

Gift of the Waves

By Philippa Ballantine

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The storm gave her the man, and for that Frea would always be grateful. After that nothing would part them, but death.

It was the time of plenty, when her clan the Dunlery, were busy with all manner of preparations for the coming winter months. The seas around their tiny island teemed with life, and each had its place in their diet. Even the Godlings, including stern face Escolar, put aside their mystic duties and helped the clan prepare for the coming winter. The children were set to work, scampering among the rocks to lever shellfish loose, and skeins of seaweed was hung out to dry in front of the sturdy little cottages by the waters edge. Crews took the nimble coracles out into the bay, and returned with nets full of fish, which was split and hung on long sticks like washing to spend hours drying in the smokehouse. As daughter of the Lord of the Deep, Frea had her own sturdy ketch the *Windbird*, and on the morning after a particularly fierce storm, she'd sailed it round the southern headland, to see what the sea had washed up on this more exposed shore. The wind was still high. Frea stood swaying slightly, hand on *Windbird's* tiller, glossy black hair flying behind her like a banner. It was a moment of utter peace and contentment, but also one of excitement.

There might have been a whale, or a piece of one of the many shipwrecks that littered the seafloor hereabouts; but she never would have expected anything like what she found. Dropping anchor in the harbour, she spotted a line of what looked like some kind of oddly shaped seaweed. Frea squinted, but from the boat she couldn't identify the type. Stripping off her heavy cloak, she dived into the water and swam to shore. The pile of vegetation looked stranger the closer she got, and even the smell was different, not salty, but almost sweet.

The seaweed, if that was what it was, was a strange silver gray, and the long pods were huge, as tall as a man. She approached, her heart thundering in her chest.

For a long moment Frea stood looking down, wondering if she was dreaming. The strange pod looked burnt somehow, maybe lightning struck; but it was not empty.

The person inside was pale, but beautifully formed, and as pale as snow. She was seized by the sudden desire to free whoever it was.

Freya tore at the tough outer coating, which might have looked like seaweed but felt like skin, and cut her hands until they bled. It was then the person's eyes fluttered, and opened slowly to reveal a pair of startling green eyes. And when Freya touched the white skin, the indeterminate features, which had somehow seemed androgynous, solidified. Freya smiled, she must have been mistaken, for the man staring back at her was the essence of masculine beauty. And as he was naked in the pod, it was very easy for her to judge.

But whoever he was, he was drowsy. Unpeeling him from the seaweed, she propped him up near the rocks, and swam back to the *Wavebird* to bring him some of her brothers' cast off clothes. All the time he said nothing, merely staring about him with an undiminished awe. Indeed he spent a long time staring at Freya herself, until she blushed scarlet. He though, seemed to have no idea of embarrassment, for he did not lift his eyes from her.

She took him back to the Hall of her father. Luckily there were few people there, most being off fishing, but her father was forced to stay home with an injured leg he'd got the week before while showing off and chasing after youngsters on the rocks. So he was not in the best of moods. He sat at the end of the Hall near the peat fire, with his favourite dogs at his feet, and stared glumly at his daughter coming dripping towards him. She was his only girl child, and dear to his heart, but when she told him of her find, he did not temper his words.

"Sacred waters daughter," he surged to his feet, as if to make for the great sword hanging over the hearth, but then staggered on his injury, "Are you mad to bring such a thing into our home?"

"But father," she smiled winningly, and gestured to where the stranger was standing shivering and bemused, "He has no harm in him- I can tell."

Lord Alagre Candre regarded the man from under beetled brows, as if he was something nasty on the bottom of his boot. "The south coast you say? That is the last shore before the Great Deep, and nothing of any good comes from there."

The vast and terrifying wide oceans, plagued by storms and other less friendly creatures, were the only part of the ocean that the clans of the Outer Islands ever feared. And Frea knew he was right, but something in her had already claimed the stranger for her own, and would not be turned.

And her father looking on her knew it. Sighing, he tried to regain his temper. Hobbling down to the man, he said very slowly, "What is your name boy?"

The green eyes regarded the Lord with clear innocence, but he licked his lips, and said clearly enough, "I don't know."

And so by proving that he was no simpleton, the stranger gained a place in the clan. For it was their way never to refuse a guest, or turn away a person in need, and that he most certainly was- without memory, kin or clan. So Frea named him Arul'mea, gift from the sea, and nothing any wiser heads could say to her would move her from him. He'd looked on her first, and that was enough for him it seemed. Without knowing it, he'd claimed the best of them.

Arul'mea proved himself to be quick and strong. Only once did he have to be shown how to do anything, and after that he was its master. Frea heaped praise on him, and so beloved was she in the clan, that eventually the murmurs of doubt subsided. Only the Lord of the Deep kept his skepticism. In his heart a suspicion of the man's origins had lodged, on the first moment he'd seen him. But the rules of his people held, even if that was so.

So Frea became Arul'mea's teacher. She taught him the smell of land that guided the clanspeople home from the sea, what the creaks and groans of the boat meant, and to enjoy the taste of salt spray.

He was not like any other she'd ever known; he could hold a seashell in the palm of his hand, and spend hours drinking in the beauty of it. And he was interested in what Frea had to say, and in his quiet way tried to please her in everything. Usually this would have infuriated her, but somehow Arul'mea was different. For the first time the Lord of the Deep's daughter was in love.

She even shared the *Windbird* with him, something the clan had never seen. They would take the boat out in all weathers, and every time was new and different and wonderful.

It was on one of those mad, joyous trips that Frea realized the depths of her feelings for her gift of the sea. She took him down into the rocking belly of her boat, and there they made love until the dawn came creeping over the waves.

But in the way of all things, it could not last. Alagre knew it, and wished for his daughter's sake that it could. But something in the rising of the new moon, and the sound of the ocean at his doorstep told him that Arul'mea had not arrived alone.

At first it was the dogs; they barked all night, the great hounds, and the tiny terriers kept the clan up with the dark of the moon. And then the fish fled. The coracles went to their usual hunting grounds, and found nothing. Areas that had been plentiful for generations were suddenly barren. It was a crisis for the clan. Without the seas bounty, life on the island could not go on. There were rumblings of discontent, and Frea knew eyes were watching Arul'mea, searching for reasons.

She would have asked her father, but she was too afraid to hear it from the Lord of the Deep. So she left Arul'mea working on the nets with the distrustful clansmen, and trekked round the bay to Escolar's cave. The Godling kept to himself, in the way of his kind.

Freya had heard the story, of a man broken by the Deep. He'd once been the proudest of her father's generation, tall as a main spar, strong enough to haul full nets in without breaking a sweat, and he'd thought that was enough to conquer the endless ocean. Declaring he'd find the places that surely lay beyond, he'd sailed into the ocean's Deep. And no one had ever expected to see him again, like those that had gone before him; he'd be swallowed up by the seas. And perhaps that would have been kinder. For when they found him washed up half alive, there was little of the man he'd once been about him. The ocean had taken his sight in one eye, broken his legs in so many places he'd never walk properly again, and worst of all stolen his joy of the waves.

Only by turning to the path of the Godling, and finding the Divine had he survived. But still the clan felt wary of him, like he'd seen something, that none of them wished to hear of.

His tiny cavern was sparsely furnished, only a bed made of heather, a modest fire, and stacks of books.

"So the gift of the waves is proving difficult already?" Escolar sighed, and moved closer to the fire, his visitor seemed to have bought a chill wind with her, "Will you give him back to them?"

Frea shook her head, feeling the emptiness inside clench, "No- I will not."

The old man's face crumpled a little, but he hobbled to his battered sea chest, and opening it with a creak that could have been his back as well as its hinges, came back to the flames with a vial of black powder. "Then I will try and find the answer for you child." And with that he threw the powder into the heart of the fire. It flared up, filling the cave with purple clouds of thick smoke. For a moment Frea lost sight of him completely. But there he was standing in the middle, and actually inhaling, drawing the smoke into him, eyes closed, intent. It was the way of the Godling of course, to find the Divine within themselves, to here its words whispering in the dark recesses of their mind. Frea though held her breath; she had no desire to hear such things.

"The creature did not come alone from the Deep, there is another, a jealous sibling who will fight to hold what it considers its own."

"Where can I find it?" she thought nervously of all the sheltered spots her clan ventured.

Escolar put the half empty vial into her hand, "Sprinkle this into the edge of the sea, and wait. It tastes of Godlings, which its kind hate- it will come."

"Then I shall defeat it," Frea replied sternly.

"There will still be a price to pay for Arul'mea, but it is one that is needed." Esolar's eyes caught at hers, and all there was beyond was deep darkness, "His child will be all that is between us and his master."

A dread cold stole over Frea then. "Master?" her voice was small and timid, even in her ears.

"Lord of Flesh, child of the Deep," Escolar whispered, "He is not known among the clans, but he is never far. But this time, he has sent his own doom to us."

"Arul'mea..." Frea's hands twisted on each other as she tried to see the danger in her love.

And then Escolar's broken and calloused hands were stilling hers, pulling her attention back to a decision that had to be made. "No one would ask this of you child, it is up to you."

She thought of Arul'mea's sea green eyes, and his utterly honest love for her, could she really bear to be without it? "A child you said," the image flashed through her mind of a child with her hair and his eyes, and it was easy after that. "I will fight for him."

So she pushed away the Godlings talk of a price, and taking the vial, went away with determination in her heart.

The next morning, when Frea awoke before the rest of the clan, fear had returned. Frea's body felt chill, and dark shadows fluttered in the back of her mind. But, on the face of it, stealing her father's great sword from above the hearth was sensible really. She knew the basics of fighting, all of the clan had to be able to wield a blade if raiders came to the village, but as she tucked the cool length of steel into her belt, she could only wonder if she had enough strength to defeat whatever lay outside.

The morning was certainly quiet, with no dogs or chickens to disturb the pre dawn, and even the usual early fishermen had not stirred from their homes. It was as if the whole land and all her people were waiting for Frea to choose. For although she had the vial and her father's sword, she had not yet fully made up her mind. Something in Escolar's tone had said that whatever price she had to pay was, it would be high. So she hesitated on the doorstep of her house, wondering if fate would push her either way. Still nothing stirred, but the thought came to Frea, that if she did not move, then there would be no child between her and Arul'mea; eventually the clan would drive him out. And that changed everything- for she could think of any other she loved as much, nor whose child she would want. Life was for living, taking chances, and snatching what joy could be found, her father had told her that often enough.

So Frea went down to the water's edge, where the sea was lapping gently among the smooth rocks and pebbles, and there she cast the last of the vial's contents. Standing back a little, she drew her father's blade, and waited with hammering heart for Arul'mera's pursuer to arrive.

It did not come with a roar or with fire, but so silently that it took a long moment for Frea to realize that there was in fact a woman standing at the water's edge, watching her with alien eyes. The clanswoman turned slowly on her heel, and took in the other. She wore a sleek costume of silver that somehow seemed to rise up out of the waves she was standing in. Her long green hair was cast about her shoulder, and tiny pointed ears peeked out from under it. Her face was sharp and at the

same time heartbreakingly beautiful. She carried no weapon, and Frea suddenly felt very ridiculous holding bared steel before her.

And it was that dip in her guard that the evil creature had been waiting for; with a high-pitched cry, the sea-woman launched herself at Frea. And she was so fast that the other barely had time to bring her sword up, and as soon as she did, she knew there was no way she could win a fight against this creature. She batted her father's sword, now desperately, finding herself giving ground. Sweat pooled and ran down the back of her neck. This was no mortal enemy, the sea woman was fast, like a blur, and only a desperate desire not to die was keeping Frea on her feet. She felt a fool; she should have known by the look in Escolar's eyes that he was warning her. More of Alagre Candre's words came to her- nothing good came from the Deep. And this time it would be her death.

Freia slipped, a rock caught her toe, and then the sea woman lashed out, her hand like a curled fist of daggers.

"No!" Arul'mea was there, standing sleepy eyed in the shadow of the boat sheds, but his voice lanced out like a flock of arrows. The woman from the sea was frozen, staring at the man, making some connection that Frea couldn't understand. Something though seemed to flow between them. Arul'mea's face fluttered, and went pale and soft like it had been in that pod. Frea's heart pressed against the back of her throat; she was going to lose him.

And her father's sword leapt out, like it had a life of its own, a will that moved it to protect that which she loved. And the foot of steel was thrust through the woman who had come from the sea, who was somehow part of Arul'mea. A fire seemed to erupt at the end of Frea's body, like a burning light through which could be heard a far off cry of outrage. The dawn had come and erupted from the sea like a herald, bathing the beach in warmth and light.

But then the world cleared, she was staring up at Arul'mea's worried face, and nothing could be seen of the sea woman; she might have been a cruel nightmare.

"Are you alright?" she was asking him for some reason, even though it had been her in danger of losing her life.

He shook his head, those sea green eyes unfocused for an instant, and she couldn't tell if he'd heard that cry as well; truthfully she was too afraid to ask.

They returned to the clan, and after a while everyone forgot how the daughter of the Lord of the Deep had found a man washed up after a storm, and how things had turned very strange for a while. They were handfasted by her father, and Frea insisted that they built their own place on the hilltop, as far from the sea as anyone could be on Dunlery. And when a few years later their daughter was born, she did not complain when her father named her after the risen dawn, for she remembered that moment of salvation; the still moment before the arrival of the sun, and the sudden fire when Arul'mea was hers.

Escolar came to the Mother's blessing on the child, and if he saw anything in the crowing golden haired infant, he said nothing, nor did he mention Arul'mea. But Alagre Candre Lord of the Deep watched with troubled eyes as his daughter laughed, and enjoyed the moment of pure joy with her husband and child.

But he could not tell her the true danger of what lay beyond the Deep, nor what he suspected Arul'mea to be. He could only pray that there would be no more storms, and no more talk. But looking down into the sea green eyes of his only grandchild, he chuckled "Isn't your granddad a fool Ashi'mei," he whispered to her.

She gurgled and grabbed onto his hand with surprising strength. Something powerful lurked in those innocent eyes, and one day the Lord of the Deep would be glad that he had not stopped his daughter from loving the man she'd found. One day he would be grateful of the strong sword arm of his granddaughter, and the power of her heritage.

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