

THE MERMAN

LANDFALL

5

An artistic illustration of two muscular, merman-like characters. The character on the left has long, dark, flowing hair and is shown from the back, looking over their shoulder. The character on the right has shorter, dark hair and is looking towards the first character. They are both shirtless and have a shimmering, scale-like texture on their skin. The background is a deep blue with swirling, ethereal patterns. The overall mood is romantic and intimate.

X. ARATARE

A RAYTHE REIGN PUBLICATION

THE MERMAN

5 LANDFALL

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Gabriel Braven knows his destiny, but is he willing to face it?

Gabriel has only one day left on land before moving to the wondrous Mer city to live forever with his true love, Mer Prince Casillus Nerion. He wishes his greatest challenges were giving up making love on land with Casillus and telling his beloved grandmother that he is a merman. But ex-soldier Johnson Tims has other plans for him.

Twisted by exposure to the magical statute of the dread creature Cthulhu, Johnson intends to start a war with the Mers. He wants Gabriel to use his power as a Caller to bring Cthulhu itself to land, something that Gabriel has sworn never to do. If he does, everyone on the East Coast will die.

When Johnson takes the desperate measure of kidnapping Casillus, Corey, and their Miskatonic friends, Gabriel must come up with a plan to save both his loved ones and the entire Eastern Seaboard from death and insanity.

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CHAPTER ONE

NEW PLAN, SAME AS THE OLD PLAN

BUT WITH GUNS

“**I** know that you will change your mind. You will call Cthulhu to land. Johnson will have his showdown. And millions of people will die.”

Henry’s words seemed to hang in the air like frost. Despite the heat of the summer sun, Gabriel Braven felt chilled to the bone. His best friend Corey Rudman, usually a ball of fun and energy, seemed frozen as well. Corey’s red hair and beard stood out starkly against his suddenly too pale skin. Fellow Miskatonic students Roger and Greta looked equally shocked by their friend’s words. Roger visibly tightened his hold on Greta’s shoulders. For her part, Greta stared at Henry with a mixture of worry and unease.

She turned to Gabriel and said in supposed explanation for Henry’s words, “Henry isn’t well, Gabriel. Ever since he went into the temple and was exposed to that terrible statue of Cthulhu he hasn’t been himself. He says...*things*. You mustn’t take offense at them.”

The temple she was referring to was an ancient glowing, blue stone structure allegedly built by mermen, Mers, to celebrate the pact they had with a local Native American tribe. The temple was in the center of the Native American settlement that had recently been unearthed by a condo developer. Miskatonic University had sent Dr. Johnson Tims, an ex-military man now turned professor of archeology, down to investigate the settlement. He had brought Greta, Roger and Henry, along with other Miskatonic students, with him.

The temple was dedicated to Cthulhu, a dread, many-tentacled and miles high monster who dwelt in the darkest depths of the ocean and defended the Mers from all enemies. Within the temple was a statue, a representation of this dark god. Henry had sequestered himself in the temple with the black stone effigy of Cthulhu. Simply being exposed to this statue had caused Henry to become dreadfully ill.

“Just because I’m *dying*, Greta, doesn’t mean I’m suddenly *stupid* or a *liar*,” Henry said with an angry flick of his head. “Don’t they allow a man’s dying declaration in a court of law because it’s assumed that few will lie on their deathbeds?”

“You’re not dying, Henry. You’re going to get well,” Greta said, but her voice was weak and unconvincing.

"I *am* dying, Greta. We *all* are. Well, maybe not all of us. Mers live forever," Henry said with a pointed glance at Gabriel. At that moment, he swayed and nearly fell over.

Greta reached towards him, to steady him, crying out, "Henry!"

"Don't touch me!" Henry twisted away from her hands and somehow kept his feet.

"Henry, let me help—"

"I need you to leave me alone!" His feverish eyes blazed for a moment before fading into dullness again.

Greta's hands snapped back to her sides even as her gaze was anguished. "You're not well. You need help."

"I don't need *your* help!" Henry snapped again.

"Hey, dude, Greta's just concerned about you," Roger said. There was an angry, almost disgusted glint in his eyes as he looked at Henry. There was evidently tension between the three of them that went deeper than just this showdown.

"She's trying to undermine my words by suggesting that since I'm *sick* I'm unreliable! If you all wish to ignore what I'm saying because I'm dying that's your problem, I suppose," Henry said. He bared his teeth as he suddenly let out a laugh and Gabriel again saw blood on his gums. "Maybe *ignoring* me is the better course anyways. Maybe *ignorance* really is *bliss*. I wouldn't know anymore. I can't remember what it was like not to have all this knowledge in my head that just wants to spill out like puke onto the sand."

Greta slipped out from under Roger's protective hold and went to Henry's side. She put a hand on his upper back. At first, he tried to shake her off, but suddenly he just slumped forward and allowed her touch. She stroked his back and, for one moment, the dark-haired young man didn't look like a crazed zealot but a frightened little boy.

"It's okay, Henry. It's okay," she said soothingly.

"Greta, I didn't mean what I said. I..." His words broke off so he could cough into one of his hands. When he opened that hand and exposed his palm it was stained bright red with blood. Greta pulled out a tissue to clean it off.

"We need to get you to a hospital, Henry." She looked over her shoulder at Roger for agreement, but he just shrugged as if he already knew that wasn't going to happen.

Henry's words confirmed that. "No hospitals, Greta!"

“Dude, you really don’t look too good,” Corey said, his brown eyes narrowing with concern.

“Just like Gabriel didn’t look good this morning at the settlement?” Henry taunted. Though Henry had not been there when Corey and Gabriel had accompanied Greta and Johnson to tour the settlement, he seemed to know about Gabriel’s earlier illness. “But while Gabriel’s weakness is merely his *becoming* what he always should have been, I’m—I’m changing, too, but my body can’t take it.”

A rush of surprise and unease went through Gabriel. Henry clearly knew that he was transitioning into a merman. Ancestors on both sides of his family had been the result of Mer and human interbreeding. In Gabriel, there had finally been enough merman DNA to trigger the transition, for his body to turn into that of a Mer’s. Being a Mer had many advantages: immortality, the ability to breathe underwater, and telepathic communication, to name a few. Yet it had one large disadvantage, at least for newly transitioned Mer: being on land equaled death.

Gabriel had only about a day left on land before he’d have to take to the water for years, perhaps decades. But before he left the land he still had a few things he had to do. The most important of them was to get that statue of Cthulhu out of the temple and away from humanity so it couldn’t cause more harm than it already had.

“You’re changing?” Gabriel finally asked the other young man even as he didn’t acknowledge what Henry had said about him.

Henry nodded. “Cthulhu is trying to make me into one of its servants, something that can survive underwater at great depths, but I don’t have Mer blood like you do.” Gabriel didn’t confirm or deny that statement either. Gabriel had only wanted to reveal that truth to Corey and his grandmother, but now it seemed like these students knew all about it. Henry continued, “I’m just a regular human. Or I *was* just a regular human. I won’t live through whatever this change is.”

He sounded almost sad, but not about the fact he was going to die, but for the fact he wasn’t going to get his chance to serve Cthulhu. That had Gabriel shuddering.

“And this change is happening *just* because you were in the temple with the statue?” Corey asked. “Because we were all the statue and we’re fine.”

Corey was right. Greta, and likely Roger, had been around the statue as well and they weren’t sick. Johnson Tims had also spent considerable time with it, but he wasn’t ill either. At least not physically ill. Though thinking on the professor’s

obsession with Cthulhu—and with Gabriel himself—perhaps his mind wasn't all that healthy.

Another weary smile from Henry. “No, not just that. I thought I could connect with Cthulhu like a Caller can, like Gabriel can.”

At that moment Gabriel felt Casillus' unease spike into the stratosphere. Casillus Nerion, Prince of the Mers and Gabriel's beloved, had been keeping out of sight in Gabriel's bedroom and listening to the conversation over their telepathic bond. But upon hearing Henry talk about “Callers,” a purely Mer term, Casillus went tense as a bow.

“A Caller?” Gabriel asked as if he had no idea what that meant.

Henry shook his head. “Please, Gabriel, I've contacted Cthulhu. I *know* what you are and so does everyone else here. And that's part of why the others are here in the first place. They want to make sure that Dr. Tims doesn't find out the full truth about you and force you to use that statue to call Cthulhu to land. Yet all their plans will be for naught. You *will* call Cthulhu. There's nothing to be done. It's going to happen.”

Callers were Mers with the power to call Cthulhu into battle to protect those they cared about. But there was a catch. Cthulhu's mere presence on land would destroy not only a Caller's enemies, but *anyone* and *everyone* up and down the coast. Supposedly Callers needed to physically touch the statue of Cthulhu in order to bring it to land, but not Gabriel. He could do so with just a thought. Gabriel had to be careful to not even think Cthulhu's name, because he feared the monstrous creature would use it as an excuse to come to him.

At that moment there came the soft screech of the cottage's screen door as it opened and then a solid thunking sound as it fell shut. Gabriel spun around even though his bond with the Mer already told him who it was that was leaving the house. Casillus strode down the front porch's steps towards them. His gills still fluttered at his sides even though they were fast disappearing as his skin dried.

“Casillus! Um, you ah—wow, you're—you're *here*, outside, where *everyone* can see...” Corey's voice drifted off as the Mer stopped in front of Johnson Tims' archeology students.

Casillus, what are you doing? You should have stayed inside! Gabriel cried over their bond. Gabriel fully turned towards the Mer as he said this.

Casillus' long dark hair was still damp and hanging in a long silken rope down his back. The scrap of cloth that he wore loosely around his hips to identify his House and position was still plastered against his cock from their frolic in the

ocean. Gabriel felt a burst of possessiveness. He fought against the urge to cover the Mer up, because he knew that urge was foolish. Casillus was his forever. No one else could ever have him. Others' opinions of the Mer prince's beauty were irrelevant. Only Gabriel's appraisal meant anything to Casillus. Still, he gritted his teeth a bit as he heard Greta let out a low breath. And when he darted a glance at her, he saw her look at Casillus' cock. She flushed deep crimson and quickly looked away, biting her lower lip.

There is no need to stay hidden any longer from these people, Gabriel, Casillus said as he put a protective arm around Gabriel's shoulders. They already know about Mers. If Henry's words had not alerted me to their knowledge, the expressions on their faces now confirm it. They know everything.

Gabriel swung back around to glance at the three Miskatonic students. He realized that Casillus was right. Other than a few awe-struck looks from Greta and Roger, and a sickly smile from Henry, no one looked at all surprised to see Casillus and his gills. They knew about the Mers. They believed in mermen. They were only amazed at seeing the proof of their beliefs in the flesh. He was sure that Casillus' beauty and grace also was causing some of their awe.

Yes, but still! I don't think they need to see you, Gabriel said.

If Henry intends to talk about Callers—about you—I will be here by your side, Casillus said firmly. His protective instincts were on high alert, and Gabriel knew that in Casillus' place he would have done the same thing and revealed himself.

"Okay so, everyone, this is Casillus Nerion, Prince of the Mers. Casillus, this is everyone," Gabriel said. He glanced over at Corey, who just looked back at him sheepishly. "I can tell that you all know he's a merman, so at least that's out of the way."

"Can I just say that although everyone here is playing it pretty cool, I took the news about merman being real like a champ, too? I was cool as a cucumber," Corey said with a smile as he linked his hands over his massive Buddha belly. "I was speechless for only about ten minutes or so and my jaw dropped to the floor like only once. So totally cool."

"You were very cool, Corey," Gabriel agreed with a laugh.

"And *you*, Gabriel? Are you a merman, too?" Greta turned her warm brown eyes towards him.

"You already know that I am, Greta. You saw my eyes change at the settlement," Gabriel said. "You knew then what I was. That's why you shielded my face from Johnson Tims and helped me get away from him."

During his and Corey's tour of the settlement Gabriel had started having visions of what had happened there centuries ago between the Mers and the Native American tribe they were allied with. After countless years of co-habitation and procreation, a war had broken out. The Mers and their half-Mer offspring were killed by the tribe who turned on them, but then the Native Americans themselves were killed when Cthulhu came to land and destroyed them in kind. After experiencing these visions, Gabriel's eyes had temporarily changed from human to Mer, giving him irises and pupils much larger than a human's. Greta had seen and recognized the change. She had then distracted Johnson Tims so that he wouldn't see the physical change in Gabriel.

"Are you *really* a Caller?" Roger asked. He stood terribly still as he asked, not blinking. "Is Cthulhu real? And can you really bring it to land?"

"It's real," Gabriel said. "And yes, I can call it."

Casillus tightened his hold on Gabriel's shoulders.

"I've been telling them that for ages, but they didn't believe me," Henry got out.

"Yes, well, its hard to believe unless you've seen," Gabriel said.

"If they saw Cthulhu, Gabriel, they would be *dead*," Henry said. "Only you can see it and still retain your sanity and your life."

"Gabe's the man," Corey said with a nod.

Greta brought her hands to her head. "Oh, God, we really need to talk. Really, really, really. I mean I *knew* that you were based on Corey and Henry told me, but to *really* hear it? To really know it?"

"I think we all need some beer," Gabriel said, running a hand through his still damp hair. "Why don't we talk out on the back porch? You guys go on in and Corey, Casillus and I will be right in after you."

The three students started heading towards his grandmother's cottage while Gabriel and Casillus lingered outside with Corey. His best friend was shifting guiltily from foot to foot. His guilt undoubtedly came from the fact that Corey had brought the three Miskatonic students there without letting Gabriel know he was going to do so. However, Gabriel was momentarily distracted from his best friend by hearing Greta speaking softly to Henry.

"It's just a few steps, Henry. Roger and I will help you," she said.

She and Roger practically carried Henry up the stairs and into the house. Gabriel thought about his own weakness when he was out of the water too long. Though he and Casillus had been swimming all afternoon and his T-shirt still

clung damply to his back, his breathing already felt slightly forced. Henry wasn't just out of breath, though. He looked *drained* of life.

He is dying, Casillus said simply and sadly. But his fate will seem kind if Cthulhu is called to land.

I'm not going to call it, Casillus, Gabriel said firmly. I wouldn't do that. Even though I've been told twice now that I am going to change my mind—

Twice? Who else said this other than Henry? Did— did Cthulhu speak to you? Casillus was suddenly gripping his shoulders. The Mer's eyes looked rather wild.

Cthulhu had talked to Gabriel in a dream after Gabriel and Casillus had made love in the ocean. Like Henry had said, Cthulhu had claimed that Gabriel would call it. But Cthulhu had not allowed Gabriel to tell Casillus about the meeting when he woke. But now the stricture seemed partially gone and Gabriel was able to say, *I couldn't tell you. It wouldn't let me, and even now it feels like my throat is being squeezed by one of its tentacles when I try to talk about it.*

Casillus immediately soothed him, stroking his hands down Gabriel's arms instead of gripping them. *Forgive me. I should have realized that you were under some kind of unction not to speak. A Caller's duty is a solitary and heavy one. It is just that anything Cthulhu says has many meanings and many layers. Any meeting with it is fraught with both wonder and horror. It knows much, and anything it shares is precious to the Mers.*

This time it wasn't precious for sure, Casillus. Trust me on that. But it's not by choice that I'm not telling you all about it anyways. I'm going to speak to C—to IT about restricting me in this way. I won't allow it!

Casillus' blue-green eyes grew larger and the Mer shook his head. *Do not challenge it on my account. I should have understood your need for silence.*

You're scared of it. I guess I can understand that. It is scary, but it's in my head all the time. I have to set some boundaries with it, Gabriel explained. He was as connected to Cthulhu as he was to Casillus.

While I am mostly respectful of it, I am a little frightened of it as well. Perhaps a lot frightened, Casillus admitted with a lopsided smile. That smile faded. *Cthulhu has its own agenda. A Caller does not control it, just summons it.*

I know, Gabriel said. Though I do wonder why it needs me to call it at all. If it wishes to come to land and confront Johnson, why doesn't it?

I do not know, Gabriel. Perhaps it is a stricture that it has put upon itself, Casillus said.

At that moment Corey, who had been standing beside them patiently while they talked telepathically, cleared his throat and said, “Is everything okay?”

Gabriel reached out and squeezed Corey’s pudgy shoulder to assure his best friend that all was well. “Yeah, it’s fine.” But then he narrowed his eyes at the other young man. “Though we weren’t exactly expecting *company*.” Gabriel tilted his head towards the house where the three Miskatonic students had disappeared. “And it sounds like you told them quite a bit.”

Corey immediately lowered his head, shamefaced. “I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t know what to do. I mean—that’s not right.” Corey straightened up as he explained, “I *made* a decision without you and I hope it was the right one.”

Gabriel crossed his arms over his chest. Though it was clear that the three students had already known something about Mers, Cthulhu and Callers he still was not happy that Corey had brought them here without asking first. Knowing something and actually seeing proof of its existence were two separate things. The existence of Mers needed to stay a secret from humanity. The more people who knew, the more danger the Mers would be in. Members of the military and scientists would be eager to get their hands on Casillus or Gabriel or any of their kind. Secrecy was the greatest shield the Mer had, and here Corey had brought three more people into it.

“I was snooping around the settlement and found them,” Corey said, his hands gripping the sides of his very bright yellow T-shirt. “Roger and Greta were trying to stop Henry from going back into the temple.”

“That doesn’t seem very hard considering how ill he is,” Gabriel said, remembering how Henry had to be practically carried inside his grandmother’s cottage.

“It’s weird, but there are times when he’s so weak he can hardly walk, like you just saw, but then others when he’s fast as a rabbit and strong as an ox,” Corey said.

It is part of the change he is undergoing, Casillus responded. *It gives those exposed to Cthulhu great strength and speed if what they are doing is Cthulhu’s will while burning through their life force at an incredible rate.*

Oh wonderful, so Henry could do other crazy things?

Yes, Casillus said grimly. *He could if Cthulhu wills it.*

Corey continued, “From what Henry was saying to Roger and Greta, I guessed that they already knew about Cthulhu, the temple, the Mers and even *you*, Gabe. I was just going to listen to them, eavesdrop, you know, but then Henry broke away from them and took off towards the temple.”

“Why did he want to get back into the temple?” But Gabriel had a feeling he already knew even as he asked. There was only one thing inside of it: the statue of Cthulhu. Even though the statue had harmed Henry it was clear that he couldn’t stay away from it.

“He was running for the statue inside the temple,” Corey confirmed. He sounded almost breathless, as if the memory of Henry running was causing his lungs to seize. “Greta was screaming that if he touched it he would die. Henry was totally outpacing them, though. I was closer to him than they were. He was going to get to the statue unless I stopped him. So I dashed out and tackled him. I had to hold him down with everything I had. He might be a little guy, but he was *strong*. Eventually he wore himself out.”

Corey is very brave. He is to be commended. He saved Henry’s life, Casillus said.

“Casillus wants you to know that you did a good thing, Corey,” Gabriel said.

His red-bearded best friend immediately brightened, and he shifted from foot to foot like an excited little kid. “Well, I did what I thought was right.”

“Stopping Henry from harming himself even more was definitely right,” Gabriel agreed.

Corey then grimaced. “Yeah, but it led to the cat being out of the bag. After I saved Henry, I sort of had to explain what I was doing there. I lied, but they seemed to know the truth anyways. And Greta has this *look* she gives you. I knew that they would want to help, so I told them about our plan to take the statue out of Johnson’s reach. And I’m glad I did for at least one big reason.”

“What reason?” Gabriel asked.

“While Johnson isn’t supposed to be at the temple tonight, his *goons* are,” Corey said.

Goons? Casillus tilted his head in surprise.

“What goons, Corey?” Gabriel didn’t like the sound of that.

“Johnson convinced Miskatonic to hire some of his old military buddies to guard the site at night,” Corey explained. “They have *guns*.”

“Guns?! Are you kidding me?” Suddenly, their plan to sneak into the settlement that night, snatch the statue from the temple and hustle it out to sea was sounding as likely to succeed as Gabriel blasting off to the moon from where he was standing.

“No, it’s God’s honest truth. But Greta has an idea for how we can get in, though. There’s a tunnel connecting the settlement to some caves nearby,” Corey finished.

Gabriel had a momentary panicky feeling in his chest as he remembered the cave he had nearly drowned in. Although it had been dark and claustrophobic, that cave and his experience in it had led to him meeting Casillus and discovering what he truly was.

“I’m curious to hear more of this plan. Let’s head in and talk about it,” Gabriel said.

“Also, beer,” Corey said gravely and rubbed his stomach.

“And beer,” Gabriel laughed.

CHAPTER TWO

LEFT BEHIND

The sun was still well above the horizon when Gabriel re-emerged from the cottage, following after a tottering yet determined Henry. Greta and Roger were still inside talking to Corey and Casillus. Henry though was determined to leave even though there was still an hour before the sun set and their plan could be put into action. Evidently, he thought if he was in the SUV that the others would follow after him more quickly.

As Gabriel stood on the front porch watching, Henry had managed to walk on his own to the SUV and get the door open, but he could not lift himself up into the cab. Gabriel saw him try three times before hustling over to assist the other young man. Henry might not welcome his help, but it was clear he needed it.

“Let me help you,” Gabriel said, fully expecting Henry to snap at him as he did at Greta and Roger.

Henry stilled when Gabriel touched him, but, after a moment, he finally relaxed. Yet then it was Gabriel’s turn to feel discomfort touching Henry. Henry’s body felt too hot, burning under his hands, yet at the same time strangely clammy. He also seemed far too light for his size, as if his bones were filled with air. Henry’s eyes met his for a moment and then he gave a half smile that once more showed the blood that was continually seeping out of his gums and running down his teeth.

“I don’t regret what’s happening to me, Gabriel. I’ve seen wonders that few humans have ever seen,” Henry said, apparently reading Gabriel’s dismay at his ill health. “I just wish I wasn’t dying quite so quickly so that I could see *more* of them.”

Gabriel could not imagine what Cthulhu had shown Henry that was worth dying for, especially not like this. He didn’t think they could possibly be good things, and yet, Henry wished to see more of them.

“You shouldn’t want to die *at all*, Henry,” Gabriel said firmly.

“Oh, but there are things worth dying for. Things that elevate and debase the soul at the same time,” Henry murmured.

“That’s the statue talking,” Gabriel responded. “If you weren’t ill from it you wouldn’t say these things.”

“I wouldn’t go as far as that.” Henry swallowed and asked, “You’re really all right with this plan, Gabriel? Taking the statue from the temple and hiding it away?”

You're a Caller. You should *worship* Cthulhu. You should *want* all to see its likeness."

"I don't *worship* it."

Henry half-turned towards him and his eyes shone with a zealot's light. "But you *should*. It is magnificent. It is from someplace that only the most blessed of us have seen in our darkest dreams. And what it wants to *do* to us, to each and every one of us—"

"It wants to bring only madness and death, Henry," Gabriel cut him off. He gripped one of Henry's clammy hands in his, resisting the urge to throw it from him as if it were unclean. "You should go away from here. Far from the sea. Far from any body of water. Maybe that will extend the time you have—"

"I would rather die more quickly than leave the sea," Henry interrupted him this time. He leaned towards Gabriel then, his breath smelled of dead fish. "How could you stay away from it for so long, Gabriel? How could you resist what's in your blood?"

Gabriel swallowed and slowly drew back, dropping Henry's hand as he did so. He knew his face reflected his mixture of horror and shock. "What draws you to the water is what *repels* me."

"So your *opinion* about what is good and bad should rule? You should take the statue from its hallowed halls?"

"It will be safer for *everyone*, human, Mer and—and *it*, if the statue is removed from the temple and hidden in the sea," Gabriel answered sharply.

"You really think Johnson could do anything to Cthulhu? Johnson's a fool, but you're an even greater one if you believe he could succeed in harming it." Henry laughed until he was coughing so hard Gabriel feared his ribs would break for it.

Gabriel patted his back even as he felt deep revulsion for Henry. "You should rest. You're tired."

Henry leaned back and leaned his head against the seat as if he didn't have the strength to hold it up any longer. "You should leave the statue where it is. Let Johnson have his showdown and *die*."

"Johnson might not be the only one who dies, Henry. The plan is sound. It will work," Gabriel said firmly and wondered who he was trying to convince.

As if to confirm that Gabriel was speaking more to himself than to Henry, the ill young man's eyelids had already slid shut and his labored breathing had smoothed out as if in sleep. Gabriel clicked the seat belt around Henry's slender, burning form and shut the door securely.

The plan will work.

The plan was simple in theory. It had taken many beers and several plates of nachos out on the back deck of the cottage to work out the details, but they'd gotten it down now. For the most part, the plan had come together smoothly, but the one sticking point had been Gabriel himself.

You cannot go to the settlement, Gabriel. You cannot be anywhere near the statue, Casillus had said with the sun's rays streaming all around him. *You promised Aemrys that you would not go to the temple again and now I am saying that you must stay away, too.*

"I know what I said, Casillus, but that was *before* I knew about the guns. I have to go with you!" Gabriel cried. "I'm not going to just stay here while you all walk into danger."

"Technically, Casillus will be *swimming* into danger at least part of the way," Corey responded as he licked salsa off of his fingers.

"Right, well, swim or walk or fly, it's all the same. It's *dangerous*. I can't just stay here twiddling my thumbs!" Gabriel's back was rigid. He turned a pleading gaze towards Casillus.

The Mer prince returned that stare with one full of even more power and composure. *When the statue is removed from the temple you will be in even greater danger than when it is within it. The temple directs the statue's power and influence to those within its confines. Once the statue is out in the open it will seek something or someone to latch onto. As a Caller, you will be its natural target.*

Gabriel couldn't ignore the unease at the thought of the statue *latching* onto him. He repressed a shudder as he paraphrased Casillus' words for Corey and the Miskatonic students and then said, "I won't touch the damn thing and I certainly won't call Cth—it!"

You might not have a choice. Casillus touched Gabriel's chin and turned his head towards Henry as if the ill Miskatonic student was Exhibit A. *Look at him. Do you think anyone would choose his fate? No, the statue compelled him and now it is destroying him. The statue could compel you to call Cthulhu.*

"But you might need me!" Gabriel cried. That was his last ditch argument, but it sounded pathetic even to his own ears. After all, what would they need him for? He couldn't even help them lift the damn statue. He would just get in the way.

Remember Aemrys' warning, Gabriel. He foresaw great danger if you went back to the settlement. Would you ignore his words? Casillus challenged.

Gabriel's head lowered in defeat. "I—I guess not."

“So Gabe’s not going with us?” Corey asked, guessing the telepathic conversation between Gabriel and the Mer.

“No, I’m not,” Gabriel replied sullenly.

Henry let out a thin laugh. “The two people with the most connection to the statue are barred from being anywhere near it!”

Unlike the others, Henry hadn’t been eating or drinking. Instead he was lying down with his head resting on a pillow the entire time. He looked like death.

“Will you be all right on your own tonight, Henry?” Greta asked quietly. They planned to take Henry home before heading over to the settlement.

“I have to be since you won’t let me go with you,” he replied acidly.

“But you’ll be alone. Is there anyone we could call to come be with you? Maybe Marya could stop by,” Greta pointed out and rubbed her hands together.

“No! Absolutely not! I don’t want Marya or anyone else irritating me,” Henry hissed, lifting his head up off the pillow before sinking back down again.

“What about staying here? Staying with me?” Gabriel asked even though he really didn’t want to spend time with Henry.

“No, I really have no interest in being here for their victorious return,” Henry said, his face screwing up into a bitter expression for a moment. “I can’t bear hearing how they removed the statue from its sacred temple. Tomorrow will be soon enough for me to learn of their exploits.”

“Hopefully, those exploits don’t involve anyone getting *shot*,” Gabriel retorted angrily, shocked at Henry’s tone.

“They’re not going to shoot us,” Greta insisted as she balanced a cold Corona on one knee while lifting a nacho dripping with cheese to her mouth. “The guns are there to scare people off, not actually *kill* anyone.”

“You can’t assume that!” Gabriel exclaimed as he thought back on the zealous light in Johnson’s eyes. “Once the goons see you with the statue, they’re going to try and stop you.”

“With any luck they *won’t* see the statue,” Roger responded. “Because of the pot, remember?”

The pot was crucial to the plan. First, Roger and Greta would openly return to the settlement. The students would claim to the goons that they needed to work late, which wasn’t unusual. That was how both of them had seen Johnson spending hours inside the temple by himself after the sun went down. As part of this supposed work, they would grab one of the large intact pots that had been discovered buried beside the temple and carry it into the temple’s interior.

“But have you ever been allowed in the temple after dark without Johnson? Especially carrying something inside, let alone taking something *out*?” Gabriel argued.

Greta nodded. “I have gone in and out of the temple at night with pots loads of times to compare writing on them to the inscription. The guards have never questioned me.”

“And if they do, they’ll get an earful. You should see Greta when she gets hot with someone,” Roger said with pride. “I’ve seen grown men nearly cry. Basically she can bluff our way in if she has to.”

“Seriously, Gabriel, we’ll be fine. These goons are military types, not archaeologists. They won’t have any basis to be suspicious,” Greta responded patiently.

The next part of the plan was to hide the statue inside of the pot. Greta and Roger would then take the pot out of the temple as if they were done with their comparison and place it with the other pots in a tent that had been set up behind the temple. And that was when Casillus and Corey came in.

Corey and Casillus would get into the settlement via a tunnel that ran between the nearby caves and the site. The tunnel ended just behind the tent where the pots were kept. Corey would be waiting for Roger and Greta in the tent, while Casillus remained in the tunnel itself. Then Corey would carry the pot on his own into the tunnel. Greta and Roger had discovered the tunnel and thoroughly explored it the previous week.

“And Johnson doesn’t know about this tunnel?” Gabriel had challenged, his arms crossed, when they had first mentioned the tunnel.

Both shook their heads.

“I meant to tell Johnson about it, but then Henry became ill,” Greta said with a gesture towards Henry, whose eyes were closed. His breathing had a wet, phlegmy quality to it that didn’t sound healthy.

“And since Henry became ill, Johnson has become even stranger and more secretive,” Roger added. “While neither of us really had a plan to smuggling the statue out of the settlement through the tunnel when we first found it, it just seemed smarter *not* to tell him anything about it. Just in case.”

There was a loaded silence after that, and then Corey shook himself like a large red dog and said, “Casillus and I will then carry the pot together through the tunnel, and when we get to the water he’ll swim it offshore and stash it someplace safe until more Mers can come and take it wherever it should go.”

“Will this really work?” Gabriel asked after another long pause.

“We can only try,” Greta responded softly.

Gabriel met Casillus’ steady gaze and the Mer said, *You convinced me of the need to remove the statue from humanity’s reach, Gabriel. Now I believe it must be done, too.*

Great, so I’ve put you in danger! Not to mention my friends! Gabriel laughed darkly.

Casillus stroked his arm. *The plan will work. We will save countless people. Would you have others experience the same fate as Henry, or worse?*

Looking at Henry now, asleep in the SUV with his gray skin and feverish, sweat-slicked brow, Gabriel had to agree with Casillus. They couldn’t let what had happened to Henry happen to another person. Whether the plan worked or not, they had to *try*.

Behind him, Gabriel heard the front door of the cottage screech open and slam shut. He turned and saw Corey dash out onto the front porch and then down the stairs with Greta and Roger following closely after him. Gabriel couldn’t help but laugh. Corey was dressed all in black. A form-fitting black outfit, no less. When he looked more closely he realized it was a sweat shirt and sweat pants, but they were so tight that they looked like a second skin on his best friend.

“Where did you get that outfit?” Gabriel asked. “I mean, you don’t own anything black!”

Corey did a circle in front of him as if he was modeling the outfit. “Wouldn’t you like to know!”

“I would. Because I think those are my clothes,” Gabriel said with narrowed eyes.

“They are,” Greta admitted as she walked up behind Corey. “We went through Corey’s entire wardrobe and, well, neon yellow is the *darkest* clothing he brought with him.”

“That sounds exactly like Corey’s style,” Gabriel said.

“So we went into your room and raided your suitcase,” Roger added. “Corey said you wouldn’t mind.”

“How could I mind when Corey looks so much better in that get up than I ever could?” Gabriel responded generously.

Corey stopped his modeling and threw his arms out, saying, “I’m totally like a ninja in this!”

“A ninja, huh? I think there’s a reason that ninjas don’t have wild red manes and a Santa Claus beard,” Gabriel laughed before he tugged the hood up over Corey’s head, trying unsuccessfully to hide the bright red hair.

His best friend cinched the hood tight with the sweat shirt's strings, leaving only the oval of his face visible.

"See?" Corey mumbled. "I'm practically invisible."

Gabriel smiled even as his heart clenched. His best friend would be facing down men with *guns* and he made a very large target. He told himself over and over again that no one would get hurt removing the statue from the settlement. Even if they were discovered, the goons wouldn't shoot them. Greta and Roger were Miskatonic students. They were *Johnson's* students. Corey was like a second grandson to Grace, and Johnson was dating her. And while Casillus was a different story from the others, the Mer would never leave the tunnel so it was unlikely that he would even be seen, let alone caught. Surely the goons wouldn't hurt any of them. Yet still Gabriel worried.

Corey again startled him out of his thoughts by getting into the SUV's back seat, dressed in his ninja outfit.

Gabriel blinked. "Where are you going, Corey?"

"He's coming with us. We're kidnapping him," Greta said with a smile.

"I'm going to help Roger and Greta get Henry home, then they'll drop me off at the cave before they head to the settlement," Corey explained.

"What about Casillus? You two are going to the cave together, remember?" Gabriel pointed out. He could sense the Mer prince waiting on the back porch for him.

"I'll let you know when we're heading to the cave and Casillus can meet up with me there," Corey said, and then he winked at Gabriel. "I figure there's an hour before showtime and you two might want to be on your own."

Gabriel colored at the sly tone in Corey's face. "I—I want to spend time with *you*, Corey. I—"

"You will *after* we successfully steal the statue. We'll be coming back here for the victory party," his best friend enthused.

"What do you think Casillus and I are going to do for that hour?" Gabriel asked even though he already was thinking about exactly what he wanted to do.

"Well, I don't know. But I'm sure you'll figure it out," Corey chortled.

The truth was that Gabriel wanted to make love with Casillus one time on land, in a bed, since it seemed unlikely that they would be doing that again anytime in the near future.

"You're the best, Corey," Gabriel said, patting the SUV's door.

"Of course I am!" Corey grinned.

“We’ll see you tonight, Gabriel, after it’s all over,” Greta said as she got in the driver’s seat and Roger got in the back beside Corey.

“Take care of one another, okay? No unnecessary risks,” Gabriel said, looking each of them in the eye.

“Everything will be fine, Gabriel,” she promised. “You’ll see.”

Gabriel watched as they pulled out of the driveway and headed down the highway. He didn’t have a premonition that this was going to be the last time he saw them. He was sure they would be fine. They had to be fine. He would never forgive himself if they weren’t.

CHAPTER THREE

GRAVITY

Gabriel headed through the cottage and out onto the back porch, where he found Casillus leaning against the porch's railing, staring out at the sea.

Are you missing the ocean already? Gabriel asked, putting a touch of amusement in his mind voice. Both the Mer and Gabriel had gone into the water twice during the planning session, but Casillus appeared as if he wanted to be in the water again right at that moment.

The Mer turned his head to look back at Gabriel before responding, *I was just thinking about tomorrow.*

Gabriel pressed his front to Casillus' back. He wrapped his arms around the Mer's waist, resting his chin on the Mer's broad, muscular shoulder. It was strange touching Casillus when neither of them was wet. The Mer's skin was warm and soft. The shift around his waist had dried, as had his hair. Gabriel rubbed his cheek against those silky strands. The Mer purred softly.

What about tomorrow? Gabriel asked.

I am considering how I would feel if I had to leave Emralis and all of my family and friends behind me and go onto the land tomorrow, Casillus said. *I am trying to think of what would comfort me at such a moment. In fact, I am wondering if anything could comfort me.*

Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment and the rush of the sea filled his ears. The salt-tanged breeze flowed over him. He then opened his eyes. *There is nothing to be said or done other than what you already have. Just be with me, Casillus. That's all I ask.*

Then I will do that though it seems insufficient, the Mer promised.

Casillus turned in Gabriel's arms and drew the young man against his chest. They kissed. It was a warm, dry kiss, not meant to inflame but just to show tenderness. Yet Gabriel's stomach fluttered anyways. It was Casillus. It was Casillus kissing him. And that was *always* exciting.

Where did Corey go? Casillus asked. He evidently had not been listening in on Gabriel's conversation with Corey and his best friend's offer to leave them alone. Gabriel explained this and the Mer chuckled. *Ah, so he is still playing Cupid!*

Always! Gabriel laughed.

So you wish to make love in a—a bed? Casillus' eyebrows rose expressively.

Yes, since we really won't get a chance to do it again. At least not for ages. It's something I want to experience with you, Gabriel said.

I have never made love on dry land. In fact, when the Mers took human lovers in the past they would always mate in the sea, Casillus responded.

You aren't nervous about making love in a bed, are you? Gabriel asked as he took the Mer's hands and began to pull him into the house.

Eager and uncertain, Casillus confessed. *You will have to lead me through this, Gabriel. I am afraid my limbs will not move as they should.*

You move like a dream on land or in water, Gabriel assured him.

He pulled open the screen door as he tugged Casillus after him. The Mer gazed at the yellow walls of the kitchen and the various kitchen implements on the counters with interest. Gabriel knew that these things were "new" to the Mer even though he understood their uses and names from Gabriel's mind. Earlier, when Gabriel had used the oven's broiler to melt cheese on the tortilla chips, Casillus had crouched down and stared at the cooking food through the small window in the oven door.

Gabriel wished he had the time to show Casillus everything about the human world from blenders to skyscrapers, but from the tightness already settling in his chest he knew that he likely had less than twenty-four hours on land left. As they walked down the hallway, hand in hand, he thought of the things they would never be able to do together. They would never get a chance to go to a restaurant or see a movie together. They would never take a road trip with the wind whipping through their hair. They would never ski down rolling mountains or tromp through snow-covered woods. They would never vacation with Corey and Grandma. There were so many things that they would never do, at least not in the foreseeable future.

But we will do other, wonderful things that you have never even dreamed of, Gabriel, Casillus said, following his train of thought. His expression was tender and understanding as they mounted the stairs to Gabriel's bedroom.

I'm not sad about the fact that we won't get to do those things, exactly. I just want to do everything with you, Gabriel explained.

I understand. But unlike you, I rule out none of those things, Gabriel. We can come on land for a time after your body has completely taken to the water, Casillus said.

Why do I have this feeling the world will be a different place by the time that's possible? Gabriel asked.

It may indeed be, but then think about how exciting it will be for both of us to discover new things together, Casillus offered.

You're right. Of course you're right, Gabriel said, and shook off the sad thoughts. There was so much to be grateful for in his new life. That was what he had to concentrate on. At that moment, he felt the brush of Aemrys' mind against his. His ancestor was near enough that Aemrys could now reach out to him without Gabriel having to do the heavy lifting to connect them.

Tomorrow, I will be with you, Aemrys said. His voice was a bare whisper, but it was *there*.

I look forward to it, Gabriel sent back, and a warm glow filled him as they disengaged again. He would see Aemrys very soon.

They reached the door to Gabriel's room. He pushed it open and saw the bed. It looked awfully small in comparison to the vast ocean where they had made love before. He could feel the Mer's slight concern at being so confined. Gabriel couldn't help but laugh and kiss Casillus.

I promise that we won't fall off the bed, or if we do, that it won't hurt, Gabriel assured the Mer.

Casillus continued to give the bed a distrustful glance.

We made love in the tub before and that's far smaller, Gabriel reminded him.

Casillus gave him a lopsided grin. *You are correct.*

The Mer allowed himself to be led over to the bed. Gabriel immediately dropped his hands to the shift around Casillus' hips. It was simple to remove and the silken thing soon fluttered to the ground. He eagerly let his gaze run up and down the Mer's front.

You are so beautiful, Gabriel murmured. It was hard to believe that Casillus was his.

I so dislike these coverings! They hide your equally lovely body from my gaze, Casillus lamented. The Mer then began stripping off Gabriel's clothing with gusto. Gabriel was nude in seconds, or so it seemed.

Gabriel cupped Casillus' face, feeling the strong lines of the Mer's jaw under his fingertips, and kissed him. Hot and wet and intimate. Gabriel sucked on Casillus' lower lip before dropping his mouth down to kiss the Mer's chin, then throat, then chest. His mouth lingered on Casillus' nipples. First the right one then the left. He sucked and rasped his teeth over them until they were a darker red and stood up in stiff nubs.

The Mer's breathing had become heavier. Gabriel felt the tip of Casillus' now-erect cock paint a line of precum down his own chest as he sank down onto his knees in front of the Mer. In the ocean, they had been on an equal playing field when they had sucked each other off, but Gabriel knew how powerful this position was. One partner standing and the other kneeling. Most thought that the person standing was the one in power, but Gabriel knew that this wasn't always true.

He parted his lips and let them glide over the peaks and valleys of Casillus' heavily muscled stomach. Those muscles quivered beneath his ministrations as he licked and sucked and kissed them. Such velvety skin. Acres of it. His own cock throbbed.

The dark hair between Casillus' legs was curled tightly. Gabriel kissed down the treasure trail of hair to the erect cock waiting below. The hair was wiry, but not as wiry as a human's. It was softer somehow. He buried his nose into it and smelled Casillus' scent: salt, musk and a clean scent that oddly reminded him of melted snow coming down from mountain tops.

Casillus' cock was brushing against his left cheek. It was hot and hard. It trembled against him. Actually, Casillus was trembling all over. He looked up at the Mer's face and found it tilted down to watch him. His eyes were nearly black with desire.

Not taking his eyes from Casillus', he grasped the base of that quivering cock to steady it. He was always amazed how *alive* cocks felt in his hand. Perhaps it was the thin skin and the amount of blood that flowed through the organ, making it so hot and pulsing with every heartbeat. He kissed along its length then paused at the tip. Casillus drew in a shuddering breath. He had seemingly not blinked since Gabriel began this dance with him.

He parted his lips and took the head of Casillus' thick cock into his mouth. The weight of the cock on his tongue was pleasant. He immediately began to salivate, something he had not had to worry about in the ocean. He swallowed the excess down, his mouth suctioning tightly on the Mer's organ as he did so. Casillus' fingers curled against his palms. A more pronounced shudder went through the Mer. Gabriel's own cock jerked between his thighs and he rubbed it with one hand to sooth it, which was a mistake as the burn of arousal only rose higher.

He slid his tongue over the slick head. The slit parted and there was a gush of hot salty liquid that he eagerly swallowed down. Casillus' hands were clenched into fists now. His eyes were closed and his brow furrowed as if he were concentrating

on something very hard. Gabriel guessed it was on not cumming. He smiled around that hot, hard cock.

Gabriel relaxed his throat and breathed deeply through his nose. Unlike underwater, he would need to use it to breathe. No handy gills to help out. He slowly sank down on the thick length until his lips hit his own fist. He knew he wouldn't be able to take Casillus all the way down this time, but he would use his hand to give the Mer the sensation of being completely encased in heat and pressure. He slowly drew his mouth off with his hand following closely after it. Casillus' whole body rolled forward as if following after Gabriel. He grabbed the Mer's left hip with his free hand and held him in place.

I'm in charge, Casillus, he said, knowing his eyes glittered as he did.

You... you are. Casillus' mind voice sounded breathy.

He moved as fluidly as he could up and down the Mer's solid length. He loved the ache in his jaw as it was forced to open farther than it was used to for a longer amount of time. His tongue pressed up against the underside of the cock. It was so incredibly warm and tender. He drew off and lapped at the flushed head. Precum dribbled out onto his tongue and he swallowed it down eagerly.

Casillus' hands flexed at his sides and finally they reached and he feathered his fingers in Gabriel's short hair, holding his head in place. He then slid his cock further into Gabriel's mouth before drawing it out again. Gabriel let his hands fall from Casillus' cock and hip. He allowed himself to be used as a vessel of pure lust, though he felt the Mer's deep love for him flowing over their bond as well.

He sucked hard on Casillus' cock when the Mer drew it out as if to try to keep it in his mouth. Casillus thrust back in again and the tip of his cock went partially down Gabriel's throat. He relaxed as fully as he could. Down it sank and then it was up again, the head of it resting on his eager, questing tongue. Casillus' hands tightened as he pushed in once more, and Gabriel felt the Mer's cock pulse and plump even more. The Mer was near completion. He felt Casillus begin to pull out.

No, stay. I want this. I want to drink you down, Gabriel insisted as he became an active partner again, gripping the Mer's hips and directing that cock to stay in his body.

Gabriel swallowed and Casillus sank inside of him even farther. There were fine tremors running through Casillus' body. So close, he was so close. Gabriel's own cock jerked in sympathy, but he would not cum yet. He wanted to be inside of Casillus when that happened. He would be the taker this time.

Gabriel closed his eyes and knew that this was the final thrust in. Casillus' cock was full to bursting. He relaxed his jaw and took Casillus fully inside of him. His bottom lip brushed Casillus' balls.

And then the Mer was cumming. His cock jerked inside Gabriel's mouth before semen poured down his relaxed throat. It was sizzling as it gushed into his belly. A feeling of incredible warmth and fullness filled him. Gabriel let the softening cock sit on top of his tongue. His eyes were still closed. He relished the feeling of being connected. Only when he felt the muscles in the Mer's legs begin to give out over their bond did his eyelids flutter open and did he release Casillus' cock. He helped the Mer to the bed. Casillus sank down onto the mattress, face down. He laid there, mouth parted, eyes closed, body loose-limbed with his orgasm.

Gabriel's cock was still a hard bar in front of him, his own arousal far from quenched. He knew that Casillus needed to recover, and that was fine. He did not need the Mer to move. Casillus was in the ideal position actually, and Gabriel could adjust him as he needed.

He straddled Casillus' strong thighs. The Mer stirred, but Gabriel placed a comforting hand on the center of his back and rubbed it.

Shhhhh, stay still. Relax. Let me do all the work. I imagine you're not used to so much gravity, Gabriel said with a soft smile.

There was a soft, sleepy murmur from the Mer over their bond. Gabriel was right. All this time on land was exhausting him. Gabriel began to massage Casillus' powerful, broad shoulders to ease some of the pressure on the Mer's body. His fingers dug into the hard muscles. The Mer relaxed even further onto the mattress. Gabriel leaned forward to get more access to that smooth expanse of silky skin on the Mer's back. His cock rubbed temptingly along the crack of Casillus' ass. The Mer's hips rose slightly as if to get more contact between them. Gabriel's own desires were completely in line with that.

He pressed his length tighter against the Mer's perfect, powerful ass. He lowered one hand to part Casillus' butt cheeks. Those muscular globes closed around Gabriel's cock and he had to pause in his massage. The movement of his cock between those silky buttocks almost sent him over the edge. He wanted to cum *in* Casillus, though cumming *on* him would be almost as good.

After he was sure that he had a hold of himself, Gabriel went back to the massage. His thumbs framed Casillus' spine as he worked down it from the base of the Mer's skull to the beginning of the swell of his ass. His fingers glided over the

Mer's sides and he thought he felt the gills trembling underneath that velvety skin. He leaned forward and kissed where he felt that trembling, letting his lips linger.

His cock was now sandwiched between his body and the Mer's buttocks. It jerked, and precum dripped, wetting Casillus' luscious skin. Gabriel began to rock his hips forward even as his hands continued to trace invisible designs on the Mer's back. Gabriel's breathing became heavy as arousal coursed through him. He allowed his lips to part and let out a moan.

Casillus was no longer limp beneath him. The Mer lifted up his ass and tilted his hips so that Gabriel could more easily rub against him. Gabriel's thrusts became quicker and more desperate.

I need to be in you. Can I? Gabriel asked.

Yes, yes, please, Casillus said as he looked over his shoulder at Gabriel.

The Mer's long hair covered part of his cheek but one of his blue-green eyes was uncovered. There was so much love in that glance that even if Gabriel couldn't feel it over their bond, he would know it from that look. He found himself leaning forward and kissing Casillus' mouth. He then peppered kisses all along the Mer's back before he sat up and parted the golden globes of Casillus' ass.

Gabriel was shocked by how much his hands were shaking. He looked back up at Casillus' face, but the Mer's head was now buried in the soft pillows. Casillus' hips were lifted to give the optimal angle for Gabriel to breach him. So easy, so right, so perfect.

Gabriel looked down at the Mer's now-revealed anus. He let out a brief groan of pleasure mixed with surprise as he saw that Casillus' opening glistened with the clear gel of arousal. No lubricant needed. Just like his own body had done, Casillus was ready for him without any preparation.

Gabriel lined the head of his cock up with that gleaming pink swirl of muscle. His cock felt more than just alive in his hands, it felt *wild*. He knew that this joining wasn't going to last long. Yet he had not stretched Casillus and feared he wouldn't be able to hold back his orgasm long enough to loosen the Mer properly.

Do not worry. Take what you need. I am ready for you, Casillus assured him.

Gabriel could not respond, not even through his mind. He was beyond words. He took a deep breath and then he pushed inside of Casillus. The Mer's sphincter tightened around him as if to keep him out, but it could not. He allowed his body weight to advance that thrust inside his beloved Mer prince. The gel that Casillus' body was creating made the way slick and hot. The slickness extended all the way inside of him, making the thrusting so much easier and more fluid than with plain

old lube. It was incredible and he thanked heaven for Mer physiology. Over their bond, he experienced what Casillus did at that moment, which was the pleasant pressure and burn as Gabriel's cock plowed inside. Casillus' own penis was already hardening again.

Only when he was fully seated inside of Casillus, his balls pressed against the Mer's ass, did Gabriel pause. He felt Casillus' heartbeat through his cock. Soon it felt like their hearts were beating as one. There was a feedback loop of pleasure between them that threatened to overwhelm Gabriel and have him cumming right then and there. Casillus squeezed his ass around Gabriel's cock and Gabriel gasped audibly. In response, he raked a hand down Casillus' broad back. The Mer purred in appreciation.

You must move. I need you to move, Gabriel, Casillus told him as he bore down again on Gabriel's cock.

Gabriel let out a strangled whine that time. *If you don't stop that I'll cum!*

Good. I want you to. I want your arousal to crest within you and take you over, the Mer said, his mind voice husky with desire.

Casillus' command had Gabriel pulling his cock out only to slam back in again. He didn't mean to be so violent, but he was on the edge. But he needn't have worried. Casillus loved it and lifted his hips up higher to give him better access.

Let yourself go, my love. Do not hold back, Casillus told him.

Gabriel was so grateful for those words, because his body seemed beyond his control at that point. He thrust in and pulled out again and again, hard and fast and nearly punishing. He held onto Casillus' compact hips, aiming his cock so that the head of it put pressure along the sides of the Mer's inner walls. He knew the moment when he had hit Casillus' prostate. The Mer's head jerked up from the pillow, his long hair flying and spilling over his back. Casillus' lips parted though he made no sound, but over their bond Gabriel felt Casillus' pleasure. His mind translated it into moans, groans and desperate whines. Casillus' pleasure was so pure that it was almost a religious experience. With knowledge gained over their bond, Gabriel knew what was pleasing Casillus so much and he repeated it.

He aimed for that place inside the Mer again and once more the head of his cock dragged over it. Casillus trembled like a newborn foal underneath him. Gabriel pulled out and thrust back inside of him over and over again so that his cock was touching that spot repeatedly. Casillus was wild. His hips thrust back frantically against Gabriel's. It was becoming harder and harder to control his movements

and Gabriel stopped trying. His own arousal was burning so hot inside of him that he was nearly beyond reason himself.

Their bodies came together and jerked apart before coming right back together again. Gabriel ground his cock into Casillus' body. The Mer whined and bore down harder on his cock. There was so much heat between them that it was hard to know where one began and the other ended. The dual sense of taking and being taken had Gabriel's synapses firing madly. All he could do was thrust and thrust and thrust.

Then Casillus bore down on him one last time and Gabriel couldn't pull out. He pushed deeper forward instead. His cock jerked inside of the Mer's body and he felt his balls draw tight before the release began. But it wasn't just his pleasure that he felt and it wasn't just physical. It was a complete joining of his and Casillus' minds and bodies. There was nothing separating them. They were one. Gabriel's mouth opened in a silent cry of completion as his cum spurted out of him in thick, hot streams, painting Casillus' insides.

With the last gush Gabriel's limbs simply gave out on him, and he collapsed over Casillus' back. The Mer sank down onto the mattress, his own cum having streamed out onto the sheets beneath him, but Casillus did not care. It was evidence of their love. It was something he had never experienced before. In the sea, semen was always washed away. To feel the rapidly cooling wetness against his belly was new.

Gabriel kissed the back of Casillus' neck as his softening cock gently left the Mer's body. Casillus laced the fingers of his right hand with the fingers of Gabriel's left. He felt Casillus' lips kissing their linked hands.

Gravity, Casillus whispered.

What about it?

I believe I understand why you will miss it, Casillus said with a smile in his voice. *We will be doing this again, Gabriel. I will insist upon it.*

Instead of feeling sadness about the fact that such lovemaking on land might not happen again for years, Gabriel held the Mer's promise close as he and Casillus sank into sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEST LAID PLANS

I *want to go with you to the cave,* Gabriel said as he rested his hands on Casillus' compact hips.

They were back out on the porch. The sun was just a sliver above the horizon now. The sky was a brilliant mixture of purples, reds and gold with streaks of luminous clouds. It was so beautiful. Gabriel felt that selfish urge to keep Casillus with him, but duty and Corey had called. His best friend had literally phoned the cottage's land line to say that Greta and Roger were driving him to the cave.

"I'm sorry to take Casillus from you," his best friend had said.

"So long as you bring him back to me I'm all good," Gabriel had replied and willed himself to be okay with it.

But now that it was time for Casillus to go, Gabriel didn't want him to leave or, at least, he wanted to extend their time together by accompanying the Mer prince to the cave. Casillus rested his forehead against Gabriel's. His blue-green gaze was gentle as were his hands running up and down Gabriel's bare back.

I would rather be with you than with anyone else, Casillus assured him. *But I do not think you should accompany me to the cave.*

What? Why?

Casillus' hands slid down his back a final time and lingered on his waist. *It would not be wise. The cave is very close to the settlement and the farther you are from the temple and the statue the better.*

Gabriel wanted to object, but he knew Casillus was right. Cthulhu was *eager* to make landfall. The monstrous being would use *any* excuse to come ashore, even Gabriel's near proximity to the temple.

You'll come right back here after you hide the statue, won't you? Gabriel asked finally. His grip tightened on the Mer's hips.

Casillus nodded. *As soon as I take the statue into deep water.*

At that moment, Gabriel sensed something else that the Mer thought they should do. His head jerked back and his nostrils flared. *You—you want us to close down the bond when you're at the settlement!*

The Mer rubbed Gabriel's back. *I fear if we are connected when I touch the statue then your power might pass through me and summon Cthulhu.*

Panic trilled through Gabriel at the twin thoughts of narrowing their bond or risking Casillus calling Cthulhu. Both were equally bad. He couldn't believe how easily he had cut off Casillus altogether while talking to Johnson just that morning. Now the Mer wanted to merely narrow their bond for a short while and Gabriel was nearly hyperventilating. He had been counting on having the bond open as wide as possible while Casillus and the others stole the statue. It would let him keep tabs on them and make sure that everything was going okay. But now that little bit of comfort and security was going to be taken away from him.

But I won't know what's going on with you if you shut down the bond! Gabriel cried. *Something could happen! You could need help!*

If we do... Casillus broke off. *You coming to our aid would only make things far worse.*

Gabriel jerked away at that. He looked at Casillus with betrayal. *You can't believe that!*

Casillus reached for him and firmly pulled Gabriel against him. *Cthulhu is a greater danger than anything or anyone else, Gabriel. If it makes landfall... Again Casillus broke off. He didn't have to say anything else. Gabriel already knew what he was saying was true. You cannot come to the temple. You must stay away no matter what happens.*

I don't know if I can do that, Gabriel admitted. *I don't know if I can let you go and—and sit here waiting to hear if everything's okay.*

Casillus kissed him. The kiss was tender and loving. *I know this is hard, Gabriel. I would feel the same if our situations were reversed. But it must be this way.*

Gabriel squeezed his eyes shut. He took in a shuddering breath. It had to be this way. He was just making this harder on the Mer. He had to get it together. He opened his eyes and met Casillus' gaze. He could do this. He forced the words to come and sent them over the bond, *As soon as you're away from the statue you'll restore our bond fully right?*

I will. I promise. I am no more eager to do this than you are. Casillus held him close.

Gabriel rested his head on Casillus' broad shoulder. *Please be careful. Take care of yourself and the others.*

We are doing the right thing, Gabriel, Casillus assured him. He kissed the side of Gabriel's head. *You made the correct choice for us to remove the statue and protect humanity.*

Gabriel winced a bit. He *had* been the one to demand that something be done about the statue. Now he was getting his wish, but it was putting in danger the

people who meant the most to him.

Yeah, I know, Gabriel agreed.

Finally, they released one another. It was time for Casillus to go. The Mer walked down the stairs and onto the sand. He was going to swim to the caves. It was faster that way. Gabriel could *feel* that Corey was only a few minutes away from the caves himself. Gabriel took in a deep breath. It was getting difficult to breathe again. He needed to get in the water himself, but he couldn't imagine being in the ocean at night, at least not alone. He would take a shower instead.

I will not close down the bond until I get to the cave, Casillus promised.

It's all right. It'll be all right. Gabriel wasn't sure which one of them he was assuring more.

Yes, it will be.

They stared at each other for several long moments, then Casillus turned on his heel and sprinted into the water. Gabriel watched as the Mer smoothly dove into the waves. Casillus broke through the water's surface to look back at him one last time before he again disappeared beneath the waves. Gabriel, though, wasn't quite ready to let him go. He closed his eyelids and saw through Casillus' eyes.

The water at night was different than during the day. It was more mysterious. The neon blue had turned to silver gray. It was not fully dark yet. Moonlight was not yet streaming through the surface, so everything was indistinct and shadowy. But to Casillus the water at twilight was as familiar as it was at full noon. He swam with assurance and with no fear.

Gabriel tried to imagine the two of them swimming together in that silvery water. He envisioned them out in the deep with no land in sight. He was surprised and pleased that he was actually excited by the thought. Only the faintest trace of fear ran through him as he imagined it, but that just added an edge to the excitement.

Soon, Gabriel, Casillus promised, reading his desires.

Soon. That word held so much emotion for Gabriel. It meant both excitement to start his new life and grief for what he was losing. He knew that the Mer felt his dueling emotions and he didn't want Casillus to grieve or feel like he was taking something away from Gabriel personally. To remove any of the sting from his feelings, he assured the Mer, *I love you, Casillus.*

I love you, too, Gabriel, the Mer responded.

All too soon Casillus was at the cave. It was not the cave that Gabriel had nearly drowned in. This one was slightly farther up the beach. It was also farther from the

waterline, so it did not get flooded at high tide.

Casillus walked out of the water. Gabriel could feel the sifting of sand under his feet. Corey was standing by the cave's mouth. In the strange half-light of dusk his best friend was almost invisible in the tight black sweat suit, though his bright red head was like a flame on a match. Corey hustled towards the Mer, stopping only a few feet away.

"Everything okay, Casillus?" Corey asked. He was bouncing up and down on his feet with excitement. Corey saw this as a wonderful adventure. Gabriel wished he could feel that way about it.

The Mer nodded.

"Greta and Roger just texted me." Corey held up his smart phone to show Casillus. The Mer looked at it and nodded again. He knew what it was because Gabriel did. Corey continued, "They are at the settlement. So far so good! Shall we go into the cave?"

Casillus held up one finger to indicate that he needed a moment. *Gabriel, it is time to close down the bond.*

R—right, yeah, Gabriel stuttered. His chest seized. They had to do this. It was the safest way. How ironic that staying behind was harder than rushing into danger!

I will be back with you soon, and then I will never leave you again. The Mer embraced him over the bond. His love and certainty flowed through to Gabriel as well.

Be safe, Gabriel whispered.

When Casillus shut the bond down to nothing more than the slenderest of threads it felt as if someone had turned off the lights in what had been a brilliantly lit room. Gabriel's mind seemed a dark and empty place without Casillus in it anymore. He opened his own eyes as he could no longer see through Casillus' eyes or hear his voice any longer. He let out a long, shuddering breath.

He'll be fully back with me soon, Gabriel told himself, hugging the idea close, then he turned and went into the cottage.

Gabriel knew he should head up to the shower. He should then lay down and wait for Casillus and the others to return. The less he strained himself the more energy he would have for later. But he didn't do that. Instead, he found himself wandering through the rooms in the cottage and looking at everything as if to memorize it.

He touched the smooth backs of the chairs in the dining room. He ran his hands along the countertops in the kitchen. He even patted the appliances as if they were

pets and not inanimate objects. He went so far as to open the refrigerator to gaze inside a few times. He knew that he was both saying goodbye to his old life by doing this and also distracting himself from what was happening at the settlement.

He didn't want to think about Greta and Roger blithely walking into the temple with the pot past the guards with guns and then sidling back out again. Would this really work, or was it ridiculous? And what if Johnson came back early? What if he was in the temple? So many things could go wrong. More than once he checked the clocks to see how much time had passed. The sun had fully set now and the house was in full shadow, but he didn't yet want to turn on the lights.

If I keep padding through the house in the dark, worrying about what could be happening at the settlement, I'll drive myself crazy. An idea suddenly struck him. I know what I'll do. I'll gather all of the things I found from Samantha Braven, including her husband's journal, and get them ready for Grandma. They are the beginning of my story, too, in a way. Grandma will want them.

With that thought in mind, Gabriel headed from the first floor to his bedroom where he was keeping the box he had found the kalish and journal in. Halfway up the stairs while he was considering whether or not to give the kalish to his grandmother the mental blast came. It was as if someone had screamed at the top of their lungs directly into his ears. He was rocketed back by it and nearly pitched end over end down the stairs. At the last moment, he grabbed the banister and collapsed down on one knee, nearly completely overcome. He was not able to move or speak for what felt like ages. His brain felt like it was rattling around inside of his skull. He realized then that the scream was from Casillus. Cold dread gripped him and he groped for their bond.

Casillus? Gabriel got out, but he could form no further words.

The bond was open again, but Casillus' thoughts were garbled and the images that flashed through Gabriel's mind were chaotic. There was shouting. Screams. What sounded like gunshots. And then running, running, running. At first Gabriel could make no sense of it, but then everything suddenly became far clearer. Startlingly clear.

They were waiting for us! Casillus cried. All is lost. Johnson was there. He was there! He knew what we intended!

Gabriel closed his eyes so that he was just seeing through the Mer's. Casillus was running back through the cave toward the beach. The cave was dark and the ground was uneven, yet the Mer ran full speed. Then ahead of him appeared the opening to the cave mouth. Moonlight streamed onto the beach. It was almost as

bright as day. Gabriel found himself urging Casillus to run faster and faster and faster.

Get out of there, Casillus! Head to the water!

It was then that Gabriel realized that Corey was racing beside Casillus. A wave of relief crashed over him. Corey was okay! His best friend's breathing echoed eerily in the cave. But then came the sounds of pursuit, including footfalls and curses. Casillus looked over his shoulder. There were beams of light from flashlights behind them, bobbing up and down in the dark like crazy shooting stars. They were pursued!

Johnson grabbed Greta and Roger on the steps of the temple! Casillus explained. He had men at the mouth of the cave. As soon as Corey left to go into the tent they saw him and started after us.

There was a sudden pained cry from Corey. Casillus skidded to a stop and spun around towards the red-haired young man who was, ironically, almost invisible in the darkness. Corey was on the ground. He was grabbing his right ankle. Gabriel realized immediately that his best friend had just twisted it, likely from stepping into a hole in the loose sand. The men following them were closing in. They were only ten feet behind Corey's prone form.

Corey, no!

"Go, Casillus, GO!" Corey cried. He wildly waved at Casillus to keep running, to get away.

The thought of Corey in the hands of Johnson's goons made Gabriel's stomach lurch. This couldn't be happening! How had it gone so wrong? He wasn't the only one to be wondering this. Casillus' mind was filled with the same questions, but the Mer focused himself on getting Corey out of there. He would carry him if he had to.

But the red-haired young man shouted, "Get into the water! Leave me! Casillus, leave me!"

There was an angry whining sound. It took Gabriel a moment to realize it was a bullet. Someone was shooting! Someone was shooting at Casillus and Corey! Gabriel tried to get up onto his feet. He had to get to them! But his legs wouldn't obey him. Gabriel was still frozen.

There was another angry whine, and this time rock rained down on Casillus' shoulders. A bullet had hit the side of the cave near him, shattering rock and sending it spinning through the air. Because Gabriel knew Casillus also understood what those bullets could do to him yet he still hesitated, wanting to

help Corey. He already loved the red-headed young man almost as much as Gabriel did. He would not leave unless there was no other choice.

And suddenly there was no other choice.

Three shadowy men piled on top of Corey. One of them had his shoulders, another had his legs and the third had something pressed against his temple that made Corey sit as still as stone. His face was a white blur in the darkness. But then Corey was again shouting at Casillus to run. Run. RUN! One of the men cuffed him on the side of the head and Corey went down with a groan. Gabriel cried out.

One of the men then lifted something that glinted in his hand. A gun. Gabriel gasped. The man was pointing it at Casillus' chest. The Mer was only twenty feet away. He wouldn't miss at that range. If he pulled the trigger Casillus would die. But at the last moment, another of the men slammed his hand down on the gunman's arm, sending the barrel down towards the floor of the cave.

"Don't, you fool! Don't you remember what Tims said? Not the *gun*! Not the Glock!" the man growled.

Casillus had no choice but to turn and flee then. The Mer grieved at leaving Corey. He cursed Johnson and the goons with every breath. Every fiber of Casillus' being told him to go back, but he knew he could do nothing. Gabriel felt the same.

The Mer was out of the cave now and onto the beach. Sand puffed up. He was racing towards the water. Fifty feet. twenty-five feet. Fifteen feet. He heard soft footfalls behind him as two of the goons flew out of the cave and came after him. They would not be able to follow him into the depths of the sea. Once Casillus reached the water he would be safe. Gabriel held his breath. Casillus would make it! He had to!

But suddenly there was this *fwumping* sound and then there was a terrible pain in the middle of Casillus' back. The *fwumping* sound occurred again and a second pain joined the first. Casillus stumbled. He caught himself and tried to keep running. The sea was only five feet away! But the Mer could no longer feel his legs. He staggered forward, his feet touching water, but he simply couldn't go any further. He was falling. Casillus collapsed face-first into the surf. He was in the water, but not far enough. He could not move. He tried to drag himself further into the oceans, but the goons grabbed a hold of the shift around his waist. They dragged him back onto the land and turned him over.

Not the gun. Gabriel's mind repeated the words the one goon had said to the other in the cave, and then he realized what they had meant. *Not the gun with the*

bullets, the gun with the darts. They had another weapon. A tranquilizer gun.

Casillus was now on his back, staring up at the sky. There were so many stars. They were sprinkled across the velvety blackness. It was beautiful and cold and unfeeling. Casillus was but one person in all the worlds there were. He was insignificant and precious at the same time. Was Cthulhu the only god out there that looked after Mers? Gabriel wondered. Was there no one and nothing looking down and seeing the wrongness of this? The faces of the goons suddenly appeared in front of him, blocking Casillus' view of the sky.

Theirs were the faces of soldiers. It was unnerving how easy it was to tell that they were not civilians. It wasn't just the crew cuts, their trim, muscled forms or even the body armor they wore. It was their *eyes*. Those eyes had seen death. Lots of it. They were looking at Casillus now, gazes roving over him in a cold, detached appraisal that chilled Gabriel. One of them grunted and pointed to Casillus' sides. The water had undoubtedly brought out his gills. Gabriel clutched his own sides as if he could shield the Mer in some way by doing that.

"He's one of them," the goon said.

"Not the one that Johnson's going after though, right?" the other goon asked.

Not the one... does he mean me? Gabriel thought, a chill running through him.

"No, this one's got long hair. Older, too. He was *never* human," the first goon said.

Never human. The words were spat out.

"Better call Johnson and tell him the one he wants isn't among them," the second goon said as he unclipped a walkie-talkie from the right strap of his bullet proof vest.

"Call him while I get this one up. Johnson will want him for study," the first goon responded.

"Right."

The first goon handed his weapon over to his compatriot and lifted Casillus up into a fireman's carry. The man grunted at the Mer's weight but he finally straightened up. Casillus' view now was of the man's back and the sand. Casillus vision was going in and out. Unconsciousness was overtaking him like a rogue wave.

Gabriel... Gabriel, you must—must get out... out of the—the house, Casillus said.

Gabriel could barely form a coherent thought in response. He was in agony, he was losing consciousness himself right along with Casillus. *Coming to get you. Coming—*

NO! Go—go—go into the sea. Await—await Aemrys... Johnson is coming for—for you...

And then Casillus was gone, sucked into oblivion.

Gabriel lay like a dead thing on the stairs. His body hardly felt like his own. He was like a marionette whose strings had been abruptly cut, yet the puppeteer was still trying to make him dance. But then he began shaking badly. His teeth chattered. His arms finally responded and he was able to wrap them around his chest, in an attempt to still the involuntary movement.

I'm in shock. Maybe part of me is still with Casillus. But I need to get it together. I need to stand.

He had to get to Casillus, Corey and the others. He had to rescue them. Gabriel grasped the banister and hoisted himself to his feet. His legs trembled beneath him like a new-borne fawn's. He took one step down the stairs. He waited a moment until he felt steadier and then took another step. Right at that moment he saw the headlights of a vehicle as it pulled into the cottage's drive. He had a momentary hope that it was his grandmother returning home from the council meeting, but he immediately knew it wasn't her. It was Johnson. He could *feel* the ex-soldier's mind out there. It was touched by darkness. It was touched by Cthulhu. And it thought only of capturing him.

Gabriel staggered to the bottom of the stairs just as he heard the crunch of gravel as two people got out of Johnson's SUV and headed for the cottage. One of them was going to the front door and the other seemed to be heading around to the back.

They're trying to cut me off from the one place I can escape from them: the sea.

Gabriel's limbs felt alien to him, but he forced them to work as he tottered down the hall. His movements became more fluid once he made it to the kitchen and he was able to run to the back door. One man was already at the front door. Gabriel glanced behind him and saw the silhouette through the screen. The man's voice was harsh as it shouted for him to stop. It was not Johnson. Gabriel suddenly realized that it must be Johnson who was going around to the back.

Gabriel thrust his hands out in front of him as he slammed out of the back door and onto the porch. The screen pulled out of its housing and tangled around his arms, but Gabriel kept going. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Johnson was rounding the side of the house. Johnson physically jerked to a halt for a moment, and Gabriel knew that Johnson had seen him. Johnson let out a shout.

"Gabriel! Gabriel, stop! Stop! You must stop!" Johnson cried.

But Gabriel didn't stop, didn't slow down, and didn't look back. He had to make it to the ocean. He was going into the sea. Alone. It was the only way to save his lover and his friends.

"Gabriel, you must stop! Don't make me do this! Don't make me stop you!" Johnson's voice rose up like a roar.

Just as Gabriel's feet hit the water he heard the first fwumping sound. He nearly jumped straight up in the air, but there was no accompanying pain. Johnson had shot at him with a tranquilizer gun, but he had missed. He was thigh deep in the sea when the sound of the second shot came. He immediately dove underneath the waves without any hesitation. He felt something streak past his left cheek. The dart. It sank harmlessly to the sandbar in front of him. Then Gabriel swam. He swam as fast as he possibly could. He headed for deep water. Deep, black water. It was the only place he would be safe.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEW PLAN

Gabriel swam until the sea floor was lost from sight, and then he kept swimming out and out and out. The fear of being caught fueled his flight. It wasn't fear for himself, though, but for what might happen to Casillus, Corey and the others if he was caught. If he, too, were in Johnson's control, what hope would they have? Even less than the slender thread that they had now with him being free.

He finally stopped swimming. He hoped he was far enough out. Surely, Johnson could not find him here. Fine tremors ran through his body as he floated about twenty-five feet below the surface. The trembling came from the aftereffects of adrenaline. He curled into a fetal position until the tremors slowed then ceased. Once his body was under control, he realized just how far he had swam and how terribly alone he was.

Around him the water was silver from the moonlight, but beneath him it was nearly black with the darkness of the deep. He could feel his gills fluttering at his sides. His shirt billowed up underneath his arms. He did not shrug it off, as he knew that eventually he would need to return to land and it would help hide what he was.

Even after all that had happened his mind was curiously blank. He knew why. He was alone. Black water was all around him. There was no land in sight. Yet there were greater things to fear. The loss of Casillus and Corey among them. He closed his eyes, wishing he could take a deep breath to steady himself, but the gills did not allow that. They kept up their rhythmic, steady movement.

What do I do? How do I rescue them?

He could faintly feel Corey's mind, like a sonic ping, coming from the settlement. Despite being far out at sea Gabriel realized that he knew exactly where he was in regards to the shore. It was a neat Mer ability and he was glad for it. It made him feel less untethered to everything. With his Caller abilities he could sense where Johnson was holding Corey, Casillus and the others, too. It was as if he had a map in his mind and he was the glowing blue dot while his friends were a glowing red dot. But he could do little with this information. He could swim to the temple, but there would undoubtedly be plenty of those armed goons guarding them. Gabriel had no illusions that he could somehow fight his way

through trained military men and free his friends. It was ludicrous. He needed help. He simply couldn't do this on his own.

You will change your mind. The memory of Cthulhu's words slid through his brain. Gabriel thrust them away as soon as they appeared. The last thing he needed to do was to call the monstrous entity here now.

But what if it's the only chance to save them? But could it save them? Even if there was some way to protect Casillus, Corey and the others from its ill-effects, what about the millions of other people on the East Coast that wouldn't be so lucky when it made landfall? No, it's not an option.

He then thought about contacting his grandmother. She was a councilwoman and could make the police accompany them to the settlement. But if he called his grandmother and the police became involved, even though his friends would likely be fine, the existence of the Mers would be exposed. He and Casillus would most likely be locked up in some government facility and experimented on. Maybe the military would take Johnson's view on Cthulhu and the Mers and try to harm them. So that really wasn't an option either.

Who else could he turn to? What about the Mers themselves? He could contact Aemrys right now and have him relay back to the warriors in Emralis that their prince had been captured. But it would take days for them to get here. Days that Casillus might not have. Gabriel feared that Casillus wouldn't even last a few hours under Johnson's care. But maybe Aemrys would have some ideas anyways, things that Gabriel wasn't thinking of.

Besides, he needs to know that the prince of the Mers is a prisoner and it's my fault. I was the one that insisted on moving the damned statue. I was the one that insisted on staying on land today. After what happened in the temple, I should have gone into the water with Casillus.

Like he had with the thought of Cthulhu, he pushed those miserable thoughts away from him, too. Those "would have, could have, should have" type thoughts would not change what had already happened. He had to deal with things as they were. Guilt would only cloud his thinking. He needed to be crystal clear in his planning. He shut his eyes as he prepared to call his ancestor. Looking into the silvery water only reminded him of his old fears of the sea and disturbed his concentration.

After a moment, he sent, *Aemrys*.

There was no response. He remembered how easy it had been to touch Aemrys' mind before, but that was because he had unconsciously been thinking about the

man for some time with the glory of House Liseas all around him. This time he was just reaching out into the darkness with nothing to remind him of the other Mer. He settled himself and tried again, but this time he imagined a silver cord connecting him to his ancestor. He imagined a vibration going through the cord, jangling Aemrys, alerting him that he was needed like a phone ringing.

Nothing. Gabriel dug his fingernails into his palms. He felt the pull of the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. The webbing made him think of Mers and his Mer blood. He concentrated on that feeling and called again. Suddenly, there was the softest response.

Gabriel? What is wrong?

Gabriel let out a bark of pleased, watery laughter. *Aemrys!*

Yes, yes, I am here. His ancestor's alarm was loud and clear now, as was his mind voice. *What is wrong? I can sense something is terrible has happened.*

Gabriel swallowed. *Casillus...*

Is Casillus injured? Aemrys jumped to the logical conclusion.

Gabriel still could not reach Casillus' mind. He sensed only black currents and guessed that the Mer was still being held in deep unconsciousness by the drug in the dart. Gabriel curled forward and wrapped his arms around his legs, hanging in a fetal position in the water again. But he forced himself to get out, *He's been captured by Johnson Tims! Oh, you don't know who that is—*

Of course I do. You know so I know. You have just shared this with me, Aemrys' interrupted him.

Gabriel blinked. *I—I didn't realize I had done that.*

I can see all you wish me to know now. The plan to get the statue. Casillus' capture. Johnson's attempted kidnapping of you, Aemrys said.

That's handy, I guess.

Do not worry. Your secrets are safe with me. This a gift of blood. You and I are closely connected, Aemrys explained. *The silver cord you envisioned when you sought me out? That is real. No other Mer could know your thoughts as I do... except for Casillus.*

Oh...

There is nothing to fear, my heir, Aemrys responded soothingly.

I'm sorry. I'm thinking about things that don't matter, Gabriel said, shaking himself.

Of course they matter, but rescuing Casillus and your friends is more pressing. His ancestor was quiet for long moments, likely thinking on all that Gabriel had passed to him. When he did speak, he was not hysterical or angry like Gabriel had

feared. He was quite controlled and gentle. So *Johnson Tims seeks madness and death.*

If he only was going to hurt himself I wouldn't care, but he wants to take Casillus, Corey and the others with him! Gabriel cried.

Only if he does not get what he wants, his ancestor corrected.

He can't have what he wants! There's no way of giving him what he wants and not destroying everyone on the Eastern Seaboard, including Casillus and my friends. Gabriel's voice was high and tight. He knew he was panicking. He rested his forehead against his knees and tried to keep a hold of himself.

Do not be so sure. Aemrys was so calm. There was no sense of panic from him at all. Gabriel wasn't certain what to make of that.

After 5,000 years, maybe Aemrys couldn't understand haste and the terrible pressure of present danger. He knew that it couldn't be disinterest in Johnson's intended victims that led his ancestor to be so cool. Aemrys cared about Casillus very much.

Reading his thoughts, Aemrys chuckled softly. *Oh, no, Gabriel, I feel these things very acutely. Tabatha taught me a painful lesson about human haste and the failure to act in time. And Casillus is very dear to me, especially as he is to be my son-in-law. I am not as calm as I seem.*

But you're not panicked! I mean—that sounds stupid. I should be glad you're not. I should be glad that one of us is thinking clearly, Gabriel clarified. The more he thought about his lover and friends' positions the worse his unease became.

Though I am far from sanguine about their fates, I see something you do not yet. I see that Johnson can be stopped, Aemrys said. *I see that you can and will do it.*

For one moment, Cthulhu's words rustled again through Gabriel's mind. *You will change your mind.*

How? By bringing Cth—IT to land? No, I can't do that! Gabriel bit his lip hard until he tasted the copper heat of blood on his tongue. *I love Casillus and Corey more than anyone. But to kill millions... They would no longer love me if I did that, and would wish with all they are that I had let them die instead.*

Johnson wants to face Cthulhu. He thinks that this can only happen on land, at the settlement, but that is not true. You are a Caller, Gabriel. Cthulhu will come to you wherever you are, Aemrys replied.

Gabriel's mind was a complete blank for a moment, not understanding what other place there could be for the standoff, and then he realized what Aemrys

meant and felt like a complete fool. *You mean give Johnson his standoff, but not on land—*

But on water, Aemrys finished. The humans have ships. Take Johnson to Cthulhu.

Would he agree to that?

I think his mind is so riddled with foul desire that he would do almost anything, Aemrys said.

Where should this happen? What part of the ocean? Really far out? I don't want to risk anyone else being hurt, Gabriel said.

I think you should take Johnson to where Cthulhu is now. That is far enough offshore that you will not risk anyone else, but close enough to the temple that Johnson will wrongfully think he has the upper hand, Aemrys said with a quiet certainty. There was something in his voice that was urging Gabriel to figure it out.

Where is that? I mean I suppose I could ask it—

You know where Cthulhu is, Gabriel, Aemrys said firmly but gently.

I... And then Gabriel did know. Cthulhu was where it had been the day his parents died. Waiting there just for him. Of course it would be there.

Yes, I am afraid so. It has a sense of...fate, destiny...or black humor, perhaps, Aemrys said.

Johnson can't really hurt it, can he? I mean there's no chance he could succeed in this? Gabriel asked.

He will succeed only in destroying himself and those who follow him. He has been touched by Cthulhu, so death may be his real goal now in any event, even if he does not realize it, Aemrys assured him.

Gabriel thought of Henry then, of how the young man didn't care about his deteriorating health, instead wishing for just one moment more with Cthulhu. Aemrys' view of Johnson was likely correct. The irony that the ex-soldier was working *for* the enemy while he thought he was working *against* it was the saddest thing Gabriel could imagine. Suddenly, Gabriel realized that he could sense Aemrys' location.

You're not that far away, Gabriel said with a start.

I will be with you before the sun rises tomorrow, Aemrys said.

Keep away until I deal with Johnson, Gabriel said. *I don't want you anywhere near danger.*

I sense that it will all be over by the time I arrive. Aemrys' voice was filled with confidence, confidence in Gabriel.

Gabriel was quiet for a moment and then said, *How do you know so much about Cthu—it?*

We have had many Callers in our House, Gabriel. It is lore that is passed down, Aemrys said.

When I see you I'll ask a million questions about it, Gabriel said.

And I will answer all I can, his ancestor assured him.

All right, well, I guess I need to get working on this, Gabriel said, and a shiver went through him. Would this plan succeed? So far their plans had been zero for one. He couldn't fail again.

You will not fail. This was how it had to be. How it has always been meant to be, I think, Aemrys said.

You will change your mind. Cthulhu's whisper was in Gabriel's head, but this time it didn't seem like a memory.

He *was* changing his mind. He was going to call Cthulhu and he would see it in the flesh again exactly where he had seen it last: at his parents' graves.

CHAPTER SIX

LAST CHANCE

The temple pulled at Gabriel, reeled him in on a string that seemed to connect him and the statue of Cthulhu, which still resided inside the temple's walls despite his friends' best efforts. He didn't have to *see* the land to know that he was going in the right direction. The string *thrummed* and his own new sense of direction led him unerringly to it. He swam under the water the whole way and only surfaced when the sandbar finally rose to meet his feet. The temple *glowed* ahead of him like a silvery blue beacon.

A beacon of death, Gabriel thought, and it didn't seem like hyperbole looking at the evilly glittering building. The temple was meant to draw one in with its unearthly beauty, and then madness and death lay inside. *Just like what happened to Henry and now Johnson.*

Two of Johnson's goons who were patrolling the beach saw him rise up from the waves. They stiffened and their guns, which looked like AK-47s to Gabriel's untrained eye, swung towards him. He heard their guttural commands to stop and identify himself. Fear skittered up his spine, but he remained calm, on the *outside* at least. The surf was gentle that night and the undertow weak. Gabriel hardly felt the suck of sand from beneath his heels as he stood still to address them.

"Tell Johnson Tims that Gabriel Braven is here," Gabriel said, raising his voice slightly so that he could be heard over the shush and crash of the waves.

The goons stiffened again when he said Johnson's name and then his own. He was who they were looking for, after all. He was who they were *hunting* for. But they had not expected him to give himself up to them willingly. One of them tilted his head to the side in order to speak into a walkie-talkie clipped to the shoulder strap of his bulletproof vest. There was a burst of crackly static and then Johnson's voice, slightly garbled, squawked over the line.

"What?" Johnson asked, his voice clipped.

"We've got a kid here that says he's Gabriel Braven, sir," the goon said. "He looks like the picture you showed us of the boy."

There was only the slightest hesitation before Johnson responded, "Bring him to me."

The eagerness Gabriel heard from the ex-military man's voice had him swallowing bile. Johnson no longer had to hide his true desires. Where before he

had to pretend to be merely a concerned friend, now his obsession with Cthulhu and the Mers, especially Gabriel, was revealed. For his part, Gabriel no longer had to pretend either. He wasn't human. He was Mer. And he didn't have to fake politeness with Johnson this time around.

"Walk slowly towards us," the goon on his right ordered.

"I'm unarmed," Gabriel said as he lifted his arms into the air to show them that his hands were empty. His wet shirt clung to his sides and his gills fluttered.

Could the goons see the strange movement beneath the nearly see-thru material? The moon was high and bright. The temple cast its own glow as well, reaching the edge of the waterline. Johnson had told them what he wasn't human. Emerging from the sea like he had might have given them a clue anyways. But neither of them looked away from his face.

"Keep your hands up," the other goon said.

"What do you think I'm going to do to you? What did you think a group of college students was going to do to you?" Gabriel challenged. He recognized these two as the ones that had run after Casillus and shot him with a tranquilizer dart like they were hunting for sport. Gabriel's hands curled into fists at his sides. "Do you like hurting unarmed people?"

"Be quiet!" the first goon said. His voice was steady. His eyes though were narrowed.

"Has Johnson told you that *we* are the enemy? That *I* am an enemy?" Gabriel asked. The water was ankle deep now and Gabriel nearly laughed at the fact that he desperately wanted to go back into the ocean at that moment. Leaving it felt like he was leaving home and safety. The irony ran deep.

"Are you saying you're not?" The goon who asked was about six foot two and heavily built. He had closely cropped blond hair and a pleasant, angular face.

"Don't engage," the other goon hissed in warning. He was dark-haired and weak-jawed. "You know what Johnson said—"

"Johnson is *wrong*," Gabriel interrupted. "Even now, he's in the temple, isn't he? Staring at that statue? I'm sure that's what he's doing. You must feel how *strange* he's become. He's going mad. He *is* mad."

The goons stirred uneasily, and it confirmed what Gabriel already guessed. More than guessed, Gabriel realized that he could *sense* Johnson's mind in the temple. He sensed, too, the dark, oily threads of Cthulhu's influence on the ex-military man, though Johnson himself was not aware of it. Gabriel realized that he likely felt Johnson's mind over Casillus, Corey, Greta or Roger's because of that

influence. He was Cthulhu's Caller and Johnson was Cthulhu's victim. That meant that there was a connection between them. And there was nothing that Gabriel could do about it.

Johnson wants this confrontation. I can try to talk him out of it, but I already know it won't work. But what about these guys? Do they have to die, too? Is it too late to save them?

"Shut it," the dark-haired goon snarled. "Get out of that water *now*. We're taking you to Johnson."

The muzzles of the goons' guns did not waver from the center of his chest as Gabriel finally stepped out onto the beach. Gravity fully reasserted itself with a vengeance and Gabriel felt heavy and ungainly again, so unlike the sleek graceful being he had been in the water moments before. Dry sand dusted his feet like powdered sugar. The grains were cool now that the sun had long since gone down. Gabriel shivered slightly as a breeze flattened his wet clothes against his skin. He *yearned* for the warmth of the water and its silky embrace, but Casillus and Corey, not to mention Greta and Roger, were in the temple and he had to save them.

I'm really more Mer than human now, Gabriel realized as his gills fluttered at his sides.

"You should leave here," Gabriel said to the goons. "You really should leave here. Bad things are going to happen. And I can't save you. Johnson can't save you. His actions are going to kill you."

"Johnson is going to stop you and your kind," the blond goon said, his earlier doubts seemingly gone.

"*My kind?* What he's after isn't *my kind*. It isn't anyone's kind," Gabriel said.

"Enough! You're going to Johnson. Marko, you keep watch," the dark-haired goon said.

"Are you sure, Jax, I—"

"He's just a kid," Jax scoffed. "And he's unarmed. Besides, he wants to go see Johnson, don't you?"

The last was addressed to Gabriel. He smiled thinly at Jax. "That's why I'm here."

That, and to save Casillus and my friends and the Eastern Seaboard.

Jax gestured with the muzzle of the gun for Gabriel to walk ahead of him. The goon followed closely behind him. When Gabriel glanced back, he realized that Jax had his gun pointed at the middle of his back. Marko remained on the beach, probably to guard against any other swimmers that might emerge from the deep. He needn't have bothered. No one else was coming here. Cthulhu awaited out in

the ocean. Gabriel could feel its amusement and slight eagerness to face the “forlorn soldier,” as it called Johnson.

Is this going to work? Will Johnson really agree to go in a boat to meet it? Won't he recognize the danger?

But really, what was the difference between meeting Cthulhu on land or on water? Other than the possibility of it pulling the boat beneath the waves? Yet those tentacles could just as easily pull them into the surf even if they were standing on the beach. There were all kinds of reasons why it hardly mattered where they met Cthulhu. Madness and death would follow. Yet Gabriel's earlier confidence started to pour out of him with every step towards the temple. He had to somehow convince Johnson that he would only get his showdown away from land.

Gabriel had just reached the bottom of the steps that led up to the temple's entrance when Johnson appeared in the open doorway, a large black silhouette. Golden light limned him. Gabriel guessed that Johnson and his goons had set up large spotlights inside the temple to add to the illumination cast by the temple's glowing blocks. He peered around Johnson's bulky form, but couldn't see Casillus or the others. His heart lurched sickly. They had to be okay.

“Gabriel! I'm so glad you're here,” Johnson said. “I feared that you would stay away.”

“Like I had a choice?” Gabriel asked as he climbed the steps. He felt his lungs straining from the effort, but he managed to walk and talk at the same time. “You are holding my friends hostage.”

“They aren't hostages. We're just keeping them out of harm's way. Well, the *humans* aren't hostages at any rate,” Johnson said. He then spoke to the goon. “Jax, go back to your station. I'll radio you when it's time to move.”

“But, sir—”

“Gabriel doesn't intend to harm me. He has no weapons. But I do.” Johnson patted the powerful looking handgun that was in a holster under his left arm.

“Yes, sir,” Jax said and saluted. He then turned on his heel and returned the way he had come.

Gabriel stepped up onto the platform before the temple's doors. The internal glow of the stones flared brighter with every step he took. The temple knew who and what he was. He was Cthulhu's Caller and this was Cthulhu's temple. Yet for all the strength that should have given him, Gabriel had to rest for a moment when he reached the top of the steps as his lungs literally *ached*.

Definitely more Mer than man now, Gabriel thought with an hysterical chuckle.

Gabriel rested his hands on the tops of his thighs and focused on breathing. When he finally straightened up, he realized that Johnson was just five feet away from him. A stirring of unease ran through Gabriel. The ex-military man was looking more like a current military man. Johnson was dressed in black and gray fatigue pants, a black, tight T-shirt and a bulletproof vest. When Gabriel tried to speak, but was too winded to do so, Johnson suddenly moved to his side as if to assist him. Gabriel reared back from the man, warding off Johnson's touch. His gaze met Johnson's.

"Don't," Gabriel said simply. His voice was low and filled with anger.

"*Don't?* You need help, Gabriel," Johnson said, his bull-like voice strangely soft.

"Not from the man who kidnapped my friends, I don't," Gabriel spat out. "And I don't need help. I'm just—"

"*Transitioning*," Johnson interrupted, somehow knowing the word that the Mer used to describe changing from human to Mer. Maybe Miskatonic *did* have secret information. There was a mixture of amazement and something else in Johnson's tone as he said it, too.

Gabriel hesitated a moment before speaking again. There was a trill of fear low in his belly, but the feeling was merely a remnant of old concerns. He knew he could tell the truth now because Johnson was either going to die or go mad that night, and then it wouldn't matter what he knew. Besides, Johnson already seemed to know all about his secrets. He wasn't revealing anything to the former soldier that he hadn't already guessed.

"Yes, I'm transitioning into a Mer and I don't have much time left on land," Gabriel said finally.

"You haven't told Grace," Johnson said, a statement not a question.

"I'm going to," Gabriel said. "And at the exact same time, I'm going to tell her that *you* got close to her just so you could find that out about me. That you *used* her. You're not fit to kiss the ground she walks on, Johnson, and you might as well have spit on her."

There was a flicker of some emotion—guilt, maybe—that flowed over Johnson's face, but it was gone so quickly that Gabriel wondered if he had imagined it altogether.

"You were not the *only* reason I approached Grace," Johnson said. "But I did know that whatever was between us would end after..." He let the sentence hang.

After what? After he uses me as bait for Cth-it? After he kills me because I'm Mer and he thinks I'm the enemy?

"Yeah, Johnson, it's so over with my grandmother," Gabriel said, anger deepening his voice.

All of this is over. You just don't know it yet.

"It's just the beginning," Johnson parried.

"I want to see Casillus and my friends," Gabriel demanded, ignoring Johnson's provocative words.

He tried to step around Johnson and enter the temple. But Johnson quickly blocked him and laid a heavy hand on Gabriel's shoulder. When Gabriel tried to throw it off, Johnson merely tightened his hold.

"Not yet," Johnson said. "We need to speak. Just the two of us for a time. Before I let you get near *him*."

For a moment, Gabriel didn't know who Johnson was talking about. Who was 'him'? Did he mean the statue? But Cthulhu was an *it* not a *him*. And then he realized that Johnson meant *Casillus*.

"What do you think is going to happen when I'm near Casillus? The one you had your men *run down* and *drug*?" Gabriel snarled.

"He—the Mers did this to you. They *changed* your body, but you grew up among us, among *humans*, Gabriel. You have to remember that humanity," Johnson said with all seriousness.

"Who says I don't?" Gabriel sputtered. The insult implicit in the comment that the *human* aspects of him were the only good aspects had him adding, "And by the way, from what I've seen the Mer are a damn sight better than *humanity* on its best day!"

"The Mers are deceitful that way. Everything about them seems to indicate *goodness*. Even their appearance. After all, the Mers are *beautiful*. So very beautiful. That beauty can make you feel and do things you wouldn't otherwise," Johnson said, his gray eyes bleak, and Gabriel felt Johnson's thumb slide along the exposed skin at the edge of his wet collar. "They're so beautiful, and that beauty is dangerous."

And suddenly, Gabriel realized something that had always been there, under the surface, in his interactions with Johnson the whole time. Something which had unnerved him, but which he had never been able to name though it was obvious now. There had always been an undercurrent of attraction in the older man's interactions with him. Johnson found *him* beautiful. Not Mers in general, but

Gabriel specifically. Gabriel made Johnson feel and do things that he allegedly wouldn't have absent Gabriel's Mer nature. Unnerved and disgusted, Gabriel reached up and grasped Johnson's wrist, trying to wrench the ex-military man's hand off of him. But it was like trying to move concrete.

"Let go, Johnson! I want to go see my friends," Gabriel hissed, his throat tight.

"You have to make the Mer Call Cthulhu," Johnson said instead of responding to Gabriel's request. Gabriel could hear the capital "C" of Call in his voice.

He thinks Casillus can Call it, Gabriel realized.

Gabriel reached again for his bond with the Mer. He felt Casillus' consciousness. The Mer was still sluggish and dazed from the drug, but he was coming out of it. Gabriel could feel the Mer's head throbbing and a raw feeling around his wrists and ankles from where they were bound by zip ties.

For a moment, Gabriel saw Casillus lying on his side in a near fetal position, long hair spread out like a fan on the temple's floor, beautiful face creased by pain. Gabriel started and inadvertently lost the connection when he realized he wasn't seeing through the Mer's eyes or just imagining Casillus like that. He had been seeing through *Corey's* eyes as well. His gift was increasing in power. He tried to reach out again to his best friend, but all he felt was a wash of fear mixed with frustration and nothing more.

"Casillus can't Call it," Gabriel found himself saying. He almost said "Cthulhu" instead of "it". The syllables wanted to form on his lips, but he knew that the monstrous creature would take that as an invitation to come to shore, especially if he said it here on the temple's steps.

"He's a Mer," Johnson said. His gray eyes stared unblinkingly at Gabriel. His thumb again lightly traced the exposed skin between Gabriel's shoulder and neck once more.

"You've got this all wrong, Johnson," Gabriel said. He tugged at that hand again. He wanted it off of him.

Johnson leaned in. He was so large that Gabriel felt like he was being crushed by the looming spectre of Johnson's shadow. The ex-military man's voice, though, retained a softness, an almost gentleness, that freaked Gabriel out more than if he had been shouting. "What have I gotten wrong, Gabriel?"

"You think the Mers are your enemy. They aren't," Gabriel said. "Cth—It isn't anyone's friend, Johnson."

"But it comes when the Mers Call," Johnson pointed out.

“Not when *all* Mers Call,” Gabriel explained. His mouth went dry. He had to tell Johnson that he could Call Cthulhu, but now he couldn’t form the words. The eagerness in Johnson, the suppressed desire, frightened him.

Johnson moved in even closer. “When *you* Call?”

Gabriel realized that he had been slowly retreating from Johnson ever since the man had leaned in, but he had run out of room. He felt the edge of the step beneath his heel. He would tumble down the stairs if he wasn’t careful.

“Johnson, if it makes landfall all of the Eastern Seaboard will go *mad* or *die*. That includes *you*,” Gabriel stressed.

“I’m well aware of the risks,” Johnson said, drawing himself up. “Do you think I haven’t prepared for them?”

“You *can’t* prepare!” Gabriel thought of the monstrous being out there in the water. No one could prepare for Cthulhu.

“On the contrary, there are many things one can do and I have done them. Cthulhu’s influence cannot affect us, but we can affect it,” Johnson’s voice was almost triumphant.

“It’s *already* affecting you,” Gabriel countered. He tried to push away his discomfort with Johnson, tried to remember that Johnson, like Henry, was sick and couldn’t help himself, that Johnson likely had been a good man before all of this. Johnson went still at his words. He didn’t even seem to blink. “It is already in your head, Johnson. The fact that you’ve done all of this? Kidnapped your own students, brought armed men here, deceived my grandmother, all that you’ve done is because of its influence.”

Gabriel tried to put all of his conviction into his voice. He reached out and touched Johnson voluntarily for the first time. The former military man watched Gabriel’s hand as it grasped one of his large biceps and gripped it hard.

“The only way to stop this is to let us take the statue away from here,” Gabriel continued. “It will break the hold it has over you before you become like Henry. Then you can talk to Casillus and me about the Mers and—and *it*. You’ll see that —”

“Why will you not say its name, Gabriel? Why will you not say *Cthulhu*?” Johnson asked, ignoring everything he had just said and zeroing in on exactly what Gabriel didn’t want to explain.

“Because it’s not a good idea. It’s watching this place because of the statue and —”

"I have spoken its name countless times, and nothing has happened even though I wished it would," Johnson's voice was a deep rumble. "Are you not saying its name because you worship it?"

"No!" Gabriel nearly shouted. "No, no, definitely *not*."

He felt Cthulhu's amusement grow at his words. It was, of course, listening quite closely to their conversation. Gabriel felt sweat prickle his upper lip.

"Then *why* not say Cthulhu?" Johnson pressed.

"It's just not a good idea," Gabriel responded as he removed his hand from Johnson's bicep.

Johnson watched his hand retreat. Suddenly the ex-soldier snatched at it, grabbing Gabriel's hand in both of his larger ones. His hands were calloused and as strong as they appeared. His eyes were like burning coals in his face. "Gabriel, tell me why you won't say Cthulhu's name?"

"I want to see Casillus and my friends first," Gabriel's voice had taken on a rather shrill tone. He had never considered himself a weakling, but Johnson was preternaturally strong, stronger than even the muscle bound man should be.

"No, Gabriel." Johnson slowly pulled Gabriel's hand to his chest and held it there almost like how a lover might. "Tell me. Tell me now and I'll take you to them."

Gabriel licked his suddenly very dry lips. He had to tell Johnson. It was all part of the plan. Yet he didn't want to. It felt like *rewarding* the former military man. It felt like Johnson was winning if he said anything.

Johnson spoke again, "Can you Call Cthulhu, Gabriel?"

The words were like stones dropped into a still pond.

Finally, Gabriel breathed out, "Yes, I can."

CHAPTER SEVEN

CALL

“I knew it!” Johnson dropped Gabriel’s hand and slapped both of his together with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. He grasped Gabriel’s chin. “I *knew* you were special from the moment we met!”

Gabriel didn’t think his ability to Call Cthulhu was special. It was more like a *curse*. Johnson, though, was enthused, which made the whole thing even more disturbing. The ex-military man released Gabriel’s chin and started pacing in front of the temple doors with short, sharp strides.

“It’s all falling into place! This is *meant*, Gabriel!” Johnson continued.

“What’s falling into place?” Gabriel asked.

He craned his head to see around Johnson and into the temple. He needed to get to Casillus and his friends, but every time he made a move towards the temple’s doors the ex-military man countered it. Gabriel tried to sidestep him and get inside, but again Johnson was in his way. The former soldier man stopped his pacing and spun around to face him. He once again was in Gabriel’s personal space and Gabriel had no way to escape.

“You are the culmination of all I’ve been looking for since Kane,” Johnson said. There was a mixture of triumph and anger in his voice. His next words explained the anger. “They called me *crazy*! They looked at me like—like *I* was the enemy! Men and women I had served with for *twenty years*!” Johnson clenched his hands into fists so hard that they shook. “Sometimes I thought they were right! But *then* we found the temple and then—then I found *you*.”

Gabriel ignored the strangely possessive tone and words. He tried to empathize with the man as he said, “You aren’t crazy, Johnson. *Cth*—It exists. You were right. You know something that few people do—*thankfully*.” Gabriel breathed the last. “Isn’t that enough? To know? Can’t you just let it go now?”

“Let it go? How could I ignore the danger that Cthulhu poses to all of humanity?” Johnson asked. “How could *you*?”

Gabriel didn’t have an answer to that. Did he wish Cthulhu neutralized? The madness and horror that it could cause were undeniable, and those few who had unfortunately already come into its sphere had, like Henry, paid a terrible price. So why did Gabriel hesitate to answer Johnson’s question with anything other than “I can’t”? It was the “could” that tripped him up, he realized. Cthulhu wasn’t

attacking humanity right then and there. It had no intention to from all he had seen, at least not in the way Johnson envisioned it, anyways. It was dangerous and terrible, but so were many other things. Should they be condemned to death simply for being?

“It needs to just be left alone, Johnson,” Gabriel said, a thread of desperation in his voice. “I’ve *seen* it. I’ve—I’ve *talked* to it. You have no idea—*no idea*—what it’s like.”

“But I *do* know, Gabriel” Johnson disagreed. “I’ve seen what it has done. I want to stop it from doing those things to anyone else.”

“It’s *monstrous*, but it’s intelligent,” Gabriel said, his mouth going dry. “It’s wholly *other*.”

“I *know*,” Johnson said, his gray eyes glittering in the mix of lights coming from the stones and the spotlights. “That’s why Cthulhu has to be destroyed. That’s the whole crux of the matter.”

“No! You aren’t hearing me. For all its difference and dangerousness, it’s intelligent and ... *unique*. Humanity is safe from it so long as humanity stays away,” Gabriel said.

“Humanity seeks *dominion* over this entire planet. How long before humans and Cthulhu meet? Five years? Ten? Technology will bridge the gap between us and the deepest depths of the ocean and then what?” Johnson shook his head.

“We’ll deal with it then! If that time ever comes! I don’t think Cthulhu exists completely on this plane,” Gabriel said. He stopped for a moment, realizing that this was not something he had considered before, but he was pretty sure of now. “What I mean is that humankind could explore every inch of the seas and never find it.”

But they could find the Mer...

Johnson was touching him again. His hands framed Gabriel’s face and Gabriel froze. It felt like Johnson was about to kiss him. Once more he felt the edge of the stairs under his heels. But even if he had been able to back away, he wouldn’t. He had to get inside the temple where Casillus and his friends were and he wouldn’t let Johnson’s unconscious lust stop him from doing that.

“Oh, Gabriel, you have such an *innocent* heart,” Johnson tutted. “Cthulhu must be destroyed *now*.”

“It can’t be! And you still don’t understand!” Gabriel yelled as he wrenched away from Johnson’s ever questing hands. “I fear you never will until ... until it’s too late.”

He managed to step around the ex-military man and headed towards the temple's interior.

"I don't blame you for not having faith," Johnson said, causing Gabriel to look back at him almost against his will. There was something in the former military man's voice that was so forlorn. "Cthulhu would do whatever it had to in order to convince you to keep me from it—"

"I'm not keeping you from it," Gabriel said with a weak laugh.

"You'll Call it then?" Johnson grabbed him by the shoulders again, nearly shaking him. "You'll do it?"

Gabriel felt despair well up inside of him. Johnson looked like he was on *fire*. His eyes blazed with the possibility of meeting Cthulhu on a battlefield and leaving victorious. But that wasn't what was going to happen. He could faintly hear Cthulhu laughing now in the rumbling of the waves.

"Let my friends go," Gabriel said, his voice hoarse.

"If I do that then you won't Call it," Johnson said.

"That would be far better for you." Gabriel felt his stomach bubble sourly. If he did what Johnson wanted, he would be condemning him and whoever followed him to a terrible end. "Don't you see? It wants you to think you have a chance, but you *don't*. It wants me to Call it. It wants you to *die*, Johnson."

"I can destroy it, Gabriel." Johnson's eyes narrowed. "Maybe you realize that. You're its Caller, after all. You worship—"

"No!" Gabriel shouted, shaking off Johnson's hands successfully for the second time that night. "No, I don't worship it. I'm trying to save your life!"

"I don't need saving," Johnson responded.

Gabriel realized then as he stared into that craggy, determined, zealous face that there was nothing he could do. He couldn't save Johnson anymore than he could save Henry. The burn of madness was running through them both. Cthulhu's madness. He had to save who he could. Johnson was already lost.

"Then the only thing I can do is make sure you don't kill anyone else in the process," Gabriel replied. Johnson did not flinch. He looked completely unmoved. Gabriel's voice then hardened as he added, "I want to see my friends. *Now*."

"Not until you promise to Call Cthulhu," Johnson said.

"I promise. But not *here*," Gabriel said.

"Then where?"

"There." Gabriel turned towards the ocean and pointed. The surface was silvered by moonlight now. It was a calm night with waves only a foot or two in height. It

looked incredibly beautiful, and Gabriel longed to be under those waves instead of on the sandy top step of the temple.

“On the water?” Johnson asked.

“It’s the only way to ensure that more people don’t die,” Gabriel said. “Don’t your protections work out there?”

“They work *anywhere*,” Johnson tilted his chin up proudly.

“So we need a boat,” Gabriel said.

“I can get a boat,” Johnson answered gruffly, as though Gabriel were challenging him.

“Good. I thought you could. Now I’m going to see my friends.”

“I am not stopping you,” Johnson said, though he did not get out of Gabriel’s way.

Gabriel circled around Johnson and strode into the temple. He had failed with the former military man, but he wouldn’t fail his friends. His heart was in his throat as he looked for Casillus and the others. When he saw them, he realized that he was right to have been worried. The four of them were all bound and gagged. That explained why none of them had called out to him while he was arguing outside with Johnson. They also were all injured.

They were lying against the back wall of the temple, feet jutting straight out in front of them, bound at the ankles with black zip ties, with their wrists evidently fastened behind their backs as well. White cloth had been used to gag them. Yet another goon, this one black-haired and dead-eyed, was standing to the side of them with his AK-47 unslung and pointed vaguely in their direction.

Greta was leaning her head against Roger’s shoulder. There was a cut across her left temple, as if she had been struck. Roger had a few scrapes along his legs. His eyes blazed with anger and fear. Corey, though, looked the worst. The sweatpants he had borrowed from Gabriel were ripped and dirty. There was sand in his hair and beard. His right ankle was visible, and Gabriel could see that it was already swelling. Gabriel made an inarticulate sound of anger at this. Corey’s bright brown eyes looked pleadingly into Gabriel’s and then darted towards Casillus.

Gabriel’s gaze slid over to the Mer. He could sense from their still hazy bond that Casillus was still groggy. Casillus was still lying on his side. For a terrible minute, Gabriel was reminded of that fish out of water he had found on the beach as a child, straining for breath just before it died. Casillus’ blue-green gaze found his and the Mer’s eyes widened in shock and dismay.

Gabriel, you should not be here! Casillus said, his voice slurred.

Don't worry. Aemrys and I have a plan, Gabriel said as he rushed forward, intent on helping all of them. He would pull those gags off, get Casillus sitting upright, and have those bonds removed. But the moment he took that first frantic step forward, the black-haired goon's AK-47 swung around and pointed directly at the center of his chest. Gabriel froze.

"Point that someplace else!" Gabriel growled at the goon.

Gabriel, get out of here! Casillus pleaded.

No! I told you, Aemrys and I have a plan. It'll work! Gabriel cried.

Johnson is lost to madness. He may seem normal, but he—

I know, Gabriel responded bleakly. *The plan takes advantage of that.*

"Johnson, tell your goon to lower his weapon!" Gabriel snapped when the goon still did not move.

He had felt Johnson's presence come into the temple behind him. He sensed the connection between them and the statue in the next room. The statue perched evilly in the inner sanctum. Gabriel fought not to stare at it. It didn't look like Roger and Greta had even had the chance to put it in a pot to take it out of the temple at all.

Best laid plans, Gabriel thought. He hoped the same didn't apply to his and Aemrys' plan. He really needed it to work. All of humanity did.

"It's all right, Greer. He can go to them," Johnson said finally.

Greer slowly lowered his weapon, though his dark eyes still expressed distrust. Gabriel didn't care. He immediately ran over and dropped down among his friends. His hands flew between all of them taking off the gags, which had exclamations of delight and relief coming from all of them. Even Casillus let out a sigh. He then gently pulled the Mer up to a seated position and positioned him so that he could rest his back against the wall.

"Gabriel, what are you doing here?" Greta asked, her voice raspy but high with fright. Her eyes, though, were full of determination as they flickered over to Johnson and then back to him.

"Yeah, Gabe, you shouldn't be here," Corey echoed earnestly.

"It's okay. Johnson and I have come to a deal," Gabriel explained.

"What deal?" Corey rasped out, his brown eyes full of suspicion and worry.

Yes, Gabriel, what is all this? Casillus sounded much more alert now, and he was staring hard at Gabriel's face.

Gabriel allowed Casillus to simply access the memories of his conversations with both Aemrys and Johnson instead of summarizing it for him. The Mer's eyes

widened hugely before a troubled look came into them.

This is too great a risk, Casillus said.

It's the only way. Believe me. I tried everything I could with Johnson, Gabriel said.

The Mer's expression softened. *I know. I just... I do not want you near Johnson, let alone with him and Cthulhu.*

It's always with me, Casillus, Gabriel confessed. *Even now I can hear it's thoughts and it can hear mine. It knows what I'm saying and doing. It knows what I've planned.*

The Mer stilled. *I... see. I did not know this.*

Neither did I until a little earlier today, Gabriel explained. *It is a connection that I will have to keep from you. Everything about it—*

Be at ease, Casillus interrupted. *I understand.*

Yet the Mer prince looked so sad for Gabriel then. He obviously felt that it was a hard and heavy burden for Gabriel to bear on his own. Gabriel sensed the Mer make a silent promise that he would help Gabriel however he could with this.

Thank you, but just you being with me is enough, Gabriel assured him.

At that moment, Gabriel let out a snarl of annoyance as he found he was unable to break the zip tie bonds with his hands. He called over his shoulder, "Johnson, I need something to cut these bonds off of everyone." His words were met with silence so Gabriel demanded, "Now, Johnson! Or do you want to delay your confrontation with it?"

"The Mer stays bound. He is coming with us," Johnson said.

"No!" Gabriel spun around. His heart was in his throat and he felt rather wild. "Not happening!"

Johnson looked unconcerned by Gabriel's menacing expression and replied mildly, "I need to ensure that you Call Cthulhu for me."

"I've given you my word!" Gabriel cried. "I'm going to do it! I've tried to save you, Johnson, but you don't want saving, so I'll do what you ask to save everyone else."

"I'm afraid that while I *want* to trust you, I *cannot* do so," Johnson said, and he actually looked sad about it. "Your mind has undoubtedly been affected by the transition. This Mer can speak with you telepathically. And perhaps he can do more than just speak. Perhaps he can control you."

"He can't and he wouldn't even if he could!" Gabriel yelled, but then he stopped himself. Johnson wasn't going to believe him. The ex-military man was so full of suspicion and craziness that he wouldn't be able to recognize the truth. "Casillus *cannot* come with us."

“Why?” Johnson tilted his head to the side.

“Because if he does it’ll be worse for him than if I let you put a bullet in his head,” Gabriel said.

Silence fell over everyone in the temple.

“What does he mean, sir?” Greer asked.

“It’s simple. Facing *it* means madness and death for men *and* Mers,” Gabriel said.

“But not for you?” Johnson clarified.

“No, because I’m a Caller,” Gabriel said. “So if I bring Casillus on that boat with us, he’ll go mad or die or go mad and *then* die. It’s all the same. So he’s not going on the boat. Corey, Greta and Roger aren’t going either. You’re releasing them.”

There is a cost for you to face Cthulhu as well, Gabriel, Casillus said forlornly.

I’ll pay it to save you guys and the rest of humanity, Gabriel said.

Oh, my brave love, Casillus responded with passion, but his eyes were filled with pain.

“I told you that I have protection for us,” Johnson said.

“I don’t believe it will work,” Gabriel responded curtly.

“So you expect me to go mad and die then?” Johnson asked, eyebrows rising.

“I think I’ve made it crystal clear that that is exactly what I believe,” Gabriel said.

“So nobody else is going, but you and me and, I guess, whatever goons you want to bring.”

“Then the Mer stays here under guard with the others. All of them remain bound,” Johnson replied after a moment. “No one leaves here until I succeed.”

Gabriel gritted his teeth. Johnson wouldn’t believe that he would Call Cthulhu without the pressure of saving Casillus and his friends’ lives. But if—*no, when*—he came back to shore without Johnson? What would Greer do to them then?

A voice bubbled up in his mind, full of ancient malevolence, *Do not be afraid—afraid—afraid. Do you think these little men—little—little—forlorn soldiers—can hurt you?*

Not me, Gabriel answered Cthulhu. Casillus. Corey. Greta. Roger.

You and yours are safe. I protect them, the monstrous being responded.

You don’t have to make landfall to save them? Gabriel asked.

There was a shaking, echoing sound, which was Cthulhu’s now-familiar laughter. *Did I have to be on land to destroy Henry and so many more—destroy more—destroy more—destroy all?* When Gabriel remained quiet, Cthulhu said, *Bring the forlorn soldier to me and I will save you and yours. A promise—promise—promise, my Caller.*

Gabriel leaned in and kissed Casillus hard on the mouth and then he rose to his feet. All eyes were on him. He found that he could only look at the Mer as he said, "All right, Johnson. I agree to your terms. Get your boat."

"Now? You wish to Call it to me now?" Johnson asked. He sounded surprised.

Oh, Gabriel, the Mer breathed sadly.

"Yes, Johnson, I will Call it for you now," Gabriel answered.

Cthulhu let out more terrible, echoing laughter as it said, *I knew you would change your mind.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POWER OF STONE

The ocean's spray peppered Gabriel's face as the speed boat headed to where his parents' sailboat had gone down. He closed his eyes and relished the cool wetness. He felt Casillus doing the same through their bond. The Mer was suffering from lack of water. Through Casillus' senses, Gabriel could smell the dry dusty scent of the interior of the temple. Despite their liquid blue appearance the stone seemed to soak up moisture, leaving everything else desiccated.

Other than being thirsty, though, the Mer was mostly unharmed. Johnson had grudgingly allowed their bonds to be cut off since Greer had the gun. Being freed had allowed Casillus to help the others, especially Corey, whose ankle had turned a deeper shade of purple. Gabriel's best friend likely wouldn't be able to walk for a week or more. Greta's face was pale as milk. Roger hugged her tighter to him, but his touch didn't seem to soothe her. Whenever Casillus looked at her she was glancing nervously at Greer. Though the goon appeared relaxed, his gun was more often pointed at them than the ground. Gabriel's jaw clenched. He had to save them.

You swam by yourself, the Mer suddenly said proudly. Gabriel knew Casillus was trying to take his mind off of where they were going and what was going to happen.

I would do anything for you, Casillus, Gabriel responded. His lips curled into a smile and a warm flame of happiness that not even this direst of moments could extinguish bloomed in his chest. *I'm not scared of the water anymore.*

No, you are not. Such wonders we shall see together beneath the waves, my love! I promise you splendors the likes of which you have never imagined, Casillus said, his voice going lyrical. The dry as dust feeling in the Mer's mouth undoubtedly made him crave those wonders more than ever.

Gabriel, who had feared leaving the land so much, now was wishing with all his heart that he and Casillus were on their way to Emralis, because that would mean this terrible thing with Johnson was done and everyone was safe.

After this I'm not sure I'll be afraid of anything else ever again, Gabriel found himself saying. He immediately wished he had not. He did not want to weigh down Casillus with his fears.

What will happen is not your fault, Casillus said, his voice deepening with emotion. Concern, love, the desire to be there, holding him, protecting him, flowed over their bond. *Johnson has chosen his path.*

I tried to talk him out of it, didn't I? I did all I could to stop this, right? Gabriel found himself asking more than believing.

Yes, you did all that anyone could, Casillus replied loyally.

We're not there yet, though. Could I do more? Gabriel paused and measured the distance between them and Cthulhu. Still half a mile away. If he closed his eyes he could actually *see* Cthulhu floating only fifty feet below the surface. And if he followed its tentacles down, down, down he knew he would find some of them caressing a barnacle-encrusted vessel. He swallowed deeply. *We're about ten minutes away.*

It will be all right, Casillus promised, and his certainty wrapped around Gabriel.

One life for the safety of the entire East Coast. Actually, three lives. Marko and Jax had joined him and Johnson on the boat. Marko was behind the wheel while Jax and Johnson were going over what looked like old parchments. They thought words would stop Cthulhu. Words and *stones*.

"He has stones from a place called Ecthelian. Supposedly they have magical spells cast upon them to keep away darkness," Greta had explained in hushed tones while Marko had brought the boat around. Evidently, Johnson had explained the entire plan to them before Gabriel had arrived.

"Stones? *Magic stones?* That's what he thinks is going to save him?" Gabriel had asked and then shook his head.

"That and an incantation," Roger had whispered. "Supposedly it will send Cthulhu back to the Outer Dark where it came from."

"Stones and words. Isn't there a nursery rhyme about that?" Gabriel had almost felt badly for Johnson then. It was all so pathetic.

"Be careful, Gabe. The things he's bringing along may not be that impressive, but he's—he's crazy," Corey warned.

"He's a great man," Greer had growled at them then. "He's saving humanity."

Gabriel had straightened up and stared at the man standing there with a gun and dead eyes. "The statue has affected Johnson. It affects everyone near it."

"Meaning me? I don't think so, kid. That ugly thing can't affect me. You have to actually touch it for it to do anything and I haven't so much as coughed on it. I'm surprised you think the statue's so powerful. After all, weren't you the one just scoffing at the power of *stone*?" Greer had responded with a sneer.

Gabriel had looked over at the squat statue of Cthulhu resting in the inner sanctum. It had glimmered at him. Maybe Greer had a point.

Johnson stepped up beside him at the boat's rail, breaking him out of his memories. Unlike his parents' sailboat, this vessel was made for speed. Gabriel tried to move away from the former soldier. His knee brushed against one of the pale knee-high white stones from Ecthelian in the process. There were four of them. Three of them had been put in the corners of the cabin. Johnson had said he would put the final stone, the one Gabriel had just touched, in the remaining corner once Gabriel Called Cthulhu. The stone was cold. Gabriel found himself jerking his bare skin away from it and rubbing the spot. Maybe Greer *really* had a point about the power of stone.

In order to be heard over the roar of the engine, Johnson spoke directly into the shell of Gabriel's ear. "How much farther?"

Gabriel grimaced, but he reluctantly turned his mouth towards Johnson's ear as well to tell him how far, but the former military man had not turned away. Gabriel and Johnson's lips were only half an inch apart. Gabriel reared back and nearly toppled over. Johnson caught him around the waist. For one long moment, Gabriel froze in Johnson's arms. The former military man's gray eyes were unreadable. Gabriel tried in vain to break the unwanted intimacy by pushing at that rock hard chest, but it was like trying to move a mountain.

"Let me go, Johnson!" Gabriel cried, but his voice was robbed of all strength by the overpowering sounds of the engine and the sea.

"You'll fall if I do," Johnson said.

What is he doing? Casillus' voice was strained. *What is he—he cannot touch you! He has no right to touch you!*

"Let me fall! I don't care!" Gabriel yelled.

"But I *do*," Johnson said. "I'm doing this for you. Not just humanity, but for *you*, Gabriel. To save you."

Gabriel stared at him with wide uncomprehending eyes, unable to follow the man's abrupt shift in topic. "Save me? Johnson, I'm only in danger from *you*."

"The Mers want to change your body and mind. I may not be able to fix your body, but I can save your mind," Johnson said. "I believe delivering you from Cthulhu will help with that. Greatly."

He is mad! Casillus snarled. *He speaks of minds being affected, but it is only his own that is diseased! That and his desire for you has taken all reason from him!*

Maybe that's the key, then. Maybe I'm the key, Gabriel said.

What? Gabriel, no! Johnson cannot be reasoned with—

I have to try. One last time, Gabriel responded slowly.

No, Gabriel, he will not do what you want no matter what you offer him!

He's going to die and die horribly in front of me, Casillus. I have to know I've done everything I can to stop that, Gabriel said.

"What do you want, Johnson?" Gabriel challenged. He stopped trying to push Johnson away from him even though he longed to do so.

"I've told you, Gabriel. To help you," he said with an amused smile.

"Do you want *me*?" Gabriel asked.

Those dark eyes flickered over to the other men on the boat, but they either didn't hear what Gabriel said or pretended not to. "I want to help you."

"How? Exactly?" Gabriel asked. His hands were flush against Johnson's chest.

Five minutes away. Just five minutes away. Then madness and death. Even if it was justified, it would mark him. He would have allowed three men to die.

"However you need to be," Johnson rumbled.

"If you want to help me then you need to turn this boat around," Gabriel said. "We can help each other."

"You really think I'm going to die in this battle?" Johnson asked. His hands lingered on Gabriel's waist. His touch was appalling. He had caressed Gabriel's grandmother with those hands just the night before. Gabriel wanted to shake them off. He wanted to scream. But he reminded himself that Johnson was sick.

"Yes, I really do. And Jax and Marko, too, as I keep saying," Gabriel said.

Four more minutes and they would be there.

No, Gabriel, you cannot be his! You cannot!

I'm yours, Casillus. Nothing can change that. But his life—

Is his to throw away! He will try to keep you in a cage! If the madness does not kill him, he will never let you go! But I will not either! I will kill him myself to save you! Casillus yelled.

Johnson gently touched Gabriel's hair. "We're going to spend a lot of time together after this, Gabriel. I'll take care of you."

"What?" *No, you'll be dead, Johnson, and I'll be in the sea.* "You're letting me and my friends go if I call Cthu—it for you!"

"No, Gabriel. I can let your friends go, but you and Casillus...you have to stay with us," Johnson said.

Gabriel jerked away from him then. He nearly toppled over but he caught his balance. "You're changing the deal, Johnson!"

Three minutes away.

His heart thudded sickly in his chest. His mind offered images of himself and Casillus in tanks of water while scientists observed them, took samples from them, tortured them. Casillus had been right all along. Johnson couldn't be reasoned with.

"We can't have you going back to the Mers and telling them what we know," Johnson said. His gray eyes were flat and expressionless.

"The Mer communicate *telepathically*, Johnson. So *bullshit* that you're worried about us talking to them!" Gabriel yelled.

Aemrys knows his plans! Casillus cried. *He has told our people. They will not let Johnson keep us!*

No, they won't, Gabriel realized with a chill.

"It'll be war," Gabriel said out loud. "You want a war with the Mers."

"Without Cthulhu to protect them, I think the fight will be fairly on humanity's side," Johnson said mildly.

"And everyone who didn't believe you when you told them that there was a threat in the ocean suddenly will, won't they? They'll have to admit that they were wrong about you. You'll have their respect back and more. But that'll only be because you will have created the threat, right, Johnson?" Gabriel snapped.

The former military man said nothing.

Johnson couldn't be saved, or if he could, it would be at the expense of a war between Mer and humankind. The price was too high to save him. The stark fact sat there and Gabriel let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. Johnson had to die so that many more would live. The decision was made.

Two minutes away.

I knew you would change your mind, my Caller, Cthulhu rumbled.

"You may have told the Mers much already, but you do not know everything." Johnson grasped the final stone and carried it over to the empty corner. "We're there, aren't we, Gabriel? Where your parents' boat went down? That's where Cthulhu is, isn't it? That's what the scanners are telling us, anyways."

They were there. He could feel Cthulhu below them. Waiting. Watching. Amused.

Gabriel began, "If you already knew where it was—"

"Cthulhu wouldn't have stayed without you being on board, and you still need to Call it up, don't you? Or will it come on its own?" Johnson asked.

I only come for you—my Gabriel—my Caller—for you—to kill the forlorn soldier, Cthulhu rumbled.

Yes, I know. I understand, Gabriel said.

“One minute to go,” Gabriel confirmed. “And Cthulhu comes *only* for me.”

It felt strange to say Cthulhu’s name finally, but also *right*. He had no fear now. No doubt. He would endure what was to come and have no regrets.

Gabriel, Casillus called to him softly. He hadn’t heard Cthulhu’s voice, but he felt what Gabriel did and knew that Gabriel had come to a decision.

Casillus, I need to close down our bond now, Gabriel said. *I need to protect you.*

I understand, Casillus said, and Gabriel did feel understanding over the bond, but he also felt Casillus’ anguish at not being with him, at having put Gabriel in an impossible position. *You have decided?*

Yes.

You will Call Cthulhu and Johnson will die.

Yes, Gabriel’s voice was softer.

It is the right thing. I... it is the right thing, Casillus said.

I know, Gabriel said. *There is no other way. And it’s my decision, Casillus. Mine alone. Not yours. Not the Mers. Mine. I’m good with that.*

I will never allow you to be harmed like this again. I swear it, Casillus said.

I—I love you, Casillus, Gabriel sent.

And I you, my Gabriel.

Gabriel winnowed down the bond, sending one last flow of love over it to the Mer. Then he said to Johnson, “We’re here.”

The boat’s motor revved down and then cut off. The sea was completely flat now. Like glass. It reflected the sky above them. Stars upon stars upon stars, and the moon was a bone white disc. It was a fitting battlezone.

“Will you Call Cthulhu now, Gabriel?” Johnson asked. He was standing over near the empty corner, stone hefted up on one of his massive shoulders.

“Yes, I’ve done all I can to save you,” Gabriel said while meeting Johnson’s gaze for the last time. He would think of this moment as the one when he said goodbye to the man. He looked over at Jax and Marko, too. They would die. His actions would cause that.

Gabriel then looked over the side of the boat. He could see the phosphorescent discs on Cthulhu’s tentacles moving beneath the water as the tentacles stirred through the water. They were no more than twenty feet below the boat’s keel.

Gabriel reached out mentally to the monstrous being just like he did for Casillus. Cthulhu reached back.

For a moment, the world was blotted out and Gabriel thought he might have swooned. He was enveloped in a darkness so deep that it seemed like the very idea of light was not possible. And there was a bone-deep coldness, a bottom of the ocean cold that seeped into Gabriel's body and chilled him to the core. He sensed that some memory of this coldness would always be with him. He would never feel completely warm again. The price a Caller paid. Suddenly Gabriel was aware of the world again, both above and below the water.

I Call you, Cthulhu. I Call you to strike down the Mers' enemies.

I come, my Caller, I come... I come... I come...

The water frothed and bubbled as the monstrous creature rose up from the depths. The boat rocked wildly, nearly sending Gabriel onto his ass, but he grabbed ahold of the railing and held on. There were shouts from Marko and Jax, but not Johnson. The former military man seemed as unconcerned by the rocking as he would have been by waves in a bathtub. He kept his feet planted firmly and continued to balance the stone on his shoulder. Waiting and watching for his enemy to surface.

Gabriel's eyes left him and fixed on the spot where he knew the top of Cthulhu's bulbous head would break the surface. He would see it with his own eyes now. The water roiled as if it were boiling from heat, but there was nothing warm about Cthulhu. Gabriel wouldn't have been surprised to see the water turn to ice.

And then Cthulhu burst through the water's surface. It rose up and up and up and up until it blotted out the sky and was the only thing to be seen. A mountain growing out of the sea. A mountain of madness. Gabriel felt a thin trill of a scream whistle in the back of his throat as he looked at it.

Its skin was the color of an oil slick dotted with green-gold phosphorescent discs. Its countless eyes were the size of tires and glittered under the bone-white moon. Its tentacles spread out across the water like a writhing army of snakes large enough to crush a town with one swipe. A piping sound filled the air. Cthulhu was magnificent and terrible and connected to Gabriel at the most intimate level.

He heard Marko and Jax scream then. Both soldiers were gripping their heads and screaming as if they were hearing an unbearable sound. Blood leaked from their ears, noses, eyes, and mouths. It would be over soon. Their brains would liquify and they would fall to the ground. Dead. All over soon. This was not a battle. Not even a slaughter. Cthulhu was a force of nature that could not be

stopped. Knowing that the land tribe had faced this horror for their crimes, too, enabled Gabriel to forgive them. For this was the ultimate punishment. Nothing could be more horrible than this.

Gabriel's head turned towards Johnson expecting to see the same terrible bleeding and dying. There was blood leaking from Johnson's right eye, but he wasn't screaming. He was *smiling*. He stared at Cthulhu with satisfaction. And then Johnson set the final stone down into the corner of the cabin.

Silence.

The piping and screams were suddenly cut off. Gabriel thought for a moment he had lost his hearing, but then he heard Marko and Jax moaning. But that moaning lessened soon. The goons' hands left their heads. Blood droplets spattered the boat's bottom as the goons blinked. They were coming back to reason. Gabriel realized that he could also hear the swish of Cthulhu's tentacles in the water, too. But he couldn't *hear* Cthulhu. Not the piping and not the monstrous being's voice in his mind. He couldn't hear Casillus either. Even with their bond winnowed down to its smallest, there had still been some sense of the Mer's presence. But not now. There was an emptiness in Gabriel's soul. He was cut off from Cthulhu and the Mers. He was truly alone.

"And now to free you, Gabriel," Johnson said as he picked up one of the parchments and indicated for Jax and Marko to do the same.

The three of them began the incantation and it was Gabriel's turn to scream.

CHAPTER NINE

LANDFALL

Gabriel fell to his knees and screamed as the chanting swelled in volume. His blood felt like it was *burning* inside his veins. The pain was so great it almost felt *pure* in some terrible way. His fingernails clawed at his arms and shoulders as if he could dig his own blood out to stop the agony it was causing him. In contrast, he didn't feel the red welts that he scratched into his skin. He curled into a ball then, unable to remain upright.

CASILLUS! CTHULHU! He reached for them vainly over bonds that did not seem to exist. He was in a glass box, stopped on all sides from reaching out and from them reaching back.

Through the pain that cramped his body, keeping him in a curled ball on the bottom of the boat, he desperately strained his head around to look up at Cthulhu. Why wasn't it attacking? Why weren't Johnson and his men dead? Why wouldn't the chanting stop? But in a second the answer to all those questions became painfully clear. The water was roiling around Cthulhu. Huge waves were rising up as the monstrous creature surged up and down, yet the boat was not moving. The sea around it was still. Calm. For fifteen feet in any direction from the boat, the seas were like glass. Outside of this oasis of calm, Cthulhu's tentacles thrashed wildly in the air and water. The ocean outside this circle of calm looked like a sea of snakes.

Dozens of tentacles rose up and snapped towards Johnson and his goons, but they didn't get closer than the line that cut the smooth seas from the roiling waters. It was as if there was an invisible wall. Every time that the tentacles hit this wall there was a burst of electric blue sparks. Cthulhu roared and it had Gabriel curling into a tighter ball and rocking from a new agony. Its roar was like an avalanche of sound, like mountains grinding themselves to dust. He wondered why he could hear the roar, but not the trilling. Perhaps the trilling was just in his mind.

Then the sky above them suddenly flashed pure white, night turning to day. Brighter than the day. It was like the flash of atomic fire. At that moment, Gabriel remembered saying to Corey and Casillus that of all humankind's weapons only nuclear weapons had a chance of destroying Cthulhu and here was that atomic blast.

The blackness that followed was complete or maybe Gabriel had gone blind for a moment. He didn't know. He blinked his eyes again and again until finally the night sky returned. Gabriel realized that he was now lying on his back, looking up at the vastness. But something was very different than it had been before. There was a rent in the sky, a rift, a wound, and through this opening, Gabriel could see alien stars. They glittered redly and the darkness around them was somehow darker and seemed physically heavy. He feared that darkness might pour through the tear and splash down onto Earth, painting the world black.

The Outer Dark, something told him. They're going to send Cthulhu back there. They're really going to do it.

Gabriel turned his head to look at Johnson. The ex-military man's head was thrown back. Gabriel could see his profile and it was glowing in the moonlight. It reminded him of an ancient Roman general's bust. Jax and Marko did not look as triumphant. Sweat coated their pasty faces. Their hands shook like they were doddering old men and not the strong fit mercenaries they were. Jax's hair was now gray and Gabriel did not think it was just from the moonlight. His gaze then slid past them to Cthulhu itself. Gabriel saw himself reflected in those dozens of eyes, which were as large as car wheels. Though he could not feel its thoughts or emotions, he knew that there was pain and rage pulsing inside of it.

If Johnson wins then he'll take this fight to the Mers. He'll imprison my friends. He'll experiment on Casillus and me. Many, many people are going to die for no reason. I can't let this happen!

Gabriel didn't have a plan beyond getting to his feet again. He flopped back over onto his stomach and pulled his arms underneath his chest so that he could push himself up into a kneeling position. From there, he would grab the boat's railing and haul himself up. But then Johnson, Jax and Marko's voices rose again. The incantation was building to a crescendo. Cthulhu roared once more. Gabriel shook with the sound. His limbs thudded against the bottom of the boat.

Why doesn't Cthulhu swim away? Swim away! Swim away! Swim away!

And then Cthulhu did begin to move. But not towards the sea, but towards *land*. It didn't move like a mountain lumbering any longer. Now it was *steaming* towards the shore. It flowed around the boat, giving it a wide berth, as it headed for the beach. Cthulhu had clearly determined that if it was going down, it was taking the Eastern Seaboard with it. Gabriel's choked "no" was completely lost against the boat's fiberglass bottom. Johnson turned with a snarl that mixed with the chant as his eyes followed the monstrous creature.

“Get the engines started!” Johnson suddenly cried. “We have to go after it!”

Jax tried to move towards the steering column, but he fell to his knees. Marko went to help him up but then he fell down, too. They looked to have aged fifty years in the past fifteen minutes. Neither man could get up again. Only Johnson appeared unaffected by his exposure to Cthulhu. At least physically. There was complete madness in his eyes. Johnson jumped over the goons and the roar of the boat’s powerful engine suddenly came to life. Johnson slammed the boat into drive and it jumped forward like an eager dog on a leash. He piloted the boat in a wide circle to turn it around. He then pushed the throttle up to maximum power and they raced after Cthulhu.

Cthulhu’s back was more horrible than its front. It had ragged wings, which were spread wide like sails. They reminded Gabriel of a bat’s wings but moth-eaten. The rear of the squid-like head was bulbous and protruded like an obscene balloon. Its back was a mountain of oily blackness. But its hideousness did not slow it down. It moved as fast as a freight train towards shore.

At first, it seemed that Johnson would not be able to draw even with Cthulhu let alone get around it to the front and stop it from making landfall. But somehow the boat gave an extra lurch of speed and they gained upon the monstrous creature.

Johnson crouched low over the controls. Sea spray glistened in his short hair. Gabriel felt the spray all over his body and it soothed him. Without the chanting, he was able to get up onto his hands and knees. The boat jumped beneath him and he had to hold onto a nearby low seat to keep from falling flat on his face again.

They circled around Cthulhu and Johnson once more stopped the boat. Now they were between the monstrous creature and land. But Gabriel knew that Cthulhu could just move further down the beach. It could outlast the fuel in Johnson’s boat. Johnson’s plan simply couldn’t work. Because in the end, his chant relied on Cthulhu staying still and there was nothing keeping it in place. Yet Cthulhu did stop as if the boat between it and the wide swath of sand was really an obstacle. Gabriel again saw himself reflected in Cthulhu’s alien eyes.

Why are you stopping? There was no answering rumble yet Gabriel suddenly knew. It was *his* choice whether Cthulhu went on to make landfall or not. *But how is it my choice? I can’t stop Johnson! What options do I have?*

Cthulhu wasn’t even moving its tentacles so that the water was still as glass again. Gabriel got to his shaky legs. He still felt drained, drained of energy by the stones surrounding him. They cut him off from the Mers and Cthulhu itself. His belief that he had ever truly been alone was completely blown out of the water. Like

Casillus had said he had just kept himself to himself because he feared the emptiness and rejection, but the Mers had always been with him

Suddenly, Johnson spun away from the controls and grabbed the parchments he had been reading from off of from the ground. He turned towards Cthulhu. His craggy face looked haggard.

“Jax! Marko! Get up! We must continue the chant!” Johnson screamed.

But the two goons were not getting up. They were unconscious in the bottom of the boat. Johnson let out a roar of frustration. Gabriel gasped when Johnson began to kick the goons’ prone bodies. Again and again and again, the thwack of Johnson’s boot into flesh rose up. Gabriel stumbled over to Johnson on legs as weak and uncertain as a newborn fawn’s.

“Stop! STOP!” he cried as he thrust Johnson back from the prone, unconscious men.

Johnson whirled towards him. There was nothing of sanity in his eyes for a moment. But then he realized it was Gabriel and shook himself like a massive bull.

“Gabriel,” he said, his voice rumbling more like a beast’s than a man’s. “You.” He pointed a finger at Gabriel’s chest. “You can help me.”

“No, Johnson, it’s *over*. Don’t you see that?” Gabriel begged. His limbs trembled. He was so exhausted and hurting. “Cthulhu will make landfall if we don’t end this now.”

Johnson though acted like he didn’t hear Gabriel or maybe he really hadn’t, because he was too full of his own thoughts. He leaned down and swiped up a selection of parchments that were half covered by Jax and Marko’s bodies. He then thrust the pages into Gabriel’s hands. The feel of the pages was strange. They didn’t feel like paper, but like ... *skin*. Human skin. He dropped them back down onto the floor.

“Gabriel, pick them up! You must help me!” Johnson roared. “Help me!”

I can’t. I have to stop you to help everyone else. I Called Cthulhu. Everything that happens is my choice. That’s the burden of being a Caller. I understand now.

But he didn’t say any of that to Johnson. He was sure if he did then Johnson would fasten those bull like hands on his neck and would wring the immortal life out of him. Yet he had to stop the ex-military man. He wasn’t strong enough to take Johnson on physically even when he was at full health and he surely wasn’t capable of it now with his strength at an all-time low. The stones had drained his energy to the barest dregs.

The stones...

And that was when he knew the thing he had to do, that he could do, and that would end this.

He found himself saying in a calm, even voice, “All right, Johnson.”

“Good, good,” Johnson said. His eyes were fixed on the silent and still Cthulhu. He moved towards the side of the boat closest to monstrous creature.

With Johnson’s gaze locked on Cthulhu, Gabriel leaned down as if to get the pages, but then he lunged forward to the nearest stone. He had his hands underneath it in mere seconds and he began to lift it up. It was heavy. Incredibly heavy. Though Johnson had seemingly tossed it around as if it weight no more than a football, every muscle in Gabriel’s legs, back and arms strained to get it up. All he had to do was tip the stone overboard. The protective barrier would then be gone and Cthulhu would take care of Johnson once and for all.

Gabriel heard Johnson’s angry snarl as the former military man realized his plan. Gabriel heaved the stone up further and was spun around by its weight. He saw Johnson barreling towards him, his face a rictus of rage and the white froth of madness on his lips. Gabriel did the only thing he could. He fell backwards, clutching the stone against his chest. He tipped over the side and into the water.

The ocean opened its embrace to him. He didn’t close his eyes as the water closed over him. He stared upwards, still holding onto the stone, letting its weight sink them both down and down and down so that the protection for the boat was surely gone.

He strained to see what was happening above him. He had to see what would happen once the protective barrier was gone. Everything that happened—every death—was his choice. By Calling Cthulhu he was responsible. He would see what he had wrought.

Bubbles cut through his vision, but his view was remarkably clear as he saw Johnson at the edge of the boat. His arms were outstretched towards Gabriel as if he could will the young man and the stone back up to him. Then the tentacles surrounded him. Dozens of them, dripping with sea water.

Johnson straightened, his hands falling to his sides, then his bull-like figure was obscured by the tentacles as they *slammed* together with him between them. Dark droplets fell into the water and drifted downwards. Blood. Johnson’s blood. Gabriel swore he could taste copper in the water. Johnson was dead and gone and could hurt no one else. It was so quick. So easy. Gabriel felt numb. He experienced neither triumph nor regret.

There was a muffled crunching sound and Gabriel's gaze was dragged up once more to the ocean's surface. Cthulhu had smashed the boat. It had become splinters with Jax and Marko still on board. They were dead, too. He felt strangely empty at the thought. They had followed Johnson after all. He had tried to warn them, but still, it was a terrible way to die.

But the Mers are safe. That is something.

For one moment, Gabriel allowed himself to sink lower with the weight of the stone on his chest, but then a tentacle streaked out of the darkness and wrapped around him.

Release—release—release the stone, my Caller, Cthulhu rumbled.

Was this all a test? Gabriel asked as he still clung to the stone.

Test? No. Choice—choice—choice.

Were you ever really in danger? Gabriel insisted though his hands had loosened their death grip on the stone.

Cthulhu said nothing in response at first. There was just a pregnant silence. Gabriel could read into that silence many things, but those things were direct opposites. Cthulhu truly could have been in danger and was too proud—or arrogant—to want to admit that a mere human had outwitted it. Or, the more likely theory was that while the chant had hurt Cthulhu, perhaps surprised it and angered it, there had been no real danger. Cthulhu instead had used this as a moment to show Gabriel the truth of what he was and the power he wielded.

You rescued—rescued—rescued me from the forlorn—dead—crushed—soldier, Cthulhu finally responded with a trace of amusement.

Yes, I did, whether you needed me to or not, Gabriel responded simply.

There was another silence. The tip of the tentacle that was holding him nudged the stone from his hands. It slid off of his chest and fell down to the depths far below him. Cthulhu then began to carry Gabriel to shore. He stiffened.

Do not worry—worry—worry, Cthulhu chuckled. *Your choice—choice—choice has been made. Humanity is safe—for now—now—now.*

CHAPTER TEN

CALLER OF STARS

Cthulhu carried Gabriel tenderly to shore. The water rushed past him like a silk sheet running all over his exhausted body. He continued to gaze upwards at the sky through the water. The stars and moon seemed to blur into a smear of silver light. It was an ethereal sight and made him feel unreal as if all of this was a dream.

The tentacle holding him brought him up to the water's surface and gently set him on his feet. Gabriel's legs trembled beneath him for a moment, but then they firmed. The water was up to his chest. There was a firm sandbar beneath his feet. He ran his hands through his hair, moving it away from his face. As Gabriel blinked the water from his eyes, he realized where Cthulhu had brought them and his stomach clenched.

They were directly in front of the temple. Cthulhu was technically still in the water though very, very close to land. Gabriel had a momentary qualm that madness would still sweep the East Coast now anyways despite everything he had done to stop it.

Cthulhu let out its rumbling laugh that sounded like the mountains quaking. *No madness—madness—madness for the humans. Not yet—yet—yet. Remember?*

Gabriel's eyes scanned the temple's steps to see if anyone raced out to see what had caused the wild disturbance in the water. If they saw Cthulhu what would happen? Nothing good, he was sure. After all if a mere statue of Cthulhu could kill Henry, what might seeing it in the flesh do? Thankfully, the temple's steps were empty and no one stood in the doorway.

I would not take your Mer prince—Prince Casillus Nerion—your prince away from you, my Caller.

Thank you, Gabriel breathed out.

Yet Gabriel had not and would not open the bond with Casillus until Cthulhu was physically gone. But even without the bond open, surely the sound of Cthulhu's monstrous form cutting through the water had drawn some attention from the Mer prince? He would have heard the difference between the normal slap of waves on the beach and the incoming rush of a being the size of a mountain? Even Greer would have understood something was happening. So why weren't people coming out to see what was happening?

None will see me but you—you—you, my Caller, until the stars are right—stars—stars—stars. Caller of Stars, Cthulhu said with dark amusement.

Gabriel let out a breath he hadn't know he had been holding. One of Cthulhu's tentacles caressed his cheek with an almost touching tenderness. Gabriel felt a wave of exhaustion run through him. He was crashing after what had happened with Johnson and the boat. But he wasn't done yet. He couldn't be done. Casillus, Corey and the others were still being held prisoner by Johnson's last goon and he had no idea how he was going to get them out.

No need to worry, my Caller—Caller—Caller of Stars. You have new friends—friends—enemies of the forlorn soldier—dead and crushed and smashed soldier who serves me forever—forever—forever. His servant is subdued. All is well—well—well for now, Cthulhu rumbled.

Who took out Greer?

You will see—see—see. They wish to see, too. Servants all in the end, Cthulhu answered and its tentacles roiled the water. It was starting to move away. It was leaving.

You're going? Gabriel was shocked by a feeling of loss.

Always with you—always—always—always, my Caller of Stars, Cthulhu rumbled with near affection even as its massive bulk flowed further out to sea.

Where are you going? Home? Gabriel asked as if to keep Cthulhu hear for one moment more.

Another rumble of laughter. Home? Is home beyond the veil of stars in the black places—black places—the terrible night—that has never known light—light—light? Or is it here? In you—you—you?

I shouldn't ask when I'll see you again, because it'll mean something bad has happened if I do, Gabriel admitted.

I await your Call, was Cthulhu's only response.

With that, the monstrous being slid further back into the ocean's depths, its dozens of eyes fixed on Gabriel as it moved deep out to sea and, finally, vanished beneath the waves. Gabriel, though, still felt Cthulhu as near as it had always been. Just a Call away.

Gabriel turned towards the temple. His heart fluttered wildly in his chest at the thought of seeing Casillus, Corey and the others. Against all odds, they had been victorious. He walked out of the surf and onto the sand. His legs felt incredibly heavy and he knew he was going to be out of breath before he was halfway to the

temple, but he pressed on. He had to see Casillus. Yet still he didn't open their bond.

I'm afraid that something in me has changed by Calling Cthulhu, by the deaths, by everything. I'm really a Caller now. What if I reach for Casillus and he recoils?

He was at the base of the temple's steps now. His breathing was ragged and he wanted desperately to sit down. But another squirt of adrenaline hit his bloodstream and his head jerked up as he heard voices flowing out from inside the temple. He heard Greta's higher pitched tone and Corey's staccato delivery as they both spoke, practically over one another, to someone whose voice was too low to catch. They weren't speaking to Greer. He could tell that from the tone of their voices even if Cthulhu hadn't already told him that Greer had been taken care of. Still his heart thudded harder as the voices grew louder. People were coming out of the temple. They would see him at any moment. He had to open his bond to Casillus, but he couldn't.

Suddenly, Casillus burst out of the temple's open doors and raced to the edge of the steps. Gabriel heard Corey calling for the Mer to come back, but Gabriel already guessed that Casillus wouldn't. The Mer prince was coming for him, thinking he was still in danger, and willing to do anything to save him. The moment the Mer saw him, Casillus nearly pitched down the stairs in shock. The moment Gabriel saw that beautiful figure, limned by moonlight, he opened the bond up like one would a faucet to full blast. The bond immediately enveloped his mind and he felt bliss.

Gabriel! Casillus' joy was like riding the largest of waves, but Gabriel did it with ease.

Casillus, it's done. Johnson is dead, Gabriel gasped out.

He felt an echo in the back of his mind and realized he had sent the same information to Aemrys. He felt an answering satisfaction and pride from his Mer ancestor. Aemrys would pass the new back to all the Mers now. Again, Gabriel felt the enormity of what had happened. They had stepped back from the brink of war between humanity and the Mers. Johnson's death had been right and necessary.

Casillus' thoughts were too chaotic for a simple response to Gabriel's statement. Instead, the Mer raced down the staircase and grabbed him. Casillus lifted Gabriel up in his arms and off his feet. Gabriel's arms flowed around Casillus' neck and he was holding on so tight he half-feared that he was strangling the Mer. His chest though was hitching and he realized he was crying and laughing at the same time. Casillus had not recoiled from him. The Mer would never recoil from him.

I have you, Gabriel. I have you. All is well, Casillus said.

All is well—well—well, Cthulhu's remembered rumble streamed through his mind. Gabriel made a conscious determination to keep the part of himself that was in contact with Cthulhu separated from his connection with Casillus.

Is everyone all right? Gabriel asked.

Everyone is fine, Casillus assured him.

Though Gabriel had tons of questions he did not ask them. For this moment both his and Casillus' thoughts turned to simply loving one another and the stars spun not in the right way for Cthulhu, but in the right way for them. Gabriel just drowned in the Mer's love, soaking it in, letting it light all the dark places inside of him. He allowed Casillus to see some of what had happened with Johnson, shielding him only from Cthulhu's influence. The Mer still shuddered and held him more fiercely.

You were so brave. So very brave. I am incredibly proud, Casillus murmured.

Where's Greer? The guy with the gun? Gabriel asked.

Taken care of, Casillus said. *Dr. Marstand and the Next Society came and rescued us.*

Casillus directed Gabriel's gaze up to the temple's entrance. It was then that he saw Corey, Greta, Roger and an older man with a shock of white hair and piercing blue eyes standing on the top of the steps. The older man was dressed like a professor in a tweed coat with patches at the elbows, but those eyes didn't seem like the eyes of an academic but a big game hunter instead.

Dr. Marstand is from Miskatonic University. He met Johnson earlier tonight and he was... concerned by Johnson's behavior, Casillus explained. *He decided to come back here and confront Johnson. He found us and Greer instead.*

Gabriel tightened his hold on Casillus as he met Dr. Marstand's gaze. *Does he know about Mers?*

Oh, yes. He is quite aware of us, Casillus said. *It appears that Miskatonic has files about us stretching back several hundred years at least.*

Behind Dr. Marstand Gabriel saw Greer being escorted out of the temple, hands tied behind his back by what looked like glowing cords. A young woman with black hair and eyes and a young, slender man with a dreamy smile accompanied him. Gabriel blinked. They didn't look at all like the types that could take down an armed mercenary, but evidently they had. And what was with the *glowing* rope? It almost looked like –

Magic. Yes, it is, Casillus finished the thought for him.

Magic? Gabriel boggled.

The Next Society is ... full of such surprises, Casillus said, his gaze sliding back to the older man next to Corey. Perhaps the Mers need not keep their existence secret from all humans. Perhaps we could even have official contact with some.

Official contact? Like with this Next Society? Gabriel asked, his forehead furrowing.

Yes, Dr. Marstand has given me hope that the Mers do not need to hide forever, Casillus said.

Since he rescued you, Corey and the rest from Johnson's goon, I think I'm inclined to like him, Gabriel said. *Speaking of Corey, his attempt at dancing up there on one leg means he has to pee or he's dying to talk to us.*

Corey's right ankle was black and blue and swollen to twice its normal size. Roger and Greta were bearing his weight yet he was still hopping up and down, which caused Roger to tell him to quit it.

He definitely wishes to speak to us. Casillus laughed.

Gabriel found a grin finally breaking over his face. For so long, he had felt like he would never smile again. The darkness of what had happened with Johnson was still there, but there was now hope and light before him.

You're going to have to help me up the stairs, Casillus. I'm feeling a little winded, Gabriel admitted as he observed the now daunting amount of stairs ahead of them.

You are not alone. If Corey was not injured, I would have suggested we ask him to come to us, or better yet, for him to join us by the water, Casillus said.

That was when Gabriel realized that Casillus was straining to breathe. The Mer prince had been out of the water for way too long.

Corey, I want to talk to you, too, but Casillus and I can't make it up the stairs and you can't make it down the stairs, Gabriel said telepathically to his best friend. *Why don't we meet at the cottage?*

Corey jumped as if poked by a cattle prod. It was then Gabriel realized that he had spoken to Corey mind to mind and his friend had heard him clearly. Corey's eyes were as round as saucers and his little mincing dance became more excited.

"Guys," he said to Greta and Roger. "Gabriel and Casillus need to get in the water. We can meet them at the cottage."

Gabriel, your gift has grown! Casillus said proudly as he realized what had just happened.

Yeah, I can feel myself getting stronger, Gabriel said and that was both comforting and frightening. Cthulhu had named him the Caller of Stars. When the creature

had first said it, Gabriel had presumed it was just a lyrical title Cthulhu had made up with no real meaning behind it. Now he was not so sure.

“Dr. Marstand, you are invited to my grandmother’s cottage as well,” Gabriel said out loud so that the professor with the big game hunter’s eyes could hear.

Dr. Marstand inclined his head. His voice was a pleasant rumble. “Thank you. I have questions. As I’m sure you do as well.”

The four of them began to turn away from Gabriel and Casillus then. A thought suddenly occurred to Gabriel. There was one part of the old plan that still had to happen.

“Wait!” Gabriel called, causing the four of them to freeze. “ I can’t believe I forgot this. We need the statue. It has to be put somewhere in the ocean. It can’t remain on land.”

Dr. Marstand tilted his head to the side, regarding Gabriel for long silent moments. Gabriel feared he might object to the statue’s moving, but he did not. Even if he had, Gabriel would not have allowed the statue to stay on land one moment more.

“Right-o!” Corey cried with a thumbs up.

Casillus though held up a hand, freezing everyone in place. He looked at Gabriel worriedly. *Should you be here when the statue is brought out, Gabriel? You could accidentally Call Cthulhu again.*

But Gabriel shook his head. *Cthulhu knows when I am Calling it or not.*

Casillus let out a mental gasp. Gabriel had said its name and nothing had happened.

See? It’s all right. I want to make sure that the statue is secure and cannot harm another person, Gabriel said. *So let them bring it out and you can take it someplace safe to wait for the other Mers to come take it away.*

“Are we good to go?” Corey asked, clearly sensing that they had come to some agreement.

“Yes. Get the statue,” Gabriel said.

It appeared that Corey was about to hobble inside with Greta and Roger who were squawking that he couldn’t carry himself let alone the statue when Casillus surprised them all by running up the stairs. Out of breath or not, the Mer was determined to finish this task. He passed by the group of students, squeezing Corey’s shoulder as he raced by. He then disappeared into the temple’s interior. Gabriel felt the bond winnow down and he guessed that Casillus had picked up the statue. The Mer prince wasn’t taking any chances and that was likely wise.

When Casillus re-appeared, he was indeed carrying the black squat statue. Gabriel immediately felt the statue trying to latch onto him, but somehow he managed to block it out.

Casillus made it down the stairs just as fast as he had gone up them despite the weight of the statue. Determination to rid the land of the statue fueled the Mer prince. He was on the ground in no time and urging Gabriel towards the surf.

“See you guys at the cottage!” Gabriel called with a wave.

He and Casillus headed towards the water together. As soon as the surf hit their feet, both of them let out a mental sigh.

Are you going to take off those ridiculous clothes? Casillus teased as Gabriel’s t-shirt ballooned out around him in the water.

I will. When we leave for good tomorrow. Got to keep my modesty until then with our guests. Don’t you worry about them seeing me naked back at the cottage? Gabriel teased.

Casillus was careful not to let the statue of Cthulhu touch him as he leaned in and kissed Gabriel. *Not in the least so long as they know that they may look, but never touch, for you are mine.*

Gabriel grinned into the kiss.

Now stay here, my love, Casillus said. *I am going to take this statue out into deeper water. Our people will come and retrieve it at a later date and remove it to the temple in the trench.*

Gabriel nodded. *Sounds like a plan that will actually work.*

Your plan did work, Gabriel, Casillus reminded him.

It was insane, but yeah, it did, Gabriel said, feeling another wash of relief go through him at that realization.

Will you be all right alone in the water? Casillus asked. *I would have you come with me, but I do not think it wise to have you near the statue any longer than necessary.*

I will be fine. I’m not afraid anymore. Go on. The faster you go, the faster you’ll be back, Gabriel told him.

Another brief kiss and Casillus disappeared beneath the water’s surface.

Gabriel let out a sigh and slipped onto his back, floating. The plan had succeeded. Johnson and the threat he had posed was gone. The statue was out of human hands. Cthulhu had retreated to the deep. Once Casillus had returned, all that would be before them was telling his beloved grandmother the truth about who and what he was. And tomorrow, would be the day he said his goodbyes.

That weight was still heavy on him, but it was less than it had been now that he knew he could communicate with Corey whenever he wanted. Maybe Corey was not the only one. He stretched out his mind and felt his grandmother's mind. She was driving home to the cottage from the meeting. She was worried about him. She was eager to see Johnson and Gabriel felt a wash of pain at that. He withdrew his mind from hers for fear that his emotions might cause her to crash her car. But still he felt her and Corey and Casillus and then Cthulhu in his mind. Like Cthulhu had said, they were always connected. His grandmother and Corey would always be with him and he with them no matter that he would be in the deepest depths of the ocean.

With that comforting thought, Gabriel let his mind empty of all thought and merely looked up at the stars, and the remnants of the rift in the sky.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

REVELATIONS

Gabriel and Casillus floated fifty feet offshore of the cottage. His grandmother had already pulled into the driveway and was in the house. Corey, Greta and Roger were also there. The three of them were out on the back porch. Through Corey's eyes, Gabriel could see that the hurricane candles were lit and casting a warm golden glow over their faces.

Corey was laying down on the couch with his injured leg propped up on the arm. Through his best friend's senses, Gabriel could feel how Corey's ankle throbbed. The skin was raw and swollen. Even the faint touch of the warm breeze whispering over it *hurt*.

He will be all right, Gabriel. Do not worry so, Casillus assured him gently. The Mer Prince was hearing, feeling and seeing everything that Gabriel was.

I know, but I didn't want Corey or you or anyone to get hurt. Gabriel curled his arms around himself.

What Johnson did is not your fault. Casillus caressed his cheek.

At that moment, Gabriel's grandmother bustled out of the interior of the cottage and Gabriel's perception changed from Corey's to hers. She had an ice pack in one hand and Gabriel could feel the cold of it against her palm. He sensed her mind whirling with confusion and fear. Corey was injured. The other two college students looked like they had seen better days. And no one would tell her what was going on. But, most importantly, Gabriel was not there and no one would tell her where he was.

She kneeled beside Corey and Gabriel felt the press of the porch's wooden floor against her knees. He also felt the faint twinge of arthritis in her left hip as she kneeled down.

"Corey, what happened to the three of you?" she asked as she pressed the cold compress to Corey's very swollen ankle. Gabriel felt the cold leave her hand and move to Corey's skin. The cold felt good there.

Through his grandmother's eyes, Gabriel saw Corey share a look with Greta and Roger. The two Miskatonic students were sitting together on the hammock. His grandmother had already brought out wet wash cloths and bandages for them.

Corey took Gabriel's grandmother's hand into both of his. "I know you have a few questions—"

“More than a few! Corey, I feel like you’re not telling me something and that whatever it is must be *terrible*.” There was a tremor in her voice.

Gabriel feared that she would suddenly be worried about Johnson, but she wasn’t. Her thoughts were only of him. For a moment, he experienced her anguish over losing her son and daughter-in-law. Before he had been found, she had thought she lost him, too. She was feeling the same way now that she had back then. This piercing emotion caused Gabriel to jerk in the water. One of Casillus’ arms slid comfortably around his waist.

“No... I mean... yes... I mean...” Corey got out.

“Just tell me that Gabriel is okay!” she cried.

Corey’s hands flapped in the air. “Oh, yeah! Yes! Gabriel is—is *awesome*. It’s just... Gabriel will explain everything when he gets here, I promise.”

“But where is Gabriel?” she asked, her voice rising up in concern.

“He’s—ah, he’s... coming. I *know* he is,” Corey said.

“But *when*?” she cried.

“I—I—I’m sure he’ll be here *soon*,” Corey stammered.

We should swim in, Gabriel, Casillus said. It’s time. She needs to see you and know you’re safe and sound.

Gabriel pulled himself out of Corey and his grandmother’s minds and said to Casillus, *I know. I don’t want to cause her any more pain worrying about me, but...*

You fear that you will cause her more pain when you see her, because then you will have to tell her about Johnson’s betrayal, Casillus stated more than asked.

Gabriel turned to him. The Mer prince’s long dark hair floated around his head like a halo. His blue-green eyes were silvered in the moonlight. As always, Gabriel was floored by Casillus’ outer and inner beauty. The Mer prince knew exactly what to say, but this time it could not fully comfort him.

I can feel everything she feels, which I know is normal for Mer, but it’s not for me. When she tells me she’s fine and that Johnson’s betrayal doesn’t hurt or my leaving is a blessing I’ll know she’s lying. Not just suspect it. I’ll know it. I’ll feel her true emotions, Gabriel said. *There can never be any pretty lies again. I’ll feel when I devastate her.*

Your gift will let you feel her pain, but it will also allow you to connect to her from wherever you are, Casillus reminded him. *Grace and Corey will experience all your joys and you theirs. While there will be no more lies, the truths will be so much more beautiful.*

I so want that to be true. I want both of them to have such good lives.

Casillus leaned in and kissed him. Gabriel's lips opened and their tongues tangled for a few moments. They embraced as they kissed and slowly spun in the current. When they broke apart, Gabriel rested his forehead against the Mer prince's. He was ready to swim ashore. With Casillus' love filling him he knew he would have the courage to tell his grandmother everything and comfort her afterward.

Let's not delay any longer. I want my grandmother to meet you, Gabriel said. I want her to know how much I love you. And I know that she's going to adore you.

I already adore her.

Then without a further word, they both stroked towards shore. The bottom rose up to meet them, but they did not start walking until the surf was causing sand to swirl around them uncomfortably and the tops of their heads broke the water's surface.

As soon as they stood up Corey caught sight of them. The moon was burning brightly above them and silvered the sand and their wet hair. The thick, fat candles that were lit on the porch allowed Corey's outstretched finger to be easily seen as well.

At that moment, Gabriel's grandmother turned around towards them. The second she saw him she jumped to her feet. She raced off of the porch and reached them just as they stepped out of the surf.

"Gabriel! Thank God!" she cried as her arms flowed around him.

He held her tightly to him even though he knew that he was getting her nice suit all wet. But he also knew that she didn't care. She was so very glad he was okay. That was all that mattered to her. He closed his eyes and sent his love to her over the mental bond they shared, but that she was not yet aware of. He knew the moment she felt his emotions when she stiffened in his arms in surprise.

"What—what was *that*?" she gasped. Her fingers tightened in his wet shirt.

"My love for you," Gabriel explained. "And part of what I have to tell you."

He pulled back so that they could see one another's faces. Just as he did so, he felt her reach back to him over the bond. It was a tentative brush of her mind against his. He was surprised at how quickly she grasped how to do it. She was a natural. It was in her blood just like it was in his. She gasped again when his mental touch flowed around her like an embrace. Her eyes grew huge then tears formed in them. He felt her extreme joy and awe. It was like fireworks going off between them.

"Oh, Gabriel, I can *feel* you!" she got out.

“And you *always* will,” Gabriel promised.

“I don’t understand how you’re able to do this! Talk with our minds! It’s telepathy!” She shook her head as if to clear it.

“I’m getting to that, but first, let me introduce you to someone,” Gabriel said, his mouth becoming very dry. He knew that she hadn’t even noticed Casillus yet. Her attention had all been all on him. But as soon as he turned towards the Mer prince her attention went to Casillus as well. It was only then that she realized that they weren’t alone. She jerked back and gasped.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he assured her. “This is Casillus. He’s a—”

“*Merman*,” she whispered. Her eyes were fixed on the gills at Casillus’ sides. One of her hands extended forward to touch them. Casillus grasped that hand and brought it against his gills. She was silent for a long moment and then burst out, “I can’t believe it! They’re *real*! Mers are real!”

Gabriel realized that she wasn’t just *guessing* that Casillus was one of the Mers of legend in the area, she was partly reading his mind.

“Yes, they’re real.” *More real than you know.* “His name is Prince Casillus Nerion.”

She blinked and stared hard at Casillus who blushed and ducked his head. “*Prince?*”

“Yeah, I had the same reaction as you, Grandma.” Gabriel laughed.

His grandmother extended her other hand. This time it was for a shake instead of to feel the Mer prince’s gills. Casillus took her hand and kissed the back of it.

“He’s so charming and—and *handsome*. Are you...” She studied Gabriel’s face then a smile bloomed on her lips. Her eyes shone with happiness for him. “You’re *together*. He’s your—”

“Someone amazing,” Gabriel completed for her.

She hugged him again, laughing and crying with joy. They clung to one another for a long time then she went and hugged Casillus. The Mer prince eagerly accepted her embrace and held her just as tightly back. Finally, the two of them broke apart and she stood there, hands clasped in front of her, beaming at them both.

“I knew there was someone out there for you, Gabriel. Something that would put all others to shame and I can tell that Casillus is it,” she enthused.

“He’s all that and more,” Gabriel assured her. But as much as her approval of Casillus thrilled him the dread of telling her the rest began to rise up inside of him higher and higher.

Casillus put a hand on Gabriel's lower back and rubbed a circle there. *It will be all right, Gabriel. Tell her.*

"Tell me what?" she asked.

Casillus' eyes went huge this time and Gabriel was just as stunned.

"You heard him?" Gabriel asked.

You can hear me, Grace? Casillus asked.

Unlike when Casillus had spoken directly to Corey, Gabriel could hear them both. "I can hear you too!" she said, her voice filled with wonder.

Gabriel turned to Casillus. "How is this possible? You aren't putting your fingers on her temple like you did with Corey. How is she able to hear you?"

She has the blood, Gabriel, Casillus said, mirroring his own thoughts on this. *House Liseas is a strong house. The blood runs true. And I also believe that you are connecting us.*

"House Liseas?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's who—ah... well..." Gabriel cleared his throat.

She stilled for a moment and then gripped her hands tightly in front of her chest. He felt knowledge flow from him to her. She processed it with amazing speed. "Does that mean that Tabatha truly *had* a Mer lover?"

She was speaking of their long ago ancestor. He nodded and explained, "Yes, the Mer lover's name is Aemrys Liseas and he is coming here. He will arrive tomorrow."

A shiver of pleasure ran through Gabriel at the thought of actually seeing Aemrys for real. He could feel his ancestor in the water, coming for him. Aemrys was much nearer now.

"But it can't be him! His affair with Tabatha was over a hundred years ago. He couldn't still be alive!" she cried.

"Mers live *forever*. It is him. Our ancestor. Living history, Grandma," Gabriel assured her.

Her face transformed with the shock of it. "An ancestor! A *Mer* ancestor!"

"History is priceless," he repeated her favorite phrase.

"*Living* history is even more priceless." She shook her head and raised her hands to her face as if she could not believe their good fortune. She let out a laugh and then stilled. Her hands lowered and she looked at Gabriel, long and hard. "Gabriel, you came *out* of the sea just now. And you survived the sinking of the boat so long ago when no one else did. I'm missing something here, aren't I? Something *huge*? It's part of what Casillus wants you to tell me, isn't it?"

He knew then that words would not suffice to answer her, but actions might explain many things like they had with Corey. Gabriel pulled his shirt off and tossed it to the side. He wouldn't be needing any of his clothes come morning anyways. His gills fluttered as if tasting the night air. Her gaze drifted down his front and when she saw them one of her hands rose to her mouth. She was crying again and, for a moment, he couldn't read her emotions. Was she happy, sad, *disgusted*? It was one thing to see gills on someone else, but on *him*, her grandson? And she might wonder what that meant about her own humanity. But then she put both hands over his gills and stared up at his face with awe.

"Oh, Gabriel, you're *beautiful*. I could never think anything else," she assured him. Her forehead furrowed as she added, "So Kate's family had Mer blood, too. That's why you have gills and could survive the sinking of the ship and can speak telepathically. Mer ancestors on both sides. Amazing."

Again, she had read his thoughts with startling ease. He leaned down and rested his forehead against hers. Maybe she could read more. Maybe he could tell her everything mind to mind.

Try, Gabriel, Casillus suggested.

"Grandma, I want to try something," Gabriel said. He switched over to telepathy, *I want to tell you everything. Actually, I want to show it to you.*

She answered him telepathically too, *Show me.*

And he did. He let her experience how he had met Casillus. He let her tour Emralis with them. And, finally, showed her Aemrys' face. Her mind was awlirl again, but not with anguish, but with wonder, joy, shock, and love.

Your meeting with Casillus is like a storybook! Emralis is so beautiful. House Liseas is a dream! I wish... She bit her lower lip. *I wish I could see it myself.*

You will, Gabriel said.

I don't have gills, Gabriel, she said with a soft smile.

He paused and then said, *I can help you experience it with me.*

Her forehead furrowed, but then cleared. *Oh, yes, of course, you will visit there—*

Live. I will live there, he corrected.

She froze. He took in a deep breath. The hardest parts of what he had to tell her he had not yet showed her. This was the first of those.

You'll live there, she repeated as if the words had no meaning.

I have to.

Her hands went to his gills again, which were now settling down on his sides. *You have to or you'll... die?*

Yes. He grasped her hands and gripped them. *But this gift, this ability to talk like this, show you these things, will only grow stronger. You'll be with me and I'll be with you no matter where we both are physically. We will be only a thought apart.*

Tears were flowing now. Casillus came and touched her shoulder. She looked up at him and put a hand on his face.

You'll take care of Gabriel for me, won't you? she asked.

I will. He is worth more than my own life, Casillus promised her.

She swiped tears from her eyes. *I can feel that's true.*

Gabriel took in another deep breath. She had accepted that he was a Mer. She had accepted that he had to leave. But the truth of Johnson remained to be revealed. She heard his breathing grow labored or perhaps she felt his sudden tension and turned back to him.

What is it, Gabriel? she asked. *What more do you have to tell me?*

Could he lie to her? Could he say that Johnson had died in a terrible boating accident and leave it at that? No, of course, he couldn't. She would know these things were lies.

Let's go sit on the porch with the others, Gabriel said, stalling, delaying.

All right, she agreed though she kept looking up at him anxiously. *Do the others know about you?*

The others were Corey, Greta and Roger. He nodded. Telling her more than that was dangerous. Gabriel had to keep his emotions and thoughts in tight check so that they wouldn't accidentally be revealed to her. What would she think of him when she discovered he had allowed Johnson, Marko and Jax to die?

You have nothing to feel ashamed about, Casillus said. *You did everything you could to save them.*

She cared about him though. Cares. She might even have been falling in love with him! Gabriel objected.

She loves you more than she could ever have loved Johnson. And once she hears what he tried to do anything she felt for him will die, Casillus said knowingly.

But it'll hurt her when it does, Gabriel said quietly.

The three of them continued to walk slowly back to the porch. Gabriel could feel his grandmother's emotions spiking in both amazement and then falling into confusion. She moved from joy to concern and back again and yet all the while her expression was serene under the moonlight. He was amazed at her ability to control herself. If only he was so strong. Not once did she flinch back from wanting to know the truth. Would she regret that once she heard about Johnson?

As they came up the porch steps, Corey called, “Oh, man, is it good to see both of you! Everything—is everything ah *okay*?”

Gabriel could see the questions in his best friend’s eyes, but before he could answer, his grandmother said, “Yes, Corey, everything is—is quite fine. My grandson is a Mer! And that is quite a miracle.”

“Total miracle! And Casillus is a prince! Can you believe our very own Gabe has a prince as his boyfriend? Soon they’ll be living in a palace. It’s amazing,” Corey enthused with a bobbing head.

“How’s your ankle doing, Corey?” Gabriel asked and winced as he caught sight of the swollen dark skin.

“It’s ugly,” Corey said, interpreting the wince. “But it’s no big deal. We have a happy ending here, Gabe.” Then he gaze slid to his grandmother and he added, “Well, *mostly*.”

Gabriel realized then that Greta was talking on the phone. She pulled the cell phone from her ear after signing off with someone. Meeting Gabriel’s gaze, she said, “Everything’s been cleaned up at the settlement. The whole place is now secure and in the proper hands. Dr. Marstand should be here in a few minutes.”

His grandmother’s head lifted. “The settlement? Did you all get injured at the settlement?”

“We ah...” Greta’s voice dropped off. Roger took her hand and Gabriel saw their fingers link.

“Come and sit beside me, Grandma G,” Corey said with a wave of his hand.

She sat down on one of the rattan chairs next to the loveseat he was sprawled out on. Corey took her hand.

“So you know about Gabe. I can tell. I could almost hear you guys talking out there,” Corey said.

She nodded and that flash of wonder crossed her face. “I’m aching at the thought of him going, but...but it doesn’t feel like he’s going all that far. He’s in my mind. He’ll never truly be gone.”

“You’ll probably hear from me too much,” Gabriel said as he and Casillus perched on the railing side by side.

“Never!” She swatted the air with one hand as if she could physically swat such an absurd idea away. Her gaze was on him then and there were tears in her eyes. “I’ve always known that you were going to go someplace else to live, Gabriel. Maybe even across the country. Emralis is the same as San Francisco in a way.”

Gabriel's throat got tight. He nodded. "But this mind to mind thing is *way* better than Skype or phones or anything."

She smiled and touched her temples as if she were touching him as she did so. "It's the most incredible thing. I would never have said I felt separate from you before, but compared to now...you're truly *with* me, Gabriel. I am not alone."

She understands. Her mind is Mer. If only her body was as well, Casillus said. His left hand snaked around Gabriel's bare waist.

She figured it out way faster than me, Gabriel responded.

His grandmother sat up straighter and regarded each of them with a rather stern expression. "Now tell me what you're holding back. Spare nothing. I need to know."

Corey and Gabriel's gazes met. Again, though it was Corey who spoke, Gabriel felt as if it came from both of them. Corey said, "It's about Johnson."

"Is he all right?" she asked, her eyes flickering between him and Gabriel.

"He's dead," Gabriel said. His voice sounded almost cold. He wished it didn't for her sake. But anger at Johnson flared inside of him once more. If the man had not been so damned bullheaded he would still be alive. As much as Johnson had been affected by the statue, he had opened his heart to darkness as well and let it stream on in. Most importantly, Gabriel couldn't forgive the older man for seducing his grandmother as part of his plan.

Even if he loved her, he knew what he was going to do would make her hate him, Gabriel thought.

He is gone now, my love, Casillus reminded him and gently pried one of Gabriel's hands from the porch's railing where he had been gripping the wood so tightly that his knuckles had gone white.

"Oh, my God," his grandmother breathed and stared out at the sea for a moment as if to take in Johnson's death. "How did this happen?"

"That, my dear Mrs. Braven, is partly my fault," Dr. Marstand said from the side of the cottage.

He must have parked his car and walked around the side of cottage following the sound of their voices. Gabriel was surprised he hadn't sensed Dr Marstand's approach. Even now the professor's mind was locked to him. Dr. Marstand briefly glanced at him and Gabriel realized that the professor *knew* that he was trying read his thoughts. Gabriel quickly looked away.

"Who are you?" his grandmother asked as she half rose from her seat.

"I am the man who allowed Johnson to come here when the temple was discovered even though I knew he was deeply obsessed with—"

"Don't say its name!" Gabriel interrupted sharply. While Cthulhu and he had an understanding, the monstrous creature could change its mind. They shouldn't tempt fate. Then softening his tone, though it was still full of conviction, he added, "*Never* say its name here in Ocean Side. It's listening."

Dr. Marstand regarded him without blinking for several moments, but then he nodded, agreeing to what Gabriel asked, recognizing him as an authority. He was one. The only one.

"Tell me everything," his grandmother said again, her hands balled on her lap.

Gabriel found that he couldn't open his mouth to speak, not even with Casillus' strength and love flowing into him, but he didn't need to. Corey, Greta and Roger spoke for him. As they explained all that had happened with Johnson, he watched his grandmother sag. Pieces of her seemed to be chipping off with every word like an ancient monument worn away by the sands of time. When they reached the part where Johnson had taken Gabriel out to Call Cthulhu, she buried her face in her hands.

"Did he hurt you, Gabriel?" she asked, her voice was small and muffled against her palms.

"It doesn't matter. He's gone now," Gabriel said.

Her head shot up and so did she. She was across the porch and gripping his shoulders. Her face was haggard. "*It does* matter! After your parents died I was the one person in this world whose only purpose was to protect you. And I *let* him into our house. I *introduced* him to you."

Gabriel wrapped his arms around her and she sobbed against his chest. They were hard, wet cries. Everyone on the porch was stricken by them. Corey looked like he was ready to hobble over to them and crush them with love. As Gabriel held his grandmother, Casillus stroked Gabriel's back and rested his other hand on Grace's shoulder.

"I know you're not going to believe me, Grandma, but you have to forgive yourself. This really wasn't your fault," Gabriel told her.

She slowly drew back from his chest, her arms still tightly around him, in order to look at Dr. Marstand who was standing between Greta and Roger. "*You* were Johnson's boss. *You* sent him here. How do I know that you aren't here to hurt Gabriel and Casillus, too?"

Dr. Marstand smoothed a hand down his front before meeting her gaze. "Because I *know* what Gabriel can do. Attacking him or Casillus would be the death warrant of potentially the entire human race. Like the settlement, Ocean Side would be destroyed for sure. But beyond those very reasonable explanations for why I wouldn't make a move against your grandson is the fact that I am a member of the Next Society."

"What *exactly* is the Next Society?" Corey asked.

"I'm glad you asked me that," Dr. Marstand said with a faint smile. "It is simply this. We are humanity's ambassadors and defenders against all non-humans on this planet and beyond. Our first tenet is to make contact and our second is, if at all possible, to make peace with other species. We never attack first. We act only in defense."

"Because you would *lose*," Gabriel said, a hint of frost in his tone.

Dr. Marstand regarded him again with those steady eyes. "In some cases you are quite right, Gabriel. But we don't want war. We want peace and understanding. Those are our goals."

"So Johnson just didn't get this memo?" Gabriel snapped.

"Johnson was never part of the Society. He wanted to be, but his mind was too filled with aggression," Dr. Marstand said. "This mission at the settlement was a test to see if he could put that aggression to the side."

"He totally failed," Corey pointed out.

"He did and in a way that nearly cost humanity everything," Dr. Marstand said. "I take full responsibility for that."

Tell him that he is not Johnson, Casillus said after a long moment. *And the Mer are not war-like either unless we have no other option.*

Gabriel relayed Casillus' words to Dr. Marstand.

"By the way Casillus is a Mer *prince*!" Corey emphasized. "Johnson kidnapped the prince of their entire species!"

"Yes, I know," Dr. Marstand said.

"You know?" Gabriel's forehead furrowed.

"Not from just meeting him now, but we have records. You are not the only descendant of Mers among humans, Gabriel," Dr. Marstand said.

Casillus straightened. *He knows of other children lost to us! I can tell! He knows of others like you, Gabriel! They must be returned to us!*

"I see by Prince Casillus' face that he understands some of what we can offer the Mers," Dr. Marstand said.

“In exchange for what?” his grandmother asked. She held Gabriel tighter.

“After Johnson, I don’t blame your distrust,” Dr. Marstand said.

“Tell them what you want, Dr. Marstand,” Greta urged.

“As I said,” Dr. Marstand paused, holding Casillus and Gabriel’s gazes one after another. “*Peace and friendship* between Mers and humanity.”

“That’s a tall order,” Gabriel said.

“It is,” Dr. Marstand agreed. “And that is why we must start this process tonight, while you are still on land, Gabriel Please, won’t you, at least, hear me out?”

Casillus? You’re the Mer prince here. What do you want to do? Gabriel turned to the Mer.

Casillus studied Dr. Marstand with an expression that was rather opaque. *I believe we can trust him to an extent. But more importantly, I believe he knows where more of our children are.*

And Mer children are precious, Gabriel finished.

Casillus nodded.

Gabriel took in a deep breath. He squeezed his grandmother to him and then urged her to sit down. This was going to be a long discussion.

“We’re willing to listen, Dr. Marstand,” Gabriel said. “I can’t promise more than that.”

“It’s a start,” Dr. Marstand said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

COREY THE AMBASSADOR

The conversation with Dr. Marstand was not as onerous as Gabriel feared. In fact, he quite grew to like the genial professor. Sometimes when he looked into those shrewd blue eyes he felt that there was far more to this man than what appeared on the surface, but what was there was neither bad nor was it necessarily dangerous to the Mers. In fact, Dr. Marstand could be quite the opposite. He offered a list of people Miskatonic suspected might have Mer blood without asking for anything in return not even the peace and friendship he wanted. It was a gift.

He will give us this? Casillus asked. His hands trembled slightly.

Even if Gabriel wasn't able to sense the incredible joy mixed with shock in the Mer prince through their bond he would have known it was there just from seeing the look in Casillus' eyes. He smoothed a hand up and down Casillus' bare back. He could feel the Mer prince trembling with eagerness.

"You really don't want anything in return for this list of Mer children?" Gabriel confirmed.

Dr. Marstand shook his head and then with a rueful smile added, "I think we already owe you quite a bit for stopping Johnson. He was a member of our faculty. We were responsible for him even if we were unaware of what his true plans were."

"I believe that giving over the names and locations of potential Mer children will go a long way to mending any fences with the Mers," Gabriel said, which were also Casillus' feelings on the matter.

Casillus could not wait to tell his parents that there were more children out there that might be capable of joining them in Emralis.

And even those who do not have the capability, they are our family just as much as those who live in the sea. They should know their complete heritage and understand that they are not alone, Casillus said.

I agree.

Gabriel knew all too well how alone those with Mer blood felt even surrounded by people who loved them. Gabriel covered one of Casillus' hands with his own before looking over at his grandmother. She immediately looked back at him, aware of his regard from catching sight of his movement as much as sensing it in her mind. He knew that his gift had increased exponentially since touching minds

with Cthulhu, but he knew that part of the reason she could hear him so easily was the Mer blood in her. She smiled warmly at him. Now neither of them would ever be alone.

“There’s something else I think you’ll approve of,” Dr. Marstand said, breaking Gabriel out of his thoughts.

“What?” Gabriel asked, his curiosity peaked.

Dr. Marstand turned those shrewd blue eyes on Corey. The red-head straightened up from his slouch. One of his hands froze in the air, about to plop a nacho into his mouth.

“Uhm, yeah, what?” Corey asked.

Dr. Marstand pointed to the melted cheese that was dangling precariously from the chip. “Do eat that, dear boy, before it stains that rather glorious shirt.”

Gabriel had brought down one of Corey’s orange, pink and yellow long-sleeved shirts to replace the black ensemble in order to cheer him up. Corey had stripped without delay and immediately sighed in relief as if just *wearing* something less than neon had *oppressed* him in some terrible way.

Corey did as Dr. Marstand recommended and gobbled down the chip. When he had finished crunching it, the professor said, “I believe from the reports I’ve had of you and my, albeit limited exposure to you, that you would do well at Miskatonic, Corey.”

Corey blinked. Gabriel blinked. Greta and Roger perked up like prairie dogs sticking their heads out of their burrows to see what was going on.

“You do?” Corey asked.

“I do,” Dr. Marstand answered and pressed his hands together as if in prayer. “I also believe that you would do even *better* as a member of the Next Society.”

There were gasps from Roger and Greta. Gabriel had pretty much figured out that to be in the Society was a pretty big deal. Considering they used *magic* in the Society, Gabriel was positive that Corey would love it.

“Why do you think that?” Corey asked. “I’m not really a cloak and daggers type of guy.”

Dr. Marstand chuckled. “No, your feelings are written all over your face and you are a truthful person. I believe to lie causes you pain.”

“Sometimes,” Corey admitted with a shrug of his large shoulders.

“But I’m also certain that you can *keep* secrets to protect those you care about,” Dr. Marstand added.

“Now *that* I can do,” Corey agreed pointing one pudgy finger at Dr. Marstand.

“We need those qualities in our people,” Dr. Marstand said. “Especially those who would be representing humanity in front of a *telepathic* race.”

More blinking.

He wishes Corey to be the representative for humanity to the Mers, Casillus realized.

That would be great! I mean we can trust Corey. He would never do anything to harm us, Gabriel pointed out.

I believe that the Next Society might be honest in their desire to broker peace with us. They certainly are picking someone to negotiate who would be on our side. Casillus looked thoughtful. Finally, after a moment, he turned to Gabriel and said, *If Corey wants to do this, I believe it would lead to great strides in the possibility of peace and cooperation between our two races.*

I think so, too, Gabriel agreed.

“You two are talking,” Corey said, looking between him and Casillus.

“You can tell?” Gabriel asked with a laugh.

“You both get this kind of dreamy expression on your faces when you do like there’s no one else in the world,” Corey teased.

“Well, that’s sort of how it feels!” Gabriel laughed. “But actually we were talking about *you*, Corey.”

“Me?”

“And the offer that Dr. Marstand just made,” Gabriel said. “Do you want to do it?”

“It sounds really interesting, for sure,” Corey said, scratching his red beard.

“We’d love to have you at Miskatonic,” Greta said warmly.

Roger leaned towards Corey and clapped his shoulder. “You’ve already got two friends on campus at least!”

“Aw, thanks guys! That’s means a lot.” Corey smiled at both of them.

“I think you would be an excellent addition,” Dr. Marstand urged.

“Miskatonic is a very prestigious school,” his grandmother said though her words were more muted. Gabriel knew that she was thinking of Johnson then. She was associating the former soldier with the institution. That was the only reason she couldn’t quite bring herself to be completely enthusiastic about it.

“Guaranteed job placement after, too. Especially if you’re a member of the Next Society,” Roger said.

Greta nodded.

“Speaking of the Next Society,” Dr. Marstand said to the two of them, his blue eyes twinkling. “I would like to have a conversation with the two of you tomorrow.

We need to discuss what happened with Johnson in greater detail and, I believe –”

“They were great! They weren’t with him!” Corey interrupted stoutly.

Dr. Marstand smiled. “Yes, *exactly* so and I believe that such actions should be rewarded. Corey, if you decide to come to Miskatonic and join the Next Society you may also have Roger and Greta in *both* aspects of your life.”

Greta’s mouth was open and there was a look in her eyes of disbelief and complete happiness. She clapped her hands together and then hugged Roger. He looked too gobsmacked to react.

“That would be—that would be wonderful, professor,” Roger finally sputtered out.

“Awesome!” Corey grinned. Tapping his chin, he then added, “With Roger and Greta being in the Next Society, too, that does make my decision easier. Plus, I don’t have anything holding me at my old school now that Gabe’s...well, that Gabe won’t be going there any longer.” Corey and Gabriel shared a long look. Then Corey shook the emotion away like a big, shaggy dog might shake off water and asked, “But what do you guys think, Gabe, Casillus?”

Encourage him, Gabriel, Casillus said and squeezed Gabriel’s arm.

“We think that going to Miskatonic *would* be a good thing, Corey,” Gabriel said. His throat felt tight for a moment as he realized it would be easier on Corey if he wasn’t around their old school. “It’ll be a fresh start, you know.”

“And I won’t be focusing on the things that we planned at the old school,” Corey added with a nod as if he was the one that could read minds.

“We both have new plans, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t still going to be doing things together,” Gabriel said and he mentally embraced his best friend.

Corey made a happy sound and his brown eyes rose up to meet Gabriel’s. They were shining. “I love when you do that! I’m like all warm and tingly inside... wait! That totally came out wrong!”

Everyone laughed and Corey squirmed.

“So will you come to Miskatonic and join the Next Society, Corey?” Dr. Marstand asked.

Corey nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like a total plan.”

Greta was immediately giving him a hug and kiss on the cheek. Roger pumped his hand. As the general joyousness quieted, it was Greta who spoke.

“What’s going to happen with the settlement?” she asked.

“Now that the statue is gone it’s okay to excavate it fully, isn’t it?” Roger asked.

Dr. Marstand's gaze went to Casillus' face. Though the professor could not read minds, he seemed to know what Casillus wanted.

"We're going to cover it back up," he said quietly. "Miskatonic has already bought the land. We will ensure that no one else unearths it."

"While I don't want to lose any part of history," his grandmother said, her hands linked together tightly in her lap, "I'm glad that you're going to leave the settlement alone."

"Some things should be left *buried*," Dr. Marstand agreed.

Gabriel let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. Though the statue was gone from the settlement, the temple remained, and Gabriel didn't trust that Cthulhu wouldn't be drawn there anyways. Evil, disturbed or even the very curious might find another way to summon the dread monster. He felt that by covering up the settlement they were saving humanity from itself.

Yes, exactly, Casillus said. *It was touched by Cthulhu. It is not a good place and never will be again.*

"If there's anything you need from the city council, please let me know," his grandmother said. The knuckles of her fingers were white. "I will make certain that no one stops you."

"I appreciate having you on our side, Grace," Dr. Marstand said.

She briefly nodded and stood up. "Forgive me, but I need to clean the house."

"Clean the house?" Gabriel asked.

She gave him an impish smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "We have company coming tomorrow, Gabriel. Aemrys, remember? I won't have this place a mess when he gets here." She looked at the others. "Please stay as long as you like. I'm so happy to have all of you here."

She turned and went into the house. Gabriel stood as well.

Gabriel? Casillus looked up at him curiously.

It's okay. She needs me though. Gabriel kissed the Mer's cheek. Gabriel then went into the house.

He found his grandmother at the kitchen sink. She wasn't doing dishes. She was just standing there with her hands on the lip of the sink and her head bowed. Her shoulders shook slightly. She was crying quietly in the dark. She had already evidently learned how to shut her mind down tight so he couldn't read her thoughts or emotions. She was trying to hide her feelings from him. He guessed that she didn't want to ruin his happiness with her own grief.

He came up behind her, sliding his hands around her waist and kissed the back of her head. She turned and buried her face against his bare chest. He felt her tears wet his skin. He made soothing sounds.

"I'm so sorry, Gabriel. I shouldn't be crying like this. You have enough going on without me falling apart on you," she said, her voice bleary with tears.

"You don't need to apologize and I *want* to know what you're thinking and feeling no matter if its happy, sad, good or bad. Doesn't matter, I'm here, Grandma," he said.

He felt a tug on their mental bond. "And you always will be, won't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"Long after I'm gone, too. How strange immortality is, but part of me..." She sighed. "Life is full of both happiness and pain. Can't have one without the other. So while part of me thinks you're very lucky to keep going on, another part of me is glad I'm not."

"What? Why?"

"Because of disappointments like...like Johnson," she breathed out the name.

Gabriel was glad he hadn't told her about Johnson's unhealthy sexual interest in him. It was something she *never* needed to know. It would destroy her self-confidence even more than his deception already had.

"He was very ill," Gabriel said.

"How could I not have seen it myself? How could I have missed this sickness inside of him?" she asked.

"He hid it really well."

She looked up into his face. "Not from you though. You never liked him. I could tell that though you tried for my sake. He was *malignant*. I'm so glad he's gone and I'm even gladder that *you* are all right."

"I feel responsible for his death," Gabriel said quietly.

"The power you have over that creature is immense, Gabriel," she said. "And, though it sounds trite it is also truth that with that great power comes great responsibility. But you don't need to question what you did with Johnson. You tried everything you could to turn him from that course, but no one could. He was set upon it."

He looked down. "Thank you. I couldn't...I couldn't face you and tell you –"

She cupped his cheek. "You owed me nothing in regards to him. It is I who owe you –"

"No! Grandma –"

"I brought him into this house, into our lives. It was *my* judgment that was so very wrong," she said. Tears appeared in her eyes.

"Like I said, he was very good at hiding what he really was. And, Grandma, he *did* care about you," Gabriel said.

Her eyes sharpened and she held onto him fiercely. "Any man who cares about me would never lay a hand on you, Gabriel. No, whatever Johnson's feelings were they were not of care and love."

"You deserve so much more," Gabriel whispered, his voice cracking.

She gave a watery laugh and swiped the tears from her face. "I *had* more! I had your grandfather. One cannot hope to have a *second* true love. It would be too much to ask."

"You deserve happiness. Don't close your heart to others, Grandma. Please," he begged her. "Don't let Johnson take more than he already has."

She patted his arm. Her expression was at once bleak, resigned and thoughtful. "Perhaps in time I will feel differently again. But, for now, I will be happy to have you and Corey in my life."

He was relieved that she didn't really see him going to Emralis as leaving her life. She seemed to hear his worry and cupped his cheek again.

"No, Gabriel, in truth, with our minds joined, I will be closer to you in Emralis than we were when you were at school. You are just a *thought* away as you said," she said. "Now, go back outside to your prince. Better yet, have him take you into the sea. Your breathing is sounding very labored."

The last was said with a concerned frown. Gabriel nodded after a moment. He didn't want to leave her, hard to breathe or not, but he knew she needed time alone to focus and process what had happened that night. So he leaned down and kissed her forehead before going back out on the porch.

Greta and Roger were standing up when he stepped outside. Both of them looked impossibly weary and the cuts and bruises on their bodies appeared far more livid now than earlier.

"We're going to go home and get some sleep," Roger said.

"But we'll be back tomorrow before you leave, Gabriel," Greta quickly added.

"Good, I look forward to it," Gabriel said with a smile. He couldn't help but like both of them. Though he had only known them a very short time he knew that they were going to be good friends to Corey.

"I want to check in on Henry, too. I tried calling a few times, but he's not answering," Greta added, holding up her phone as if to demonstrate the calls.

“He’s probably resting,” Roger said. His lips tightened though and Gabriel could tell that Roger could care less what Henry was doing.

Greta still looked worried. “Even if he was he would have kept his cell right by his head with the ringer full blast. You know that, Roger.”

An uncomfortable silence fell. They were all wondering if Henry was dead already. He had looked close to it that afternoon.

Dr. Marstand suddenly stood, too. “I think perhaps that I, too, will go see Henry. Perhaps there is something Miskatonic can do. He should be under medical care at the very least.”

“If you can make him go,” Roger muttered darkly.

Dr. Marstand smiled a not nice smile and Gabriel was reminded that the professor had hidden depths. “I assure you that Henry will go if I ask.”

“Right. I’m sure he will for you, sir.” Roger nodded like one of those bobbing head dolls. Evidently, Gabriel wasn’t alone in thinking that Dr. Marstand could be a pretty scary guy.

“Would one of you help me to my room before you go?” Corey asked. He was looking rather worn out himself.

“I’ll help,” Gabriel volunteered and stepped towards his best friend.

Corey waved him off though. “No, Gabe, you sound like a wounded bellows. Casillus needs to get you into the water.”

Gabriel’s chest was feeling rather tight and there were a few of those black squares appearing in front of his vision again plus the thought of stairs caused him pain, but he wouldn’t leave his best friend stranded on the couch.

“Don’t worry, Gabriel, we’ll take care of him,” Greta assured him with a gentle look and he knew she was saying more than just that she and Roger would help Corey up into bed. They would watch over him for Gabriel.

He nodded. “Okay, so I’ll see you all in the morning.”

Everyone smiled and nodded. Casillus’ arm went around Gabriel’s waist.

Let us get you into the water, my love, Casillus said and led him out onto the sand and into the surf.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MOONLIGHT SWIM

As soon as Gabriel dove into the ocean, the tightness in his chest disappeared. His gills pumped oxygen into his system. He was light and fast. He and Casillus stroked away from shore. Fear of the water was not even a memory now. Gabriel actually yearned for it. In the water he was strong and healthy. It was where he was meant to be.

Gabriel stretched his senses out and felt Aemrys shooting towards them like a rocket and beyond his ancestor was the whole of House Liseas, waiting for him, already loving him. He could sense each and every single one of them like silver strands. His family numbered over 500. Five-hundred and fifty-one to be exact. Their feelings were like the warmest of embraces. But not even their caring for him could distract him from Casillus. The Mer prince swam easily beside him. Casillus, sensing his gaze, turned his head to look at Gabriel.

I love you, too, Gabriel, Casillus said.

Gabriel swam around Casillus' form until they were face to face, the Mer prince facing upwards towards the ocean's surface and Gabriel downwards towards the ocean floor. Gabriel leaned in and nipped Casillus' lower lip. The Mer grinned.

With a teasing hand that stroked Casillus' right hip, Gabriel asked, *How far should we go out to sleep?*

They were already nearly 100 feet from shore. While the deep called him, his grandmother and Corey called him stronger and he didn't want to go much farther. He had one last day on land. He would not give it up for the lure of the sea yet.

Gabriel felt the Mer measuring the distance to the bottom. There was about forty feet of water between them and the sandy floor. *We can stop here though we dive deeper. Not many boats come near this area, but its always wise to sleep below where their keels can reach.*

We can go to the very bottom if you like, Gabriel said. Despite there being only moonlight, he could see the ocean floor below them almost as clearly as he could have if it had been high noon. His night vision evidently had improved.

You are not afraid? Casillus' voice held a note of awe.

Gabriel looked up to see the Mer's beautiful face. He could sense every single one of the Casillus' feelings without seeing any of his body language, but he

looked anyways, because he wanted to see the Mer. To see such beauty was a blessing.

When you are with me, Casillus, how could I be afraid of anything at all? Gabriel caressed the Mer's cheek.

But its not just that. You have let go of all of your fear. Completely. Casillus took Gabriel's right hand and they drifted down to the bottom. There were still half a dozen feet between their toes and the rippled sand when Casillus stopped their downward glide.

I never thought the fear would leave me, Gabriel admitted. *But it has. Tomorrow, I'll be able to swim out with you and Aemrys with no worries.*

I wish we could take Corey and Grace with us, Casillus said, his hands holding onto Gabriel's waist. *I have come to feel about them as you have. Before, I never considered that I could become attached to humans. Those on land were to be...used.* Casillus looked thoughtful. *My understanding is so different now than when we first met.*

Mine as well. Gabriel reached out and felt his grandmother and best friend's sleeping presences in his mind. *They will be with us, Casillus. Maybe not physically, but I will share everything with them.* He gave Casillus a smoldering look. *Well, maybe not everything.*

There are things we need to keep just to ourselves. Casillus sent a smoldering look back at him.

Gabriel shook himself from the lustful haze as he said, *But I'm going to show them all of the wonders of Emralis. Your parents. House Liseas. Even that very scary court house. I can't wait to do it. I can't wait to see it all myself.*

Casillus drew him closer. Their lips were just an inch apart. *I will show it all to you, Gabriel.*

I want to see all the carvings by Zed, too, Gabriel said. His hands wound around Casillus' neck. *Because I know you've seen them all.* Casillus lowered his head and Gabriel knew he was right. *And I know that you love each and every one and I want to love them, too.*

There was another reason that Gabriel felt the urge to know and understand Zed. He was almost certain that Zed had been a Caller and part of him felt that Zed still lived. Somewhere.

I would have you know only joy and beauty after what you've endured, Casillus said, his face still lowered.

Gabriel put a hand under Casillus' chin and lifted the Mer's head up so that they were eye to eye. *You are all the joy and beauty that I need. Everything else has been*

worth a mere moment with you and now I have all of eternity by your side.

I give you all of myself, Gabriel. Everything I am is yours. Everything I will be is yours, Casillus promised.

Like I said: all worth it.

And Casillus was. So worth it. So beyond worth it. The Mer prince was his and he couldn't pay enough for him.

We should rest. You have gone through much, Gabriel, Casillus suggested, but his hands lingered on Gabriel's waist.

Are you very tired, Casillus? Gabriel ran his fingers through the silken mass of Casillus' hair.

A slow smile crossed the Mer's lips. No, I could stay awake for some time yet.

Me, too.

What would you like to do to pass the time? Casillus chuckled.

As if you don't know. Gabriel laughed. *But since you're asking me to spell it out... I want to make love out here and then fall asleep in your arms. The first time.*

The first time, Casillus agreed

Even though they had made love in Casillus' memory of Emralis, this would be the first time Gabriel and Casillus would make love in the water without any illusions. It felt momentous somehow.

The Mer prince and Gabriel began to dance in the current. It was a combination of spinning and swimming. Fish darted around them as if joining in the dance. Gabriel was grinning and then laughing. Watery laughter. Bubbles came out of his mouth and nose and strained up towards the surface. Casillus kissed him and the laughter turned to moans.

Casillus' hands, which had been firmly on his waist, slid around to Gabriel's ass and slipped down until he was cupping both of Gabriel's butt cheeks. The Mer squeezed them appreciatively. He pulled them apart slightly and his fingers dipped between them. Gabriel tried to take in a sharp breath, but his gills pumped steadily at his sides. His muscles trembled though and Casillus knew all too well how much Gabriel enjoyed his touch.

I want you inside me, Casillus.

A tremor ran through the Mer prince, but then Casillus dove in and kissed Gabriel, deeply. But it seemed to last only a moment before Casillus was moving down Gabriel's body. Kisses, nips, licks rained down on his chest and stomach. Casillus moved around his side, fluttering his tongue over Gabriel's hip bone and the swell of his right buttock, until those lips were at the very top of his crevice.

Gabriel shuddered. To have Casillus' lips *there* was such a pleasurable thing. He found himself opening his legs, urging the Mer prince to move yet further downwards and he got his wish.

Casillus parted Gabriel's buttocks with his strong hands and dragged his clever tongue down the valley of Gabriel's butt cheeks. When he reached Gabriel's anus, his tongue followed the tight, pink swirl of muscle. Heat bloomed in Gabriel's body. His cock rose up high and stiff in front of him. His heart beat all the harder as Casillus probed that opening with that tensile tongue.

The Mer prince's thumbs were then spreading him further, helping that tongue work inside of Gabriel's tightness. Gabriel strove to relax, to open himself, but his anus seemed to want to stay clenched tight as if it wanted to draw in the tongue and fingers and never let them go. He could already feel the self-lubrication starting. It was like a creeping slick heat inside of him. If not for the gills he would have been panting as some of it oozed out of him and into the sea.

Casillus' tongue popped through the tight muscle and lapped at his silken insides. Gabriel's toes curled even as his mouth opened in a watery gasp. The Mer prince worked that tongue inside of him until his sphincter just finally gave up and let Casillus do whatever he wanted. The Mer prince thrust his tongue easily inside and devoured him. Gabriel clawed the water as he was eaten by that plush mouth.

Casillus drew back, which caused Gabriel to moan in dismay. He wanted that mouth back on him. But Casillus pressed a kiss to each butt cheek before he gripped Gabriel's hips with his left hand and slowly pushed in two fingers of his right into Gabriel's opening instead. Gabriel shuddered with pleasure. His cock strained forward as if towards a target.

Those fingers delved deeply into him, all the way up to the knuckle then Casillus pulled them back out so that only the tips of his digits stayed buried inside. Gabriel felt so empty and pushed back as if to recapture them again. He was rewarded with them pressing inside once more. In and out and out and in. Two fingers became three. They stretched him, spreading apart as Casillus drew them from him then plunged back inside again like triple spears. All the while the Mer prince kissed his back and sides, sucked on his skin, and nipped just below his left line of gills. Gabriel's head tipped back and his eyes slid halfway shut from the gorgeous pleasure that filled him.

The Mer prince then drifted up so that his groin and Gabriel's ass were at the same level. Gabriel rested the back of his head on Casillus' broad shoulder. The Mer prince kissed down his throat as he continued to thrust those fingers deep

inside Gabriel. His other hand slipped from Gabriel's hip and ran around to his front to grasp the base of Gabriel's cock. Gabriel's hands frantically clawed the water in front of them again as Casillus rolled his balls in his fingers and then firmly stroked his shaft. More kisses rained down his cheek, neck and shoulder. Gabriel twisted his head around to capture the Mer prince's lips with his. Casillus' tongue slipped inside and Gabriel drowned in the taste of him.

Suddenly, Casillus' fingers withdrew from Gabriel's ass and the long, hard length of his cock was sandwiched between the two globes of his ass. Gabriel whined as the Mer prince ran his cock up and down the crease, putting pressure on his aching, needy anus. Casillus stroked him in time to that rubbing, nearly causing Gabriel to buck.

In me, Gabriel managed to demand. His thoughts were too chaotic with desire to form any other words. He would have begged, pleaded, worshipped at the Mer prince's feet if only to get that hot, hard cock inside of him.

Love you, Gabriel, the Mer prince whispered in return.

Then the head of Casillus' cock was at his entrance. The Mer prince slowly pushed forward. Gabriel could not bear the slowness. He thrust back with a powerful push of his hips, taking in the entirety of Casillus' cock inside of him, all the way down to the root. It was the Mer prince's turn to nearly go wild. Casillus held onto Gabriel's hips, keeping him utterly still.

Do not move, my love. I could cum at any moment, Casillus breathed.

That's the idea. Gabriel laughed wildly.

Casillus gently bit his neck. *Not until I have you incoherent with desire*.

Gabriel shuddered, again unable to speak as need and desire filled him to the brim.

The Mer prince began to move his hips. It was slow and steady, driving Gabriel wild while at the same time keeping Casillus in charge. The Mer prince made sure that when he sank into Gabriel that he ran almost the entire length of his cock up hard against Gabriel's prostate. Gabriel moaned and thrashed as heat built between his legs and sizzled up his spine. Casillus squeezed the base of his cock, keeping him from cumming just yet. And then the Mer prince was pulling out, that glorious sensation of being filled was leaving him, and Gabriel desperately reached back and grabbed at Casillus' hips, wanting to drag him inside once more. And the Mer prince obliged. He set up a punishing, beautiful rhythm of thrusts and withdrawals that had Gabriel's body quaking.

Arousal burned through Gabriel, seeming to ignite every part of him. He expected the water to boil around them. He was molten with need. Casillus increased the rhythm of his thrusting and Gabriel let out a mental shout of pleasure. The Mer prince was slamming into him now. The rhythm building and building in strength and speed. Casillus was delving so deep inside of him that Gabriel didn't know where he stopped and the Mer prince began. Their bond swelled with the pleasure. The feedback loop suddenly started to work overtime and he was both taking and being taken. He was Casillus and he was himself. He was the ocean all around them.

Finally, the need to cum overwhelmed him. His body could bear it no longer. The pleasure was nearly pain, but that only heightened the experience he had of them being together. Casillus' cock swelled even further inside of him and he knew that the Mer prince was about ready to explode as well.

Casillus drew his hand down the length of Gabriel's shaft and let his fingers play along the slit just as he thrust in one final time. Their bodies seemed to fuse together as they came. Gabriel's cum clouded the water around Casillus' fingers while the Mer prince's semen drenched the inside of him. Gabriel bore down on that beautiful cock and milked every ounce of semen from it even as his own cock expelled the last of his own cum. Casillus grasped Gabriel's chin and turned his head so that they could kiss as the last pulse of semen left their bodies.

Love. Love. Love. Love. Gabriel knew that thought was from both of them.

They stayed connected, Casillus' cock still inside of him, as the moonlight silvered water gently spun them in place. The Mer prince so tenderly kissed his cheek, his arms winding completely around Gabriel's form. For his part, Gabriel was able to link their fingers together and lean back into that strong body. His eyes were mere slits. He had no strength to do anything else, but it didn't matter. They were safe in the sea's embrace.

Casillus remained connected to him physically and mentally as both of them drifted into sleep, into shared dreams. Gabriel's last conscious thought was simply the knowledge that he would never be alone. Casillus would always be with him and there was nothing better than that.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LAST DAY, FIRST DAY

Gabriel awoke to the soft brush of fingers across his forehead and down his cheeks to finally linger on his throat over his kalish. He knew that the touch was not Casillus', but it was full of love and tenderness so even in his half-asleep state he was not afraid.

He slowly opened his eyes, the waking world blooming in front of him. Clear morning sunlight streamed down through the water making everything a brilliant blue that was almost dazzling. Schools of fish swam this way and that in the far distance from where he and Casillus slept in an embrace. Aemrys Liseas floated next to him, touching Gabriel's face.

Aemrys! Gabriel immediately went to embrace the man, but he was unable to as Casillus curled tightly around him.

His ancestor smiled broadly. *I am sorry that I woke you, but I could not wait to touch you.*

Don't apologize! I'm so glad you're here! Gabriel assured him as he unwound an arm from Casillus' back and reached for his ancestor.

Aemrys' skin felt the same as Casillus': soft, silky over hard muscle, but Gabriel had an awareness of shared blood. His ancestor grasped his hand gently and brought it up to his face. He pressed a kiss on Gabriel's palm and just held his hand there for long moments. Aemrys' thoughts were of Tabatha and the child who had long ago grown into an old man and died in his arms.

You have his eyes, Aemrys murmured. *My son had such striking eyes. They seemed to look inside of you and know everything you sought to hide. But there was no fear in him knowing. He could be trusted.*

I didn't think Mers had secrets, Gabriel teased gently even as he was touched by his ancestor's words.

Aemrys chuckled. *In some ways, we have more than most.*

He released Gabriel's hand and smiled at him broadly. He then did a quick circle around Gabriel and Casillus, looking at him from all angles. Gabriel wore nothing, his shorts lost to the tides, and it was still a bit embarrassing to be naked in front of anyone but Casillus. Still, he knew that Aemrys' gaze was not sexual or even judging him on beauty, but on health and the state of the transition.

How much time do I have left? Gabriel asked him.

Only a few hours at most, Aemrys answered after coming to a stop in front of him again.

Then we shouldn't waste them. My grandmother wants to meet you so desperately, Gabriel said.

Already he sensed that she was awake and brewing coffee and preparing a huge meal. Corey was still snoring peacefully. Gabriel's heart clenched as his love for them flowed over him yet he would have to leave them. Today would be the last day he would be able to sit on the porch with them and drink coffee and eat pancakes. Today would be the last day for many things.

Aemrys touched his cheek. *Remember that you are taking them with us. While there is joy in physical connection, the one you have with them is here.* His ancestor touched his temple. *Will always be far vaster and deeper.*

Gabriel just nodded. No matter how many times he told himself the same thing, it would still be hard to leave. But he centered himself, because it had to be done and he was leaving with two people who loved him just as deeply as those he was leaving behind.

Let me just wake Casillus and we can go to shore, Gabriel said.

Aemrys was the one to just nod this time. Gabriel sensed both excitement and anxiety about meeting Grace in his ancestor's mind. Aemrys feared that she would feel abandoned by him for not being there for her life. Gabriel knew that his grandmother would understand why he had stayed away. His pain for Tabatha and his son was still so fresh despite the long years. He knew that Aemrys would only find forgiveness from Grace himself so he did not say those things to his ancestor.

Instead, Gabriel turned his attention fully to the Mer prince. He placed a kiss on the tip of Casillus' nose. It twitched. He did it again and tried not to laugh. Casillus' forehead furrowed and finally sleepy thoughts crossed their bond.

Gabriel? Is it time to wake?

Yes, afraid so, sleepy head, Gabriel murmured. *I wouldn't wake you for the world, but...*

It's your last day. I understand. Casillus' eyes opened and he smiled sleepily at Gabriel.

Gabriel felt his heart clench again. He felt love, but also concern. He had a feeling that Casillus needed to sleep so long and deeply because of what had happened at the temple with Johnson. Just being in the temple had drained the Mer prince even without the terrors of guns and being kidnapped. Even now Gabriel could feel the pulse of the temple in his mind. He was so glad that Dr.

Marstand was going to have the place buried again. He wished that they would dump concrete on it like they did to nuclear reactors that had melted down. It had contaminated the area around it and that contamination would continue to creep outward if it was not stopped. Casillus kissed him softly on the lips then and those dark thoughts were pushed away.

Aemrys, you made good time! Casillus turned to look at Gabriel's ancestor. *You must have swum all the time and never rested.*

Aemrys, who had been swimming a little ways off, swam back to them. He showed no signs of exhaustion or even tiredness. In fact, Gabriel felt his own movements were sluggish in comparison to Aemrys' sleek glide.

I was too excited for sleep or rest of any kind, Aemrys said, his gaze drifting to Gabriel again. His joy at their meeting flowed over Gabriel in heady waves.

And I'm sure all the—ah, stuff with Johnson didn't exactly make you want to stay still either, Gabriel suggested.

But Aemrys surprised him by saying, *I had no doubts that you would emerge victorious.*

You didn't believe that Cthulhu was ever in danger? Gabriel guessed. *I should have known that.*

Your actions in trying to save it, which were brave, if unnecessary, bought you that being's good will. At least a little of it. And that is of incalculable value, Aemrys told him. There was a shrewd look on his face and Gabriel thought back to how his ancestor had forced Casillus to admit his desire for Gabriel to marry him in the shared vision. Aemrys was clever, very clever.

Aemrys is the head of our... I suppose you would call it our spying division, Casillus explained.

You're a spy? Gabriel goggled.

Aemrys smiled. *Not exactly. I see all the pieces on the board and know how to move some of them.*

That strange explanation had Gabriel blinking, but he decided not to bother pursuing it at that moment. His ancestor was fascinating and still a little unnerving to him even as Gabriel felt a burst of love from Aemrys so strong that it almost overwhelmed him.

Shall we go in? Casillus suggested.

Yes, I can't wait to see them, Gabriel said.

With a burst of energy, the three of them swam towards shore. Gabriel caught Aemrys watching his form more than once. His ancestor corrected his swimming

gently. Soon Gabriel was nearly outpacing them, which had both Mers laughing.

Soon the student will become the master, Aemrys said.

I think we have a long way to go before then, Gabriel said.

Gabriel gently mentally tugged his grandmother to leave her food preparation and come out onto the porch to meet them as soon as they were twenty-five feet from shore. He felt her heart leap and beat faster as she realized that they were coming in and Aemrys was with them. Their ancestor was their living history. He was sure that his grandmother had millions of questions for Aemrys. He had them himself, but knew that he would have plenty of time to ask as much as he wanted once they were on their way to Emralis.

Soon there was not enough depth to swim easily and the three of them stood up in the surf. Gabriel was suddenly acutely aware that he was naked. He would have to dash upstairs and get a pair of shorts.

The three of them waded out of the ocean and onto the beach. His grandmother was already walking down the steps, dusting the flour off of her hands onto a towel. Her gaze was on Aemrys. He could sense her comparing Gabriel's features to their ancestor's.

You have his nose, Grandma, he teased her.

You may be right, Gabriel, but you have his cheeks, she said back. Though her mental voice was full of amusement, her hands fluttered restlessly in front of her with the towel as they approached.

Aemrys stepped to the front of all of them so that he was first to greet her. She was not the only nervous one. With only a momentary hesitation, looking for approval in her eyes, Aemrys cupped her aged face in his hands. They stared into one another's eyes. They were speaking privately Gabriel realized. As they spoke, Gabriel compared their faces and he could see the shared blood. They were family. Finally, his grandmother covered Aemrys' hands with hers and one single tear drifted down her cheek.

"Oh, Gabriel, he's so—so much more than I ever imagined," she whispered.

Aemrys leaned in and kissed her forehead. Gabriel now heard his ancestor's apologies to her for staying away. They ran over one another forming a stream of regret that he had missed a moment of her life. He made a promise to be there for the rest of it.

"There's nothing to forgive, Aemrys. You're here *now* and you'll take care of Gabriel for me," she responded and brought his hands from her cheeks to her lips.

She kissed his knuckles. “Now come inside and let me feed the three of you. I know you’re starving.”

Cooking and feeding people were her ways to show love so even if they hadn’t been starving, Gabriel knew that they would still have eaten eagerly just to please her. She had towels hanging on the backs of the chairs in the kitchen for them to use to dry off with. Gabriel quickly grabbed one, swathed it around his hips and headed for the stairs while the other two sat down at the kitchen table. He was surprised at how easily Aemrys and Casillus seated themselves as Mers had no chairs, but then again, the Mers knew what he knew. He mentally linked his grandmother, Casillus and Aemrys together so it would be easy for them to hear one another. He felt Aemrys and Casillus’ pleased surprise. His abilities continued to grow and each of them wondered what he would be able to do in the days, months and years to come. He wondered himself.

Gabriel went upstairs to his bedroom to get some shorts. His intention was to pull on a pair and head back downstairs. But he found himself staring at his suitcase, his bed, the worn braided rug and the mellow sunlight on the wooden floor. He watched dust motes float through the air and breathed in the faded smell of his own cologne that lingered in the room. This was the last time he would see this room. The last time he would wear these types of clothes, at least for a very long time and styles would have changed by the time he could take to the land again. The last time...

“It’s just stuff in a room, Gabe,” Corey said from the doorway. “It’s not you or me or Grandma G. Leaving it doesn’t mean you’re leaving us.”

Gabriel spun around to face him. “You’re hearing my thoughts even without me connecting to you intentionally.”

Corey smiled though it was a little sad. “Actually, I just *know* you, Gabe, even without reading your mind I guessed what you were thinking.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Gabriel’s voice was clogged with emotion. There was so much more to say but none of it came out.

In response, Corey hugged him tightly and half lifted Gabriel off of the floor even though he was able to put weight only on one leg. He finally said, “I will be and so will *you*.”

“You’re *crushing* me with love again,” Gabriel laughed even as he wiped away tears.

“Being crushed by love is a good thing or so I always say.” Corey set him down on his feet again. “Let’s go down and party.”

“It’s six in the morning.”

“It’s *always* time to party, Gabe.” Corey laughed.

The two of them went downstairs. Gabriel helped Corey limp down the steps. Corey’s ankle looked better than it had the night before, but it was still terribly sprained.

Corey had been right that it was never too early to party. It seemed like a celebration in the kitchen. Even as Gabriel mentally connected Corey to the others he could see from the smiles and bright eyes the happiness, almost festive atmosphere of this last meal. Aemrys was standing beside Grace, watching intently as she fried the French toast in butter. Warm cherry compote was already bubbling in a small pot beside it.

... And the butter adds to the flavor? Aemrys was asking her.

She touched their ancestor’s nearest forearm and responded with a knowing tilt of her head, *Butter makes everything better.*

Casillus rose from his seat and received a crushing hug from Corey. Once Casillus escaped Corey’s crush of love he went to Gabriel and stroked a hand down his back. He dipped his head down to kiss Gabriel’s cheek.

You are loved on land and in the sea, Casillus said simply.

I am very lucky, Gabriel agreed.

There was nothing more to say. He had to leave and, while sad, was excited, too. Even now he felt the pull of the ocean and the straining of his lungs. The trip up and down the stairs had taxed him somewhat. He wanted to increase his time on land as much as he could so he allowed Casillus to help him into a chair. The Mer prince sat beside him. Corey had gone over to Grace and Aemrys to “supervise” the cooking of the French toast, compote and bacon.

Salty with sweet is best, Corey was telling a patient Aemrys. *You have to put a little piece of bacon on top of each bite of French toast. It’s a whole new experience. Trust me on this.*

Gabriel laughed and rested his head on Casillus’ firm, muscular shoulder. All of breakfast proceeded like that. One bright moment to the next. There was plenty of laughter and jokes. His grandmother was already writing down everything Aemrys was telling her about all of their relatives. She was sketching out a family tree.

I can’t wait to put faces with names. Gabriel, you will have to show me every single person in House Liseas and get a history from them, his grandmother commanded.

Her face was filled with interest and excitement, not sadness. Her family was expanding in her view, not shrinking.

Personally, I want to see Emralis, Corey said. *It was so cool what little I saw of it.*

We will take you for a tour, Casillus promised. Gabriel would share what he saw with his best friend.

Corey made a “tee hee” of pleasure and wiggled in his chair. *Most excellent!*

Gabriel was glad that they were not speaking out loud. He did not think he could manage it. He could hear the strain of his breathing in his own ears. As breakfast ended, his grandmother was so entranced with what Aemrys was saying that she didn’t actually get up to do the dishes. Gabriel made a move to do them instead, but when he stood black dots clouded his vision and he nearly fell over. Casillus caught him and eased him back into the chair.

Whoa, must have got up too fast, Gabriel said weakly even though he had risen quite slowly. He knew what this weakness meant. He needed to get into the water. He just didn’t want to be the one to suggest it.

Casillus and Aemrys shared a look. Corey and Grace nodded. Their smiles dimmed, but did not go away.

It is time, Gabriel, Casillus said gently.

Oh, I guess it is. Gabriel’s hands were suddenly shaking and he had to grip both of them tightly together to stop the involuntary movement. The shaking though just moved to the rest of his body. Casillus stroked his back again.

It’ll be all right, Gabe, Corey said, his round face straining for assurance.

His grandmother rose and went to him. She put her hands on his shoulders. *Gabriel, we’re going to be with you always.*

He nodded. *I know. I just hate goodbyes.*

It’s not a goodbye, she said.

They had been telling him this and he them the same for some time, but still it felt like it was. Everything was going to change. This was the last day. No, this was the last few minutes.

Let’s go out onto the beach, his grandmother suggested and urged him to stand.

Casillus had to help him up. Gabriel held on tightly to the Mer prince’s hand. Aemrys came around to the other side of him and took his other arm. Between them they supported him out of the kitchen, onto the porch, down the steps and onto the sand. The moment he saw the blue expanse of ocean some of the weakness eased. All five of them walked to where the surf beat upon the sand. The bottoms of his feet seemed to drink in the water.

I wonder where Greta, Roger and Dr. Marstand are? Corey asked as the sea flowed over their toes. *I know they really wanted to be here.*

At that moment, as if in response, Gabriel felt the minds of the two students and the Miskatonic professor. He turned his head to look back at the house and the highway. An SUV barreled down the road and turned off almost too quickly into the cottage's drive.

What's happening? His grandmother asked as she looked at the SUV, too.

Greta, Roger and Dr. Marstand all popped out of the SUV as if on springs. Catching sight of them, all three hurried forward. Greta was the first to get to them followed by Roger and then the professor. Their faces were all strained despite trying to smile. Gabriel knew that they had not run here *only* to say goodbye to him. Something had happened.

"What's wrong?" Gabriel sounded breathless and Casillus petted his back, urging him to let others speak.

"Henry's gone!" Greta got out.

"What? Where?" Corey asked, his forehead furrowing.

"We only caught a few hours of sleep before going to check on him at five a.m.," Roger explained. "But when we got to his apartment he was already gone."

"Maybe he just went out for a minute," Corey suggested.

But Greta shook her head. "No, he took all his things and one of the school's SUVs was missing."

"We have trackers in each of the cars," Dr. Marstand said gravely. "We tracked the car up the coast, but he had already abandoned it. There is no sign of him."

"But the dude was sick as a dog!" Corey objected. "He could barely walk when we saw him yesterday. He's—he's *dying*. How far could he get?"

Gabriel remembered Henry's feverish eyes and the gleam of desperate madness to connect to Cthulhu once more. Would Henry have stayed home when he knew that Cthulhu might make landfall? No, he wouldn't have done that. He would have come to the shore, out of sight, but nearby to see everything. And would Cthulhu be content at having killed Johnson and his goons and *not* wish to engage humanity again? No, it would be eager to drive another man or woman mad. It was not done at all. It would have made a deal with Henry, its servant. More life in exchange for his assistance. Gabriel suddenly knew what that assistance had been.

He turned his head to look out at the sea and he cast his senses outwards. He thought of them like radar that would ping when they located the thing he was looking for. But there was no ping from the sea.

"The statue," Gabriel said. "It's gone. Henry's got it."

How do you know this, Gabriel? Casillus asked. *You do not know where I put the statue.*

But Gabriel *had* known. Part of him had been quite aware of its presence, tucked beside a reef. Now it was not there. He turned his gaze to the land and stretched his senses out farther and farther. He felt the faintest of pings. The statue was being moved up the coast. He wasn't able to locate it exactly.

"Henry has the statue," Gabriel repeated. "He's driving up the coast about... eight hours away, I think."

"How? Why?" Greta gasped.

Gabriel's jaw clenched and he let out a rather bitter laugh. "Henry made a deal with *it*. Henry watched the whole battle with Johnson and after I went into the temple, he and Cthulhu met. It wants to still go after humanity and the statue is a way to cause great mischief. Cthulhu gave Henry the statue after Casillus had hidden it away and told him to take it... elsewhere."

"In exchange for what?" Dr. Marstand asked.

"Life, I suppose. Or power. Maybe both." Gabriel had to stop speaking as he was beginning to wheeze badly.

The statue is too dangerous to be let loose upon the world, Casillus said, his voice grim. *But we need to get you home, Gabriel. You cannot be out of the water any longer.*

I don't know if I'll be able to sense it all the way from Emralis, Gabriel objected. *Not at first at least. My power needs to grow more.*

Do not be concerned. There are other ways to track the statue, Aemrys said, his expression set and determined. *After you are settled in Emralis, I will return to assist Miskatonic with the hunt.*

Gabriel felt a wave of relief. He nodded. *All right. That sounds like a good plan. Maybe I'll be able to help even from the city.*

Aemrys clasped his arm. *I am certain you will.*

Gabriel had Corey relay what had been said to the Miskatonic students and professor.

"We'll be honored to have the help of Lord Aemrys," Dr. Marstand said with a slight bow.

And we shall see how this Next Society can keep its word, Aemrys said. Though Dr. Marstand could not hear him, Gabriel had a feeling that he knew what Aemrys was thinking.

“Gabriel truly needs to get in the water now,” his grandmother said. She was watching his face with increased worry in her eyes. “His lips are *blue*.”

Yes, it is time, Casillus agreed.

Wait one moment. Aemrys was suddenly untying a part of the shift that covered his body. Gabriel realized as he did so that Aemrys had brought a second shift. The shift was deep purple with a silver star design. He realized it was House Liseas’ colors and design. It was for him.

So I’m finally going to get one of these, huh? He joked feebly.

It is with great honor that I present this to you, Aemrys said.

He helped Gabriel off with his shorts as the young man was finding that his fingers didn’t wish to work. Greta stared for a moment at his naked body before blushing hotly and looking away. Aemrys then tied the shift around Gabriel’s waist. It felt *right* on him. Aemrys then rose, cupped his face and kissed his forehead.

I welcome you into House Liseas, my Gabriel, our Caller, he intoned.

Gabriel hugged him back for a moment. When they broke apart, his Mer ancestor was turning to Grace. Aemrys had a kalish in his hand, a twin to the one that he wore. He was putting it around Grace’s neck. There were tears in both their eyes.

And this is so you, too, know, Grace, that you are a member of House Liseas as well, he said and kissed her cheek.

Gabriel reached up and took his own kalish off. He went to Corey and pressed it into his right hand. His best friend was looking suspiciously wet-eyed. *Though you are not my blood brother, you are my brother in all ways that matter. Thank you for everything*.

He and Corey embraced again. This time Corey’s touch was terribly gentle and Gabriel knew it was because he seemed so fragile. When his best friend let go of him, still snuffling softly, Gabriel turned to his grandmother. There were no words between them as she wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly to her. There was just love. He clasped that to himself. Finally, he stepped out of her embrace. He could see tears in the eyes of all those that looked on. Greta sniffled as she clasped her hands in front of her. Roger, too, looked a little dewy. Dr. Marstand nodded gravely.

Gabriel turned towards the sea. Casillus and Aemrys stood on either side of him. Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment and listened to the waves. The sea breeze

stirred his hair. He heard the call of seagulls on the wind. He felt the love of all those around him. He opened his eyes.

I'm ready, Gabriel said.

Though he still felt weak as a kitten he found himself running along with the other Mer into the sea. As soon as the water was deep enough he dove in. His skin felt quenched and immediately he could breathe easily. They swam out until the water was up to their necks and then they surfaced. All three of them turned back to wave to the people on the shore who waved back enthusiastically.

Gabriel kept his mind connected to Corey and his grandmother. They would be with him as he swam out to sea. They would be with him as he dove down the great fathoms to Emralis. They would be with him to see the glorious city of the Mers. They would know all his joy and he would know theirs.

Let us go home, Gabriel, Casillus said.

Everyone is waiting for you, Aemrys assured him.

The three of them waved one last time and dove beneath the water's surface.

EPILOGUE

Henry patted his right palm against the steering wheel in time to the beat of the song on the stolen car's radio. Sunshine spilled in through the car's windshield and summer winds breezed in through the open windows. He had made good time.

He knew that the Next Society would be coming after him. He would have guessed that even without Cthulhu telling him that they were already on his trail. Gabriel had figured out what the two of them had done. He was glad that Gabriel would be stuck in Emralis. He, alone, could have obstructed Cthulhu's plan, but now Henry was nearly home free.

He took in a deep breath of summer air. He could finally breathe again. His whole body felt *good*. It was another gift from Cthulhu, his master. There would be other gifts if he was successful and he *would* be successful. There was so very much both he and his master wished to do to this world. He glanced over at the statue on the passenger seat beside him. Despite it being covered with thick blankets he could still feel its power. Others would feel that power soon, too.

Henry smiled and pressed harder on the gas.

THE END ... FOR NOW!

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I sincerely hope that you have enjoyed reading this series as much as I have had writing it. Some of you may know that I write mostly for a serial site raythereign.com, adding about 75k words a month every month. *The Merman Series* started as a serial story there called *The Sea*. With the experience of writing *The Sea* and Members comments *The Merman Series* was born. So if you're looking for some more stories like this one, you can find a ton of them there.

Thank you for reading and I hope to hear from you in the reviews or at the site!

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