

SOUL STRANGERS
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Harlequin Spice Briefs
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She moves deeper into the blue and green water, looking out to sea where the late afternoon sun touches the tips of the waves in glinting bits of silver. The ocean surges, swells, caresses her knees, her hips, like the soft hands of a lover she has never known.

Movement next to her and she turns to find a man standing nearby, waist-deep. All she can see of him is his torso, his head. Sunlight gleams off his wide, tanned shoulders, one of which is covered by an intricate tattoo, but she can't make out the design. She can see the shadowed planes of a finely muscled back, a narrow waist.

Her body gives a surprising shiver. He turns, almost as though he is aware of her looking at him, and smiles, brilliantly.

She smiles back and suddenly he is moving toward her. She can see now he has a beautiful face, one of those faces which is beautiful and masculine at the same time. His features are a bit irregular, but his jaw is strong, his mouth lush and sensual. His eyes are the color of the earth, that same deep brown she finds when digging in her small garden at home. But

she doesn't want to think of home now. No, all she wants is to be here, watching this man.

His body is all hard-packed muscle and he moves with grace through the weight of the water. He pauses several feet away. But he is still close enough that she can make out the smooth texture of his skin. Her eyes are brought back to his tattoo, which she can now see is a tiger drawn against a background of tsunami waves in classic Japanese style. She finds herself wanting to touch it.

Water seems elemental to the moment. Except that he is all earth, this man. This stranger. And when he speaks, his voice is a deep rumble that is very much of the earth.

"You're new here."

It is a statement, yet she feels the urge to answer. He's American, and it seems the hospitable thing to do.

"I came the day before yesterday."

He simply nods, moves in closer. She cannot take her eyes off of him. When she does glance up his gaze is focused on her face. The sun is glaring but she can see his eyes, dark and earthy, and they make her tremble inside.

Why does she feel as though he can see right through her?

She is suddenly very much aware of the water rushing like silk between her thighs as the waves surge, then retreat. The

bare skin of her stomach makes her feel naked beneath the stranger's gaze, beneath the fabric of her turquoise bikini, the same shade as the ocean out beyond the waves.

She watches him. He licks his lips. She wants to kiss him so much her own mouth waters. He takes another step closer, until he is standing so near she swears she can smell the salt on his skin.

She doesn't dare move, to break the spell of this moment. They are doing nothing more than watching one another. She doesn't want to have to speak. Her whole body feels raw with yearning. She just wants to touch his skin. She doesn't want to think about why.

A wave rolls in, splashing against the small of her back. With his elemental gaze still locked on hers, she can imagine it is his hand that caresses the tender flesh there. And again, she feels as though he can see right into her, as though he knows who she is deep inside.

"Swim with me," he says.