

THE MERMAN

CALLER

3



X. ARATARE

A RAYTHE REIGN PUBLICATION

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The Merman - Book 3: Caller

Gabriel Braven sees monsters, but he does not believe it.

As Gabriel struggles to cope with the three days he has left on land, a new complication arises. His grandmother's lover, the enigmatic archaeology professor Johnson Tims seems to know more than he should about Gabriel's transformation into a merman.

Gabriel's lifeline is his own lover, Casillus Nerion, prince of the ocean-dwelling, immortal Mer. Life on land is becoming more and more difficult, but their loving mental connection grows with Gabriel's trust in what he is becoming. Gabriel is even eager to get in the water if it is to be in Casillus' strong arms.

However, Johnson is even more eager to lead Gabriel to the ancient temple his team has discovered that may have some tragic connection with the Mer. Not even Casillus can sustain him when Gabriel is plunged into visions of the terrible past between the Mer and the humans... but what Gabriel discovers about himself is even more shocking.

THE MERMAN

BOOK 3: CALLER

A RAYTHE REIGN NOVEL

Based on the novel The Sea by X. Aratare

Story by X. Aratare

Cover Art by Mathia Arkoniel

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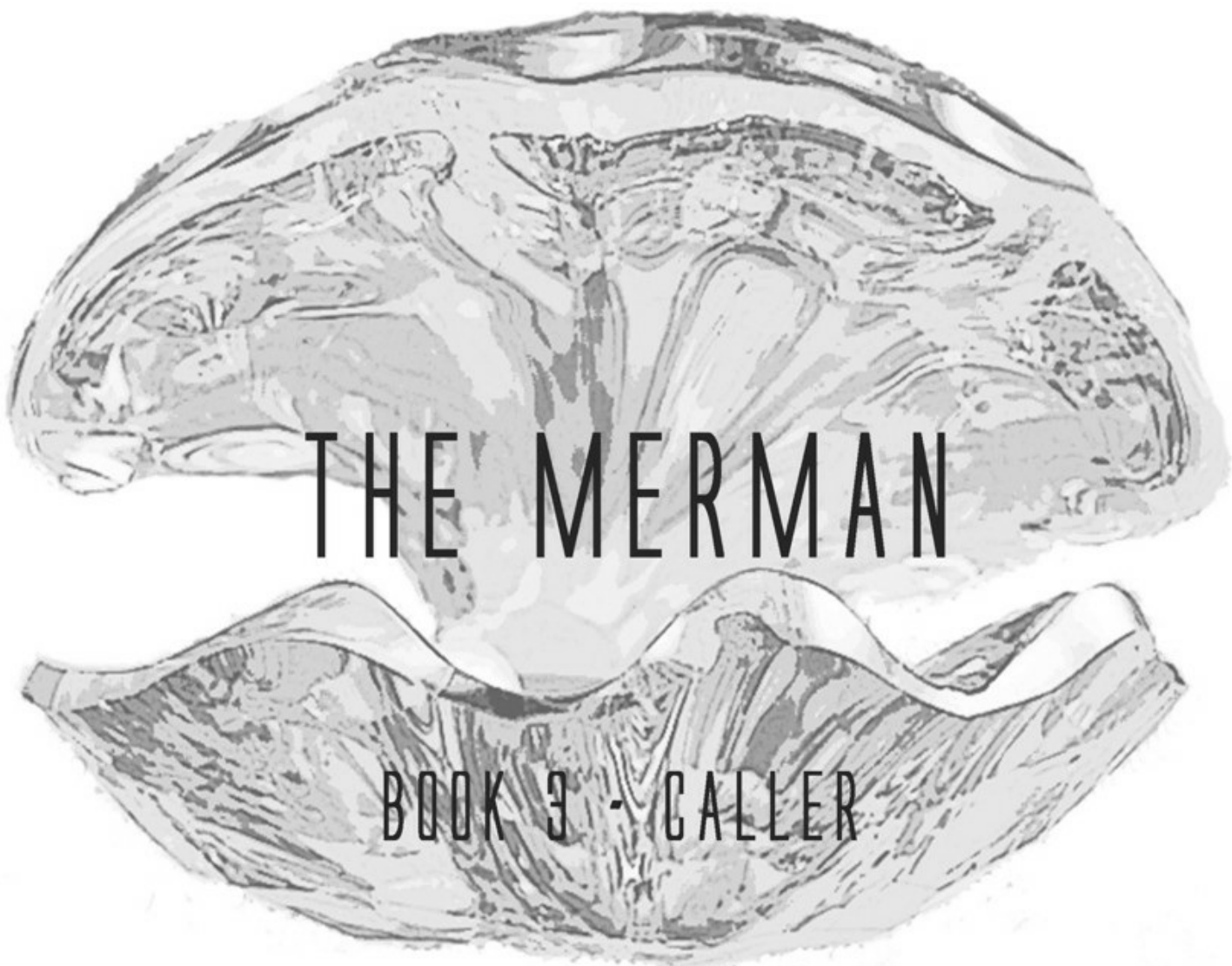
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THE MERMAN

BOOK 3 - CALLER

X. ARATARE

STORY

MATHIA ARKONIEL

COVER ART

Chapter 1



FOOTSTEPS IN THE SAND

Gabriel Braven met Johnson Tims' gray gaze and wondered if the older man had seen the Mer Prince Casillus Nerion dive beneath the ocean's surface. Because if Johnson had, things were about to get very interesting.

"Johnson! I—I didn't hear you come—come out," Gabriel said lamely, gesturing to the porch where the man stood. "How long have you been standing there?"

Watching me? Watching Casillus? Spying on us?

Johnson Tims was a former military man-turned-professor at the mysterious and secretive Miskatonic University and, evidently, also Gabriel's grandmother's boyfriend. After all, why would the man be in a robe at 6:00 a.m. on Grace's porch unless he had spent the night? But standing there in the morning light, Johnson didn't look like a man blinded by love. Instead, his bright, inquisitive gaze was completely clear. Too clear.

What am I thinking? That he spent the night with my grandmother to be near me? That he's seducing her so that he can find out if Mer blood still runs strong in Braven veins? That's crazy.

Then again, Gabriel had thought believing mermen were real was crazy, too. However, not only were mermen real, he was transforming into one of them.

Johnson walked down the steps and onto the beach that spread out from the back of his grandmother's cottage in a fan of gold. The black robe he wore strained over the bulging muscles in his arms. The end of it hung to just above his knees. Gabriel guessed it wasn't Johnson's own robe by how tight it was and how little it covered. It didn't look like one of his grandmother's either, so that left it being his grandfather's, a man whom Gabriel had never met as he had died before Gabriel was born.

Wearing a dead man's clothes? That's sort of creepy. But it's certainly better than seeing him naked.

"I'm surprised to see you up and looking so ... *refreshed*, Gabriel," Johnson said as he stopped alongside him. "You seemed so ill at dinner last night."

And I thought you went home after that dinner, but evidently not. We're both full of surprises.

He had spent the night in the bathtub in Casillus' arms with water surrounding them both. That had relieved some of the weakness that now plagued Gabriel as his body transformed from human to merman. He resisted the urge to touch his sides and assure himself that his gills, which appeared when he got wet, had disappeared. If faint traces of them still remained it would only draw Johnson's attention to them, so he kept his hands down.

In some ways, the fact that Gabriel was becoming a merman was the most ridiculous thing that

could have ever happened to him. He had been afraid of the sea since he was a child. His fear had started after his parents had drowned in a terrible storm on the ocean. Seemingly miraculously, Gabriel had survived the sinking of their boat by two rogue waves, but his love of the ocean had died that day along with his parents. After their deaths, Gabriel had feared and loathed the water as much as he had formerly loved it. And then, just yesterday, Gabriel had nearly drowned *again*. This time, he had been rescued by Casillus Nerion, a prince of the Mers. Casillus had told Gabriel the truth about why he had survived drowning twice. Gabriel was a Mer, too.

Casillus explained that Gabriel's ancestors on both sides must have had Mer blood, and once combined in him, there was enough merman DNA that he was transitioning into a Mer. The change normally took place much earlier in life, but Gabriel's avoidance of the sea had delayed the transition.

Gabriel hadn't believed Casillus at first. After all, mermen did *not* exist. Like unicorns and Santa Claus, they weren't real. But Gabriel had ultimately had to accept the truth as his breathing became more and more labored out of the water and gills started appearing on his sides whenever he got wet. The physical transformation had pretty much sealed the deal as far as proof went. He was not human. Then Casillus had told him one more thing. Mers lived forever, but Gabriel would die unless he entered the water. He only had three days left on land before he had to go into the sea and transition fully into a Mer. Three days to say goodbye to all he loved and go into the ocean he still feared.

The existence of Mers and his transition into one of them had to be kept secret from humans. Only his grandmother and his best friend Corey Rudman could ever know. Gabriel hadn't had a chance to tell them yet, but Johnson, with his cold eyes and military mindset, seemed to have guessed something. At least, he *suspected* something.

What does he suspect? What does he know?

"Yeah, well, a good night's sleep helped," Gabriel said finally.

Johnson's slate gray gaze, which had been sweeping the water looking for something—or *someone*—turned towards him. "I wouldn't have thought sleeping in a bathtub would be that restful."

"How did you know I slept there?" Gabriel tensed. "I mean, yeah, I did—did take a bath last night and I fell asleep in the tub, but how do you know that?"

"I thought I heard the bath running last night. It woke me up, and then I heard your voice. You must have been talking to yourself." Johnson's gaze was opaque.

Talking to myself? Oh, shit, that was when I was INSISTING to Casillus that it was too intimate to speak through our bond. Why was I so stupid?

"Yeah, I do that sometimes. Talk to myself out loud about ... about things," Gabriel said.

Gabriel immediately shut down his mental bond with Casillus. This bond allowed them to speak to one another telepathically. He felt as though shutting it down would keep the Mer safer from Johnson somehow.

"You had a lot to talk out, then," Johnson said.

"And you, ah, listened?" Gabriel's mouth went dry. What had he said out loud? How much of it could Johnson make out?

Johnson dug his toes into the soft, warm sand. "You mustn't worry. I didn't clearly hear what you said. Just the cadence of your voice rising and falling."

"Oh, I—I see."

And he heard all of this from my grandmother's bed? For a moment, Gabriel envisioned Johnson and Grace's bodies entwined. *Gah! I have to put that image out of my mind. Then again, I*

was doing things with Casillus that would curl their hair and we were in the tub just down the hall, so I guess we're even.

Johnson continued on, "By the *length* of your conversation, I could tell that you were quite concerned about something. Is it something I could help you with?"

Help me? Gabriel's gaze slid to the sea. It was beautiful and terrifying, and he had no idea how he was ever going to live in it for eternity. He wished he could talk to Casillus at that moment, but the silence was better. He was protecting the Mer.

Johnson touched Gabriel's shoulder. "I can tell you're troubled. You don't have to bear this burden alone."

For one wild moment, Gabriel considered telling him. Without Casillus there to take away his doubts and fears he suddenly felt like he would explode. Johnson's expression was almost gentle and definitely concerned. The urge to confess was so strong that Gabriel actually opened his mouth to speak, but then he saw the coldness lurking behind Johnson's eyes. His mouth snapped shut. Revealing any of this to Johnson would be crazy. His confession would be to Corey and his grandmother, not to this ex-military man.

The only reason I even considered telling him is because I've cut myself off from Casillus, Gabriel realized with a start. *I'm alone again and I'm not thinking straight.*

Shaking himself, Gabriel said, "No, it's nothing you can help me with. It's something that I've got to deal with on my own."

On my own ... no, I'm not on my own. Casillus is with me. He's out there. Watching. Waiting. Caring for me. And Corey and my grandmother are here for me as well. I'm not alone. Repeating that to himself helped calm down his frantic thoughts.

"But on your own, you fell asleep in a tub full of water," Johnson pointed out.

"I—"

"You need to be more careful, Gabriel. You could *drown* doing something like that," Johnson said too casually.

Gabriel found himself stepping back. He hadn't meant to react to Johnson's words, but he couldn't help it. "Y—yeah, but I'm fine. Clearly, I didn't—I didn't *drown*."

Terror had him thinking, *He knows!*

But what did, or could, Johnson know? That Mers existed?

His mind offered, *He saw Casillus dive into the sea!*

But then his mind then offered, *He can't know Mers are real even if he did see Casillus. Casillus looks just like a normal man. Albeit, an extremely beautiful, nearly naked man who disappeared under the waves and never surfaced for air ...*

Gabriel mentally shook himself. *He can't know! He knows nothing!*

"You didn't drown *this time*," Johnson corrected quietly, but then he gave Gabriel a stern look. "And not the time with your parents either. One would almost say that the water loves you. That or you're exceptionally lucky."

"The sea took my parents! That's not *love*!" Gabriel snapped.

"Forgive me, Gabriel," he responded. "I shouldn't have said it the way I did."

"You shouldn't have said it at all!" Gabriel shouted. His throat felt raw.

"It's just so *strange* how you survived that day when your parents did not. When *no one* should have. You were *miles* away from land. The storm was the most powerful in a *century*. I can't even imagine what the ocean must have been like. Waves as tall as buildings bearing down on you. Rain like knives hitting your skin. Yet you managed to *swim* to shore although you were just a little boy,"

Johnson said, and as he spoke, Gabriel remembered.

But Gabriel didn't remember the waves or rain. He remembered looking up and seeing the storm raging far, far, far above him. He was safe. The lightning that streaked the sky illuminated the water around him ... the water ... he was underwater ... being carried by tentacles like he was the most precious of treasures ...

Gabriel blinked and the memory disappeared. His gaze jerked to the sea. He expected to see the sky turning black and the waves rising and rising and rising. But the sky was clear and the sea was almost flat. It was a calm day. A beautiful day. Sweat coated his forehead and upper lip.

That wasn't real. That couldn't be real. Casillus, I need you. But he did not reach for the Mer. He had to keep it together and keep Casillus safe.

"Do you ever wonder about why you survived?" Johnson asked. It was more than asking, it was probing.

Gabriel's back straightened. The urge to flee flowed over him. *But where would I go? And what would he think? If he has suspicions about me, running would clearly confirm them. I have to keep calm.*

Gabriel took in a deep breath and turned back to Johnson before he said, "I've been thinking about it a lot since I've been back here." He crossed his arms over his chest and looked out at the water once more. Casillus was out there. The sea was not as frightening as it had been now that he knew the Mer was right there. Nearly touchable. Casillus would let nothing happen to him. "Coming back here is bringing up a lot of memories. Not all of them are good."

"The day of the storm being one of those bad memories, I'm sure," Johnson said.

"Y—yeah, the worst." Gabriel blinked back sudden tears. The image of his mother and father being dragged down by the boat as it sank flashed through his mind. He had dreamt of the sinking just last night. The dream had been so vivid, so real, that his sadness at their deaths was now almost as fresh to him as if they had just happened.

"Your grandmother said that you *directed* where you and your parents sailed that day," Johnson said.

Gabriel stiffened once more, and then his head snapped towards Johnson in surprise. "She *told* you that?"

"She didn't mean to betray a confidence. She was just so nervous about how you would feel coming back here that she *had* to talk about it. She's been so concerned about you, Gabriel, you have no idea," Johnson said, and Gabriel felt a wash of guilt run through him.

"There's nothing for her to worry about," Gabriel said almost sharply. He tightened his hold on himself.

"She told me that you blamed yourself for your parents' deaths," Johnson said. "Because you had picked that spot to sail to, and that spot was where the rogue waves appeared that sank the boat."

Gabriel *had* blamed himself for that choice. The "what ifs" had haunted him for years. What if he hadn't insisted on going out on the boat that day? What if he had told his father to pick where they sailed? What if they had sailed closer to shore like his mother had wanted? His grandmother hadn't understood his guilt. She had assured him over and over again that it was not his fault, that he could not have known where the storm would be or where the rogue waves would appear. No one could.

But is that true? I'm a Mer with a connection to the sea. Was I sensing something out there in the depths? Did some part of me know—and yearn for—the storm to come so I could ... could see it? So I could see something miles high with tentacles ... That thought stopped Gabriel cold. That was madness. That "it" was not real.

"I—I did choose where we went that day," Gabriel found himself saying. "My mother wanted to sail closer to shore. She had heard a weather report that a storm might be coming, but I convinced her that we had to go out farther than she wanted. So yes, I *am* responsible for us being there when the storm came."

"What was it about that particular spot that called to you, Gabriel?" Johnson asked. He lowered his voice as if he wanted this to be a secret just between them. "Did you *hear* something coming from there? *Feel* something? *See* something?"

The pull. It was like a silver thread connecting me to that part of the ocean. I had to go there. At the time, it felt like nothing could have stopped me from going there. How could Johnson know about that? Again he mentally shook himself. *He doesn't know! He's guessing.*

"I don't know," Gabriel answered, his lips numb.

He had long tried to convince himself that it was just a childish whim that had made him pick that terrible spot that day, but some part of him had never really believed that. Now that he knew about his Mer heritage, he really didn't believe it. What if he had been *compelled* in some way? He passed a shaky hand over his suddenly damp forehead.

"What did you think at the time? What did you *feel*?" Johnson asked.

Gabriel's mouth opened and he heard himself saying, "I just felt—felt that we had to go there, because ..."

"Because?" Johnson pressed, and Gabriel could have sworn the older man was holding his breath as he awaited Gabriel's answer.

Because something amazing was going to happen. Something amazing was waiting there. Waiting for me. Something miles high with tentacles.

Gabriel shuddered as he remembered the tentacles rising up from the glittering depths after the boat sank. Another wash of cold sweat broke out on his forehead and upper lip. *That thing couldn't be real*, he told himself for what felt like the millionth time. It was a monster that his oxygen-starved mind had created based on his mother's story about the Mer's Guardian. He hadn't been drawn out to that spot in the ocean because that monstrous creature was there. That was just impossible!

"Gabriel, is everything all right?" Johnson again laid one of his massive hands on Gabriel's shoulder. His thick, dark eyebrows drew together in concern.

"I—I—everything's *fine*," Gabriel got out. He was shaking and felt so ill again.

"You look rather pale. Let me help you," Johnson said. His voice was gentle, but there was a hungry expression in his eyes.

"Help me? You're the last person who could *help* me! You're the one talking about my parents! I don't want to speak about it! Can't you understand that?" Gabriel's voice was shrill. He would never share his thoughts with Johnson. The more eager the older man was to hear them, the less Gabriel wanted to reveal. He stepped away from Johnson's touch. "Why do you want to drag it all up again? What business is it of yours?"

There was a flash of disappointment, and maybe even frustration, in Johnson's eyes. "You must think it very strange that I'm asking you these questions."

"Strange?! Strange?!" Gabriel crossed his arms over his chest. "More than strange! Sadistic, actually!"

Johnson flinched. He held up one hand as if to placate Gabriel. "I assure you that the *last* thing I want to do is hurt you. I want to *help* you."

"You have a bizarre way of showing it!" Gabriel wanted to go inside. He didn't want to be there any longer, but there was something in Johnson's expression and voice that held him there despite his

anger, pain and fear.

“There is a *reason* I’m asking you about all of this. A *good* reason.” The older man put his hands on his hips and looked down at his feet. He was quiet for a moment, but then began to speak again. “My last mission in the military took me to a remote jungle island.”

“I don’t care to hear a *story*—”

Johnson raised one hand again, which silenced Gabriel, and continued, “I swear you will understand my point after I’ve told you this.”

“I don’t see why I should stay a second longer with you!”

“Please,” Johnson begged. “*Please*.”

Gabriel stared for a long moment at the former military man. His temper wanted him to turn his back on Johnson, but his instincts told him to stay and listen. “All right. Fine. Tell me then.”

“Thank you,” Johnson said, letting out a relieved breath.

“Don’t thank me. Just say what you have to say,” Gabriel said sharply.

Johnson nodded. “All right. Fair enough.” He paused, apparently centering himself, and then began, “The military had a listening post on a remote Pacific island. A young man about your age, name of Kane, was stationed on the island two months before—before things went *wrong*.” Johnson’s gaze went distant as he clearly remembered his mission. “The listening post’s main purpose was to keep track of enemy vessels on the sea and intercept their messages, decode them and send them on to the mainland. And Kane was brilliant at it. He seemed to know just where our enemies’ ships were at all times, all over the globe. His colleagues joked that he had an *affinity* for water.”

Gabriel’s stomach fluttered uncertainly. A young man with an affinity for water? That sounded rather familiar. Could Kane have Mer blood, too? “Something happened to Kane?”

“Something happened to the people *around* him,” Johnson said. “I suppose something happened to him, too, but ... but I’ve always suspected that he survived somehow. I have no proof of it. Just a feeling in my gut.”

Survived? Like how I survived drowning twice? Or something else?

Gabriel’s back straightened. “What exactly do you think he survived?”

“The first sign of something being wrong at the base came a month after he arrived.” Johnson crossed his arms at the wrists behind his back as if he were reporting. “Kane claimed that he was hearing signals, *music of the deep*, he later called it. No one else heard what he did. And this music, which he said he traced to the Mariana Trench ... well, it didn’t correspond to any human activity.”

“So he was tracking fish? Whales? Sharks?” Gabriel’s voice sounded high and fake to his own ears. He had a terrible feeling he knew what Kane had been hearing: the Mer. And he hadn’t been hearing them over the machines, but from inside his own head.

“No, Gabriel, other people would have heard it too if it was anything like that,” Johnson said, his expression stony. “Kane became obsessed with this music of the deep to the exclusion of all else.”

“So was he actually hearing something or just going crazy?” Gabriel asked.

Johnson did not answer his question. Instead, he said, “They found Kane destroying all of the listening equipment one night. He was smashing it to bits with a crowbar. He was *raving* that the music wasn’t ours to listen to, that we were violating *its* domain and that we must leave the sea to *it*.” Johnson swallowed. Kane’s words obviously still unsettled him to this day. “They locked him up, still screaming. He never stopped screaming. The last message from the base informed us of these developments and then ... it went *dark*.”

“You mean the base stopped reporting?” Gabriel asked. He was surprised that his voice sounded so even, because his heart was pounding in his chest even though he did not know exactly why.

The sea is "its"? The Mers? But then wouldn't "it" be plural? Them? They? Not "it". And why would the Mers attack a military base anyways? Why not just contact Kane and take him into the water if he was transitioning?

"I was sent in to find out what had happened to the base." Johnson's head lifted and his eyes were bleak. "The station was utterly destroyed. More than destroyed. It was simply gone."

That doesn't sound like the Mers. I can't believe Casillus or anyone related to him would order such a thing, or even be able to do such a thing.

Gabriel blinked. "How could a whole station be gone?"

"The only clue about what had happened there was this bizarre *compaction*, an extreme *compression*, of the land." Johnson didn't even blink as he explained, "The compression started far offshore. We followed it from the seabed to the sandy beach and then up to the asphalted area around the base. The ground looked as if something impossibly heavy had *slid* up from the sea, crushed the station beneath its bulk, and then dragged the remains into the deep."

Something miles high with tentacles. Another shudder ran through Gabriel.

"Did you ever figure out what happened?" Gabriel asked faintly.

Johnson's gray eyes gleamed. "I know what caused it, yes. I found reports of it appearing throughout the ages written in esoteric books. Visions of it drawn on crumbling, ancient pages. Horrified whispers of its existence passed down through generations. But no one in the military would believe me!" Johnson's hands shook. He looked down at them as if surprised to find his hands clenched in front of him. He released his grip and took a deep breath. "But the people at Miskatonic *did*. They had come across this *thing* too, and others, many others, like it or worse. Studying things like this is the university's purpose."

Gabriel didn't ask what the *thing* was. His mouth wouldn't form the words. Instead, he asked, "Is that why you're a professor at Miskatonic now and not in the military any longer?"

"Yes, Gabriel." Johnson was standing at attention as if he were in military uniform still and not in a robe several sizes too small. "You see, I found that the *best* place I could be to protect this country—all of humanity, actually—was at Miskatonic, *not* in the military."

Protect humanity? From the Mers? Or that thing ...

"Why are you telling me this, Johnson?" Gabriel asked, remembering why Johnson had supposedly begun this story in the first place, which was to explain his interest in Gabriel's parents' deaths.

"I told you this because I *know* that there are things in this world, *forces*, that few people would understand, let alone believe," Johnson said. His gaze was piercing.

"I still don't see what that has to do with me or how my parents died," Gabriel lied.

"Just that I would *believe* you, Gabriel, if you told me that you were *compelled* to go to that particular spot in the ocean that day," Johnson said, his voice almost pleading. "I wouldn't tell you that you were *mistaken* or ... *mad*, like so many others would, if you confessed that to me. I would understand. I would try to help you."

A chill ran through Gabriel. He felt so exposed, so vulnerable. "It seems like you've already made up your mind about what happened that day, Johnson."

"Perhaps I have. But I would like to hear it from you," Johnson paused as if he expected Gabriel to say something further, but Gabriel just stared silently back at him. "Since coming to Ocean Side has anything happened? Have you felt *compelled* like you did that day your parents died? Are there *any* strange things happening to you again?" Johnson was so still.

Strange things? Oh, Johnson, you don't know the half of it.

After three beats of silence where all Gabriel could hear was his own frantic heartbeat, he lied, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do.”

“I’m sorry about Kane and the people at the base, but that has nothing—”

“The thing that destroyed the base ... Miskatonic has been tracking it for decades,” Johnson said.

“Tracking ...” Gabriel’s voice dropped off. He found that he was hardly breathing as he waited for Johnson to say more.

“Yes, *tracking*. What drew me most to overseeing the settlement excavation, Gabriel, was that the tracking records showed that *it* had been here before. *It* had been exactly where your boat went down that day. Exactly where your parents died,” Johnson said calmly. “*It was there that day.*”

Gabriel felt like he was going to throw up or fall to the ground and curl into a ball. He did not believe in monsters. He now believed in Mers, but not things miles high with tentacles.

“I—I’ve got to go,” Gabriel mumbled through numb lips.

“I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk,” Johnson said, obviously confident that Gabriel would be back. “And whatever you say, I will believe you.”

Gabriel turned on his heel and fled for the interior of the house. His heart was beating so hard that it felt like it wanted to escape from his chest. The bitter taste of fear coated the back of his throat. His feet slipped on the porch’s top step and he almost fell, but he caught himself at the last moment by grabbing the railing. His momentum though spun him halfway around, and he caught sight of Johnson behind him once more.

The older man wasn’t rushing after him. He wasn’t even looking at Gabriel. Instead, he was staring down at the beach. Specifically, he was gazing at the footsteps Casillus had left in the sand, the footsteps that led into the sea, but did not come back out of it.

Chapter 2



SEIZE THE MOMENT

Gabriel escaped into the kitchen, leaving Johnson to stare at Casillus' footsteps in the sand. He found his grandmother standing at the kitchen counter. There was already a mixing bowl, a sack of flour, a sack of sugar, a carton of eggs, and a glass jug of milk set out in front of her. These were the ingredients to make her mouth-watering pancakes. She immediately brightened when she saw him, but he also saw a touch of embarrassment in her expression.

"Gabriel! You're up so early!" she exclaimed. "I thought that Johnson and I would have a chance to make ourselves presentable before you and Corey joined us."

His grandmother was wearing a pretty pale blue robe with white flowers on the sleeves. Her normally sleek hair looked mussed, which made her more beautiful in an earthy way. Once again Gabriel imagined her and Johnson tumbling around in bed together, and his panic from earlier was abruptly replaced by discomfiture. It was hard to hold the idea of monsters and his grandmother having sex in his head at the same time.

Monsters aren't real. No matter what Johnson says. But he said that Miskatonic was tracking something, something that was here the day my parents died.

He cleared his throat and tried to banish all thoughts of the *thing*.

"You don't need to get dressed on my and Corey's account, Grandma," he found himself saying. "This is your house and Johnson's your ah, *friend*."

She cast an eager glance out the window towards the beach. Once she caught sight of Johnson a smile curled her lips and she said, "It's the first time he's stayed the night. I didn't intend for him to, but we drank a whole bottle of wine and I couldn't have him drive home and ... well, you see the result!"

Then it was my grandfather's robe he was wearing.

Though Johnson's interest in him still gave Gabriel a crawling sensation between his shoulder blades, he couldn't share that with his grandmother. He couldn't—*wouldn't*—think about the fact that Johnson's interest was *warranted*. He was a Mer and he had been compelled to the spot where a monster had waited for him—*No! That wasn't real! It couldn't have been!* Gabriel ran a shaky hand through his hair.

And what if I'm wrong about Johnson being a bad guy? What if he really wants to help me? What if he's just really bad at showing it? He saw the sheer joy in his grandmother's face as she regarded the professor through the window. *I'd be destroying my grandmother's happiness. I can't say anything until—or unless—I'm sure. Not to her anyways.*

Considering all this, he touched her arm, squeezing it gently as he said, "Again, this is *your*

house and you can have whoever you want spend the night.”

“Oh, Gabriel, I know, but Johnson’s the *first* man I’ve felt this way about since your grandfather died and you’ve just come back here and—”

He interrupted her gently, “No need to explain or worry. It’s totally fine, Grandma.”

And I sincerely hope I’m wrong about his motives for getting to know you.

Also, if Johnson wasn’t a bad guy, it would be good for his grandmother to have as much support as she could after Gabriel went into the sea.

I’m going to have to tell her soon that I’m leaving. How do I explain all this without her thinking I’m crazy?

Looking into his grandmother’s warm gaze he felt a sense of despair. How would she ever understand him turning into another species and leaving her? Facts. Logic. Irrefutable proof. That’s what he needed to offer her.

So I need to literally show her. She has to see the physical changes in me with her own eyes. That means getting wet and letting her see my gills.

He surreptitiously stroked his hands down his sides. Nothing there but soft skin and the ridges of his ribcage. But he knew that the gills were there. He could almost feel them fluttering beneath his palms.

But I can’t just show her the changes in me and have that be it. She needs to meet Casillus, too.

The Mer was so clearly *other* and *wonderful* that maybe, somehow, she wouldn’t be as devastated that her only living relative was leaving her to go with him.

At the thought of the Mer, Gabriel realized that he still had their bond shut down. He immediately opened it and got hit by a blast of emotions from Casillus. Concern, worry, anxiety, then overwhelming relief that Gabriel was back. Gabriel actually had to grab the counter to stop himself from rocketing back from the force of Casillus’ emotions.

“Gabriel?” his grandmother asked, her eyes widening in alarm at his sudden physical reaction.

Gabriel? Casillus sent at the same time, making it feel like he was hearing his voice in stereo.

Suddenly Gabriel was seeing through Casillus’ eyes as his connection to the Mer overcame him. The kitchen disappeared and the sea was all around him, or rather, all around Casillus. The Mer was swimming out beyond the drop off, where the bottom sloped from ten feet deep to over fifty. Behind the Mer the sea floor continued to pitch steeply downwards to over a hundred feet deep, and it got even deeper than that farther out.

Casillus was treading water near the water’s surface. Sunshine, bright and golden, streamed down and lit up everything around the Mer. The water was a brilliant aquamarine blue. There were schools of orange and yellow fish with velvety looking black stripes swimming in huge groups. They flashed from visible to nearly invisible as they darted around the Mer, showing their sides and then their fronts. Deeper in the blue water, down on the sea bottom, there was the prow of a vessel, a ruin of a sailboat encrusted with coral. For one terrible minute Gabriel thought it was his parents’ boat, even though he knew it couldn’t be for many reasons. His vision snapped back to the kitchen. He blinked as everything swam sickeningly for a moment.

“Gabriel?” his grandmother asked again. She had grabbed his arm, and that had brought him back to himself.

“I—I’m okay. Just stubbed my toe,” Gabriel lied as he focused on being in his own body and not the Mer’s. It was a struggle to do so while Casillus was mentally holding on to him so tightly.

His grandmother winced as if she felt his fake pain. “I hate when that happens. Go sit down

while I make breakfast.” She cocked her head to the side as a creaking sound came from above. “Oh, Corey’s awake, too! Looks like all my men are up and bound to be hungry.”

“Corey is like a bloodhound when it comes to your pancakes,” Gabriel said with a shaky smile. He kept seeing blue water behind her head. He blinked furiously and the yellow painted walls of the kitchen returned.

Gabriel gratefully sat down at the kitchen table and spread his hands out on the surface, palms down. His hands were trembling. He balled them into fists and took a deep breath. Casillus’ emotions and his own were both running through him as fast and furiously as a fire fed by gasoline. He took another deep breath and felt Casillus do the same. They both had to calm down.

He sent to Casillus, *I’m all right.*

Thank the Great Ones! Casillus cried. The Mer thoroughly checked him out over their bond.

I really am all right. But are you? Gabriel asked even as it felt like the bond was a live electric wire that kept zapping him with every word from Casillus.

Do not worry about me. There was silence for a moment, and then Casillus said, *My emotions have harmed you. The force of them was too great!* Casillus immediately tamped down further on the strength of the emotions flowing over their bond, but the Mer’s shredded nerves were as clear as day to him. *Forgive me. I was just so very worried, Gabriel!*

Please don’t apologize, Casillus. I can feel that I did more than just worry you. A shudder went through Gabriel. Casillus was swimming in a tight, anxious circle to try to burn off his need to have Gabriel in his arms. Only that physical contact would fully heal the wound that being cut off mentally from Gabriel had caused. *I had no idea that shutting down the bond would hurt you like this. I’ll explain everything in a moment. I just need to—*

Talk to Grace. Yes, I know. I am fine now that you are connected to me once more, Casillus completed. But the Mer was obviously not fine, though he was trying to hide that.

Gabriel recalled his own earlier bizarre behavior, like when he had almost confessed to Johnson that he was a Mer. Clearly, it hadn’t only been him who was adversely affected by the bond being shut down. *I’ll be right back. I promise.*

You are not going anywhere, Gabriel. Your mind stays with me so long as we keep the bond open. I do not need to be your sole focus.

I’ll never close the bond down again. Never. I swear it.

Taking another deep breath, Gabriel asked his grandmother, “Can I help you at all?”

He already knew she would refuse the offer, which was good, because with his shaking hands he would likely just get flour all over the place. That wouldn’t be helping her. It would just be making more work.

She shook her head. “No, Gabriel, you sit right there. I love cooking for the three of you. It makes me feel very homey and happy.”

“I’m—I’m glad,” Gabriel said.

“You do look a lot better compared to last night.” She gave him a thorough once over as she measured flour for the pancake batter.

“I feel better. You don’t have to worry about me.” He drew his hands into his lap. “When Corey and I ... when we leave for good ... will you be okay?”

“Leave for good? You make it sound like moving into an apartment for your senior year is leaving for another planet,” she laughed.

“You have a full life, don’t you? I mean even if I’m not around,” Gabriel said awkwardly.

She had just finished cracking a few eggs into the bowl when he said that. She turned towards

him fully again. She put her hands on her hips and sighed. “Aren’t we a pair?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Both worrying about the other,” she said.

“I just want you to be happy. No matter what,” Gabriel said, picking at the seam of his shorts.

“No one can be happy ‘no matter what,’ but I do promise to be as happy as I can be,” she said. She poured him a glass of cold milk and set it in front of him. “Now drink that while I cook.” She ran a hand through his hair and kissed his temple. “I love you so much, Gabriel.”

“I love you, too,” he said. His throat felt tight with emotion. He quickly blinked back the tears that welled up in his eyes.

She went back to the counter and began whisking the ingredients together for the pancake batter. He was able to turn his attention back to Casillus fully.

I’m so sorry I closed off our bond, Gabriel said again. Johnson startled me by appearing like that. I—I felt like I was protecting you by doing it.

I understand, Gabriel, though you do know he does not have the ability to hear us? Casillus pointed out gently, though there was a thread of hurt in it.

It was so stupid! I knew that in my head, but in my heart I was afraid. I just wanted to keep you safe. It was a foolish thing to do and I should have at least realized how worried you would be when I went silent, Gabriel said. *I never thought I would hurt you like I did.*

You were there and then you were ... gone. It felt as if one of my limbs had been cut off, Casillus confessed softly.

Gabriel shut his eyes for a moment in shared pain and apologized again. *I felt something like that as well. Words are not enough to express to you how sorry I truly am.*

You did not know. You thought you were protecting me, Casillus said as if he were reassuring them both. *I surfaced and saw you speaking to Johnson so I knew you were still there. That was a relief, though I could tell that he was upsetting you—*

So you WERE watching me? Gabriel thought back to his belief that Casillus was looking after him. That he was not alone.

Of course. Always, the Mer murmured. Gabriel wanted to apologize profusely again, but Casillus asked, *What did he say to you, Gabriel? What did he say to upset you so?*

At that moment, the screen door’s spring gave out a loud squeak as Johnson came back inside. His gaze zeroed in on Gabriel, assessing, studying, looking for something. Gabriel found himself sitting up straighter and then quickly looking away from the professor.

Monsters don’t exist.

What, Gabriel? Casillus asked.

Nothing. Just ... nothing.

If you are sure ...

I am. Don’t worry, Casillus. I’m really fine. Gabriel hoped that was true.

Gabriel had hoped Johnson would stay outside for a while longer. The thought of being in the same room with the former military man while he communicated with Casillus still made him uneasy. He could go elsewhere and speak to the Mer, but if he did, he would lose precious time being with his grandmother. After all, soon he wouldn’t be able to sit at the dining room table with her anymore, or taste her pancakes, or listen to her hum as she cooked. So he continued to sit at the table in his mother’s old spot and watch his grandmother move around the kitchen with practiced ease.

Gabriel, what did Johnson say to you? Casillus repeated.

Gabriel refocused himself, studiously ignoring Johnson, and pretended to zone out watching the

sunrise through the screen door to the porch. *He said he wanted to help me. That he wouldn't call me crazy no matter what I told him.*

Help you? He cannot help you. Casillus sounded nettled, as if he thought Johnson was horning in on his territory. Gabriel suppressed a smile at the trace of jealousy he also detected in his tone. *And would he truly not find you "crazy" if you told him of people that live under the water?*

Gabriel caught Johnson's gray eyes on him again. *No, I don't think he would.* To himself, he added, *Because he believes in monsters.*

"That smells delicious, Grace." Johnson finally turned towards his grandmother and the tension in Gabriel's shoulders eased.

She immediately started patting her hair with one hand while still holding a spatula in the other. "I'm just melting the butter for the pancakes, Johnson. I haven't cooked anything yet, you silly man."

He went over to her side and put his hands on her hips. He kissed her cheek. She reached back and linked their fingers together.

"Butter. Mmmmmm," Johnson said. His gaze, though, slid back to Gabriel.

Gabriel quickly looked away from him again, hunching his shoulders. His heart was pounding once more. He found himself saying, *Casillus, don't surface anywhere near the cottage.*

I would ask why, but I already know. I can see it in your mind, but also, I saw it for myself.

Saw what? Gabriel tensed.

After you went inside, Johnson was looking at my footprints. The ones that led into the sea.

Yes. I think he saw you disappear beneath the waves and I think he knows about the Mers, Gabriel confessed. His heart pounded sickeningly again as his gaze flickered to Johnson, but the professor and his grandmother were busy speaking softly to one another. From his grandmother's pink cheeks and smile, it was likely something romantic. Nothing about him. Nothing about Mers or monsters.

Because of this archeological site he is investigating?

The site was an amazing archeological find. It was a previously unknown Native American settlement with structures the likes of which had only been found in Egypt or South America until now. The temple that was at the heart of the settlement referenced a mysterious people from the sea who the Native Americans had exchanged gifts, and perhaps even people, with. An inscription had been found in the temple indicating that this seafaring tribe were more than human, and Gabriel wondered if they were actually Mer like Casillus and himself. When pressed, Johnson hadn't dismissed the possibility of such creatures existing.

Casillus continued, *Last night, Johnson said he would keep an open mind about the possibility of mermen existing, but it seems unlikely that he would leap to the conclusion that mermen exist simply from seeing me.*

It was Gabriel's own argument and it was a good one, but Casillus had not experienced Johnson's intensity as he had told Gabriel that story. He hadn't heard the absolute certainty in Johnson's voice as he said that joining Miskatonic had been the best way to protect humanity. He hadn't heard about the *thing* that Johnson had tracked from the base to the area where Gabriel's parents had died. Gabriel hadn't yet told him about the tentacles.

You're right, but I still have this feeling that the site confirmed something he had already guessed, Gabriel said slowly. *It was such a strange conversation. He told me this story.*

What story?

Immediately, Gabriel imagined something miles high with tentacles lumbering onto land, compacting the earth beneath its massive, unnatural bulk, then crushing the station and dragging it into

the sea. Would it have released Kane before the destruction, or had it killed the young man, too? His imagination didn't answer that. Slick sweat coated his upper lip. He didn't know if that was what had happened to the station, yet he didn't share any of these thoughts with Casillus. He was afraid that Casillus would know what the *thing* was, would confirm that it was real.

Instead Gabriel asked, *Have you ever heard the phrase "music of the deep?"*

Where did you hear that? Casillus asked sharply. Gabriel felt the Mer's body go still before he started treading water furiously to keep from sinking.

In Johnson's story, this young man started hearing something over covert listening devices in the ocean. He went crazy, I guess, from hearing these sounds. He called it music of the deep. Soon after, the station where he was assigned was destroyed. Utterly destroyed in a manner that Johnson and the US military couldn't explain. Gabriel paused. *I thought maybe this music of the deep was you ... us ... the Mers.*

No, the music of the deep is not from the Mers, Casillus answered. Gabriel could almost *feel* the weight of all that Casillus was not saying.

Does the music have something to do WITH the Mers, though? Gabriel pressed. He did not want to believe that the Mers had anything to do with sending a young man mad and destroying a military base, but he had to know the truth of it.

No, not exactly, Casillus answered. Gabriel heard the loud swish of his feet in the water as he moved anxiously. He did not like this topic.

So the music is a real thing? And if the young man, his name was Kane by the way, if he heard this music was he part Mer? Gabriel pressed.

He must have been if he heard it. No human could hear the music and not die immediately. Yet another of our children lost. Casillus sounded so forlorn.

Johnson thinks he didn't die.

Even if he did not, he is still lost to us ... and everyone, Casillus answered, and his voice was bleak. *We did not find him in time.*

In time?

Gabriel, there are things—so many things—that I have not had a chance to tell you about the Mers yet, Casillus said. *But I promise I will. You are very special.*

I thought every Mer was special? Gabriel joked uneasily. Being a "normal" Mer was special enough for him. He was unnerved that a young man who had gone insane and this music of the deep could have any connection to him.

Casillus let out a huff of laughter. *Yes, but you are even more special.*

Why? How? Gabriel asked. *Am I special like Kane was special? Am I going to start hearing this music?*

I—I do not know, the Mer answered, sounding disturbed at the very idea.

Does my specialness have something to do with the strength of our bond? Gabriel could still remember the utterly breathtaking feeling of making love with Casillus in the tub. The Mer had told Gabriel that the power and depth of their connection was unusual even for very connected Mers.

Our connection shows that you have a great ability to connect to your fellow Mer, but your gift is far greater than that, Casillus murmured. Their bond pulsed with remembered pleasure for a moment.

"Are you excited about seeing the site today, Gabriel?" his grandmother asked, breaking him out of his conversation with Casillus.

"I—oh, right, that's happening today," Gabriel said. He drummed his fingers on the table. Did he

really want to be trapped at the site today with Johnson speaking about Mers and monsters? Should he say he was still feeling ill?

“If you’re not feeling up to it, Gabriel, I would understand.” Johnson was leaning against the counter with a mug of coffee in his large, capable hands. Those shrewd gray eyes looked so penetrating, as if he were the one with the mental connection to Gabriel. “Perhaps you should go to the doctor’s instead.”

“No! I mean no, I’m fine. Much better.” He tried to swallow but his throat felt dry again.

“You *do* look much better, Gabriel, but if the site visit is going to be too much maybe we *should* call Dr. Todd today,” his grandmother said.

“I’ll definitely be going to the site. Really, no need for the doctor today,” Gabriel said with a tight smile. *Or ever.*

Johnson smiled back at Gabriel over his coffee cup as if he had won something.

I do not know if it is wise for you to go to this site with Johnson, the Mer said. He clearly did not like Johnson from what he was seeing through Gabriel’s eyes.

I don’t have much choice. If I stay behind, Grandma will insist I go see Dr. Todd, Gabriel said.

That would be even more unwise. The Mer sighed. *I would almost say that Johnson trapped you into visiting the site. He saw how violently you reacted to the idea of going to the doctor last night and knew you would do anything to avoid it. Why is he so eager for you to see this ancient settlement?*

No idea. Do you know anything about this site? Did the Mers ah, “mate” with this tribe?

Casillus chuckled. *You are embarrassed by that word!*

It sounds sexy and weird at the same time, Gabriel admitted.

Hmmmm, I will have to think of a suitable way to tease you about it later, the Mer said.

Tease away, Gabriel laughed.

Casillus’ emotions were calm again even though there was still a thread of concern for Gabriel running through him. Gabriel felt treasured. He sent that feeling back to the Mer. The loop of emotions burned between them like a merry fire. He basked in its warmth.

So about the site? Gabriel asked. *Any secret Mer intel you can give me on it?*

No, it is ... odd. I have sent questions to the Elders, but I have received no information back, Casillus answered. *It is another reason I do not want you to go there. I do not like this silence, though it could be nothing.*

“I’m glad you’re feeling so much better, Gabriel. I must admit, though, that I’m eager to show you the site today,” Johnson said. “We found the inner sanctum of the temple.”

“The inner sanctum! What is that?” Grace asked.

Johnson caressed her cheek. “We hadn’t found it yet when you visited, Grace. It was hidden. It’s quite *something*.”

“That sounds so exciting! I’m sorry I won’t be able to join you boys today and see it for myself,” she said with an almost pout. Gabriel had *never* seen his grandmother pout and it was adorable.

“A council woman’s work is never done.” Johnson smiled at her.

“No, it is not. You’ll both have to tell me all about it later,” she said with a wag of her spatula.

At that moment Corey came into the kitchen. He was wearing an orange bathrobe that Gabriel had tried—and failed—to make him get rid of for years. Gabriel smiled. He loved that bathrobe now. Corey was scratching his beard and yawning. His bright red hair stood up on end. As soon as he saw Gabriel, though, he perked right up.

“Dude, you’re awake! Normally the only time I see you at this hour is if you stayed up all night,”

Corey said, and then his brow furrowed. "Tell me that you didn't stay up all night."

"Don't worry. I actually fell asleep in the bathtub." Gabriel rubbed the back of his neck.

Corey peered at his face. "Well, you look pretty good for sleeping on porcelain!" He immediately sat down next to Gabriel. "Oh, hey Grandma G! Hey Johnson!"

Corey, evidently, was *not* surprised that Johnson had stayed the night. Knowing Corey, he was likely pleased. Love was in the air and all that. A wave of deep affection flowed through Gabriel. He reached over and took one of Corey's hands in his. His best friend's eyes widened in surprise. Gabriel wasn't normally very physical, even with him. Gabriel squeezed his hand and released it.

Corey cast a glance at the older people before lowering his voice and asking, "Gabriel, what's up?"

Gabriel was going to say "nothing," but that wasn't true. He had only three days left. Like with his grandmother, he wanted to tell Corey the truth so he said, "A lot. I—I need to tell you something."

Corey's eyebrows rose. "Okay."

Gabriel kept his voice very low as he said, "But not here. Not now. Later."

Corey nodded, though Gabriel could see the interest and concern in his warm brown eyes.

I'll tell him everything this afternoon.

Gabriel realized that the best time would be after their visit to the settlement. He could have Corey come with him to meet Casillus. Then Corey could help him tell his grandmother as well. It would be good to have Corey's assistance with that. As the other three talked cheerily about the beauty of the morning and what they would be doing at the site, Gabriel realized how hard it had been not having Corey in on this with him. He might not have acted so stupidly with Casillus in the beginning if Corey had been there. He cringed a bit as he remembered how rude he had been. He would have deserved it if the Mer had left him.

Gabriel, Casillus said softly. He realized the Mer had been listening. I understood then as I understand now how hard this is for you. I look forward to meeting Corey. Someone who holds such a large part of your heart must be very special.

Gabriel looked over at Corey as he enthused about the maple syrup his grandmother was heating up on the stove. *He'll love you. He'll probably give you a big bear hug after he gets over the shock of mermen being real.*

Casillus chuckled. *I look forward to it. All of your thoughts of him are so warm and bright.*

Yeah, he's the best. A wave of sadness moved through Gabriel. He would be losing Corey soon.

Seize the moment, Gabriel. Do not think of anything else but this moment. Enjoy your family, Casillus urged, trying to distract him from his dark thoughts.

His grandmother was suddenly setting plates of fluffy pancakes in front of him and Corey. As Corey raved about the pancakes' awesomeness, Gabriel did as Casillus suggested. He let go of his concerns about Johnson, the site, everything. He could almost feel them flow away from him, and he realized that Casillus was helping him do this, taking the emotions away from the front of his mind. He wasn't alone in his burdens any longer. He didn't need to be alone in his joy or love either. He allowed himself, and Casillus, to experience the love he had for his grandmother and Corey. He listened to their jokes, ate too many pancakes, and pretended that this moment was forever. He seized it and didn't let go.

Chapter 3



ONE MOMENT OR ONE HUNDRED YEARS

Gabriel and Corey walked up the stairs to the second floor together after breakfast. Gabriel tried to hide how breathless he was as he struggled to keep up with Corey's jaunty pace.

"So who gets the shower first, Gabe? Or do we have to fight for it?" Corey playfully poked at Gabriel's side when they reached the second floor landing.

"Hey!" Gabriel quickly moved his arm to protect his ticklish side, and also what *else* might be there. For one moment, he feared Corey would feel his gills, but that was foolish since he wasn't wet, though Gabriel could sense his gills there, waiting to come out. "You can go first. I think I'm going to lie down for a while."

Corey's worry-eyes immediately went in. "Are you okay, Gabe? You're sounding a little *winded*, and this is coming from a guy with like one hundred pounds on you."

Evidently he hadn't hidden his breathlessness quite well enough. Gabriel patted Corey's Buddha belly affectionately. "I'm okay. Just *tired*. Sleeping in the tub was ... well, it was an adventure. I'll catch a cat nap and be okay."

Corey did not look convinced. "I'll wake you up in an hour." He hesitated, shifting from foot to foot. "But you know that you don't have to go to the settlement, right?"

"I—"

"You could skip out on today's tour," Corey rushed out. "We're here for the whole summer and this is just our third day here. There's plenty of time for you to see it."

Actually, I only have three days left to see it unless it's from the water, Gabriel thought. *Besides, Johnson isn't going to let me get out of going to the settlement that easily if today's conversation on the beach is any indication.*

"I think Johnson would be disappointed if I didn't. And it'll worry everyone needlessly if I back out. They'll think I'm *sick* or something," Gabriel said with a weak smile.

Or something, for sure.

Corey shifted from foot to foot as he clearly debated saying something about Gabriel's health or lack thereof. Now that Gabriel looked back on the last year with clear eyes and no fear, it was obvious he had been really sick, but Corey understandably believed that Gabriel would still keep denying it. Finally, his best friend said, "You know that you can tell me *anything* right? Even if it's *bad*."

"I know, Corey, but I promise there's nothing really *wrong* with me." He touched Corey's arm. "I haven't been myself for a while, but I promise I will be soon. I'll tell you everything this afternoon."

Corey shifted from foot to foot again as he said, "I just want you to be okay."

Gabriel knew that Corey wanted to say more than that, but was holding back because he didn't want to be a nag. Gabriel felt a stab of regret and shame that he had made his best friend worry for so long and had done nothing about it. Soon, at least, he would be able to put Corey's mind at ease.

"I really will be okay. More than okay." Gabriel suddenly hugged his best friend fiercely. Corey loved him so much, and Gabriel loved him back just the same.

Corey reacted to hugs like he always did: with enthusiasm. "Hey, hug!"

He picked Gabriel up in his arms and squeezed him until Gabriel was laughing and begging not to be crushed to death.

"Crushed by *love*," Corey said as he released Gabriel.

"I really don't think that *anyone* wants to be *crushed* by love, Corey." Gabriel leaned against the wall to recover.

Corey tapped his chin. "Maybe you have a point." Ever unflappable, he added, "And hey, since you're determined to go to the settlement, maybe we'll find *someone amazing* for you there, and then there will be summer love on the beach for you!"

Someone amazing ...

Gabriel's eyes widened. It seemed almost prophetic for Corey to use what Gabriel thought of as his own catchphrase back at him. Before his parents had died he had believed that he would meet someone amazing someday, but then he had lost that belief. Somehow, losing his parents had just crushed all of the hope out of him. He could still remember the conversation he had had in the van with Corey three days ago. He had stated with such certainty that he would be a bachelor forever. If he had never met Casillus that would still be true. But everything had changed after meeting the Mer.

He makes me feel ... oh, man, he makes me feel such joy.

Gabriel had found his someone amazing, or rather, his someone amazing had found him. And Casillus really was absolutely amazing. Suddenly, Gabriel was struck by an urge to tell Corey all about the Mer, to share the overwhelming happiness he felt, right then and there. Why wait? But at that moment, he heard Johnson's voice drift up from downstairs. He was laughing about something with Grace. Gabriel closed his mouth tighter.

I will tell him everything. After the tour today, when we're the hell away from Johnson.

But still, Gabriel couldn't resist saying, "Maybe I already have met *someone amazing*."

Corey froze in place, then his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Really? You're not just saying that to throw Cupid off his game, now are you?"

"So you're back to being Cupid again instead of Dr. Freud?" Gabriel laughed.

Corey straightened up and tried to appear affronted. "I am *always* Cupid no matter what other personas I take on."

"Multiple personality disorder, Corey. It's a thing. You should read up on it." Gabriel laughed harder, then he turned Corey around and pushed him gently towards the bathroom. "Now go take your shower."

"Wait! You're trying to sidetrack me here! You need to tell me who this mystery man is!" Corey wailed.

But Gabriel was already inside his bedroom, and just before closing the door he tossed over his shoulder, "Maybe it's a merman, Corey. After all, we're at the beach!"

He heard Corey's muffled cry of frustration as he shut the door firmly. He chuckled.

You are happy, Casillus said, and Gabriel felt the Mer's own happiness build at the realization.

Corey has that effect on me. I was teasing him about you. And I'm finding that even just thinking about you has me feeling ... Gabriel flushed. *Fantastic. You make me feel like anything's*

possible.

The Mer swam in a happy circle, which had Gabriel grinning as he threw himself onto his back on the bed. He put his left forearm over his closed eyes. He wanted to see through the Mer's eyes at that moment, and he immediately did. Unlike before, he found himself easily connecting with Casillus.

It is because you are continuing to transition. The closer you come to the fullness of the change, the easier our joining will become, Casillus answered his unasked question.

The Mer was hovering over a reef that was alive with fish, crab and eels. One of the eel's long, sinuous bodies slipped between the waving sea fans. A crab was snapping its pincers at Casillus. Fish darted here and there as they ate and swam. There was so much to see and just take in that Gabriel was stunned into silence as he enjoyed the view. This was a view that he would see for real soon.

This looks just like the mural I saw on the cave wall, Gabriel mused.

Did you like the mural? Casillus actually sounded slightly shy. *I know that you allowed yourself to lose time in the cave because of it.*

It was exquisite! I really was mesmerized by it, Gabriel enthused. *Though getting caught in the cave was terrifying, I don't regret looking at the mural.*

I am sorry that it caused you any harm—

Why are you feeling guilty about that? It wasn't your fault—oh! You painted the mural, didn't you? Gabriel was struck with amazement that Casillus had created that gorgeous piece of art. Even then, the mural had re-ignited his feelings of wonder for the ocean.

There was a tentative kick of Casillus' feet. The Mer actually ducked his head. *Yes, I did. While I was waiting for ... well, waiting for you.*

That's amazing. You're amazing! But, um, how did you do it? Gabriel asked as he remembered the elaborate colors and immense amount of detail. *You don't exactly have pockets to hold chalk or paint or anything.*

Casillus laughed. *No, I do not. But the raw materials to make the colors are all around us, Gabriel. I used what I could find.*

And you did it all in one night? Gabriel remembered how sad he had been at the thought of the mural being washed away.

Oh, no! The pigments last underwater for quite some time, Casillus assured him. *It took about a week.*

You're really gifted, Casillus, Gabriel murmured.

The Mer ducked his head again, which had Gabriel smiling more broadly. *Thank you. I love to paint.*

It shows. I hope I get to see more of your work, Gabriel said, and a rush of warmth went through him.

I have thought of painting you, actually.

Seriously? Gabriel pinked. *I can't see why ...*

Can you not? Casillus' voice went husky. *I will do so when we return home.*

So ... we have an hour to do whatever we want. Clearly no painting can happen right now, Gabriel said, his cheeks burning even hotter.

What would you like to do with this time, Gabriel? The Mer's voice was filled with amusement.

I guess with the bond we have it's sort of pointless to try to hide anything. Gabriel laughed self-consciously as he realized his desire for the Mer had undoubtedly spilled over the bond.

You have your privacy. I do not know every thought you have, Casillus assured him.

Maybe it would be easier if you did know. Gabriel let out another embarrassed chuckle.

Although I can't read your mind very well yet, other than the thoughts you send me directly.

Let me tell you what I am thinking, then.

Okay, I'm eager to know.

I wish you were with me in the water without those ridiculous clothes that hide your beautiful body from me, Casillus said, his mind voice deepening.

Gabriel's mouth went dry and his lips parted in a small gasp. Pleasurable heat ran through him. He immediately imagined being naked with Casillus in the water. His bare thighs would brush against Casillus' powerful ones. Their cocks would bob in the water between them, lightly caressing each other's bellies as the currents moved them. Gabriel's cock jerked in his shorts, and he drew one hand down to squeeze it through the restricting material.

I feel that you would like that too, Casillus chuckled.

I would. After last night, I think I would do just about anything to be with you. Even get in the water.

Oh, Gabriel, the things you say. The Mer chuckled again sensually.

Gabriel's fingers undid the button on his shorts and unzipped them. His cock, plump and pink, popped out of his pants like a flower bursting from the earth. *I was wondering how far our bond could go.*

How so?

I can feel the water around your body. I can even feel it slide between your fingers and toes. So I was wondering how much can you feel when I touch myself? Gabriel stroked his cock.

Casillus let out a gasp and his cock immediately hardened. *Gabriel!*

Ah, so it DOES work! Gabriel felt almost giddy with power.

Yes, it works so very well. Let me show you the same, my naughty Gabriel. Casillus suddenly gripped his own cock and drew his thumb over the head of his penis, spreading the slit open further.

Gabriel's hips arched up off of the bed at the sudden rush of unexpected pleasure. Precum gushed out of his own cock and coated the tip of his penis. *That - that - oh, God, that was good. What else can we do?*

Anything, Gabriel. Whatever your imagination can conjure up.

Gabriel smoothed his fingers over the head of his cock and then brought his fingers up to his lips. They were wet with glistening precum. After a moment's hesitation, Gabriel licked his precum off of his fingers. The salty, musky taste coated his tongue. *Can you taste this? Taste me?*

Casillus moaned and responded, *Oh, yes, I can taste you.*

Gabriel shimmied out of his shorts and then leaned over and fished out a tube of lubricant from his bag. He lay back on the bed and popped open the tube. He was about to squeeze some lubricant into his hand when Casillus spoke.

What are you doing, Gabriel? Casillus sounded amused.

Um, well ... I want to ... God, trying to say this makes me feel tongue-tied even though I'm not using my tongue! I'm going to ... finger myself.

And you think you need this chemical substance to do that? Casillus sounded incredulous and a little disgusted.

It makes me slick. Gabriel's cheeks were nuclear red now.

You think you need this substance to make you slick? Casillus asked.

Don't the Mers use anything to ease the way? For men, I mean?

There is no need. It is naturally occurring, the Mer said.

Naturally occurring? You mean men get slick when they're aroused? Gabriel blinked.

You should touch yourself and find out, Casillus suggested. The Mer's arousal poured over the bond at the thought of Gabriel fingering himself.

Gabriel stared at the lubricant before he set it to the side. He didn't know if it would be cool or gross to find that his body created a lubricant. *I'd be prepared for Casillus whenever we want to be together.* Gabriel's cock jerked with eagerness. *All right. Let's do this.*

He spread his legs and slowly let his right hand drift between his thighs. He felt Casillus concentrating intently across their bond, wanting to feel everything with him. That had him biting his lower lip in pleasure. He ran his fingers over his furry balls, rolling them, loving the sensation of Casillus' heartbeat rising in arousal as his did. His cock lengthened even more and a drop of precum splashed on his stomach.

Gabriel touched the sensitive skin behind his balls. He found himself breathing more heavily. Through the bond, Gabriel felt the Mer's feet twitch and his hands flex at his sides in anticipation. Wanting to please his audience, Gabriel lightly dragged his fingertips back until he reached the base of his crack. Would there be slickness there? Did he want it to be there? His fingers drifted up the crack and touched the tight swirl of muscle ringing his anus. He traced the exterior of it.

I don't feel anything wet, he said to Casillus.

Inside, my love. Push up inside and you will feel it, Casillus said.

Gabriel's brain stuttered at the endearment. With humans such an endearment might have no real meaning, but that was not the case with Mers. It was not the case specifically here. "My love" literally meant he was Casillus' love.

Oh, okay, was all he managed to get out as his emotions swirled.

He gently pushed his pointer finger up into his opening and *something* wet and slick oozed out. Gabriel jerked his hand away as if he had been bitten. He started laughing nearly hysterically and quickly covered his mouth with one hand so as not to have Corey running into his bedroom, concerned he had totally lost it.

Gabriel?

It's okay, Casillus. I just ... I don't know. The gills. The webbed fingers. Those things I expected, but ... self-lubrication? Um, no, never, not even in my wildest dreams. Gabriel was laughing again.

It is very handy, Casillus said, but he was chuckling too.

I can believe it. Gabriel swallowed his laughter. *Now let me do this. I'm trying to be sexy here.*

You ARE sexy. You do not need to try, Casillus assured him.

Gabriel touched his opening again and coated his finger with the wetness there. He drew his hand back up and opened his eyes, seeing his room instead of the sea. The liquid on his fingers was clear and had a gel-like consistency. He sniffed it. It didn't smell of anything.

It is natural, Gabriel. Far better than that chemical mixture you would have used on your sweet passage. Casillus actually gave a little shudder at the thought of using the lubricant.

Right. Natural. Okay, I can do this.

Gabriel shut his eyes again and immediately the sea reappeared in front of him. He actually let out a sigh of pleasure and relaxed more fully against the mattress and pillow. He was shocked at how eager he was to see the blue vastness, at how much *better* he felt with the water all around him. Or at least with the view of the sea all around him.

Gabriel drew his feet up until their soles were flush with the bed. This would allow him far

more access to his ass. One of his hands ventured between his thighs again, and his fingers began circling his anus while his other hand gripped his cock. The familiar heat began to build in his groin. Just the thought of fingering himself was enough to get him incredibly aroused. With Casillus as his witness, the muscles in his stomach were jumping in anticipation.

He circled his hole with his fingers. More of the liquid leaked out and made his fingers slide much more easily over the surface of his tight pink pucker. He felt Casillus tense, wanting those fingers inside. Gabriel would oblige him. He started to push one finger inside. He did it slowly. As he did, he realized that in a way he wasn't just pushing up into himself, but into Casillus, too. His finger popped through the tight ring of muscle. Gabriel was expecting to feel the faintest burning sensation, like what he had experienced in the past, but there was none. Instead, his passage *throbbed* and more of the liquid gushed out around his finger.

Your body is reacting to your arousal—our arousal, I mean, Casillus breathed. The Mer was half curled up into a ball.

So weird, but ... Gabriel thrust his finger inside of him up to the knuckle. He felt a tingling pleasure that raced along his passage and trilled deep inside of him. He drew his finger out and then thrust it inside again. The tingling increased, making Gabriel's toes curl against the mattress.

Yes, Gabriel, just like that. Touch yourself. Touch me, Casillus murmured huskily.

Gabriel pushed two fingers inside of himself. The liquid inside of him eased the way for the increased width easily. He scissored his fingers inside of himself, dragging the pads of them along the soft, slick passage. His other hand started to stroke his cock. Long, steady strokes with a twist of the wrist at the end. He felt tremors run through Casillus' body as the Mer's body began to twitch in time to his strokes.

Gabriel moved from two to three fingers. His lips parted as he pushed them as far up inside of him as they could go, then he found his prostate and rubbed his fingers over it again and again. Casillus arched in response. Gabriel's cock twitched in his hand and more precum leaked out.

Gabriel thrust his cock up into the shaft he had made with his hand then let his hips fall, impaling himself on his fingers. Sweat broke out across his body. A sheen of perspiration covered his bare chest. His nipples hardened. Every movement he made caused pleasure to race through him. His ass burned with the need for more, but his fingers were all he had.

Not for long, Gabriel. I will be inside of you ... oh, so soon! So very soon! Casillus breathed. The Mer was nearly lost in arousal.

Gabriel's hips stuttered at the thought of having Casillus' huge cock inside of him. That was what he needed. That was what he wanted. And in the water there would be no pesky gravity to hold him down. Gabriel's cock jerked. The skin was pulled taut as blood seemed to have filled his organ to the bursting point.

He drove his fingers inside of himself mercilessly. Casillus begged for him to do it harder and faster. He complied. The tingling in his ass spread out to fill every part of him. It danced up the shaft of his cock, and just as it hit the head his balls drew up tight to his body. Gabriel arched. The muscles in his passage clamped down on his fingers as he felt the heat of his release fill him. He felt his cum rise up the length of his cock before finally gushing out onto his chest and stomach.

Casillus came at the same time. His hips shot forward and the sea in front of him became clouded with his semen. Just as Gabriel's body sagged back against the mattress, tiny after-tremors running through his frame, Casillus curled forward and hung suspended in the water. Curious fish nibbled at his toes and swam through his long, lush hair.

My love, rest, Casillus said as Gabriel struggled not to nod off so he could stay in the sea with

the Mer.

I don't want to leave you especially when you call me that, Gabriel confessed. His view of the sea was starting to haze out. Sleep was tugging at him.

You are not leaving me, my love. We are together. We are one, the Mer replied.

Gabriel remembered the terrible dream he had had, the one that had separated him from Casillus before, but he sensed he would not sleep deeply enough for it to return.

You keep calling me "my love." Casillus ... do you ... no, it is too soon—

Too soon to love you? The Mer's answering chuckle was sleepy. *For some, a hundred years is not time enough to feel love, but for others it takes but one moment.*

One moment?

Yes, Gabriel, did I not tell you from the moment we met that I would never leave you? Casillus asked.

Yes, but I thought it was just a figure of speech, Gabriel confessed.

But now you know the truth. For me, I loved you in a moment, that first moment, the Mer answered. *Now you must rest.*

Don't you want me to ... Say it back? Confess it too? Make some sort of statement? Those were all of the possibilities that rose up in Gabriel's mind but did not come out. Or perhaps all of them did.

I want you to rest, and when your moment comes, you will tell me, Casillus assured him.

As Gabriel drifted off into sleep, he thought to himself, *I already know, Casillus. I think you do, too. I loved you before I ever met you. You're my someone amazing.*

Chapter 4



THE TEMPLE

Gabriel woke to Corey shaking his right foot. He jerked into consciousness to see his own personal Cupid grinning down at him. He then realized that he was naked, his cock lay quiescent against his belly and he was covered in drying cum.

“I see that you had a good ‘nap.’ ” Corey made air quotes as he said “nap.”

Gabriel flushed to the roots of his hair and jerked a sheet over himself. “Oh, Corey, I’m sorry! I thought I would wake up before you came in and—ah, clean myself up.”

You are most presentable, Casillus’ voice whispered through his mind.

Not for Corey!

Perhaps not, Casillus chuckled.

Corey shook his head with that huge grin on his face. “You were sleeping like a baby. I almost didn’t wake you, but, ah ...” Corey’s face actually scrunched up and an unusual expression of anger crossed his normally cheery features. “Johnson sort of *insisted* on it.”

“It’s okay, Corey. I knew he wasn’t going to let me get out of it.” Gabriel quickly pulled on his shorts and scrubbed the cum off of his stomach with the sheet. He would have to launder the sheets later so his grandmother wouldn’t have to.

Corey was still frowning. “I don’t like Johnson.”

“You not liking someone? Is the world about to end?” Gabriel asked jokingly, though he stilled his movements to hear Corey’s impressions. His best friend was normally so forgiving of other people’s foibles. If Corey really didn’t like Johnson that would really mean something, and it would confirm the bad vibes that Gabriel was getting from him.

“I don’t know.” Corey’s forehead furrowed. “I’ve been trying to figure it out, but something about him just isn’t *right*. But then I feel bad about thinking that, because Grandma G likes him so much.”

Gabriel nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I’m not real fond of him either.”

“Well, maybe he’ll grow on us,” Corey said, scrubbing the back of his neck.

Not likely, Gabriel thought while he said out loud, “Maybe.”

“I’ll let you get into the shower,” Corey said. He turned to leave, but then he looked back over his shoulder at Gabriel with an impish smile. “So were you thinking of this *mystery* man while you were ‘napping’?”

Gabriel gave his friend a sly smile. “I was more than thinking of him, Corey.”

You are teasing Corey mercilessly, Casillus said as he luxuriantly stretched in the water, still loose-limbed from his orgasm.

I know. But he loves it.

“How could you be more than thinking—was he *here*?” Corey’s eyes were darting all over the room. He actually ducked down to look under the bed as if Casillus could be hiding under it.

“That is something you will learn today after we go to the settlement.” Gabriel stood up and patted Corey’s back while his best friend continued to look around the room, convinced someone was in there besides the two of them.

“But—but—” Corey sputtered.

“Later, Corey, later,” Gabriel tossed over his shoulder. “Oh, could you make sure to get us a ton of water for today?”

“Sure, no problem!” Corey answered brightly.

“You’re the best, Corey.”

He truly is, Casillus murmured.

Gabriel got into the shower and spent as much time as he could under the spray. Casillus hummed happily as they both luxuriated in the hot water. Gabriel’s hands drifted over the gills that had appeared on his sides. They fluttered. Gabriel looked down at them as water droplets fell from his eyelashes.

They are a part of you, Casillus murmured.

I know, but they still feel separate. Like my body is a mystery to me, but it’s not a bad thing. I suppose I’ll either get used to all the changes or be in a constant state of wonder. I don’t know which. Gabriel smiled.

Suddenly someone knocked on the bathroom door and Gabriel froze, but then he took a deep breath. There was no need to worry. No one would simply walk in on him, and even if they did, they would see the shower curtain and nothing more. But Gabriel still found himself crossing his arms protectively over his sides.

“Who is it?” he called out.

“Just me!” Corey called back. “I wanted to let you know, water baby, that Johnson left for the settlement. He’ll meet us there.”

A slight trill of unease ran through Gabriel at the thought of the settlement, or maybe it was just the thought of having to meet Johnson on his home turf that did it. But his arms dropped from his sides as he realized that Johnson was gone from the house. “Okay, I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Take your time. It’s hot as Hell out there. I’m getting us a van-load of water,” Corey said before Gabriel heard his footsteps drift off down the hall and to the stairs.

Gabriel leaned back against the cool tile wall. He didn’t want to go to the settlement. He wanted to go directly to Casillus, but he knew that couldn’t happen. *I need to just get this over with. Like a band aid. Rip it off and be done. Then I can get to Casillus sooner.*

I will be with you the whole time, the Mer said.

Gabriel mentally embraced Casillus. He thought of the words the Mer had spoken to him about love. *Casillus ...*

Gabriel, you need not say what you are not ready to say. The Mer knew, of course, exactly what was on his mind.

That’s just it. My feelings ... Water ran over Gabriel’s face and made the world blur. *I’ve never been so happy. I’ve never felt so complete. I know what this is. It’s what I’ve been looking for my entire life.*

But you are still afraid, Casillus said softly, knowingly. *You believe if you say those words to me, even though they are already in your heart, that your fear will grow.*

I am afraid and I don’t know why! Gabriel answered and lowered his head. More water ran

down his cheeks like tears.

You fear you will lose me, the Mer said.

Gabriel's head jerked up. It was so simple. That was exactly what he feared. The Mer understood it already. *Yes, that's it. You already mean so much to me. I can't imagine how much more you will mean tomorrow or the day after that or the day after that. My heart ... Casillus ...*

I will never leave you, Gabriel, Casillus said with such quiet certainty.

My parents didn't want to leave me either. They thought they would be with me for a long, long time. The image of tentacles flashed through Gabriel's mind but he blinked it away, hoping that the Mer wouldn't see the monster in his mind. *But they left.*

I could tell you that nothing will happen to me, but that is a guess, a hope, the Mer said. *To love is to risk losing, Gabriel. That is part of why you have kept your heart so closed for so long, is it not?*

Yeah, I guess it is. Gabriel smoothed his hair away from his forehead. *I just wish I had the power to keep you safe. Always.*

We shall keep each other safe.

Gabriel nodded. The Mer began to hum like he had the night before during dinner and the calming tune filled Gabriel's mind. He turned off the shower and stepped out onto the fuzzy bath mat. He had brought his clothes into the bathroom so that no one could see his gills by accident. He grabbed a towel and dried himself off as thoroughly as he could before he threw on the T-shirt and shorts. His gills still fluttered at his sides, but they were settling down now. Soon, they would be invisible again. Gabriel touched the kalish, running his fingers over the shell's fine lines. Touching it made him feel more secure.

It is beautiful on you, Casillus said.

Gabriel couldn't help but smile, but then he sobered. *Any more news on the settlement from the Mers? Does it have anything to do with—ah, us?*

No, I am sorry. The Elders are still silent despite what have I told them about your specialness.

Once again, the feeling that the Mer was holding something back flooded Gabriel. *This specialness you won't tell me about in any detail is giving me a complex, Casillus. If it's important enough that you thought revealing it would make these close-mouthed Elders release information when they don't want to, maybe you should tell me more about it.*

Yes, indeed, you are right. After your time at the settlement, I will reveal all.

All right. That sounds like a plan.

I wish they would tell me why they are silent. Casillus sounded pensive.

Gabriel ran a hand through his damp hair, arranging the curls as best he could. *It's just an archeological dig. Empty buildings. Sand. Students. What could possibly happen to me there? And yes, okay, that's what everybody in a horror movie says before they're chopped to bits, but really, it's going to be fine.*

I suppose you are right, but still, I do not like it. Gabriel heard the swish of Casillus' feet as he kicked them anxiously in the water. *But perhaps it is because I do not like being away from you physically at all.*

Gabriel was smiling again, and blushing, too. *That's my line. But we'll be physically together soon. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm looking forward to swimming again.*

Casillus swam in that happy, wonderful circle once more. *I am so glad, Gabriel. I am looking forward to it, too.*

Gabriel jogged down the stairs, pushed open the front door and stepped out onto the porch. He relished the feeling of well-being he still had as a result of the shower. As soon as he stepped off the porch and into full sunlight he skittered to a stop. He had a momentary qualm that the good feeling wouldn't last. It was so hot that it felt like he was breathing in magma.

It will be all right, Gabriel. You still have time before you fully transition, Casillus assured him.

Gabriel licked his suddenly dry lips and responded, *Yeah. I have time. Three days. Three more days.*

You have time, Casillus repeated softly.

Gabriel noted that he did not confirm that Gabriel had three days left. That number was only a guess. Gabriel was older than most people who transitioned because he had avoided the sea since his parents' deaths. It could be that he had much, much less time than that. He swallowed.

For one moment, Gabriel closed his eyes and saw what Casillus saw: turquoise waves and pink and white coral. He imagined how that water would feel wrapped around his body, quenching his thirst in a way that nothing else could and protecting him from the terrible heat.

So beautiful. It wouldn't be so bad to be there. Swimming. Forever swimming, Gabriel thought. He felt a thrill of desire to be out there in the waves with the Mer flow over him. The desire to be in the water was no longer as shocking as it would have been to him less than twenty-four hours ago, but then again, he hadn't believed in Mers before all of this either.

You belong here, Gabriel, Casillus said. The warmth of the Mer's love wrapped around Gabriel just like the imaginary water had.

I belong with you.

Yes, my love, you do.

Casillus swam in yet another happy circle in response. Gabriel grinned and opened his eyes. As scary as these changes in him were, Casillus made them seem exciting and positive. He took in a deep breath. At that moment, Corey called to him. Gabriel's head turned towards the sound and he saw that his best friend was already sitting in the driver's seat of the van.

"Good to go, Gabe? I've got mondo amounts of water! I think some of it's starting to boil, though." Corey held up one of the crystal clear bottles and waggled it at Gabriel.

Gabriel hurried to the van and slid into the passenger seat. He snatched the water from Corey's hand and drank half the bottle in a single long swallow. Corey's mouth opened in a comic "O" in response.

"Thirsty," Gabriel explained as he self-consciously screwed the top back on the bottle even though he really wanted to drink the whole thing.

"I can see that. Remind me not to get between you and a bottle of water, okay?" Corey started the van. It hummed to life beneath them. Corey began reversing out of the driveway. "So where is the Morse Place?"

"Just take the highway back the way we came here. It's about one mile away. It'll be on your left," Gabriel said as his stomach clenched.

Corey put the van into drive and started down the highway. His eyes flickered over to Gabriel then back to the road. He said too casually, "The Morse Place is where you—ah—"

"Washed up after my parents drowned, yeah, exactly," Gabriel finished for him. He swallowed. A carousel of images—the storm, the boat sinking into the deep, his parents disappearing—flashed through his mind. But he shook himself. Now was not the time to think of those things. He needed to be as strong as possible just to last through the visit to the settlement. So, anticipating Corey's next

words, he added, “And before you ask, I feel *fine* about going back there.”

That was a partial lie, but what else could he say? In some ways, compared to everything else going on with him he *was* fine with it. But only in comparison.

“You haven’t been back there since it happened, have you?” Corey asked.

“No, I haven’t stepped foot there since,” Gabriel said. He wrapped his arms around his chest. “When I woke up on that beach, I remember ...”

“What?” Corey asked after Gabriel stopped speaking.

“That I thought I was dead,” Gabriel answered with a soft, sad laugh.

“Why did you think that?” Corey looked aghast.

“Because it was the only thing that made sense,” Gabriel confessed.

He remembered that moment when he had come to. His mouth had been filled with seawater. Salt had coated his tongue and his lips had been raw and bleeding. His skin was shriveled and it actually hurt where his cheek had been resting against the wet sand. The waves had been rocking his body ever so slightly against the harsh grains, slowly rubbing his skin down almost to the bone. Gabriel had lifted his head up and looked around him. The sea had been a stormy gray, and so had the sky. Where the sky and the sea met they became indistinguishable, a soft horizon. But everything else had been so terribly *sharp* and *clear* and *alien*.

“I was alive and my parents were dead,” Gabriel continued. “I already knew that before—before making it back to land. I just couldn’t fathom how I *wasn’t* dead. I *should* have drowned. Just like them. But I didn’t. I was still alive.”

Gabriel, I am so sorry, Casillus’ voice said, drifting through his mind. The Mer’s distress threaded through his voice, and it was like he was touching Gabriel tenderly.

I knew back then that I shouldn’t have survived if I was human. He had almost said “normal,” but now he knew that what was normal for a human wasn’t normal for a Mer.

Someone should have been with you. One of us, Casillus said.

But you didn’t know about me then. No one knew.

However, the way Gabriel remembered it was that he hadn’t been alone. Not exactly. The tentacles had been with him. Once again he told himself that they must have been a delusion, something he imagined as a result of not getting enough air, or the shock of losing his parents, or something born from the depths of himself as he had changed into his Mer form for the first time. His mind tugged at him, asking if it couldn’t have been the Mer Guardian his mother had told him about. But he quickly rejected that idea. How could anything like *that* have anything to do with someone as wonderful as Casillus? Gabriel once again didn’t bring the tentacled thing up with the Mer to confirm or deny either way. He locked it deep away so that it wouldn’t accidentally stream over their bond.

“I’m sorry I brought it up, Gabe. Just forget I said anything,” Corey said after the silence had stretched between them for too long.

Gabriel reached out and squeezed Corey’s nearest forearm. “No, Corey, I’m glad you did. It’s important that I remember. Sometimes the past isn’t really past, you know?”

Corey glanced sharply over at Gabriel. “This *thing* you’re going to tell me—”

“Has to wait until *after* our visit to the settlement.”

“It’s something to do with the past, isn’t it?”

Gabriel paused, but then nodded. “Yeah, it is, but it’s more about the present and the future.”

“It’s big, too, isn’t it, Gabe? Big and important.” Corey’s hands tightened on the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. “Just tell me you aren’t—aren’t dying or something—”

“No, I’m *not* dying.” *Because I’m going into the water. Oh, my God, I’m going into the water*

because I'm a Mer.

"You tensed up there before you answered me. It makes me think that maybe you *are* dying, because—"

"I'm *not* dying. Corey, I *swear* it," Gabriel assured him.

"I know it sounds crazy, but you've been so *sick*, and last night ... I don't know. I could tell that you have some *secret* that you aren't telling me about and I could only imagine that it was *bad*. *Really bad*," Corey confessed.

Gabriel lowered his head. A wave of shame went through him once more. He had hidden all this from Corey. There might have been an understandable reason for it, but still. It was Corey. He didn't lie to Corey. And clearly, he had hurt his best friend by doing so.

"I'm sorry, Corey," Gabriel said, feeling like he was doing a lot of apologizing lately and hating having done things that necessitated it. "You're right. I *have* been hiding things from you. First, it was just being sick and not knowing why and now I've found out why and I'm going to be okay. With your and Casillus' help—"

"Casillus?" Corey's eyes went round as he said the unfamiliar name. "Is that the name of the mystery man?"

"Yes, it is, and you're going to meet him later today," Gabriel said.

Corey practically jumped up and down in his seat. "I can't believe you found this guy in a *day* and I haven't even met him yet."

Gabriel looked over at his friend affectionately. "The first part of your sentence explains the second part, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess, it's just ... this feels *momentous* somehow." Corey's eyes were shining now with happiness instead of worry.

"It is. Casillus is the one who explained what was going on with me. With both of your help I'm going to be okay. Maybe better than okay," Gabriel said. He still couldn't quite believe it, but a part of him felt that to be true.

You are a strong and capable Mer, Gabriel, Casillus said.

Corey has always been stronger than me. Always open to new things and ideas. He'll love the fact that the Mer are real and I'm one of them, Gabriel said.

Corey is very special. I see that through your eyes. You are opening up more of your thoughts and feelings to me. I am eager to meet him and join minds. I know the secret of the Mers will be safe with him, Casillus said.

Gabriel refocused on the road in front of them instead of answering. "Take this exit, Corey. The Morse Place is—oh, my God!"

"What? Whoa!" Corey exclaimed as he caught sight of the Morse Place just as Gabriel had.

"I can't believe it. When Grandma said that they had found a settlement here, I didn't think ..." Gabriel's voice trailed off.

"It's huge. How could no one know this was here all this time? I mean how could something so *big* be hidden?" Corey slowed the van as he pulled off to the side of the road and finally parked.

"Maybe because no one wanted it found," Gabriel whispered, though he didn't know why he had said it at all.

Both of them stared out Gabriel's window at the settlement. The Morse Place had been a small ranch home surrounded by acres of woods and a vast expanse of marsh grass that led down to the sea. Now it looked like a meteor had hit the area. There was no house. The lawn had been blasted away, leaving a crater of mud and sand that went down seventy-feet deep. The trees were long gone, not

even evidence of their large root systems remained. In place of the trees, rising from the crater like a stone forest were dozens of structures. Gabriel could see that hundreds more were still mired beneath the sand, with only their very tops sticking out like broken teeth bursting through rotten gums.

“Look at the middle building.” Corey pointed to the structure at the very center of the settlement. “That’s—that’s—”

“The temple,” Gabriel breathed. He knew instinctively that the structure was the temple. It resembled a stepped pyramid from Mesoamerica in shape, but that was the only similarity. He suddenly felt like there was a string running from his chest to the temple. It was exactly the same sensation that he had felt with that spot in the ocean so long ago.

“The stones ... they glow,” Corey remarked about the stones making up the temple. “How could the Native Americans have built something like this? I don’t think we could build something like this *now*.”

“I don’t think ... I don’t think they did,” Gabriel murmured.

The massive stones that made up the temple looked like they were made of ice with a liquid blue center. They shimmered as if lit up from the inside. Gabriel blinked and he suddenly saw a sudden vision of the temple in his mind’s eye. But the temple he saw was only half-built. His lips parted in shock as he saw one of the stones for the temple’s base, which must have weighed several tons, levitate up into the air and settle into place. The vision faded, but Gabriel still had to hold on to the van’s dashboard to keep from pitching forward.

As soon as he recovered, he asked, *Is this Mer architecture, Casillus?*

Yes, but it cannot be, Casillus sounded completely shocked.

What do you mean? Gabriel popped open the van door and stepped out onto the dry ground. A puff of dust appeared around his sandaled feet.

This should NOT be here. Not on land! The Mer’s feelings were a storm of emotions.

So we have a really big mystery here, Gabriel murmured.

Although the image of the temple being built was gone from his mind, the familiar feeling that had always accompanied the pulled-by-a-string sensation was once again rising up in him. Something was in the temple, waiting for him, waiting for years and years and years. He hadn’t been deposited on this beach by accident after his parents’ deaths. No, it had been meant. Whatever was in that temple was waiting for him, and whatever it was would be *amazing*.

Chapter 5



NO CHOICE

Corey got out of the car and joined Gabriel at the edge of the excavation. Both of them continued to stare at the temple. It was beautiful, but it was a terrible, cold beauty. It reminded Gabriel of how he felt the first time he had looked up into the night sky and realized that the stars were suns just like the Earth's sun and that meant that the universe was vast and he was small. The temple was alien. It was *other*. It made him realize that there was so much more out there than he knew now. He was awed by it, but also slightly overwhelmed by it.

So this is Mer architecture. This is a Mer temple, Gabriel said to both himself and Casillus.

It is a special temple to a—a particular entity, Casillus said, his voice tight.

What entity?

The Mer did not answer, but instead murmured almost to himself, *It should not be here! The only other one is deep in the trench and—and I do not understand why one would be here of all places!*

Gabriel could feel that Casillus' body was tense. Instead of his normal fluid swimming, his movements were jerky. Gabriel could tell that the Mer was fearful about the temple being there. Casillus' unease had ratcheted up hugely. Gabriel knew that the Mer truly wished for Gabriel to turn right around, get back in the van and head to the beach.

But I have to stay here. The string that connected him to the temple tugged at him. *Just like that day with my parents, I have to go where this connection leads. I can't turn away from it. No matter what.* Gabriel paused at that thought as a sense of unease crept over him. *But isn't that what got my parents killed?*

"The buildings seem like sentinels, don't they?" Corey asked, breaking Gabriel out of his thoughts. "I just can't imagine this as a place where living people talked, laughed and loved. I can't imagine anyone *wanting* to be here."

"I know what you mean. This place ... it doesn't feel like *anyone* should be here," Gabriel agreed. But a small part of him added, *Except me.* Gabriel stilled internally at the unexpected words. *Me? Why do I belong here?* There was no answer from that small part, but Gabriel felt like there would be if he waited long enough.

To their right was a flight of stairs that led down into the dig. Johnson's head and shoulders suddenly popped into view as he mounted the steps. Following close behind him came a young woman with short brown hair surrounding a round, cheery face. She waved as she caught sight of them. Johnson gave them a seemingly genuine smile as well.

"Hey!" Corey waved back eagerly with a chubby arm.

Gabriel gave her and Johnson a faint smile. His mind was focused on the temple that both drew

and repelled him at the same time. He had no idea what was down there. He feared that like with what had happened the day of the sinking, something terrible—*not amazing*—would happen when he entered the glowing temple's doors.

But Johnson and the students have gone in there lots of times! Why would my presence make any difference? He thought, but Casillus caught his words over their bond.

You are Mer, Gabriel, Casillus said. And you are -

Special, Gabriel finished for him. I really wish you had told me before I got here why I'm special.

So do I, but I fear if I tell you now ... Casillus' voice drifted off. *There is no time for me to do it and I hope that I am wrong about this place. Your presence may have no effect on it or it on you so long as you keep your visit short.*

Believe me, I don't want to be in there long, Gabriel said, but he feared that this was partly a lie. That "something amazing" feeling had caught hold of him and wouldn't let go.

To try and distract himself, Gabriel turned back to the van and grabbed his half-finished water, as well as a second full bottle. His hands were trembling, but was it with fear or excitement? Shaking his head in dismay at his unruly feelings, he stuck the full bottle in a rucksack that he threw over his shoulder while keeping the opened bottle on hand.

He took a swig of water. Being out in the heat of the day was like standing in an oven. Sweat had already broken out under Gabriel's arms and across his brow. He licked his dry lips. He was beginning to feel that terrible thirst, though he didn't know if it was just his fear of the heat and sun or the changes in his body causing it. Looking down at the nearly empty bottle, he realized he would have to ration the water carefully to make it last throughout their visit. He screwed the cap back on the opened bottle and licked his lips again, unsatisfied. Finally, he turned back to the approaching people.

Johnson was wearing a pair of khaki pants and a tight black T-shirt that strained across the bulging muscles in his arms and chest. His massive, muscular neck was also shown off to full effect. There was something intimidating about his size. For a moment, Gabriel wondered if there was some reason other than vanity or health for why Johnson made sure he was in tip-top shape. Did he think he needed to be? To protect himself from someone, or something?

"Gabriel, Corey, you're here exactly on time," Johnson said as he clasped his massive hands in front of him.

Corey rocked back and forth on his heels. "We were really excited to come. Right, Gabe?"

Corey cast a hopeful look at Gabriel. Gabriel could tell that Corey was trying to overcome his feelings of dislike for Johnson with greater enthusiasm for the settlement. That was Corey's way, but Gabriel didn't think Johnson cared whether they liked him or not. He had other concerns. But Gabriel didn't want to make this visit terrible for Corey so he sucked it up.

Gabriel's answering smile though felt like it was a gash across his face, but he managed to make his tone friendly as he said, "Yeah, sure, definitely."

"Good. I'm glad." Johnson then introduced them to the young woman standing next to him, who looked like the epitome of summer with her khaki shorts and white tank top. "Gabriel, Corey, this is Greta."

"So you are Jenny's friends! I recognized you immediately, Corey. Jenny's description was perfect." Greta smiled broadly at both young men. When she looked over at Gabriel he flushed, as he could tell she was appraising him when her eyes went up and down his form quickly. "She told me about you, too, Gabriel. You look *exactly* how she said as well."

“Ah, thank you,” Gabriel said.

Corey elbowed him playfully in the side.

She thinks you are beautiful, Gabriel, Casillus said mildly.

That’s because she’s never seen you, Gabriel said with a smile.

There is something about you, Gabriel, that draws people in. A vulnerability mixed with strength. I believe she would still have eyes only for you even if a million Mer were there, Casillus said.

Gabriel blushed. *You only believe that because you—you love me.* Saying those words was electrifying and scary at the same time.

I assure you that though I am biased, what I am saying is true.

“Gabriel? You still with us?” Johnson cocked his head to the side.

“Oh, yes, of course. I am just rather ah, *stunned* by the settlement,” Gabriel lied. He was going to have to be careful when he spoke to Casillus during this visit. He spaced out when they were in communication, and Johnson seemed incredibly attuned to his mental state.

“Come this way, then,” Johnson said. “We have a lot to see and the day is already scorching hot, which will affect how much work we can get done.”

“I bet the temple is cool inside,” Gabriel found himself saying and there was this yearning lurch to his voice. Immediately, he wished he could take the words back, because Johnson’s eyes narrowed with suspicious interest.

“It *is*, and I am very anxious to show you the interior of the temple, especially the inner sanctum,” Johnson said. “I think you will be particularly interested in what’s inside there.”

Greta actually paled beneath her tan. “You’re going to show them the inner sanctum?”

Johnson looked over at her mildly. “Didn’t I just say so?”

Greta blanched further and objected, “Even after what happened to Henry?”

“*Henry* had no business being in there by himself,” Johnson’s voice was arctic.

Greta jerked as if he had struck her. “I—I realize that, but—”

“I assure you that nothing similar will happen to Gabriel ... or Corey, though if he doesn’t wish to go into the inner sanctum, he doesn’t have to,” Johnson answered tightly.

But he wants me to go. He isn’t giving me a way out. The string that ran between Gabriel’s chest and the temple thrummed. *And I don’t want a way out. I want to see what’s there. Even if it’s bad. What is wrong with me?*

Nothing is wrong with you, Gabriel. Nothing, Casillus assured him, but there was a thread of worry in the Mer’s voice.

Corey’s brow furrowed as he asked, “What about Gabe? What if he doesn’t want to go into the inner sanctum? You’re not going to drag him in there or something, are you?”

Johnson smiled in a way that showed too many of his sharp, white teeth. “I think that Gabriel will *want* to go no matter what.”

The tug on his chest abruptly increased, as if confirming Johnson’s words. Gabriel clapped Corey’s arm to assure his best friend, who was looking incredibly uncomfortable and confused, that it was fine. He whispered into Corey’s ear, “Don’t worry, Corey, Johnson can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do.”

“If you’re sure, Gabe,” Corey whispered back uncertainly.

I do not like this, Gabriel, Casillus whispered. *I do not understand his insistence on you being there. He cannot possibly know anything.*

What could he not possibly know, Casillus? Gabriel asked.

But the Mer did not answer and Gabriel knew he had to say something to Johnson, Greta and Corey. He found himself saying, "It's fine. *Really.*"

But is it fine? It doesn't feel fine, but I'm doing it anyways, Gabriel realized.

Johnson guided them back to the flight of wooden stairs, which led down to the bottom of the crater. Greta hung back to walk beside them. She was already chatting with Corey as they stepped onto the stairs. The wooden boards creaked under their weight. Gabriel wasn't surprised to see Corey grip the railing so hard that his knuckles went white. Sweat formed on his best friend's upper lip, and it wasn't the heat causing it. Corey hated heights. Heights and unkindness were his two least favorite things.

"Are you okay, Corey?" Greta asked, noticing his unease.

"I'm just a little nervous about -- about the *distance* between us and the ground. Gabe, can you tell her why I hate heights?" Corey asked as he looked over the railing and quickly drew back again.

"Because you hate falling?" Gabriel asked as he squeezed Corey's shoulder gently.

"Exactly. Because falling leads to things breaking like bones and stuff. Add breaking bones to things I don't like either, Gabe." Corey moved as close as he could to the side of the crater and away from the railing.

"I've walked up and down these stairs a dozen times a day for weeks. They're safe, guys, really," Greta assured them.

Gabriel thumped Corey's back. "We won't let you fall, Corey."

Though he was acting nonchalant himself, Gabriel wasn't exactly too keen about the height, either, but the need to get inside the temple, the pull of that string, was too strong to ignore. He actually had to stop himself from racing down the steps ahead of everyone and running into the temple by himself. His hand tightened on the railing. He would not rush ahead. He would not show the interest he felt in that terrible, beautiful place. He would be normal. He had to be.

Once they reached the bottom of the stairs and were on solid ground again Gabriel let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. Now there was just two hundred feet of open sand between the bottom of the staircase and the temple. Gabriel found himself walking towards it, outpacing the others, even though he had just said he would act normally. The doors of the temple seemed to *pulse*. The string *tightened*. He had to go there. He had to get inside. Something was waiting for him. Something amazing.

"Gabe? Hold up." Corey caught his arm.

Gabriel nearly shrugged Corey off, a snarl on his lips. But then he realized it was *Corey*. And what was he doing? Cold sweat broke out on his brow as he quickly turned to his best friend.

"You okay, Gabriel?" Greta asked.

"Just—just hot," Gabriel said with a dry smile. The giddy, sick-with-anticipation feeling in his chest increased, but he planted his feet firmly in the sand and refused to move in response to it. He unscrewed the cap of the water bottle and took another small swallow. It wasn't enough to even touch his thirst, but it helped combat the heat. Sweat was already sticking his T-shirt to his back.

Calm down. I have to calm down, Gabriel told himself. He hid his sick excitement from Casillus, knowing it would just alarm the Mer. *What is special about me that's causing this to happen? Or am I just off somehow? I was weird for a human, why couldn't I be weird for a Mer, too?*

At that moment Johnson cleared his throat. All three of them jerked to attention as if they were raw recruits and Johnson their drill sergeant. He stepped in front of them and gestured to the temple. Gabriel felt that he actually looked and was acting like a professor for once.

“Notice how the temple is fashioned like a layer cake, with each successive layer getting smaller,” Johnson said. “The developers had only scraped the top of the highest layer, the tip of the iceberg, if you will, when Grace cried out for them to stop the excavation.”

“Wow that Grandma G recognized what it was and stopped construction. I mean, that’s amazing,” Corey said. “But then again, she’s amazing as a general rule.”

“Yes, she is at that.” Johnson pulled out a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Amazing? Could it be that my grandmother’s Mer blood told her this was here? Gabriel wondered.

It could be, Casillus said. *This temple would call to many, both dark and light.*

Dark and light? What do you mean? Gabriel’s back straightened.

Good and evil. This entity calls to both equally, but there is only one who can call back without being destroyed.

Destroyed? Is going inside the temple dangerous? Should I stop everyone from going inside? Gabriel’s heart began to pound. Was this like his parents all over again? Should he stop them from going into the temple unlike he had with his parents sailing to that spot in the ocean?

No, a brief interlude inside will do nothing, but do not linger, Gabriel, Casillus warned again. But Gabriel wondered how long was too long? How would he know before it was too late?

What about the students and Johnson though outside of today? They’re spending a lot of time in there, Gabriel pointed out.

We cannot save everyone.

But they’re—

Gabriel, the more they know about the temple, the worse it will be for them. And you ... you cannot risk telling them the truth, because then they will guess who and what you are, Casillus said.

I don’t like this, Casillus. It feels wrong, Gabriel said mulishly.

I know, Gabriel, and I wish there were another way, but I do not see one, Casillus said.

Johnson’s gaze was speculative as he stared at the temple and said, “You might be interested to know what Grace told me about why she acted that day the temple was discovered. She said that it was more than just her normal quick thinking that had her shouting out for the developers to stop the digging. She said she felt *compelled* to act.”

Compelled? That’s like what I felt when I directed where we sailed that day, Gabriel realized.

There was a momentary beat of silence before Corey asked, “Do you believe a building could *compel* her?”

“Perhaps *compel* is not the right word. Maybe Grace’s instincts *alerted* her,” Johnson said as he turned his gray eyes on Gabriel, and not Corey, speculatively. “I am a big believer in instincts. They have helped me out of more than one bad situation.”

The back of Gabriel’s neck prickled as Johnson continued to look at him with that searching, almost pleading gaze.

My instincts are telling me you’re dangerous, Johnson, but I don’t know why, Gabriel said to himself. *I don’t understand you at all. On the one hand you seem to want to protect me, but on the other you want to challenge me somehow.*

He is a warrior who is not sure whether you are friend or foe. He hopes friend but he fears foe, Casillus said.

I think you’re right. It makes his shifts between gentle and aggressive make sense.

“Do you have any instincts about this settlement?” Corey asked Johnson.

“I do, and most of them have been confirmed by what we have found,” Johnson said. He began leading them towards the temple again. Gabriel found himself eagerly following. He hated the eagerness, but he could not shake it. Johnson continued, “We concentrated on unearthing the temple first. We guessed that this was the most crucial structure and that it would help us anticipate the organization of the rest of settlement, which would tell us where to dig next. Why don’t you tell them a bit about that, Greta?”

Greta cleared her throat and straightened up as she hurried ahead of them all like a tour guide. “Notice that the temple is closest to the sea. No other structures have been discovered further seaward than it. We believe the temple to be the exact center of the settlement, and that the rest of the buildings fan out from it almost like a peacock’s feathers. It is the focal point of the entire settlement.”

“Good, good,” Johnson said, and Greta beamed as if he had patted her on the head. “Now the structures we have identified are the temple, obviously, and the two tombs flanking it, which are where high ranking people of the land tribe were buried.”

“So the central point of the settlement is a graveyard?” Corey asked. His chubby face screwed up in distress. “A graveyard facing the sea?”

Greta was the one to answer. “Yes, and what is even more interesting is that the settlement seems to have been designed to be seen *from* the water. The structures where people lived are actually much farther back.”

“And the tribe did not live here year round, either. It was only during certain seasons from what we can tell,” Johnson said. “Summer being the high season.”

“Any idea why?” Gabriel asked as he looked from the settlement to the sea.

“We think it was the best time to go into the water and—and it was *mating season*,” Johnson said.

“With the seafaring tribe?” Corey perked up.

Gabriel shook his head even as his chest tightened at his best friend’s words. “Corey, put the Cupid persona *away*.”

Johnson flashed a smile. “Actually, Gabriel, Corey is right ... or so our theory goes.”

As soon as they stepped into the shadow of the temple Gabriel’s head began to pound and his vision blurred. He blinked his eyes furiously and gripped the water bottle in his hand. Were these symptoms related to his transition? Then out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw movement. It looked like feathers waving in the wind, yet they seemed to be floating six feet above the ground. When he turned his head to look at them, there was nothing there but sand and the ruins of the settlement. No feathers.

Was that real? Or a trick of the light? Gabriel wondered.

You saw something, Gabriel? Casillus asked.

I thought I saw ... headdresses. Feathered headdresses.

He turned back towards Johnson and Greta. They were saying something about the tombs. Suddenly he thought he heard faint drumming and chanting. His head jerked to the right again as he tried to follow the sound and find its source, but he couldn’t. It kept moving all around him.

Do you hear that, Casillus? He knew that the Mer was listening through his ears and seeing through his eyes.

Hear what? The Mer asked, sounding confused.

The drums. The chanting. The sound grew in volume.

No. Do you hear it now? the Mer asked.

Yeah. You really don't? It felt like someone was banging a drum right beside him. He reached out and actually brushed a hand through the air where he thought it was being played, but he felt nothing.

It could be that the sound is not physical, Casillus said slowly.

What do you mean?

You might be hearing something that happened long ago here. I cannot hear it because I do not have your gift, the Mer answered.

I'm hearing something from the past? Something that happened here?

Like an echo of the past, Casillus answered.

Gabriel knew whatever Casillus was edging around had something to do with him being special even for a Mer. He really was looking forward to having Casillus explain some of these mysterious things about him, though he was completely unnerved by the thought that the waving headdresses and phantom chanting were from some long forgotten past. He decided to ignore these ghosts of the past as best he could.

"Where are all the rest of the students?" Corey asked. His best friend peered around the temple towards a line of smaller, but still impressive stone structures that rose one, two or three stories up from the ground.

"They're mapping the structures we've uncovered and trying to estimate where more structures are for further digging," Johnson said as he vaguely gestured beyond the temple towards the maze of building that rose up behind it.

"You'd be surprised at how these structures swallow sound. It's easy to believe you're the only one here sometimes," Greta added.

"Is everyone here your student, Johnson?" Gabriel asked.

Johnson nodded. "They are."

He couldn't help but think about Johnson's statement from earlier about how joining Miskatonic was the best way for him to protect humanity. From Johnson's words, Gabriel had imagined that his students would all be dressed in fatigues with bulging muscles just like him. Greta did not fit the image of a "soldier." Maybe the other students would.

They were now just twenty feet from the base of the dozen steps that led up to the temple's massive doors. One of the doors was cracked open, and the urge to streak ahead of the group and squeeze through that slight space was almost overwhelming. Gabriel nearly crushed the one bottle of water he was carrying. The sound startled everyone and he gave an apologetic smile. He unscrewed the cap and took a swallow of water instead. His mouth was once again as dry as dust, but he thought that it was more from anticipation than anything else.

"What classes do you teach, Johnson?" Corey asked.

"I teach many things," Johnson answered, which wasn't much of an answer at all.

Do you tell your students stories about Kane and the music of the deep? Gabriel wondered and his gaze slid to Greta. She looked troubled now. Her earlier excitement at meeting them and showing them around had dimmed considerably since she discovered that Johnson intended to let them see this temple's inner sanctum.

"So archeology and history, that sort of stuff?" Corey prodded. "Greta, you have to tell us if Johnson won't."

Greta looked down uncomfortably, and that struck Gabriel as incredibly odd. She said lamely, "Oh, sure, yeah, we have those classes."

She can't even tell us what she's studying? Gabriel thought with a jolt.

"You read up on Miskatonic, Corey, you know we can't really talk about any of that," Johnson

said with a small smile.

“Even the class subjects are confidential?” Gabriel couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his voice.

Another flash of white teeth from Johnson was the only response.

Yet he’s letting us come here and see this inexplicable place. Why be secretive about the classes, but not about this? Gabriel wondered.

Because he really wishes you to see something here, Casillus said. The Mer had been quiet, but his presence in Gabriel’s mind had never lessened. For that, Gabriel was impossibly grateful.

They had reached the first step of the temple’s staircase and the pull was now undeniable. Gabriel’s chest actually hurt from the sensation yet he stopped walking with the rest of the group by the first step. The step was made of the same glowing material as the rest of the temple. The glow slid around inside the stone like the watery center of a semi-frozen icecube. Gabriel nearly lost himself in the luminous swaying. Corey crouched down and put a hand, palm down and fingers spread, on the smooth material.

“What is this stuff? It feels cold.” Corey withdrew his hand from the stone and shook it as if his skin had been chilled.

“No one knows. We haven’t even been able to take samples of it,” Greta said. She stared at the stone too for a moment, but then she wrenched her gaze away. Gabriel sensed that she had mixed feelings about the temple. “It resists our hammers, chisels, even Skil saws.”

It is imbued with the power of the entity it was built for. No human tools can harm it, Casillus explained.

About this entity. Gabriel paused and then decided he had to ask. He had to know. *Does it have tenta—*

Johnson suddenly bounded up the first few steps of the staircase. He grasped Gabriel’s elbow and drew him up onto the steps after him. Gabriel didn’t have a chance to flinch back as Johnson released him just as quickly as he had touched him.

“Come,” Johnson said. “We have much to show you.”

The older man set off up the stairs at a brisk pace. The heat seemed to suck Gabriel’s energy away with every step even as his eagerness to be inside the temple pressed him to keep going. He licked his lips again. The saliva in his mouth seemed to have entirely evaporated, but he resisted the urge to drink more water. It felt like a challenge to himself. He wasn’t sure what possible prize he might get if he “won,” but he kept on anyways. The tug in his chest helped him keep going. They reached the top step. The doors rose far above their heads. Gabriel felt dwarfed by them. There was one simple engraving on them. It stretched across both doors. It showed a chieftain with a headdress standing on the beach, arms outstretched towards the sea, and in the sea were people rising from the waves wearing only loincloths around their hips.

Mers! Gabriel cried.

“Amazing, isn’t it? Even from the top of the crater you really can’t get a sense of how very large and impressive it is. What we’ve already uncovered here is just a fraction of what there is to find,” Johnson said, his eyes glowing. “I intend to ask for more funds to buy up any adjoining land that the settlement might extend under. Miskatonic has the money to spare, especially for something of this importance.”

“How many people lived here in the high season?” Corey asked.

“Twenty thousand,” Greta said. “That’s the estimate, anyways.”

“That’s the same size as Ocean Side now,” Gabriel murmured through numb lips. His gaze was fixed on the engraving.

“Yes, and imagine all of Ocean Side being killed overnight,” Johnson said.

“Killed?” Gabriel gasped. His gaze snapped to Johnson.

“Yes, this is something that we *haven't* been telling the public,” Johnson said. He stood straight and tall. A soldier through and through. “You see, this settlement wasn’t abandoned. The people here were destroyed in a war.”

“A war with who?” Corey asked.

Johnson’s expression was grim as his gaze fixed on Gabriel. “That is the question, isn’t it?”

Chapter 6



INNER SANCTUM

Gabriel's eyes widened at Johnson's words. The former military man was looking at him soberly, almost sadly, as if what he was saying should hurt Gabriel most of all. But why should it? This was an ancient settlement. It was here well before the Bravens. That left one group of people Gabriel was related to that could be involved.

Did the Mers go to war with this settlement, Casillus? Gabriel asked.

I—I am not certain. I have told the Elders about this temple, Casillus said. Their reaction to my news tells me that they know what happened here, but will not speak of it.

Does that mean something bad happened? Something the Mers want to keep hidden even from their own kind? Gabriel asked. Casillus was the prince of all the Mers. If he didn't know about what happened here, then Gabriel worried that it must have been something awful.

There are certain things which are forbidden to speak of. This must be one of them. Casillus sounded ill, which just increased Gabriel's unease. *I have sent word to my parents, asking for anything they might know and for them to advise me. But even with just these vague and uncertain fears about the settlement, I am even more worried about you being there. Gabriel, again, stay the shortest time necessary and get out of there.*

I'll try. Gabriel met Johnson's gray gaze and quickly looked away from him towards the sea. *I'm just not sure how to do that.*

From the top of the staircase he could see the cool blue of the ocean and the white froth of waves. He actually ached for the sea. He turned back to the group. Corey was asking Johnson and Greta tons of questions about the war and who had killed whom and how they knew. Gabriel had completely lost track of the conversation again when he was speaking with Casillus. Johnson's eyes were fixed on him. The former military man had definitely noticed his distraction. Gabriel stared back at him challengingly.

He doesn't know I'm talking to Casillus. Maybe I'm just spacing out. Maybe I'm really not interested in the temple. He can't know what I'm really feeling and doing, Gabriel thought, but part of him felt that Johnson somehow *did* know. If shutting the bond down with Casillus didn't hurt them both he would have done it again right then and there. It felt like Johnson could see right through him and he hated it. *I have to keep Casillus safe. I have to keep all the Mers safe from him.*

"When destruction came here, it came from the sea," Johnson said, interrupting Corey's flood of questions. He pointed out towards the blue depths. "The people here had no defense against such an assault."

"How do you know this? How do you know any of this?" Gabriel's tone was angry and he didn't

try to hide it. He was sick and tired of Johnson's secrets and half-reveals. He probably could have said the same about Casillus' evasions, but he knew that the Mer was just trying to protect him. Johnson's motives were far more murky.

"Inside, there is an inscription." Johnson touched the doors of the temple. The doors stood over twenty feet tall and were made of that same blue stone that swirled with that same mesmerizing, sickening light as the rest of the temple. "This inscription is a warning, actually. And the person who wrote it is still there."

"What do you mean *still there*?" Gabriel asked tightly. For one moment he had the crazy thought that an ancient warrior stood inside the temple, wearing rotten armor and a frayed headdress, just waiting to reveal the truth of the Mers to anyone who came inside. That was ridiculous, of course. Only the Mers lived forever. Humans did not.

"His bones," Greta answered. Her hands twisted together in front of her. She had seemed so bright and cheery when they met her, but now it seemed like she was just as ill at ease about going into the temple as Gabriel was. "It looks like he finished writing the inscription and then ... died."

"Why would he do that? What's so important that he would use his remaining strength to write an inscription?" Gabriel asked.

"To warn whoever found this place," she said with a faint shiver and then with a strained smile at Johnson, she added, "We, of course, have *ignored* his warning."

"Warn them of what?" Gabriel crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't try to hide that he was unnerved about the fact that a dead man was still in the temple.

Greta opened her mouth to answer before Johnson cut her off by saying, "It is complicated and will make more sense in *context*. I know it seems as if I keep saying 'wait,' but you need to experience the full effect of the temple and the inscription." Johnson's eyes bored into Gabriel's. "It's important."

"All right. Let's go in," Gabriel said reluctantly. *And get this dog and pony show over.*

Even though Gabriel had expressed irritation and a desire to leave quickly, the string attached to his chest *vibrated* as Johnson put his hands on both of the massive doors and pushed them open. They swung inwards with a grinding sound that increased the vibration even more. Johnson stepped back and then gestured for Gabriel to go in first.

"Do you want me to go in with you, Gabe?" Corey asked, clearly not trusting Johnson's motives once again.

"I'm—I'm good."

Suddenly, Gabriel *wanted* to go inside alone. He wished he *was* alone to see this, experience this, because then if the "something amazing" was actually "something terrible" he would be the only one affected. But he couldn't send the others away and there was nothing he could tell them that would convince them to leave on their own.

"I don't like this," Corey said, but he stepped back to stand with Greta.

Greta didn't look happy about Gabriel going inside alone either. Her gaze kept going from Gabriel to Johnson. Her eyes seemed to be asking her professor to have a change of heart, but Johnson's arms remained crossed tightly over his chest. He ignored her pleading expression.

"Go on, Gabriel," Johnson urged.

Be careful, Gabriel, Casillus warned. The Mer's amorphous unease flowed over their bond.

Stay with me, Casillus.

I will never leave you, the Mer promised, and Gabriel believed him.

With a deep breath, Gabriel stepped forward and stood on the threshold of the temple. The glow

of the stones illuminated the interior in a wavering blue light. It made him feel like he was underwater. But the light was unnecessary. There was no decoration in the temple's interior. No carvings. No statues. No altar. No seats for worshippers. It looked to be simply one big rectangular room. He saw no sign of this inner sanctum that Johnson and Greta had mentioned, either, which surprised him.

It's empty, Casillus. Gabriel felt a strange sense of disappointment. There was simply nothing there. Nothing amazing. Nothing terrifying. Nothing at all. Gabriel let out a breath he had been holding. His shoulders relaxed.

Not completely empty, my love, Casillus said, and Gabriel turned his head to look full on at what the Mer had already glimpsed through the corner of his eye.

It was the skeleton that Greta had warned him about. Truthfully, it wasn't much of a skeleton. It was more a pile of bones, some of which had disintegrated into powder. There was a glass box resting over the bones, likely to protect them from further damage. Gabriel was surprised they hadn't been removed. He was about to turn around and ask Greta why, but then his gaze swept upwards and he forgot everything else. On the wall by the bones was an inscription written in a language he didn't know, but which held a strange fascination for him nevertheless.

Casillus, do you know what that says?

No, the language is unfamiliar to me, but I can tell that it is old. An ancient script, and it has a dark cast.

What do you mean?

I think it has been used to pen many bad things.

Is this one of those bad things, Casillus?

I fear it is, the Mer answered somberly.

Gabriel ran his gaze along the twenty lines of text that stretched from one corner of the room to the other. He found himself squinting as the letters seemed to fade in and out. Maybe it was the interior light from the stones that was causing this effect. The words weren't etched into the stones. He tilted his head to the side. Perhaps they were painted on. But if they had been painted, what substance could have withstood all these years and not flaked away? The letters were as dark and clear as if they had just been written.

Gabriel's vision blurred like it had when he had stepped into the temple's shadow as he continued to study the individual letters of the inscription. He was forced to shut his eyes. The darkness spun behind his eyelids. Nauseated, he shook his head to clear it. When he opened them again and looked back at the words, the squiggly letters appeared to be hovering above the wall's surface. Gabriel jerked back in surprise. What was happening here?

Do you see that, Casillus?

See what? The Mer had stilled in the water. Casillus had evidently come to know that when Gabriel asked him something like that it was a bad thing.

The words ... they're floating ...

No, I do not see that at all, the Mer said, his uneasiness growing with every thought Gabriel sent.

"You okay, Gabe?" Corey put a hand on Gabriel's right shoulder.

Gabriel jumped slightly at his touch. He had forgotten he wasn't alone. Corey's round face was full of concern.

"I'm sorry. I'm keeping everyone waiting." Gabriel suddenly realized that Greta, Corey and Johnson were all standing on the temple's landing, not advancing inside, evidently waiting until he

cleared the threshold.

“Take your time. This place is ...” Corey peered inside and then added, “Weird.”

“Weird doesn’t begin to describe it,” Gabriel agreed.

Casillus, is this normal for a temple to this, ah, entity? For it to be empty like this? Gabriel asked.

I do not know. I have never been inside one of its temples. Few have, Casillus answered. His voice was hushed and there was a sense of awe and dread rolling off of him.

Gabriel finally drifted into the temple. Everyone followed after him. Greta immediately went over to the wall with the inscription as if she wanted to get the tour over with. Corey toddled after her. His best friend’s eyes were wide, but he did not seem afraid, merely cautious.

Gabriel didn’t join them yet. Instead, he stood in the center of the temple, feeling the vastness of the empty space. He found himself looking at the temple’s back wall. He frowned. Something was off. The wall seemed too close. From what he had seen of the temple’s dimensions from the outside there should have been a lot more space inside, but there wasn’t.

“So you noticed it too?” Johnson asked.

Gabriel jumped again. Johnson had snuck up behind him. For a big man, he moved quietly. Gabriel smoothed a hand over the front of his T-shirt to hide his surprise, but the former military man’s narrowed gaze showed that he had seen it.

Gabriel cleared his voice and asked firmly, “Noticed what?”

“That the temple is much smaller on the inside than the outside.” Johnson crossed his hands at the wrists behind his lower back as he looked at the blank back wall as well. “We measured the width of the blocks to confirm what our eyes were already telling us. There is over twenty square feet of floorspace *missing*. Except, of course, it’s not missing. It’s just *hidden*.”

“So the inner sanctum is hidden by the back wall?” Gabriel asked. The throb in his chest, the feeling that something amazing was waiting, returned. His fingers curled against the palm of his free hand as he fought the urge to start pressing on the glowing blocks of stone to see if any of them moved and revealed the inner sanctum.

“Yes, it is, but before I show it to you, I think that you need to hear the translation of the inscription. Remember, *context* is everything.” Johnson lightly touched Gabriel’s back in an attempt to steer him towards the right wall. Gabriel twitched away from him. Johnson dropped his hand. He lowered his voice and said, “You don’t need to be afraid of me, Gabriel.”

A thousand responses ran through Gabriel’s mind at that moment, but each of them would have extended the conversation with Johnson and might even have led it in directions that he would rather not go. He settled on replying, “I’m not. Why would I be?”

“Exactly. There is no need to be.” Johnson’s eyes flickered over to Greta and Corey before he added, “What I told you earlier on the beach was to *help* you. What I want to show you here is to help you as well.”

“Help me *how*?” Gabriel asked.

“Help you to *understand*. When the time comes,” Johnson said.

What does he think I need to understand, Casillus? Gabriel asked.

I believe he knows of the entity that this temple is dedicated to. I believe he thinks that the Mer are ... are responsible for it, Casillus said.

Is it ... is it your Guardian? Gabriel finally asked the question he should have from the beginning.

No, Gabriel. It is not ours. It is ... it is not anyone’s.

Realizing that he had been silent for too long and Johnson was staring at him again, Gabriel gave the older man a bright, fake smile. “I’m really sorry, Johnson, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. You seem to think I have some secret information that you also know, but I don’t. I really don’t.”

After a beat of staring at Gabriel without blinking, Johnson asked, “How’s your breathing, Gabriel?”

“My ...” Gabriel’s mouth went dry and he swallowed hard.

“You should drink the water you have left. This heat must be difficult for you. Drying you out.” Johnson tipped his head towards the nearly empty water bottle in his hand. There was only a mouthful left. “I have more if you need it. You don’t have to restrict yourself.”

Gabriel knew his lips were trembling. “I—I appreciate that, Johnson. I’m sure Corey and Greta will need water, too.”

“Perhaps.”

Gabriel turned abruptly away from the older man and headed over towards the other two. Thankfully, Johnson hung back.

Gabriel sent to Casillus, *He knows! He knows I’m a Mer!*

Yes, yes, I believe he does, Casillus agreed and gave a nervous kick in the water. *It is so strange that a military man should have such imagination that he can accept that we exist while your scientists are blind to us.*

Something happened to that base where Kane was. Something terrible. Johnson sees a threat out there. That’s why he joined Miskatonic. He’s trying to defend humanity from whatever it was. What happened at that base opened his mind to a ton of possibilities, including Mers existing, I think.

Gabriel tugged on the collar of his shirt. It felt like it was strangling him. He fumbled with the water bottle and cracked it open. He drank down the meagre remnants before he pulled out the full one and drank half the contents of it, too, in one large gulp. There was no sense in hiding his thirst since Johnson already knew about it. He stuffed both bottles back in his rucksack.

We are not humanity’s enemy. We never have been, Casillus said.

So what attacked that base, Casillus? I think you know. Was it the entity that this temple is dedicated to? Is that why you won’t talk about it? Gabriel pressed.

Casillus swam in a tight, anxious circle. *To even speak of it is to invite its presence. I cannot tell you of it while you are in that temple!*

Gabriel’s steps stuttered at Casillus’ words. He looked at Corey and Greta. Both were deeply involved in their conversation. His best friend was his happy, eager self, loving finding out something new and exciting. Greta was clearly charmed by Corey, though he still sensed unease flowing from her. This place was dangerous and they didn’t know it.

Once again he found himself asking, *What’s going to happen when I go into the water and this temple is still here with Miskatonic students continuing to poke around inside? Casillus, I know I can’t just blurt out that this place is dangerous, but we have to do something!*

You are right. Something must be done to protect the innocent. Let us think on it, Casillus answered with a sigh. The Mer did not want innocent people to be harmed either. Gabriel though understood that keeping the Mers secret was his greatest duty.

At that moment, Corey noticed that Gabriel had joined them by the inscription. “Gabe, Greta was just explaining that this language is an offshoot of Sumerian! That’s how they were able to translate it so fast. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Uh, yeah, that is cool,” Gabriel said. He thought about Casillus’ comment that this language had probably been used to write about many bad things, and he wondered if Greta knew that. “So can you tell us what it says, Greta?”

She nodded. She laced her fingers together in front of her and began to speak. “The inscription begins by describing the land tribe’s first contact.”

“First contact with aliens?” Corey asked hopefully, which had Gabriel as well as Greta smiling.

“Sort of,” she said with a mischievous smile that matched his. “First contact with the people from the sea. The writer calls them the ‘Gods of the Sea.’ ”

“Oh? Gods? Wow!” Corey exclaimed, his eyes shining with interest.

“The text states that the chieftain of the land tribe performed a ceremonial dance to try and save his people,” Greta explained. Her voice took on a storytelling quality. It was clear from her bright eyes that she was fascinated by the topic. “There had been a terrible drought and the tribe’s luck with hunting and fishing had been very poor. They couldn’t leave the area because they were harried on all sides by enemies who would pick them off if they tried to flee. With his people dying, the chief had no choice but to call upon the ‘Gods of the Sea’ to save them.”

“How did he know about the Gods of the Sea?” Corey asked.

“They had been seen frolicking in the surf by the hunters of his tribe throughout the ages,” she said.

Gabriel remembered his mother’s account of people in Ocean Side seeing beautiful people in the ocean as well. *These Gods of the Sea are Mers, aren’t they, Casillus?*

It would seem so, Casillus said.

“The ritual to call the Gods had been passed down from chief to chief from time immemorial, but none before him had been bold enough to do it,” Greta added.

“So then things were pretty darn bad for the tribe if he was willing to call these Gods?” Corey guessed.

“Desperate,” she said. “Because the chieftain knew that the Gods’ help came with a *price*.”

Gabriel darted another glance up at that first line of text. Once again, the words seemed to detach from the surface of the wall and hover a few inches off of it, but unlike before the words didn’t just hover. They continued to *move*. They moved towards *him*.

Casillus! The words—the words are—

Gabriel’s vision blurred as the words filled it, and then, between one blink and the next, the world faded out altogether.

Gabriel gave out a startled gasp as the world popped back into sight again, but the world was not as it had been before. He was no longer in the temple. Instead he was standing on the seashore right above where the waves crashed against the sand. The air was filled with the scent of salt and nothing else. No car exhaust. No cooking smells. No scent of modern human habitation.

Where am I? What is going on here?

“Corey? Greta?” *Casillus?*

None of them answered. The place where he connected with Casillus in his mind felt like it was suddenly made of cold, smooth glass. He could not reach beyond it to the Mer. Panic flooded him and his hands shook. He spun around to face inland and recognized the area as the Morse Place. Something about the shape of the coastline must have told him this, though, because there were no other identifying landmarks. There was no temple. There was no settlement sprouting up from the sand. There wasn’t even the old ranch home that had once stood farther back from the waterline. There was only sand, long grass that whipped in the wind and the endless sea.

Suddenly, Gabriel heard chanting to his left. He jerked towards the sound and saw a man standing beside him who hadn't been there before. Gabriel stepped back in surprise. The chanting man was Native American. He was dressed in animal skins instead of modern clothes. His flesh was a rich, dark brown color like mahogany. His eyes were a velvety black. He wore an elaborate feather headdress that moved as he danced to the sonorous rhythm of his chant, and Gabriel abruptly realized what and who he must be seeing.

It's the chief of the land tribe. Gabriel then understood something more. *He's performing the ritual to bring the Mers to land just like Greta described! But how am I seeing this? How am I here? Actually ... am I here?*

The chief did not acknowledge him at all. Instead, the man continued with the ritual. His arms rose up into the air. There were shells tied around his wrists which clicked together as he moved. Like seagulls diving down into the water, his hands swiftly lowered to point down at the earth before they soared back up into the sky once more. He then reached towards the sea. The rhythm of his chanting increased. Gabriel felt the vibration of it in his chest. Anticipation built within him.

Something is coming, something amazing. The old familiar phrase raced through his mind.

The chief's hands opened just before he pulled them back against his chest as if drawing whatever was out in the deep to himself. Just as suddenly, he thrust them back towards the ocean. Gabriel followed those hands with his eyes and gasped again.

Instead of the open, empty ocean, the chief was reaching towards over a dozen people, both men and women, who were standing among the waves like statues. Around their waists were brightly colored shifts that were exactly like Casillus' except in color and design. They wore nothing else. Their beauty—and the gills at their sides—made it obvious what they were.

The scene faded and the world as he knew it returned, but not before Gabriel gasped out just as he had at the engraving of this moment, *Mers!*

Gabriel? Casillus sounded alarmed.

Gabriel caught himself from falling forward. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice his strange reaction. He was back in the present. He could touch Casillus over their bond. Corey and Greta were talking beside them. A feeling of wild relief went through him. *I'm—I'm all right.*

What happened? You were gone—

I—I had a vision. I saw what Greta translated from the inscription. He reflexively squeezed the top of his nose as if a headache were coming on. His head did hurt. *Didn't you see it? Didn't you see a chieftain dancing by the ocean and Mers appearing in the waves?*

No. I saw only the interior of the temple, though it did seem like things grayed out slightly, as if you were not paying attention, but then you did not answer me when I spoke to you. Casillus sounded shaky. He had thought that Gabriel had cut off their bond again, but he hadn't. Not on purpose.

It felt like I was really there in the past, Casillus. I could feel the wind on my face. I could smell the chief's sweat. I could taste the salt of the sea on my tongue! Gabriel explained.

Apparently completely unaware of what was happening to Gabriel, Greta continued on with her translation. "The Gods of the Sea answered the chief's prayer and came to him. They brought with them a bounty of fish. They also aided in defending the land tribe against its enemies."

"But what did the Gods of the Sea want in return for their help?" Corey asked.

"Ah, you remembered that the Gods' help was not without cost." Greta leaned forward, as if speaking conspiratorially. "The Gods of the Sea wanted to *mate* with the land tribe."

"Ho, ho, hooo, *loving!* See, Gabe, love is in the air no matter who you are!" Corey chortled.

“R—right, Corey.” Gabriel’s voice sounded hoarse to his ears and he felt disconnected, half there and half somewhere else. The inscription—and the past—were calling to him again.

Will I see the past again? Will I be transported back once more? Gabriel wondered. He both wanted it to happen again and desperately did not want it to at the same time. He clutched onto Casillus through their bond. The Mer held him just as tightly back, but Gabriel wondered if it would be enough to keep him here if the past called to him again.

“At first it wasn’t thought of as *that* much of a price, as the Gods were said to be *very* beautiful.” Greta’s right hand rose and touched the next line of text. More of the words seemed to streak off the walls towards Gabriel.

I—It’s happening again, Casillus! Gabriel cried.

As the world disappeared once more, he heard Greta continue, “But when the children of those first matings grew up, the price became far more apparent and, in some cases, *unbearable*.”

Gabriel was back on the shore again. He tottered on shaky legs. He could not feel Casillus. Corey and Greta were gone. He spun around to face inland. Where he had seen just a flat expanse of sand and grass in his first vision, he now saw the base of the temple being laid. Just like he had glimpsed when they arrived at the settlement, he saw the stones of the temple levitating into place, but this time he saw two Mer standing before the stone with their arms upraised. He turned back towards the sea as he heard murmuring voices come from that direction.

Gabriel saw a young woman of the land tribe walk out into the waves and take the hand of a male Mer. The Mer had long black hair and stunning blue-green eyes. An older Native American couple stood on the shore. He guessed that they were the girl’s parents. They looked on in stony silence, arms crossed, expressions grim, as the Mer cupped their daughter’s face in his hands. She looked upon the Mer with awe and a little fear.

The scene suddenly blurred again. The same woman was before him, but she looked older. There was a touch of frost in her hair. This time, instead of walking into the waves she was standing on the beach and watching while a teenage boy, with the same stunning eyes as the male Mer, ran into the sea. The black-haired Mer was there to greet him.

Father and son, Gabriel realized.

Gills appeared on the teenager’s sides as soon as the water touched them. His expression was joyous and his father picked him up and spun him around in happiness. In contrast, his mother wept. The Mer then led the child into the ocean. Neither looked back at the woman, as if she did not matter anymore. Gabriel felt a trace of sadness at this. He could not leave the people he loved on land so easily. But maybe if he had been told all his life that he was going to leave then it would be easier, though he doubted it. This was the price. The children wanted their Mer parents more.

Gabriel blinked and he was back in the present once more. Again, he felt relief that he was back, but he knew that he had not yet seen everything he needed to. He reached for Casillus and found the Mer right there with him again and not the cold, chill feeling of glass. He was embraced mentally and sagged against Casillus eagerly.

You were gone again! Casillus cried. *Did you have another vision?*

Y—yeah. It’s the inscription. It’s doing something to me, Gabriel got out as the world continued to spin. He wanted to lean against the temple’s wall, to give his shaking legs a break, but the thought of touching the glowing stone cause his stomach to roil. He forced himself to remain upright.

Do not look at the inscription. The energy stored in the stones themselves might be causing your gift to react and force you to see the past, Casillus advised.

All right, I’ll—You’ve come nearer to shore! Gabriel realized as he sensed that the Mer was

now directly opposite the temple in the water. *Casillus, you can't be anywhere near here! Johnson could see you and—*

He will not see me. I am safe, but I fear you may not be, the Mer said. *I want you out of that temple.*

But before Gabriel could answer Casillus, Corey was already asking Greta a question. “So you’re saying the last chief’s daughter was the cause of the war?”

Despite himself, Gabriel lifted his head and listened carefully to Greta’s answer. “Yes. She was to go into the ocean with the Gods of the Sea, but her lover would not release her. Instead, they hid her from the Gods. But she grew very ill, and then --”

Gabriel knew it was coming. He didn’t even have to look up at the words before the vision overtook him.

Gabriel! Casillus cried faintly, but then the Mer’s voice was lost again.

Gabriel expected to see the vast expanse of sea again like he had the other times, but instead he was inside a structure. It took a moment for him to recognize that he was in a wigwam.

I’m not in the settlement! Where am I? Am I near the sea even?

He could smell wood smoke from the fire and the richness of tanned hides surrounding him. There was no salty tang from the sea in the air. A shudder ran through Gabriel. He was far from the sea. So very far. When he looked out the wigwam’s opening, he saw only grass bathed in moonlight. There was a whispery sound as the wind whipped through the blades, but no crash of water on sand or rock. Gabriel’s heart clenched.

Too far. I’m too far from the sea. Gabriel swallowed and his mouth felt full of dust.

He then heard a soft moan to his right. He jerked towards the sound.

A Native American girl with braided black hair and feverish blue-green eyes was lying on top of a pile of furs. Even in the dim light, he could see that her lips were blue from cyanosis and her breathing came in harsh, short gasps. A young Native American man, his lush long hair spilling over his bare shoulders, was kneeling next to her. He was stroking one of her hands, murmuring words to her in a language that Gabriel did not know, but somehow he still understood the meaning behind them. The young man was begging her not to die, not to leave him. He loved her more than life.

But it was no good. She let out one last gasp, her eyes bulged, and her lips skinned back from her teeth before her body went completely limp. She was gone. She had died. The young man curled over her body, his own wracked with sobs.

Feeling numb, Gabriel thought, *That would have been me if Casillus hadn’t found me and convinced me that I needed to go into the water.*

At that moment, the light from the opening into the wigwam dimmed for a moment. Gabriel turned and saw a female Mer entered. She looked so much like the dead girl on the furs that they could have been twins.

Her mother. That is the girl’s mother.

When she saw the girl’s still form lying on the furs the Mer covered her face with her hands and wept silently, though the young man must have still heard her. His head whipped around to face her. Fast as a snake he was on his feet. He grabbed her shoulders in what looked to be a painful grip. Her hands fell away from her face and she made an audible gasp this time. Both she and Gabriel could see that the young man’s eyes were filled with hate. He shook her violently as he screamed at her, and once again Gabriel understood the meaning behind the words he did not know. He was shouting that she was responsible for his love’s death, that she was going to die, too. The young man then snapped the Mer’s neck with one violent, fluid motion. He released his hold on her and she crumpled to the

ground beside her daughter.

His actions were so sudden, so merciless, so violent that it took Gabriel's mind several long moments to actually realize what had happened and when he did, anger flooded him. He lunged for the young man, but he touched nothing. For the world had fast forwarded once more. Gabriel caught himself just before he fell to his knees on a stone floor. He was back at the settlement and standing in the threshold of the temple, looking out at the wide expanse of sand between it and the sea.

The young Native American man was there, too. However, his face was now painted black. There were two red streaks extending down from his eyes like tears of blood. He was leading the land tribe into battle, urging them on. The eyes of the members of the land tribe snapped with hatred. Their mouths opened with howls of rage. Their arms were raised, hoisting aloft hatches, spears, clubs and bows. They were advancing on a handful of Mers who were in the settlement, likely visiting lovers and children. Beautiful Mer blue-green eyes widened in shock and horror in response.

The Mers formed a tight circle in the center of the beach, fighting back to back. They were cut off from the ocean by members of the land tribe, though many still threw frantic glances towards the blue waves. Gabriel watched as the Mers' bodies moved against the land tribe with quickness and impressive strength of martial arts' masters, but their fists and feet were not enough. The Mers had brought no other weapons with them.

Arrows sped through the air like hundreds of feathered serpents and rained down on the Mers. The Mers on the outside of the circle were immediately struck down. Their bodies were pierced in dozens of places. Gabriel's heart wrenched as he saw their faces empty of life and their bodies tumble to the ground like wheat cut down with a sickle.

A girl, one of the Mer children from the color of her eyes, threw her body between a massive human warrior and a female Mer who had already gasped her last breath with an arrow blooming out of her chest like an unnatural flower. The warrior's lips writhed back from his teeth. His arm rose over his head, stone hatchet in hand.

The warrior did not hesitate, not for a moment, even though it was a child in his path. Gabriel shouted as he saw the girl's blood, crimson as rubies, fly into the air and then spatter the sand as the hatchet crushed her skull. He watched her fall in slow motion, her limbs flailing in the air, a cloud of sand puffing up as she landed on the beach. Her blue-green eyes stared emptily outwards as a sheet of red washed over them. Then she was lost in the crush of bodies as the battle continued.

No! NO! I can't let this happen! I can't just stand here! Gabriel thought, forgetting that this was the past and could not be changed. *I have to save them!*

Gabriel had no weapons and he was not skilled in hand to hand combat. He needed to do something, though. And that was when he felt it. The *pull*. The feeling of being connected to something deep within the temple. It was the same feeling he had felt as he directed his parents' boat to that certain spot in the ocean. But the pull he was feeling now made the pull from back then seem weak and insubstantial in comparison.

Instead of storming out into the fray, Gabriel found himself turning and running *into* the temple and towards the back wall. His mind was empty of thought. The pull was leading him. He had no idea what he intended to do in the temple, but he somehow knew that he would be able to stop the slaughter by doing it.

As soon as he reached the back wall his hands moved of their own accord. The pull dragged him to touch towards the center-most stone. Its radiance increased for a moment after he had touched it. The pull then directed him to slam his palm against the stone to the right of the first one. Then the pull had him double-tapping a stone on a lower row. The entire wall lit up as bright as fireworks. There

was a grinding noise, and then the stones were *folding* back to reveal another chamber, the inner sanctum.

And inside ... inside was a statue.

A terrible statue that was far from life-sized. After all, the temple was not miles high.

Gabriel recognized the thing sculpted out of black stone. He had seen it so many times in his dreams. It was the creature that had been waiting for him out in the deep. It was the *something amazing* that had saved him as his parents' bodies sank into the ocean's depths.

And he knew one other thing, that if he touched the statue, the real creature would come up from the deep and wreak havoc. It would destroy the land tribe. It would save the Mer.

Gabriel prepared to slam his hands down onto the statue's bulbous, squid-like head ...

Chapter 7



COREY, MEET CASILLUS

Gabriel's hands rose up above his head. He was about to slam them down on the black statue's skull. He would destroy the land tribe. He would make them pay. He would—

Suddenly, Casillus' voice screamed in his mind, *GABRIEL, NO! IF YOU TOUCH IT CTHULHU WILL COME AND KILL EVERYONE! YOU MUST NOT TOUCH IT! YOU MUST NOT TOUCH IT!*

Casillus? Gabriel blinked and the world seemed to shimmer. The statute was still there, though. The glow of the blue stones was not reflected in its obsidian surface. The idol seemed to suck in all light.

Do not touch the statue! Please, Gabriel! Casillus begged. His voice was streaked with terror.

I don't understand. Gabriel's hands slowly lowered. The statue's many eyes seemed to watch him. *They were killing the Mers. The land tribe ... they killed the children, too. I have to—I had to do something. I had—*

That is all in the past, my love. That is all over and done with. You were having a vision of what happened here long ago, remember? Casillus reminded him.

The past? Gabriel touched his forehead. His skin was clammy and cold. *Yes, it was the past, but it was so real! So incredibly real. I can't get their faces out of my head!*

I can feel that. But turn around and see the present. Corey, Greta and Johnson are the only ones there with you. There are no dead Mers. No slaughtered children. Turn around, Gabriel, Casillus urged.

Gabriel slowly turned his head to look out the doors of the temple. Despite Casillus' words, he fully expected the sand to be stained red with Mer blood. He also expected to see piles of beautiful Mer corpses on the ground. But the beach was empty. There were no bodies. No blood. No Mers.

"Gabe? Are you—are you okay?" Corey asked.

Gabriel's head snapped around towards his best friend's voice. Corey and Greta were standing near the wall with the inscription. Both of them looked incredibly pale and shocked. Gabriel made sure that he did not look directly at the inscription this time, but the words were not moving. They were dead things now.

What did they see me do? What did they think I was going to do? Gabriel asked the Mer.

They saw you open the inner sanctum, Casillus said.

"C-corey?" Gabriel asked. His voice sounded so uncertain.

"Dude, wha—what happened?" Corey took a few steps towards him, but Greta caught his arm.

"He may not be himself yet! When we found Henry here he seemed okay at first, but then he—he attacked us," Greta explained.

“Gabe would never hurt me—”

“It’s not *him*, Corey, it’s this *place*,” Greta said with a shake of her head. She looked over at Johnson. “Dr. Tims, we need to get Gabriel out of here. *Now*.”

“How did you know how to open the inner sanctum, Gabriel?” Johnson asked. He was standing on the opposite side of the temple from Greta and Corey. He didn’t look concerned at all. He seemed completely unsurprised by what had just happened.

“I—I ...” Gabriel turned back towards the statue once more. It squatted obscenely on top of a rough-cut pillar. Gabriel could barely look at the thing’s tentacles before he felt the urge to touch its squid-like head come over him again. He wrenched his gaze away with difficulty.

“He doesn’t know, professor!” Greta’s voice was shrill. “Just like Henry didn’t know what he was doing either!”

“We left the inner sanctum open when Henry had the *bright* idea of communing alone with Cthulhu,” Johnson snapped. “This is *not* the same!”

Cthulhu. He knows its name too, Casillus.

Yes, and I fear he knows far more, Casillus breathed. The Mer’s body was as tense as a bow.

“So what?” Greta demanded. Her hands were fisted in front of her. She was shaking with fear and anger.

“So how did Gabriel know how to get into it? It took us *weeks*, but he opened it in *seconds* without a moment’s hesitation.” Johnson’s eyes were glittering.

How did I know, Casillus?

You are a Caller, Gabriel. I had suspected it before, but now I know. You are the most rare of Callers: one that can summon dread Cthulhu from the deep to wreak chaos and destruction on everyone.

I—I don’t understand.

I know, my love. It is a hard thing to understand. But I will explain everything, once you are with me.

Gabriel’s gaze went to the water. Though the sea was several hundred feet away, Gabriel swore he caught sight of a dark head rising above the waves for a moment. Fear gripped him that Johnson would see it too, but then the head disappeared beneath the surface.

“Cthulhu has strange effects on *everyone*,” Greta replied. “Even *you*.”

Johnson frowned. “What do you mean?”

She stepped towards him. “You’ve become obsessed with the statue, Dr. Tims. I know that you spend hours in here after you think we’ve all gone home. *I’ve seen you*. Night after night you come in here.”

“So you’ve been spying on me?” Johnson asked. His tone was mild, but something in his gaze had her straightening up and crossing her arms defensively over her chest.

“Only because I’m worried about you,” she answered.

He smiled at her, but it was not a nice smile even though it tried to be. “You don’t need to worry about me, Greta. I’m perfectly fine.”

Greta did not look like she believed him.

“I think I want to go,” Gabriel said faintly.

Yes, come to me, Gabriel. Come to me now. Get out of there.

Gabriel took a step forward, but his legs crumpled beneath him. Corey darted to his side and stopped him from collapsing utterly. Johnson started towards him, too, but Gabriel stiffened and shouted, “No! Not you!”

“How about me?” Greta asked as she knelt at his side. “Can I help you?”

“All—all right.”

Gabriel finally lifted his head and looked up into her face. Her eyes widened hugely and there was an inexplicable look of surprise and awe on her face, but then she was pulling one of his arms over her shoulders and pressing his head down so that his gaze was on the floor. He realized that with his head down like she wanted, Johnson wouldn’t be able to see whatever she had in his face. But he could feel Johnson’s piercing gaze on him as Greta and Corey helped him out of the temple, down the steps and onto the sand.

“Gabriel, I’m taking you to the hospital,” Corey said mulishly as he and Greta half carried him to the stairs.

“N-no, I don’t need—”

“You collapsed! I can hear your breathing! It’s like you have double pneumonia! Your lips ... they’re *blue*!” Corey cried.

Gabriel thought of the young girl who had died with blue lips, gasping out her last breath far from the sea. That wouldn’t be him.

It will not be you. You will be in the water. You will be with me. You will be safe, Casillus said.

“I need ...” Gabriel’s eyes flickered to Greta. Their gazes met again.

“It’s all right, Gabriel. Tell Corey what you need,” she said, her brown eyes full of knowing.

She knows I’m a Mer! How? As he blinked she stared hard at his eyes, and then he realized how she had guessed. Somehow his eyes had changed to those of a Mer’s, and she recognized what the change meant.

They were at the base of the stairs when she added, “I’ll head back and keep Dr. Tims from following after you.”

“Why—why are you doing this?” Gabriel asked. *Why are you helping me?*

“Ever since we found the inner sanctum and that—that *statue*, things have been going wrong,” she said before passing a hand over her forehead. “People haven’t been themselves and I believe the statue is the cause.” She bit her lower lip. “Some things shouldn’t be unearthed. They should be left alone. That’s what the inscription was warning us about. The writer *died* to make sure anyone who found this temple after him would know it, but Dr. Tims is ignoring the warning.”

Without any more explanation, she turned on her heel and hurried back to the temple.

After watching her walk away and meet Johnson on the temple steps, Corey asked, “What is going on, Gabe?”

“I don’t know all of it, but I’ll tell you everything I do know. But first, I need to get to the ocean,” Gabriel got out.

Corey froze as they started walking up the steps. “The ocean?”

“I—I need to get into the ocean and then I—I’ll be *fine*.” Gabriel could not catch his breath. He hoped that it was just the shock of what he had seen in the visions, the deaths, the blood, the horror. He wished he could block it out, but the memory of the dead child’s sightless blue-green eyes kept cycling through his head. And then there was the statue. A statue of something that shouldn’t exist. Something made of madness.

“I don’t understand,” Corey said.

“I—I know, but y—you *will*,” Gabriel said. He pushed the words out as they continued to mount the stairs. Just one more flight. He would make it up one more flight, and then he could collapse in the van. “This is what I wanted to tell you about today. Please.”

Corey nodded slowly, still looking completely unconvinced. In fact, he was clearly wondering if

the lack of oxygen was affecting Gabriel's mind. After all, why would Gabriel, who was afraid of the water, want to go swimming now?

"I—I promise I'll be fine. You just need to trust me, Corey," Gabriel said as they stepped off the stairs and onto gravel. Gabriel let out a groan of thankfulness.

"All right, but if you don't get better, we're going to the hospital. I don't care what you say," Corey said as he helped Gabriel into the van.

Gabriel gratefully collapsed onto the seat as Corey shut the door and hustled around to the driver's side.

Gabriel. Casillus' voice was threaded with fear and agony. I need to get to you.

I will come to you. Meet us by the cave where you found me the other day, Gabriel requested.

I will be there the moment you arrive, Casillus said. Gabriel felt him start speeding through the water. The Mer's strokes was fast and effortless, and Gabriel tried to imagine that it was his body that was cutting through the waves and startling brightly colored fish. Instead, he was in a sweltering van and his body felt like a useless sack of bricks.

Corey hopped into the driver's seat and shoved the key into the ignition. He was pale despite the heat and the exertion of half-carrying Gabriel up the stairs.

"I'm going to the beach, right? Which beach?" Corey asked.

"Just get on the highway. I'll tell you where to pull off," Gabriel said. His voice was raspy and his throat was dry. He pulled off the rucksack from around his shoulders and took out the half empty water bottle from it before letting it fall to the ground. He drank the water all down in one swallow. There were more full bottles behind his seat. Corey really had gotten a van-load full of water. He grabbed two more and drank them down as well. He was then able to add the thought that was keeping him most calm at that moment, "Casillus will be waiting there."

"Who is this Casillus? He's more than just your boyfriend," Corey said as he stepped hard on the gas and the van revved up. Not that the van could go all that fast. The poor thing usually topped out at about sixty miles per hour, but Corey put his foot to the floor and managed to coax out an extra five more miles per hour.

"Yeah, he's far more than that," Gabriel said with a soft smile.

Corey's face took on a determined expression. "I can't wait to meet this guy and find out what the deal is."

"You and me both, Corey. We met the day I drowned," Gabriel found himself saying. "Well, almost drowned. Again."

"D-drowned?!" Corey was now staring at him instead of the highway.

"Road, Corey. I promise everything will be explained when we meet Casillus," Gabriel said.

"Oh, shit!" The van swerved as Corey realized he was drifting over the white line and overcorrected.

"I'll tell you everything once I'm in the water, but I can't—can't talk very well right now," Gabriel rasped.

"O-okay, so quiet until we're there?" Corey asked.

"Y-yeah, I'm sorry big guy, just—"

"Don't worry, Gabe! Just rest up, okay?" Corey's worry eyes were back in on full power.

"O-okay. I'll tell you when to turn off," Gabriel assured him.

He shifted uncomfortably in the seat. It was like a furnace in the car. The air conditioner worked fitfully when it did at all, and they weren't going on a long enough car ride for it to kick in with even a pitifully cool breeze anyways, so he sat still and tried to ignore the fact that his back was covered in

slick sweat, which had also soaked through his T-shirt. Once he stopped talking his breathing was still labored, but not as bad as before.

Do you need me to help you breathe? Casillus asked. He was almost at the cave. It was amazing how fast he could move.

No, no, my breathing is calming down now. It was the shock of what I saw that was causing most of my distress, Gabriel explained.

The visions, yes, and Cthulhu. All of that would be a shock. Cthulhu is poison to the soul, Casillus murmured. He glided over a reef, and Gabriel nearly laughed as a startled crab snapped its claws ineffectually at the Mer.

The urge to laugh faded quickly away as Gabriel thought about the statue.

Cthulhu is the Mers' Guardian, right? Gabriel asked.

Cthulhu is ... its own. We do not worship it. It does not protect us unless ... unless summoned by a Caller.

It came to the settlement though, didn't it? It destroyed the land tribe. What I saw about the past was real, Gabriel guessed.

Yes, my parents have confirmed it. That is the reason the Elders would not speak of that place. It is ... our way. After Cthulhu has acted upon our behalf, we must be silent for fear it will turn its eyes towards us and our city next, Casillus explained, and Gabriel saw an image of Cthulhu's many tentacles winding around strange, but wondrous towers that stretched upwards from the bottom of the sea.

Would it have come if I had touched the statue? Gabriel asked.

Yes, Gabriel. You are a Caller and you were in great distress.

I thought I could get revenge for the Mers who were killed there. It was so awful, Casillus. Gabriel shut his eyes for a moment, but the images of the dead still crowded in on him. *The Mers were slaughtered! They had no chance to survive! They had no weapons! They were there to see children and lovers and I—I can't think about it without wanting to do something and—*

I am sorry that I could not shield you from what you saw, Casillus interrupted, stopping the awful flow of images from crowding into Gabriel's mind again.

Gabriel swallowed hard. He balled his fists over his thighs. *It was so awful.*

I am with you. I promise I will keep you safe, even though I have failed so far ...

You haven't failed. You've been with me every step of the way. After another moment, Gabriel had recovered enough to ask, *How do you know I'm this Caller thing and not like that Henry guy who simply went crazy in the temple?*

I could feel it. The Call was building in the temple around you. The moment you touched the statue, the Call would have been sent out into the depths and Cthulhu would have come, Casillus explained.

Gabriel swallowed. Though he had not been aware of it at the time, the pull had been there, building. Suddenly, he was certain of something else. *I think Cthulhu destroyed that military base where Kane was.*

Yes, it is likely so.

That's why Johnson is so weird and freaked out. He knows about Cthulhu and he knows about its connection to the Mer.

He is misinformed. Only a Caller of your sort can bring Cthulhu, and you are the first Caller of Cthulhu to be born in a thousand years, Casillus explained. He was nearing the caves. Gabriel realized the Mer truly would be there once he and Corey arrived. *I was sent out by the Elders in the*

hope that ... well, they had hopes that I was a Caller, and that my journey would unleash my powers. I believe our Elders were actually seeing you and our connection in their visions.

They were hoping you would be able to call Cthulhu? Why? Gabriel shook his head. The very thought was appalling.

A Caller holds a position of great respect and authority, and a Caller of Cthulhu can save our people if necessary ... though at great cost to himself, Casillus said softly. *Just like how you wished to save the Mer at the settlement. If you had been there in the past, Gabriel, you could have rescued them.*

Gabriel thought of the dead Mer child and shuddered. After a pause, he added, *But Cthulhu did come back then. But it was too late. It just ... it just killed everyone left.*

It only came because it was excited by the deaths of the Mer so near its temple. It watches its places of worship, Casillus explained.

Does it watch its Callers, too?

Why do you ask—

It—it saved me. Before.

What? Casillus sounded shocked.

The day my parents died. Cthulhu was there. I—I think I felt it waiting out in the deep and I—I had to go to it. I made my parents sail to where it was. Gabriel swallowed. *And when the storm came and capsized our boat, Cthulhu took me back to shore. Back to the Morse Place, actually.*

Yes, that makes sense. It brought you to the only one of its temples you could survive at. The other is too deep, Casillus said.

At that moment, Gabriel saw the strip of parking nestled by the beach near the caves. He could already feel Casillus coming towards the shallows. “Corey, pull off here and park.”

His best friend slowed the van down and glided into a parking spot. Just as soon as the engine turned off, Gabriel was popping open the door and practically falling out onto the sandy parking lot. The wind had whipped up some of the sand from the beach and piled it onto the hot pavement. Corey was hustling around the front of the van, his flip flops making a sucking noise with each step as if the heat was melting them to the ground. Corey put an arm under Gabriel’s.

“Gabe, are you sure about this?” Corey asked as he helped Gabriel walk out onto the sand.

Casillus’ dark head appeared above the surface of the waves, and Gabriel found himself grinning as he answered, “Yeah, most definitely.”

Corey didn’t notice Casillus coming out of the water. He was so concerned about Gabriel’s condition that he didn’t even hear Casillus splashing towards them until they were almost at the waterline. The Mer ran through the shallows towards them.

Casillus!

My love!

“Who ...” Corey’s head finally lifted at that sound, and his eyes grew very round. “That’s—that’s Casillus?”

“Yeah,” Gabriel got out.

Casillus took Gabriel from Corey’s arms and clutched his body to him. Gabriel held onto the Mer just as tightly.

“Gabe—Gabe, he ... he ... he ...” Corey sputtered out.

Gabriel knew that Corey must have spotted the gills on Casillus’ sides.

Gabriel pulled back so that he could introduce two of the most important people in his life to each other. “Casillus, this is my best friend in the world, Corey Rudman. Corey, this is Casillus

Nerion, Prince of the Mers.”

Story Continued in Book 4!

The Merman



BOOK 4 - UNDERSEA

~ A PREVIEW ~

Chapter 1



REVEALING

“Casillus, this is my best friend in the world, Corey Rudman. Corey, this is Casillus Nerion, Prince of the Mers. Casillus is my *someone amazing*,” Gabriel Braven said as he introduced the two most important men in his life to each other before he collapsed against Casillus’ strong body. The merman easily bore his weight, cradling Gabriel against him. Gabriel clung to Casillus’ half-naked form, which was still dripping wet from the sea.

You are safe, Gabriel. We are together now. It is all right, Casillus murmured through their telepathic bond as he kissed Gabriel’s forehead and temples. Gabriel felt Casillus’ gills flutter against his arms as he held on to the Mer. Casillus continued, *Rest and recover, my love. He cannot hurt you here.*

The “he” Casillus spoke of was Johnson Tims, a former military man and current professor at the mysterious and secretive Miskatonic University. Corey and Gabriel had practically fled from the man after he had insisted on Gabriel entering a strange ancient temple made of glowing blue stones that Johnson and a group of Miskatonic’s archeology students were investigating. This temple was the heart of a long abandoned Native American settlement where the alleged “Gods of the Sea” had come to mate with the humans and worship their terrible deity in the temple’s aquatic-like interior.

Johnson had told Gabriel that he needed to see the temple in order to “understand.” But what the ex-soldier wanted him to understand was still unclear. What *had* become certain was that Johnson knew about the existence of the Mers, believed that the Mers were the “Gods of the Sea”, and suspected that Gabriel was one of them. Johnson may have actually gotten romantically involved with Gabriel’s grandmother, Grace, in order to investigate the Bravens and their genetic history. The crazy thing was, he was right to be suspicious. Ancestors on both sides of Gabriel’s family had inherited Mer blood from when the Mers were still mating with humans on the coast. Combined in Gabriel, there had been enough Mer DNA to trigger a transformation.

Gabriel had avoided undergoing this transition for years longer than normal because he had avoided the sea after his parents’ tragic deaths in a boating accident on the ocean. His parents’ boat had been capsized by rogue waves and both of them had drowned, though Gabriel himself had inexplicably survived. Gabriel had woken up on the beach after dreaming of a creature miles high with tentacles tenderly transporting him to shore.

It was only after Gabriel had returned to Ocean Side a few days ago, over a decade after his parents’ deaths, and gotten caught at high tide in a nearby sea cave that the transition had been triggered. Gabriel had nearly drowned, but then gills had opened up along his sides and allowed him to breathe underwater. It was then that Casillus had seemingly come out of nowhere to rescue him. Casillus was the one to reveal the truth to Gabriel about himself. Gabriel was a merman. Gabriel hadn’t believed that Casillus was real at first, let alone that he was a merman, but not even his stubborn denial could overcome seeing the physical changes in his body whenever it got wet. He

wasn't human. He was a Mer.

You are safe, Casillus repeated.

But the settlement is still there, Casillus. As is the temple and that —that statue inside. That statue can hurt people, can't it? Like that Henry kid? No one is safe with that there, Gabriel whispered.

Gabriel was referring to a squat obsidian statue hidden in a secret inner sanctum in the very back of the temple. The statue was sculpted to resemble the monstrous creature Cthulhu, an ancient being that wreaked havoc when called. The monstrous creature Gabriel thought he had dreamed being taken to shore by. The statue depicted Cthulhu as having a squid-like head, masses of tentacles and strange leathery wings. Hundreds of eyes had stared out of its utterly alien visage. The statue was much, much smaller than the original, which was miles high and able to crush a military base and drag it out into the sea, but it had the same terrible *presence*.

No one but a Caller can summon Cthulhu by touching the statue, Gabriel, Casillus reminded him.

And I'm the only Caller you know of, right?

You are the only Caller born in a thousand years, Gabriel.

Casillus had explained to him that a Caller was a Mer with the inborn ability to connect to Cthulhu and draw it up from the ocean's depths to attack. Gabriel had nearly accidentally called Cthulhu to the settlement, as he had been caught up in bloody visions of the past. He had been forced to watch as Mer had been killed in retaliation by the Native American tribe at the settlement after the death of one of the half-Mer, half-human women. Her human lover had fatally kept her from going into the sea. She had died in his arms. Blaming the Mer for her death, he had whipped the tribe up into a murderous frenzy.

The surf splashed against Gabriel's ankles at that moment, distracting him from his thoughts of the settlement and Cthulhu. Gabriel's skin seemed to greedily drink up the water. He was shocked by the longing look he found himself giving the brilliant blue ocean spread out over Casillus' broad, tanned shoulder. Gabriel's shock grew as he realized he had no desire to go back to the strip of sugar-sand beach behind him. He wanted water. He wanted the sea.

The sea is your home, Gabriel, Casillus murmured, reading Gabriel's thoughts. *It is our home.*

Our home. Corey doesn't know that I'm a Mer like you. He didn't even know that Mers existed until this moment. And after I ask him to accept all of this as real, then I have to - to tell him that I'm leaving him and my grandmother behind. Gabriel paused and swallowed hard. He didn't want to think of what he would be giving up by going into the sea.

I know. But, in time, you will be able to touch their minds and talk to them no matter how far away you physically are from them.

Talk to them ... Corey! He's not talking!

Gabriel jerked around to face his best friend, cognizant that Corey had been strangely silent as he had been thinking through the craziness of the past few days. "Corey, are you—are you okay?"

He looks very shocked, Casillus said. *He is ... staring.*

"Casillus is a merman." Corey's voice was high, as if he were about to start giggling hysterically any minute. As Casillus had said, Corey was staring at the Mer with huge brown eyes that seemed to enlarge until they filled his face.

"Yeah, he is," Gabriel said with a soft smile for his best friend.

"No, Gabe, he's a *merman*!" Corey repeated as if Gabriel was denying it.

"I know he is. He is actually the Prince of the Mers," Gabriel agreed.

“But—but—but, Gabe, he’s a merman!” Corey babbled.

Gabriel reached out and grasped his portly best friend’s shoulders. “Yes, he is. Mermen are real, Corey. Just like you always hoped. And I found a boyfriend, too. Another impossible thing, right? Isn’t there some saying about how you should try to do three impossible things a day? Well, we’ve done two already and the day isn’t even half over yet.”

Gabriel finding love—*let alone true love*—would have seemed impossible only the week before. Gabriel had not believed that love was in the cards for him. After his parents’ tragic deaths, Gabriel was convinced that it was his destiny to be on his own. Corey had desperately wanted Gabriel to find love, and now he had, but Corey was still too shocked by the whole “mermen exist” thing to appreciate that all of his Cupid plans had come to fruition.

Gabriel’s gaze swung between the two most important men in his life. Casillus looked down at him tenderly out of stunning blue-green eyes. Corey’s mouth slowly opened and shut, and he didn’t seem to blink.

He’s already so shocked and I haven’t even told him the “best part” yet.

Gabriel’s heart began to pound because the “best part” was that he, too, was a Mer. He realized that his heart wasn’t just pounding due to his anxiety over telling Corey he was a merman, but also because his body was transitioning. He needed to be submerged in water, and he was only standing ankle deep in the sea.

Casillus, sensing Gabriel’s physical distress, was suddenly moving. *We cannot wait to get you in the water any longer. It must be now, Gabriel. All that time in the heat and the temple stressed your system.*

Yeah, okay, maybe we should go out a little deeper—

Gabriel didn’t get a chance to finish that thought as Casillus immediately proceeded to strip off Gabriel’s shirt and toss it onto the sand as if it were offensive in some way. All of the Mer only wore a shift of brightly colored fabric around their waists that announced their family and position to others but did nothing to hide their bodies, so maybe his T-shirt was unpleasant in the Mer’s eyes. Casillus’ beautiful cock was quite out in the open and visible for all to see, while Gabriel’s was covered with a pair of shorts and boxer briefs. The Mer then reached for those shorts.

Gabriel stammered out, “We don’t have to take those off, Casillus—”

But by that point the Mer had already undone the button and fly of his shorts and yanked them, along with Gabriel’s underwear, down his legs until they puddled around his ankles. At Casillus’ urging he stepped out of them, and the Mer flung that clothing away, too. Gabriel knew his cheeks were nuclear red even as his ass cheeks were pale as the day. He had never tanned in the nude. Casillus, of course, had no tan lines. He was a beautiful golden color all over.

“You’re naked, Gabe!” Corey giggled, shocked out of his silence by Casillus’ actions. “He stripped you—whoa, where is he taking you! Hey, Gabe doesn’t like to go in the water!” Corey grasped Casillus’ arm as the Mer began to draw Gabriel into the waves.

Gabriel, you must go into the water now! Casillus cried. Tell Corey to release me!

Casillus actually looked like he meant to push Corey away physically. Casillus clearly perceived Corey’s actions as a threat to Gabriel. However, his gentle best friend wasn’t trying to hurt either of them, but to save Gabriel. Corey knew the ironic truth that Gabriel had been afraid of water since his parents had drowned in that terrible storm.

Casillus, it’s all right! Be calm. He doesn’t understand. He’s just trying to protect me, Gabriel mentally soothed the Mer before he turned physically back to Corey.

“It’s okay, Corey. I *need* to get in the water. I’ll be much better once I do.” Once again he found

himself yearning for the buoyant weightlessness of the ocean.

“Gabe, I don’t get this. Why would you get better in the water?” Corey had kicked off his sandals and was walking into the surf with Gabriel and Casillus.

You can tell him, Gabriel. I know he will understand. He guesses already, Casillus told him. The Mer must have sensed the anxiety that was building in Gabriel as he realized he finally had to tell Corey the truth of what he was.

“I -- I have some things to tell you,” Gabriel stammered out.

“So you’ve been saying and ...” Corey gestured to Casillus. “He’s obviously not all of it. So? What more do you have to say, and will my jaw literally unhinge and fall into the ocean when I hear it?”

“Umm.”

“Gabe!”

The surf splashed up over his knees. He swallowed. How did he tell his best friend he wasn’t human? And worse, that he was going to have to go into the water permanently in two and a half days or die? That was the kicker about becoming a Mer. The Mer lived forever, but Gabriel would not survive another seventy-two hours out of the sea because his newly transitioned form could not handle living on land.

Having to go into the sea meant that all his and Corey’s plans for college next year, like the apartment they would share, and all their plans for the future were going to be ruined. How could he tell Corey that everything that both of them were looking forward to simply wasn’t going to happen? Corey’s worry-eyes were in, and Gabriel knew that while his best friend’s fear for his health would go away once he learned about the transition. But how long would it take before Corey realized that everything had changed, and maybe not for the better?

He will mourn, Gabriel, but not in front of you. That is not his way, Casillus said. The Mer knew that about Corey because he shared all of Gabriel’s memories of his best friend. Casillus continued, *He will find only the positive things in this change. He will embrace it, and you. Do not be afraid.*

Gabriel reached back mentally to the Mer over their bond, and it felt like their souls interlocked. Gabriel took in a shuddering breath. He could do this. He would do this. Corey would accept it. And he knew the perfect way to *tell* his friend he was a Mer was by simply *showing* him.

“Gabe?” Corey asked tentatively when Gabriel’s silence went on too long.

“I’m going to get better in the water because of *this*, Corey.” Gabriel reached down and scooped up several handfuls of water and splashed it along his sides. Immediately, four slits appeared on each side of his ribcage. There was only the briefest hot sensation as they opened, whereas before it had felt like his skin was unzipping. The gills immediately started to flutter. He looked up at his best friend’s face to gauge Corey’s reaction. “Because I’m a merman, too.”

Corey’s mouth was open in an “O” of awe. There was no disgust on his face, just complete and utter amazement. “You’re a—a merman?”

“I am. Or well, more like I’m *becoming* one. The story that Greta told us about the Gods of the Sea mating with people along the coast, including the Native American tribe at the settlement? All true. Tabatha Braven, the wife of the guy whose journal I found, the woman he killed? She had a Mer lover,” Gabriel explained. Greta was Greta Anderson, one of the Miskatonic students Johnson had brought along to the dig site, but she seemed to be on Gabriel and Corey’s side. In fact, she appeared to have guessed that Gabriel was a Mer, but had tried to hide that fact from Johnson. As for Tabatha Braven, she was an ancestor of Gabriel’s from a long time ago who had been killed by her husband

Samuel after he caught her having an affair with a Mer named Aemrys Liseas. Samuel had tried to kill both her and the child that was not his. Samuel had, unfortunately, succeeded in slaying his wife, but not the half-Mer child. Aemrys had taken his revenge by killing Samuel. Gabriel continued, "My mom's family must have had Mer ancestors, too. Between the two of them, there was enough merman DNA to change me when I finally went into the sea."

"Holy smokes, all this time I was joking about finding you a merman soul mate and merman loving and all that, and it was *true*?" Corey shook his head, still stunned.

"It was, though I didn't believe it until recently." Gabriel cast a glance over at Casillus and knew his love was written large on his face. "Casillus seemed too perfect to be real. But my body wouldn't let my mind convince me it was all a dream." He gestured down to the quivering gills on his sides. "These are sort of hard to explain away."

Corey reached forward with one of his pudgy hands to touch the moving gills, but he stopped himself before actually doing so. "Can I? Can I touch them?"

"Yeah, go ahead. They feel pretty weird," Gabriel said, a flicker of excitement mixed with anxiety floating through him. Corey touching them would *really* make this all real.

His best friend was so gentle as he lightly touched the top of one of the gills. The purple villi inside fluttered and showed their tips along the edge of the gill, causing Corey to make a little gasp followed by a "tee hee" of delight. He brushed the villi with his fingertips and Gabriel laughed, too.

"That tickles, Corey!"

"Oh, your gills are so *cute*," Corey said and touched one again.

"Cute? You think they're cute?" Gabriel had not expected Corey to say that!

"They are! They're like shy little creatures that want to be petted." Corey was leaning over now to study them with rapt appreciation.

Casillus then placed a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. *You need to be submerged at least up to your chest now. Corey may observe your very cute gills underwater.*

Very cute? Well, then yours are the cutest ever. Gabriel flashed him a smile, but Casillus was right. Though Gabriel's breathing was better than it had been at the settlement, it was still hard to get in a full lungful of air.

"Corey, I've got to go further in and get wet, okay?" Gabriel asked.

Corey's head bobbed up and down in agreement. "Absolutely. Can I come into the water with you guys?"

"Of course!" Gabriel said. "I have so much more to tell you."

"You bet you do! I can't believe you found out you were a merman and fell in love with another merman without telling me!" Corey whipped off his shirt and shorts, leaving on his neon-pink boxers.

"You wore pink under orange?" Gabriel's eyebrows rose up.

"I like color," his best friend said with a wink. "Now let's get you wet."

Corey drew one of Gabriel's arms over his shoulders while Casillus did the same with Gabriel's other arm. The two of them practically carried him over the rest of the sand bar and then finally into water that was chest deep. As soon as Gabriel's gills were completely submerged he started to feel better and let out a sigh. Some strength surged back into his limbs again, and the heavy feeling, like his body was weighted down by leaden bars, was relieved.

"Gabe, I noticed that Casillus doesn't say a lot, at least not that I'm hearing," Corey said.

"Mers don't speak with their mouths. He talks to me telepathically," Gabriel explained.

"Telepathy, too? That is so cool! But I guess it makes sense. I mean underwater it's hard to talk," Corey said sagely.

I can speak with Corey as well, but I must be in physical contact to do so. Once you are further recovered, Corey and I will touch minds and we will know one another, Casillus offered.

“Casillus will demonstrate it to you in a little bit,” Gabriel said.

Corey immediately perked up and looked over at the Mer with big eyes and a happy grin. Casillus smiled back.

He is such a happy, positive person, Gabriel. It is like being bathed in warmth in his presence, Casillus said.

I knew you would love him, Gabriel began, but then he dug his heels into the soft, sandy bottom as both Casillus and Corey tried to keep going deeper. He had just realized they were trying to take him into water that was over his head. His fear of the sea suddenly slammed back into place.

“No farther! Please!” Gabriel cried out.

“Gabe, you all right?” Corey asked.

Casillus asked almost at the same time, *Gabriel? What is the matter?* But the Mer had access to his thoughts and feelings and quickly amended to, *Ah, you fear the deeper water.*

“This is far enough for—for now,” Gabriel concurred. His chest was tight again, not from lack of air, but with fear. He clutched onto both men. “We can just stay right here. Staying right here. Not moving.”

“But don’t you want to swim a little, Gabe? Or maybe float? You looked like death warmed over in the car and you only look a bit better now,” Corey said with a playful splash of his fingers in the water. “I bet it would be easier on you if you were at least floating.”

“Umm, in a little bit. I’ll just stand here for now.” Gabriel attempted to stand still even as the waves tried to sweep him off his feet and have him float against his will. But floating meant being at the mercy of the ocean. Floating meant danger. His legs though were trembling beneath him and he really needed to rest. If only he could just relax!

I have to get over this. I only have two and a half days before I have to get into the water! Gabriel’s thoughts tumbled over one another frantically.

The Mer immediately tightened his grip on Gabriel. *I will hold you, Gabriel. That will allow you to enjoy the feeling of weightlessness while also feeling secure.*

O-okay. Maybe that will work. Gabriel remembered his recent dreams of swimming and how wonderful it had felt. He also flashed back to being in Casillus’ body while the Mer swam. He had loved it. He could love it again.

“Casillus is going to hold on to me, Corey, so I can float without having a panic attack,” Gabriel explained.

“Okay, sure.” Corey gently drew Gabriel’s arm from around his shoulders and swam a small distance off to watch them.

Casillus pulled Gabriel’s back against his front and wrapped his arms around Gabriel’s chest just under the young man’s arms. *Lay your head back against my shoulder, Gabriel. Let yourself relax. I will let nothing happen to you.*

Gabriel knew that the moment he laid his head back his feet would leave the sand. He would be floating in the ocean. He would have to let go of the land. He swallowed back the sour taste of fear mixed with excitement as he forced himself to lean back.

I want to feel the freedom of being weightless again. I miss it. I miss it so much, Casillus.

I know, Gabriel. It shall be yours again, the Mer assured him.

Gabriel rested his head on Casillus’ broad shoulder and let his feet rise up off the bottom of the sea floor. At first, every muscle in his body was tense. But the waves did not buffet him. The current

did not pull him out to sea. He floated in place. He rode up and down on the gentle swells easily. Casillus held firm. He was safe. His body relaxed into the Mer's powerful embrace.

Oh, this feels so good, Gabriel murmured as he let his eyelids shut. The golden sun shone down from above and he saw brilliant reds and oranges behind his lids.

This is how it should be, Gabriel. Let yourself relax. Let yourself float, Casillus urged.

"You're doing great, Gabe," Corey said.

"Floating on my back is doing great?" Gabriel asked with a quirked smile.

You are doing very well, Casillus assured him. He kissed the top of Gabriel's head.

"You voluntarily entered the water without someone's life being at stake. I would say that's pretty darn good," Corey enthused. Gabriel heard his best friend paddle back over to them. He cracked his eyelids open and saw that the bottom of Corey's luxuriant red, curly beard was getting wet, which made him look like a pudgy Poseidon.

"Well, it's not exactly *voluntary*," Gabriel confessed. He swallowed and his gills fluttered anxiously.

I understand your grief at leaving him, Gabriel, Casillus said.

"Well, Casillus and I did carry you," Corey agreed good-naturedly. "But you wanted to get in the water."

"Because in two days, I have to get into the water or I will die," Gabriel said. His lips felt numb as he said those words. He looked up at the sky rather than over at his best friend.

Silence fell.

I can't look at his face, Casillus. I can't see his anguish over this.

"You would d-die?" Corey asked softly.

"I only have *at best* two and a half days left before I have to take to the water forever, or else ... you remember what Greta told you about the last chieftain of the land tribe's daughter?" Gabriel asked.

"She died because of a disease or something, didn't she?" Corey asked. "I mean I know the land tribe blamed the Gods of the Sea, but clearly—"

"No, Corey, she was half Mer. She was transitioning into a Mer just like I am. The Mer *mated* with the land tribe and she was one of the children born as a result. Her lover took her far away from the water, though, and she -- she died. She couldn't *breathe*," Gabriel said. He glanced over at Corey. His best friend was biting his lower lip and his brown eyes were filled with sadness.

"Her lover thought he was saving her, though didn't he?" Corey asked. "He thought she would be fine."

"Maybe." Gabriel could not speak of the land tribe without bitterness. After the young woman's death, the land tribe had turned on all visiting Mer, killing them and their children mercilessly. It had been a slaughter. The fact that the land tribe had been destroyed by Cthulhu afterwards seemed insufficient revenge somehow. Those Mer, who would have lived forever, who would have still been alive *now*, were gone and would never come back. The visions he had seen at the settlement started to flood over him again, and he had to thrust them away so the grief wouldn't overwhelm him once more. He couldn't risk the chance of summoning Cthulhu here.

"So what does 'go into the water' mean exactly? Casillus got out of the water just fine. Can't you do that? Like we can live on the beach and you can spend some time in the ocean and the rest of the time on land?" Corey asked hopefully.

Gabriel opened his mouth to say "no" and to explain that when a Mer first transitioned they needed to be under the water for a long time. He wasn't sure on the exact amount of time, but it had

seemed like *years* from what Casillus had said. He would not be able to be on land at all before then. But before Gabriel could say any of it, Casillus spoke.

Let me tell him, Gabriel. Let me explain. It might be easier, Casillus suggested.

All right, Gabriel agreed. He was still having trouble looking at Corey's beloved face without tearing up, so he was glad not to have to talk.

Tell him that I need only put my fingers on one of his temples for our minds to touch. Ask for his permission to do so, Casillus requested.

"Casillus wants to talk to you, Corey. He's going to touch your temple and then you two will be telepathically linked," Gabriel said, clearing his suddenly tight throat.

Corey bobbed his head in agreement as he said, "O-okay."

Casillus gently pressed two fingers against Corey's left temple. His best friend's brown eyes widened as if he had touched a live wire before sliding half closed. Gabriel watched as Corey's pupils moved back and forth like they did in REM sleep. Gabriel heard nothing of what Casillus was saying to Corey, so when he removed his fingers from his best friend's temple he was eager to hear Corey's reaction.

Corey's big brown eyes were filled with tears, but he was smiling, too. He clasped Gabriel's shoulder. "Oh, Gabe, it's going to be so great where you're going! The city is just—just *beautiful* and you have a ton of family waiting there for you. So anxious to meet you and embrace you!" The tears overflowed. "And Casillus says that he'll make sure you can come near shore for us to talk. That there might even be a way to do it long-distance sort of!"

Gabriel hadn't heard that before. He glanced up at Casillus. *Does he mean that I will be able to communicate with him telepathically without touching him?*

Casillus nodded. *You are a Caller, Gabriel. I believe that with practice you will be able to do so.*

"What does my being a Caller have to do with talking to Corey?" Gabriel asked. "Though honestly, I'm all for it since the other things you mentioned about being one weren't so hot."

It was Corey who answered rather than the Mer. "You have the ability to communicate over vast distances with other species. That's how you're able to -- to call Cthulhu."

"What? How did you—"

"Casillus told me. He showed me. I understand now." Corey touched his bearded chin. He looked both thoughtful and worried. "I'm glad that Johnson doesn't know any of this."

"Why exactly are you worried about Johnson knowing?" Gabriel asked. He had his own bad feelings about the man, but Corey seemed awfully serious about this.

Corey's mournful gaze met his. "Because he wants to kill Cthulhu, and the only way he can do that is to call it to land. And you would be his best chance to do just that."

If you enjoyed *The Merman – Book 3: Caller*, check out another title by X. Aratare, *The Artifact – Book 1: The Bodyguard*.

Dane Gareis is a wealthy, reclusive young man with a traumatic past, but a spine of steel. When his father, Julius Gareis, is killed in a mysterious plane crash, Dane carries on the family business and continues his passion for the very antiquity that got his father murdered — a golden sarcophagus belonging to an ancient cult known as the Ydrath.

Soon, the Ydrath threaten him as well, and Dane seeks to hire a bodyguard he can trust. Someone who can protect him, and someone who will respect his boundaries. While he gets the first two, the third requirement falls apart when he hires Sean Harding.

Sean Harding is an ex-detective with a sixth sense for danger. After his entire unit was murdered in a drug bust gone very wrong, he is a broken man who thinks only of revenge until he takes the job protecting the Gareis CEO.

Sean's attraction to the vulnerable Dane gives him new purpose, but his past is not escaped so easily, and his sixth sense tells him that there is more to the Ydrath than even Dane knows.

Read the preview of chapter one...

THE ARTIFACT - BOOK 1: THE BODYGUARD

CHAPTER 1

SOLE SURVIVOR

Detective Sean Harding thrust open Winter Haven Memorial's emergency room doors. He strode past the nurse on duty with a flash of his detective badge and a curt nod. The badge was a necessity. As an undercover operative for the Winter Haven Special Task Force and Narcotics Unit, known simply as “the Unit,” he didn’t look the part of a police detective even when he wore a suit like today.

His dark brown hair was long enough for it to begin to curl and brush the tops of his shoulders, and he had a perpetual five o’clock shadow. His olive-toned skin spared him from looking vampire-pale despite long hours spent on night-darkened streets and in the windowless rooms of clubs. But despite having been up for over thirty-six hours straight, Sean’s green eyes still looked sharp and clear.

He hadn’t stopped moving since first hearing about the drug that was known simply as the Powder. Everything surrounding the drug was shrouded in darkness. Where it came from, who was behind its manufacture, and even its actual chemical makeup were all unknown. The only thing that was certain was that it killed everyone who took it. And that fact made Sean fear there would be a holocaust of drug users unless he could locate the source of the Powder and choke off its flow. He had finally gotten his first solid lead tonight in the form of a phone call from Dr. Olga Vostok, a good friend and emergency room physician at Winter Haven Memorial.

“Sean,” Dr. Vostok had said. “We have a survivor.”

“Are you sure?” His heart rate had risen.

“Yes. He’s a young man. More like a boy. He took the Powder and he’s here. Alive,” she had said, her voice rushed and strained.

“Keep him alive, Olga. If he says anything—I mean ANYTHING, write it down, record it, remember it. Do whatever you have to do,” Sean had ordered. As soon as he had hung up, he had jumped into his car, peeled out of the police station’s parking lot. He got to the ER in record time.

And now he was here, in the hospital, feet away from the boy that could turn his investigation around. Sean yanked aside the curtain that surrounded the boy’s hospital bed. The sound of the metal rings sliding along the pole was nearly deafening. He froze.

Too late.

Sean recognized death when he saw it. His gaze riveted on the red blood oozing out of the corners of the boy’s unseeing blue eyes. It looked especially vibrant against the child’s chalky white skin. The blood trails were dry, appearing almost painted on in their vividness. For a moment, Sean wanted to grab the boy’s shoulders and shake him. He wanted to believe that the red was makeup or paint. But he knew it was not. The boy was dead and gone. Sean swallowed the bile that rose in his throat.

“His brain liquefied. We will need an autopsy to confirm it, but I am sure already. Just like the others,” Dr. Vostok’s Russian-accented voice suddenly came from behind him. Startled, Sean spun around to face her. His first thought was that she looked as deathly pale as the boy. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you, Sean.”

Sean waved off her apology even as his heart still thundered in his chest. “How long ago did he die?”

“Moments after I called you, so the guilt in your eyes is unfounded. You couldn't have gotten here in time unless you had teleported.” She touched his shoulder tenderly, but he didn't want tenderness. The disappointment was too great.

“He is—*was*—the only lead I had, Olga. More are going to die, because I didn't get here fast enough.

Dr. Vostok walked over to the boy's bed. Her dark blonde hair gleamed under the fluorescent lights. The lines that framed her mouth deepened as she looked down at the dead boy. She lightly placed one of her hands on the child's forearm. Sean noticed that her nails were bitten to the quick.

“He took the Powder just once,” she said softly. “Just once, and this was the result. He looks all of fifteen, doesn't he?”

“Any ID?” Sean's police instincts kicked in even as his shoulders slumped in exhaustion and despair. Another lead to nowhere.

“No, no ID. No wallet. He didn't even have on shoes or a shirt when he wandered into the ER,” she said, patting the boy's arm.

“Did he say who he bought the drug from?” Sean asked.

She shook her head. “He would only speak of what the drug showed him.”

“So it causes hallucinations?” Sean asked wearily. He expected a quick confirmation from Dr. Vostok, but she was silent for so long that Sean began to feel a trickle of unease. “Olga?”

“I don't know,” she said, then shook herself. “I mean, most probably. Yes, definitely, it causes hallucinations. He couldn't have really been seeing what he claimed he was. It's quite impossible.” The last was said softly, almost as if she were speaking to herself.

Sean grasped her elbow gently. “What is it? You look unnerved. I've never seen you like this.”

“Unnerved? That's a very good word to use to describe how I feel.” She wrapped her arms around herself as she added, “This drug, Sean, it isn't like anything I've ever seen. If you had heard what he *said*. His voice is still in my mind.”

“Tell me,” Sean urged.

“He said that I should think of reality as a *matryoshka*,” she said.

“A *matryoshka*?” Sean asked. The word was alien on his tongue, and didn't sound like something a fifteen-year-old would know.

“It is the Russian term for a traditional Russian nesting doll,” she explained. “You know, the wooden dolls where, when you open them, there are other dolls inside.”

“Oh, I've seen those.” Sean's brow furrowed as his confusion grew with the explanation. “And he used the word ‘*matryoshka*’?”

“Yes, it is strange, isn't it?” Dr. Vostok let out a soft, uneasy laugh. “And what's even stranger is that I believe he used that metaphor just for *me*. Just so that *I* would understand. But if he had been speaking to someone else, he would have used a different metaphor. A metaphor that would have resonated for that person.” She wrapped her arms around herself again. “He was dying, Sean. His brain was literally becoming soup in his skull, but he was thinking at such a level—I cannot explain it.”

“Did he say anything else about this—this nesting doll metaphor?”

She nodded. “He said that I should imagine that the outermost nesting doll is the world as we know it. That doll is the reality we can see. But the drug, the Powder, has the ability to pull that doll apart and show us what is inside.”

“And what does the inside look like?” Sean asked, that earlier trickle of unease becoming a torrent.

“Beautiful and terrible.” Dr. Vostok shivered. “He told me that just one layer down from here, just *one*, things get a whole lot more interesting, but if you continue on, you will find ...” She suddenly stopped and let out a nervous little laugh that had the hair on the back of Sean’s neck standing on end.

“What do you find?” Sean asked, resisting the urge to shake her. His desperation to know *anything* about the drug rose up in him stronger than ever.

Her eyes were bright, glassy with unspeakable unease, as she said, “You’ll find that we’re not alone. But having seen who we’re sharing all of this with, you’ll wish we were.”

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