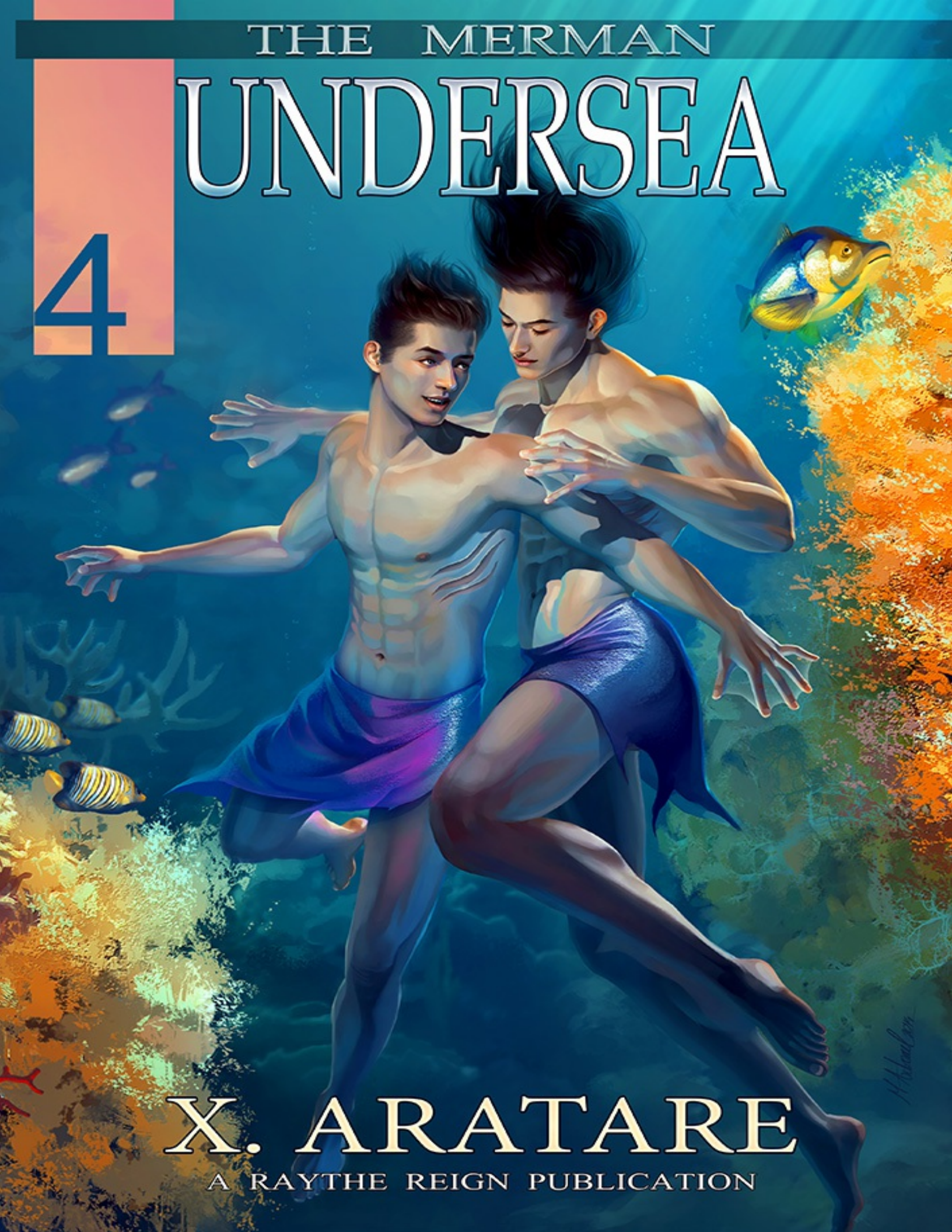


THE MERMAN

# UNDERSEA

4



X. ARATARE

A RAYTHE REIGN PUBLICATION

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## The Merman - Book 4: Undersea

*Gabriel Braven senses danger, but he's helpless to stop it.*

Gabriel's inevitable transformation into a merman brings him both great joy and great sadness. Though he must soon leave his human family, he is eager to experience the beauty of Emralis, the Mer city, together with his water-dwelling lover, Casillus. As Gabriel's protective mental barriers finally begin to drop, he can grasp the true depths of his Mer prince's encompassing love.

But Gabriel is unusual, even for a Mer. As a rare Caller, his psychic gifts surprise even Casillus. Though they will enable him to speak mind-to-mind with Corey and Grandma G on land, they also draw him closer to Cthulhu, the alien entity whose presence means destruction and madness for the human race.

But Gabriel's time on land is running out. He has a feeling that nothing will stop his grandmother's lover, Professor Johnson Tims, from exposing the Mer's existence. And he is not at all sure he can hold Cthulhu back from protecting the ocean-dwelling race... and destroying the humans in the process, including Corey and Grandma G!

# THE MERMAN

BOOK 4: UNDERSEA

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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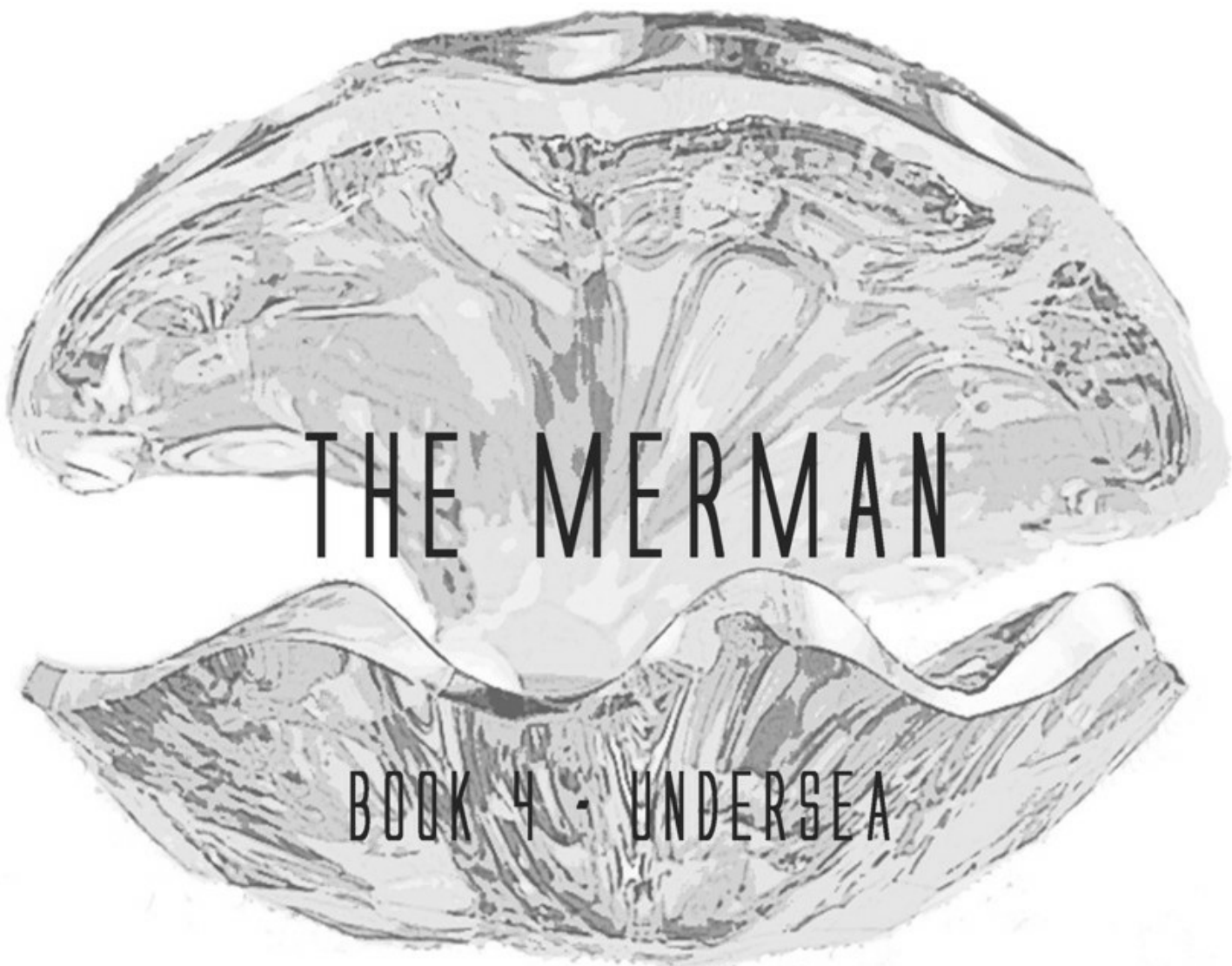


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# THE MERMAN

BOOK 4 - UNDERSEA

X. ARATARE

STORY

MATHIA ARKONIEL

COVER ART

# 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 one another.

Gabriel then collapsed against Casillus’ strong body. He had no strength of his own as his transition from man to merman was well underway and he had just survived a terrible psychic shock. Casillus bore his weight easily, cradling Gabriel against him with aching tenderness. Gabriel clung to the Mer’s 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. You have escaped him.*

The “him” Casillus spoke of was Johnson Tims, a former military man and current professor at the mysterious and secretive Miskatonic University. Johnson had insisted on Gabriel entering a strange ancient temple made of glowing blue stones that he and a group of Miskatonic’s archeology students were investigating at a long-abandoned Native American settlement. This temple was the heart of the settlement where 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 from the visit 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” referenced in an inscription on the temple’s wall, suspected that the Mers were out to harm humanity, and, finally, was convinced that Gabriel was, in fact, not human, but a Mer, too. Johnson’s insistence on Gabriel’s presence in the temple had bordered on obsession, frightening and disturbing Gabriel and Corey greatly. Johnson’s obsession with Gabriel being at the temple was just part of a greater seeming obsession with Gabriel overall. Gabriel even suspected that Johnson may have actually become romantically involved with his grandmother, Grace, in order to investigate him and the Braven genetic history to see if he had Mer blood.

The thing was, Johnson was *right* to be suspicious about him. 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 from human to merman. 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 a rogue wave and both of them had drowned, though Gabriel himself had seemingly inexplicably survived. He 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 returned to Ocean Side a few days before, and had gotten caught at high tide in a nearby sea cave that the transition had been triggered. Gabriel had nearly drowned, but gills had opened up along his sides and allowed him to breathe underwater. It was then that the Mer Prince Casillus Nerion 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 even 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. Gills. Webbed fingers. Changed eyes. He wasn't human. He was a Mer.

*You are safe,* Casillus repeated.

*But the settlement is still there, Casillus. So is the temple and that statue inside of it! That statue can hurt people! No one is safe with that there!* Gabriel cried.

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 and caused madness when called. It was also the same being that Gabriel believed he had only dreamed of taking him tenderly to the shore so long ago. The statue showed in great detail Cthulhu's 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 with effort, but the statue had the same terrible *presence* and perhaps other powers as well.

*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?* Gabriel confirmed.

A Caller was a Mer with the inborn ability to connect to Cthulhu and draw it up from the ocean's depths to attack.

*You are the only Caller born in a thousand years, Gabriel,* Casillus agreed.

*What happened to that Caller? Or all the other Callers? Aren't they around any longer? Mers live forever, right?* Gabriel asked.

Casillus was silent for a moment and then said, *All our Callers perished or went away.*

There was something in Casillus' voice that told him not to ask more. Perhaps being a Caller was a perilous thing in and of itself. Perhaps Casillus just did not wish to worry him by talking about the fates of other Callers as if Gabriel could not escape those as his own.

*But Henry -- that student Greta mentioned -- was harmed just by touching the statue though,* Gabriel pointed out. Henry was one of the Miskatonic students working at the settlement. He had gone into the inner sanctum alone with the statue and had seemingly gone mad.

*All things connected with Cthulhu have a noxious effect on human souls,* Casillus agreed.

*So even without being called, Cthulhu is still able to cause the humans harm,* Gabriel said.

The surf splashed against his ankles at that moment. His 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 the water. He wanted the sea. Yet he was still terrified of it at the same time.

*The sea is your home, Gabriel,* Casillus murmured, reading Gabriel's thoughts. *It is our home.*

*Our home,* Gabriel repeated and tried to believe it. His eyes went to his best friend. Corey had always been home for him. Now the sea, something that had filled him with loathing and dread since his parents' deaths, had to take that place. It was then that he realized, *Corey doesn't know that I'm a Mer like you. He didn't even know that Mers existed until he saw you.*

*But he believes in Mers now. He will believe you are one, too,* Casillus said with certainty.

*I guess he will eventually. Though I don't know how I'm going to tell him. And I really don't know how I'm going to tell him that I have to go into the sea and leave him and my grandmother behind,* Gabriel said and swallowed hard. The Mers lived forever, but Gabriel would not survive another seventy-two hours out of the water because his newly transitioned form could not handle living on dry land.

*It will be a difficult conversation to have,* Casillus said. *However, going into the water might not be the complete loss of your life on land that you think.*

*How do you mean?* Gabriel asked. It wasn't as if he and Casillus could stay near the beach like this after he had transitioned. It was dangerous for them to be here as it was, especially with a man like Johnson nearby. But until Gabriel's body fully transitioned, he could not go to the Mer city of *Emralis* so they had to stay here.

*I believe in time, that as a Caller, you will be able to touch Corey and Grace's minds and talk to them no matter how far away you are from them,* Casillus said.

*Talk to them ... Corey! He's not talking!* Gabriel realized. He jerked around to face his best friend, cognizant that Corey had been strangely silent since learning Casillus was a Mer. He asked, "Corey, are you—are you okay? I mean, I know you're not okay, but -- but are you *okay*?"

*He looks very shocked,* Casillus said, his forehead furrowing. *He is ... staring. I do not think he has blinked in over five minutes.*

"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 grow bigger and bigger until they filled his face.

"Yeah, he is," Gabriel agreed, trying to smile encouragingly at his best friend and make the existence of Mers as normal as possible.

"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 again, his smile taking on a more rigid appearance. His attempts to make the existence of Mers normal were clearly failing.

"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 Casillus is my boyfriend, too. Another impossible thing, right? Isn't there some saying about how you should try to do three impossible things in 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. He had not believed that love was in the cards for him. After his parents' tragic deaths, he 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, but he still wasn't blinking.



*He's already so shocked. How will he ever understand the rest?* Gabriel thought despondently.

His heart began to pound in his chest as he imagined confessing to his best friend that he was not human. Would Corey's eyes pop out of his head then? Would he fall over in a dead faint? Gabriel then realized that his heart wasn't just pounding due to his anxiety over telling Corey this, but also because his body was a complete mess still after the fiasco at the temple. 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 them both. *We cannot wait to get you in the water any longer. It must be now, Gabriel. All that time in the heat at 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. The Mer only wore shifts of brightly colored fabric around their waists that identified 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 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 reached for those as well.

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's 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, tell Corey to release me! I must get you into the water now!* Casillus cried.

Casillus actually looked like he meant to push Corey away physically. The Mer 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 when 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 them. "You *hate* the water. You normally have panic attacks at the thought of just *walking* on the beach. So what's going on?"

*You can tell him, Gabriel. I know he will understand. He guesses already,* Casillus said as he studied Corey's face intently.

"I -- I have some things to tell you," Gabriel stammered out.

"So you've been saying." 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?"

"Uhm." Now that Corey could talk, Gabriel could not.

"Gabe!"

The surf splashed up over his knees. He swallowed. It was going to be hard enough to tell his

best friend he wasn't human, but he realized then that the far harder thing would be telling Corey he had to go into the water permanently in two and a half days or die. Having to go into the sea meant that all his and Corey's plans for college next year, like the apartment they intended to share, and all their plans for a future together were going to be ruined, or, at least, drastically changed. 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, other concerns would not. After all, 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 already because he shared all of Gabriel's memories of his best friend. He was clearly plucking out the things that Gabriel already knew, but was too anxious to see clearly. 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 for the Mer over their bond, and it felt like their souls interlocked for a moment. That gave him strength. He took in a shuddering breath. He could do this. He would do this. Corey would accept it. And he knew that the perfect way to *tell* his friend he was a Mer was by simply *showing* him.

"Gabe?" Corey asked tentatively when Gabriel's silence stretched 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 them 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. "The water will make me feel better, because I'm a merman, too."

Corey's mouth was open in an "O" of awe. There was no disgust, just complete and utter amazement on his face. "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? Well, they didn't just mate with the Native American tribe at the settlement. They mated with the Europeans who came here, too, including my ancestors. Tabatha Braven, the wife of the guy whose journal I found in the basement, you know, the woman he killed? She had a Mer lover and had a baby with him," Gabriel explained.

"Greta" was Greta Anderson, one of the Miskatonic students Johnson had brought along to the dig site. She had translated an inscription etched on one of the temple's walls for Gabriel and Corey during their visit to the settlement. The inscription told how the human tribe and the Mer had become enemies and described the tribe's ultimate demise. But though she was Johnson's prized student, she appeared to be working against him. She had been appalled by his obsessive behavior towards Gabriel and though it appeared that she, too, knew that Gabriel was a Mer, she had hidden that fact from Johnson.

As for Tabatha Braven, she was an ancestor of Gabriel's from a long time ago on his father's side 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, and, he had, unfortunately, succeeded in slaying his wife, but not the half-Mer baby. Aemrys had taken his revenge by killing Samuel.

Gabriel continued, "My mom's family must have had Mer ancestors, too. Because 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 his gills would make them somehow more real than before.

His best friend was so gentle as he lightly brushed the top of one of the gills with his chubby fingers. 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 touched 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 his breathing was better than it had been at the settlement, it was still hard to get his lungs full of air.

“Corey, I’ve got to go further in and get wet, okay?” Gabriel said.

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, only 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 of relief. 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? Whoa! That is so cool! But I guess it makes sense. It would be hard to talk underwater,” Corey said sagely.

*I can speak with Corey directly, but I must be in physical contact with him to do so. Once you are further recovered, I will touch Corey’s mind and he and I will know one another. If he wishes it,*

*that is*, Casillus offered.

“Casillus can speak to you telepathically, too, if you would like that?” Gabriel told Corey.

“Like that? Hell, yeah!” 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 when one is in his presence*, Casillus said.

*I knew you would love him*, Gabriel said, but then he dug his heels into the soft, sandy bottom as both Casillus and Corey tried 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. “I want to stay right here. I don’t want to move.”

“But don’t you want to swim a little, Gabe? Or maybe float? You looked like death warmed over in the van and you only look a little bit better now. Maybe if you moved around in the water you’d recover faster,” 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.”

“Uhm, maybe I’ll float in a little bit. I just want to 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!* Gabriel’s thoughts tumbled over one another frantically, *I only have two and a half days before I have to go into the water forever! What am I going to do? Clutch onto Casillus? Have a panic attack if we leave the beach? I can’t stay here like this!*

The Mer immediately tightened his grip on Gabriel. *Do not think of the future yet. Think only of the now. And right now, 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’ mind while the Mer swam. He had loved the sensations he had experienced through the Mer’s body. Maybe somehow he could love swimming by himself again. That seemed impossible at the moment, but he had to believe there was at least a scintilla of hope for him.

“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 away and watched 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. Panicky tendrils of fear wormed their way through him. Sweat broke out on his upper lip and his heart trip-hammered in his chest. But his legs were also trembling, not with fear or not just with fear, but with exhaustion. He needed to rest.

*I want to feel the freedom of being weightless again. I miss it. I miss it so much, Casillus,* Gabriel said.

*I know, Gabriel. It shall be yours again. This is the first step for you to regain your love of the water. I will take it with you,* the Mer assured him.

Gabriel swallowed back the sour taste of fear mixed with excitement as he forced himself to lean back. He 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 with Casillus' arms around him the waves did not buffet him and the current could 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 slide 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 cheered.

"Floating on my back is doing great?" Gabriel asked with a quirked smile. He didn't have to open his eyes to know that his best friend was beaming at him like a proud parent.

*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.

"Well, Casillus and I did carry you part of the way," Corey agreed good-naturedly. "But you *wanted* to get in the water."

"I wanted to get into the water, because I -- I *need* to be in the water. And that need is only going to grow greater until ..." Gabriel let his voice peter off.

"Until what?" Corey asked, his forehead furrowing.

"In about two days, I have to get into the water *permanently* or I will die," Gabriel said. His lips felt numb as he uttered 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, shocked and grieved instantly by Gabriel's words.

"You remember what Greta told us about the last chieftain's daughter at the settlement?" Gabriel asked.

"She died because of a disease or something, didn't she?" Corey asked. "I mean I know the tribe blamed the Mer for her death, but it seemed like natural causes."

"It wasn't natural causes at all. The Mer *mated* with the tribe and she was one of the children born as a result. She was transitioning into a Mer just like I am, but her lover took her far away from the water. She couldn't *breathe* on land. She -- she *suffocated*," 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 tribe without bitterness.



While Corey had just *heard* the tale of what had occurred between the Mer and the tribe, he had actually *experienced* it. Gabriel had started having visions of the settlement's past. In these visions, he had seen the Mer come to the tribe's aid in their time of need. He had seen them mate and watched as some of the resulting offspring left their grief-stricken human parents to go into the sea with their Mer ones. He had understood how the human parents would have been angry with the Mer, but he also knew it was the bargain the tribe had struck.

And then Gabriel had watched helplessly as a young, transitioning tribeswoman had taken her last ragged breath and died, because her human lover could not let her go into the sea. Gabriel had then seen that human lover incite the tribe to terrible violence against the Mer. He couldn't get the images of death and destruction out of his mind. He feared he would forever see one of the tribe members bludgeoning a Mer child to death, her blood flying into the air like rubies. But the tribe had paid a heavy price for that slaughter. Cthulhu had made landfall and destroyed every single one of them, erasing them from history. Until now.

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 felt Casillus' arms tighten around him in sympathy.

"So what does 'go into the water' mean exactly?" Corey finally asked. "I noticed that 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?"

Gabriel opened his mouth to say "no" and 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 described. Yet time wasn't the same for a Mer as it was for a human so for all he knew it could be a hundred years. What it came down to was that he would not be able to be on land at all for likely a very long time. 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 and then they slid 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 the Mer removed his fingers from his best friend's temple he was eager to hear Corey's reactions.

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 for you. They're so anxious to meet you and embrace you!" Corey's eyes overflowed with tears. "And Casillus says that he'll make sure you can come near shore for us to talk. But he hopes that there might even be a way to do it long-distance, too!"

Gabriel glanced up at Casillus. *I really hope you're right about my being a Caller enabling me to speak to Corey from Emralis.*

Casillus nodded. *I believe it, Gabriel. If you can reach Cthulhu in the vastness then reaching for Corey on land should be completely within your power.*

“What does my being able to reach Cthulhu have to do with talking to Corey?” Gabriel asked out loud so that Corey could be a part of this conversation.

Surprisingly, it was Corey who answered rather than the Mer, “Imagine that the rest of the Mers’ telepathic powers are like kids talking over coffee cans and string while you are speaking over fiber optic cable! You’re supercharged, Gabe!”

“How do you know that?”

“Casillus told me. He showed me. I understand now.” Corey touched his bearded chin. He looked both thoughtful and worried. “I’m just glad that Johnson doesn’t know about you being a Caller and stuff.”

“The less Johnson knows about anything the better. He’s obsessed with the Mer and -- and *me*,” Gabriel said and the skin between his shoulder blades twitched.

Corey’s gaze met his. “He’s actually really obsessed with Cthulhu.”

“What does he want with it?” Gabriel asked.

“Didn’t you hear what he said?” Corey asked, his eyebrows rising in surprise.

“He said a lot of things, but I sense I missed something big,” Gabriel responded slowly. The twitching increased.

“He did say it right before you went all weird on us in the temple so maybe you did miss it,” Corey said.

“What did he say?” Gabriel prompted.

“He wants to kill Cthulhu,” Corey explained. “The only way to do that is to get Cthulhu on land and, from what Casillus just told me, the only way to get Cthulhu on land is if you called it there.”

# Chapter 2



## THE PLAN

“**W**hat do you mean Johnson wants to *kill* Cthulhu? With what? *Nuclear weapons*?” Gabriel let out a harsh, semi-hysterical laugh. Cthulhu was miles high. It was huge, like a mountain walking, or rather lumbering. Gabriel could *feel* how very alien it was from the very scarce experiences he’d had with it. Ancient. Powerful. So vastly different from humanity and the Mers that it was truly unfathomable. “To be honest, I don’t even know that nuclear weapons *could* kill Cthulhu.”

*Gabriel, you should probably not use its name*, Casillus warned, and Gabriel saw that the Mer was looking out at the ocean in alarm suddenly as if he feared Cthulhu would suddenly appear. Reading his thoughts, Casillus said, *That is my fear, Gabriel. It COULD appear. It is said that Callers can summon Cthulhu, even without intending to, simply by thinking about it too long.*

*Oh—oh, man, okay, no using that name then, and I’ll try not to even think about it, like at all*, Gabriel agreed, his chest tightening with unease. Thankfully, the sea remained placid and nothing with tentacles rose from the depths. Yet there was this sense that something was waiting out there. *Something amazing.*

“I can’t believe you missed Johnson’s big speech about Cthulhu and evil and duty. But he was talking just before you took off towards the back of the temple and you were pretty out of it then.” Corey tapped his wet bearded chin. “You must have really been freaked out to -- to do that. Not that I blame you. The temple was creepy and awful and I wanted out of there, too.”

“I didn’t take off for the back of the temple because I was freaked out, Corey,” Gabriel said. When his best friend just looked at him with a disbelieving light in his eyes, Gabriel amended, “Okay, okay, so yes, I freaked out, but not just because that temple makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I opened the inner sanctum, because I was *seeing* the past.”

“Seeing the past?” Corey’s eyebrows rose up into his red, curly mane.

“Oh, yeah. I saw everything that happened at the settlement like a movie, except far more real than any movie I’ve ever been to.” Gabriel swallowed deeply before telling Corey and Casillus everything that he had experienced in the visions in the temple. He ended with, “I could smell the blood and the salt of the sea. I could hear the Mers’ screams reverberating in my head.” He shook his head, as if doing so could help shake out those images. “So you see, I didn’t actually hear anything you or Greta or Johnson were saying for the most part when we were in the temple.”

Corey’s face looked as pale as milk. “Holy cow, Gabe! That’s awful! The story alone was terrible, but to *see* it? To *experience* it? I can’t even imagine!”

“It’s still with me like I was really *there*,” Gabriel said. “And that’s why I—I nearly called *it*.”

Casillus' hands tightened on him in sympathy.

"Called Cthulhu?" Corey goggled.

"I thought I could save the Mers, Corey. I thought I could stop the slaughter. I forgot that what I was seeing was just the past. The past can't be changed," Gabriel said and let out a shuddering breath. "Somewhere in my subconscious I must have known how to call to it. That's the only explanation I have for how I knew how to open the inner sanctum and touch the statue."

"Wait a minute! All you have to do is touch the statue to call Cthulhu to land?" Corey asked.

"According to Casillus, I don't even need to do that much, but touching that statue *definitely* would have brought it here," Gabriel explained. A cold sweat dotted his upper lip again. "God, Corey, everyone would have died! You and Greta and Johnson ... *everyone*. Only Casillus' voice pulled me out of the fog of the vision at the last minute and stopped me."

"Whoa, I can't believe all that was happening and I didn't know!" Corey actually looked ashamed, as if he had let Gabriel down in some way.

"I didn't want you to know, Corey. I was hanging on by my fingernails to appear normal. Johnson was already giving me the creeps. I figured if he saw me do anything else *weird* he'd -- he'd -- I don't exactly know what he would have done, but I didn't want to find out," Gabriel admitted. "Though I pretty much failed at that in the end. Speaking of which, what exactly was Johnson's big speech about *it*? He clearly couldn't have just said he wants to kill a mythical sea monster without some kind of explanation."

"I thought he was joking while he was saying it, even though he was completely sober and serious," Corey admitted. "I mean, I didn't believe anything like Cthulhu could be real. Aliens, sure. Mermen, sure. But *that*? No, it's almost too terrible to believe."

*It is terrible*, the Mer said.

Gabriel touched Casillus' arms to steady the Mer. They were still wrapped protectively around his chest, helping him feel safe as he floated, and he knew that his touch made Casillus feel protected as well. Gratefulness flowed over their bond.

"So Greta was finishing up her presentation," Corey continued. "She had just explained that the guy—you know, the one who ended up a pile of bones in the temple—who wrote the inscription in the first place, well, his whole purpose was to warn people to stay away from the settlement and even, to stay away from the *sea* itself. Johnson then started on his speech."

"He wanted people to stay away from the ocean? Trust me, can't be done," Gabriel laughed.

*You belong to the sea*. Casillus tightened his hold on Gabriel.

"Totally, and Johnson thought it was stupid, too, but for another reason. He thought abandoning the sea to Cthulhu was like surrendering on the battlefield. Johnson had this really *hard* look on his face while he was saying it." Corey shook his head. "So I pointed out that Cthulhu wasn't real. But then Johnson said that if such a being existed, it would be everyone's *duty* to try to destroy it. That humanity could never be safe if it was still out there."

Casillus stirred behind Gabriel. He could feel the Mer's anxiety and a touch of anger.

*Johnson does not know what he is dealing with. Cthulhu is beyond his comprehension and beyond his—or any human's—ability to destroy*, the Mer said. *All such a mad quest will do is cause innocents to suffer. Cthulhu will have no mercy on him or anyone around him if he continues on.*

*What do you mean?* Gabriel asked.

*If Cthulhu were to make landfall not just Ocean Side would be in danger, Gabriel, Casillus explained. All of the Eastern seaboard would likely be destroyed. Some people would go mad right away and attack their families, friends, neighbors, strangers. Others would simply drop dead.*

*None would be safe from its terrible spiritual effects. Even if people did survive such a landing, many wombs would be barren. The land would be, too, as if the soil had been sown with salt, and the sea would give up no fish.*

*Whoa—that's—God—we can't let that happen!* Gabriel gasped.

*No, Gabriel, we cannot. Johnson must be stopped. He must not be allowed to continue on with this foolish, dangerous quest,* the Mer said firmly.

Gabriel then summarized for Corey all Casillus had said. Corey shook his head and responded, "Johnson is not going to give up though, Gabe. You heard what Greta said about him hanging out in the temple all the time with the statue, right?"

"Yeah, he's obsessed," Gabriel agreed. He rubbed a hand over his mouth. "He'll find a way to get Cthulhu to come even if he never finds out about me. I just know it. I feel it. So long as that statue -  
-"

*The statue!* Casillus' thoughts were suddenly very active and his mouth actually opened as if to speak. *Gabriel, that is it!*

"What is it, Casillus?" Gabriel asked.

*Removing the statue from the temple and interring it in another location will stop Cthulhu's attention from being drawn to the settlement!* Casillus eagerly explained.

*Just moving the statue will make it forget about Johnson and humanity and everything?* Gabriel asked incredulously.

*Cthulhu is not like us. Johnson's obsession with it will soon be forgotten. Humanity has never interested it for long,* Casillus said. *Without the statue, even Johnson's white-hot obsession will not draw its gaze.*

"So simply moving the statue will protect everyone from it?" Gabriel repeated out loud.

"Move the statue from the temple, you mean?" Corey asked.

Casillus nodded and said, *It is simplest. For now it should simply be moved out of human reach. But eventually, it should be relocated to Cthulhu's other temple in the Tonga Trench in the Pacific Ocean. The temple is at the very bottom. That is where the statue can rest where no human will ever be exposed to it again.*

Gabriel hoped that was true, but he knew how ingenious humans were, and how dedicated to discovery they were as well. Not to mention the fact that some of them had a penchant for getting into trouble. But Casillus was right that moving the statue to the Tonga Trench would, at least, make it harder for humanity to bring this doom upon itself.

"So our mission, if we choose to accept it," Corey mimicked the *Mission Impossible* opening, "is to get the statue out of the temple without Johnson knowing, or if he figures it out, stopping us."

"That's about the long and short of it," Gabriel said. "But, Corey, you don't have to be in on this. It's going to be dangerous."

"Are you kidding? I am *so* in on this! Like you could keep me out of it!" Corey stood up straighter and put his hands on his hips. The bottom of his beard was still trailing in the water so he looked more comical than stern. Gabriel bit back a laugh.

"Are you going to say that 'Danger' is your middle name or something like that? Or maybe 'Danger' is one of your many personas along with Cupid?" Gabriel teased.

Corey scratched his beard and his forehead furrowed as if he was really thinking about how to answer that. "Gabe, I would do this just for you, but it's *not* just for you. It's also for Grandma G and everybody else on the East coast! Anything I can do to help, I'll do."

*Corey is very brave, Gabriel. I know you are teasing him, but I think he would like to hear*



*your true thoughts on his offer*, Casillus said.

Gabriel touched Corey's shoulder, and taking Casillus' advice, said, "Actually, I don't know if we could do it without you. Knowing you're in this with us makes everything much better."

Corey beamed. "We're the dynamic duo!" He paused and then gestured to Casillus. "The totally awesome trio, I mean!"

"So how do we get the statue out of the temple?" Gabriel asked. "Clearly we can't go steal it now. I'm pretty sure that Johnson would notice us carrying it out of there."

*And you are in no shape to be out of the water even if it were safe for you to touch it*, Casillus said.

*So I can't touch it at all, Casillus?*

*No, I fear that by doing so you would summon it accidentally. Corey and I should carry it without your assistance*, Casillus said.

"Sorry, Corey, Casillus just said that I can't touch the statue, not even with my fingertips, or we'll have Cthu—it here," Gabriel said.

Corey cocked his head to the side. "You know, I think I can *almost* hear you guys when you talk together."

*That is your gift, my love. You are bridging the gap among the three of us. With time, you will be able to bring many non-Mer into our circle of minds*, Casillus said. He looked so proud that Gabriel nearly fidgeted under his gaze.

"According to Casillus, eventually you'll be able to hear us clearly," Gabriel said.

"That would be super cool!" Corey crowed, but then he turned serious. "Okay, here's the plan. I leave you and Casillus to hang out in the water for now." His best friend gave him a stern look. "I can see you're feeling better, but not *good*. There's still a tint of blue to your lips. So you need to *stay here*."

"I have the urge to salute you," Gabriel said.

"If it keeps you in the water, I'm all for it!" Corey grinned.

*As am I. We really need to get you swimming, Gabriel*, Casillus said gently.

Gabriel felt that familiar mixture of excitement and dread at the thought of swimming. But he knew that he had to. There really was no choice. They couldn't stay in the shallows and Casillus couldn't hold him forever.

*I will hold you as long and as often as you like, but I hope that it will only be because you wish to be held by me, not because you are afraid*, Casillus said.

*I want that, too.*

"I'll get dried off and head back to the settlement," Corey continued. "While I'm there, I'll poke around. Find out what Johnson's plans are and when he's leaving the settlement tonight."

Gabriel started. "He's not coming over to the cottage for dinner, is he?"

"Oh, no, Grandma G has a City Council meeting tonight so we're good," Corey said.

"Thank God," Gabriel said, nodding. "I really don't think I could handle sitting with him tonight making small talk."

*I do not think that Johnson could do it either considering how he acted at the settlement*, Casillus pointed out.

Gabriel nodded. "But that means he might not leave the settlement at all."

"He's not going to spend the whole night there, is he? I mean that would be ... crazy," Corey muttered. He shook himself. "He'll have to leave sometime and when he does, we go in, grab the statue and hustle it out into the sea."

Corey made it sound incredibly easy, but Gabriel highly doubted it would be.

“You’ll have to wear dark colors tonight, Corey, if you’re going to be inconspicuous. Notice I didn’t say black, because I’m positive you don’t own anything black,” Gabriel pointed out teasingly.

“So neon yellow is out, right?” Corey tapped his chin. “I think I have something that will work.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” Gabriel cracked a smile.

“I will prove that I can dress *subtly*!” Corey proclaimed as he lifted one finger dramatically in the air.

“Again, time will show me the truth,” Gabriel laughed, but then he sobered. “Corey, before you head out.” His chest felt tight again, and Casillus stroked his back. “I’m going to need your help with something else.”

“What, Gabe? Name it and I’ll do it,” Corey said stoutly.

Gabriel flashed him a pained smile. While Corey would mourn Gabriel’s leaving out of personal sadness, he would really hurt for Grace. His best friend couldn’t bear to see another person in pain. Gabriel had seen Corey impacted by other people’s pain many times, and Gabriel knew that Corey was as close to Grace as any flesh and blood grandson could be.

“I need to tell Grandma about all of this,” Gabriel said softly.

Corey brightened. “She’ll *love* Casillus!”

Casillus ducked his head and looked up at them almost shyly through his thick, dark lashes. *I doubt that she will have any good feelings towards me since she will perceive me as the one who is taking you away from her, Gabriel.*

Gabriel sat up in his arms and turned, cupping his cheek. *She’ll love you, Casillus. Corey is right.*

And, as if to confirm that, Corey added after watching the two quietly, “She and I were talking about how much both of us wanted Gabe to find his someone amazing, and in you he has, Casillus.”

*I will endeavor to be worthy of the trust Corey seems to place in me. I will treasure you always, my love,* Casillus said.

Gabriel swallowed. Emotions clogged his throat and he blinked away unexpected tears. He caressed the Mer’s cheek as he spoke to his best friend. “Casillus really is—is my *someone amazing*, Corey. I can’t express how much that is true. I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about!” Corey enthused, but his brightness wilted as he realized that both Gabriel and Casillus were still sad. “You’re not worried about Grandma G’s reaction to Casillus, are you?”

“No, not really. I’m not even worried about the merman thing,” Gabriel admitted as he dropped his hand from Casillus’ cheek and faced his best friend. He gestured to his sides. “Once she sees the gills, well, *you know*. It’s sort of hard to deny the reality of mermen once you’ve seen them.”

“Totally.” Corey then peered down into the water and waggled his fingers at Gabriel’s sides. “Oh, your *cute* little gills!”

Gabriel let out a snort of laughter. “You’re going to give me a complex.”

“A *good* complex!”

“Somehow I think *good* complexes and being *crushed* by love are in the same category of do-not-want,” Gabriel responded wryly. Then he looked down at the water before glancing back up at Corey. “I need you to help her—maybe not *understand*—maybe not even *accept*—that I have to *leave*.”

“It’ll be really hard, Gabe,” Corey’s voice was soft, serious, and his expression matched it. He had never before seemed so stripped of all good humor.

“You have to stay with her after I’m gone,” Gabriel rushed out, his voice getting higher and tighter the more he spoke. “You have to take care of her. You have to make sure she’s all right.” Tears immediately welled up in Gabriel’s eyes.

Corey suddenly pulled both Gabriel and Casillus into a fierce hug. He patted Gabriel’s shoulders. “It’s okay. It’s going to be just fine. I promise I won’t leave Grandma G alone. You can count on me, Gabe. Always.”

That last “always” had Gabriel actually crying and shaking for a moment before he struggled to clamp down on his emotions.

*Do not fight your tears so, my love. Let them out,* Casillus urged.

Gabriel reached for Casillus mentally while clutching Corey to him physically. Corey cried with him, which was so Corey that Gabriel cried harder. He was going to miss them all so terribly. He resolved then that he would learn to use this gift he had so that he could talk to his grandmother and best friend as soon as possible. He would not lose them.

Finally, the crying eased and they pulled apart. Corey swiped at a few stray tears on his delightfully round face.

“Now that we’ve cried, we can laugh,” Corey said. “Or at least that’s what my mother has always said.”

Gabriel did let out a few watery chuckles. “She’s undoubtedly right.”

“I don’t want to miss out on this time with you, but I should go to the settlement,” Corey said regretfully.

“Duty calls.” Gabriel gave him a weak smile. “So tonight we get the statue and tomorrow we tell Grandma about *everything*.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Corey replied with a nod. “I’ll see you back at the cottage then, right, Gabe?”

“Yeah, I’ll be back by dinner,” Gabriel assured him. “Please be careful, Corey. Johnson is—is *intense*.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me. I’ve got his number,” Corey said, then started swimming back to shore.

Gabriel held on to Casillus’ hand tightly while they both watched Corey swim away.

*We’ll be seeing him tonight,* Gabriel said to himself as much as to Casillus. *It’s not like we’re saying goodbye. And it won’t be goodbye even when I go into the sea, right?*

Casillus cupped Gabriel’s face. His thumbs lightly brushed Gabriel’s temples. *He will always be with you, Gabriel. Always.*

# Chapter 3



## SWIM

Casillus urged Gabriel to lie back against him again and just float for awhile. Gabriel thought that his mind and body would be too anxiety-ridden to be still, but Casillus continued to suggest it so sweetly that he finally gave in. He was glad he had.

They floated peacefully in the water. The Mer's body cradled him as the sun's rays rained pleasantly down on them both. Gabriel's eyelids soon fell shut. He could see the red-gold glow of the sun through his eyelids. His thoughts slid languidly past Casillus'. Gabriel's anguish and worry for Corey fell away as they drifted. His body no longer ached either. He felt *almost* completely healthy.

Casillus raised his right hand and playfully dribbled water on Gabriel's cheek, and Gabriel chuckled. He turned his face into that hand and licked Casillus' fingers. They tasted of salt.

*You seem much better,* Casillus remarked.

*I feel good for the first time in,* Gabriel paused as he thought about it. *I would hate to say years, but I think it has been at least a year since I last felt so well.*

*Your body has been aching for the sea,* Casillus said. There was silence for a moment over their bond, and Gabriel knew that Casillus wanted to suggest something, but was holding back.

He grasped Casillus' teasing hand. *What is it? What do you want to say?*

The Mer sighed. *Things are so peaceful that I do not wish to ruin the moment.*

*But?* Gabriel grinned.

*I was thinking that perhaps we could swim a little,* Casillus suggested.

Though his tone was casual, Gabriel felt the Mer's deep desire for them to swim together. It wasn't just based on his desire for Gabriel to overcome his fear, though a Mer that could not swim was an oxymoron. For Casillus it was so much more. Gabriel could see into the Mer's thoughts. Casillus envisioned the vast seas open to them. They could swim wherever they wished. Together. Forever. For the Mer, the moment that they could swim together like that was the moment that they started their true life together. Gabriel suddenly had all the more reason to lose his fear of the water.

*Okay, let's swim,* Gabriel said.

He lifted his head up from Casillus' chest. The hair on the back of his head was heavy with water and it felt strange to have to hold the weight of it up. His feet settled on the soft bottom of the sandbar. Casillus loosened his grip on Gabriel so the young man could turn around in the circle of the Mer's arms to face him.

Casillus' head was tilted slightly to the side. There was a mixture of hope and wariness in the Mer's blue-green eyes. Considering Gabriel's violent reaction to swimming in the past, Casillus was

right to be distrustful that this was really going to happen.

*Are you certain, Gabriel?* Casillus probed.

Gabriel gave the Mer a quirked smile. *About wanting to swim with you? I am more than certain. About whether I'll be able to do it? Well, I have to, don't I? It has to happen. I managed to swim out to those people who were drowning and I managed to swim after the cave incident. So ...*

Casillus nodded. *We will start slow. How would you feel if I swam twenty feet away and you had to swim to me?*

Gabriel swallowed. The thought of being alone in the open water unnerved and excited him at the same time. He nodded. *All right. Go a bit away and I'll—I'll swim to you.*

Casillus hesitated. His arms lingered around Gabriel's waist. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth. *I am proud of you, Gabriel.*

Gabriel lowered his head. *Let's see if I can do it first before you say you're proud.*

Casillus kissed his forehead, and then the Mer fluidly turned around and dove underwater. Gabriel's eyes were locked on his sleek body as Casillus easily swam twenty feet away before resurfacing. Casillus swept his hair back with his hands so that it hung like a long silken rope down his back. The Mer then blinked away the water droplets that clung stubbornly to his thick eyelashes. He opened his arms to Gabriel.

*Come to me, Gabriel.*

*I can do this.* Gabriel took a breath and measured the distance between them. Twenty feet. He could touch the bottom the whole way. Nothing to be afraid of.

*Yes, Gabriel, you can,* Casillus confirmed.

Gabriel meant to dive in just as Casillus had, but at the last moment, he awkwardly splashed into the water instead. He immediately jumped back up again, sputtering. His heart was racing and his chest felt tight. As soon as his head had gone beneath the water all he could think about was that moment after the second rogue wave had hit and pushed him impossibly deep. He blinked rapidly and the memory went away. He saw then that the Mer was about to swim towards him, but he held up a hand.

*No, Casillus. Stay there. I must do this on my own.* He gave the Mer a shaky smile. *Besides, you are the best incentive I know to make me do something.*

*Gabriel, you do not need to rush—*

*We both know I do.* Gabriel interrupted. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, centering himself. *Let's try this again. I can do this. I know I can.*

*Perhaps do not go underwater this time. Keep your head above the surface,* Casillus suggested.

Gabriel nodded. He pushed off of the sand bar and dog-paddled towards Casillus. He kept his head well above the waterline for the most part, only panicking a little when his chin got wet. But despite all the restrictions that his fear put on him the sense of weightlessness and the sleek feeling of water moving over his skin felt wonderful and natural. His gills fluttered eagerly at his sides. Casillus caught and embraced him, placing kisses all over Gabriel's face. Gabriel laughed with delight, but he was shaking, too.

*You did it! You did it!* Casillus cried as he continued the kissing.

Gabriel grinned as his shaking slowed and then stopped. *You really are the best incentive, Casillus.*

The Mer gave him a heavy lidded look which had Gabriel relaxing further against Casillus' bare body. His cock twitched. They were naked together. Casillus drew a hand down Gabriel's cheek.



*Shall we try again? Perhaps I will sweeten the incentive with the offer of more kisses and caresses when you reach me?* Casillus asked.

A flood of heat went through Gabriel. He nodded eagerly. He wanted those caresses and kisses from Casillus, but he also wanted to experience the weightlessness of swimming again, too. Casillus swam farther away this time. Gabriel once again pushed off towards him. No longer dog-paddling, he swam smoothly through the water, though he still kept his head dry. Casillus kissed him deeply upon catching him this second time.

They repeated this swim-and-catch routine over half a dozen times. Each time Gabriel had to swim farther to get to his Mer lover. Swimming became easier and easier. His muscles seemed to unfurl in ways that they hadn't in years. Still, his head stayed above water and he never left the safety of the sandbar. After the last swim, and after Casillus' tongue had tangled sweetly with his own, Gabriel rested their foreheads together. His body sparked with arousal, but until he had conquered his fear of the sea more he could not imagine making love while at the mercy of the ocean's currents.

*I want to try to go underwater.* Gabriel's mouth went dry even though he was only mentally saying it. But it was the next step, and it was one he had to take. He added, *Would you—would you go underwater with me?*

*Of course. Shall we go underwater here?* Casillus suggested. *We can sit on the sandbar.*

*Talk to me while we do this. Tell me about the Mer capital city,* Gabriel pleaded.

*I can speak of home as much as you like,* Casillus said with a wide smile. *Emralis is a most remarkable place.*

*Wait until we are under and then begin,* Gabriel requested. He didn't know how much of what Casillus said he would actually register, but at least it would distract him from the panicky beating of his heart. His mouth flooded with the sour taste of fear and he really didn't know if he could go under, but he had to try. *Hold on to me, Casillus. Hold on to me tight.*

Casillus grasped Gabriel's biceps and Gabriel mirrored his grip. Their eyes met. Gabriel lost himself in Casillus' blue-green gaze.

*I am with you, Gabriel. Always,* Casillus assured him.

With those words echoing in his mind, they slowly sank beneath the ocean's surface. Despite his best intentions, Gabriel automatically held his breath and closed his eyes as water flowed over the top of his head. However, he soon realized how unnecessary it was as his gills continued to pump oxygen into his blood. Gabriel's shoulders slumped in relief. There was no burning need to gulp air. He had a momentary panic as the memory of the weight of those rogue waves flowed through. But it soon faded as there was no heavy pressure here. He was light, buoyant, and he had plenty of oxygen. Casillus tapped his still bulging cheeks, filled with the large mouthful of air he had drawn in before submerging. Gabriel parted his lips and released a stream of bubbles that tickled his nose as they drifted up to the ocean's surface.

*Open your eyes, too, my love,* Casillus stroked his temples.

*The salt will sting them,* Gabriel objected. He remembered how when he was a child he would always come out of the sea with reddened, irritated eyes because he had opened them underwater without goggles to watch fish. His mother had tisked him for this, but he kept doing it. Right now he felt very far from that fearless boy in love with the sea.

*There is a membrane that will slide over your eyes. They will be protected. Try,* Casillus urged.

Gabriel let a beat pass, saying and doing nothing. The truth was that he was afraid to open his eyes, not so much because it would hurt, but because he kept remembering seeing the surface of the

water far above his head when his parents' boat had capsized.

*You will see me when you open your eyes, Gabriel,* Casillus said, understanding his true fear. *Bright sunlight streams down all around us. There is golden sand beneath our feet. Just to our left is a school of fish. Their shiny pink and yellow bodies are lovely as they flash back and forth. It will be nothing like the night you remember.*

*That sounds so beautiful, Casillus.*

*It is. See it through your own eyes, Gabriel.* The Mer's webbed fingers caressed his temples once more.

Gabriel slowly opened his eyes. There was a momentary blurriness that he remembered from when he had swum out of the cave, but that soon went away and everything became astonishingly clear. His eyes did not sting at all. Just as Casillus had said, sunlight lit the world around them, turning the sea a brilliant neon blue. He focused on the Mer's face. The sunlight caressed Casillus' high cheekbones and powerful jaw. The Mer's blue-green eyes seemed to glow. His long hair floated around his head like a halo. Gabriel found himself letting go of Casillus' arms so that he could touch some of it. The strands wound effortlessly around his fingers before he released them and they floated away.

*It is beautiful here, Casillus,* Gabriel whispered.

*As are you,* the Mer responded. *Look at the fish, Gabriel. See how they tease us with their prettiness?*

Gabriel's gaze followed the arm that Casillus stretched out towards a school of fish. They were bright and colorful. With the sunlight, the fish and Casillus there, the ocean now could not have seemed further from the storm tossed sea that Gabriel still dreamed of. Yet fear returned as Gabriel's body started to drift away from the Mer's when Casillus let go of him to point to the fish. Gabriel clutched at him in response. Casillus immediately held him close again without Gabriel having to ask.

*I am sorry that I let go of you,* Casillus said.

*It's okay,* Gabriel assured him. *I know that we would be less—less affected by the current if we moved farther out but I just can't. Not yet.*

He shivered. He thought he could see the darkness of the drop-off about fifty feet from them. But distances in the water were deceiving.

*You wished me to speak of our home, Gabriel,* Casillus said, attempting to distract him from his thoughts of the dark depths that haunted him.

*Yes, yes, for sure. Please.* Gabriel turned his head back so that he was looking only at Casillus.

*I thought I might show you,* Casillus said.

*Over the bond?*

*Yes and no,* Casillus said. There was a slightly mischievous smile on the Mer's lips.

*No?*

*You will see Emralis as if it were all around us. It will not truly be so, but it will seem so,* Casillus explained.

Gabriel felt a rush of excitement run through him. He was eager to see this city that Casillus felt such longing for, especially if he didn't actually have to swim to it. *All right. What do we do to make this work?*

*Just close your eyes and open them again when I tell you to.* Casillus swept one hand in front of Gabriel's eyes, prompting him to close them.

At first Gabriel saw only darkness behind his eyelids, but then the red-gold glow that he associated with the sun appeared. Yet he knew that his head was not tipped back towards the burning

orb above them, so the source of the light was unknown.

*Open your eyes now, Gabriel,* Casillus said.

Gabriel did and gasped. Instead of being surrounded by a vast expanse of sandbar and mostly empty water, they were seated in what looked like a square. The ground was not sand, but carved rock laid out in a mesmerizing pattern of spirals and other geometric designs. In the very center of the square there was what looked like a fountain, except instead of spraying out water, it was an explosion of coral.

*Casillus, this is—this is ...*

*Our home, Gabriel,* Casillus said with a sweet smile. *Welcome to Emralis.*

The square was surrounded by brilliantly colored glowing towers that stretched up far above their heads. They were so tall that Gabriel could not see the tops of them. He realized then that the ocean's surface had to be even farther away. They were deep, deep down in a trench. However, the depths he had feared for so long were not black and crushing, but bright and airy.

The towers were the source of the glow he had glimpsed from behind his eyelids. Each of the towers was a different hue of glittering, glowing stone that looked somewhat like the material that made up the temple at the settlement. The tower directly in front of them was a deep crimson. Golden seams ran up and down its length. Beside it was a neon blue tower laced with black veins. Thin bridges stretched between the towers. The colors of different towers mixed together in the bridges they shared, as if whatever gave them their color *moved* like liquid inside of their delicate-looking crystalline walls. The bridge between the red and blue towers was violet. Gabriel wondered why the Mer would need bridges underwater in any event. After all, there would be no walking, only swimming between buildings.

*The towers are alive, Gabriel,* Casillus said. *Those bridges are not for us, but for the towers themselves. They share nutrients through the bridges in order to thrive and grow.*

*Wow,* Gabriel responded, unable to be more eloquent even though he wished he could be at that moment.

The towers were also connected to sheer walls of rock that, like the towers, extended up into the vastness above. In places the walls had been carved out, creating huge rooms with domed ceilings that reminded Gabriel of vast open-aired amphitheaters. Phosphorescent mold or algae lit up those spaces as well. Everywhere Gabriel looked there was light and color and beauty.

*This is—is amazing!* Gabriel gasped out, still unable to find the words to express how awestruck he was by the Mer city. He dragged his eyes away from the towers that surrounded them to look back at Casillus. *Can we see more? Maybe go in one of the buildings? I'd like to see your home and House Liseas and—well, everything!*

*We can,* Casillus said carefully. *But it would help if we swam around and acted as if they were real. It will allow me to visualize things as realistically as possible for you.*

The desire to look around was stronger than Gabriel's fear. It was similar to how Gabriel's wonder at the mural in the cave had made him forget his terror of the sea. Awe overcame everything else. Furthermore, Gabriel didn't feel as overwhelmed by the hugeness of the ocean with the towers all around them. In fact, he felt rather safe and protected. And then there was Casillus. He could not truly be afraid with the Mer beside him, so as long as they were together it would be all right.

He turned back to his lover, who was awaiting his answer. *Yes, Casillus. Let's swim.*

# Chapter 4



## LISEAS

Casillus was the first to get up from his sitting position. He stretched out a hand to Gabriel and the young man took it, unfurling his body at the same time. They were now floating three feet off of the square's floor. Gabriel was amazed at how steady and level his floating was. He had fully expected to start floating towards the ocean's surface and have to struggle to stay down. But it was nothing like that.

*Our bodies adjust. Human divers must use weights and air to accomplish the same thing that our bodies do naturally,* Casillus explained.

*We have it far easier for sure,* Gabriel said, but he still held tightly on to Casillus' hand. He knew it would make it harder for both of them to swim, but the thought of floating on his own was too overwhelming.

*Where to first?* Casillus asked.

Gabriel eagerly looked around them. There was so much he wanted to see. He wondered what it would be like to truly be here with other Mers swimming alongside them. Would he feel like he fully belonged being surrounded by them? Would he finally fit in? A strange longing filled him then, something he had not allowed himself to feel since his parents' deaths. He wanted to connect to others. Just like his grandmother's cottage, House Liseas was his House, was his family.

*I'd like to see House Liseas first,* Gabriel said.

*Of course! It is near my home as well,* Casillus said.

*I want to see your home right after,* Gabriel assured him. He wanted the Mer to know that House Nerion was just as important to him, too, because it was Casillus' House.

*I know that, Gabriel,* the Mer said with a brilliant smile.

Both of them used their free hands to stroke the water ahead of them while their feet kicked. Casillus led him out of the square and down a massive street that appeared to be lined with far larger and more impressive towers than the ones he had so far seen. The glow of the towers illuminated the water around them and painted their bodies with shades of gold, red, green and blue. It was as if they were passing through a rainbow.

*This is called the Kingway,* Casillus said.

*Why?* Gabriel asked.

*Because it leads to the palace.* Casillus gestured around them. *Also, all of the Elders live here as well.*

*Is there a Queenway?* Gabriel asked.

*Yes, it is on the other side of the palace,* Casillus said.

*I guess the fact that this avenue leads to the palace explains all the fine homes I'm seeing! So there are rich areas and poor areas of the city?* Gabriel guessed.

*None are truly poor, but yes, there are some places grander than others,* Casillus said.

*Is there crime?* Gabriel asked.

*There is,* Casillus said somberly. *Certain Houses have been in feuds for eons. It is foolish, but change is difficult for us. Grudges can literally last forever.*

*Because you live forever—I mean WE live forever?* Gabriel corrected, not sure how he felt about that, or if he even believed it.

*We have tried to mediate these disputes, but it seems as if there is always a reason for them to be reignited again.* Casillus then pointed to an intersecting road. *Our courts of law are down this avenue.*

Gabriel caught a glimpse of a much fatter tower that had multiple layers. The layers on top were thinner than the ones below, much like a layer cake. They were ringed in thick columns standing in front of what looked like a portico. The structure was black in color and veined with silver and gold.

*Impressive and a little foreboding!* Gabriel said.

*That is the intention.* Casillus chuckled dryly. *Ah, we are almost at House Liseas. It is just around this bend.*

The avenue they had been swimming down curved to the left ahead. Gabriel found himself kicking harder. He burned to see House Liseas. He had a romantic notion that he might recognize it somehow. Casillus squeezed his hand, sensing Gabriel's excitement. They passed around the curve and the avenue widened substantially. A tower that was at least twice as wide as any of the others that Gabriel had previously seen appeared ahead of them. It was a dark purple laced with silver. Gabriel stopped swimming. His mouth opened.

*Yes, Gabriel, you have recognized House Liseas,* Casillus said with pride.

Gabriel's eyes went first to the massive arched opening directly in the center of the tower. It was large enough for twenty Mers to swim abreast and still enter unimpeded. He could see at least a dozen impressive windows on either side of the doors. A latticework of thin lengths of a clear crystalline material covered each window, which stopped anyone from simply swimming through one of them. And that was all just the *first* floor. Gabriel saw *hundreds* of windows and balconies stretching up the length of the tower. The top was lost in the distance.

*Can we see inside?* Gabriel asked.

*Yes, I know this House well,* Casillus said.

It took a moment for Gabriel to realize that it was *necessary* for Casillus to actually know what the interior of any structure looked like before they could go inside, because none of this was real. It was all from the Mer's memories. They swam over to what appeared to be a gate made of the same clear crystalline substance that covered the windows.

*Place your hand, palm flat, against the center of the gate,* Casillus urged.

*Why?*

*You will see.* The Mer smiled mysteriously.

Gabriel did as he was instructed. At first the crystalline material was hard like glass, but then it seemed to *melt* beneath his hand. With a shocked gasp, Gabriel watched as the gate *receded* under his touch like a plant's growth reversed. Gabriel snatched his hand away.

*It is all right, Gabriel! It recognized you as a member of House Liseas, and so it is letting you in,* Casillus explained.



*Oh! I was—was wondering if there was any way to keep people out,* Gabriel confessed. He flexed his hand at his side, though, as if it might start shriveling too.

*The materials that make up the city are alive, as I explained. They have a symbiotic relationship with each of us, recognizing us and allowing us access to those places which are open to us,* Casillus said. *There are places, of course, which are open to all, such as the courts, the schools, the libraries and so forth.*

Gabriel kicked nervously as they started swimming into House Liseas. Directly through the gates was a large round chamber whose single, curving wall was broken up by doorways to either side, as well as by one leading further back into the tower. Gabriel saw no stairs going to the upper floors, but then he realized that there wouldn't be. Casillus pointed to an opening in the ceiling.

*No need for stairs when you can simply swim up,* Gabriel said.

*Exactly,* Casillus agreed.

Gabriel craned his neck and looked up through the opening. He saw a dizzying number of floors above them. Each floor was a different color and the colors *rippled*. Gabriel floated up and touched the edge of the opening. The stone was smooth and reminded him of quartz. Where he touched the stone it flared white. He took his hand off and saw that there was a white imprint of his hand left behind on the stone. Slowly, the purple color reasserted itself.

*The stone really does react to us, doesn't it?* Gabriel wondered.

*Yes, and it misses each of us when we are gone.* Casillus brushed his fingers along the stone, but instead of white, the stone turned a brilliant blue. *Or that is what I believe.*

*Misses us? Then it must be missing you tons,* Gabriel said as they floated over towards one of the walls.

*Not as much as it has missed you,* Casillus said with a soft smile.

*It doesn't even know me yet,* Gabriel objected.

Casillus squeezed his hand. *It knows each of us. It knows you.*

Gabriel looked all around the room, imagining that the stone really *did* know him and miss him. He saw then that there were large engraved panels of plant and fish life on the curving wall. Different parts of the carvings glowed red, gold or green as opposed to the nearly uniform purple glow of the rest of the wall. Gabriel swam over to one of the panels and studied it. The scales of each fish, the leaves of each plant, and the texture of each rock were carved with loving detail.

*These were done by a famous artist known only as Zed. He or she—no one knows Zed's sex—has disappeared from our memories almost completely. Only Zed's art remains,* Casillus said.

*How could Zed disappear from everyone's memories? Is it like what happened with the settlement? Does it have something to do with—with you-know-what?* He wouldn't say Cthulhu, not here.

Casillus floated quietly for a moment. *Zed was incredibly gifted, seeing things that others did not. So yes, it could be that in part. I have studied Zed's work for almost a millennium. Sometimes I think there are clues in the work to where Zed went, to why Zed went and to whether Zed will be back.*

Gabriel turned to look once more at the intricate and spectacularly realistic engravings. The more he looked at them the more he also felt there *were* hidden meanings in them. He was reminded of Casillus' mural on the cave wall.

*Even if you hadn't told me that you studied Zed's work, I think I would have guessed anyways.* Gabriel looked over at Casillus again. *I can see something of Zed's style in the mural you painted in the cave.*

Casillus' head lowered and his cheeks flooded with color. *That you would compare my humble art with that of Zed's is too kind.*

Gabriel put his fingers under Casillus' chin and tipped his head up. *Not too kind. You are gifted. I'm amazed by you.*

Casillus kicked his feet with pleasure and gave Gabriel a broad smile. *Thank you.*

*Just don't disappear like Zed, okay? Not unless you take me with you,* Gabriel said, half-joking, though he could never completely joke about losing those close to him.

*I will never leave you, Gabriel,* Casillus said, his eyes glowing with truth.

It was Gabriel's turn to lower his head. *I believe you. I'm just afraid.*

*One day, you will lose your fear, Gabriel,* Casillus said. He smiled softly. *And the seas shall shake, because then all of your focus will be on worthy things.*

Gabriel ducked his head again.

*But come! There is much more to see.* Casillus gestured towards the adjoining chamber to the right. *I'm afraid I only know the first floor well. The other floors are less familiar to me and I fear I might fill them in with false information.*

*Seeing any of it is excellent. What's through there?*

*Let us go see.*

They swam into the adjoining room. In the center of this room there was a stone box with a grated lid. The box was ten feet long by five feet wide. Warm water flooded out of it.

*This is one of the many deep sea vents which we draw both heat and minerals from,* the Mer explained. *We build around them and funnel the hot water throughout our structures.*

The ceiling directly above the box was thick with plant life. There was dark green vine-like vegetation that crawled all across the ceiling from a thick central stalk. A profusion of white flowers opened all along the vines and a cluster of the same flowers erupted from the middle of the central stalk itself as well. There were also pale green pods hanging among the flowers. Casillus reached up and broke two off. He handed one of them to Gabriel.

*Your first taste of Mer food,* Casillus said with a twinkle in his blue-green eyes.

*How do I eat this?* Gabriel asked.

*Peel it like a banana.*

Gabriel realized then that he and Casillus would have to stop holding hands while they peeled the pods. He knew the Mer was waiting for him to make the first move to break their physical connection. Though they were "in" House Liseas, they were really somewhere on the sand bar. But Gabriel realized that his fear was substantially reduced. He let go of Casillus' hand. His fingers hovered over the Mer's, but then he slowly drew them away. He remained floating steadily in place. No stray current whisked him away from the Mer. Gabriel's shoulders slumped in relief.

*You are safe, Gabriel. I am here,* Casillus said. The Mer then squeezed his shoulder.

Gabriel peeled the pod, finding the inside to be filled with bright orange beads somewhat like grapes on a stem. He watched as Casillus sucked a few into his mouth. Gabriel did the same, and there was a burst of sweetness and the tang of citrus on his tongue. He had devoured the whole pod before he realized that the pod wasn't even real. It was Casillus sharing with him what it would have tasted like if they had been eating them.

*You miss these, don't you?* Gabriel laughed.

Casillus blushed again. *Momos are my favorite.*

*Momos? I think they're going to be my favorite, too,* Gabriel said before plucking another pod and devouring that one, too.

He started to root for more pods among the flowers, drifting easily around the room. It wasn't until he was halfway across the room from Casillus that he realized how good it felt to just *swim*. No encumbrances. Not that Casillus' hand was an encumbrance, but he had been using it like a crutch instead of treating it as the wonderful connection it should have been. The Mer was watching him earnestly, clearly waiting to see when Gabriel noticed that he was swimming freely. Gabriel grinned before easily gliding over to the Mer and kissing his lips.

*Thank you,* Gabriel said.

The Mer's eyes widened. *I have done nothing.*

Gabriel kissed him again. *You've done everything. Your patience. Your gentleness. I couldn't even think of going into the sea before you came, let alone being underwater, but here I am. And while I have to do this, you've made it so much better than it ever could have been.*

Casillus cupped his face and his hair surrounded them both in a halo of dark strands as the Mer kissed him, this time with such fierce love that Gabriel nearly shook with it. Finally, they parted.

*Come, Gabriel. I want to show you House Liseas' garden,* Casillus said.

*Are there more momos in there?* Gabriel flashed him a grin.

*Oh, yes, but that is the least of its attractions!*

Casillus swam out of the room and Gabriel followed swiftly after him. He was amazed at how easily his body moved. He was as graceful and sure as Casillus. It felt totally *natural* to move like this. Gabriel stretched his fingers out mid-stroke and saw the webbing stretched between them. He felt a momentary qualm about it. It wasn't human. His hands, unlike his sides, were things he saw all day every day. But that feeling went away as he thought of the webbing between Casillus' fingers. He was the same as Casillus, and that could never be bad.

The Mer led them through a spiraling hallway that reminded Gabriel of the inside of a shell. Abruptly, the hallway opened out into a courtyard that was bursting with vegetation, coral, and color. Gabriel would have skidded to a stop if he were not swimming, but instead he found himself abruptly ceasing his kicks and drifting to a stop.

*Oh, Casillus, it's -- it's so beautiful!* Gabriel cried.

The garden was circular in shape and so large that the opposite wall looked distant, almost misty. Everywhere Gabriel looked there was color and movement. There were towering stalks of seaweed in every shade of green that stretched up and up and up so tall that he thought they might brush the next story of the tower. He glimpsed delicate deep red fans that looked sharp to the touch. Violet and pink sea grasses waved hypnotically. Large beds of coral shaped like slippers in whites and mustard yellows lined stone paths that snaked through the garden, undoubtedly so that Mers could swim through the garden rather than just above it. He and Casillus began to do just that.

They passed by spiky coral bushes the size of small cars in deep blues. Gabriel paused beside some coral that looked like individual lettuce leaves, but these leaves were as big as his head. Casillus pointed to a huge nest of coral that looked like a stag's horns. And everywhere there were fish.

Unlike the avenues outside where Gabriel had only seen schools of fish from a distance, in here the fish swam thickly around the coral and through the grasses. Gabriel followed four striped black, pink and yellow fish with spotted black tails as they drifted over one of the massive table-like coral formations. The fish had large black eyes tinged with pink, and Gabriel found them fascinating.

Gabriel started swimming after them, wanting to see them more clearly. The fish led him to a section of delicate blue coral that had flat centers and ruffled-looking edges. The fish then darted over to a section of great star coral that had formed itself into a massive boulder. Each polyp was the size

of his thumb. Gabriel happened to glance up from a section of star coral for a moment. He wasn't sure what had grabbed his interest, but then he saw that there was the dim figure of another Mer swimming through the paths of the garden towards him and Casillus.

So far in their tour of the Mer's capital city Gabriel had not seen another merman. This made sense, as Casillus would have had to "imagine" that Mer being there. He was merely showing Gabriel the city itself, he wasn't bringing it fully to life. But now there was another Mer coming towards them down the path.

*Casillus, who is that?* Gabriel asked, for whoever it was must be very special to Casillus to have the Mer imagine him just for Gabriel.

The unknown Mer had long dark hair and a powerful build. He swam gracefully, though he somehow still seemed surprised to be there and see them. Suddenly, it was as if the unknown Mer realized where he was and who they were, as he immediately began to swim towards them more quickly.

*I did not bring him here, Gabriel. I could not,* Casillus said, shock tinting his voice.

*You mean he's real?* Gabriel sounded just as shocked and a little afraid.

*Yes, yes he is.* More awe from Casillus.

*But—*

*He is too far away for me to share this imagining with him. There is only one explanation for his presence. I believe you brought him here, Gabriel.* Casillus laced his fingers through Gabriel's. The awe had actually grown in the Mer's voice.

*But I don't know any Mers except you! How could I bring him here?* Gabriel asked.

*It must be your gift. And I believe that some part of you does know him, or that you were thinking of him, for that is Aemrys Liseas, your ancestor,* Casillus explained gently.

*Aemrys?* Gabriel suddenly wanted to cover up his nudity. His cheeks flushed and he felt incredibly self-conscious now that he knew the Mer approaching them was *real*, not some made up merman. And what was worse was that this Mer was *family*. *I—I—Casillus ... what do I do?*

There was no time for Casillus to answer as Aemrys was now floating in front of them. He had stunning deep blue eyes that were different from the Mers' that Gabriel had seen so far but similar to his own. Aemrys had a strong jaw and an expressive mouth. His nose was aristocratic, and there was an altogether regal aspect to him. He regarded Gabriel with a singular intensity that once again had Gabriel squirming and wishing he had a swimsuit on.

*You are the one,* Aemrys said.

Gabriel unconsciously jerked back, as it was strange hearing a Mer voice in his mind other than Casillus'. Aemrys' voice was deeper and sharper.

*I'm—I'm Gabriel Braven,* Gabriel responded. He didn't know what or who "the one" was.

A slight smile curled Aemrys' lush mouth. *You are amazing.*

Gabriel's eyes widened hugely. *Uhm, really, I'm not. I'm—*

*You are,* Casillus interrupted. *Gabriel, you have brought Aemrys into my mind even though he is still over a day's swim away.*

*But—but you were able to talk to him when he was even farther away!* Gabriel exclaimed.

*There are Listeners who relay our voices back to the person we seek to speak to when we are too far from the city to reach them directly. Aemrys was the one who answered. But you are doing this without their assistance, Gabriel. Furthermore, you are more than speaking with me. You have brought me here. How shocked I was to find myself in my own garden again when I had been swimming in the deep just moments ago!*

*It sounds impressive when you put it like that.* Gabriel kept looking down at the path and then glancing back up at Aemrys' face. His ancestor's eyes were so intense. Gabriel felt like they were peering directly into him and he could hide nothing, so he decided not to try and confessed, *The thing is I'm also finding you quite impressive, actually. A little intimidating, too.*

Aemrys reached out and cupped Gabriel's face. His expression was incredibly tender. *I would not have you intimidated by me for all the oceans of the world. I have dreamed of you, wished for you, but thought that such dreams and wishes would never come true. I thought there would never be a child descended from Tabatha and I that would take to the water. But here you are. And you are magnificent! Beyond my imaginings.*

Gabriel felt Aemrys' yearning then. It was so huge and all-encompassing for a moment that he felt like he could fall into the dark hole of emotions that existed in the Mer and never escape. Gabriel found himself reaching out and touching the center of Aemrys' chest. He wanted to stop that pain.

*I'm here. I'm with you. Whatever part of me connects back to your son, I am proud of it,* Gabriel said. *I'll do whatever I can to heal this hurt in you.*

Aemrys was suddenly embracing him. Another torrent of thoughts and emotions flowed from his ancestor into him. Love, loss, acceptance, and finally, a small peace. *You already have.*

The hug seemed to last both a long and a short time. Casillus floated a foot away, one of his webbed hands still on Gabriel's shoulder. Once again, there was tenderness in his eyes.

*Aemrys will be with us to assist with your final transition,* Casillus said. While there was no way to tell if someone was crying underwater, it was clear that the Mer was rather emotional about their meeting. He was so happy for Gabriel.

For his part, Gabriel felt rather amazed. He was so used to having only two people in his family, but now there were Casillus and Aemrys, too. And through Aemrys he sensed there were so many more who wanted to meet him and love him. He swallowed the ball of tight emotion that welled up in his throat.

*So you'll be with us for—for real tomorrow?* Gabriel asked Aemrys.

His ancestor nodded. *I will. And I cannot wait to show you this place myself and for you to know it as your home. Though ...* His deep blue eyes slid over to Casillus. *Though I think you will have another home as well. A home in the palace?*

*Yes, that is my wish, if it is Gabriel's,* Casillus said mildly, though there was nothing mild about those words.

Gabriel's head jerked towards him in shock. *Are you ... Casillus ... are you ...* He couldn't get the words out.

Casillus touched his cheek. *I will never leave you, Gabriel.*

*Oh, Casillus ... oh, I ... I ...* Gabriel clutched the Mer against him. *I love you.*

He felt Casillus curl tighter around him. He had said the words easily, and he meant them.

*Forgive me for interrupting this moment, but I believe I am fading from this joint dream,* Aemrys said gently.

Immediately, Gabriel turned back towards him. Aemrys appeared to be literally fading out of sight.

*Please don't go! Not yet!* Gabriel pleaded. Now that he had touched Aemrys' mind, he realized that it would hurt to let it go, to not have the Mer with them. Gabriel reached out and grasped Aemrys' outstretched hand and his ancestor became sharp and clear again.

Aemrys smiled. *Our minds will always be touching, Gabriel. I will not be gone. I will just be swimming to you.*

*It's just ...* Again, words failed him.

Aemrys caressed his cheek. *I know. But let the desire to see me again help with the pain of leaving those you care so deeply about on land.*

*Yes, yes, you're right. I know that I have to let you go for now. You need to be returned so that you can see where you're going,* Gabriel realized. He would feel terrible if Aemrys swam headfirst into an outcropping of coral because of him. *I wouldn't want you to be late for our meeting tomorrow.*

*I will swim even faster than I already am. Tomorrow I will hold you in my arms for real and our minds shall be as one, Gabriel,* Aemrys promised. He then turned to Casillus. *Keep him safe. Do not let him return to the temple.*

Gabriel was shocked that Aemrys knew of the temple let alone their plan to return to it. Casillus must have shared it with him, or perhaps Aemrys had read it from his mind. However he had discovered it, Gabriel objected, *But we have to get the statue of—*

Aemrys interrupted Gabriel's objection, *Let Casillus do this.* He cupped Gabriel's cheek again. *It is too dangerous for you to go to that place. I foresee ...* His dark blue eyes went distant. *I foresee great pain and suffering if you do. Please stay away from there, Gabriel. Promise me this.*

*I ...* Gabriel looked over at Casillus and saw that the Mer wanted him to promise as well. *I promise. Though I don't like others going into danger while I stay out of it!*

Aemrys chuckled softly. *Spoken like a true Caller and member of House Liseas.* He began to fade again. This time Gabriel had to let him go, but still his heart ached from it. *Tomorrow, Gabriel, we will be together.*

Aemrys faded away altogether, leaving just the waving sea grasses and the spectacular coral around them.

# Chapter 5



## THE PALACE

Casillus put a hand on Gabriel's shoulder as they both continued to look at the empty space where Aemrys had just been a moment ago.

Finally, the Mer said, *Come, let us leave House Liseas.*

Gabriel nodded. His chest felt tight, though not from lack of air. *Okay.*

*I believe it would be better for Aemrys to show us around this House when we are truly here,* Casillus said.

*Yeah, that would be good,* Gabriel responded faintly, still struggling with the remnants of the grief he felt at Aemrys leaving. He shook his head and gave Casillus a rueful smile. *I was such a liar. I didn't know I was, but I totally was.*

*A liar? What do you mean?* Casillus looked perplexed.

*I used to tell myself and everyone else that I didn't need anyone other than Corey and my grandmother. I believed it,* Gabriel said. *But then I met you and now Aemrys. I'm a mess over meeting him for just a few moments. I miss him already in a way that I can't—can't explain.*

Casillus drew Gabriel against him. *You held yourself apart, Gabriel. It was too painful for you to reach out and not feel anyone reaching back.*

*Because humans can't touch minds?* Gabriel guessed, still feeling faintly fragile from Aemrys' departure. He suddenly realized though, that he could still feel his ancestor in the back of his mind, and that they could speak if he willed it.

*That is correct. Humans are sadly limited in this way.* Casillus drew his fingers through Gabriel's hair. *But you are not alone, Gabriel. A whole family awaits you. Both your family and my own.*

Gabriel recalled what Casillus had said to Aemrys. *You want me to live with you in the palace, don't you? With your parents and the rest of your family?*

*Yes.* Casillus lowered his head and looked up at Gabriel through his lashes. *If you are agreeable to it.*

*This is more than just living together, though, isn't it?* Gabriel asked, a smile curling his lips.

Casillus swished his feet nervously, but then went still again as he looked up into Gabriel's eyes. *Yes, it would be.*

*I know that you weren't prepared to say any of this yet, but your hand was forced when Aemrys asked that question about where I would be living,* Gabriel said, remembering how Casillus had felt almost a touch of dismay at the other Mer's probing question.



*Not because I do not want this, but because—*

*You wanted to ask in a particular way and at a particular time? Yes, I understand and I—I do want it, too, Casillus. I want to live with you,* Gabriel said.

He knew that he was actually agreeing to something far more. Mer marriage, he supposed. That's what Casillus meant. Joining fully. Gabriel mentally snorted to himself. Here he was completely content to say "yes" and bind his life to Casillus' forever without another thought. Corey would stare at him and laugh when he heard this. All Gabriel's claims about love and longing had been proven so wrong, at least in regards to his own life. Never in his existence had he contemplated marrying before his best friend, but it looked like he would.

Casillus, though, looked flustered. *I wanted to give you time and—*

*I know. And I will give you all the time you need to ask the way you want to, but the answer is yes,* Gabriel said with a certainty that had him feeling like he could fly as well as float. *I won't have you rushed, though. We have all the time in the world, don't we?*

Casillus cupped his face. *We do. And I shall spend every minute of it with you.*

They leaned in and kissed. It was their first full kiss underwater. Gabriel expected to taste salt, the brine of the sea, but perhaps his taste buds were already used to it from the flow of salt water down his throat and into his lungs and stomach. Instead, there was a sweetness that reminded him of the momos. Gabriel's tongue sought more of that taste eagerly. There was no need to break apart for air as their gills worked independently from their mouths so the kiss went on and on as their bodies spun in the faint current. They only separated when Gabriel wanted to look into Casillus' blue-green eyes. Their arms were still wrapped around one another loosely. It was so peaceful to spin slowly over the coral and between the towers of seaweed.

*We can't be too mad at Aemrys for saying what he did,* Gabriel joked. *It just led to our first underwater kiss.*

Casillus chuckled and rested his forehead against Gabriel's. *Too true. Aemrys has always been clever. He knows that such a connection of our great Houses will be a serious matter. He wants to prepare your House for that moment.*

Gabriel laughed. *It sounds like he's preparing for a political alliance!*

*He is,* Casillus said with a wry smile.

*Oh, right, you're—you're a prince and ...* Gabriel blinked. Joining with Casillus suddenly seemed a bit more overwhelming than simply linking his life to the Mer's.

Casillus kissed Gabriel's lips lightly. *Do not think on it yet, Gabriel. We will not rush.* He was smiling softly. *You said you wanted to see my home after House Liseas. Do you still wish to?*

Gabriel nodded. *Please.*

Casillus and Gabriel swam out of the glorious garden of House Liseas, back through the room with the momos hanging from the ceiling and then past the artwork by the forgotten artist, Zed, displayed in the round room. In no time they were again on the vast avenue, the Kingway.

*Everywhere I look there is something amazing to see,* Gabriel confessed.

*When we are truly here, Gabriel, you will realize that my imaginings are but a poor representation of the true beauty and wonder of Emralis,* Casillus told him.

*Then I'll be speechless for days!* Gabriel laughed.

*Let us see if the palace has a similar effect.*

Casillus led him around yet another curve in the Kingway and the avenue abruptly broadened even more. They were at its end. Before them was the most fabulous structure that Gabriel had seen so far in the Mer city, probably the most fabulous structure that he had ever seen anywhere. It was the

palace. His mouth fell open and, indeed, he was speechless.

The palace was not just one tower but hundreds of them all connected to a central base. It was so big that Gabriel had to turn his head from side to side just to see all of it. Unlike the other structures, which were all one main color with different colored veins, the palace was a riot of colors. There were crimson, blue, green, gold and silver towers. The central base reminded Gabriel of a rainbow as all of the colors streamed up side by side until the split where they divided into their individual hues in the towers.

*Is it just you and your parents living here?* Gabriel finally got out. Three people for all of this?

*No, all of House Nerion resides in the palace,* Casillus answered. *It is the largest House.*

*Have all kings and queens come from House Nerion?* Gabriel's gaze swung from one side of the palace to the other.

*Yes, though we intermarry with all of the other Houses so that other points of view are heard and we do not become an echo chamber,* Casillus said.

*Since Mers don't die, how is it determined when the old king and queen step down and a new king and queen take their place?* Gabriel asked.

*We change every thousand years. My parents are only in their hundredth year of rule,* Casillus explained. *But it is not only a king and queen who can rule. Sometimes there are two queens or—*

*Two kings?* Gabriel waggled his eyebrows at Casillus.

*Yes,* Casillus said, and he looked meaningfully at Gabriel.

*Are you—wait a minute, if you're a prince does that mean you are going to become king?* Gabriel stammered.

*That is not always the case. The Elders tell us who is next in line to lead,* Casillus said.

*And have they said who that person is?* Gabriel prodded.

But Casillus would only smile and say nothing more.

Gabriel shook his head and turned back to the palace. In front of the massive structure there were three huge "fountains" of coral. As he and Casillus neared them, Gabriel felt heat flowing out of them. The coral disguised more of the vents that let out warm water and minerals. They swam between two of them and Gabriel relished the heat that wrapped around him. He flipped over onto his back and kicked his feet leisurely. The palace rose above him like some magnificent flower, blooming forever in the deep.

One of Casillus' hands stroked down his back and lingered at the base of his spine. A trill of desire ran through Gabriel and he spun over to see Casillus swimming beneath him. There was a playful smile on Casillus' full lips. Gabriel darted in for a kiss. The shift around Casillus' hips caressed Gabriel's thighs. Their cocks brushed against each other's.

*Making love in the water must be incredible,* Gabriel murmured.

*It is.* Casillus put his hands on Gabriel's waist and swam them forward. *I will have to show you.*

*Oh, yeah, I'm sure you'll have a lot to show me,* Gabriel teased.

They leaned in together for another kiss before breaking apart and swimming towards the palace's main gate. The main gate made House Liseas' look like a child's door in comparison. There was another elaborate glass-like latticework, which glittered at them like the strands of a spider's web caught in the sun.

*Casillus, this is so stunning.* Gabriel couldn't stop gazing at the magnificent palace. *I knew you were a prince. I understood you were royalty. But I guess I didn't understand it fully! Seeing the palace makes it clear you aren't an ordinary Mer—though from what I've seen I don't know what an ordinary Mer is!*

*I do not think of this place as only my family's, but as all of the Mers'. This place represents our past, our present and our future. It is a responsibility to reside here as much as a wonder,* Casillus answered him.

Gabriel snuck his arm around Casillus' trim waist. *I can't imagine living here. I mean I want to, but it's like a—a monument or something.*

*While there are places inside that feel personal to me, the palace as a whole is too grand for me to ever think of it simply as a home,* Casillus agreed. *In fact, I have not seen every room inside yet myself.*

*We'll have to make it a goal to see every single one then,* Gabriel said.

*It is times like these that I am grateful for a Mer's long life. For the palace grows, and there is always more to see,* Casillus explained.

*So we can never really see it all, can we?*

*We can try.*

Casillus took Gabriel's hand. They swam to the center of the gate and without Casillus having to touch it, the latticework retracted and allowed them to swim inside. To say that Gabriel was stunned at the beauty of the outside of the palace was not an overstatement, but the inside truly took all words and thoughts away.

The gate opened into a long vaulted chamber. The ribs of the vault were gold while the walls were crimson. There was a ramp, also gold, that led up to a four-story tall wall covered in crawling vines and flowers so vibrant that Gabriel was dazzled by their colors. The vines branched off from a brilliant center stalk. The whole of it reminded Gabriel of the old evolutionary tree he had seen an etching of in a science book. There were no thrones before the tree for there was no need to sit in the ocean, but Gabriel guessed that this was the throne room. He could feel it even without Casillus telling him.

*Your parents wait there when they are holding audience, don't they?* Gabriel pointed to the space in front of the wall with the tree.

*Yes, any Mer can come and speak to them when they are here before the Tree of Life,* Casillus agreed.

*Tree of Life? That's the vine thing?*

*Yes.*

Gabriel's eyes slid from the Tree of Life to the other walls. The walls were all carved with various scenes of Mer life. Gabriel found himself swimming over to one of the panels, which was several times taller than himself. He recognized the mysterious Zed's work immediately.

The panel was carved with the image of vast forests of kelp being harvested by the Mers. Assisting them were dolphins and octopi. Another panel was engraved with a representation of the court house with Mers streaming in and out of its impressive halls. But it was the third panel he drifted towards that stopped him cold. It contained a carving of a temple located deep in a trench. There were no other structures around it. There were no carved representations of Mer or fish swimming towards the yawning doors at the temple's base. The temple was alone, sitting solitary and resplendent in the deep. Gabriel would have recognized it even without having seen its twin on land.

*It's—it's a temple to—*

*Do not say its name, Gabriel! Not here,* Casillus cautioned. *But yes, it is what you think it is. This is how I recognized the temple at the settlement. I have passed by this panel almost every day of my life.*

*Is this where the statue will go?* Gabriel asked.

*Yes, it will be safe there.* Casillus shook himself. *But come, let us go see brighter things, better places.*

Gabriel silently agreed and took Casillus' hand once more. He cast one last glance back at the carving of Cthulhu's second temple before resolutely looking ahead of himself again, determined not to think of the temple or the way the open doors seemed to urge him to come close, to come inside.

Once again there were no stairs, but instead circular openings above their heads that led to the upper floors. Gabriel was not surprised that access to those floors was cut off by more of the latticework.

*As I explained earlier, coming to see the king and queen in the throne room is something that any Mer can do, but we need privacy for our own quarters,* Casillus said as they swam together towards the first latticework opening. The crystal bars retreated before them like the others had.

Casillus then had them swimming up countless floors. Each one that Gabriel glimpsed seemed more fabulous than the one before it. He saw floors and walls encrusted with what looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds and other precious and semi-precious stones that glowed softly with a mesmerizing inner light. There were floors of pure clear crystal. There were rooms where the walls and ceilings were covered in brilliantly flowering plants of every hue that bobbed lazily in the currents. Finally, they stopped their upwards swim as they entered a space that Gabriel immediately knew was Casillus'.

The floor was made of deep blue lapis lazuli. The walls were a creamy white stone. Flowering purple plants wound up columns that framed a vast doorway into a room beyond. Even from where they were, Gabriel could see that the next room had a massive balcony screened in by a thinner, clearer version of the latticework of the gates. It allowed one to see out without obstructing their view. And what a view! Gabriel swam towards it eagerly.

He passed by what looked like a large fluted clam shell the size of a Volkswagen Beetle that was closed tightly. Its outside was a pearlescent white. He also swam by a vast, smooth wall where a mural had been started. Small pots of thick colored gels still sat on the ground before it. Brushes were attached by cords to hooks in the wall so that they would not be swept away by the mild current in the room. The brushes were not the only things attached like that. The Mer had no need for closets or dressers for clothing. Instead, he saw several silken shifts similar to the one that was tied around Casillus' waist also attached to hooks on the walls. Yet as curious as he was about Mer life, Gabriel barely had eyes for any of this, for outside the balcony that ran the length of the room was a scene of wonder.

*And I thought House Liseas' garden was amazing!* Gabriel cried.

The courtyard was so large that Gabriel could not see the other side of it, but within its vast circumference there was the most spectacular reef. His lips parted and his eyes widened. Bright stalks of towering seaweed stretched up so far that Gabriel could nearly reach out and brush their tops with his fingers even though they were rooted ten stories below. There were acres of yellow-green lettuce coral, forests of tree coral, mounds of the strangely insectile bubble coral, and then an ocean's worth of waves of fan coral.

Casillus floated beside him, one hand on Gabriel's lower back. *This is known as the Life Seed Reef. There is at least one of every species of plant and coral that we have discovered growing in the ocean here. As new ones are found we bring them here and plant them where they will grow and thrive.*

Gabriel could well believe Casillus' statements. The variety of plant life was staggering. But it was the profusion of fish, everything from silversides to parrotfish, that really stunned him. He saw

large turtles paddling their stumpy limbs as they strained their heads forward. He felt a momentary qualm as he caught sight of a tentacle between two of the leaves of lettuce coral, but it was a pinkish color and belonged to a normal-sized octopus that quickly hid itself again in one of the openings in the reef. Then there were the larger predators. Sharks glided with predatory grace over the tops of the table-like coral. Many a fish twitched away from their dead black eyes. Gabriel gave an even greater gasp, though, when a dolphin abruptly swooped up to the balcony and the latticework disappeared to let it in. It immediately went to nose around Casillus, who laughed and rubbed his hands over its head.

*Gabriel your gift is at work again! You have aided me in summoning Ieshles! I did not think I would be able to introduce you until we were truly in Emralis!* Casillus cried.

*I have no idea how I'm doing this, Casillus. I had no idea you had a ... ah, dolphin for a friend.*

The dolphin let out excited squeaks and circled Casillus happily.

*Our minds are linking far more deeply than before, Casillus explained. You do not need to consciously know what I want to assist me. But I assure you that this is your doing, for I could not do it myself.*

*Well, I'm glad to meet any friend of yours.* Gabriel stared at the dolphin's sleek gray body with wonder.

*He is my best friend and usual partner in crime, though I could not bring him with me on my journey. Ieshles, meet Gabriel. Gabriel, Ieshles,* Casillus introduced them.

*Hello, Ieshles,* Gabriel greeted the dolphin.

The dolphin immediately circled Gabriel, studying him with its black, intelligent eyes. After a circle and a half it appeared to find him acceptable and it nosed one of his hands for petting. Gabriel tentatively ran his hands over the dolphin's skin, enjoying the soft yet rubbery feel of it beneath his palm.

*He loves you already, Gabriel. I am not surprised,* Casillus said, and there was a warm glow of approval over their bond.

*Don't dolphins need to surface for air, though? Aren't we too far from the surface for him? I'd imagine that we are actually way too deep for most of the other creatures here, too,* Gabriel asked, remembering that reefs, as well, were normally much closer to the surface, needing sunlight.

*We have places where air is brought down in large bubbles and stored for Ieshles and the others like him who require it,* Casillus answered. *All life is sustained here by our will.*

*That sounds an awful lot like magic!*

*We have long been able to control the sea in small ways. No one can truly control it completely, but we are able to alter it to suit our needs,* Casillus explained. Ieshles suddenly bobbed its body and chittered with happiness. Casillus laughed. *Yes, yes, my friend. Thank you for the thought!*

Ieshles then swam rapidly away, the latticework disappearing to release him back into the reef and, presumably, back to his real home.

*What thought did he have?* Gabriel asked.

Casillus framed Gabriel's trim waist with his hands. His expression showed immeasurable fondness as he looked at Gabriel. *He only wanted to remind me that many long for my return home.*

Gabriel looked away from Casillus. The Mer prince *should* be in the Mer city, but instead he was babysitting Gabriel. Casillus touched his chin.

*I would wish to be no place else but here, Gabriel,* the Mer assured him.

Gabriel lifted his head. *I know. But it's good to have a reminder of what you're missing by staying with me.*

*I am giving up nothing! I have gained everything,* Casillus told him firmly.

Gabriel gave him a quirked smile. *I just feel so lucky to have you with me.* Gabriel's left arm swung out towards the reef. *Such beauty seems almost unreal.*

*The reef is beautiful, but you are so much more so,* Casillus murmured.

Gabriel turned back to the Mer. *Love has blinded you.*

Casillus smiled. *Love has opened my eyes.*

*Mine as well.* Gabriel ducked his head. What a fool he had been about love! Corey had been right from the beginning. His personal Cupid knew him all too well.

*I did not bring you here only because I wanted to show you the palace,* Casillus said suddenly.

Gabriel turned his head to regard the Mer curiously. *What other reason did you have?*

Casillus' eyes were hooded. *I want to make love, Gabriel. Right here. With the Life Seed Reef before us and the palace at our backs.*

A rush of heat went through Gabriel and his cock twitched between his thighs. He didn't answer the Mer with words. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Casillus' neck and drew the Mer in for a kiss. He had been so afraid of the sea for so very long and now he was going to make love in it. It would not be a dream this time. It would be real.

# Chapter 6



## THE WAVE CRESTS

Casillus' hands slid down Gabriel's back, cresting over the swell of his buttocks until they came to rest cupping his ass cheeks. Heat built between Gabriel's legs and there was a slickness between his buttocks that had nothing to do with the seawater. His heartbeat thudded heavily as Casillus' fingers slipped into his crevice. Would he feel the slickness there? Would Casillus know that Gabriel was already prepared for him from just a simple touch? Maybe it hadn't been just that one touch, but the entire time they had been in the city together. The glory and wonder of swimming with his lover through their new home had brought him to the cusp of cumming now without any more stimulation required.

*Why are you afraid of me knowing how eager you are for our coupling?* Casillus, of course, already knew his thoughts.

Gabriel's fingers played down Casillus' muscled front. *I'm so exposed with you. You know everything.*

*Know my thoughts and feelings then, Gabriel. Reach out and embrace my mind. I will hide nothing from you either,* Casillus murmured.

*I ...*

Gabriel almost said that he did not know how. But that wasn't true. He knew he was still holding back. He could feel it. His reluctance came from the last shred of his remaining fear that fully bonding with Casillus would risk the destruction of his heart if the Mer ever went away.

*But even if I don't bond fully with him, my heart won't survive losing him anyways,* Gabriel thought. *So why not actually enjoy being with him fully even if it does only last a short time? Why hold back?*

Slowly, Gabriel put his hands on either side of Casillus' face. His thumbs ran along the Mer's high cheekbones. He relished Casillus' physical beauty, but the true beauty of the Mer was inside, and that was where he wanted to be.

Gabriel consciously stretched out his senses. For the first time, he felt the barrier between them. It was a permeable barrier that many thoughts and feelings could breach, but not all. It was a barrier that he had created. All he needed to do was move through it and he would be inside of Casillus' mind completely just like the Mer was in his. Once he did that there would be absolutely nothing separating them ever again if he chose it.

*Do not be afraid, Gabriel. I love you,* Casillus said. His blue-green eyes did not even blink.

Gabriel stared into them and then he *moved*. Not physically, but mentally. His consciousness



simply slipped through Casillus' eyes and then he was *inside* the Mer. It was like being embraced by light. Casillus was radiant sunlight streaming through the bluest water. Gabriel luxuriated in it. There was no fear here. No darkness. No grief. No aloneness. All was Casillus. All was light and wholeness. A perfect joining.

*I am with you, Gabriel. Always and forever.* Casillus' words were more than words. They were promises. They were sacred vows.

*I love you, Casillus. I love you,* Gabriel breathed.

But suddenly, on the edge of his vision, there was a blot of blackness. It was not from Casillus. It was another mind. Another mind that was with him just like the Mer's was with him. But this entity was nothing like Casillus. Or rather it was the exact *opposite* of his beloved Mer. Where Casillus was light, this being was darkness.

*Who are you?* Gabriel asked, surprised that his voice did not waver.

Its presence was a velvety blackness that called to him. It was a magnet that he could not resist. He imagined what it would be like to be wrapped in that silky darkness and caressed ...

*Cthulhu.* He hadn't meant to whisper the name.

He heard his own name being called, but it sounded like it was from far away. Casillus was calling for him. Somehow he had moved out of his lover's mind and towards the something else, and the Mer was calling him back.

*I'm—I'm here.* The world seemed to spin and Gabriel was suddenly back in the Mer city with Casillus. Cthulhu—or rather his awareness of the being, was gone.

Casillus' blue-green eyes were troubled. *You were with me fully, and then—*

*It's okay, Casillus. I'm with you. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere,* Gabriel assured him even as something inside of him shivered with an unnatural longing.

*Something happened,* the Mer insisted.

*I saw—saw another mind,* Gabriel confessed.

A look of understanding filled the Mer's gaze. *You saw my connection to our people. No wonder you were drawn away.*

Gabriel meant to tell the Mer that it was not other Mers who had drawn him away. No Mer or man could ever distract him from Casillus. It was Cthulhu, and it frightened him that he had gone so very eagerly towards the darkness that was that being. But no words came.

Casillus caressed his face and said, *Everyone is anxious for you to return to us.*

*You ...* Gabriel paused and swallowed. *You are the one that matters most to me.*

Casillus' mouth covered his and their tongues slid together so slick and warm. The Mer sucked on Gabriel's lower lip until it was swollen and red as his fingers continued to quest between the globes of Gabriel's ass. Suddenly, Casillus lifted Gabriel up above his head with ease until Gabriel was stretched out horizontally above him.

*Casillus?* Gabriel asked, his voice filled with laughter and surprise at the Mer's unexpected action.

*We are not bound by the rules of the land, Gabriel. We can do so much more in the sea,* the Mer said with a chuckle.

*What is the sea going to allow you to do with me up here?* Gabriel laughed as he floated above the Mer, his body somehow adjusting to keep him level and in place.

*Let me show you,* the Mer said.

Casillus then started kissing the backs of his ankles. Gabriel pointed his toes in pleasure. The kisses almost tickled, and he had never been touched in that way. The Mer continued to kiss up the

backs of his legs from ankles to knees. He felt the light brush of Casillus' long hair drifting between his thighs. Those lips sucked and kissed the tender skin just above the backs of his knees. He was working his way up. Then the Mer was kissing his inner thighs. That soft, sensitive skin that loved to be touched. Gabriel shivered and spread his legs farther apart.

Gabriel's cock bobbed eagerly as Casillus' teasing mouth came close to his ball sack a couple of times but never actually touched it, let alone Gabriel's aching shaft. He sunk his teeth into his lower lip and whined softly. Without warning Casillus then lightly bit his right ass cheek, which had Gabriel squirming and squeaking instead. The Mer gripped Gabriel's hips to keep him in place.

*No moving, my love,* Casillus said sternly.

*You bit me!* Gabriel feigned outrage, but the sting of Casillus' bite was actually incredibly arousing rather than hurtful.

*And I'm going to bite you quite a bit more,* Casillus laughed. *You are so sweet. I want to devour you.*

*Like the momos?*

*You are much sweeter than the momos,* Casillus answered throatily.

The near weightlessness of being underwater allowed the Mer to move him in any way he wanted, and Casillus could easily circle him as well. Nothing was off limits. Nothing was beyond reach. There was no hard bed beneath their backs or sheets for their legs to get tangled in. They were completely free, and the glory of the palace and the reef all around them was more than just an incredible backdrop. They weren't separated from the wide world by a bedroom, but a part of it. Them together, making love, was part of the beauty of this place.

Casillus kissed a line along Gabriel's hip and up his side. As he did so, the Mer brushed his hands over the sensitive places along the insides of Gabriel's arms. Pleasurable goose flesh broke out all over his body. The Mer's fingers dug into the muscles of his shoulders, massaging them, as his mouth glided up the back of Gabriel's neck and into his waving hair. Gabriel moaned and reached back to touch the Mer. His hands tangled in Casillus' long locks as he pulled the Mer closer to him. Casillus sucked on his neck.

All the while they made love, fish flitted around just outside the crystal latticework. The dark shadows of sharks passed by, too, their sleek, aerodynamic bodies surging through the water with ease. The sail-like forms and whip-like tails of manta rays soared overhead as well like living kites. Gabriel knew that these creatures were only from Casillus' imagination, but he was sure that this was exactly how it would be once they really were in the palace. He would insist on them making love just like this the first day they were there. Gabriel's musings were abruptly ended as Casillus suddenly nipped Gabriel's ear.

*I must not be pleasing you if you are so easily distracted,* Casillus wheedled.

*Pleasing me? Oh, you are so pleasing me.*

Gabriel had mostly been a passive partner in their lovemaking so far. His body was alight with the sensations of being touched and kissed and sucked. But at that moment, Gabriel saw the powerful, sleek muscles of the Mer's bare left hip and thigh. Gabriel turned and dove down so that he could kiss that soft, velvety skin. Casillus stilled and then unfurled, arching backwards so that Gabriel could kiss more of him.

*I'm not the only one that tastes sweet,* Gabriel murmured as he kissed Casillus again and again.

The glow from the palace made exploring the Mer's body like wandering through hills and valleys of light and dark with all of it covered in silk. His mouth followed along the curve of Casillus' hipbone around to the Mer's powerful back. The shift brushed against Gabriel's forehead as

he ran his lips along Casillus' muscular ass. Gabriel placed a long passionate kiss at the top of the crevice between the two magnificent globes of the Mer's buttocks. Casillus shivered beautifully beneath his lips. The Mer suddenly contorted himself so that they were in a sixty-nine position. The soft light from the palace lit his beautiful face.

*What do you want to do, Casillus?* Gabriel's body was already taut with his anticipation for what he hoped would happen, which was for them to suck each other off at the same time.

Casillus' mouth curled slowly into a sensual smile. The Mer knew what he wanted and it was a mutual desire. Casillus leaned in towards Gabriel's bobbing, erect cock and licked the tip of it. Gabriel's hips jerked and his cock waved wildly in the water. He covered his mouth even though his nervous, eager laughter was all internal. The Mer shook his head as if Gabriel had been naughty, but he was grinning too.

*Two can play at that game, Casillus. See if you can keep it together when I do this!*

At that moment, Gabriel reached out and grasped Casillus' slender hips as he fastened his lips onto the head of the Mer's cock. He sucked hard. It was his first real taste of Casillus. Salty, sweet, delicious. It was liquid sex. The taste alone had his cock leaking. He forced his eyelids to stay open even as they longed to close. He just had to see the Mer's reaction to being sucked, and as he watched he was not disappointed.

Casillus tossed his head back. His long hair flowed in dark waves around his face like a halo. His mouth opened to reveal white teeth and a pink tongue that jutted forward delightfully. If Gabriel's mouth hadn't been full already he would have wanted to suck on it, too. A gush of precum pooled on Gabriel's tongue. Salty, though less briney than the sea. A hint of citrus, sweet and sour, followed and puckered his lips. His stomach grumbled, wanting more. Gabriel swallowed and slid further down Casillus' length.

The Mer's fingers were suddenly flexing against Gabriel's ass before Casillus dove in to take Gabriel's cock into his own mouth. Gabriel gasped and almost lost contact with Casillus' member. He quickly shut his mouth tightly around the thick, hard cock in his mouth. Both of them *sucked*.

Gabriel's eyelids shut tightly. The pleasure was like nothing he had experienced before. Giving pleasure and getting pleasure had always been incredibly intertwined for him. Those times he had been able to really let go with another person, he had cum just from sucking the other guy off. While having Casillus' lips on him, for real this time, while his own were on his beloved Mer's cock was incredible, it was their mental connection that was sending him into the stratosphere. Impossible heat built in his balls and groin. He didn't know how long he could hold off on cumming, but before he did he was going to give the Mer as much pleasure as possible.

He swallowed around Casillus' cock, which had the Mer bucking. Gabriel gripped the Mer's hips tighter to keep from losing that glorious cock. He loved the feeling of Casillus' penis sliding down his throat. And then Casillus' mouth slid down his shaft and his lower lip "kissed" Gabriel's balls.

Gabriel experienced a full body shudder. His cock was burning hot as his arousal grew inside of him. Some of his precum gushed out into the back of Casillus' throat. The Mer swallowed it eagerly. Gabriel opened his own throat and sank down on Casillus' thick member, but it was so big. There was a slight strain as he stretched his lips as wide as they could go. Then he felt the brush of Casillus' balls against his lower lip. He had the Mer completely inside of him. For a moment, both of them were fully engulfed by the other. It was a level of intimacy that Gabriel had never truly known before. Their bodies spun slowly in the slight current.

But then Casillus was drawing his mouth off of Gabriel's cock, a millimeter at a time, so that

Gabriel felt every bit of loss as that hot, heavenly suction left him. His hips desperately wanted to thrust forward, to dive back inside that tight, sucking cavern, but the Mer held him in place. His balls felt like they were filled with something molten rather than just semen. He was shaking like a leaf.

Casillus' lips were now barely brushing the tip of his cock. The Mer's lips parted and his tongue slowly, oh, so slowly snaked out and licked the slit. Gabriel nearly bit down on Casillus' plump cock by accident, but he covered his teeth with his lips at the last moment and merely *pressed* down. He felt Casillus' pleasure flood over their bond, and it was as if there was this unending loop of heat and arousal between them.

Gabriel was lost for a moment in the pounding heat of Casillus' mind. Everything was red with lust and desire and love. It was like being inside the Mer's heart. He heard the rush and shush of Casillus' blood. It surrounded Gabriel like the sea and he was swept up in it. His arms wound around Casillus' waist as the Mer drew him close again, swallowing down his cock once more.

Gabriel began to move his mouth up and down Casillus' shaft as well. He had to do it now before he came. He was so close. He was hanging on by a thread. The Mer's cock *pulsed* in his mouth. It was so *alive* and velvety. Casillus' hands scrabbled at his hips. It was the Mer's desire that sent Gabriel over the edge. His own cock jerked, shuddered, and then he was cumming and cumming and cumming.

Gabriel then lost the ability to do anything but suck and feel as his cock spilled what felt like an ocean of semen into Casillus' mouth. The Mer drank it down easily. Using gills to breathe had more advantages than just letting one breathe underwater. Gabriel chuckled at the thought between moans of pleasure. His mouth, however, remained suctioned around Casillus' cock as it continued to pulse and swell in his mouth. He could no longer get all the way down the shaft.

Casillus suddenly started withdrawing his cock from between Gabriel's lips even as he released Gabriel's own flaccid organ from his mouth, leaving one final kiss on the tip. Gabriel tried to hold the Mer still, but Casillus was insistent.

*I want my cock in your ass, Gabriel, when I cum. I need to be inside of you that way. I have fantasized about it for far too long. Please.* The Mer's murmured pleas had Gabriel opening his mouth and releasing him even as his own cock twitched almost painfully. He wasn't ready yet to be erect again, but he knew he would be soon.

Casillus smoothly swam around him until his mouth was on Gabriel's buttocks. His fingers parted Gabriel's buttocks and his tongue, hot, so very hot, painted a line along the crevice and over his quivering anus. Gabriel's mouth opened in a gasp and a few bubbles came out, rising up to burst against the crystal latticework above them.

Casillus' tongue flickered inside of him, leaving a trace of warmth behind each time it slipped in and pulled out. The Mer's fingers pried open his asshole further. Gabriel was already lubricated and eager to be penetrated, but the Mer took his time with his tongue and fingers as he plumbed Gabriel's interior. Those long fingers slid inside of him, probing deep alongside Casillus' tongue. Gabriel's spent cock was struggling to become erect again and his hips were moving restlessly. A steady stream of bubbles burst from his lips as he moaned in pleasure.

Casillus' front was suddenly pressing along Gabriel's back. His large cock slid between Gabriel's ass cheeks. Gabriel tried to draw in a deep breath, but, of course, he pulled in only water. Was there no panting with gills? There was definitely trembling, though. So much trembling. Casillus was going to be inside of him! He wanted it so badly that he pushed back against the large, plump cockhead that was poised just outside his opening. However, Casillus grasped his hips once more, holding Gabriel still and in place.

*Casillus*, Gabriel whined.

*Please. One moment. I must control myself or this will end all too soon*, the Mer pleaded.

Gabriel could feel Casillus' desire like the vibrations of a pounding drum. Casillus was teetering on the edge of control. His body wanted to just ram inside of Gabriel and rut, but his heart would not allow him to do that. This was their first time. He wanted it to be tender.

*Casillus, let it be what your body, and mine, need it to be*, Gabriel urged as he reached back and pulled at the Mer's hips. *I know you love me. And I will feel that love even if you give in to what you're feeling.*

*I do not wish to hurt—*

*You won't. Let go. I can take it*, Gabriel said.

The Mer said nothing more. Desire crashed like a tidal wave inside of him and words were swept away in its path. Now that Gabriel had told him to let go he finally did. Gabriel just hoped he would be able to hang on for the ride.

Casillus held on to his hips with one hand while he reached around with the other and gripped Gabriel's semi-hard cock, which almost instantly sprang to full hardness. He began to stroke Gabriel firmly. Root to tip. Tip to root. A twist of his wrist with each upward stroke. A spreading of Gabriel's slit with his thumb when he reached the top before sliding back down again.

*You're supposed to be in me!*

*I will be.* Casillus nipped his right ear lobe.

And then the Mer was pushing inside of him. That wide, plump cockhead spread his anus to what felt like the breaking point before it popped through to the other side. Gabriel's mouth opened in an "O" of pleased pain. But the pain was blotted out as Casillus stroked him harder and faster even as he sank his cock deeper inside of Gabriel's body. It was hard to know what to pay attention to: the cock spreading his tender tissues wide or the hand that had his balls tightening against his body with the need to cum again all too soon.

Finally, with Casillus fully seated within him, both of them stilled. Through slitted lids Gabriel saw the swirl of colors from the coral, fish and palace spread out above them. It was a wonderland. It was glorious. Then Casillus was moving.

The Mer pulled out halfway and then slid back in, as if testing the waters. Without a bed or floor or wall to be pushed against, Casillus' strength was the only thing that kept him in place. Gabriel was amazed by that. He was utterly controlled by the cock in his ass and those powerful hands on his hips.

Casillus pulled out again and Gabriel's toes curled as he thrust back inside. There was a sizzling sensation inside of him as his prostate was rubbed. The Mer kissed his neck as he plunged in and out of Gabriel's body. His teeth raked over Gabriel's jaw leaving marks that Gabriel knew he would touch later and remember this moment. Gabriel tossed his head back to give Casillus better access to leave evidence that they had been together like this. The Mer complied. Bites, sucks, bruising kisses.

Casillus' cock was so deep inside of him. Molten heat was building in his core. He felt like the water should be boiling around them. His own penis jutted forward, needy and throbbing. Casillus ground his groin against Gabriel's ass. Gabriel's cock jumped and precum clouded the water. He was on edge all over again. Riding a wave of euphoria and arousal. He needed more. He needed the wave to crest.

Gabriel reached back to try to hold the Mer tight against him so that they would be completely connected. His fingernails raked along Casillus' right ass cheek and hip, marking the Mer in turn. Casillus grunted in pleasure and slammed all the way inside Gabriel just as he had wanted. And the wave crested. Oh, how it crested.

Gabriel and Casillus' orgasms came almost simultaneously. Hot semen, so much warmer than the water around them, spurted inside of him, coating his insides in heat. His own cum spurted out in a long creamy rope before dissipating. Casillus managed to get some of it on his fingers, and he smeared it on Gabriel's lips before kissing him deeply.

The shared experience of both penetrating and being penetrated, of cumming and kissing, of being taken and taking, formed a feedback loop of pleasure. Gabriel could not tell where he ended and Casillus began or vice versa. Even though he had already orgasmed, the connection between them had his body still jerking as if he had put his finger in an electric socket. Pleasure spiraled into every part of him, shaking him to the core, scraping him down to the bone of pure sensation. It was only having the Mer's powerful arms wrapped around him that anchored him at all.

Gabriel reached up and threaded his fingers with Casillus'. His limbs still trembled and he was still lost in the haze of arousal, but he needed to do this, to connect on a conscious level as well as on all of the subconscious ones. Casillus kissed the back of his neck. Dreamy, sleepy, loving kisses that weren't meant to inflame, just to comfort. And they did. For the first time since his parents' deaths Gabriel was not at all afraid, and he realized he truly was not alone.

*I love you, Casillus. I'll never leave you,* Gabriel murmured. *I'll be with you forever and always.*

# Chapter 7



## FIRST MEETING

Gabriel curled into Casillus' arms as the waves rocked them back and forth like a mother rocking a child. His eyes were half shut as he recovered from their lovemaking. He sensed more than saw the lights from the imagined Mer city dying away. Casillus was undoubtedly bringing them back to reality again.

Gabriel frowned slightly, as it seemed awfully dark now that *Emralis'* glow was gone. He would have expected there to still be sunlight streaming down through the waves above them. But maybe they had spent longer in the dream of *Emralis* than he had thought. If that was the case then they needed to fully wake up so that they could meet Corey to pursue their plan to get the statue out of the temple.

He fully opened his eyes, not really wanting to leave the loose-limbed, sensual state that post-sex always brought, but as soon as he did he froze. He was in the deepest, darkest water that he had ever seen. Darker than what he had been plunged into the night his parents died. It was an inky blackness that surrounded them. They must be so deep down that the sky could only ever be a faint memory here. He could not see the ocean floor, either. It could be a foot or fathoms below them. Surely Casillus would not bring them back to consciousness in this frightening place. Not willingly. Had something happened to the Mer? Why was he silent?

*Casillus? CASILLUS?* Gabriel's voice was suddenly shrill.

He curled tighter against the Mer's body instinctively as the darkness seemed to press in on them, but something felt *wrong* about Casillus' form. Instead of the sleek, silky skin he expected, he felt something *rubbery* and *slippery*. He froze and swallowed shallowly.

*Casillus? Casillus, are you with me?*

Lights suddenly seemed to wink on. They were small greenish-yellow lights, but they weren't electric. They reminded him of the phosphorescent glow of sea creatures, but they were all uniform in size and shape. They were round and about the size of tennis balls. These "lights" had started appearing far below him, one by one, and they seemed to follow a curving *line* that got closer and closer until suddenly they were all around him. That was when he knew the truth of them. The "lights" were phosphorescent disks on a massive tentacle that was attached to something too far away to see. The tentacle was holding his naked body almost tenderly. Gabriel wasn't in Casillus' arms. He was in Cthulhu's.

Gabriel bit back a watery scream even as he realized that a part of him had *longed* for this. That thought shocked him further.



He watched as more phosphorescent lights *appeared* on thick, rubbery tentacles that squirmed in the deep all around him. There was a burst of more of that sickly light, though instead of small, tennis-ball shaped phosphorescences, this time it was an outline that appeared before him. It was the outline of a squid-like bulbous head that was as wide as four buses put end to end were long. Then he saw the huge ragged wings that, for as large as they were, could never have hoped to launch this colossal creature into the air.

*Greetings—greetings—greetings.* The voice, which was neither male nor female nor human in any way, echoed all around him. It sounded like the cracking of icebergs or the shearing of a mountain in half or the explosion of a volcano deep underground. The sound was both natural and unnatural.

Gabriel found himself curling forwards as if to physically shield himself from the voice. He trembled and sought to shrink down, but then realized that would press him closer against the tentacle. His stomach twisted with nausea at the thought.

*Waited for you. Now you call. And I answer—answer—answer.*

Called? He had called to this creature? He wanted to violently object to that. He hadn't even been thinking of Cthulhu other than that passing thought of needing to remove the statue from the temple. That couldn't be enough to have called it to him! Could it? But then again, maybe like with Aemrys, whom he had not been consciously thinking of either when his ancestor had shown up, he had called Cthulhu to him unintentionally. He was a Caller after all. Maybe he could not help himself. Maybe this meeting was inevitable. Some part of him resonated with that answer. With the realization that this had to happen, some of the twisting fear inside of him lessened.

But what of Casillus? The Mer was gone. It was just him, Cthulhu and the dark deep.

*Casillus, where is he? Have you—have you done something to him?* Gabriel asked. He was surprised at how firm he sounded for the most part. For Casillus he could face anything. For Casillus he would not be afraid.

In response, there was a rumbling sound that rolled over him like an underwater earthquake. Gabriel would have been flung end over end by its force if he had not been in the strong, rubbery embrace of that tentacle. As it was, he still rattled around in the tentacle's hold. It was only after the rattling ended and he had steadied himself once again that he realized Cthulhu had been *laughing* at the suggestion that it had harmed the Mer.

*I'm assuming that means "no" and that Casillus is fine. Just not here,* Gabriel said hesitantly.

Cthulhu did not respond, but the silence seemed to be meant as acquiescence, or at least Gabriel prayed that was what it meant. He looked upon the completely alien face. Cthulhu had a cluster of black eyes in the exact middle of its face. There were dozens of them, each as large as a car wheel. As he stared into those black, fathomless eyes, he realized something. *We're—we're not really here, are we? Just like Casillus and I were not really in Emralis.*

*Always here—always—always,* the voice echoed strangely. This time only "always" was repeated even though it had been the first word spoken, not the last. It seemed the word or words that Cthulhu meant to give emphasis to were repeated, and that it had nothing to do with actual echoing.

*We're in my mind, aren't we?* Silence again in response, but once more he believed it was a sign of assent. *You're always here. With me. In my mind. I saw you for a moment when I connected fully with Casillus.*

*Always,* the voice rumbled again.

He had called Cthulhu here to the forefront of his consciousness. He wasn't sure why he had done it at this moment other than the fact it was inevitable that they should meet. Nevertheless, he shouldn't waste the opportunity. He had something to say and Cthulhu seemed inclined to hear it.

He placed his hands on top of the tentacle that held him so that he could easily face the massive being before him. The flesh was so odd. Rubbery. Hot. Cold. Pliant. Hard. There was a *pulsing* sensation running through it. Blood flow? Heartbeat? Something else?

*You're in danger*, Gabriel said, though he wasn't sure if that was really true. Could Johnson Tims truly do anything to something this massive and otherworldly?

The same rumbling as before came again, and Gabriel had to close his eyes and lower his head as the vibrations rolled over him. Cthulhu was laughing once more.

*The soldier yearns for battle—battle—forlorn soldier—destroy him—destroy himself*, Cthulhu's voice rolled over him.

*He thinks to lure you to land and harm you*, Gabriel continued on. *You must not come anywhere near him or land.*

The black eyes regarded him. The alien intelligence was clear in them. Gabriel could almost *feel* its thoughts like a miasma. He realized he likely *could* feel them. They were talking mind to mind after all. None of this was happening in the physical world. He was likely sleeping in the cradle of Casillus' arms right at this moment.

*Do you wish—wish—wish that I stay away—away—away?* Cthulhu's words conjured up impressions of vast gulfs of emptiness separating the monstrous creature from Gabriel.

*No, you misunderstand. I don't wish you away from ME*, Gabriel said then added, *Not—not exactly. You are awe-inspiring and—and well, frightening.* Another rumbling laugh came from the creature, as if it were pleased by his fear. *I want you to stay away from Johnson and the land. Johnson knows about you and the Mer. He may have a way to actually harm you.*

*Harm—harm—harm—forlorn soldier—captor—traitor—interloper—harm himself*, Cthulhu said.

Some of its words meant nothing to Gabriel. Captor? Traitor? What did it mean by those titles? Whatever it meant, it was clear that Cthulhu believed that the only person who would be harmed by their meeting would be Johnson. Gabriel, therefore, felt forced to tell Cthulhu his other reason for wanting the creature to stay far from land. Somehow he didn't think this reason would impress Cthulhu whatsoever.

*Even if Johnson can't harm you, you can harm everyone else if you make landfall. I don't want that.* Gabriel remembered Casillus' admonition that if Cthulhu came ashore it wouldn't just be Johnson, or even all the citizens of Ocean Side, but the whole of the Eastern seaboard that would be affected.

*Ignore your call—call—call?* Cthulhu sounded amused.

*I won't call. I won't be calling you. We're going to—*

*You will call.* No echoing then. Curt. Certain.

Gabriel was shocked into silence. Nothing could cause him to call Cthulhu to land! Nothing at all! He couldn't put at risk hundreds of thousands, no, more like *millions* of people by doing that. And yet Cthulhu was certain he would. Did the being see the future? Did it know something he did not?

*We're going to remove the statue from the temple*, Gabriel said after several long moments of silence between them. *We'll have it properly cared for in another of your temples. You won't be bothered by the humans.*

Cthulhu regarded him with silence again. This time it wasn't assent. Gabriel had the terrible feeling that the entity was simply biting its figurative lip to stop from laughing at him again.

Finally, Cthulhu did respond to him. It was a simple sentence. No echoes. Certainty once more dripped from it and Gabriel was chilled. Cthulhu said, *You will change your mind.*

# Chapter 8



## MATTER OF TRUST

Gabriel was about to protest Cthulhu's words when suddenly everything seemed to *swirl* like water running down a drain. He felt the tentacle that was fixed so snugly around him *tug*, almost as if it would pull him with it to wherever it was going. Panic flooded him, but then that tug was gone. Arms were around him once more. Casillus' arms. Cthulhu was gone, back into the depths of his mind.

*Gabriel? Is something wrong?* The Mer sounded very sleepy. Casillus was smiling dreamily at him.

Gabriel realized that both he and Casillus *had* been sleeping, and that both were now awake. He could feel the wisps of Casillus' brilliant sun-soaked dreams of them exploring underwater cave systems. He hoped that none of the darkness from his visitation from Cthulhu had drifted from his mind to the Mer's. He sensed that it had not.

The sunlight, though, wasn't only in Casillus' dreams. There was sunlight all around them. It streamed down from the surface and lit up everything a beautiful, brilliant neon blue. There was even a brightly colored reef in the distance. They were floating just beyond the drop off, and Gabriel was surprised to note that he *knew* where they were in relation to land. They were opposite the cottage.

*Gabriel?* Casillus' voice took on a hint of sharpness, of concern, when Gabriel didn't immediately answer him. His blue-green eyes were fully open now and regarding him with complete awareness.

Gabriel went to tell him about his meeting with Cthulhu, but he found he could not form the thoughts. They felt like they were being *strangled*, held back by ghostly *tentacles*. Instead, he found himself saying, *It's all right. I just woke up and—and we're so far out.*

Casillus glanced around them, perhaps realizing for the first time that the sandy bottom was a shadowy thing far below them. However, Gabriel was not afraid of the depths any longer. He felt completely at ease with them. After being in the deep darkness of his meeting with Cthulhu, no normal depths would ever frighten him again. But Casillus did not know that.

*Oh, Gabriel!* Casillus' face rose to look into his. He looked crushed, which caused Gabriel great guilt. *I forgot! When I had us swimming in the city, I needed to move us out into deeper water so that we would not risk hitting the sandbar and breaking the illusion! I had meant to bring us back nearer to land before I let the illusion fall. But I fell asleep! I'm—*

*Casillus, it's all right!* Gabriel interrupted. He could not bear to have the Mer believing that he was at fault for Gabriel's fear. Cthulhu might be restricting his ability to speak to Casillus about what really happened, but he wouldn't have the Mer feeling badly because of him. *Everything is fine. It was just a surprise. But I'm good. Really. I don't mind the depths at all. Let me show you.*

Although he did not wish to leave Casillus' arms, he needed to wipe any guilt the Mer felt away. He gently disengaged Casillus' arms from around his waist and drew back until a few feet of distance were between them. Casillus' hands reached towards him seemingly of their own volition. A look of uncertainty flashed across the Mer's face. But then Casillus resolutely brought his arms down to his sides, recognizing that he had to let Gabriel do this.

Gabriel smiled at him and then started swimming a circle around the Mer, diving below him and spinning above him before diving back down once more to kiss the Mer's inviting mouth. Casillus' earlier concerns for him vanished and he laughed delightedly at Gabriel's aquatic acrobatics. The Mer caught him around the waist and drew Gabriel firmly against him. As they kissed deeply, the darkness that was still clinging to his thoughts floated completely away.

After a few moments of this, Gabriel said reluctantly, *We should get back to the cottage. Corey will be there any minute with his reconnaissance.*

Even as Gabriel said it, he actually *felt* his best friend's mind for a moment. Corey wasn't in the van yet, but he was going there. He had news. A spurt of excitement ran through Gabriel when he realized he was *hearing* Corey's thoughts.

Casillus grinned as Gabriel shared this with him. *Already you are reaching out, Gabriel, and making connections. Your gift is very strong.*

Casillus had no idea how strong it had already become. Gabriel thought of the fact that he had Cthulhu lurking in a dark corner of his mind right now. He swallowed heavily, but refused to let it darken his mood. Once they got the statue out of the temple everyone would be safe, because Gabriel was *never* going to call Cthulhu to shore. Never, ever, ever.

*Should we go back to get your clothing on the beach?* Casillus asked tentatively. The way his nose scrunched up as he referred to Gabriel's clothes showed his preference that the young man *never* wear them again.

Gabriel stretched his mind out towards the cottage. Was his grandmother there? Because if she was, coming in naked would bring up questions that he wasn't quite ready to answer yet. Tomorrow he would tell her that he was a Mer, and that he was leaving her for the sea. He did not feel her presence inside. He then *knew* that she was not there. He really was beginning to get the knack of using his gift.

With all that in mind, Gabriel responded, *No, no need. I have plenty in the house, and since I'm only going to be out of the water for one more day or so I won't really need the ones I left behind.*

It both thrilled and saddened him to think of that, for as excited as he was to see *Emralis* and be with Aemrys again, he knew that a part of his heart would always be on land with Grace and Corey. Casillus heard his thoughts, but did not say anything. Instead, the Mer merely leaned in and kissed him gently. He understood.

Gabriel asked Casillus, *Will you wait out here until Corey comes or—*

*No*, Casillus said firmly. *I will stay with you.*

His desire to not be parted from Gabriel ever again passed over their bond. Gabriel smiled. The protectiveness was welcome. He felt so very loved and treasured.

*All right then. Let's go*, Gabriel said.

They began to swim leisurely towards shore. It was amazingly easy to keep up with Casillus while they swam above, below or to the side of one another. As they reached the sandbar and it became too shallow to swim, both got up and walked hand in hand out of the surf.

Sand covered the bottoms of their feet and dusted the tops. They mounted the steps to the back porch. There was a towel hanging on the porch railing. Gabriel grabbed it to knock off the sand from

both of their feet before they went inside. He didn't want to leave a trail of sand in the kitchen for his grandmother to find if she came home before he had a chance to clean up.

Casillus allowed Gabriel to lead him deeper into the house. Gabriel was amused at the Mer's delight in the color of the kitchen walls, the smoothness of the wooden banister and even the soft faded carpet in his bedroom. The Mer was squishing his toes in it as Gabriel threw on some clothes. They were going to be just in time, as he could sense Corey's impending arrival.

Gabriel glanced out the window in his bedroom that faced the driveway, intent on catching a glimpse of his best friend the moment he arrived. It wasn't until he heard the chugging sound of the van as it came up the road that Gabriel felt *others* with him. Gabriel straightened. If he had whiskers they would have quivered, for after the van pulled into the drive for the cottage, a battered SUV came up right behind it and parked.

*Gabriel, who are those people accompanying Corey?* Casillus asked as he joined Gabriel by the window.

Corey got out of the van and went to the driver's door of the SUV. The glare from the sun made it impossible for Gabriel to see who was inside. Corey was talking with them intently. He kept glancing up at the house.

Gabriel's brow furrowed as he "heard" snippets of the conversation Corey was having with the people inside the SUV. He said to Casillus, *He—he told them about me. About us.*

*But why would Corey do that?* Casillus sounded shocked and his eyes went wide in surprise and hurt. *He seemed so trustworthy.*

*He is trustworthy,* Gabriel responded firmly. *If he told them, there was a good reason. I just don't know what it is.*

At that moment, the doors of the SUV popped open. It was Greta and two young men. One was slightly pudgy and wore an orange bandanna over his hair. The color was so vibrant that Corey must have been jealous of it. The young man put a protective hand on Greta's shoulder and she glanced back at him. Gabriel sensed that he liked her while she thought of him only as a friend, at least for now. How he knew that was uncertain. Maybe his ability to connect had allowed him access to their minds without him actually having to hear specific thoughts. Gabriel wasn't sure how he felt about that. But then he looked at the other young man with them and he forgot about everything else.

This young man had black hair and a pale, pinched face. His dark eyes squinted as if he had been inside for a very long time, away from the light. He had been ill, was *still* ill, but it wasn't an illness of the body, not exactly. It was more one of the mind, but the body was failing under the mental duress. The young man looked up at Gabriel's window. Gabriel jerked back so that he was completely out of sight.

*Gabriel? What's wrong?* Casillus asked, one of his hands touching the center of Gabriel's back in concern.

*That guy. The one with the dark hair and eyes. That's Henry,* Gabriel said, his mouth feeling dry suddenly. The illness was his exposure to Cthulhu.

*He has been exposed to—*

*Yes, don't say its name. Please, don't,* Gabriel said quickly. Though Casillus was not a Caller, Gabriel still felt like it might be a risk even for him to say the creature's name.

Casillus glanced sharply at Gabriel in concern. *Gabriel, what is going on? I feel that you have not told me everything that has happened. Yet I have been with you this whole time except for when we—we slept. There was a moment then when I lost track of you—*

*Casillus, I can't—I want to—but I can't,* Gabriel managed to get out. His mind actually *hurt* just

saying that much.

Casillus' eyes widened further. *You are in distress!*

*You've no idea*, Gabriel said rather brokenly. *I want to share it all with you. Believe that. But I can't!*

The Mer studied him for several long, quiet moments, but then he nodded. *A Caller cannot always share their burdens. In some ways, they are alone.*

*Not alone. Never alone, unfortunately*, Gabriel responded. He could almost *feel* the shadow of Cthulhu's monstrous presence in his mind.

Casillus squeezed his shoulder. *I am here for you, Gabriel. I will do anything you need.*

Gabriel looked out the window at Henry and, suddenly, he knew what he had to do. *For now, Casillus, just stay here. Watch, but don't let yourself be seen. I have to talk to them.*

*All right*, Casillus agreed, even though Gabriel felt the Mer's desire to be right by his side.

Gabriel kissed the Mer. *You will be with me. It'll be all right. I just have to take care of this.*

He then quickly turned and left the bedroom. He knew that if he stayed with Casillus a moment longer he wouldn't leave. He clattered down the steps and immediately went outside. He plastered a smile on his face. He knew that Corey would recognize it as false, but none of the others would.

"Hey, guys. Well, this is a *surprise*. I didn't expect a *party* tonight," Gabriel said.

Corey swung around to face him. His pudgy face was creased in distress and misery. He hadn't wanted to bring them there. His voice was just as unhappy. "Gabe, I told them that we *really* weren't up for company tonight, but—"

"But we insisted." It was Henry who spoke. His voice was raspy and there was this strange, unnatural smile on his lips. "Well, *I* insisted, and that made Greta and Roger insist on coming along. They think I'm sick."

"Aren't you?" Gabriel found himself asking.

Another ill, slow smile crept across his pale, sweaty face. "Yes, yes, I suppose I am. It might even be fatal."

*Casillus, is there any way to help him?* Gabriel found himself asking.

There was a pause, but then the Mer answered, *It is said that a Caller can do so. But I do not know how and I assume that—*

*I don't know either. Damn. I don't think Henry has enough time for me to learn*, Gabriel responded miserably.

Henry smiled wider, showing off teeth that had a hint of pink overlaying them. Blood. He was bleeding inside. "You're asking your beloved about saving me. How kind of you. But you shouldn't bother yourself with that. Some things are just *inevitable*."

"How did you know what I was—was thinking?" Gabriel gasped.

Henry shrugged thin shoulders. "I just *know*. But really, that little bit of knowledge is not all that important."

Gabriel stared deeply into the young man's sickly face. His stomach fell into his feet even before he asked, "Then what is?"

"I know that *you will change your mind*," Henry said, echoing Cthulhu's words. "You will call Cthulhu to land. Johnson will have his showdown. And millions of people will die."

*The Story Concludes in The Merman book 5!*

# The Merman



BOOK 5 - LANDFALL

~ A PREVIEW ~



# Chapter 1



## NEW PLAN, SAME AS THE OLD PLAN BUT WITH GUNS

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

Henry's words seemed to hang in the air between them. Gabriel Braven's mouth went dry. His best friend Corey Rudman, usually a ball of fun and energy, looked rather bleak. His dark red hair and beard were stark against his suddenly too pale skin. Roger tightened his hold on Greta, who was looking over at Henry with a worried frown.

"Henry isn't well," Greta explained after the silence had stretched on far too long. "Ever since he went into the temple and was exposed to that terrible statue of Cthulhu, he hasn't been himself."

The temple was a strange, glowing, blue stone structure located in an ancient Native American settlement that had been unearthed by developers. Miskatonic University had sent Dr. Johnson Tims, an ex-military man now turned professor of archeology, down to investigate. He had brought Greta, Roger and Henry, along with other Miskatonic students, down with him. They had discovered that the temple was dedicated to a dread, many-tentacled and miles high being called Cthulhu who dwelt in the darkest depths of the ocean. Cthulhu's influence drove humans mad and eventually killed them. Henry had only been exposed to a statue of it, a black stone effigy that sucked in all of the light around it. Yet he was dying and maybe a little mad as well.

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

"You're not dying, Henry. You're going to get well," Greta said stoutly.

"I *am* dying, Greta. We *all* are, well, maybe not all of us. Mers live forever," Henry said with a half-smile.

Greta reached towards him and said, "Henry, you need to let us take you --"

"I need you to leave me alone!" Henry snapped, his feverish eyes blazing for a moment before fading into dullness again.

"Hey, dude, Greta's just trying to help," Roger said. There was an angry, almost disgusted glint

in his eyes as he looked at Henry. He also drew nearer to Greta, as if he wanted to show the other young man that Greta was his. There was evidently tension between the three Miskatonic University students that went deeper than just this showdown.

“If you all wish to ignore my words because I’m dying that’s your concern, I suppose,” Henry said. He bared his teeth as he let out a laugh and Gabriel again saw blood on his gray-looking gums. “Maybe ignoring me is the better course anyways. Maybe *ignorance* really is *bliss*. I wouldn’t know anymore. I can’t remember what it was like not to have all this information in my head that just wants to spill out like puke onto the sand.”

“What did Cth—it tell you?” Gabriel forced out through gritted teeth. He didn’t dare say the dread creature’s name because he was a Caller, a person who could by force of will call Cthulhu to fight on their behalf. But to call Cthulhu was never without a cost. In this case, the cost was that if Cthulhu made landfall then everyone on the Eastern seaboard would likely go crazy and die, because of the creature’s ability to corrupt. Gabriel was certain beyond certain that he would never call Cthulhu for that very reason, but the great god and Henry seemed to think otherwise. That made Gabriel wonder what exactly they knew that he didn’t.

Henry gave him an almost drunken smile. The slender young man looked ready to keel over. Gabriel was sure it wasn’t alcohol that made Henry weave like that, but weakness. Greta slipped out from under Roger’s protective hold to grab Henry’s arm. She stroked Henry’s back and, for one moment, the dark-haired young man didn’t look like a crazed zealot, but a frightened little boy.

“Greta, I didn’t mean ...” he began before stopping to cough into one of his hands. When he opened his hand and exposed his palm, it was stained bright red with blood. Greta pulled out a tissue to clean it off.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed, Henry. We need to get you to a hospital.” She looked over her shoulder at Roger for agreement, but he just shrugged as if he already knew that wasn’t going to happen.

Henry’s words confirmed that. “No hospitals, Greta!”

“But you look pretty bad,” Corey said, his brown eyes narrowing with concern.

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

Gabriel gasped. Henry clearly knew that he was transitioning into a creature called a Mer, a merman. Ancestors on both sides of his family had been the offspring of Mer and human interbreeding. In Gabriel, there had finally been enough merman DNA to trigger the change, for his body to turn into that of a merman’s. Being a Mer had many advantages: immortality, the ability to breathe underwater, and telepathic communication, to name a few. Yet it had one large disadvantage, at least for the newly transitioned Mer: being on land equaled death. Gabriel had only about a day left on land before he had to take to the water for years, perhaps decades. But before he left the land he had a few things he had to do. The most important of them was to get that statue of dread Cthulhu out of the temple and away from humanity where it could cause harm like it already had to Henry.

“You’re changing?” Gabriel asked.

Henry nodded. “Cthulhu is trying to make me into one of its servants, something that can survive underwater at great depths, but I don’t have Mer blood like you do. I’m a regular human. Or I *was* just a regular human. I won’t live through whatever this change is.”

He sounded almost sad, though not about the fact he was going to die, but the fact he wasn’t

going to get his chance to serve Cthulhu. That had Gabriel shuddering.

Gabriel didn't confirm or deny the truth about him being a Mer. He had only wanted to reveal it to Corey and his grandmother, but now it seemed like these students knew all about it. He just stared at Henry and wondered if there was any way to save him. "And this is happening *just* because you were in the temple with the statue?"

That didn't make sense. Greta, and likely Roger, had been around the statue as well and they weren't sick. Johnson Tims had also spent considerable time with it, but he wasn't ill either. At least not physically ill. Though thinking on the professor's obsession with Cthulhu -- and with Gabriel himself -- did not indicate a healthy mind. Greta had indicated that Johnson wasn't behaving normally either.

Another weary smile from Henry. "No, not just that. I thought I could connect with it like a Caller can."

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

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

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

*I don't really need to use the statue,* Gabriel thought to himself. *Cthulhu is in my head always. All I need is to reach out and ... and ... no, don't even think it!*

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

"Casillus! Umm, you ah—wow, you're—you're *here*, outside, where *everyone* can see ..."

Corey's voice drifted off as the Mer stopped in front of Johnson Tims' archeology students.

*Casillus?* Gabriel turned to fully face the Mer, speaking through their mental bond. The Mer's long dark hair was still damp and hanging in a long, silken rope down his back. The scrap of cloth that he wore loosely around his hips to identify his House and position was still plastered against his cock by water from their frolic in the ocean. Gabriel felt burst of possessiveness. He fought against the urge to cover the Mer up. But he knew that was foolish. Casillus was his forever. Other's opinions of him were irrelevant. Only Gabriel's appraisal meant anything to him. *What are you doing? You should have stayed inside!*

*There is no need to stay hidden any longer, Gabriel. Not with these people,* Casillus said as he put a protective, possessive arm around Gabriel's shoulders. *They already know. If Henry's words had not already confirmed it, you can see it on their faces.*

Gabriel swung around to stare at the three Miskatonic students. He realized that Casillus was right. Other than a few awe-struck looks from Greta and Roger, and a sickly smile from Henry, no one looked all that surprised to see Casillus. They obviously knew about the Mers. They believed in mermen. They were just amazed from seeing the proof of their beliefs in the flesh, not to mention Casillus' beauty and grace.

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

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

“Can I just say that although everyone here is playing it pretty cool, I took the news particularly well? I was cool as a cucumber and I didn’t know Mers existed at all before meeting Casillus” Corey said with a smile as he linked his hands over his massive Buddha belly. “I was speechless for only a minute or so and my jaw dropped to the floor like once.”

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

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

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

During his and Corey’s tour of the settlement, Gabriel had started having visions of what had happened there between the Mers and the Native American tribe they were allied with. After countless years of co-habitation and procreation, a war had broken out. The Mers and the half-Mer offspring were killed by the tribe, who turned on them, but then the Native Americans themselves were killed when Cthulhu came to land and destroyed them. After experiencing these visions, Gabriel’s eyes had temporarily changed from human to their Mer form, giving him irises and pupils much larger than a human’s. Greta had seen and recognized the change. She had then stopped her professor from noticing and helped distract him so that Gabriel and Corey could get away without him seeing.

“I—I think we all need some beer,” Gabriel said, swallowing shallowly. “Why don’t we all talk out on the back porch? You guys go on in and Corey, Casillus and I will be right in after you.”

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

“It’s just a few steps, Henry. Roger and I will help you,” she said.

She and Roger draped his arms over their shoulders and practically carried him up the stairs and into the house. Gabriel thought about his own weakness when he was out of the water too long. Though he and Casillus had been swimming all afternoon and his T-shirt still clung damply to his back, his breathing already felt slightly forced. Henry wasn’t just out of breath, though. He looked *drained* of life.

*He is dying,* Casillus said simply and sadly. *And his fate will seem kind if Cthulhu truly is brought to land.*

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

*Twice? Did Cthulhu speak to you?* Casillus was suddenly gripping his shoulders. The Mer’s eyes looked rather wild.

Cthulhu had talked to Gabriel in a dream after Gabriel and Casillus had made love in the ocean. It had said exactly what Henry had, but it had not allowed Gabriel to tell Casillus about the meeting when he woke, but now the stricture seemed partially gone. *I couldn’t tell you. It wouldn’t let me,*

*and even now it feels like my throat is being squeezed by one of its tentacles when I try to talk about it.*

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

*It wasn't precious for sure, Casillus. Trust me on that. And it's not by choice that I'm not telling you even what it did tell me. I'm going to speak to C—to IT about restricting me in this way. I won't allow it.* Gabriel was angry at Cthulhu's interference with him, and he knew it showed in his expression.

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

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

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

Which was why if Gabriel merely called on Cthulhu to come to land to destroy one person his request could and most likely *would* be ignored. If it *did* come it would destroy the one person, but then it would also destroy as many other people as it could. *I know. I just don't understand why it doesn't come on land, regardless of me Calling it*

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

Gabriel reached out and squeezed Corey's pudgy shoulder. "Yeah, it's fine." But then he narrowed his eyes at the other young man. "Though we weren't exactly expecting *company*." Gabriel tilted his head towards the house where the three students had disappeared.

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

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

"I ran across them while I was snooping around the settlement," Corey explained, his hands gripping the sides of his very bright yellow T-shirt. "Roger and Greta were trying to stop Henry from going back into the temple."

"That doesn't seem very hard considering how ill he is," Gabriel said.

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

*It is the obsession,* Casillus responded. *It gives those exposed to Cthulhu great strength and speed if what they are doing is what Cthulhu wishes.*

*Oh great, so Henry could do other crazy things?*

Yes, Casillus said, tightening his hold on Gabriel. *He could if Cthulhu wills it.*

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

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

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

*Corey is very brave. He is to be commended,* Casillus said.

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

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

"Stopping Henry from harming himself even more was right," Gabriel agreed.

Corey then grimaced. "But after that, I sort of had to explain what I was doing there. I lied, but they seemed to know the truth anyways. And Greta has this *look* she gives you, and I knew that they would want to help, so I told them about our plan to take the statue out of Johnson's reach. And I'm glad I did for at least one big reason."

"What reason?" Gabriel asked.

"While Johnson isn't supposed to be at the temple tonight, his *goons* are," Corey said.

*Goons?* Casillus tilted his head in surprise.

"What goons, Corey?" Gabriel didn't like the sound of that.

"Johnson convinced Miskatonic to hire some of his old military buddies to guard the site at night," Corey explained. "They have *guns*. There's even supposed to be a sniper."

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

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

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

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

"Also, beer," Corey said gravely and rubbed his stomach.

"And beer," Gabriel laughed.

**If you enjoyed *The Merman – Book 4: Undersea*, 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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In exchange for sanctuary in Neo-Tokyo, Tristan Price is sold into service to a mysterious, handsome yakuza heir. The clan values his status as a survivor of Ghost, a mysterious killer disease of possibly supernatural origins.

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*Modern fairy tale, shapeshifters.*

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### The Dark Earth

*High fantasy, elves & magic.*

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### Readers as partners

Raythe Reign was built on the principle that our readers are our partners. Members are involved in the creation process as much as possible. One of the major ways we do this is with our comment system.

Each chapter is uploaded as soon as the last word is written -- even if it's in the dark hours of the morning! The minute it's posted to the website, Raythe Reign members have the ability to comment and discuss it. This usually results in lively conversations, which is a lot of fun for everyone involved. Raythe reads each and every one of the comments and usually responds!

### No waiting!

Finished, edited novels are wonderful, but they take a long time to release. Our in-house editor is meticulous and leaves no stone unturned... which means that we're often months away from our next book release. (And yes, that means the stories on the site are NOT edited. The members told us that more stories with more typos was far better than less stories that were edited.)

We're happy to be able to offer our readers the option of the membership. Each month brings you 12 chapters, two for each serial story, so that your favorite story in the lineup is *guaranteed* to get updated. This way, readers don't to wait such a long time for a story to be edited and rewritten!

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### Try us out

We have a special trial offer for new members -- a month for just \$.01. We wanted to give people the chance to experience everything Raythe Reign has to offer for very low risk.

Just use coupon code D1475348 on the signup form here:

<http://raythereign.com/membership/signup.php>

If you'd like more information about our membership, we have an entire site dedicated to helping you explore the options, including previews of our most popular stories and our (sometimes rabble-rousing) blog. Visit the "welcome site" here:

<http://welcome.raythereign.com>

- Raythe Reign Team

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