

## NETTED

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THE DOOR was jammed, trapping him in the close darkness of his one-room home. Ethram, muttering a curse, set his shoulder against the stubborn wood and pushed with muscles made strong by years of hauling in fishing nets. The door gradually creaked open enough to let Ethram slip outside, glaring at the mound of sand that had been blown up against that door. Half the beach seemed to have been washed up here from the shoreline by the waves.

No wonder. That had been a true monster of a storm last night, strong enough to make him wonder, only half in jest, if it hadn't been the result of a quarrel between two angry wizards fighting over earth-power, sky-strength, whatever they called the fabric of their magic.

"Who cares about their quarrels?" Ethram glowered out at the still heavily overcast sky and the still-rough waves—too rough for him to dare launch his boat. Every day away from fishing was another day without the chance for income.

He shrugged. What was, was. At least his boat, Eliss II, was still safely berthed under its oilskins. Eliss I, no longer seaworthy, hull-side up, as the roof of his house, as was the style here on the Isles: a nice, sturdy roof the old girl made, too, covered with sand from the storm but undamaged. His nets, now—

"Damn. Oh, damn."

Bitterly, Ethram consigned every wizard and every magical squabble and most certainly every one of that thrice-cursed magic-spawned storms to the darkest corner of Forever. He had stowed the nets away as carefully as he had berthed his boat, well above high tide; every fisherman on the Isles took such pains. But the storm had been supernaturally savage enough to tear off the oilskin covers, and his precious nets were strewn all over the beach, with great, gaping holes torn in them by the spears of driftwood—ha, yes look at that. one of the nets was tangled about a whole man-sized

chunk of stuff! Now he would have to start the time-consuming, tedious business of mending all those tears, yes, and miss still more precious fishing days while—

Ethram stopped short. “Holy Selda. Sweet, holy Selda.”

That wasn’t driftwood ensnaring his net. A man lay tangled in its folds.

A...being, anyhow, tall and slender, sleekly muscled as any sea thing. His long hair was a deep, sea-blue, his skin (and there was a good deal of skin to be seen since all the fellow was wearing was the net) a pale blue-white. His ears... were most definitely pointed.

Ethram blinked, shook his head. Old Meggett, back in the village, had always vowed he’d go mad from solitude someday, and maybe now—

Fish guts. He *liked* living alone, and that didn’t make him crazy. And the man, being, whatever, was still here, undeniably blue of hair and skin and pointed ears.

And red of blood. Ethram’s breath caught in his throat as he saw how a ragged gash marred the sleekness of an arm, another wound slashed its way across the deep chest. The man must have been trapped in the storm and battered by the sea against the rocks. After an uneasy moment, Ethram squatted by his side and put a tentative hand on the pale blue wrist, wondering if someone so blatantly alien even *had* a pulse.

He had, faint beneath the chilly skin, but steady. He seemed to be breathing air easily enough, and Ethram found no signs of gills on his neck, but those long-fingered hands and toes were webbed, and the pointed ears, seen this close, looked flexible as cloth, as though they could be tightly furled to keep out water.

“A sea-elf,” Ethram realized with a sudden shock. “By all the gods, he’s a sea-elf right out of the stories.” Had to be. Nothing else could be so perfectly suited to the sea yet be breathing on land.

Going to be a dead sea-elf if something wasn’t don’t to help him.

Like what? Ethram glanced fiercely about, as though he might actually see something more than sea and sand and the upturned ship-curve of his roof. It seemed foolish to bring someone surely used to the cold sea into a warm house, and something deep within Ethram was screaming, no, *alien, he’s alien*. But one of the unspoken rules of everyone who fished the Isles was that you didn’t deny help to anyone in need, just in case next time it was *you* in need.

So be it. Ethram shouldered the elf—heavier than he looked, that one, dense with swimming muscles—resolutely trying not to shiver at the touch of that too-cool skin and started back.

Ethram was sitting hunched over by the smoky light of his oil lamp, muttering over his net-mending, when a sudden stillness in the air told him his patient was awake. Heart suddenly racing, he folded the half-mended mass of net, returned the precious bone needle to its case, then looked with forced calm across at the bed.

Eyes dark as the sea at midnight looked back at him, regal as those of any prince, unblinking as the stare of a cat. A *noble*, Ethram thought, *he has to be a noble of his people, or maybe even a ruler.* Or maybe all sea-elves looked so proud.

The silence was growing heavy. Ethram asked, “You... uh... speak the human tongue?”

The faintest frown creased the sea-elf’s elegant brow. He started to raise an arm, then stopped with a hiss of pain as Ethram added hastily, “Don’t move! I sewed you up as best I could, same needles as I use on my nets, the good needles.”

Damn, he was babbling like an idiot. And all the while, the sea-elf was watching him with an inhumanly steady stare. Like a sea-beast watching its prey.

No, Ethram realized with a sudden, unexpected stab of sympathy, like someone trying desperately to hide fear and make sense of the alien place into which he’d been thrown. Ethram watched one long, webbed-fingered hand stroke across the rough woolen blanket as though puzzling over its weave. Then he heard the sea-elf murmuring something that sounded more like the whisper of the sea than actual words. Sea-magic, he thought, uneasiness prickling up his spine, sea-magic or whatever they called it.

The sea-elf stopped. “You . . . can . . . understand now?” he asked.

“Y-you magicked the language, didn’t you?”

“Not well. I...have not enough of...of the feel of it. You, human...you are...?”

“No one to harm you.” Ethram wasn’t about to give any elf his name. “A fisherman, that’s all.”

But the steady blue gaze suddenly shifted to the flickering little flame of the oil lamp. “That. What is that?”

“What?” Ethram echoed. “The lamp—the *flame*? You don’t know fire?” Ah, no, he wouldn’t, would he? No fire in the sea. “That’s what we humans use to help us see in the dark. And keep us warm. And cook our food.”

The sea-elf was clearly struggling to keep awake. Ethram sighed and picked up his half-mended net. “Enough talking. Get some sleep.” Mm, that rip was mended. “And don’t worry, you’re safe.” He drew his knife to cut off the loose end of cord and straightened in surprise at the sea-elf’s sudden gasp. “Now what—ah.”

Iron. The sea-elf was clearly terrified of iron, and too weary to hide that fear. Ethram deliberately sheathed the knife, and repeated, “Don’t worry, you’re safe.” After a thoughtful moment, he added a firm, “My word on it,” and saw relief flicker in the deep blue eyes. Eyes that quickly glazed as the sea-elf sank into exhausted sleep.

Weird, having someone sharing his home. Weirder to have that someone be a being who just would not see the point of clothing or cooked food yet retained an eerie grace and elegance even when he was gnawing on dried fish. Outside Ethram’s house, the weather remained alarmingly unsettled. Inside, the days passed quietly as he continued to mend his nets and tend his alien patient, who was swiftly picking up the human tongue.

Not that there was much they could discuss, other than the obvious matters: no, being out of the sea so long wasn’t hurting the elf; yes, the wounded of his people did stay out of the sea till they healed to keep the smell of blood from attracting predators. Yes, Ethram and his guest exchanged names; Ethram couldn’t see a way around that. The sea-elf’s name turned out to be Sishalalelek, and apparently (if Ethram understood him correctly) “elek” meant that his guest really was of the nobility.

Difficult to talk about much else, though. How did you get across the idea of villages and selling fish to someone who was having just as much difficulty trying to get across the thought of—what were they? Cities? Cities that didn’t have any solid walls or roofs? And nobody sold fish in Sishalah’s world, apparently, not in that strange watery place where everyone used the sea’s own magic to summon food to them.

Sea-magic.

A sudden sly thought stole into Ethram’s mind as he mended his nets and mended his nets and meanwhile watched his store of dried fish grow perilously low.

What if . . .? What if . . .?

No. He had given his word. Nonhuman or no, this odd guest was safe here.

*I wouldn't hurt him. Just. . . well. . . detain him.*

It still seemed wrong to even be thinking such things, guilty-wrong. Maybe they weren't really friends, not two such different types of folk, but they had been sort of comrades these past few days, and there was host-honor to consider, and . . . and . . .

*Hell, I don't have to worry about it, not yet. He's still too weak to go anywhere.*

But Sishalah was healing with inhuman speed yet had begun looking strangely worn. He needed the sea, no doubt about it. "I am healed," the sea-elf said without warning. "My thanks to you, but now I must go home."

He got smoothly to his feet. Now, Ethram thought and, heart racing, jumped to block Sishalah's way.

The sea-elf stopped in surprise. "What?"

"Sorry. But . . . " Ethram whirled, sinking his knife, his iron knife, deeply into the door, hearing Sishalah's startled gasp. "Can't let you go."

The blue eyes narrowed. "Why not? Why betray me now?"

"I'm not betraying you, honest," Ethram said, hearing his voice come out too loud. "It's just . . . well . . . you have magic, and I don't. And I need something."

"What?"

"Look you, there hasn't been a calm day the whole week you've been here. And even if I could have taken out the boat, I haven't got more than one whole net yet, so I couldn't even do any real fishing. But now the weathers finally settled."

"What does that mean to me?"

"Not much. Except you've been eating my stores all the while-not that I'm begrudging you that, understand, you had to eat and so did I. But I haven't got much food left. Today I can take the boat out. And you can help me."

"I am not a slave."

"Well, no, but you're not free, either, not with the iron barring the door. And you're not going anywhere until you help me."

Sishalah's face could have been carved from pale blue stone. "Is this human honor?"

"This is human need. Look, I'm not asking much, just one little spell."

“Are you? What?”

Guilt was flooding him, pounding in his ears. Forgetting all his carefully rehearsed words, Ethram gasped out, “My nets. Give me a net that isn’t going to tear.”

One thin blue brow raised skeptically. “And is that what you truly want?”

He was missing something. But Ethram was so eager to get the whole business done that he snapped, “Damn right. A net that won’t tear, so I can get some fishing done.”

The sea-elf sighed. Bending over a net, he murmured strange, sea-whispery words, eyes half-closed, then straightened. “It is done. The net will not tear, not even at the touch of your ugly iron. Now let me go. Or are you planning to keep me as a pet?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Ethram pulled the knife free and stood aside to let Sishalah pass. Then stood in the doorway, watching. Without a backward look, the sea-elf leaped into the waves and vanished. More shaken than he ever would have admitted, Ethram forced a casual shrug and went to launch his boat.

He caught nothing that day, nothing the next. Wondering if the sea-elf could have put a curse on him, Ethram set out on the morning of the third day, shivering in the chilly air, ignoring the warning the rising wind was giving him. There wasn’t a curse, dammit, and he would prove it, hurl his unbreakable net overboard and—

Somehow his foot had gotten tangled in the folds. Before Ethram could cry out, he was overboard, cold water in his eyes, his ears. He fought to swim, to catch hold of the gunwale of his boat, but the net was waterlogged, the weights woven into it pulling him down.

Taking a frantic breath, Ethram dove, trying to untangle his leg. No good. He was snared fast. He struggled back to the surface, gasping in a lungful of air, then dove again, knife drawn, hacking at the net—

The unbreakable net. The net that could not be cut even by iron. And it was damned cold in the water, too cold. The knife slipped from his hand, and he couldn’t find the strength to fight back to the surface, to the air... he couldn’t...

A strong arm was suddenly about his waist, pulling him to the surface. Ethram choked, gasped, drew in wonderful air, and only then could turn his head to see who held him:

“Sishalah.” It was a croak.

“Sishalah,” the sea-elf agreed. “Hold fast to your boat.”

As Ethram clung, Sishalah dove. Ethram was too numb to feel much, save that a sudden weight was gone from him; the sea-elf had freed him from the net.

Sishalah surfaced. “Come, into your boat.”

He heaved, inhuman strength in him. Ethram collapsed into the boat, convulsively pulling sailcloth about himself for warmth, gasping out, “Why? Why?”

Sishalah, clearly undisturbed by the cold for all his nakedness, leaned lightly on the gunwale. “Why what? Why save you? It pleased me. How did you enjoy your gift, Ethram? Was it not exactly what you wished?”

“It nearly killed me!”

“And you nearly enslaved me. I would have given you a better gift,” the sea-elf said, almost gently. “Had you not betrayed me, I would have taught you how to call the fish to you. Think of that, human. You would never have known hunger. But now I give you the finest of gifts. I give you back your life. Use it well.”

With that, Sishalah dove back into the sea and was gone.