do we have the beastpower to handle every missing person case we receive. This isn't New York City..." The tiger quickly regretted saying that as Leilani's eyes narrowed.

Chazore quickly spoke up, "Regardless, if other fox girls are missing, there could be a connection." She looked at the olden vixen. "Mrs. Mason, can you remember what happened to Pamela?"

The fox's look changed swiftly to recollection. "Oh my, yes...it's strange to think of it now, but we found out about it when we went to talk to authorities about any updates or leads they may have been checking about Suzanne. We..." She looked at her husband and squeezed his hand. "We know the Batsons quite well. Our little girls grew up together, inseparable friends. We actually saw them that day, distraught, sitting in an office. Martha, that's Mrs. Batson, couldn't stop crying. Pamela had disappeared. She had been very withdrawn after Suzanne went missing and...one day she went for a walk, and...she didn't return."

Shade asked, "Did they give any indication where she was going?"

Mrs. Mason shook her head. "None, not really. They live close to the docks, and we feared maybe she had fallen into the water, and drowned near one of the ships. But...they never found any trace of her..."

Chazore turned to look outside the small window of their hut, thoughtful. "Mrs. Mason," she asked, still looking outside. "You said Suzanne had gone to see Pamela on the day she vanished, right?"

"Yes, she was walking home from her hut."

"How far is that?"

The fox thought a moment. "Maybe...two, three miles, not too far. Why?"

The dragon got up slowly from her seat, setting her tea down. "Captain Shade, could we look at the files again? The missing girls?"

Shade shrugged, "I don't see why not. I'm rather curious about these cases too, and why they were never brought to my attention."

Leilani nodded, getting up as well, giving Mrs. Mason a meaningful hug. "We will do what we can for you both."

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The next morning, they were all back inside Captain Shade's office, glancing over the large group of folders from yesterday. Every so often, Chazore retrieved a particular file featuring a missing girl, set it aside, and Shade made notes, while Leilani stood before a large map of Spontoon Island. After an hour, there were ten files containing information about young vixens going missing, complete with their addresses and last known whereabouts. Among them was a file for Pamela Batson, with a recent photo showing the amber-eyed, blonde-haired vixen winning a beauty pageant.

"Alright," the tiger slowly stood up and stretched, glancing at his watch. "I don't know about you two, but I could use a break..."

"Go ahead, Shade," Leilani came close to nuzzle his cheek. "We will stay here. I really appreciate your taking time to do this for us..."

The tiger smiled and took her hand gently. "Lani...I'd do anything I could to see you happy." He purred loudly as the sea-otter licked his whiskers once, then gained composure as he noticed the dragon looking at him. "I'll be right back. Just getting some coffee..."

When he left, Leilani came over to the table Chazore was at and sat down next to her, picking up the selected group of folders and looking through them. "They are all very close in age, yes?"

The dragon leaned over to look at some of the files too. "Yes...but the age isn't my concern. I want to know where they were last seen, otter. There was something still puzzling me until the Masons told us about Pamela. When they said they lived a few miles apart, something suddenly made sense...here." She picked up one of the files at random and read. "Stephanie Trayson. Last seen on Williams Avenue. She had stopped to ask for school donations and was going hut to hut." She nodded to the Spontoon Island map. "Can you show me where that is?"

Leilani nodded and got up, pointing to a small line next to a large blue-tinted square. "This is Williams."

Chazore asked, "And the blue next to it?"

"Oh," the sea-otter looked hard at the script underneath it. "The Eastern Docks." Her eyes suddenly widened. "Chazore?"

The dragon quickly opened another folder. "Mulana Megan. Last seen on Briar Street."

Leilani pointed to a smaller line connected to Williams. "Briar...again it's..."

"Close to Eastern Docks," Chazore finished for her and stood up, suddenly troubled. "I think your first hunch to check the docks a few days ago was the right one, otter."

Leilani nodded, her face grim. "We were not supposed to look for a ship that had been out to sea recently. We need to go over all those docks, and look for clues, some signs of a struggle...and missing chains."

Chazore bit her lip. "We best wait for Shade."

Leilani rolled her eyes. "What good will that do us? He cannot get a warrant to search the whole docks just because we think we are on to something. You can fly. We can do just what we did the other night. And this time, no one will spot us."

Chazore nodded slowly. "Alright, Leilani. But let's be careful. Remember, everyone knew we were there that night. They could have increased their security."

Leilani sighed, "We will just have to take that chance."

\*\*

Nightfall found the sea-otter and dragon again returning to the Eastern Docks, this time under total darkness. Chazore approached the gate and waited as Leilani secured their flashlights and other tools in a small bag before climbing up onto her back.

"Once I get us over the gate, then what?" the dragon asked, making sure the sea-otter had a good hold before pushing off the ground and flapping her wings.

Leilani let out a sharp churrip and clung tightly, still not accustomed to flight. "We need to locate some kind of proof that Suzanne was killed here." She gasped as Chazore banked sharply, and wrapped her legs a little more tightly around her. "Chazore, please! Nothing fancy..."

Chazore rolled her eyes. "You're fine, otter. And I agree. But we found nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary on any of the ships. I believe the crime scene for Suzanne may be elsewhere anyway."

"Why do you think that?"

The dragon smiled as she prepared to set down. "Elementary. If Suzanne was bound with chains, it's a matter of convenience. She was killed quickly, and dumped immediately at sea. None of these ships would possibly have the speed to make it out there, circle and come back without someone on the docks noticing. So she had to be killed away from the ships, possibly someplace where the chains would be easy to find. Not necessarily from the crates but--"

"One of the packaging plants along the docks. Chazore, you are a genius." She kissed the back of her head as the dragon settled them onto their feet again. They looked beyond the anchored ships, at the row of large buildings stretching the length of the docks and Leilani's shoulders slumped. "Oh dragon," she sighed sadly, "look at them all. How can we possibly know which one?"

They heard a loud crash nearby and immediately stiffened, ready to dash. A tall, dark canine figure came out of the shadows ahead of them, holding a large box in his arms, and the dragon and sea-otter stepped back quickly, hiding behind a large pile of barrels.

"Jess, you comin', lad? Ain't got all night," the canine growled behind him.

"Yah, yah, just lockin' up. Boss ain't takin' no chances after that crazy otter the other night."

"Well, hurry up. This grub ain't gonna keep forever. Gotta keep our lovely guests happy."

The other canine emerged with a large box of his own then stopped short, looking around them. "Pete, you smell somethin'?"

Jess sniffed the air and Leilani and Chazore shrank back fearfully. "All I smell is the sea, lad. And this stupid fish we're carryin'. Let's go already."

They heard another crash and then the two wolves were walking down the spacious pier away from them. Leilani slunk out of the shadows and started to follow them.

"Lani!" Chazore whispered urgently, "Let's go. Before we're caught!"

Leilani turned to her. "Did you not hear what they said? They have fish and--"

"Oh gods, you're hungry now?"

The sea-otter's eyes narrowed and she sighed. "No, I mean, they have fish, and it's not for them. Someone else...didn't you understand them? They said their lovely guests."

"So?"



The sea-otter turned and started padding away cautiously again. "So, I want to find out who these guests are. Maybe it's the girls!"

Chazore came out from behind the barrels. "Otter, I don't like this. No one knows we're here." But she reluctantly walked forward slowly, looking after the retreating dark shadows before following Leilani, keeping close behind her, and using the shadows around them for cover.

"Lani," Chazore whispered softly, "Maybe we could fly..."

The sea-otter shook her head. "No, we could be spotted. There are several tall structures here, and buildings with more than a few floors."

Chazore nodded and asked, "Why are they keeping girls here? And...do you suppose they're the ones missing from the island?"

Leilani replied gently, "It is possible, yes. But why they would kidnap them in the first place, I do not understand."

They followed the boisterous wolves as the pair reached the last boat on the dock, went up the long gangplank to the deck, and then looked around them again before going belowdecks.

"We can't board their vessel without someone seeing us," Chazore sighed.

Leilani started to answer before she saw a few more wolves come onto the scene, and quickly pushed the dragon behind some large crates on the dock.

"How many more boxes need to go out?" said one.

Another wolf jerked his thumb towards the crates the females hid behind. "Just three more. Pushing out tonight then?"

"Yah, boss wants the cargo ready to go. We're off to Thailand in an hour, after the girls get fed. We make it in a day's journey, if the waves be favorable."

Leilani frowned and signaled to Chazore to stay behind as she slunk around the back of the crates and pressed up against them, removing her sarong. "Chazore," she whispered softly, "Fly to Shade. Get him and his men here as soon as you can. I will create a diversion, and perhaps be able to get onto the ship at the same time. Tell them we found the girls."

"Lani, I don't know if-"

The sea-otter smiled as she finished stripping down and then blew her a kiss. "I believe in you, dragon." She then jerked forward, taking a few running steps across the dock before diving headfirst naked into the sea with a loud splash, swimming down deep as fast she could, using mainly her tail and legs.

"What the hell was that?" The wolves started running over to the dock, their backs to the hiding dragon, peering into the rippled water. "Huh. Must've been a fish or somethin'."

"Yeah," replied another, "they're always jumpin' around late at night."

Chazore slunk away from the crates, took a deep breath and pushed off the ground silently, beating her wings a few times before gaining altitude and flying off unseen into the darkness.

\*\*

Leilani panted hard as her webbed toes found purchase on another link of the large anchor's chain, and she was able to poke her head up over the edge of the deck, gripping the railing. As she had hoped, everyone seemed to have retreated belowdecks, perhaps to eat. With a mighty heave, she finally was able to pull herself onto the deck, gasping for air.

"I really...need to consider...a diet..." She continued to breathe heavily for another moment or two before catching her breath, getting quietly to her feet and padding around the deck. She had no clue how to get below without being seen. Her salt-stung eyes made out three empty crates near the pilot-house, their lids wide open. Cautiously she crept up to one of the crates, trying not to make creaking sounds on the deck, and peered inside.

A large wool blanket had been spread out on the bottom of the crate, with several small pillows and, to Leilani's growing horror, a collection of stuffed animals and plush dolls scattered across it, like forgotten childhood trinkets. On a few of the pillows, she saw dried blood spots, along with russet and white tufts of fur, mixing with blonde and dark-colored hair.

"Goddess," she whispered to herself, her green eyes wide. "What are they doing to you girls?"

She heard and felt a loud thump on the deck, and turned to see the hatch of the belowdecks starting to open. Quickly, she hopped into the crate and shrunk down against the side as best she could.

"Let's go, ladies!" came a booming male voice, surrounded by the patter of several footsteps and a few chains' jangles. "Time's a wastin'."

Leilani curled up into a tight ball and then gasped out loud as four vixens, wearing tattered cloths barely covering their budding breasts and nether-regions, climbed into the crate almost on top of her. Quickly she shushed them with a finger to her mouth as they all looked on, terror in their young eyes. Around

their hands and feet were heavy shackles, and the sea-otter saw, with growing anger, that a few of the girls were physically abused as well, a few cuts and bruises marring their innocent faces, and arms and legs filled with ripped fur and healing sores.

As the crate closed, one of the vixens cleared her throat and whispered to her. "Who are you?" she asked, curling her legs up and shrinking back from her, clutching one of the plush dolls.

"A friend," Leilani whispered back. "Don't be afraid. I need to find a way to get you all free before this vessel leaves. What are you doing here?!"

"Aren't you one of them?" another vixen asked, her amber eyes muddy with instant dislike. "A naked sea-otter in a crate. Didn't they kidnap you too?"

Leilani frowned, shaking her head and showing them her hands. "I am not bound. I came here to save you all."

"It could be a trick," she countered, "You will help one of us escape, only to see her killed like Suzanne?"

The sea-otter stared hard at the blonde-haired vixen, suddenly recognizing the deep amber eyes. "You know Suzanne? Are you Pamela Batson?"

The vixen's eyes widened. "How-how do...y-you know me?"

Leilani sighed and crawled closer to her, trying to take her hand and hold it. "Your parents, they miss you so much, Pamela. And...your mother especially. Martha." Pamela started to cry softly and leaned forward, embracing the sea-otter in a tight hug. "Shh...it is all right now, Pamela," she soothed, "I will get you home soon. All of you."

She heard a commotion outside and signaled for quiet again before kneeling up and opening the lid carefully. She saw a few wolves along the whole deck, preparing for the vessel's departure. One nearby was carefully weighing the anchor a bit at a time. He looked down and Leilani saw his expression change to curiosity, seeing wet webbed footprints around him.

Quickly Leilani lifted the lid all the way up and then climbed out, shutting the lid down behind her before creeping up close to the wolf. When his back turned to her again, she sprang forward, grabbing the wolf around the mid-section and pushing him hard. He cried out once before the momentum of the sea-otter and he together pitched them over the side and into the dark sea.

Underwater, the wolf burbled in surprise, trying to get his bearings and claw for the surface, but the sea-otter swam quickly around behind him and got him in a bear-hug, holding him down. As he struggled to free himself, she used her thick tail to lash at the water, sending them both into a barrel roll. As the wolf cried out and blew out his held breath, the sea-otter went faster and faster, until she felt the wolf

stop struggling against her. She unwrapped her legs from around him, and he let out a few more bubbles from his open mouth, eyes staring upward as he sank down into the depths.

Leilani glared down at him with hate before quickly swimming to the surface and climbing back up the anchor line as fast as she could.

\*\*

"Miss Ayres, I am a little surprised to see you here this late," Shade got up from his desk to greet the breathless dragon, looking concerned. "Is something wrong?"

Chazore finally got her breath, and quickly shook her head. "It's Lani. She, I mean, we went back to the Eastern Docks..."

"I thought I told you-" he started to roar.

"Will you please be quiet and listen?!" Chazore roared right back, and the fire in her blue eyes became more intense. "We found the girls. I mean...we think we did. There were wolves, and they had fish, and they were talking about feeding guests, and-"

Shade bit his lip. "You mean to say, the missing vixens...are alive? And at the docks? Where?!"

"There was a large boat," Chazore answered, trying to recall. "Near the end of the dock. Yes, the last one. We saw a group of wolves going onto it, carrying supplies. And..." Her eyes widened. "They were talking about leaving soon. Thailand! Leilani, I think she snuck aboard. Oh please, we must hurry! I fear she could be in great danger!"

Shade went back towards his desk and grabbed a phone on the wall, quickly dialing. "Mala? I need to talk to the Chief, is he in? Well, no...no. Just...tell him I'm taking a team to the Eastern Docks and to meet me there. What?" He looked at Chazore steadily and then replied, "I see, thank you, Mala." He hung up, looking puzzled. "She says Chief Makalroy is already there."

Chazore looked relieved. "Maybe he made the connection too?"

Shade shook his head. "I never told him any of this..."

\*\*

Leilani pulled herself over the railing carefully, looking up and down the deck for signs of the other wolves. She stepped onto the deck and padded back towards the crate holding Pamela, opening the lid. "Are you all safe?" She whispered, peeking in and speaking to Pamela.

"Yes...wh-what happened to you? We thought you'd left us."

The sea-otter smiled, shaking her head. "Of course not." She then frowned and asked, "Pamela, what is happening? Why are you here? It has been nearly eight years...you were a child then..."

The vixen nodded glumly. "I...I tried to save Suzanne..." She wiped at tears in her eyes. "We had just come back from Japan and were being kept at one of the plants, in the basement. One of the wolves, I think his name was Jess. He...he...wanted her. We're...used to the wolves having their time with us but, he...he got...really violent with her, beat her quite badly. Suzanne, she..." She bit at her lip, and her whiskers drooped, "she tried to get away. She was crying, calling out to us. But Jess grabbed her, and she hit her head and..." The tears began to flow freely and she put her head in her paws. "He killed her. She died and I watched them wrap her up and...and...they got another boat...and..."

Leilani quickly shushed her. "Alright, alright. All of you stay quiet. I need to find out how to stop this ship from leaving the dock."

"You will find that quite difficult, lass," a gruff voice came from behind her, and she whipped around to stand face to face with a heavy-set black tiger, surrounded by the other wolves.

Leilani bristled, pressing herself against the crate in fear.

"The name's Makalroy," the tiger stepped closer to her. "Chief Makalroy. And I coulda sworn I told ya to stay off the docks, otter..."

Leilani's eyes widened. "You knew all along. The missing girls."

The tiger nodded as the wolves came up on either side of her. "The industry's doin' wonders for Tahiti, lass. Sex...that's wot it's all about now. And there's beasts around the world willin' to pay through the nose fer it. The money don't stop rollin' in. A few girls here n'there, no harm. And I even give 'em a cut," he grinned widely, "less me expenses, o'course."

Leilani's arms were grabbed and pulled behind her, while another wolf pressed up against her back-side, suddenly aroused. She could feel his snorting breath at her ear, along with the sounds of chains rattling.

"Oh, Chief..." he practically moaned against her ear, "she's a fine one...maybe a little fun with 'er afore we leave?"

"No time, lads. Bind her well." He watched as the wolves wrapped the struggling sea-otter in several chains. "Too bad about Suzy, she was one o'the best we had. But we had to get rid o'her, couldn't take a chance she'd be discovered and end the operation."

Leilani bared her fangs. "Others will be here. I did not come alone."

Makalroy appeared unruffled. "Aye, lass, and we'll be well on our way t'Thailand by then to set up new operations. Pity. I was enjoyin' Tahiti quite a bit. Ah well, we all have to leave the nest sometime...just like these girls..."

Leilani was dragged towards the railing and lifted up over the wolves' heads. "Chief! You will not get away with this! I promise you!"

"Sea-otter, I suggest savin' that ungodly amount o'breath you carry in those lungs of yers. Yer gonna need it..." He nodded to the wolves and the sea-otter was pitched over the side. She hit the water on her back and sank immediately. For a moment they could see her squirming figure shimmering as the heavy weight of the chains pulled her deeper, and she was soon lost from sight. A few bubbles popped on the surface and then the water was still.

"Now that that's taken care of, let's be on our way," the Chief growled and turned from the railing, heading towards the pilot-house. "Untie the moors, Jess...next stop, Thailand."

The wolves laughed and cheered before breaking off into groups, preparing to leave. Jess hurried over to the stern of the ship to begin dealing with the ropes. He looked up and saw something flying low in the sky. He wiped his eyes, then looked again. It was much too large to be a bird, he thought, but it was coming fast.

"Uh...Chief?"

The flying object became bigger and bigger, and a tremendous roar came from a gaping mouth, shooting a lick of fire across the stern. Jess had just enough time to cry out before he was instantly torched, screaming in pain and pinwheeling his arms through the flames. Before the other wolves could react, his throes became a jittery dance and he fell to the deck dead, still smoking.

Instantly, the other wolves ran across the deck, aiming guns and firing. Chazore landed hard on the deck, quickly dodging a hail of bullets, and retreated behind a crate as Captain Shade and his tigers rushed the gangplank, firing their weapons. Chazore reached down for a long knife at her side and charged from her cover, running full tilt across the deck, growling angrily. One of the wolves paused to reload, and the dragon met him with a quick upward thrust of her knife, killing him instantly. She whirled around and ducked under a blow from a large pipe, and then lifted up on one foot to kick the offender soundly in the chin, breaking his neck.

All around her, she could hear heavy gunfire now, mixed with screams and shouts from the wolves and tigers. Another wolf charged her, teeth bared, ready to fire and then a loud bang stopped him cold. He clutched his chest and then fell overboard. Chazore looked up to see Shade still aiming and nodded to him, before turning to rake her claws through another wolf trying to grab her from behind.

The ship's deck began to stain with blood as tigers and wolves alike fell dead or injured. Finally Chief Makalroy dashed out of the pilot-house, firing a tommygun wildly, before running to the group of crates containing the girls, pointing his weapon at them.

"CAPTAIN!" he yelled above the fray, "put down yer guns or the girls die! Last warnin'!"

Gunfire slowly ceased and Shade walked boldly up the deck, training his weapon on Makalroy, while Chazore punched at another wolf, smashing his face, before joining the police-tiger's side.

"Shade," she asked fearfully, "Where's Leilani?"

Shade shook his head. "I don't see her." He grimaced from a bullet wound he'd suffered in his shoulder. "Steady, Chief...we're done. It's over."

The black tiger's eyes narrowed. "Now then...you n'yer remainin' men are gonna get off my ship, and we're gonna be on our way. And in return...I'll leave the crates filled with lasses for ya. Do we have a deal?"

Chazore grit her teeth, her blue eyes blazing. "So you can capture more girls, and destroy more families?!" She edged closer to him. "You really think we're going to allow you to do that? Where's Leilani, you monster!"

Makalroy chuckled, "Oh, the sea-otter lass? She's quite safe in the warm arms o'the Pacific..." He watched as Chazore swallowed hard and then ran towards the railing, tearing off her sundress. "Hey!" he swung the gun towards her, "where d'ya think yer goin'!"

A sharp report rang out as Shade's bullet crashed into Makalroy's head. The black tiger looked incredulously at Shade before he fell backwards with a hard thud, still clutching his tommygun.

Chazore didn't hesitate as she stepped up over the railing and dove into the sea, swimming down quickly. The dark water surrounded her, and the deeper she swam, the more frightened she became. By the time she touched the sandy bottom several feet down, her lungs were starting to burn. Her eyes darted about wildly, trying to find some trace of the sea-otter. She was about to push off to get air when she noticed the silhouette of a body in the murky distance. Fighting her need to breathe, the dragon thrust herself forwards, using her tail to help stroke as she swam to the still form of Leilani, her eyes closed, looking peaceful, her webbed hands still gripping the chains around her. She had nearly gotten free.

Chazore cried out and used all her strength to snap the rest of the chains free, before lifting the limp sea-otter into her arms and pushing off for the surface. She clawed quickly upwards, suddenly terrified at the thought of not making it, suffering the same fate as her friend, and then she saw Shade and a few of the tigers in the water, swimming down to help her. Within another moment, all were safely aboard,

looking down at the limp, dripping wet form of Leilani.

"Lani..." Chazore whispered, kneeling beside the diver and caressing her cheek. "Otter, don't go. Don't leave us, please." She bent her head down and covered over the sea-otter's mouth with her own, trying to push air into her lungs, while Shade knelt as well, pushing his large hand against her chest.

After about a moment, Leilani's eyes fluttered open and she turned her head, coughing and spitting out water, before wildly looking around them. "Cha-Chazore...Shade..."

Quickly the tiger and dragon grabbed around her and hugged tightly, and she churred softly back, nuzzling them in turn.

"Thought we'd lost you, diver-girl..." Shade pulled his head back to look into her eyes. "You alright?"

Leilani smiled widely and reached up to stroke his cheek. "I am now..." She suddenly looked startled. "The girls...are they safe?"

She turned to see a few of Shade's men carefully pulling out the dazed, grateful vixens one by one from the crates, and then smiled again as Pamela rushed to her side to hug her tightly.

"Thank you," Pamela whimpered against her, starting to cry again, before turning to the dragon and carefully hugging her around her neck. "I don't know how to thank...either of you..."

Shade grinned, looking on. "I think just reuniting you all with your families is enough. Let's get you home..."

The vixens all cheered and hugged their liberators tightly, amid joyous laughter and tears.

Chazore growled as she looked at Leilani steadily. "Now you see why I tell you, don't do anything without me?"

The sea-otter bristled. "If it were not for my help, this ship would have been safely off to Thailand by now."

Shade looked confused. "What was going on here?"

Chazore sighed, watching the excited girls being led down the gangplank. "They were slaves, weren't they?"

Leilani nodded, "The Chief. Shade, he was doing this from the beginning. Right under everyone's noses. They were kidnapping the girls and ferrying them to different places, as sex slaves. That is why the girls went missing for so long. He must have brought them back and forth from island to island,



before returning to Tahiti to keep up appearances."

"But what about Suzanne?"

Leilani shrugged, "A careless accident. Had they not disposed of her as they did, we would never have found out what was going on. Had they simply abandoned her on the island, people would have assumed she had gone missing and was a vagrant all these years, seduced by vermin in the streets."

Shade swallowed hard as he watched the last of the vixens, Pamela, turn and wave happily to them all, before running down the rest of the gangplank into the arms of a waiting police-tiger, sobbing uncontrollably. "Well, for them, at least the nightmare is over. Come on," he took Leilani's arm gently and nuzzled her. "You've had a busy day, diver-girl. After I see the doctor, I'd like you to stay at my hut tonight. And no, not for anything else but companionship, a fine dinner and scintillating conversation until you fall asleep."

Leilani blushed deeply, looking sheepish, and then asked Chazore. "Dinner and sweet talk from a tiger? Come on," she suddenly laughed, taking the dragon's hand. "How can we turn that down?"

Chazore started to laugh too, squeezing Leilani's hand back. "Fine...but no swimming. I've had enough of the water for the rest of my vacation. Probably ever."

The three walked down the gangplank arm in arm, heading down the moonlit dock and following the group of excited vixens into the distance.

END