

SOUL OF A MERMAN



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FAIRYTALE
ENDINGS

Author's Note

Fairy tales notoriously have happy endings. Except when they don't. There are a lot of fairy tales out there that didn't end as happily as is commonly believed. As a hopeless romantic, I have decided it is my sworn duty to give these fairy tales a happily-ever-after. Thank you for joining me on this journey.

Prologue

“SISTER, YOU must listen to us. All you have to do is stab your human and you will be able to return to the ocean with us.”

Curling onto the rock and miraculously managing to avoid getting wet, Caspiana looked at her bald sisters, then at the dagger they’d placed in her hands. They’d traded their beautiful hair to the Sea Witch to obtain this one weapon that could give her another chance at life, that might free her from her burden.

Caspiana stole a look toward the palace and closed her eyes. She could still remember the sight of the prince—her prince—beaming at his new wife as they exchanged vows. She had even watched them as they’d slipped into their new quarters, and her heart had broken when she’d realized he would never love her.

Everything had been in vain. She had given up her voice and her freedom to swim in the depths of the ocean. She had danced for him, suffering excruciating pain just so she could see his smile. But it had been her choice, her vain hope that he would see who she was regardless of the barrier that separated them. No one could force love, and in the end, she had been a fool to believe the only thing that stood between them was her fish tail.

In spite of everything, though, she couldn’t kill him. No matter what her grandmother had told her, Caspiana believed she had a soul too, otherwise she wouldn’t have felt so broken now.

With an inaudible sigh, she returned the dagger to her sisters. “I am sorry,” she mouthed. “I cannot do as you ask. I still love him.”

“But Caspiana,” her eldest sister protested, “if you don’t, you’ll die. You’ll turn into sea foam.”

“I know.”

That didn’t sound like such a bad fate, really. At the very least, she would return to the ocean, within it, in the liquid womb of the sea that had

birthed her.

Blowing her sisters a last kiss, Caspiana leapt off the rock and into the water. She felt the moment when the curse took effect. Slowly, painlessly, her body disintegrated, melting into sea foam—and into tears of sorrow.

Chapter One

Two hundred years later

CASPIAN PLOPPED down onto the rock, swinging his tail fin back and forth in an absent motion. In the distance, the thunder rumbled, signaling the approach of a storm. Closing his eyes, he pressed his cheek to the cool rock and shuddered.

“I hate this, Phil,” he said. “I mean, I love the surface, but I’m not the only mer like that, right?”

“Not at all,” the dolphin replied. “In fact, as far as my mother tells me, your great-aunt was very—”

Caspian cut off the dolphin with an ugly look. “I don’t want to hear about her. Over and over, your great-aunt did this, your great-aunt did that. Father never gets tired of telling me the stories. I just don’t understand. Why must I sit here and wait for a human to drop by so I can fall in love with him? It’s ridiculous.”

“It’s in the curse,” Phil pointed out unhelpfully. “The only way Caspiana’s sorrow will disappear is if one of her bloodline gains the love of a human.”

“And to do that, I’m supposed to sacrifice my tail.” Caspian snorted. “As if I’d ever do that willingly.”

Phil released a whistle-like laugh, which suited his seemingly always-mirthful face. “And yet, here you are, waiting.”

Caspian would have wept—according to Phil humans did that when they were sad—but merfolk had no tears. “It’s not like I can refuse,” he whispered back. “The ocean is dying. You know it as well as I do, Phil. Every day I hear the protesting cries of the fish, of the whales, of the corals. And it’s all my responsibility. I inherited my great-aunt’s voice. I have to save us.”

Phil nudged Caspian with his snout. “Don’t be sad, Caspian. Her story is not yours. You’ve saved humans before, and nothing happened.”

Caspian looked up at the horizon again and wondered what he truly wanted. Yes, he had pulled a lot of people from the ocean’s waters. Men, women, and children. He’d used his voice to make them forget about him, because none of them had called to him in turn.

He was supposed to fall in love with a human he rescued from a shipwreck. But how did that work really? In Atlantis, mer had elaborate rituals for getting to know one another before they could even discuss the distant possibility of kissing and mating. And yet, Caspian’s destiny had been branded with “love at first sight.” Contrary to what mer had once believed, they did have souls, and Caspian didn’t feel like his was for sale.

He didn’t trust it. He didn’t trust humans either, because they were the ones pushing him into this, not only his father. They polluted the water, preyed on the ocean’s resources, and left only devastation behind. How could Caspian love someone like that?

“Well, at the very least, I get to speak to you,” he told Phil. “And as an added bonus, I’m building up a nice tan.”

“You have to be careful, though,” Phil reminded him. “Remember last time you stayed out of the ocean for too long. You were crying and screaming because your scales hurt.”

Caspian grimaced. That was true. The stories of his Great-Aunt Caspiana had never said how much the scorching-hot sun could hurt. Without a doubt its rays were beautiful, but when they attacked Caspian’s sensitive skin and his even more sensitive scales, they didn’t seem that way.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to worry about that anymore. The storm clouds had swallowed the face of the merciless bright sphere. Lightning flashed through the sky, and Caspian took that as his cue to retreat into the safety of the ocean.

The moment Caspian slid into the water, though, a distant humming reached his ears. Watching the skyline, Caspian hid behind the rock in the hope of staying out of sight and evading the wrath of nature. It proved to be quite an effort, since the storm at last exploded over the sea. The waves brutally struck the rock, but Caspian sang under his breath, keeping himself and Phil safe from the elements. The water enclosed him in a protective embrace, like a mother holding her child.

At last Caspian saw what he'd been waiting for. A swirling dot appeared on the horizon, plunging rapidly from the sky.

"It's one of their vehicles. I believe the humans call this one a...." Phil paused as he scrutinized his memory. "A plane!" he finally provided.

Caspian frowned, peeking over the edge of the rock. Phil had mentioned planes before, as had Caspian's father and brothers. On occasion Caspian had even heard the peculiar inventions flying in the clouds above his head. So far, he'd never seen one up close, but he suspected its rapid plunge didn't bode well for the future of those inside.

"It's not supposed to be doing that swirling thing, right?" he asked Phil.

Phil shook his head—insofar as a dolphin could do that. "It's crashing," he pointed out.

Caspian and Phil abandoned their rocky haven and swam toward the general area of the plane.

"You've saved people from crashing planes before, right?" Caspian asked.

Phil released a concerned whistle. "Planes tend to break when they impact with the water. I'm not sure it's safe for us to approach."

Caspian stubbornly swam forward. Phil had a point. The plane was falling at an alarming speed, and once it hit the ocean, its momentum would destroy it. But Caspian couldn't just hide in the safety of the water. There had to be something he could do.

"Caspian!" Phil tried to draw his attention. "You're supposed to save humans from boats, not planes. Your father never asked you to risk your life."

Again, Caspian ignored his dolphin friend.

"Caspian, we can call on your brothers. They're nearby. Please, stop this."

"They're too far," Caspian replied. "They'll never make it."

In response, Phil started to whistle and click, although this time he wasn't talking to Caspian. In spite of the roar of the storm, Caspian could hear other dolphins responding to Phil's call. They would alert Caspian's brothers, who always stood by to prevent any harm coming to him while he attempted to find his destiny.

Through the water, Caspian heard his brothers talking to him. “Don’t you dare approach that plane, Caspian,” his eldest brother, Aquan, said. “It’s too risky. Wait until we’ve joined you.”

But Caspian didn’t wait. He wasn’t rash in his approach either—Poseidon only knew that getting himself killed wouldn’t help anyone, the humans inside the plane included. However, he had no intention of backing out now. If only he had a real idea of how to help the passengers. He might be able to tame the wild waves with his voice, but he could not affect the forces of gravity.

Fortunately, just as the plane plummeted to its doom, a man jumped out of the aircraft. A white bubble-like thing opened behind him, slowing his fall. “There,” Phil said, “he’ll be safe. Now let’s swim away before the plane crashes on our heads.”

Caspian might have been inclined to do that, except the fire coming from the sides of the plane somehow hit the strange bubble. The man began to fall at great speed once again, and Caspian realized this was his cue to intervene.

The moment the human hit the water, Caspian dove down after him. He swam faster than he ever had in his life, and at last found his target in the murky depths of the unsettled ocean. The man had tried to save himself, but he ended up tangled in the material of the bubble that was meant to rescue him. To top it off, he seemed to be bleeding, although Caspian couldn’t find the wound. He could, however, feel the sharks approaching.

As quickly as possible, Caspian wrapped his arms around the human’s waist and began to pull him up. At first the man flailed, attempting to push Caspian away. It made the bubble’s cloth wrap around Caspian’s tail, but he dislodged it with practiced ease. By the time he’d done that, however, the human had gone very still in his arms. *Oh no.*

Caspian pulled the human to the surface and dragged him toward the rock. As humans went, this one was pretty heavy, his bulk easily doubling Caspian’s size. Still, Caspian’s mer strength ensured that he had no real trouble reaching his destination. Phil showed up and helped Caspian with the human. Together they lifted the stranger onto the rock.

Sadly the storm still raged, and the man remained unconscious. Caspian leapt onto the rock and climbed on top of the human. It couldn’t be

helped. If the stranger died because of the time he'd spent underwater, all this would have been for naught.

With no hesitation, Caspian pressed his lips to the human's, forcing air into the man's lungs. He'd never been able to understand why the foolish creatures hadn't adapted to have gills. Gills were so much more practical.

Pulling away, he hit the man's chest, then repeated the process several more times. It felt too intimate and an awful lot like kissing, but Caspian carefully kept his tail away from the human. After all, even if the man didn't belong to Caspian's species, the two of them touching like that would be completely inappropriate. Mermen only ever kissed their true loves, their life mates, and Caspian had no intention of granting such an honor to this stranger.

At last, the injured human reacted to Caspian's ministrations. He coughed and spluttered, desperately taking in air—and mercifully not spitting on Caspian in the process. He seemed well enough now. Caspian could entrust him to Phil, who would take him closer to the shore. Once there, the human would be safe and within reach of others of his kind who could give him medical assistance.

"It's all right," he whispered in a singsong voice that would soothe the stranger. "You're safe now."

The man's body began to grow limp again, and Caspian congratulated himself for a job well done. Alas, he'd been hasty in his assessment, because the stranger suddenly went rigid. Before Caspian even knew what was going on, the human flipped them over and pinned Caspian to the rock, immobilizing Caspian's hands with a single, powerful grip. Somehow the man managed to straddle his tail, trapping Caspian with his larger body.

"What happened?" the human asked. "Who are you?"

Caspian could have easily pushed him off. His mer strength guaranteed that a mere human would never be able to hurt him. But for some reason, his body froze. He couldn't believe what was happening. He couldn't even use his voice to help or to call the ocean to his aid. It seemed impossible that, on a rock in the middle of the sea, a lone, injured human could defeat a mer, but there it was.

When Caspian didn't answer, the human began to become aware of the differences between them. He frowned, then palmed the upper part of Caspian's tail, where humanlike skin melted into scales. The human blinked

several times, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. "What in the world? A fish tail? Am I dreaming?"

As the human's fingers slid over Caspian's scales, Caspian finally snapped out of his trance. He broke free of the man's hold and pushed him off. The stranger fell back onto the rock, and Caspian leapt into the water.

Behind him he heard the human shouting, "Hey! Wait!"

Caspian closed his eyes and kept swimming, his body still buzzing with apprehension and fear. No one had ever touched him there, and it scared him. It scared him so much that he barely registered Phil's presence by his side, and he definitely didn't notice his brothers until he ran straight into a solid wall of mer muscle.

Rubbing his nose, Caspian swam back.

"Caspian, what happened?" Aquan asked, instantly registering Caspian's agitation.

"The human.... Th-The human touched my tail."

Aquan said nothing at first. He tightened his hand around his spear and clenched his jaw. He might have gone to the surface to attack the human, but his dolphin, a female named Marilla, nudged him with her snout.

Seemingly calming down, Aquan wrapped his arm around Caspian's waist. "It's all right, little brother," he said. "Let's go home. You're going to be fine."

Caspian nodded, but as he looked toward the surface, he thought he could still hear the human calling out to him.

"I SWEAR it was a mermaid. Well, a merman. You have to believe me, Stefan. I'm not lying."

Stefan nodded as he bandaged his brother's arm. "Uh-huh. Sure, I believe you. And did this merman do anything? Perhaps started singing children's songs?"

Rick scowled fiercely. "You're not taking me seriously. He didn't say anything, but.... Shit, Stefan, I'm telling you, it was amazing. He had this long, flowing hair and these beautiful blue eyes."

Stefan rolled his eyes. "And I'm guessing he had a green tail, right?"

"Well, I only saw it for a moment, but yeah," Rick said. "How did you know?"

“Jesus, Rick,” Stefan said. “You’ve just described the Little Mermaid—in male form. I think you’ve hit your head one too many times. I told you to stop with the extreme sports crap. And that dinky little plane? What in the world were you thinking? You could have been killed!”

As usual, Rick shrugged off Stefan’s words. “For your information, Stefan, he had green hair. Not that it matters. I have to go back there,” he said. “I have to find him. An actual merman, Stefan! Do you realize what that means? He could grant us a wish.”

Stefan at last finished wrapping the bandage around Rick’s arm and wondered why in the world he’d been the one to have all the sense in their little family. Some things simply couldn’t be changed, and the wish both Rick and Stefan had would never be fulfilled.

“You’re a grown man, Rick,” Stefan told his brother. “I know what happened hurt you deeply, but you have to stop living in the past. Constantly putting your life in danger won’t change anything, and this merman of yours won’t make you forget about Robert, or change the fact that he’s gone.”

Rick clenched his jaw. “And what would you know of it, Stefan? You weren’t even there when he died. You were off playing Captain Planet as usual.”

Stefan didn’t answer. That was true. He hadn’t been at his brother’s side when Rick had needed him most. When Rick’s then partner Robert had died in a boating accident, Stefan had been away with his job at USEPA—the US Environmental Protection Agency—trying to control the effects of a serious oil spill. By the time he’d gotten home, it had been too late to even say good-bye or have some sort of closure. To this day, Rick loathed him for it. Hell, they only lived together because of Rick’s inability to hold on to a job.

Heavy silence fell as Stefan gathered his medical supplies and put them into the first aid kit. He looked out the window of their home. Night had fallen over the ocean, silent and dark, black like Robert’s eyes had been. Robert, who had grown tired of Stefan’s excuses and too-long work hours, and left with his brother.

Robert, who was gone forever.

Rick didn’t apologize for his words. Robert’s death and Stefan’s history with the man would always be a point of contention between them.

“If you have any sort of brotherly love for me, and if you cared for Robert at all, you’ll come with me to find the merman. You owe me that, at least.”

Stefan bit the inside of his cheek so hard it bled. “I’ll come with you,” he said without turning, “but not because I owe you. I’m going to prove to you that your mer is an illusion, and when we come home, I’m taking you to get some professional help.”

The only reply he received was the sound of the slamming door. Stefan leaned against the cool glass of the window and sighed heavily. “Oh, Robert.... Why did you have to die?”

Chapter Two

WHEN CASPIAN'S father summoned him to the throne room, Caspian knew he was in trouble. He'd been sulking in his room, singing to the sea for the past several hours, waiting for the unavoidable. As he desolately swam out of his quarters, he wished he could just run away and pretend he didn't feel the burden of the responsibilities on his shoulders.

The moment he entered the throne room, it became more than obvious that he would not be able to do so anytime soon. "Your brother told me you saved a human from drowning," King Nereus began.

Caspian had known that would come back to bite him in the fins. "So what, Father? How is that new? I've saved humans before. Besides, dolphins do it all the time. You don't see Phil marrying humans, right?"

"Caspian, you forget your position, and mine," Nereus pointed out, not sounding very angry. "I'm sure Phil would have told you that he hardly ever approaches plane crashes. And rescued humans definitely don't grope his tail."

Caspian winced. Obviously Aquan had reported his thoughtless words to their father. "It doesn't mean anything," he said. "He was dizzy from his ordeal. He probably doesn't even remember me."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

The sphere through which the king of the seas monitored all activity within his domain manifested in front of Nereus and glowed brightly. It displayed a clear image of a man swimming through the depths. He was using the equipment humans often did when they ventured deep below the surface, and it covered most of his face. Nonetheless, Caspian still recognized him as the same man he'd saved from the plane crash.

"Caspian, this could be it," Nereus said. "He could be the man to help us save the ocean, to break the curse. You have to go to him."

"And what then, Father? What am I to do? The Sea Witch approach didn't work so well in the past, did it?"

Nereus frowned. "Of course I don't want you to go to the Sea Witch. But you're a very beautiful, very resourceful young man. You can make him fall in love with you. The day the two of you are wed, the ocean will be saved."

Caspian's shoulders slumped. "I don't want to do this, Father. I don't believe in a love that's not earned."

For a few moments, his father didn't speak. Nereus could order him into compliance if he so chose. He wasn't only Caspian's father, but also his king. But his father seemed to have no intentions to issue orders today. Instead, he sighed.

"I would save you this pain if I could. Your mother entrusted you and your brothers to me, and it breaks my heart to have to force you into such a union. But, my dear child, our people are dying out too. Your mother.... She tried to help the ocean. She went out every single time, trying to help the water whenever the humans hurt it. It killed her." Nereus's blue eyes turned stormy, like the ocean during a terrible hurricane. "I would destroy them all if I could. I would flood the entire world." His dolphin appeared from behind his throne, and Nereus slowly calmed down. "But you know as well as I do that death only ever brings death, and pain only ever breeds pain. It is love we need now, Caspian."

Caspian stared down at his hands, hating himself with every fiber of his being. "I don't love this man," he replied.

"All right," his father said. "Nonetheless, try to meet with him. If he's not the one, you can sing to him and make him forget about our existence. Remember that the secrecy of our world remains of utmost importance."

In the end, Caspian could go against a command, but he couldn't ignore what he knew to be right. That was what hurt most. He truly did hear the pain of the ocean and realized that if there was even the slightest chance he might be able to help, he had to make the attempt. His father might be powerful, but the sorrow of Caspian's great-aunt had fallen heavily upon Atlantis as well.

"I will go," Caspian promised. "But I don't know if this is the man who's supposed to help rescue the ocean. I can't promise you that he'll provide the answers we seek."

King Nereus hugged him tightly. "You're a better son than I deserve. I know you will find a way."

STEFAN LEANED against the bulwark of the boat and idly watched his brother diving again and again into the depths of the ocean. Just like Rick had wanted, they'd come here to attempt to find the nonexistent Little Mermaid doppelganger. It was a waste of Stefan's time, but since he'd agreed to it, he allowed himself to relax and enjoy the pleasant sea breeze.

The ocean had become silent and peaceful after the storm. Stefan loved these quiet times, when he could take in the smell of salt and freedom, when he could look out into the distance and see only water. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of motion next to the boat, but it was only a dolphin, performing one of its amusing but highly intelligent dances.

"Hey there, guy," Stefan greeted the dolphin with a chuckle.

It said "hi" back by shooting a stream of water through its blowhole and making a few whistling noises.

As the dolphin approached him, Stefan leaned slightly over the rail. He knew all too well that dolphins were wild predators, but this particular one had come to him of its own accord. It seemed friendly, and if Stefan had to guess, it must be accustomed to humans, at least to some extent.

Stefan petted the dolphin's snout, and the sea creature released a sound that Stefan could have sworn was laughter. Unfortunately Rick chose this exact moment to interrupt them and emerged from the water.

"What are you doing, Stefan?" he asked as he removed his scuba mask. "Help me look."

The dolphin whistled in protest and dove back into the water, splashing Rick's face. As Rick spluttered and gave the sea mammal the finger—and wasn't that an interesting gesture to make toward a dolphin—Stefan shook his head.

"I said I'd come with you, but I never agreed to playing along with your ridiculous game."

"You're just being stubborn," Rick pointed out, disregarding the dolphin that was now porpoising in the distance. "You know as well as I do that I can't go too deep, even with the scuba gear. We need the diving suit."

Stefan resigned himself to the inevitable. The sooner he proved to Rick his idiotic merman didn't exist, the faster they could go back home. He was

loath to use the Newtsuit for such purposes, since he couldn't afford making repairs to it if something broke. However, Rick wouldn't have asked him along at all if he hadn't anticipated the possibility of needing it, and he wouldn't give up even if Stefan refused.

"Fine. One hour. After that we're going home, and in the morning, we'll get you scheduled for a psychiatrist visit."

He was about to retrieve his atmospheric diving suit from the depths of his boat when the unlikeliest thing happened. A head covered in moist, blue-green curls emerged from the water. Stefan froze, simply staring, his world going a little fuzzy around the edges. It couldn't be.... Could it? The blue-eyed beauty had to be some unlucky swimmer, one with a very interesting hairstylist, yes, but definitely not a merman.

His knees kind of went weak when the body attached to the head emerged as well. The new arrival lifted himself up to the deck of the boat using just the strength of his arms. Even if he simply leaned against the protective railing of the deck without actually progressing past it, his actions still revealed an emerald green fish tail. Stefan had the urge to take off his glasses and wipe them clean—because he really couldn't be seeing this.

At first no one spoke. The strange creature looked from Rick—who remained in the water—to Stefan, holding on tightly to the railing of the boat like he was trying to keep himself anchored there. Stefan had no idea what had prompted the beautiful being to come to them, but God, he wished.... He really wished he could touch him. *No*. He needed to get a grip. This was not the time for Stefan's neglected libido to nudge him, especially not toward someone of a different species. This was the discovery of a lifetime. And really, given that the merman had just propped what would have been his ass against the deck, he could slide back into the water at any moment, at which point Stefan would lose him.

If another civilization existed in the depths, they might have a solution to the problems Stefan had been fighting for three quarters of his adult life. Toxic waste pollution, oil spills, garbage dumping—the oceans were suffering, and Stefan knew it. As an oceanographer, he'd tried to do his part in controlling it, but he wasn't the Captain Planet his brother accused him of being, and his insistent efforts had proven to be uncomfortable for his bosses—who had their own, more "practical" interests.

He had to be careful so as not to startle this marvel of nature. Obviously his brother didn't have such qualms, because he exploded at Stefan. "See, I told you I saw a merman." He glowered at Stefan, then swam back toward the boat, approaching the merman—*shit, the merman!*

"Hello. I'm Rick." When the creature just watched him warily, Rick brought his hand to his chest and repeated his name more slowly. "Rick. Me. That's. My. Name. Rick."

Stefan had the distant thought that his brother looked like an idiot while trying to talk to the quiet merman. The creature didn't seem very impressed, either, and didn't mimic Rick's words like Rick undoubtedly wanted.

With a tremulous smile, Rick insisted, "Me. Rick." Pointing to the merman, he asked, "You? What's your name?"

The merman didn't display any interest in communicating with them. At last Rick appeared to lose his patience and reached for the merman's tail—that lay dangling over the edge of the deck, within Rick's reach. Rick seemed fascinated with it, as his gaze had gone to the shining green scales more than once.

Before Rick could reach his goal, Stefan's dolphin friend appeared out of nowhere, slamming straight into Rick and keeping him from touching the merman. Rick fell back, and Stefan cursed, more than aware that angry dolphins could and had killed people before.

The dolphin released threatening clicking noises, no longer seeming all that friendly.

"It's okay, guy," Stefan tried to say as he leaned over the edge to help his brother. "I'm just going to get this idiot out of your hair. All right?"

A soft whistle came, not from the dolphin, but rather from the merman. The dolphin backed away, taking position next to the still watchful merman. The interaction fascinated Stefan, and it made him want to ask a million questions, which would probably be ignored.

For the moment what mattered was that he managed to retrieve Rick from the water successfully. His brother spouted curses and insults—vicious ones directed at the dolphin and its mother. Stefan guided him to sit down and peeled off his scuba suit to look him over. "I'm fine," Rick grumbled at him, wincing. "Dolphin didn't hit me all that hard."

Stefan palmed his brother's ribs, watching his face closely as the man took a couple of deep, shuddering breaths. He found no protruding bones, so his brother's injury was unlikely to be life threatening. Nevertheless, cracked or bruised ribs were still something that needed to be dealt with carefully, lest it grow into a more serious affliction. "Be that as it may, you might want to lie down for a while. I'll get you some painkillers and ice, and you can go below deck for a while."

"Are you kidding me?" Rick glowered at Stefan and shot to his feet. "I always knew you blamed me for your own failure to hold on to the best thing that happened to your ungrateful ass. But I don't care about that. I'm not going to allow you to—"

A soft melody filled the air, more beautiful than any symphony that had graced human halls. Rick's eyes rolled in his head, and he swayed on his feet. He'd have undoubtedly fallen, but Stefan managed to catch him at the last moment. Stefan grunted, making a mental note to tell his brother to lose some weight if he planned to swoon a lot in the future. Not that he could blame him. The song.... That beautiful song. It was simply spellbinding. Stefan wanted nothing more than to lose himself to it forever. Maybe he'd have done exactly that, but it would have been unpleasant and embarrassing if he'd dropped his already unconscious brother.

Slowly, carefully, Stefan set Rick down on the deck chaise longue. He took a couple of deep breaths and removed his glasses, then wiped them clean with his shirt. When he put them back on, he looked back at the spot where the merman had been. *Still there. Thank fuck.*

All right, Stefan needed to find something, anything he could tell the creature. Any moment now the beautiful being would leave, and Stefan would lose his chance. First of all he had to learn if the merman's voice had something to do with Rick fainting. After all, he couldn't risk Rick's dizzy spell meaning he had internal bleeding.

"You have my apologies," Stefan began, "for my brother's idiotic behavior. I gather it's rude for someone to try to touch your tail? Did you knock him out with your voice?"

The merman didn't answer, simply looking at Stefan with eyes so blue Stefan could easily get lost in them.

"I appreciate you calling off your dolphin," Stefan continued. Still faced with silence, he asked, "Can you give me a sign if you can

understand? I feel like an idiot, rambling here without knowing if I'm even getting through to you."

When the reply came, Stefan almost thought he'd imagined it.

"Phil," the merman said softly.

His speaking voice was like the whisper of the waves on a particularly calm evening, the mating call of the whales, and the laughter of the wind put together in a package that would be understandable for the human mind. By some miracle, Stefan managed to suppress a moan at the sound. *Focus, Stefan. This is important. You have to give this beautiful creature a good impression of the human race.* Rick's rant had obviously upset the merman, so Stefan needed to fix it. Of course, that would have been easier if Stefan had actually understood what the merman meant.

Thankfully his strange companion must have noticed Stefan's confusion.

"The dolphin's name is Phil," the merman elaborated. "He wanted me to tell you. He likes you. He says you're one of the good humans. And yes, your brother will be fine. I merely enchanted him with my voice, and Phil was careful not to harm him too seriously."

"Oh." Stefan didn't even know what to address first, the merman's magic powers, his ability to communicate with the dolphin beyond the level of master-pet, or the fact that they'd been communicating about him. Maybe he should say something nice in turn.

Clearing his throat, he threw a look toward the dolphin. "Hi, Phil. Thanks for not killing my brother."

The dolphin waved its—his—fins and released a few more of those angry-sounding whistles. The merman proceeded to translate.

"He says that he respects life, but if your brother tries to touch me again, he might go against that rule."

"Fair enough." Stefan cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the topic and more than ever aware that he was talking with a freaking merman, and one who had a magical voice, no less. It also occurred to him that, in spite of his obvious discomfort, the beautiful creature hadn't left. "If I may ask, why did you come to the surface anyway? You could have stayed underwater. If you and your people have remained hidden until now, you'd have been safe. No one would have believed Rick."

The merman licked his lips, which drew Stefan's attention to his pretty pink tongue. Stefan's cock strained against his zipper, and he forced himself to ignore it. He sat down on the edge of the deck, careful not to invade the merman's personal space, while still remaining close enough to encourage conversation.

"It's... complicated," the merman said, stealing a look back at the unconscious Rick. "I should have probably gone, but... I'm not really sure why I stayed."

Stefan didn't want to analyze too deeply why his heart had started to race. Instead, he offered the merman his warmest smile. "Well, I'm glad you did. I'm Stefan, by the way, Stefan Firth. I have the dubious honor of being Rick's brother, so I really must thank you for helping him earlier. He can get very reckless sometimes."

Stefan extended his hand in greeting, then nearly pulled it back when he realized that, for all he knew, merman mores didn't include shaking hands. Much to his shock, though, after a few moments of vacillation, his companion took him up on his offer.

"I'm Caspian," the merman said as he squeezed Stefan's palm. "You might have heard about my great-aunt, Caspiana. Your people call her the Little Mermaid."

The merman's grip turned out to be strong, if a little hesitant. His skin felt pleasantly warm to the touch, which surprised Stefan a little, given the whole fish tail thing. He did, however, have a weblike membrane between his fingers. Stefan barely managed to get a real feel of these strange, yet fascinating features before the merman withdrew his hand.

Losing the warmth of the merman's touch physically hurt, but also snapped Stefan's brain back into gear. "The Little Mermaid?" he repeated in disbelief. "The fairy-tale Little Mermaid?"

Caspian laughed, a crystalline, mellifluous sound that held no amusement. "Yes, that one. Phil told me there are stories about her now."

"Wait a minute," Stefan replied, his mind whirling. "You mean to tell me she was real?"

"Yes," Caspian replied with a nod, fidgeting as he seemingly tried to get himself more comfortable. "She was very much real."

It occurred to Stefan that Caspian had been sitting on the very edge of the deck for quite a while. The position couldn't be very easy to hold, since the space at the other side of the bulwark wasn't very generous, not designed for someone to actually stay there. Caspian had largely been holding himself up through the strength of his arms by using the railing as support, but there had to be another way. Stefan didn't think that inviting the merman inside the actual boat would go over well, so instead he said, "I'd love to hear the story, if you want to tell me. But first do you want to slip back into the ocean? I can join you. I'm a good swimmer."

Caspian blinked, as if surprised by Stefan's offer. He didn't immediately answer, and Stefan cursed himself for pushing, for making it seem like he wanted to grope Caspian. Well, he did, but he had no intention to act on his impulses. His patience was rewarded, though, when Caspian nodded. "All right, Stefan. I'll wait for you on the rock."

He pointed at the large rock nearby, the very same one where Rick had been when Stefan had found him. Stefan did his best not to come in his jeans at the way his name sounded on Caspian's lips, although he must have succeeded just because Caspian finally leapt into the ocean.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, Stefan slid down onto the deck. He started doing breathing exercises, trying to clear his head and telling himself that he needed to be calm. He pinched his arm as hard as he could and found that, no, he wasn't dreaming. If this was real, if Stefan hadn't fallen into some sort of elaborate hallucination, he had to get a grip and act like the levelheaded guy he'd always been.

Following a task list always helped, as did taking one step at a time. First Stefan went below deck. He carefully set his glasses aside and changed out of his jeans and polo and into his wetsuit. He noted with some dismay that one problem of his current outfit was that it pointed out his obscenely protruding erection.

"He's a merman," he reminded it. "He doesn't even have a human dick, for crying out loud."

The disobedient member just twitched stubbornly, and Stefan surrendered the battle. He hoped it wouldn't be very visible, as long as he stayed with his lower half beneath the surface. The water might have been cool enough to fix his problem, but the wet suit kept him thermally protected, so he wouldn't have help in that regard.

Stefan returned to the deck and put on his flippers. With practiced ease, he slid into the water, only to be intercepted by a certain dolphin.

For all of Caspian's words that the sea mammal liked him, the dolphin didn't seem particularly fond of him now. In fact, he nudged Stefan with his snout, as if warning him to keep his hands to himself.

Stefan had the feeling the dolphin knew exactly what he was thinking. "I know, okay, Phil? I'm sorry, but I can't help it. I promise I won't act on it."

Phil eyed him with a dose of what Stefan identified as skepticism—although Stefan couldn't have said how he managed to have any sort of expression at all. In the end, Phil must have decided that Stefan was worthy of some trust. He escorted Stefan to the rock where Caspian lay in wait, artfully draped over the stone. Really, he almost seemed to be posing, like a model for a particularly vivid merman painting—crossed with *The Thinker*. Stefan could tell Caspian wasn't even doing it on purpose. He was just... there, on his belly, flipping his tail back, staring out into the distance, his hair flowing on his white back in a cascade of blue-green curls, which Stefan desperately wanted to touch.

As he swam closer, Caspian turned toward him and smiled. He actually smiled. Stefan's dick twitched painfully, enthusiastically rising to the occasion. Stefan reminded himself that this would just be a conversation and that by rights Caspian hadn't come here for him, but for his brother.

"Thank you," Caspian began. "Your boat is pretty nice, but I much prefer it down here."

"I can understand that," Stefan replied, leaning against the edge of the rock. "There's something about the ocean that's always enchanted me. But you must know that better than I ever would." He paused, realizing he must be rambling. "Damn, I can't believe I'm talking to an honest-to-God merman. You know, my brother wanted to find you because he thought you can grant wishes."

"Sorry, but I can't. Life would be so much easier for all of us if I could." Caspian peered closer to his face, like he was examining a particularly interesting specimen of insect. "Where are your...." He hesitated, as if uncertain, and glanced toward the dolphin. Phil made some whistling sounds, and Caspian released a victorious sound. "Your glasses!"

“I left them on the boat,” Stefan replied, fascinated by the exchange. “Did Phil just tell you that?”

“Yes,” Caspian answered. “For obvious reasons, it’s not safe for us to approach human shores on a regular basis. Although we do come to the surface, we’ve found it is not sufficient for the purpose of our research on humans. So, the dolphins go in our stead, and they teach us things about your people.”

“That’s....” Ingenious. Amazing. A little hurtful. Stefan wondered how many dolphins that he’d thought were his friends because of his approachable character had come to him just to analyze him as a specimen.

“You’re upset,” Caspian guessed, sliding a little closer to Stefan.

“Maybe a little,” Stefan admitted. “I’ve always been fascinated with sea life, and sea mammals in particular. I love to spend time with them, especially with dolphins. I kind of thought they liked me back.” He laughed awkwardly, embarrassed to admit that the animals had been the best friends he’d ever had. “I suppose I should have known better.”

Caspian snorted, while Phil nudged Stefan with his snout.

“You’re being silly. Dolphins have their own minds, and they never spend time with someone they don’t like. So if a dolphin came to you, he or she must have liked you. Phil does. Proof in point, he allowed you to get close to me.”

That was true, and Stefan wanted to kick himself for falling into self-pity for something so ridiculous. He was supposed to impress Caspian with his intelligence and articulate nature, not complain over his lack of friends. *God.*

“I suppose he did,” Stefan said. “I apologize. It’s just that.... Simply meeting you has been... staggering. I thought I knew so much about the ocean. I’ve been studying it all my life. And now I realize that I actually know so very little.”

Caspian perked up. “You study the ocean? How so?”

“I’m an oceanographer,” Stefan explained. “I used to work for an environmental agency that handled oil spills and toxicity in the ocean. Basically, I monitored the composition of seawater, the extent to which a certain event affects sea life, and what needed to be done when something particularly serious happened.” And now he was rambling again. No one

ever liked to hear about his job, especially since it took—or had taken—up so much of his time.

This time around, he didn't get a blank stare from his companion. Instead, Caspian's eyes widened, and Phil began to excitedly dance around them. Stefan had the feeling that he was missing something very important. "What? What did I say?"

In response, Caspian leapt into his arms, hugging him tightly, so close that Stefan could feel every single muscle in the merman's body. The damn wetsuit kept their bodies from coming into contact, but Caspian couldn't have missed Stefan's hard cock.

If the merman did notice, he didn't seem to mind. Instead, he said, "It's you. I knew it. It's you. I've finally found you."

Stefan had no idea what Caspian was talking about, but he allowed himself the luxury to embrace Caspian back. A part of him wondered what exactly he'd gotten himself into, but when he held Caspian's slender form in his arms, he couldn't care less.

Chapter Three

CASPIAN COULDN'T believe it. After all this time, after countless arguments with his father and brothers and so many sessions of silent crying, he'd finally found the man meant to be his true love. Stefan Firth.

His mind whirled with the weight of it as he impulsively hugged Stefan. When he'd seen the man whom he'd rescued from the plane crash—and especially when the human had tried to grope him again—Caspian hadn't entertained too many hopes that his trip to the surface would be a success. But then, the rescued human's brother, Stefan, had approached him. He'd apologized for his brother and had noticed Caspian's discomfort. He showed interest in Caspian's plight, and he was fond of sea creatures.

Caspian didn't love him—but he certainly thought he could. The human already drew him, in terms of physical attraction. Stefan's wetsuit revealed a very nice set of muscles. He wasn't bulky per se, but his toned physique spoke of an active life, and probably a lot of time spent swimming. He smelled nice, like the fresh sea breeze, masculinity, and human warmth. His gray eyes missed nothing, and even the strange glasses—as Phil had called the peculiar adornment—appealed to Caspian. His dark hair had a few streaks of gray through it, and some odd lines creased the skin of his face, but Caspian didn't mind. They were tiny details that made him... real.

Most importantly, Stefan loved the ocean. He would understand Caspian's quest to break the curse. He would agree to help. Caspian just knew it. Phil apparently agreed, because he was doing his dolphin victory dance, enthusing over their success. "You've done it, Caspian," he said. "You've found him."

It was a small moment of perfection. With Phil splashing water over them and the warmth of Stefan's arms around him, Caspian truly felt at peace, and so very safe. He would have loved to hold Stefan forever—and be held by him—but something hard kept poking against the sensitive scales of his upper tail. With great reluctance, he pulled away from the

human. He had to admit he felt a little embarrassed about his enthusiasm. He'd just met the man. Even if Stefan was, indeed, his true love, Caspian had to preserve a modicum of decorum. He was King Nereus's son, after all, and a prince of Atlantis.

Stefan shot him a confused, dazed glance that finally made Caspian realize how strange this entire scene must be to the human. "Please, sit here, next to me," Caspian said as he returned to his position on the rock. "I will explain."

Stefan wordlessly complied. Caspian licked his lips and considered his words. It was hard to explain to a human what Caspian had known—and had been fighting against—for more years than he could count.

"Remember when I said the Little Mermaid in your fairy tales truly existed? You might know that when she was betrayed by her human, her heart broke."

"And she died and turned into an air spirit," Stefan said. "At least in the original story. I gather things didn't actually happen that way."

Caspian shook his head. "As I said earlier, she was my great-aunt. Her real name was Caspiana—hence *my* name. And when she died, her sorrow cursed the ocean, and since then all sorts of cataclysms have plagued us. Atlantis is dying too. My own mother was killed while trying to fight an oil spill. It's... it's terrible."

Stefan took Caspian's hand and squeezed it comfortingly. "I'm so sorry to hear that. I wish I could say more, but.... Damn, I'm sorry."

Caspian held on to Stefan's palm, finding strength in the warm, callused hold. Behind Stefan, Phil stopped his dancing and tried to tell Caspian something, but Caspian ignored him. He continued to speak, telling Stefan everything that burdened his soul. "I have her voice, my great-aunt's magical voice, that is. The only way to break the curse is for me to live out her love story, to the happy ending. I'm supposed to fall in love with a human I rescue, and together we can save the ocean." He paused and met Stefan's stormy gray eyes. "When your brother came for me, my father thought he was the one. I went along with it, even if in my heart, I knew the truth. And then I met you—and you love the ocean, and you want to save it, just like I do. You're him. My true love."

Caspian didn't know what answer he'd expected from Stefan—perhaps similar enthusiasm on the human's part. A million emotions flickered

through Stefan's eyes, but before Caspian could even figure out what any of it meant, Stefan pulled away from him.

"Caspian... I understand that you want to save the ocean. I want that too. God only knows it's what I've been fighting for. But this whole thing—the pollution, the toxicity—it isn't some magical curse. It isn't sorrow. It is, plainly put, the cruelty and thoughtlessness of my kind."

Caspian shook his head. "I realize that, but it doesn't make the curse untrue. My great-aunt's sorrow drained the ocean of strength. There's no denying it."

Stefan sighed. "Oh, Caspian. I don't know anything about curses. I'm a scientist. But I have seen what lies beyond the oceans, and where the lives of the sea creatures become bargaining chips. It's in the offices of fuel companies that often ignore all environmental norms—simply because of money. Those are the cold, hard facts. Whenever a sea creature dies in an oil spill, it's not a curse that kills it—but greed."

"Greed is a curse," Caspian argued.

"Metaphorically speaking, perhaps," Stefan agreed, "but we're not talking metaphors. An actual magic curse? I'm sorry, Caspian, but I don't believe it."

Caspian struggled to take in what Stefan was saying. He shouldn't be taking the human's words as rejection. They didn't even know each other well enough for Caspian to be hurt by Stefan's refusal. And yet, a part of him reeled from the obvious dismissal in Stefan's words.

"He doesn't understand, Caspian," Phil said sadly. "He doesn't hear the song of the ocean. You shouldn't have told him."

Caspian at last remembered his father's words. *You're a very beautiful, very resourceful young man. You can make him fall in love with you.* He'd approached this all wrong. He should have seduced Stefan, made Stefan desire him to the point of madness. He might have been able to build upon that lust, to form a real relationship with the human. Admittedly, he hadn't studied human anatomy all that closely, since he'd always thought there would be more than enough time after he found his true love. Now, he'd have to handle the problem with what little information he had at his disposal.

Decision made, Caspian pressed his body to Stefan's and wrapped his arms around the human's neck. "It doesn't even have to be about the curse

at all,” he whispered in Stefan’s ear. “It can just be about us.”

Caspian bit down on Stefan’s earlobe, finding its rounded shape very interesting. The human shuddered, releasing a very promising groan. Caspian smiled. Yes, he could do this. He could convince Stefan that they were meant to be.

He rubbed his tail against Stefan’s groin, the way he would have done if his lover had been a merman like him. The hard thing prodded him again, and Caspian distantly remembered that dolphins had something like that behind their genital slits. The hard thing could be the sign of Stefan’s excitement. That seemed promising.

The scent of pheromones spread into the water, teasing Caspian’s nostrils, confirming his guess. His heart hammering, unable to believe he was doing this, Caspian slipped his hand between their bodies to find what he’d mentally dubbed Stefan’s arousal.

Even through the wet suit, the area emanated a shocking amount of heat, so much so that Caspian almost felt afraid it would scorch his scales like the sun did. Mermen were so different from humans; they truly were. But these differences didn’t frighten Caspian. Instead, he experienced the strange urge to undo the material of Stefan’s garment and explore the human’s nether regions with his tongue. Sometimes merfolk did that to each other, licking the scales of their tails in an act that preceded copulation and, in the case of males and females, reproduction. Maybe the humans had something similar.

But Caspian didn’t have the daring or the experience to try something like that. He was, however, tempted to taste Stefan’s mouth. The human’s lips were so close to his now, so much so that they were practically sharing breath. Besides, that way, he’d truly know. His kiss would tell him if Stefan truly was the man for him, if they were meant to be together like the curse demanded.

As Caspian gathered the courage to cross the inches between them, Stefan broke free from their embrace. It felt so abrupt that Caspian was still reeling from it when the human started to explain.

“No. I know why you’re doing this, but I won’t let you.”

Caspian gave Stefan a confused look. “Stefan... I don’t understand. You... you like me. Don’t you?”

The human slowly started to swim away. "You're such a beautiful, perfect creature. Being with you... it would be like a dream. But you don't really want this. You just think you do, out of the duty you have toward the ocean. You deserve better than this, Caspian."

Caspian couldn't believe his ears. It hadn't worked. He'd botched this too, and now Stefan despised him. "You... you don't understand," he tried to say. "I want to be with you."

Stefan shook his head, already heading toward his boat. Caspian shared a panicked look with Phil, and the dolphin swam on ahead, blocking Stefan's way and whistling in obvious alarm.

"You can't go," Phil was saying. "You have to stay with Caspian."

Stefan couldn't have understood what the dolphin was saying, but he nonetheless patted Phil's snout. "Take care of Caspian for me, okay, guy? I think he's going to need your help."

As the human navigated around Phil, Caspian leapt off the rock and followed Stefan. "It's you I need, Stefan," he argued. "I'm sorry if I made it sound like I wanted to use you. It's not like that. The curse is real, and we can break it together."

Stefan used the ladder attached to the side of the boat to climb onto the deck. He didn't even look at Caspian, completely focused on what he was doing. Caspian had one last chance, a single card he could play. He hated using his voice to push Stefan into staying, but he needed to try. "Please," he sang, "please don't go."

He melted all of the emotion in his heart into his song, everything Stefan made him feel and which Caspian himself couldn't understand. The sea became restless at his call, its waves crashing against the vessel alarmingly. In the distance, whales sang back, trying to comfort him.

Stefan hesitated. He leaned against the bulwark, not speaking, not turning. Caspian used this chance to prop himself on the edge of the boat, like he had before. "Stay with me, Stefan," he continued to sing. "Hear me out."

At last, the human pivoted on his heel and looked at Caspian. His jaw clenched, and his eyes filled with unshed tears, but Stefan nonetheless said, "I want nothing more than to stay, my beautiful merman. But you have to think about what you're saying. You don't love me, Caspian. You don't even know me. And... I don't love you."

Caspian really did recoil in shock at that. He let go of the edge of the boat, slipping back into the safety and comfort of the water. As he listened to the vessel depart, Caspian lingered there, Stefan's words still echoing in his mind. Phil came to his side, and Caspian hugged his dolphin tightly.

"Oh, Phil," he whispered. "Father never told me that finding one's true love would hurt so much."

THE MOMENT Stefan said the cruel phrase, he immediately regretted it. He wanted to take it back, but he couldn't encourage Caspian. And so, without looking back, he started the boat and headed back to port.

They were halfway home when Rick emerged from below deck. "What happened?" he asked, moving slowly in deference to his bruised ribs. "I feel like I had a less than pleasant meeting with a two-by-four."

Stefan narrowed his eyes at his brother. "You mean you don't remember?"

"Remember what?" Rick asked. "Seriously, tell me. The last thing I recall is plunging into the water and getting tangled in my parachute."

Shit. Rick hadn't only forgotten about his run-in with Phil the dolphin. The entire day had been wiped from his memory. Well, Stefan didn't plan on sharing his knowledge of the merman's world with his brother. He had to find the right excuse that would explain their reasons for being out here again. After all, people had seen them in town before they'd left for the second time. He couldn't claim he was just returning from retrieving his stupid brother.

"Well, somehow, you must have made your way to a rock, and you lay here until I managed to find you," Stefan explained. "It wasn't exactly easy, but thankfully, a guy I know in the Coast Guard saw your plane crash, and together we tracked you down."

"Oh," Rick said. "So I take it that's why my ribs hurt."

Damn it. Stefan simply couldn't think of anything that would justify their second trip out to the ocean. He'd just have to do some damage control when they reached the shore. "Yeah," he replied. "You were out there for quite some time."

"I guess I got pretty lucky that you found me at all," Rick replied. "Damn, it's already getting dark."

Stefan chose not to address that. Instead he said, “We’ll be home in half an hour or so. There are some pain pills in the first aid kit to tide you over until then.”

Rick grunted and made a beeline for the box with the red cross on it. As his brother swallowed down several analgesics, Stefan focused on guiding the boat through the now restless waters. He couldn’t help but think that the somewhat angry waves were caused by Stefan’s own words.

By the time they reached Ford York, Rick was doped out on pain pills and pretty much high. Stefan locked everything down—he had the atmospheric diving suit still on board, and it was expensive as shit. After he tied the boat down, he helped his brother onto the shore. The dock guard waved at them, and Stefan waved back but didn’t stop.

Several other men and women greeted them and gave them knowing, pitying glances. They’d moved to the small coastal town shortly after Robert’s death, when Stefan had lost his job and the memories had become too much to bear. Stefan had wanted a new beginning, but Rick sometimes went on drinking binges, and when he did so, he pretty much spilled everything that had happened—including Stefan’s history with Rick’s partner. Mercifully, they’d had no problems with homophobes, but Stefan still resented Rick for airing their dirty laundry in public.

After what seemed like forever, Stefan reached the small house they shared, which was mercifully close to the dock. He helped Rick to the bed, pulled off his brother’s boots, and tucked him in. At last satisfied with the fact that his idiot brother was safe, Stefan left Rick’s bedroom and retreated into his haven, the small lab where he always fled when he couldn’t handle the world anymore.

Before he’d lost everything, Stefan had held a pretty lucrative position that had allowed him to build a tiny research laboratory and even acquire the Newtsuit. He wasn’t rich per se. In fact, his funds were dwindling alarmingly. But he still got some royalties from the publisher with whom he’d placed his most elaborate studies on marine life, so they got by. At least for now.

Usually the lab helped distract him. Research had always been Stefan’s first love. Through the microscope he could see pieces of the ocean the naked eye couldn’t reveal. Now though, as he took in all the fish tanks, the sketches, maps, and plans—he could only think of Caspian.

Stefan took off his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. “Did I do the right thing? Should I have listened?”

Even as he asked himself this question, Stefan knew he’d had no other choice. Mermen were one thing—Stefan still had trouble believing it, and he’d seen Caspian with his own eyes, held him in his arms, and almost kissed his full red lips. That was bad enough—but actually trusting Caspian’s words of a curse? No, he couldn’t do that.

Sure, by all accounts, if mermen existed, so could magic. Stefan could have been open to hearing the details—if he hadn’t worked all his life trying to control the neglectful nature of man. It always came down to one thing, a very simple thing, which had very little to do with the sorrow of a long-dead mermaid. *Money*. The world ran the way it did because of money, and true love, even if it did exist, couldn’t change that.

Still, perhaps he could have been more tactful with Caspian. Perhaps fate had brought them together for a reason. Even if Stefan couldn’t work the magic Caspian sought, together they might be able to find a way to help the ocean.

Maybe for that reason, the walls of the house started to close in on him. After checking on his brother—who now slept silently and peacefully—one last time, he left the house and headed down to the beach. The moon rose over the now still waters, and Stefan plopped down on the sand, looking up at its pale face. He remembered the tale of the Little Mermaid and wondered how many other things humans had gotten wrong.

“Are you even real, Caspian?” he couldn’t help but ask the ocean. “Did I just imagine you? Am I losing my mind?”

Now that he lay here on the shore, the earlier episode seemed far too incredible to be true. He knew what he had experienced, but a part of him—that part that remained purely a scientist—couldn’t help but wonder if he hadn’t been the one to have an elaborate illusion.

The sound of splashing water startled Stefan from his thoughts. He looked up, half expecting it to be some sort of fish approaching the shore, maybe even a dolphin. Instead he saw Caspian, perched on a nearby rock, his tail under the water.

Stefan’s eyes widened. He remembered what the merman had said about it being risky for him to approach the shores, and he couldn’t believe Caspian had taken such a serious risk, just for him.

He shot to his feet and ran into the water, ignoring the way his clothes got soaked and weighed him down. “You shouldn’t have come,” Stefan told Caspian. “If anyone should see you....”

“I will sing to them, and they will forget,” Caspian said. “Anyway, Phil is keeping an eye out. He will warn me if anyone approaches.”

The merman met him halfway and swam around him with nigh impossible grace. “The ocean spoke to me,” he added. “I was going to return to Atlantis, but I heard your question, and I had to tell you I was real.”

In the light of the moon, Caspian’s green scales shone like tiny emeralds. Stefan wanted nothing more than to kiss the sweet merman’s lips. “Caspian, this is crazy. Surely you must realize it.”

Unable to control himself, Stefan reached for Caspian’s long flowing hair. As he pushed back the merman’s curls, two perky ears finally came into view. They didn’t look like human ears, but more like fish fins, cute and tiny, formed from a membrane very similar to the one between Caspian’s fingers. The sight fascinated Stefan so much he had to force himself to let go. Clearing his throat, he added, “If there’s anything I’ve learned from the story about your great-aunt, it’s that humans and merfolk don’t mix.”

“That doesn’t matter anymore,” Caspian said. “We wouldn’t make the same mistakes they did. We could learn from the past.”

“And how would that work exactly? If I remember correctly, you’d sacrifice your beautiful tail to even come to me, and go through great pain to add to that.”

“There is a remnant from my great-aunt’s spell,” Caspian replied. “It would allow me to change my tail into legs like yours—as long as I did it for the man I loved. We’d just have to kiss.”

A kiss? Stefan wanted to laugh, because that sort of thing was a children’s story. Hell, not even Caspian sounded very convinced of that. Making fun of Caspian’s ways would have been cruel, though. Instead, Stefan shook his head and cupped Caspian’s cheek gently. “You might want to have an answer for everything, Caspian, but you don’t want to give up your life in the ocean. And I love the seas too much to deprive them of your presence.”

Caspian opened his mouth, obviously intending to protest again. Stefan pressed his finger to Caspian's lips, shushing him. "No, Caspian. I will do my best to help you. Together, we might be able to find a solution for the problems in the ocean. But it'll be with you as a mer, and me as a human." As much as it pained him to admit, Stefan couldn't offer Caspian the love the merman needed. "You deserve better," he said again.

Caspian's shoulders slumped. He didn't acknowledge Stefan's refusal. Instead, he said, "I'll speak to my father. Maybe there is a way your science and ours can blend. I'll come back tomorrow."

Stefan simply nodded. He wanted to say more, to express every single emotion in his heart, but he couldn't speak. Caspian melted back into the depths of the ocean without another word. Stefan told himself he'd done the right thing, even if a small part of him—perhaps his treacherous heart—disagreed.

IN THE darkness of the marshlands, the Sea Witch smirked as she watched the exchange between the little merman and his human. Chortling, she petted the sea snake curling around her neck.

Prince Caspian had already become quite attached to the human who called himself Stefan Firth. In no time, Caspian would fall in love—just like his great-aunt had—and he'd learn how selfish, self-centered, and cruel humans could be.

"This situation has a lot of potential, my pet," she told the sea snake. "There might be a fountain of power just waiting for me to take it."

The snake hissed in reply, and the Sea Witch's grin widened. "My thoughts exactly, my dear. But we cannot hurry. Let's wait and see what happens. The little merman will need our help any moment now."

Chapter Four

JUST LIKE he'd promised Stefan, Caspian did come back. Every single night without fail, he met with the human on the beach, in the same spot they'd come together that first evening and which Caspian had deemed "theirs." They spoke about many things—Stefan's theories on safer fuel use and his reports on illegal toxic waste dumping. In turn, Caspian brought information from his father, explanations on what the humans' activities did to the ocean. They debated the possibility of coming up with alternative fuel sources based on merman resources, but in the end decided that would be stirring up a whole new sack of problems they didn't need.

With every day that passed, though, Caspian's yearning for Stefan increased more and more. He found himself staring at the way Stefan would push his glasses back when he spoke, or the energy in his gestures when he explained something he was particularly passionate about. On occasion they would temporarily set their mission aside, and those were the moments that Caspian treasured most, when Stefan would take off his glasses, and they'd go swimming together, with Phil frolicking nearby. Or when Caspian would sit down and tell Stefan stories of Atlantis, and the human would listen raptly, all the while glancing at Caspian like he was the most fascinating thing in the world. Other times, he would talk about the human world, and Caspian would listen.

In spite of Stefan's less-than-encouraging words, it became incredibly hard for Caspian to focus just on the task the human had found for them. He hadn't pushed Stefan with the true love thing ever since the human had told him that they couldn't have that kind of relationship, but Poseidon only knew, he wanted to.

Three weeks after his first meeting with Stefan, Caspian found himself swimming toward his mother's grave. He'd been very young when she'd died, and so he didn't remember her well. However, when he came to her tomb, he always felt like he could feel her hand in his hair, like a shadow of her gentleness lingered to help him, even after all this time.

To be true, the grave was more of a monument than anything else. Merfolk turned into sea foam when they died, but the ones they left behind always felt it necessary to have something that would mark their passing. Located in the palace gardens and surrounded by beautiful ocean flora, the graveyard of the royal family held Caspiana's tomb, and that of her grandparents, her parents, and of course, her sisters. Caspiana's eldest sister had actually been Caspian's grandmother, although Caspian had never known her. She and the rest of her siblings had died before their time too, having foregone a part of their lives when they'd given their hair to the Sea Witch. Their monuments alone lingered behind, sad reminders of what had been lost.

Today, Caspian felt the need to be here, in this place that held so much history. "Oh, Mother," he said as he sat down on a seashell bench next to the grave, "I'm confused. Should things truly have gone this way? What am I supposed to do?"

It was a rhetorical question, and Caspian did not expect a reply. When an answer came nonetheless, he nearly jumped off the bench.

"You should pursue your love for the human, of course," an unfamiliar voice said.

Caspian turned, only to see a hooded mermaid approaching him. "Who are you and what are you doing in the royal graveyard?" Caspian snapped at her. "This is a private area. You shouldn't be here."

He was about to call the guards when the mermaid sat down next to him. "Your mother can't help you, little merman," she said. "However, I can."

Colorful fishes moved around her rainbow-colored tail in a dazzling display of life. The sight distracted him, and he might have been inclined to reach out and pet them had a niggling at the back of his mind not warned him about this new arrival. "You're the Sea Witch!" he said as realization dawned. "Vile creature. Leave this place at once."

The ocean's power rose around him in response to his anger. How dare she taint the graveyard with her presence? She was the guilty party behind many of these deaths, and the reason why the ocean was suffering. Caspian wanted nothing more than to cleanse the sea of her poison.

The Sea Witch didn't seem very intimidated. She just shook her head and calmly said, "Settle down, little merman. Hear me out. You wanted to

know what to do about your human, right? I came in response to your request.”

“I never asked anything of you,” Caspian replied. “I know all too well that such requests only end in tragedy.”

“They did in the past, yes,” the Sea Witch admitted, “but that was not solely my fault. Your great-aunt trusted a man who didn’t love her back, and in the end, she didn’t have the courage to enact revenge upon him. You can’t blame me for the exchange she agreed to. She came to me, my little merman. Remember that.”

Caspian gritted his teeth, fuming at the witch’s gall. “You manipulated her. You knew how things would turn out, and you pushed her toward death. You cut her tongue and stole her voice.”

The Sea Witch’s tail twitched, like she was agitated. “Her voice was my price, and she agreed to it,” she said defensively. “I never forced her into anything. But anyway, I’m not here to talk about the past, but the future. Your future.”

“I’ll make my own decisions, thank you very much,” Caspian answered. “Leave now and don’t ever return.”

“Are you quite certain? I can give you the answers you seek. I could tell you how you can make the human love you.”

Caspian didn’t want to hear any more. The creature had betrayed his great-aunt, and she would undoubtedly do the same to Caspian if he even considered dealing with her. And yet.... No one in the palace knew what to tell him. His brothers looked at him impotently when Caspian asked for suggestions, and his father was even less help. Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to listen to what the witch had to say. After all, he didn’t have to agree to anything if he didn’t want to.

Even as he thought this, an alarmed Phil swam to his side, positioning himself between Caspian and the Sea Witch, all the while releasing angry whistling sounds. “Stay away, you witch. I won’t let you hurt Caspian.”

The Sea Witch just ignored him. “Do you truly want me to go, Prince Caspian? Are you so sure you won’t need the information I have to offer?”

Caspian hesitated, and the witch caught on to his moment of vulnerability. “Tell you what,” she said. “I’ll give you a little present, as a sign of my goodwill—completely free of charge. I’ll show you what humans need so they will love another.”

From her cloak, she retrieved something that seemed to be a book. Caspian had seen human books before, although they never lasted long in seawater.

“Go ahead,” the Sea Witch said. “Take it. It’s enchanted so it can be read in the water.”

“Let me,” Phil said, snatching the book from the witch before Caspian could even reach out. The Sea Witch’s fish fretted in agitation at Phil’s actions, but Caspian smiled at the loyal dolphin.

“Thank you,” he said as Phil passed him the slender book.

Not knowing what to expect, but somehow still breathless with anticipation, Caspian started flipping through the book. At first he couldn’t really figure out what he was looking at, but then his mind made the connection between the oil-slick bodies and jutting shafts on the paper, and Stefan’s arousal. His own body heated up, his heart starting to race. “W-What is this?”

“Informative, isn’t it? Humans call it a porn magazine,” the Sea Witch explained.

“P-Porn?” Caspian repeated without looking away from the magazine.

“It depicts the desires of men—in this case, homosexual men, humans who desire the same gender.”

Caspian quickly closed the magazine. He couldn’t look at such images with the Sea Witch present, and particularly not here, in the royal graveyard.

The Sea Witch laughed lightly as if guessing his thoughts. “Take your time with it, little merman. I will come back soon.”

She flicked her fingers and her body melted into that of a rainbow-colored fish. Before Caspian could even think of summoning the guards, she was already swimming away and disappearing into the distance.

Phil tried to grab the book and take it from Caspian. Caspian saved it from the dolphin’s jaws and held it closely to his chest. Without looking back, he quickly swam out of the graveyard. Phil trailed behind him, moving his fins the way he did when he got agitated.

“You shouldn’t let her get to you,” Phil said. “She’s merely trying to manipulate you, just like she did with Caspiana.”

“Maybe,” Caspian said, “but the book is real. Even I can tell that. I haven’t made any deals with the Sea Witch, but this... porn thing might

give me a clue on what I should do with Stefan.”

Phil looked at Caspian miserably. “I’m worried for you, Caspian. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

In spite of all the turmoil and uncertainty, Caspian couldn’t help but hug his friend and guardian. All merfolk had dolphin guardians, but for some reason, Caspian had always felt Phil was special. “Thanks,” he said. “I promise I’ll be careful.”

Phil released a whistle that in dolphin language translated as a sigh. “All right,” he said. “Go on ahead. I’ll look around and keep watch so the Sea Witch doesn’t come back.”

Caspian kissed his friend right next to the dolphin’s blowhole, then swam away. He found a hiding place in the gardens behind a large orange coral, and curled down on the ocean floor with his prize.

He’d just gotten a little glimpse of its pages before, but now, as he pored over every explicit illustration, he could only be thankful that he’d chosen privacy to do it. His tail suddenly felt very hot, and Caspian rubbed his upper scales, biting his lower lip to suppress a moan. He was looking at an image that starred two naked human males, one of whom had his partner’s rigid shaft inside his mouth. It was exactly what Caspian had wanted to do with Stefan, and he could very easily imagine himself in that man’s place.

As he looked at every single picture in the book, he touched himself furiously, and his scales buzzed with sexual energy unlike anything he’d ever felt in his life. He’d masturbated before, because certain areas of his tail were very sensitive, and merboys were very curious. But having the strange book changed everything. After a while, he didn’t even see naked strangers there, but Stefan, always Stefan, and on occasion even himself. They would be kissing, their bodies entwined, their passion rising to unprecedented peaks. Stefan would hold him just like that very first day, and oh, it would be so good, so right. Caspian just knew it.

His tail went rigid, the opening between his tail fins clenching as he spent his seed into the water all around him. He arched his back against the coral, miraculously managing not to cry out and draw the attention of half the palace with his voice.

When his arousal died down, Caspian could finally think and realized what he hadn’t wanted to accept. All the men in the magazine had legs—not

fish tails or anything like that. Well, the human in one of the images boasted a pair of tall white ears on his head—but they appeared to be an added detail rather than the real thing. In most images, the focus was on the member between the humans' legs—which Caspian didn't have, and never would unless he gave up his tail.

His confusion and anxiety effectively chased off his afterglow. Holding the book to his chest, he swam out of his hiding place. He wasn't sure what conclusion he'd reached by masturbating over the Sea Witch's gift, but he did know that he had to do something, anything to let Stefan know how he felt.

He intended to find Phil and consult him on how he should address the matter. However, he ran straight into the Sea Witch. Still in her guise of a fish, she swam around him, scanning him with strangely intelligent eyes that seemed to see right through him. "So?" she asked. "Have you decided?"

Caspian's hackles rose. "I told you I have no intention of making any deals with you."

The fish danced around his tail, tsking. "But you see, my little mer, the magic remaining from your great-aunt is useless. A human will never fall in love with a merman or a mermaid, not really. As beautiful as your tail is, they will always deem it disgusting. So if you don't get rid of the tail, Stefan will never love you."

His body hot from the images in the strange book, Caspian had to force himself to shrug. "It doesn't matter. I have no reason to make any trades with you so I can get legs. All I have to do is kiss Stefan to get them."

"Go ahead, then." The witch-turned-fish turned away from him, as if disappointed. "Ask him to kiss you. See what happens."

For all his bravado, Caspian was afraid of doing what the witch suggested. In his heart, he feared what would happen if they did kiss and it turned out Stefan didn't love him. Right now he could hope, but the kiss wouldn't lie, and the moment their lips met Caspian would be forced to admit it. Alas, the memory of the images simply refused to leave his mind, and Caspian had to know the truth. He needed to find out if he had any chance to convince Stefan that they were meant to be.

"You know what? I'll do exactly that."

With a flick of his tail, he sent the rainbow-colored fish flying away from him. Still holding the book clutched to his chest, he started to swim toward the surface. He whispered a soft song under his breath, and Phil caught up with him.

“What happened?” Phil asked.

“The Sea Witch said that Stefan will never love me as long as I have a fish tail,” Caspian replied. “I realize I shouldn’t push him, but I just have to know.”

“See, I told you not to let her manipulate you,” Phil replied. “You have to give the human time. He’ll come around. He’s been very cooperative, more so than I expected. I like him, and my instincts about humans are never wrong.”

“I know, Phil, but... Does he love me?”

Phil didn’t answer, and that was all the encouragement Caspian needed. He burst out to the surface and restlessly swam about until the hour for their meeting came. At last, when evening fell, he made his way toward the beach. Stefan was already there, waiting for him on the stone that usually served as Caspian’s disguise. He waved at Caspian, smiling slightly, and Caspian’s heart melted in his chest.

Poseidon, he was in so much trouble. He might not have loved Stefan when they’d first met, but at some point the human had gotten under his skin, and under his scales. He hadn’t expected it, but he could no more deny a truth as real and as poignant as his bond with the ocean. Caspian had fallen head over fins in love with Stefan.

Torn between excitement and anxiety, Caspian met up with the human next to the large rock. “Hi,” he said breathlessly. “Have you been here long?”

Stefan shook his head. “Just for a little while. I needed to get out of the house. Rick is in one of his moods, and I couldn’t take more of his insults.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.” Caspian glanced around, didn’t spot any hulking human figures, and hesitantly climbed on top of the rock next to his human. “You know, I have five older brothers. I can’t imagine not getting along with them.”

“It’s a long story between us.” Stefan wrapped an arm around Caspian’s shoulder and held him close. “Give me a moment. Let me hold

you, okay?”

“Anytime,” Caspian replied.

Somehow, Stefan ended up with his head against Caspian’s shoulders. He’d left his glasses at home today, so Caspian got an unhindered look at his handsome face. He caressed the human’s hair, marveling at its softness. Meanwhile, Stefan’s fingers hovered over Caspian’s tail, as if he wanted to touch it, but couldn’t quite bring himself to do so.

By the time Stefan got up, Caspian had made up his mind. He had to try this. He needed to have faith in Stefan and in their obvious connection. He couldn’t let the witch’s lies stir distrust in his heart.

Oblivious to Caspian’s thoughts, Stefan smiled. “Thank you, Caspian. I’m sorry for being so morose. It’s just that... today’s been pretty rough.”

“I’ll be happy to hear you out whenever you want me to,” Caspian replied, moving closer to the human.

He licked his lips, and Stefan’s gaze went to Caspian’s mouth. For a few seconds, neither of them moved. The air seemed charged with sexual chemistry. It reminded Caspian of the tension crackling through the air before a particularly strong storm.

At last Caspian could no longer hold back. He pressed his mouth to Stefan’s, thereby granting the human his first-ever kiss.

Since he’d planned to save himself for his true love, Caspian had no experience with coitus or even foreplay. What little he did know, he’d heard from his brothers. Phil had also told him some things, but even Phil had his limits—especially when it came to actual intercourse between people, be they human or mer.

For that reason, Caspian had no idea where to take the kiss from that point. However, Stefan did. Licking over the seam of Caspian’s lips, he wordlessly guided Caspian’s actions, stirring pure lust within him. Caspian gasped, and the next thing he knew, Stefan’s tongue invaded his mouth, tasting him, exploring Caspian’s wet cavern.

Caspian did his best to kiss Stefan back, shyly meeting the human’s tongue with his own. He melted against Stefan’s chest, wanting nothing more than to touch the other man—and be touched by him, over and over again.

When the kiss broke, Caspian felt as dizzy as he had after his self-induced orgasm. His head spinning, he leaned against Stefan’s chest, loving

Stefan more than ever.

And then reality came crashing down. He stared at his lower half, and he realized in dismay that nothing had happened. He was still a merman. His tail hadn't split into legs like it was supposed to do. *No!* It couldn't be. Could it?

Even as he thought this, a clear knowledge filled Caspian's heart, emanating from the kiss they had shared. His soul had reached out to Stefan's through the kiss, but Stefan hadn't reached back. Stefan didn't love him.

Stefan brushed his fingers over Caspian's and smiled sadly. "See?" he asked. "There's no magic, Caspian. You are a merman, and I'm a human. That's how things will always be."

Caspian pulled away from Stefan, feeling like he couldn't breathe. He looked at Stefan's hands, acknowledging for the first time how different Caspian's own were. He stared at Stefan's legs, then back at his own tail—the very same one he'd been so proud of before. He'd loved his legacy as a merman all of his life. He loved the ocean, the currents, the dolphins, the whales, the corals, the seashells, even the less pleasant creatures, like the sharks or manta rays. But he'd been arrogant in assuming that he could have both his home and true love with a human.

The Sea Witch had been right all along. Stefan would never be able to love him. He should have realized it earlier, when Stefan had avoided touching his tail. Caspian's fishlike features probably disgusted him, and he hadn't wanted to say it outright so he wouldn't hurt Caspian's feelings.

His heart breaking into a million pieces, Caspian once more retreated into the sea, just like he had that very first day. Stefan called out to him, but Caspian didn't turn, didn't look back.

Phil tried to stop him too, but Caspian swam so fast that his dolphin friend couldn't reach him. This time he didn't feel surprised when the Sea Witch—back in her mermaid form—emerged in his path.

"I was right, wasn't I?" she asked with a heavy sigh. "He doesn't love you."

Caspian wished he had a reply ready. Some part of him recoiled at just being in her presence, knowing how much she had contributed to the tragedy that still plagued them. But his wounded heart was stronger, and he replied, "He doesn't. He hates my tail. There has to be a way, a way to make him see...."

“There is,” the Sea Witch said. “I’m going to need a token of your gratitude. But you already know by now that your voice hasn’t helped you much where this particular human is concerned.”

Caspian’s breath caught. He had known she would ask for this, but that didn’t make him any less afraid. “But will he truly love me when I don’t have my tail?” he asked.

It hadn’t worked for his great-aunt. Why would it work for him?

Before the Witch could respond, Phil at last reached them. “What are you doing, Caspian?” he asked. “You can’t possibly mean to make a deal with her.”

“I don’t know what to do, Phil,” Caspian replied. “I’m scared. For Stefan, I’ll always be just a fish as long as I don’t get rid of this.”

He pointed to his tail, his voice trembling at the thought at what he was planning. He didn’t think the witch could be trusted, anyway. But Stefan.... The human was so important to him. She could give him a chance, one he wouldn’t have otherwise.

“Look, Prince Caspian,” the Sea Witch said, swimming closer to him. “I will be honest with you. I realize you don’t trust me, and perhaps that is for a good reason. However, I’m an old woman now. I no longer want to carry the burden of your great-aunt’s death. I was the only one who ever tried to help her, and I’ve regretted it ever since, seeing what it did to the ocean.”

It hadn’t occurred to Caspian that the Sea Witch might have hated what had happened to the ocean too. But then again, why wouldn’t it? She belonged to the sea, just like Caspian did. The increasing toxicity and pollution hurt her too. And to top it off, she had to live with her involvement in the disaster that had caused the curse. Could it be that they’d been wrong about her?

A colorful fish swam toward Caspian, tangling in his long, flowing hair. It drew a small smile out of him, although Phil didn’t seem impressed. “Don’t listen to her, Caspian. She’s trying to deceive you.”

The Sea Witch shook her head sadly. “My little merman, your friend means well, but he is only a dolphin. He cannot understand romantic love. He cannot know how you and Caspiana felt. I do.”

In his heart, Caspian had always wondered why his great-aunt had gone to such lengths for a man who hadn’t deserved her affection or

devotion. But he could see now that he hadn't known the whole story. He could understand her pain and her need. Because when merfolk loved, they loved with all-consuming passion—and both Caspian and his great-aunt had fallen for people beyond their reach. Did the Sea Witch truly understand?

"I have never loved anyone or anything except the ocean," the Sea Witch said, "but I saw it in her eyes when she came to me—her determination, her need. Even my far too brutal request wouldn't dissuade her. Up to the last moment, I waited for her to give up. But she never did, and she would have made the human happy had he allowed it. You can do it, my little merman. You can have the destiny she couldn't reach. Believe me, I want it almost as much as you do."

Maybe she was right. Caspian had always deemed her evil, but he'd judged her without knowing her. Perhaps she was a victim of circumstances, just like Caspiana, just like everyone else in the ocean.

Gathering all of his courage, Caspian faced the Sea Witch and asked, "What are your terms?"

"I'm not without kindness," she replied. "I will give you a choice." She retrieved a bottle of black liquid from her coat and said, "Your first option is the traditional one. You will agree to me cutting off your tongue and then drink this little gem, at which point your tail will split into legs. This particular potion will give you one whole week during which you can claim your human."

One week. That didn't seem like a lot, especially since he didn't remember his great-aunt having a deadline at all. "Why just a week? It's too little time."

The Sea Witch sighed again. "I know. I would give you more if I could. Unfortunately, since the incident with your great-aunt, my magic can no longer force your nature to fully turn human. Her sorrow has weakened me as well."

Caspian believed her, because he doubted she would have admitted to any sort of weakness if she hadn't truly meant it. A part of him still didn't trust her, but he couldn't figure out any other options. By now Phil was agitatedly clicking, communicating with other dolphins, trying to reach Caspian's family—but not even Phil or any of Caspian's brothers could help Caspian earn Stefan's heart.

"What's my second option?"

“I will merely require a kiss from you,” the witch answered. “Through the kiss I will take my prize and give you yours. The one-week proviso remains in place. I realize the idea might not appeal, but I thought you might need your pretty tongue for the purpose of your seduction.”

She had a point. While Caspian didn’t look forward to kissing anyone except Stefan—least of all the Sea Witch—it sounded like an all-right offer. A kiss meant a great deal to merfolk, but considering the alternative, Caspian preferred it.

Of course, nothing from the Sea Witch could come without its caveats. “Remember, the original terms of my agreement with your great-aunt remain in place,” she warned him. “If at any point the human chooses another for his lover, you will die and turn into sea foam. The same thing goes if you don’t succeed in your task by the end of the week. Be very careful. I won’t be able to help you once you’re inland.”

Caspian nodded. “I understand.”

“Excellent,” the Sea Witch replied. “So what will it be, my little merman? Do you want to go through with this?”

Caspian closed his eyes and thought about Stefan. He remembered Stefan’s smile, his scent, his heat. He recalled his passion and his genuine desire to save the ocean. They could still do this. Caspian could still win Stefan’s heart, and they could break the curse. If he had to sacrifice his voice as well as his tail to achieve his goal, well, so be it. He’d be taking a huge chance given the one-week deadline, but what else could he do? Stefan wouldn’t suddenly decide he liked fish tails after all.

“Yes,” he replied, looking at the Sea Witch once more. “I will give you your kiss.”

The Sea Witch dropped her hood, and Caspian couldn’t help but recoil in disgust. The Sea Witch’s face almost looked rotted away, like the sea itself had consumed it. Pieces of skin dangled off her cheekbones, and when her lips parted, she revealed cracked but still sharp fangs. One of her eyeballs was missing. Her appearance contrasted sharply with her beautiful rainbow-colored tail.

The Sea Witch must have noticed Caspian’s lack of enthusiasm, and her face fell at his reaction. “I know I’m not as pretty as your human, but age hits us all, Prince Caspian. Do you still want to go through with it?”

“Yes, of course,” Caspian replied. In the end, the Sea Witch’s looks didn’t matter, but what she would take away from him, and what he would gain in return.

Phil tried to get between them, pushing the witch away with his bulk. More dolphins seemed to be approaching in the distance, coming to Phil’s assistance. “I won’t let you,” he said. “You might have destroyed Caspiana, but you won’t do the same with him.”

“I’m afraid you don’t get a say, my dolphin friend,” the Sea Witch replied. When she waved a hand, hundreds of large fish surrounded Phil, pushing him away from Caspian. Phil tried to fight them, but they were too numerous, and soon he disappeared within the mammoth school of fish.

Caspian gasped, instantly worried about his friend. As a guardian of the merfolk, Phil had gifts beyond those of a regular dolphin, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be harmed. “Please stop,” Caspian told the witch. “Don’t hurt him. He’s only worried.”

“I have no interest in harming your dolphin,” the Sea Witch replied. “I’m merely keeping him from interfering. Please hurry and decide now. We are running out of time.”

“Caspian, don’t!” Phil cried out from somewhere within the school of fish.

He swirled around and tore into his so-called opponents, shaking off the Sea Witch’s pets with his sharp teeth. The blood of the sea creatures filled the water, making the Sea Witch gasp.

“Decide, now!” she angrily told Caspian.

Caspian snapped his eyes shut, feeling horrible, selfish, out of his depth, and more than ever wanting to be with his human. “All right,” he agreed. “I’ll do it.”

A heartbeat later the Sea Witch was on him. Her lips crushed against his, cold and disgusting, nothing like Stefan’s. It was only for a moment. Their tails didn’t even touch, and neither did the rest of them. Nonetheless, it was enough. Caspian felt the moment when the Sea Witch robbed him of his voice. A sharp pain crushed his vocal chords, and he tried to cry out, but couldn’t. He couldn’t even scream when the Sea Witch pushed him away, scoffing. “Foolish merman,” she said. “Humans do not deserve your sacrifice.”

Suddenly, piercing agony exploded through Caspian's tail. It felt... well, like he was being run through, like his tail was literally being torn apart, his scales ripped off him one by one.

He couldn't breathe anymore, his now-human lungs quickly filling with water. Still, a part of him remained aware of what was happening—and for that reason, he saw the moment when the Sea Witch's rainbow-colored scales turned black and her fish became sea snakes.

Caspian realized then that he had been tricked, and he half expected drowning because of his foolishness. However, the Sea Witch waved a hand, and the remaining sea snakes freed Phil.

With an angry whistle, Phil lifted Caspian onto his back and shot straight to the surface. The last thing Caspian became aware of was the witch whispering, "Oh, and I forgot one tiny detail. You might get your week, but your human won't remember you."

WHEN STEFAN woke up, he found himself lying on a rock a good distance away from the shore. How had he gotten here? He remembered coming to the beach, yes. He and Rick had argued again, although it had been particularly bad this time around. Today was the anniversary of Robert's death, and their tempers always flared when they remembered how much they'd lost.

For some reason, Stefan had been distracted in the past few weeks and had nearly missed the event. But he couldn't remember what had even drawn his attention. He'd been putting a lot of work into his research. That was probably it, and he felt like he must have reached some sort of breakthrough. He'd have to check his notes later, because right now he had a splitting headache. At this point, he really should know better than to leave his glasses at home.

Taking a deep breath, Stefan ventured off the rock and into the water. The tide had risen, and the ocean threatened to drag Stefan away, but never did. When at last Stefan reached the shore, he plopped down onto the sand. His body felt lax with exhaustion, but at the same time, he wanted nothing more than to go back into the sea. *How odd.*

The whistling cry of a dolphin drew Stefan's attention. Dolphins sometimes approached the shore but rarely came quite so close. It was

unusual enough to alarm Stefan. Getting up, he scanned the area for any sign of a beached dolphin.

What he saw instead made him freeze in shock. An unconscious young man had somehow ended up lying facedown on the sand, and a dolphin agitatedly danced in the distance as if trying to get Stefan's attention.

Stefan didn't need to be told the man needed help—he could see it very well. He rushed to the fallen stranger, stumbling in his haste but knowing he had no time to lose.

As he knelt next to the man, Stefan tried to assess the situation. Turning him over would be risky, so Stefan bent over the fallen stranger to see if he was breathing and tried to determine if his airway remained clear. Mercifully that seemed to be the case, although that didn't mean they were out of the proverbial woods.

Stefan wanted to call an ambulance, but he'd left his phone at home in his angry fit, and he couldn't just abandon the guy. "Hey," he tried to address the stranger. "Hey, are you all right?"

He didn't expect much of a response, but by some miracle, the man stirred. He turned on his side, facing Stefan. Beautiful orbs the color of the ocean met Stefan's gaze, and Stefan was struck dumb at the sight of the most perfect, flawless face in existence. The high cheekbones and slightly upturned nose gave him an aristocratic bearing, and his full lips seemed to have been made for kissing. His long blue-green hair looked like something out of a fantasy convention or an anime movie—but somehow it fitted him perfectly. To top it off, the man didn't have a stitch of clothing on, and Stefan couldn't help but notice the coppery buds of his nipples and his pretty, slender cock.

Shit. What in the world was Stefan doing? The man might have opened his eyes, but he still needed help, not for Stefan to be lusting over him. The stranger's nakedness—while very appealing to behold—could easily cause him to get sick. Stupidly, Stefan had left the house without a jacket, and his jeans were soaked after his less-than-inspired trek through the ocean, so he had very little choice when it came to finding something to cover the young man.

"Can you hear me?" Stefan asked. "Are you hurt?"

The stranger blinked, as if clearing his vision. His eyes lit up with something like glee and... recognition? No, it couldn't be. Stefan was

imagining things.

In the end, though, the young man looked at him without replying. Maybe he was in shock. The accident—or whatever had happened to him—could have easily shaken him.

“Come on,” Stefan said. “I need to take you to a doctor.”

He took off his shirt—the one item on his body that remained reasonably dry—and pocketed his keys in his jeans so as not to lose them. “It’s not much,” he said as he offered the young man the garment, “but it’ll keep you covered.”

The stranger gazed at him in confusion. Cursing himself for his stupidity, Stefan helped the man into the shirt and quickly buttoned it down. “There,” he said. “That’s a little better, right?”

Stefan’s shirt was loose and pretty long on the slender stranger, but he looked so thrilled to be dressed in it that one would have thought Stefan had given him a priceless pearl from the bottom of the ocean. He buried his nose in the material and inhaled deeply, like he was taking in Stefan’s scent. When he gave Stefan a blinding smile, Stefan’s dick twitched in his moist jeans. *Fuck.*

Telling himself it was solely for the benefit of the young man, Stefan picked him up and left the beach.

THE RUFFLED doctor put his medical equipment away and sighed heavily. “Well, what can I say? Our unexpected patient is generally in good health. He seems to be a bit shaky on his legs, but there were no lacerations or broken bones I could find—so it must be a lingering effect of his shock. There’s no sign of a blow to the head, and his vital signs and reflexes are fine. More than fine, in fact,” he added with a sheepish smile.

Stefan winced as he got a better look at the scratch on the doctor’s hand. All throughout the medical checkup, the stranger had clung to Stefan desperately, as if just the sight of someone else terrified him. When the doctor had approached him and tried to make a note of his blood pressure, he’d wildly started to writhe. He’d also scratched the doctor’s hand, at which point Stefan had embraced him and whispered soothing nothings in his hair.

The X-ray had been a particularly evil brand of torture, but Stefan had stuck around next to the machine. When the process had ended, he'd wiped the young man's tears and held him again.

Fortunately, the less than pleasant checkup had revealed that, in general, the stranger seemed fine. Or it would have been so if not for a single fact that had become more than obvious. The poor man was mute.

Now Stefan had no idea what to do. He had the strangest feeling that he knew the beautiful youth, but that couldn't be right. He'd have remembered someone like this shipwrecked beauty.

As if guessing his thoughts, the doctor asked, "What will you do? He seems very attached to you."

"I know," Stefan replied. "For the moment, I'll take him to my place for a good night's rest. In the morning, we'll see the police chief. This young man must have come from somewhere. His family is probably looking for him."

The doctor nodded. "Keep in mind not to scare him. I suspect he must have gone through some sort of trauma. I'm not a specialist in speaking disorders, but from what I can tell, there's no obvious physical cause to his being mute. If that is the case, it might be psychosomatic—so be very careful. We'll leave it a couple of days to see if he manages to talk, but I'll write you a referral for a CT scan just in case. The nearest radiology center is a couple of hours from here, and it could take a week or more to get an appointment. Best to make one now and cancel it later if it seems unnecessary."

"I will remember," Stefan promised. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Don't mention it, Stefan," the man said, scribbling something on a piece of paper. "Here. I don't know his medical history and until the blood tests come in, I won't be able to tell you more. I've listed a few mild herbal remedies that might help alleviate the effect of his panic attacks."

Stefan took the paper from the doctor and pocketed it. In return, he passed the man his payment. "I appreciate the advice," he said, "and thank you again. I realize I interrupted your private time at a late hour."

The man waved a hand dismissively. "I'm a doctor. I'm used to this sort of thing." He hesitated slightly. "Personally, I'd prefer to keep him in the hospital overnight for observation. His inability to speak concerns me. It also worries me that he seems to have no knowledge or understanding of

writing. That's quite unusual. It could be a simple learning disorder, but again, I must advise caution."

The doctor was right. The unable-to-read thing was strange. They'd tried to find out the young man's name by getting him to write it down, but the patient had just shaken his head and stared at them in confusion.

Anyway, the young stranger had obviously been very anxious about being here in the first place. Even now he waited on the bed, wiggling his toes and looking down at them like they were the most fascinating thing in the world. He seemed to be trying to ignore the doctor's office altogether, but one of his hands always held on to Stefan's.

Stefan turned toward his soon-to-be houseguest and crouched in front of him. "Okay, we're done here. We still have some tests to pick up, but for now we're set to go home."

The young man perked up and leapt off the bed. He swayed a little, wincing like the motion had hurt him, but Stefan quickly supported him before he could fall. "Careful now," he said. "You must have been through quite an ordeal. I would hate for you to hurt yourself by falling."

Stefan picked up the still shaken young man and, after thanking the doctor one last time, left the building. He couldn't ask for more from a small-town doctor. Hell, they couldn't even figure out the patient's identity, which meant that the youth might not have any insurance to fall back on.

The entire situation seemed so complicated that Stefan had trouble processing it all. He didn't even know how he'd explain the stranger's presence to Rick. And hell, he really needed to come up with something to call him other than "the stranger" and "the young man"—or better yet, "the shipwrecked beauty whom Stefan desperately wanted to fuck."

For his part, said beauty appeared to be completely comfortable with Stefan. He cuddled against Stefan's naked chest as Stefan headed toward the house. The doctor had lent them a robe that covered the young man's nakedness better than Stefan's shirt. However, Stefan had ended up not retrieving his garment from his soon-to-be houseguest, since it seemed to comfort him. And so, for more than one reason—mostly rotating around his hard-as-nails dick—Stefan was very grateful when they reached his house.

After one-handedly retrieving his keys from his jeans pocket, Stefan opened the door and stepped inside. "So, this is home, sweet home," he

said. "It's not much, but I hope you'll be comfortable. My brother lives with me, so don't be too startled if you see a hulking mammoth in the morning. Currently he resides in his lair, also known as his room."

As the young man giggled silently, Stefan showed him around the house—not that he had too much to show. "The kitchen—again, pretty straightforward, since neither Rick nor I can cook much. Our living room."

Before he knew it, he was opening his lab and showing the stranger his work too. Not understanding his own behavior, he nevertheless explained. "And this is my research lab. Again, it's small, but after I lost my job.... Anyway, you probably don't want to hear about that."

He planned to carry the mute young man out of the lab before he could say any more stupid things. However, his houseguest started to make agitated gestures, demanding to be let down. Stefan hesitantly complied, and his beauty from the sea winced when his foot came into contact with the floor. Nevertheless, he walked to the largest map Stefan owned—one of all of the world's seas and oceans.

Meeting Stefan's gaze once again, he pointed with his finger to the Caspian Sea. It was Stefan's turn to be confused. "What is it? What about the sea?"

The young man pressed his slender digit harder on the first word. Realization dawned in Stefan's mind. "That's your name? Caspian?"

His houseguest nodded earnestly and offered him a sweet, almost loving smile. Stefan realized that he'd foregone all manners and hadn't even introduced himself. "Forgive me," he said quickly. "I'm Stefan. Stefan Firth. You'll stay with me for a while until we can figure out who you are and where your family is."

Caspian displayed no interest whatsoever in the latter part of Stefan's comment. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. Finally, he mouthed, "Stefan."

No sound came out of his lips, and Caspian teared up a little. Stefan brushed his tears away again, for some reason finding the sight of Caspian's sadness unbearable. For the first time, Caspian seemed to realize what he was doing, and he reached for his own eyes and gathered a tear on his finger.

"That's it," Stefan said, "my name's Stefan. And you can cry if you like. It's okay. I'll be here to hold you through it."

Stefan was seriously surprised at his own words, since he'd never been one to shower strangers with affection. In fact, he had always been pretty much engrossed in his work—to the point of indifference—which had eventually led to his separation from Robert. He didn't know why this young man was different, why he stirred emotions that Stefan wasn't ready to analyze.

This had to be some sort of aftereffect of his sorrow over the anniversary of Robert's death. Damn it all to hell, Caspian was a stranger! Stefan had no reason why he should feel affectionate toward Caspian, no reason for the protectiveness bubbling inside him.

The problem was that when Caspian looked at him, he seemed so fucking familiar to Stefan. Those lips, those eyes.... Where had Stefan seen them before? Why couldn't he remember?

"Fuck," he said, rubbing his temple as his earlier headache returned with a vengeance. "I get the feeling I know you. That's crazy, isn't it? Tell me it's crazy."

Caspian shook his head frantically. He took Stefan's hands, and much to Stefan's shock, kissed them. He started to make agitated gestures, sometimes pointing toward the map again and other times pressing his fingers to his lips.

"What? What are you trying to tell me?"

Looking like he was about to burst into tears again, Caspian bit his lip so hard it bled. He looked away and then suddenly went tense.

"What?" Stefan repeated.

Limping slightly, Caspian walked to Stefan's desk and took his notebook. He repeatedly pointed at it but didn't try to open it. Instead, he offered it to Stefan.

Stefan had intended to browse his latest findings later on, once he settled Caspian down for the night. However, Caspian seemed very intent on him looking over the notebook now, so Stefan decided to go along with it.

He passed through last month's observations while finding new potential in the ideas he had come up with. But when he reached this month, he found himself gaping. There was information here he didn't even remember jotting down. *What the fuck?* Was he losing his mind in his old age? He was only thirty-five, for fuck's sake. Caspian flopped down on the

nearby couch, still watching him, his big wide eyes holding a silent plea. Stefan didn't know what to tell him. And yet, as he flipped through the pages, confused and shocked, he knew there had to be some sort of explanation. He always wrote his theories and thoughts on paper first, since he didn't trust computers 100 percent. He must have made these notes sometime during the past weeks. There were details here, things he'd asked himself for a good part of his adult life but had never managed to find answers for. Historical accounts of creatures long gone. The mentioning of animal intelligence that went beyond anything scientists imagined. Effects of pollution on the marine environment and on the entire planet that Stefan hadn't found out through his research. He found no mention of the source, and Stefan might have thought he'd come up with everything himself. And then he suddenly came to a page that didn't hold notes on marine wildlife or ecological projects. Instead it was a drawing—a drawing of Caspian. It only depicted his upper body, but that didn't make it less clear, or less shocking.

Stefan had always had a limited talent for drawing, and he used it quite successfully in his documentations of the ocean. He rarely doodled for his own personal pleasure, but this was undoubtedly his work. The rough sketch even had a title: *Caspian*, followed by the date. Stefan had apparently drawn it the day before yesterday, and yet he couldn't remember even meeting its model before.

Stalking to Caspian's side, he pulled his new houseguest up. "What is this, Caspian?" he asked, gripping the young man's arms and squeezing them. "What's going on? Did I get kidnapped by the government, by aliens? What?"

Stefan couldn't even believe he was considering such wild scenarios. When Caspian just looked at him with lost, sad eyes, Stefan slowly released his far too tight hold on the man. "I'm sorry. I... I'm not sure what came over me." He had to get a hold of himself. As a rule, he dealt with unusual situations far better than this. The night's events must have shaken him more than he'd originally thought.

As if of their own accord, Stefan's arms came around Caspian. It felt so right, so comforting to hold him like this. Slowly, Stefan's rational brain started to analyze all the possibilities.

"Did we meet on the beach before?" he asked Caspian. "Did you help me brainstorm all of this?"

Caspian nodded, his smile so wide it split his face.

“Damn, I must have hit my head harder than I thought,” Stefan said sheepishly. “I can’t for the life of me remember. I’ve heard about memory loss, but this is ridiculous.”

Slowly, Caspian reached for Stefan’s temple. He massaged it gently in wide circles, and his touch soothed Stefan to an almost ridiculous extent. It also made his dick grow erect, since he could far too easily imagine how those tiny hands would feel around his cock.

He might have done something really stupid had he not remembered that Caspian was recovering from a potentially life-threatening injury. Judging by the way he leaned against Stefan, the ache in his legs hadn’t disappeared. Stefan cursed himself for his stupidity. “Shit, I’m such an idiot. Your legs must hurt like crazy.”

Without even waiting for a reply—which Caspian couldn’t give anyway—he picked Caspian up in his arms. He carried him to the bathroom and set him up on the counter. “Give me a second. I’ll run the water in the tub. It should help with every ache.”

“Thank you,” Caspian mouthed at him.

Stefan set the temperature of the water at comfortably warm—he wouldn’t want Caspian to get light-headed. Once the tub was full, he helped Caspian out of his robe, studiously ignoring the man’s nudity. He wished he had some bubbles that would hide the perfection of Caspian’s naked form, but he didn’t—so he had to endure.

Caspian sank into the water with a blissful smile. His long hair floated around him, niggling something at the back of Stefan’s mind. Stefan ignored it—rationalizing things wouldn’t help him now—and toed off his shoes to join Caspian in the bath. For obvious reasons, he left his jeans on.

Fortunately the tub was big enough for two, and it allowed Stefan to help Caspian clean up. He paid extra care not to touch Caspian’s skin with his fingers—already he was taking liberties and making assumptions he shouldn’t. Instead, he brushed Caspian down with the sponge.

His scruples didn’t hold when he got to Caspian’s legs, however. Somehow, the bathing sponge looked too abrasive. Even knowing that he could be fucking things up more and more, Stefan found himself massaging Caspian’s feet, as gently as possible, always paying attention to Caspian’s face for any sign of discomfort.

Caspian's eyes were very wide and his legs trembled slightly at first, like he didn't know what to make of Stefan's actions. He didn't seem in pain, though. In fact, when his pale face flushed and his lips parted, Stefan realized Caspian was aroused. He couldn't help but sneak a peek under the water, and unsurprisingly, saw Caspian's cock rock hard, bobbing as if trying to draw Stefan's attention to it.

Stefan should have stopped. He should really, really have stopped. Caspian was in no condition for any type of sexual contact, and with so many uncertainties between them, this seemed unwise at best. But even knowing that, Stefan couldn't pull away. By some sort of miracle, he kept himself from reaching out to Caspian's dick—God, it was beautiful, and impossibly surrounded by a tuft of dark blue-green hair—and instead focused on the dainty feet in his hands.

Caspian clutched the edges of the tub and threw his head back. Enthralled, Stefan continued his massage, exploring every toe, every single inch of skin, rubbing and mapping like he would have done with Caspian's dick if he'd had the courage. As it turned out, he didn't have the time to regret his cowardice. Suddenly Caspian went rigid. Semen shot out of his dick, spreading into the water. It was the sexiest thing Stefan had seen in his life, and Stefan almost came just at the sight.

Seriously, what the fuck was he doing? Today, on the anniversary of Robert's death, Stefan had decided to sex up a guy who was a stranger—but not. God, Stefan couldn't even understand himself anymore.

He couldn't show his uncertainties to Caspian, because they'd just hurt him. Instead, he slipped out of the tub. Caspian smiled dreamily at him as Stefan helped him out and towed him dry. He winced a little when Stefan reached his legs, so Stefan focused on being particularly gentle in the area.

At last, he wrapped Caspian in one of his robes and carried him to the bedroom. After what had just happened, Stefan remained more than a little aware of what could occur in such a room—other than sleeping. He forced himself to ignore that and set Caspian onto the bed.

"I admit this is all very strange for me," he said, "but we'll figure it out. I do believe that we were—we are friends. I can feel that."

Caspian took Stefan's hand and pressed it over his chest. Caspian's skin felt warm and silky to the touch, his heart a steady *thud thud* under Stefan's palm. "We are," Caspian mouthed.

Stefan kind of felt like a total hypocrite for claiming friendship was the only thing they had, but now didn't seem like the time to address it. He tucked Caspian in and, on impulse, kissed his forehead. "Sleep. Tomorrow is another day."

Caspian took his hand and gave him a pleading look. Stefan resigned himself to the inevitable. "Let me take a quick shower, and I'll be right back, okay?"

He needed to change out of the mess that had once been jeans, and maybe give his poor cock a chance to relieve all the tension. Thankfully, Caspian didn't insist. He just nodded and settled down onto the pillows.

As he quietly left the room, Stefan wondered what in the world he'd gotten himself into—and why he felt Caspian looked so right in his bed.

Chapter Five

WHEN HE first opened his eyes, Caspian couldn't immediately figure out his location. He could hear the sound of the waves in the distance, of sea gulls screeching—but it wasn't like before. It confused him. It scared him.

Some sort of strange material covered him, and he threw it off, startled. He looked around, taking in the strange and unfamiliar environment in a panic.

No. Not unfamiliar. It was definitely not his room in his father's palace—and this didn't feel like his seashell bed—but neither did it seem completely foreign to him. He remembered now. The Sea Witch had tricked him into trusting her. He was no longer a merman. He'd given up that life to try to win Stefan's heart.

Caspian forced himself to see the bright side of the situation. For all of the Sea Witch's deception, she had given him the seven days he'd exchanged his voice for. She had told him as much even when she'd allowed him to see the truth about herself. And now Caspian had ended up in Stefan's home—in his private quarters. At least he'd made some progress from his previous situation.

Alas, Stefan was nowhere to be seen. Frowning, Caspian slid out from the bed. He stared at the floor dubiously, then at his pale new legs. They hurt already, although not as much as he'd expected. He reached for his hair and found his new, human ears. They were so strange, round and warm, but shaped like a shell. Caspian had always thought they fit Stefan, but on him, they just felt odd and alien.

Well, it couldn't be helped. This was his life now, and Caspian couldn't expect his human to carry him everywhere or cater to his every need. He'd come here for a reason, and he would fulfill his task.

Caspian leaned against the nightstand and slowly got up. He winced when pins and needles seemed to pierce every single inch of flesh that came

into contact with the floor. In spite of it, though, he gathered his courage and stepped forward.

“You can do this, Caspian,” he told himself. “Your legs work just fine.”

The door looked awfully far away, but Caspian focused on the person who must be somewhere on the other side. At first slower, then with a little more aplomb, he reached his target and stepped out into the hallway.

In truth, walking felt like a particularly interesting brand of torture, and Caspian would have hated his new legs with a passion, if not for Stefan. At first, he’d entertained the thought that mermen simply weren’t meant to have legs, and Stefan would never be fooled by Caspian’s weak, ugly ones.

And then Stefan had massaged Caspian’s new legs in the bath. Caspian still couldn’t get over how that had felt. It seemed that the skin of his feet was extremely sensitive, but not only to pain or pressure. A simple massage had made him come undone and climax even harder than after his masturbation in the gardens.

So now Caspian counted his legs as a very good feature. He’d also noticed that Stefan’s member had been erect, so Stefan was definitely attracted to him. Caspian could work with this, but he needed to start now. Time was already ticking.

Unfamiliar scents and familiar voices told him where he could find his human. Finding strength in his willpower, Caspian made his way to the room Stefan had yesterday identified as his kitchen. As he walked, he could finally distinguish the words being said in the room.

“So let me get this straight. You found some guy unconscious on the beach and decided to adopt him?” a male voice Caspian identified as Rick’s was saying. “What the fuck? I live here too, you know.”

“I realize that,” Stefan replied calmly. “He’ll sleep in my room, and I can’t imagine he’ll be noisy or interrupt you in any way. Besides, I don’t think I have to remind you that I bought this place and I’m paying the bills. Therefore, I get to make the decisions.”

“And of course, you revel in being an asshole about it,” Rick shot back. “I can’t believe that you decided to celebrate Robert’s death by bringing in a fuck buddy.”

“Rick, I’m just going to tell you this a single time. You will not call him that. Caspian’s important to me.”

Warmth flooded Caspian at Stefan's admission, coupled with a hefty dose of confusion. Stefan had never mentioned a Robert before, but judging by Rick's words, the man in question must have been important—for both brothers. He'd have liked to hear more, but eavesdropping was rude anyway, so he at last stumbled into the kitchen.

The conversation between the brothers stopped. "Hey," Stefan greeted him and quickly helped him to a seat.

As Caspian plopped down, the human—and Caspian really had to stop thinking like that, because now he was human too—gave him a concerned look.

"You should have stayed in bed. I was going to take breakfast to you there."

Caspian shook his head, unable to look away from Stefan's face. His glasses had gone a little blurry, and he'd pushed them down his nose to look at Caspian. Really, a man so handsome shouldn't be cute as well.

Doing his best to calm down, Caspian mouthed, "I'm fine. Don't worry."

He wanted to say much, much more, but the only way they could communicate was by Stefan reading his lips. While the man seemed pretty good at it, it didn't really work for elaborate conversations. Besides, asking about Robert—which he'd have liked to—didn't feel right, and so he just sat there, feeling awkward silence descend over the room.

Ironically, Rick was the one to break the quiet. "So, you're our new houseguest. Hello, there. I'm Rick Firth, Stefan's brother."

Caspian hadn't seen Stefan's brother since that time he'd knocked the man out with his voice. Throughout the following weeks, Stefan had explained Rick had forgotten all about him, something which Caspian had ensured through his voice, and which turned out to be very useful now. For the moment, he tried to seem as friendly and harmless as possible. "Hello," he mouthed to Stefan's brother. "I'm Caspian."

"Just Caspian?" Rick arched a brow. "Don't you have a last name?"

Actually, Caspian didn't—at least not like humans. He was the son of Sea King Nereus, and that identified him for the whole of Atlantis. But he couldn't have said that even if he'd had a voice.

Mercifully, Stefan was there to save him. “Don’t badger him, Rick,” he said as he set a plate of food in front of Caspian. Caspian didn’t recognize the meal, but it looked like fluffy squares of some sort of batter. Really, they reminded Caspian a little of the algae cakes he used to steal from the palace kitchen as a child.

“Dig in,” Stefan said. “The waffles shouldn’t be too heavy for your stomach, but don’t eat too quickly. I wouldn’t want you to get sick.”

Caspian felt fine, and he doubted Stefan’s waffles would’ve changed that. However, when Stefan placed something that looked like a miniature trident next to him, Caspian just stared. It didn’t take a genius to realize he was supposed to use the thing to eat.

Caspian really wanted to taste the cakes, but the strange utensils baffled him. He did recognize the food blade next to the tiny trident, since it was similar to what mer used to eat, but even so, he had a feeling he would only mess up if he tried to use them. With a great deal of regret, he shook his head and pointed to his stomach.

Stefan looked a little disappointed, but took the plate away without insisting—and probably without seeing Caspian’s yearning glance. “I see. How about something lighter? Fruit, maybe?”

Caspian nodded quickly. Merfolk ate fruit all the time, and while theirs were different from the ones humans served, this option appealed more to Caspian.

Stefan placed a bowl of colorful fruit in front of Caspian. Caspian stole a look at Rick, who was currently peeling the skin off a longish yellow fruit. If memory served—and Phil had been right in his stories—it was called a banana.

Mimicking Rick, Caspian removed the banana’s skin. He wrapped his lips around the head of the fruit and bit down. Flavors exploded on his tongue, sweet, yet pleasurably light. Caspian would have moaned if he’d had a voice. Instead, he took more of the fruit into his mouth and devoured it slowly, swirling his tongue around it just because he could, and hadn’t ended up with it cut off like his great-aunt.

He finally realized the two brothers had stopped talking altogether and directed his attention toward them. Both of them were staring at him, and while Caspian didn’t really care about Rick’s opinion of him, he did note the look of lust in Stefan’s eyes.

Caspian wanted nothing more than to reach for the human and maybe return the favor for what had happened between them in the bathroom. He hadn't gotten to touch Stefan, since he'd succumbed to exhaustion shortly after his human had returned to the room. But now.... Now was an entirely different story.

With a frustrated huff, Rick got up from the table and stalked out of the room. His anger broke the magical moment between Caspian and Stefan. Clearing his throat, Stefan sat down in the chair his brother had left unoccupied.

"Sorry about him. He's... sensitive about some things."

"It's all right," Caspian mouthed, taking another banana from the bowl. Yet again, he wanted to ask about the man called Robert, but he didn't get the chance.

"I've been thinking," Stefan said. "I'm still not sure what happened to you, but we have to get you to the police station. Your family must be looking for you. And you know, Rick may be a jerk, but he did ask a relevant question—about your last name."

Caspian's mind froze as he struggled to come up with an answer. Stefan obviously didn't remember anything about the merman world, and while he'd jotted down the information Caspian had given him over the ocean, he hadn't made any note of the existence of Caspian's people. Without his voice, Caspian couldn't launch himself into an elaborate explanation about what had happened. Besides, Stefan would never believe him.

Even knowing all that, Caspian blurted out the truth. "I don't have one," he admitted.

Stefan blinked in surprise. "What? How is that possible?" Saving Caspian from having to lie to him, he added, "Oh. I'm sorry. Are you an orphan? Is that it?"

Caspian nodded and looked down at his hands. The webs around his fingers were gone—and so was his bond to the world of the merfolk, to his family. By all accounts he *was* an orphan, and not just because of his mother's death.

Stefan's warm arms came around him, and Caspian buried his face in the human's chest. "Okay. For the moment, you can stay with me if you

like. We'll wait until you recover a bit, and then we can find a more permanent solution. How's that?"

Actually, that sounded great. Caspian didn't need more than a week anyway, because if a week passed and Stefan still didn't love him, he'd turn into sea foam.

He hugged Stefan back—both to tell him that he agreed, and because he simply loved the feel of Stefan's muscles, even through the material of his shirt. Far too soon, Stefan broke the embrace. "All right. Finish up your breakfast. I have some tea for you that should settle your stomach and strengthen you up a bit. After that, you can get some more rest. You need it."

Caspian shook his head. He didn't want to sleep. He wanted to be with Stefan. But how did one go about making someone love him? When he'd decided to go through with the Sea Witch's plan, he hadn't actually considered the practicalities of what his task would entail.

His great-aunt had spent a lot of time with her prince, in a variety of activities, but that hadn't worked out so well for her. Should Caspian suggest something human to do? The idea didn't really appeal.

To his surprise, Stefan almost seemed to guess his thoughts. "Not very excited about being trapped between four walls, huh? Well, how about heading down to the beach? The fresh air could be good for you."

Immediately, Caspian perked up. He should have known Stefan would want that. His human loved the ocean as much as Caspian did. It didn't matter that Stefan wasn't a merman—and that Caspian had foregone that part of him. Their love for the sea remained the same.

Stefan chuckled. "All right. But first, we gotta do some shopping for you. You can borrow some of my swimming trunks and slippers, but the rest of my stuff would be very loose."

Caspian was too excited about his upcoming visit to the beach to worry about shopping. After all, mermen traded too, and they occasionally even used clothing, like, for example, cloaks. It couldn't be too different.

As it turned out, he couldn't have been more wrong. Shopping was an adventure. Humans covered their bodies with a million different items, in a million colors, textures, and materials. The garments meant for Caspian's new legs puzzled him and made him stumble more than once as he "tried them on."

It certainly didn't help that Caspian's new body decided it wanted to expel what he'd had for breakfast. At first Caspian didn't even know what was wrong with him, and it was Stefan who figured it out, Stefan who helped him to the bathroom and even directed him toward the invention humans called toilet paper. Caspian made a mental note that fairy tales didn't include everything—and that some aspects of day-to-day life, including doing his private needs, were so much easier with a tail.

By the time they left the store Stefan had taken him to, Caspian's legs hurt abominably, and he felt more embarrassed than the time he'd shed his first scales. "I guess the beach thing is off," Stefan said, noticing Caspian's dark mood.

"No," Caspian mouthed back. "Let's go. Please." He needed to see the ocean to remind himself that even if he'd lost so many things that were familiar to him, it would always be there.

"Caspian... I'm not sure that's a very good idea. You look very tired."

"I can rest there," Caspian argued. "I'll be fine."

With a sigh, Stefan yielded to Caspian's pleas. They asked the shopkeeper to keep their purchases aside for a few hours longer and headed out toward the beach. The human town was far busier now than it had been the night before, and Caspian kept his head down, shielding his eyes with his hair. He'd been taught not to approach human settlements, and being here, in the middle of one, scared him. He held on to Stefan's hand, though, reminding himself that he could do this, for Stefan, for them both.

His panic distracted him from his pain, and fortunately the town wasn't all that big to begin with. Soon Stefan guided him down to the beach, which immediately made Caspian feel better. They passed a few couples and families, with some people greeting Stefan and giving Caspian curious looks. A child even approached, dragging a disheveled woman behind him. "Look, Mommie, he's pretty. I want to have green hair! Can I have green hair?"

"Er.... No, sweetie," the woman replied, sounding more than a little tired.

"Why not?" The child pouted. "He does. And it's so wavy, just like the ocean."

The boy approached faster than his chubby legs should have allowed him to. He stopped right in front of Caspian, looking at his hair with open

yearning and inquisitiveness.

Caspian eyed the human spawn with as much curiosity as the child eyed him. Phil had told him stories of human children. Unlike adults, Phil said, children had an innocence that was refreshing. However, the human world had started to pollute them—like they did with oceans.

In the child's blue eyes, though, Caspian saw that innocence Phil had been talking about. Smiling, he knelt next to the boy. He would have liked to say something warm and welcoming, but he couldn't speak. Sweeping his fingers over the sand, he found a large conch shell.

Caspian didn't know what made him blow over the shell. Maybe it was his own need to know, rather than the desire to show the beauty of the seas to the boy. Just the same, it worked. The surface of the shell glittered green and blue for a mere flash, and Caspian smiled. "The ocean," he mouthed.

He didn't know if the boy could read his lips, so he held the shell to the child's ear. The boy's eyes widened. Caspian knew what he heard—the whisper of the seas, the distant song of the whales, the joyful cries of the dolphins, the clash of waves against the shores, and maybe a hint of the voices of mermen as they rose from the deep. Sadness, enthusiasm, life and death—everything Caspian had heard and held dear for his entire life.

Caspian placed the shell in the human boy's hand. "For you. The ocean."

The child's hearing wouldn't capture everything like a merman's would, but already he seemed enchanted. "Th-Thank you," he stammered. "Thank you."

Now completely obedient, the boy followed his mother, holding the conch shell to his ear and gazing out into the distance. Occasionally he turned to look at Caspian, and Caspian waved at him. Phil had been right. Human children were sweet.

Stefan gave him an amused look. "I think you have a fan."

Caspian smiled and shook his head. "He sees the beauty of the ocean."

In his heart, he was a little shaken. Most shells didn't hold the sound of the ocean. On occasion, certain ones had a particular shape that encouraged the resonance of the surrounding environment, making humans think they could hear the sound of the waves, but it was not the same. The conch shells merfolk used as blow-horns were the only ones that truly captured the music of the seas. This must be what the Sea Witch had meant when she'd

told him that she could give him certain sides of humanity. A part of his mer abilities appeared to have endured Caspian's transition to this new legged body. The thought filled him with a joy that quickly melted into sorrow. Apparently, even if Caspian had abandoned his Atlantean self, he could never truly become a human either. What was the use of him even sacrificing his tail if he could not be like Stefan?

Pushing away the thought, he focused on Stefan's presence. Hand in hand, they made their way toward "their spot," where they could have a little privacy. Families usually didn't come here because the water was too deep.

"I've always been terrible with kids," Stefan said as they walked. "It's just as well that I'm gay."

"I've never thought about it," Caspian confessed. Any mer female would have been happy to have merlings with him, but his life had rotated around finding his true love and rescuing the ocean. The idea of raising a child with Stefan actually appealed to him—but that would never happen.

"Somehow I think you'd make a great parent," Stefan mused thoughtfully.

Caspian arched his brow and pointed to his throat. At a different time, that might have been the case, but without his voice, it was out of the question. He couldn't even speak to them, let alone sing, and those things were very important for a merling.

Stefan shook his head. "I don't believe you not having a voice would make you any less capable to be a good parent. It's your heart that matters, and I can definitely see you have more love to give than many people I know."

Caspian struggled not to cry. Stefan's words made him crave things he'd never thought he would have, but they also reminded him of how very different he and his human remained. Stefan might not see his muteness as an impediment to being a parent, but merfolk ways were different. Caspian might not have his tail anymore, but in his heart, he still felt the pull of the ocean.

Not wanting to think about it anymore, Caspian pulled Stefan toward the water. His feet ached, and he wanted nothing more than to sink them into the liquid embrace of the sea.

He didn't even bother to take his clothes off. He just discarded his shoes onto the sand and leapt into the waves. Stefan laughed but showed no hesitation in following Caspian. He only stopped to remove his shirt and put his glasses away and then joined Caspian in the deep water.

"Be careful," he told Caspian. "There might be debris that could hurt your legs, and the current is pretty strong."

Stefan had a point. Swimming as a human was very different from swimming as a merman. When he tried it, Caspian found himself flailing and sinking, unable to get accustomed to his new body. Thankfully Stefan was always there, keeping him from drowning. That would have been a bit pathetic. A former merman, drowning in the attempt to steal a glimpse of his old life.

With a frustrated, soundless groan, he slipped off his swim trunks and his shirt. They just hindered him, keeping him from the water. Stefan's eyes widened and he made a choked noise, and Caspian grinned at him, in case Stefan was worried. Now that the material no longer restrained him, he reacquainted himself with the feel of the ocean caressing his hair, enveloping his body. His legs experienced the sensation differently than his tail had—but he enjoyed it very much nonetheless.

He threw his head back, feeling like he'd returned home, especially since Stefan was right there with him. Once Stefan loosened up, they chased each other through the water, splashing and laughing. True, Caspian couldn't actually laugh out loud, but it was still reminiscent of the times they'd spent together when Caspian had been the proud owner of a fish tail.

His new legs did serve Caspian for one thing. Unlike before, there were no anatomical differences between him and Stefan. So when they at last embraced under the water, Caspian's body responded in a very human way.

His member went hard, and Caspian rubbed against Stefan, like he would have done with his tail—like he had done once. This time, when he felt Stefan's erection against his, it seemed natural, no longer confusing, but right. He knew exactly what he had to do, and he knew what he wanted. He pushed Stefan's swim trunks off his hips and found the other man's hot shaft. Bringing their two members together, he engulfed them in his hand. He tried to push back his hesitation and follow his instincts, but his inexperience must have showed.

“Shit, Caspian,” Stefan said. “I shouldn’t do this. We shouldn’t do this.”

Stefan had said that before, more than once. But Caspian had been a merman at the time, and his tail had prevented him from actually doing something about it. Now, Caspian had the benefit of a very human body. He could no longer express everything he felt for Stefan through his voice, and that hurt—but doing that hadn’t helped him all that much anyway. He hoped touch would work better.

And indeed, as Caspian rubbed against his human, Stefan lost control. He pressed his mouth to Caspian’s, sliding his tongue past Caspian’s lips. Like the day before, Caspian relaxed against Stefan. He might have lost his tail and voice for this, but oh, it had been so worth it.

With the exception of the massage on his legs, Stefan’s hands had only ever touched his back, his torso, and his face. They hadn’t tangled in Caspian’s hair before—and when they did so now it felt heavenly. At last, those talented palms landed on Caspian’s ass. Caspian actually bit Stefan’s lower lip in his shock. Due to the Sea Witch’s book, Caspian knew how sexual intercourse between two human males worked, but that didn’t mean he felt ready for it.

Stefan didn’t seem to mind the pain, but he did see right through Caspian’s uncertainties. A few kisses later, he pulled away from Caspian, gasping. “God, I want to fuck you so badly.” He brought their foreheads together, still breathing heavily. “But we can’t. Not here, and not right now. You haven’t had the easiest day, and we have all the time in the world.”

Sadly, they didn’t. In fact, they had less than a week. Unfortunately, Caspian had to admit that he didn’t feel fully comfortable with his human body, and if he jumped into copulation with Stefan now, he’d just ruin it for both of them.

He pressed one last kiss to Stefan’s lips, then allowed the human his freedom. Arousal still buzzed through him, but he told himself restraining his desire was a good thing. Holding back would have probably been pretty hard to accomplish, for both of them, but the sound of splashing reached Caspian’s ears, followed by the distinct whistling of a dolphin. Caspian turned, just in time to see his best friend and guardian approaching. Phil swam to his side and nudged Caspian with his snout. “Caspian! Oh, thank Poseidon you’re all right.”

Caspian hugged his friend tightly. He might not be able to speak, but at the very least, he could still understand Phil. He was so happy to see Phil wasn't injured. "I'm sorry," he mouthed. "I was terrible to you."

Phil must have understood, because he replied. "You don't need to worry about that. I knew what could happen. I should have told your brother and your father when the Sea Witch first came to see you. I failed you."

Caspian didn't like the sound of that. Dolphins were free, independent creatures, not slaves of the merfolk, but that didn't mean Phil couldn't have been punished because of Caspian's choice.

His heart hammering, Caspian scanned Phil's body from snout to tail. His breath caught when he saw a bad rake mark trailed over Phil's side. With a trembling hand, he reached for his friend, wishing he could take Phil's pain away, crushed at the knowledge that he'd caused it.

Stefan must have noticed how much the sight of Phil's wound hurt him. "It's all right, Caspian. It's not very serious. It will probably scar, but beyond that, he should be just fine."

Caspian realized that. In fact, it wasn't the first time Phil acquired such injuries. It happened all the time in dolphin communities. Nevertheless, he hated seeing Phil in pain, and he hated it even more when he knew it was his fault.

"The human is right," Phil said. "I'll be fine. His Majesty's dolphin wasn't happy with me, and I can't blame him. But the important thing is that His Majesty didn't keep me from continuing to be your guardian—although to be honest, I don't know how much I'll be able to help."

Caspian caressed Phil's snout. Humans always said dolphins were expressionless—that their faces were stuck in a perpetual smile. But Caspian didn't see that. He'd seen Phil concerned, angry, frustrated, and usually because of him. "You help just by being here."

The exchange must have confused Stefan, but he didn't interrupt. He watched Phil's every motion, probably aware that dolphins could be dangerous when angered. When it became obvious that Phil and Caspian were friends, Stefan petted the dolphin's head as well.

"You wouldn't happen to be the same dolphin I saw yesterday, would you, guy? Did you save Caspian from drowning?"

He might have addressed the question at Phil, but he was looking at Caspian. Therefore, Caspian could mouth his answer. “He did. He’s my friend.”

“I see.” Stefan kissed Caspian’s temple and said, “Well, then, maybe he can be mine too. After all, I seriously owe him for saving you and bringing you to me.”

Phil nudged Stefan with his snout. “If you want to make it up to me, human, you’ll love Caspian like he deserves.”

Of course, Stefan only heard the regular dolphin whistles and clicks, but that didn’t matter. As he stood there in the water with his best friend and his human, Caspian could truly believe that, by the end of this week, he’d be able to convince Stefan they were meant to be together.

Chapter Six

Day Four

STEFAN SAT at his desk, pretending to look over his notes but not really able to focus on them. He was too busy focusing on the man curled on his couch.

Caspian scribbled furiously in a notebook, his tongue peeking out from between his lips, his hair sometimes falling over his face, only to be pushed back by slender white fingers. It was really criminal for someone to be so beautiful, and for Stefan to be so drawn to him. But he couldn't help it, damn it. In some ways Caspian seemed impossibly innocent, like a child taking his first steps through life. In others he appeared far older than he looked. His blue eyes held wisdom that went beyond anything Stefan could teach him. And he was definitely a fast learner—in more ways than one.

As if to prove Stefan's point, Caspian set down his pen and looked up, smiling. He practically glowed with accomplishment. He slid off the couch and made his way to Stefan's side, supporting himself on the edge of Stefan's desk. He offered Stefan the notebook where he'd been jotting down his so-called homework.

Stefan scanned Caspian's work in more than a little awe. There, in somewhat awkward but clear letters, lay an entire elaborate composition on the structure of a conch shell. "You did great," he praised Caspian.

Caspian beamed brightly. "I had a great teacher," he said—or rather, mouthed—as he passed his hand through Stefan's hair and over the rim of his glasses.

Stefan chuckled. He could take very little responsibility for Caspian's incredible progress. Once he'd figured out that the way to get Caspian reading and writing was through the ocean he loved so much, it had been easy. Schoolchildren might have learned the alphabet through apples and pears, but the phrases Caspian jotted down always held algae and phytoplankton.

“I wish I could say it was my merit,” he told Caspian, “but in truth, I just have a very capable student.”

Still grinning, Caspian noted something else down. “I have inventive,” the paper said. Even as Stefan looked at it, Caspian crossed out the latter word and replaced it with “incentive.”

He brushed his fingers over Stefan’s forehead, frowning. “You seem thoughtful.”

“Maybe I am, just a little,” Stefan admitted, not bothering to deny it. He could barely wrap his mind around the most recent developments in his life. He’d always been a man who treasured his privacy and personal time, and yet, in the past few days, Caspian had become an integral part of his life. Their relationship status remained ambiguous, but that didn’t prevent Stefan from including Caspian in everything he did.

Previous boyfriends had always hated his love for research, but Caspian didn’t seem to mind. He fit in Stefan’s life—in some ways, better than Robert ever had. That stirred a guilt inside Stefan that he wasn’t ready for.

Caspian knelt in front of Stefan and rested his head on Stefan’s knee. After a small moment of hesitation, he took his notebook and wrote something. When he showed Stefan the message, dread pooled in Stefan’s stomach. “Is this about Robert?” the note on the paper inquired.

Stefan supposed that he shouldn’t be surprised Caspian would ask. Robert had come up in various conversations in the past few days—or rather, in screaming matches with Rick. Stefan hadn’t looked forward to the moment when he’d have to explain it to Caspian, but he knew he had to do it.

“Robert was.... I met him in my first year at the university. At the time, both of us were idealists. I wanted to make the ocean safer, cleaner, to keep pollution from spreading. Robert aimed for a better world too, but he wanted to do it by showing everyone how bad things had already become. Through the press.” Stefan sighed. “We were so young. We truly thought we could change the world. Things didn’t work out the way we’d planned.”

Caspian’s warm hand landed on Stefan’s. “What happened?”

“Life did, I suppose. I got a job almost immediately out of uni. It involved me being away a lot. When I was home, I often buried myself in research, wanting to do more, to know more. Understandably, Robert

started to grow tired of me finding excuses all the time. He used to say I loved the ocean more than I loved him. And then Rick came home. He'd been abroad, with the Army, and he fell for Robert instantly. Long story short, Robert broke up with me and became my brother's partner. He died a few years ago, in a boating accident, and Rick never forgave me for not even managing to get home in time for his funeral."

Caspian's hold on Stefan's palm tightened, his eyes filling with tears. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

Stefan petted Caspian's long hair. "You couldn't have. And besides, it's an old story. It has nothing to do with you. Rick loves twisting the knife whenever he thinks I might get a chance at happiness."

He pulled Caspian into his arms, embracing him tightly. It always felt so good, so comforting to hold Caspian like this. At what point had Caspian become so important to him? Stefan didn't know, and right then and there, the reasons didn't even matter.

When their lips came together, Stefan knew that, this time, he couldn't hold himself back. After spending several days struggling to control his constantly growing desire for Caspian, he couldn't take it anymore. Stefan had no more time for gentle kisses or sweet coaxing, no more patience to allow Caspian to pull back or change his mind. He stabbed his fingers through Caspian's impossibly soft hair, wanting nothing more than to do the same as he buried his dick into the young man's mouth. But that would have implied them stopping the kiss, and Stefan wasn't ready for that yet... not just yet.

Instead, he thrust his tongue into Caspian's mouth, greedy for his addicting taste. Caspian settled himself better in Stefan's lap, rubbing his ass against Stefan's crotch. His tongue met Stefan's, and he did his own grabbing and pulling and clutching. It didn't even matter that the kiss was a little too sloppy and a little too frantic. To Stefan, it felt perfect, and embarrassingly enough, it almost brought him to climax.

Stefan broke the kiss for that exact reason—because his sad case of blue balls risked ending this before it had even begun. Caspian clutched his shoulders, obviously thinking that Stefan planned to push him away again.

Before Stefan could even try to explain that he had no such intentions, Caspian was already in motion. He dropped off Stefan's lap, his nimble fingers popping the buttons of Stefan's jeans. Stefan's mind just about shut

down when Caspian slid his hand into Stefan's briefs, gripping his hard cock.

"Shit," he cursed. "Fuck, Caspian... I.... Come on."

That wasn't too articulate for a man who'd graduated top of his class from Princeton, but heck, he was still a guy. He couldn't be expected to think with his brain when all the blood had rushed south to his other head.

Mercifully, Caspian understood his less-than-coherent plea. As Stefan pushed his jeans and underwear down, Caspian flicked his tongue over the leaking tip of Stefan's dick. In a desperate bid for control, Stefan clutched the hand rests of his seat and stared at the ceiling, counting each and every crack he could see. Of course, his ability to do even basic math scrambled when Caspian licked his dick from tip to base and back up.

Stefan tried to give Caspian time to explore. He held back from simply shoving his dick into Caspian's mouth, and he felt proud when he was successful—for about half a minute. After that he ended up gripping Caspian's hair and rubbing the head of his dick over Caspian's lips.

Caspian received his cock with a breathy gasp that might have been a moan if he'd been able to use his vocal chords. Stefan let out a little groan of his own as volcanic heat surrounded his dick, awakening each and every nerve ending in his body. He knew he should keep staring at the ceiling, that if he didn't, he'd lose it altogether. But he couldn't *not* look at Caspian, whose heat drew him as a moth to the flame.

The moment he stared down, Stefan realized he'd made a serious miscalculation. Seeing the circle of Caspian's lips wrapped around his cock shattered whatever part of him that remained rational, mindful of Caspian's needs and comfort.

That side of him had been screaming for the past few days, raving at him that Caspian was just a particularly frail and orphaned stranger who felt he needed to repay Stefan with sex out of gratitude. But now its voice had become muted by the roaring of the passion between them, and Stefan could no longer deny himself, or Caspian.

Holding onto his lover's hair, he thrust into Caspian's mouth far harder than he himself had expected or even wanted to do. Caspian's eyes widened and he choked a little, but he didn't try to pull away. Instead he breathed through his nose, his hands landing on Stefan's hips. When his blue gaze fixed Stefan's, Stefan only saw acceptance and need.

Not even the end of the world could have kept Stefan from taking what he felt was his. He started fucking Caspian's mouth in earnest, clutching his hair so hard Caspian's scalp must have hurt. The locks of blue-green hair felt like silken waves over Stefan's knuckles, and its softness only made Stefan want Caspian more.

Stefan kept up a nearly punishing pace, hypnotized by the rapt pleasure on Caspian's face, by the sight of his saliva-slick dick passing those full red lips. He still couldn't understand why someone so beautiful and perfect had appeared in his life, but his lust for Caspian made him selfish enough to take what the young man offered.

After stewing in need for days—but what felt like weeks—Stefan already felt impossibly close to coming. His impending climax burned in his balls, sizzled at the back of his spine. A few more thrusts in Caspian's hot mouth and he'd find his peak.

It would have been so easy to do exactly that, so easy and so right. Caspian wanted it too, Stefan could tell. But Stefan wasn't a teenager anymore, and he ached to come only once he buried himself inside Caspian's tight ass.

Removing his dick from Caspian's mouth had to be one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life. Caspian certainly didn't help, because his small hands clung to Stefan's dick like it was a prize. Stefan's knees refused to hold him up when he tried to leave his chair, so he chose a different strategy.

He pulled Caspian into his arms again, settling the young man on his lap and rubbing his thumb over Caspian's lower lip. "I want to be inside you," he whispered in Caspian's ear. It was probably a good thing that Caspian hadn't gotten undressed, because otherwise Stefan could have never managed to be coherent. "Tell me, sweetheart. Do you want that too?"

Caspian's breathing accelerated. That, added to Caspian's frantic nods, answered the question even if Caspian couldn't reply through words. Stefan got up and carried his lover out of the lab—and what in the world had he been thinking even considering having sex there?—to the bedroom.

He placed Caspian onto the soft mattress and studied his face. After everything that had happened between them, Stefan strongly suspected Caspian was a virgin. In spite of his enthusiasm, he'd seemed inexperienced

in everything they'd tried. Hell, he'd come just from a freaking foot massage.

Stefan was clean—he never took chances with this sort of thing—and he'd gotten tested regularly when he'd been sexually active, and even once or twice after that out of sheer paranoia. But he couldn't expect Caspian to take him on his word. He needed condoms.

"Give me a moment," he told Caspian. "Wait here, okay?"

Caspian nodded, licking his full, puffy lips in a way that suggested he didn't want to wait at all and had barely even heard Stefan. Stefan forced himself to pull away before he changed his mind and went bareback.

Tucking his protesting dick back into his jeans, Stefan fled to the bathroom. Literally, he fled. It was somewhat cowardly, but putting a little space between them would keep Stefan from embarrassing himself in front of his lover.

Instead of thinking about the man who waited for him in his bed, Stefan focused on his task. He couldn't remember when he'd had real sex last—and that was probably worrisome. Still, he should have some condoms around, buried beneath the stuff he actually used on a regular basis.

As Stefan rummaged through the medicine cabinet, Caspian walked into the bathroom. He was completely naked and more beautiful than seemed possible. In the lab, Stefan hadn't gotten the chance to see Caspian naked, but he'd caught guilty glimpses before—during their first night together in the bath and throughout their swims at the beach. Now, though, he could truly look his fill, and he did exactly that.

Stefan took in every delicious muscle, every inch of that white, pure skin. His mouth watered at the sight of his lover's leaking cock, and he forgot all about what had brought him to the bathroom, simply because of his fascination with Caspian's pubic hair. Who had blue-green hair "down there"? Surely it couldn't be a natural color.

Not that it mattered. Natural or not, the shade seemed to define Caspian. For Stefan's part, he could too easily imagine burying his nose in Caspian's bush as he took the young man's dick in his mouth.

He didn't know if his desire showed, because Caspian bit his lower lip and made no attempt to move forward. Stefan took matters into his own hands and crossed the bathroom, invading Caspian's personal space. He

pinned Caspian against the wall, surprised at his own actions but simply too lost in his lust to care.

“You tempt me too much,” he said to his lover.

Caspian shivered. Maybe the tiles were cold, or maybe he was just nervous. Either way, it gave Stefan a measure of his control back. When he brushed his lips over Caspian’s, he did so gently, careful not to scare the other man.

“Here’s the thing,” he explained. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you haven’t been with anyone else before, right?”

Caspian nodded, and Stefan could have sworn his lips moved to form the word “yours.”

Instead of focusing on how much he liked the idea of Caspian being his, Stefan said, “I haven’t had a lover in years, and even then I was careful. I know I’m clean. Still, I don’t want you to do anything you aren’t comfortable with, so I’m looking for protection.”

Caspian blinked like he couldn’t really understand. Stefan knew how he felt. His little speech took double the time it should have lasted, because he was busy grinding against Caspian. His lover wrapped his arms around his neck, and really, how was Stefan supposed to think when Caspian’s hard dick kissed his, when Caspian’s breath noiselessly tickled his ear, when he could feel Caspian’s need as his own?

Stefan tried one more time, because the scientist inside him reeled against risking anyone health by having unprotected sex. “Caspian.... Condoms.”

Predictably, his plea didn’t come out very convincing, not even to his own ears. In reply to his words, Caspian bit his earlobe. Just like that, Stefan surrendered to the unavoidable.

Lifting Caspian in his arms, he rushed them back to the bedroom. This time when he placed Caspian on the bed, Stefan followed. Their lips met once again, and gentleness was set aside as passion exploded between them like a wild storm rushing over the deep ocean.

Stefan had no idea how he’d ever held back with Caspian, because right then and there he felt like he couldn’t live and he couldn’t breathe if he didn’t touch Caspian. He greedily mapped every inch of skin he could reach, all the while thrusting his tongue into Caspian’s mouth. Caspian touched him right back, his frantic hands clawing at Stefan’s clothing with a

single-minded focus born of a despair that Stefan shared. He actually succeeded in discarding Stefan's shirt on the floor, but that wasn't enough—not nearly enough.

Stefan ended up breaking the kiss just because he had so much of Caspian to explore and sadly only one mouth. He licked over Caspian's jaw, then went lower down, sucking on Caspian's collarbone, exploring the hollow of his throat.

Caspian arched against him, spearing his hands through Stefan's hair. He didn't even try to guide Stefan down. He just held on, trembling, his dick nudging Stefan's still-clothed one.

It was high time Stefan fixed that. With a great deal of difficulty, he convinced himself to abandon Caspian's naked skin. He threw his shoes off and fumbled with the buttons of his jeans again. He obviously didn't move fast enough because Caspian rushed to help him, undoing his pants much like he had done earlier. The young man licked his lips and stared at Stefan's erection, as if he had plans of tasting it again.

Stefan's cock twitched in response to Caspian's expression, and Stefan bit the inside of his cheek to gather the last frayed remnants of his control. "Word of warning, Caspian," Stefan said tightly, "if you touch me now, this will all be over."

Caspian seemed to consider the pros and cons of it for a while and then lay back on the pillows, burying his fingers in the sheets. Satisfied that they were on the same page, Stefan finally slipped off his jeans and underwear.

Now naked, he crawled onto his lover once again. Caspian's perky nipples immediately drew his attention, and Stefan allowed himself to engulf a coppery bud in his mouth. His lover's reaction was quick to appear. Whatever force of will had been keeping Caspian in check dissipated, and he went wild, writhing under Stefan, grinding and gasping soundlessly.

Even mute, Caspian was easily the most passionate and responsive lover Stefan had ever had. Continuing to suckle on the nipple in his mouth, he trailed his free hand over Caspian's side, getting accustomed to Caspian's soft skin, to his reactions.

Since Caspian couldn't speak to guide him, Stefan pushed back his own lust and focused on the tremors of Caspian's body and on the other ways Caspian could communicate. He made a mental note whenever

Caspian shivered, whenever he jerked or when his body went taut with sexual tension.

He released Caspian's nipple and licked down Caspian's abdomen. It was his turn to aim for the prize, and he couldn't wait. Judging by the way Caspian's dick twitched, he felt the same.

Grinning to himself, Stefan finally did what he'd craved for what felt like forever. He took Caspian's dick in his mouth, all the way into his throat. He should have been out of practice, but this sort of thing was like riding a bicycle. One never really forgot, and all the tricks came back to Stefan—the best ways to lavish a man's cock with attention. He swirled his tongue over the head of Caspian's cock, then traced the thickest vein with his tongue, licking Caspian's dick like a lollipop. Lazily, then ruthlessly, he tested what Caspian liked most, reveling in the weight of Caspian's cock on his tongue, in controlling Caspian's pleasure, and his own.

Caspian gripped Stefan's hair again, something which he seemed to enjoy a lot. Judging by his ever-increasing tremors and the tightening of his fingers, he was very close to coming. Stefan had never particularly liked swallowing, but he found that with Caspian he craved it, ached for it like an addict needed his fix. Ceasing his teasing, he sucked Caspian's dick deep, until the younger man's prick was buried in his throat and Stefan's nose in Caspian's pubic hair. He inhaled Caspian's fresh scent—God, was it possible for someone's pubes to remind him of the ocean?—and swallowed around the head.

Just like that, Caspian found his peak. Jets of hot cum filled Stefan's mouth, and he swallowed every single drop, his lover's pleasure becoming the most potent aphrodisiac in existence.

He should have stopped there. He should have let it go. Caspian had come, and pushing the other man into coitus would be unnecessarily selfish. But Stefan's scruples had long ago died out.

When Stefan released Caspian's dick from his mouth, he reached for the nightstand and found a half-full tube of lubricant. These days, he only used it when he found lonely release with his own right hand, but now it would serve him for a far more satisfying encounter.

Even as Caspian shuddered through the waves of his orgasm, Stefan propped a pillow under Caspian's hips. He lifted Caspian's legs onto his shoulders and uncapped the lubricant. Squirting a generous amount of

liquid on his fingers, he reached between Caspian's ass cheeks for his opening.

It would have probably been easier for Caspian if Stefan had positioned him on all fours, but Stefan needed to see his face—both out of his own selfish desire and to monitor Caspian's reactions and make sure he wouldn't be in any pain.

Slowly he inserted a finger into Caspian's anus. Caspian's eyes widened, and he tensed up. His breathing became more labored—and he very much looked like he had no idea what was happening.

Stefan paced himself and removed his finger, instead choosing to rub lightly around the rim. "It's all right," he said to Caspian. "Relax. I'm going to take care of you. I'll make you feel so good. Just close your eyes and relax."

His voice seemed to have the intended effect because Caspian's tense muscles lost some of their stiffness. Stefan dared to test Caspian's channel once again. This time Caspian breathed through it. He licked his swollen lips, a small frown signaling that he still didn't feel quite certain what to think of this new development. If it turned out Caspian didn't like this after all, Stefan would have to stop and make a hasty retreat to the bathroom to take care of his not-so-little problem by himself.

As it turned out, he needn't have worried. When Stefan crooked his finger inside Caspian and found his lover's prostate, Caspian's mouth opened wide, as did his eyes. He would have probably screamed if he could have, but as it was, he pushed back against Stefan's digit and gave him a pleading look. His cock went rock hard again, which was all the encouragement Stefan needed.

Stefan poured more lubricant on his fingers and added a second one. Taking his time, he stretched Caspian's channel, wanting to make sure beyond any shadow of a doubt that his lover wouldn't feel any pain. Caspian's misgivings appeared to have disappeared altogether, though, because he kept trying to impale himself on Stefan's fingers. His now sweaty blue-green hair curled around his temples and fell over his shoulders as he moved, and Stefan had never seen anything more beautiful.

By the time he added the third finger, Stefan felt he would go insane if he didn't take Caspian soon. Mercifully, when Caspian's body swallowed his digits with no apparent discomfort, Stefan deemed Caspian as ready as

he was going to get. He pulled his fingers out, making his lover fidget and try to grab for him. Stefan knew exactly how he felt. “In a minute, sweetheart,” he promised. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Even as he spoke, Stefan slicked up his cock with more lube, using a generous amount of the substance to ensure an easy glide. After all, his girth wouldn’t be quite so easy to take as three fingers. Bracing himself, he positioned his dick at Caspian’s opening and pushed.

Caspian immediately tensed, his body unaccustomed to the invasion and trying to repel the intruder. Stefan met his eyes and began to speak to him. He himself didn’t know what he said. His own words couldn’t process in his mind, because he needed to focus on not burying his aching prick inside Caspian like he wanted.

For all Stefan knew, he could have been reciting the skeletal structure of a bonefish. Either way, it worked again, because Caspian’s body accepted Stefan. Stefan focused on Caspian’s lovely face and expressive eyes to distract himself from the nearly painful tightness of his beautiful lover’s channel. It didn’t really work, but it reminded him that this was Caspian’s first time. Stefan would make it memorable and amazing... even if it killed him.

At one point, it certainly seemed that would happen. If stopping Caspian’s blowjob had been hard, taking it slow as he pushed inside Caspian was a herculean endeavor. He moved one inch at a time and stopped whenever Caspian displayed any sign of discomfort. It was heaven and hell wrapped into one indistinguishable amalgam of sensations.

His effort paid off, though. When at last Stefan was balls-deep inside Caspian, he found no pain in Caspian’s blue eyes, just awe, wonder, and bliss. He waited a few moments, counting to ten in his mind, then to twenty, and thirty, to give Caspian time to adjust.

At last, Caspian smiled at him, and in that beautiful twist of lips, Stefan saw his green light. He pulled all the way out of Caspian, leaving only the head inside, then slowly slid back in. Even with the desperate need burning in his balls, it felt right, like coming home. It felt soothing, reaching out to a part of him he hadn’t even dared to acknowledge.

And then Caspian clenched his ass muscles and—okay—it wasn’t so soothing anymore. In fact, it felt like fuel being poured over an open fire—a fire that short-circuited Stefan’s synapses.

Stefan lost it. Clutching Caspian's hips so hard he must have left bruises, he started to pound in and out of him. His lover didn't seem to mind his descent into near violence. Caspian's dick rubbed against Stefan's abdomen, painting his skin with pre-ejaculate. All the while, Caspian's ass squeezed him in a velvety fist, like it never wanted to let Stefan go. Coincidentally, Stefan wished he could bury himself inside Caspian for his entire life, and that desire cemented into a fever, a blinding hunger to get deeper, always deeper into Caspian's body.

They fell into a maddening rhythm, moving naturally, like longtime lovers, in a dance as old as time itself. Passion, friction, lust, need, two bodies entwined in the most intimate way possible—it was pure, inescapable, and true. Somewhere at the corner of his mind, Stefan felt his memories reaching out to him, searing him like the heat in Caspian's gaze.

But he couldn't quite reach them, and he didn't have the strength of will to focus on the past, not when the present drew him in with such a potent lure—the lure of his beautiful lover. With every thrust inside Caspian, Stefan drifted ever closer to climax. He'd probably only lasted for so long because he wanted Caspian to come again before he did.

Still clinging to that decision, Stefan reached between their bodies and gripped Caspian's dick. Two strokes of his hand and it was all over. With a soundless cry, Caspian came, spurting streams of white spunk all over Stefan's chest and his own. His ass muscles tightened around Stefan's dick in an iron-like vise. Stefan buried himself one last time inside his lover and followed Caspian over the edge.

The rapture reminded Stefan of a tidal wave, pure, strong, and wild, like the ocean. It swept over him with a carnal power that only nature ever had, cleansing him, leaving only desire and completion behind. Within the whirlpool of sensation, the only thing that kept him anchored was the knowledge that Caspian remained right there, with him.

Stefan didn't know how long it lasted, how long he shuddered through the mind-melting, world-bending climax. At one point, he must have blacked out, because when he could actually think, he found himself collapsed on the pillows with Caspian by his side, breathing hard.

"That was amazing," he couldn't help but say.

Caspian rolled on top of him, meeting his gaze. "I love you," Caspian mouthed.

Just like that, the contentment of the afterglow melted into uncertainty. Stefan wanted to say the words back. He knew he should, but something made him hesitate. Love hadn't worked out too well for him. Sex with Caspian might have been explosive, but for all he knew, Caspian would eventually grow tired of him too, just like Robert had. Besides, Stefan didn't deserve to love. He was, as Robert had told him during their last fight, a cold fish, and he couldn't give Caspian anything even if he tried.

He vacillated for too long, and the moment passed. Caspian looked at him for a few more seconds, then kissed his cheek and smiled, a hint of sadness in his eyes.

Caspian's acceptance made the whole thing worse. Feeling like a downright bastard, Stefan opened his mouth to apologize, but Caspian shook his head.

"Sleep," Caspian mouthed. "Tomorrow."

With a sigh, Stefan settled back down on the pillows. Tomorrow sounded like a good idea. A rushed "I love you" meant nothing. They had plenty of time to be both in love, and in lust.

Forcing himself to find solace in that idea, Stefan closed his eyes. Before he knew it, he was asleep.

In his dreams, the image of a singing merman followed him.

WHEN STEFAN finally fell into slumber, Caspian slid out from under the sheets. For a few moments, he stared at Stefan's slumbering figure. He looked so handsome in the moonlight, so close, yet so far away.

Caspian pulled on a pair of shorts, some flip-flops, and a shirt. Like a ghost, he slipped out of Stefan's room, and then out of the house altogether. Once he was fairly certain he wouldn't wake anyone up, he started running toward the beach.

His feet had become a little more accustomed to walking over the past few days, but by the time he reached the sea, he still felt like he'd driven spikes through them. Phil must have sensed his distress, because his head soon appeared from the water.

"Caspian, what's wrong?" Phil asked.

"He still doesn't love me," Caspian replied. "He never will."

He'd agreed with the witch's plan so the anatomical differences between him and Stefan would no longer stand in his way. In the past few days, he'd begun to hope the sacrifice would pay off and he and Stefan might have a future. He'd put a great deal of work into getting accustomed to the ways of the humans, and Stefan seemed so pleased by the progress he'd made. Caspian might have known little about Stefan's world, but he'd understood the human alphabet with ease—perhaps because it was far simpler than the one of Caspian's kind. Tonight, his new form had brought them closer—physically—but at the end of the day, it hadn't changed anything. Yes, their copulation had been amazing, so much so that the memory made Caspian a little hot. Still, it had been just that: sex, not making love—at least, not for Stefan. All of Caspian's efforts meant nothing.

Caspian realized now what a fool he had been. Both he and his great-aunt had made the exact same mistake, only Caspian's was even worse, because he'd had her past experience to learn from, and still he'd failed. He wanted to think that it had been the Sea Witch's fault, but he knew better.

Ironically, Caspian had been right the first time. He could have transformed into this human form without making his deal with the witch—if Stefan had loved him. But Stefan couldn't do that, and not because of the fish tail. Caspian's shallowness had been his undoing. Stefan simply loved another. He clearly hadn't let go of Robert, and Caspian couldn't compete with a ghost.

Standing there in the water, Caspian wept silently, realizing all too well that his stupidity and selfishness had erased any chance he might have had to be happy. Not to mention that he'd failed his family, his people, and the ocean itself.

Finally, as dawn started to taint the water in brilliant shades of orange and crimson, Caspian found his courage. He couldn't blame Stefan for loving someone else. Stefan had already been through enough, and Caspian didn't have any right to make demands. He had a few more days to live and to enjoy by Stefan's side. Maybe he'd die and turn into sea foam after that, but he needed to make the most of the time he could still spend with Stefan.

"I'm going back," he told Phil. "Phil, I want you to promise me one thing. Don't let my family do anything stupid. The ocean is going to need them."

"I wish I could promise you that, but I can't."

Caspian kissed his friend's smooth head, right next to his blowhole. When he moved away, he added, "Tell them I'm sorry. They put their trust in me, and I failed them, but... I love them. I love you."

Phil released an agitated whistle, but for some reason, Caspian felt calm now. He took a deep breath of the sea air, gazing out into the distance at the morning sun. At last, he turned away from the beautiful sight and slowly walked off the beach, toward the house where his true love—and his destiny—awaited.

DEEP IN the bowels of the ocean, the Sea Witch monitored Caspian's progress with his human and shook her head. As she watched Caspian through the bubbles in her cauldron, she knew the little merman didn't have a chance of getting Stefan Firth to confess his love. This particular human was impossible to sway, and for good reason, as the Sea Witch had learned from her sea snakes.

Caspian, however, had only now learned of it, and he would pay the price for his ignorance. It served him right. Both the mermaid Caspiana and the little merman did not realize how incompatible humans and merfolk truly were. Foolish princess. Foolish prince. They didn't understand the value of their true selves. They didn't understand that humans were treacherous. They didn't understand the true worth of life, and of death. But the Sea Witch did, all too well.

Chuckling, she waved her hand and made the bubbles disappear. At this point, she didn't even care. She had what she wanted.

Brushing her fingers over her now smooth, youthful face, she preened and danced around her house. Oh, yes, this was perfect! The mer prince's magic had given her enough juice to keep her beautiful for at least two hundred more years. It amazed her that Caspian hadn't seen through the illusion that had made her pets, and her own shifted form, look like pretty, friendly fish. But who was she to complain?

Her sea snakes writhed around her, reveling in her joy. "That's right, my pretties," the Sea Witch told them. "I'm young again. All because of that little merman who fell for a human who couldn't love. Amazing."

Besides, it was only beginning. Caspian's loving family would undoubtedly try to come to his assistance. More power for her, more life to steal—to keep her young and beautiful forever.

Just like she'd predicted, not a few hours after Prince Caspian had dramatically abandoned his dolphin on the beach, a roar sounded outside her house. She smiled, having already felt the intruder the moment he'd entered her marshlands. The live polyps that populated it notified her of every motion that took place within.

She swam out of her house and greeted Prince Aquan of Atlantis with a wide smile. "Your Highness, what an honor to have you here in my humble abode. How may I be of assistance?"

Aquan narrowed his eyes at her. "I don't have time to play games, witch. You know what I've come for. I need you to make the human love Caspian."

"If only it were that easy. You cannot force true love. It is beyond any magic that I can conjure." She arched a brow at Aquan. "Come now, you know this already. Even when we mermaids charm a human, it is never true love. That has to be earned. There are no shortcuts."

"All right," Aquan replied. "I get that. But there has to be a way to help Caspian."

"Maybe there is," the Sea Witch drawled, absently petting one of her snakes, "but it won't be for free."

Aquan gritted his teeth. "What's your price?"

The Sea Witch scanned the eldest Atlantean prince from head to tail and licked her lips. If she demanded his hair like she had with Caspiana's sisters, she'd undoubtedly add at least fifty years to her lifespan—probably more. But it would be such a pity to waste this opportunity. And Aquan truly was so handsome, all hard muscle, his dark blue scales reminding her of the most hidden depths of the ocean.

"Your hand in marriage," she said before she could change her mind.

His expression was the funniest thing she'd seen in her long years. "You want me to marry you?"

"Did I stutter? Yes, Prince Aquan, that is my price. If you want to save your brother, that is."

For the longest time, Aquan was silent. He seemed to be musing over her words, contemplating the implications. At last, he said, "Fine. But no merlings. I don't want children with you. And you will forego any claim to the throne. You can have me, but that's it."

“You drive a hard bargain, Prince Aquan. Lucky for you, I have no interest in politics or children. We’re agreed. Seal the deal with a kiss?”

“Not so fast,” Aquan said, tightening his hold on his spear. “Tell me how to help Caspian first.”

“Once we are wed, I will give you a special weapon. All Caspian has to do is stab the human with it and make sure the man’s blood flows on his legs. He’ll turn back into a merman—sans his voice of course, but otherwise unharmed.”

“Caspian will never agree to it,” Aquan argued. “He loves that confounded land-dweller.”

“Of course he does. It was what you and your family have been waiting for, right? But it doesn’t matter. You can do it, and it’ll work just as well.”

Aquan hummed thoughtfully. “All right. That sounds fine. Caspian is going to hate me, but at least he’ll be alive.”

The Sea Witch smirked. “I’m so happy to hear that. I will hand you the weapon as soon as you fulfill your part of the deal.” Unable to help herself, she approached him, brushing her fingers over his strong jaw. “Or maybe after our wedding night,” she sang in a seductive tone.

Aquan went rigid. He pushed her away, his eyes flaring with anger the likes of which she had never seen in a merman. “You abomination! What did you do to my little brother’s voice?”

His fury was such that the Sea Witch faltered for a few moments. Intellectually she knew she had nothing to fear. Armies of mermen had tried to destroy her before, and they had failed. These days, the Sea Kings didn’t even make the attempt anymore, and nothing could scare her. The only enemy she had was time.

Still, for some reason Aquan’s anger made her hesitate for the slightest instant. True, when she’d kissed Caspian, she had combined her voice to his. It wasn’t very noticeable in spite of Caspian’s gender. Aquan must have noticed because of the flow of the words.

“And what of it?” she finally asked. “He traded it to me freely. You know this. You knew it even before you came here. Caspian chose to give his voice to me, in exchange for—”

Aquan roared, and suddenly his sharp spear pierced the Sea Witch's tail. "He chose nothing! You manipulated him into believing you had something he wanted. You will give me that weapon now, or you will die."

It was the Sea Witch's turn to be furious. How dare this petty little prince threaten her? She melted into her sea snake form, effectively dislodging his weapon from her body. "You'll pay for that, Atlantean."

Upon her call, sea snakes shot toward Aquan. All the polyps in her enchanted marsh rushed forward, ready to attack the treacherous Atlantean prince. They would have devoured him, but out of nowhere, two dolphins appeared. They began to tear at the polyps, leaving only poisonous blood in the water—hers, and that of her servants.

"Get out of here, Aquan," one of the dolphins, a female, said.

Aquan cut down some of the snakes with his spear, making a path. There were too many of them, but the dolphins once more leapt to his assistance, distracting the snakes.

The Atlantean prince hesitated as he looked at the fighting dolphins, but then the second one, a male the Sea Witch now recognized as belonging to Caspian, insisted, "Caspian needs you. Go!"

The little merman's name did the trick, and Aquan swam out of the Sea Witch's territory. She let him go, knowing that he would regret ever attacking her. His pain would be all the greater when he realized what he had done to himself by stabbing her—and what he'd likely end up doing.

By now, the Sea Witch's snakes had immobilized the dolphins, the venom of the creatures paralyzing the two princes' loyal guardians. She chuckled as she approached the captive sea creatures. "Well... it looks like I get to have some fun with you two at least. Come right in. We can watch how your masters destroy themselves."

Chapter Seven

Day Seven

CASPIAN PICKED at his waffles, knowing he was being morose but unable to help it. Today was it—the last day of his life. As much as he'd tried to pretend it didn't hurt him, he was still a freaking mess inside.

Stefan brushed a lock of long hair from Caspian's face. "So tomorrow is your appointment for your CAT scan. Nervous?"

Caspian smiled tightly and shook his head. He'd known his lover had scheduled meetings with various specialists to check on his voice problems and to make sure his legs were truly all right. However, it didn't concern him. By tomorrow those issues would be gone, disappearing into the depths of the ocean together with the rest of Caspian.

Stefan didn't look convinced. "What's wrong, then, sweetheart? A little under the weather?"

In truth, Caspian didn't feel all that well. A flutter had started in his legs and had begun to spread since this morning. It wasn't exactly painful—just odd and uncomfortable.

"Maybe," he mouthed. "Can we go out with your boat?"

"Whatever you want," Stefan answered as he placed a kiss on Caspian's forehead, "but only if you're well enough."

"The ocean always helps," Caspian argued, forcing another smile he really did not feel.

Still, he wasn't lying, and Stefan seemed to realize it.

"All right," Stefan said. "I can certainly agree with that. Just finish up your breakfast and we'll go."

With a little more zeal, Caspian speared the last few pieces of the waffle with his fork. He'd learned to use the utensils by watching Rick and Stefan, and it had paid off in that he'd gotten to taste human delicacies. Waffles with honey were quickly becoming a favorite—which, of course,

Stefan had noticed. Today it made his lack of enthusiasm about food even more obvious.

Nonetheless, with the incentive of the impending trip, Caspian gobbled down what would probably be the last waffle he'd ever eat. When he was done, he helped Stefan do the dishes—he found a domestic joy in sharing the simple chore—and they got ready to leave for the day.

Just as they were putting on their shoes, though, Rick appeared. “You kids going boating?” he inquired. “You wouldn’t mind if I tagged along?”

Stefan glared at his brother, and Caspian mentally sighed. He'd have liked to spend his last day alone with Stefan, but he didn't want Rick and Stefan to argue, least of all over him. Caspian would soon be gone, but Rick would remain, and maybe they could finally support each other as brothers should.

He squeezed Stefan's hand and mouthed, “Let him come. Maybe it will be good for both of you.”

Stefan arched a brow in obvious surprise, but didn't argue. Perhaps he realized Caspian wasn't up for anything sexual anyway. He often seemed reluctant to push Caspian into coitus unless Caspian himself initiated contact, which kind of proved that Stefan would never reciprocate Caspian's feelings.

An hour later, Caspian lay in the very same chaise longue that had held an unconscious Rick the first day Caspian had met Stefan. He closed his eyes, listening to the lapping of the waves as they licked the boat. The sun warmly caressed his face, so gentle, like it knew this was the last day it'd get to do so.

In the background, Stefan and Rick were bickering—for once not about anything connected to Caspian or Robert. It seemed that Stefan had forgotten to bring along beer, or something just as petty. Of course, they always argued, and that would continue to be the case long after Caspian was gone.

Caspian wondered if the brothers were ever going to forgive each other, and themselves. He wished he hadn't been so quick to trade his life away, when the man both Stefan and Rick loved hadn't been granted the chance to choose.

Caspian treasured the time he'd had with Stefan so much, and he wouldn't have regretted giving his life for it. Even so, he realized now that

the trade had been unfair. If only he'd waited, if only he'd trusted Stefan more, they might have had a chance to have a real life together, years spent by each other's side, not just a few days.

A single tear trickled down his cheek, and he let it fall. It was precious to him, like the sound of Stefan's voice, the taste of Stefan's waffles, the feel of his kiss and of his dick as he pierced Caspian's body.

"Don't cry," a sudden voice said.

Caspian's eyes shot open at the sound. He gaped when he saw his brother leaning against the edge of the deck. "Aquan?" he tried to say. "What... what are you doing here?"

He wasn't sure Aquan could read his lips like Stefan did. Nonetheless, his shock must have been clear enough, because Aquan promptly provided him with the explanation. "Isn't it obvious? I came to break you out."

Caspian remembered all too well what that had entailed for his great-aunt. "You made a deal?"

Aquan scowled darkly. "I would have. I agreed to marry the Sea Witch if she told me what to do to save you. And then she started to sing—and it was just like your voice. I recognized the tone, the magic. I couldn't bear it."

He lifted his spear, and Caspian froze in shock when he saw both the weapon and the arm carrying it had gone completely black. "What did you do?"

Aquan shrugged dismissively, and something in his demeanor scared Caspian. "It doesn't matter," he said. "The only thing of importance is that I can free you. I will slay him and have his blood flow over your legs. It won't return your voice, but it will return my little brother to the ocean—alive."

Caspian left his seat and knelt next to his brother. He passed his fingers over Aquan's arm and couldn't say he was horribly surprised when they came back slimy—like after touching a sea snake. "Aquan, you need to go home," he said. "You're not well. You're not yourself."

Aquan burst into bitter chuckles. "Funny. Marilla used to nag me too, just like that. But you know what? She's gone now, and so is Phil."

"Gone? What are you saying?"

Caspian simply couldn't believe his ears. What could have happened to his dolphin and to Aquan's?

"They helped me get away from the witch," Aquan said. "They wanted me to save you. You see now how important this is? We need you home, Caspian."

His brother had clearly lost it. The darkness emanating from the spear was spreading even as they spoke. In despair, Caspian asked, "Does Father know about this?"

"Father knows only what he must," Aquan replied. "He forced me to wait until today, the very last day, in the hope that the human would see the error of his ways. Given the circumstances, he gave me leave to do whatever it took to bring you back alive. We made a mistake, Caspian. It was always unfair of us to expect you to carry the burden of mending something you didn't break. You shouldn't have been forced into this poisonous relationship. But we can still fix it."

Caspian shook his head. Without his voice, he really couldn't explain everything he felt for Stefan. He couldn't make his brother see that, even if he and Stefan had come together for a reason that wasn't strictly connected with the two of them, Caspian's feelings had long ago stopped focusing on saving the ocean.

Before he could even attempt to make his brother see reason, Rick and Stefan approached. Caspian guessed they must have heard Aquan's voice.

"What in the world is happening here?" Stefan asked. "Who are you?"

Caspian stepped between his brother and his lover, making desperate gestures that he hoped would convey the dire nature of the situation. Of course, his efforts made Stefan rush to his side instead of retreating as he should have.

"Caspian? You okay?"

Aquan chuckled and straightened his back. "How cute. The human is worried. A little too late for that, don't you think?"

"I have no idea what...." Stefan trailed off when he set eyes on Aquan's dark blue tail. He looked from Aquan to Caspian, then back to Aquan.

Rick didn't have the same problems. Caspian's spell had weakened when he'd given up his voice, and he saw the moment the enchantment fell

off Rick. A part of him had been waiting for it. He'd noticing Rick eyeing him speculatively, like he remembered Caspian from somewhere, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"You," Rick said, narrowing his eyes at him. "I remember now. You were that merman who pulled me out of the water. What in the world are you doing with my brother?"

Aquan growled in anger at Rick's words. "My brother risks his own life to save yours, and this is how you repay him. I can't believe it. Do you see now, Caspian? Humans aren't worth it."

"Is that right, Mr. Fish-man? Well, tell you what. I never insinuated myself in the bed of someone who didn't want me. I always thought it was odd for Stefan to suddenly become so dedicated to a stranger." Rick pointed an accusing finger toward Caspian. "You did something to him, didn't you? You charmed him through some spell, just like you made me forget about you."

Caspian reeled at the angry accusations. He'd never even considered forcing Stefan's feelings. Stefan took his hand, squeezing it comfortingly. "That's enough, Rick. I have to admit this is all very confusing, but I know one thing. Caspian didn't force anything on me. I'm no naïve virgin. You don't have to defend my virtue."

"This is ridiculous," Aquan said. "I'm done talking. Time to die, human."

Stefan's eyes widened, and Caspian shielded Stefan's body with his own, shaking his head resolutely. He pushed Stefan back, away from the edge of the deck, to where Aquan couldn't reach him.

"Get out of the way, Caspian. I'm only doing this for your own good."

Caspian had no plans to comply, but Aquan was not one to give up so easily. With a growl, he leapt back into the water. Caspian didn't even dare to hope that his brother had changed his mind, and indeed, moments later, the vessel started to shake, confirming his guess. The sound of protesting metal reached Caspian's ears, and he knew his brother was cutting off their escape.

"He's attacking the boat," Rick said unhelpfully. "He can't actually break through solid metal, can he?"

Caspian wanted to snort. The material humans used to craft this type of vessel would be child's play for Aquan—especially now that he was in a rage. Caspian just gave Rick a look, and the human cursed under his breath. He took off running and retreated into the cabin.

Meanwhile Stefan rushed to the helm and started the engine. It was already too late. The boat screeched in protest as Aquan's spear pierced it. A hole appeared in the hull, and the seawater started to flood the vessel.

Even now Stefan didn't lose his calm. He guided the boat toward the harbor, his hands steady on the wheel. "If we're lucky, we might run into a boat belonging to the Coast Guard," he said. "I don't think he'd follow us into populated waters."

At a different time, Caspian would have assured Stefan that, indeed, Aquan wouldn't endanger the secrecy of the merman world by revealing himself to humans in such a blunt, violent manner. However, now he wasn't so sure.

Before Caspian could even figure out how to explain, Aquan emerged from the water, far too close to them for comfort. It all happened so fast. Clinging to the railing with one single arm, Aquan threw his spear toward Stefan. At the very last moment, just as Aquan targeted Stefan, Rick intervened. He emerged from the cabin, carrying a metal item Caspian didn't recognize. He lifted it and pointed it straight at Aquan. Three loud bangs sounded on the deck, and Aquan reeled as three projectiles struck him straight in the chest.

Merman skin was pretty resilient, especially after a certain age. However, the momentum of the human projectiles did unbalance Aquan. His grip on the spear faltered, and when he threw it, his aim was off.

The weapon flew straight at Caspian. Caspian didn't even realize it, too focused on everyone else to understand that he himself was in danger. Aquan screamed, his eyes widening in panic and anguish. "*Caspian!*"

By that point, though, it was far too late for the blow to be averted. Caspian closed his eyes and waited for the pain to come. It never did.

The reason became obvious when Stefan's grunt of pain registered in his mind. Shock coursed through Caspian, and he opened his eyes just in time to catch his lover in his arms.

They fell together onto the deck, and Caspian's heart fell when he saw the spear protruding from his lover's back. He tried to support Stefan as

best he could, but already pure blackness was seeping out from the spear into the wound.

His eyes filling with tears and his heart with despair, Caspian placed Stefan gently down. The spear seemed to be poisoning Stefan. He had to get it out if he wanted Stefan to have any chance at life.

Gathering his courage, Caspian gripped the spear and pulled. The scream that followed broke Caspian's heart, but he didn't let himself falter. This was all his fault, his punishment. If he hadn't arrogantly thought he could get Stefan to love him, none of this would have happened. But Caspian couldn't let his lover pay the price for his mistakes. There had to be a way to save him.

Even as he thought this, dark red blood seeped out of Stefan's wound and straight onto Caspian's legs. Sharp pain gripped Caspian, and he fell to the deck, no longer able to support himself on his knees. His legs came together, and excruciating pain rushed through him as he felt the bones melt away and the skin peel off.

It lasted only a moment, a brief instant during which he thought he was going to die. And then the agony vanished, melting into a sense of rightness. When he could focus, Caspian saw his human legs had disappeared, leaving behind his familiar green tail.

Caspian hated it. He wanted to claw off his scales, because they were still stained with Stefan's blood—just like his human skin had been. The tail also restrained his mobility, but he managed to drag himself back to Stefan's side.

In the time Caspian had been out, Rick had reached his brother and was trying to stem the blood flow. "Look at me, Stefan," Rick said. "Come on, look at me."

Stefan chuckled lightly, and more blood seeped past Rick's fingers. Stefan's glasses were crooked and cracked, and for some reason, seeing them in such a state truly told Caspian that he might lose his true love. "Don't tell me you'll miss me if I die."

"Fuck off," Rick growled at him. "You might be an asshole, but you're my brother. I'm not going to let anything happen to anyone I love, ever again."

Stefan looked like he was going to say something else, but then his gaze focused on Caspian. "Oh, my little merman. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

STEFAN REMEMBERED now. He didn't know how he could have ever forgotten, but everything had come back to him the moment he'd seen his lover's legs turn into a tail. Caspian had clearly made some kind of deal with the devil in the hopes of fulfilling his dream of true love. Given the other merman's behavior, Caspian must have had a deadline, and time had been running out.

"Well, this is so stupid," Stefan said. "All I had to do was to tell you I loved you, huh?"

Caspian nodded, his heartbreak written right there in those impossibly expressive blue eyes. His cheeks still bore traces of tears, but he wasn't crying anymore. He'd confessed to Stefan once that mermen couldn't cry, which had seemed very sad to Stefan at the time.

Stefan cupped Caspian's cheek, wanting nothing more than to take that pain away. The kicker was that he did love Caspian. He realized that now. He'd loved Caspian from before they'd even kissed for the first time, but he'd been too stubborn to see it. And now it was too late, much too late to say it.

He was going to die. He knew that. As far as he could tell, the spear hadn't pierced any vital organ, but it must have been poisoned. Even now, Stefan felt the venom coursing through his veins, slowly shutting down his body. He couldn't move his legs anymore, but he counted himself lucky that he could still see and feel Caspian's flesh under his fingers.

"You silly little merman," he said. "Why would you sacrifice your beautiful voice for me?"

"Stop talking," Rick growled at him. "Save your strength. We need to get you to a doctor."

"Don't be an idiot," Stefan answered. "The boat is sinking. I'll never make it."

A haze of strange calm settled over him. He could no longer hold his hand up, and it dropped limply from Caspian's face. Caspian caught it, kissing it, mouthing frantic mute pleas at him. Stefan noted distantly that the webbing between Caspian's fingers had returned, and it felt as soft to the touch as ever. Stefan had so many things he wanted to tell Caspian, so many things he would never get to say. "I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I

wish you could sing for me, like you did that first time. I wish... I wish I had told you sooner that... I l....”

Before he could finish the phrase, darkness encroached on his senses. The pain vanished, and Stefan distantly wondered if this was death—this void, this nothingness. He didn’t want to die, but he didn’t regret doing so in Caspian’s stead. He just hated that, because of his own fear, he’d let things get to this.

Suddenly, the pitch-black night exploded into a whirlwind of color. A slideshow of images swept through his mind’s eye, swirling around him, within him, dancing in an erratic kaleidoscope. Some, Stefan actually recognized—images of marine wildlife, captured in a way no human could have ever managed.

One image became clearer than any of the others—of himself, lying on the deck on the sinking boat, a pool of blood growing under him. Rick knelt there next to him, staring at his motionless body, while Caspian had draped himself over him, his tail over Stefan’s legs, his shoulders shaking as he wept without tears.

A tidal wave taller than the Chrysler building was rapidly approaching. “Get out of there!” Stefan tried to shout. “Leave me.”

“They can’t hear you,” a familiar voice said, “and even if they could, they wouldn’t leave.”

Stefan turned—or did whatever the equivalent was in this surreal world. Either way, he ended up facing a man he’d never thought he would see again. “Robert?”

Robert was exactly the way Stefan remembered him—his dark hair ruffled because he kept passing his hand through it in agitation, his black eyes twinkling with inquisitiveness, his lips twisted into a smirk.

“This can’t be real,” Stefan said. “Am I dead?”

“Well, no, not just yet,” Robert replied. “You’re kind of... in between worlds. Seriously, Stefan, I didn’t expect you to be the one I’d have to explain this to first. With all the crap Rick was pulling, I figured that any moment now he’d go too far.”

Stefan was torn between the shock of seeing Robert once again, his own confusion at what had happened, and his concern for Caspian and

Rick. “Look, I’d love to chat, but they’re going to get hurt. Not even a merman can survive that wave.”

A female figure manifested at Robert’s side, leaning against him. Her beautiful blue eyes and green tail reminded Stefan of Caspian. “You don’t have to worry about that,” she said. “You did it, Stefan Firth. You freed me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Stefan replied. Then again, maybe he did. “Are you Caspian’s great-aunt, Caspiana? The so-called Little Mermaid?”

“Indeed, I am,” the mermaid replied. “My sorrow cursed the ocean for a long time, and just like Caspian told you, the only thing that could break it was true love between a human and a merman.”

“But... I never got to tell Caspian I loved him.”

Robert snorted. “Of course you didn’t. You were never one to make heartfelt declarations.”

“I kissed him and nothing happened,” Stefan argued.

“Of course,” Caspiana said. “Merfolk know whether a person is their true love or not when they share a kiss. However, humans don’t. For you, it was just another kiss, whereas for Caspian it meant commitment. That was what could truly break the curse—committing yourself to a person, having another mean more to you than your own welfare.”

Stefan winced as he realized how badly he’d misjudged Caspian’s ways. However, the mermaid didn’t seem angry.

“You didn’t even realize it or accept it yourself, not until the end,” she said. “But it was your sacrifice that finally broke the circle. So far, it’s only been merfolk reaching out to humans, trying to bridge the gap between our two species out of love. It didn’t work, not until you showed yourself willing to give up your own life for a merman. And you never once regretted dying for him, not even when you saw his tail.”

Stefan just stared at her. “I don’t understand. Why would I regret it upon seeing his tail? It’s a very beautiful one.” He shook his head, pushing away the irrelevant question. “No matter. Does that mean they’re safe? Will they be all right?”

Even as he asked this, the tidal wave approached the sinking boat and engulfed everyone on it—even Caspian’s brother, who’d been hanging

around trying to get Caspian to come with him.

Stefan gasped. “No.... No. God, *no*.”

Behind Caspiana, a bright light flared into being. It settled into the silhouette of a merman, then changed into the image of a shark, then again and again into a thousand other things.

“They will be fine,” the strange figure said. “The question is... what will happen to you?”

Even in this spiritual form he had yet to understand, Stefan couldn’t bear to look at the new arrival. Its shape seemed to flicker a million times per second, as if it was unable to decide what it wanted to stay as. In the end, Stefan stared at Caspiana’s tail—because it reminded him of his lover—and replied, “I don’t know. I kind of thought I’d get to find out if there really is an afterlife.”

Robert’s fingers gripped his chin, and Stefan met the other man’s eyes. For a dead guy, Robert felt strikingly warm to the touch. “It’s not your time yet, Stefan,” he said. “Don’t be in such a rush to die.”

“I’m not,” Stefan assured him, “but I....” How could he explain that life had taught him people didn’t come back from the dead? The evidence was right there, in front of him, in the somewhat translucent figure of the man who, for some reason, had come to chastise him even from beyond the grave.

Robert smiled like he knew what Stefan was thinking. “Good. The two of us were never meant to be, Stefan. You always belonged to the ocean, to your Caspian, and I belonged to Rick. Unfortunately, I couldn’t live out my days with Rick like I wanted, but that doesn’t mean you have to suffer a similar fate.”

“Indeed,” the peculiar figure confirmed. “Because of your loyalty to us, we will give you another chance, like you gave us through your sacrifice. But you must choose now. Choose who you want to be.”

For the first time, Stefan truly looked at the figure. He knew now what it was, what it represented. The ocean itself, the essence of its life, just like Caspian had described it.

“I think you already know what I want,” he replied steadily.

“That might be the case, but you must be certain of your choice,” the ocean warned him. “What you wish will not be easy on you. You will have

to give up everything you are and start anew. It was very difficult for our child, but it will be more so for you.”

“I’m not afraid,” Stefan said without hesitation. It seemed like too much to hope for. Any moment now, he expected the other shoe to drop, for this to end up being only a beautiful hallucination induced by the last moments of his life. But just in case it wasn’t, just in case he would truly be given a second chance, he would embrace it without fear.

Both Robert and Caspiana smiled. Robert leaned closer to him and said, “Good boy. Don’t forget to tell that stupid hubby of mine to stop with the nonsense. I can’t even rest in peace because I’m too worried about him. Tell him that I loved him, and I always will, but it’s time for him to let go.”

“And do tell my family I love them,” Caspiana added.

Stefan nodded. He might have tried to come up with an answer, to ask what would happen to Caspiana, Robert, and even the ocean after this, but suddenly pain erupted through him, more intense than even the poison that should have killed him. Stefan screamed, and knew no more.

THE SEA Witch couldn’t believe her eyes. She’d been so sure Aquan would kill his own brother. Her magic always brought misfortune on anyone who tried to borrow it, and it always backfired in the most painful way imaginable.

And then the human had unexpectedly thrown himself in front of the spear, blocking the deadly blow with his own body. No, this wasn’t supposed to happen! This couldn’t be. Humans never sacrificed themselves for merfolk. The world didn’t work that way.

In a corner of her home, the two dolphins released anxious whistles and clicks. “Oh, Stefan,” Caspian’s dolphin said. “No....”

His eyes were rooted to the bubbles the Sea Witch used to monitor the situation, where an image of the dead human still lingered, with the merman prince lying over him.

Maybe it wouldn’t work. The human had never gotten the chance to confess his love to Caspian. That would undoubtedly be a barrier in the....

A flurry of sea snakes and polyps burst into her hut before the thought could even crystallize in her mind. They hid behind her, trembling in fear

and dismay. She would have told them not to bother, because her power couldn't stand against what was coming.

The Sea Witch swam out of her hut and stared into the distance. She felt the wave of power approaching, spreading all throughout the ocean. It was the power of true love—one she'd considered impossible to find in a human being.

She didn't try to escape it. Instead, she closed her eyes, wondering if it would hurt. She'd been around for so long now, her quest for immortality prolonging her existence beyond that of a regular mermaid. Now that she faced death, she found that she didn't fear it.

When the power hit her, something inside the Sea Witch snapped. She felt herself become smaller, just like she always did when she shape-shifted into a sea snake—a very difficult spell that she'd succeeded in after centuries of attempts.

This time, though, it was different. She scrambled for her power, trying to call her magic to her in a last futile attempt to preserve her sense of self. Predictably, it didn't work.

When the wave of power finally passed through the marshes, the corrupted polyps were gone, and so was the Sea Witch.

The sea snake looked around, uncertain as to how it had gotten there. It could see others of its kind, but they seemed just as dazed and confused. Most of them were already swimming away in various directions.

Not that the sea snake could blame them. Even now two dolphins were eyeing it with somewhat alarming expressions. Dolphins didn't usually prey on the sea snake's kind, but they did enjoy using it as a weapon to trap other fish—so for its own safety, the sea snake decided it was time to get out of there.

With no voice and no memory, the sea snake joined the rest of its group, swimming away from the abandoned hut of the age-old mermaid who had once been the Sea Witch.

Epilogue

Five years later

CASPIAN PLOPPED down onto the rock, swinging his tail back and forth in an absent motion. He shielded his eyes with his hand and stared up at the sun. "They should have been here by now," he grumbled. "What's taking them so long?"

Phil nudged Caspian with his snout. "Stop pouting. Stefan will be home soon. You'll see."

"The dolphin is right," Aquan added. "Stefan has a very important job, but he'll always come back to you."

Caspian slid off the rock and swam around for a bit, enjoying the feel of the gentle waves on his scales. He eyed his brother and hummed thoughtfully. "And so will Rick, right?" he asked. "When are you ever going to admit how you feel about him?"

Aquan shot Caspian a look of disbelief. "You must be joking. That man loathes me. I'm only here as a liaison for Father."

Caspian's brother had a point. Aquan's attack on Stefan's boat and Stefan's near-death always lingered at the back of their minds. It had taken Caspian a long time to forgive his brother for nearly killing Stefan. Aquan had admitted that it hadn't been solely the Sea Witch's influence that had determined him to do so, and that even without her darkness seeping into him, he'd have likely tried to do the same thing. In the end, it had been Stefan's insistence, and that of the rest of Caspian's family, that had led Caspian to open himself up to Aquan once again. Rick, however, still got angry whenever he saw Aquan. It was unfortunate, because Caspian could tell Aquan had started to like Rick in a less than platonic manner, and Rick had at last begun to overcome his pain over Robert's death.

Phil intervened, distracting Caspian and Aquan from the increasingly uncomfortable conversation. "Where's Marilla?" the dolphin asked Aquan.

“Probably around the marshlands, teaching her calf the joys of hunting sea snakes.” Aquan grinned. “Why? Are you suddenly gripped by paternal instincts?”

Caspian laughed. “As if. More likely he’s anticipating fathering the next calf.”

Phil blew out a jet of water through his blowhole. “You forget I am quite popular with the females,” he said. “I am just... fond of Marilla.”

Caspian pressed a kiss to his friend’s smooth head. “I know you are,” he replied. “We’re teasing you.”

The two dolphins had become quite close during their imprisonment with the Sea Witch. Aquan had later revealed that he’d attempted to release them, but he’d been unable to reach them as the witch had strengthened her defenses against him. Nonetheless, Phil and Marilla had survived, presumably because the witch had wanted them to suffer by seeing the destruction of the merfolk they had been guarding.

The pain of what they’d seen had made Phil and Marilla bond, and after they’d gained their freedom, they’d ended up coupling and having a beautiful dolphin calf. So far, Marilla was pretty protective of him, and she hadn’t weaned him yet, but Caspian couldn’t wait to meet him.

“That reminds me,” Aquan said. “Do you think you and your life mate will want children? I’ve lost count of the females who’ve been bugging me about it.”

Caspian leaned against the rock and smiled, remembering the first time he and Stefan had discussed it. Five years ago, he’d been walking on human feet, so uncertain of what the next day would bring, and somehow, they’d managed to get engaged in a conversation about offspring.

“Soon,” Caspian promised. “I’ll have to discuss it with Stefan. He’s so busy right now, but once things settle down, we’ll approach a female for the eggs.”

They were just missing a merling to complete their family, well, that and a dolphin for Stefan. But neither of the two issues could be rushed. After everything that had happened, Caspian had learned that all good things needed time.

The sound of an approaching aircraft interrupted the conversation. “Here they come,” Phil said. “I told you.”

Caspian wasn't listening to him anymore. He was staring at the horizon, holding his breath, already anticipating the moment when he'd be reunited with his life mate.

A small black dot appeared in his line of sight, growing bigger by the second. Finally it turned into a large helicopter that headed straight to Caspian, Phil, and Aquan.

The minutes it took for the aircraft to reach them felt like ages, but at last it reached its destination and stopped right above Caspian. The helicopter door opened to reveal Stefan standing on the edge. Caspian waved at him and blew his lover a kiss. Stefan grinned back, already toeing off his shoes and taking off his shirt and suit jacket.

From the pilot's seat, Rick shouted something Caspian couldn't hear over the sound of the helicopter blades. In response, Stefan lowered the hooks used to hoist things up into the aircraft.

As the carrying mechanism hit the water surface, Aquan shot into action. With the ease of practice, he started to fasten the hooks around the cargo already waiting on the rock. Once he was done, he waved an all clear to the men in the aircraft.

Caspian waited impatiently, swimming around to distract himself and singing under his breath, even if he knew Stefan most likely couldn't hear. He realized all too well the importance of what Aquan was doing, so for the most part he stayed out of the way.

The chest Aquan had just strapped to the helicopter contained a fortune in Spanish gold doubloons, money that Rick would put to good use. When the curse had ended, the true power of the ocean had reemerged, making it more resilient to pollution and toxicity. Species long considered extinct were returning, contributing to the health and welfare of the ecosystem.

But their task wasn't over, and like Stefan had once said, they couldn't rely on magic to fix their problems. And so Stefan built research centers to encourage the ongoing study of green energy and new less pollutant fuels. As the new life of the ocean provided him with unexpected solutions, he was gradually putting into practice the very same ideas he'd once brainstormed with Caspian. They were studying a type of cyanobacteria in the hope of finding safer medicine, and distributing filters that would prevent massive oil spills. Stefan had already built a revolutionary engine

that used water for fuel, and while that wasn't exactly a novel idea, he'd made it practical, easy, and accessible.

Oh, it was still a work in progress. A great deal of people remained who were skeptical of Rick and Stefan and for various reasons tried to fight them. Not everyone liked what the brothers were trying to do. The gold doubloons turned into human currency usually silenced them, and when that didn't work, Caspian intervened. Sometimes it paid to have a magical voice.

Of course, the humans didn't know Rick's money came from the ocean itself. Once the lost treasures were completely gone, other riches would follow. Aquan was already looking into a mine of precious gemstones they had discovered at the very bottom of the ocean—one humans could never reach, not even with all their technology.

Now, Rick was the only one who lived inland. Stefan still went there occasionally to supervise the progress of the research facilities, but his visits had become rarer as he focused more on his life within the ocean. Caspian always waited for him to come home, with an embrace, a kiss, and a song.

Obviously, Stefan was just as eager for their reunion. At last, he seemed to lose his patience, because he discarded his pants and leapt out of the helicopter.

Halfway down, his form blurred, and his legs came together to form a beautiful silver tail. His ears lost their human shape, turning into the mer's familiar weblike membrane. By the time he hit the water's surface, Stefan had completely turned into a merman.

Instantly, Caspian leapt on his mate. Stefan laughed as he caught Caspian, the sound so beautiful and carefree it was like music to Caspian's ears. "Welcome home," Caspian sang in Stefan's ear. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," Stefan replied, already peppering his face with kisses.

Caspian wanted to kiss him back. No, he wanted to do so much more, to explore every inch of Stefan with his tongue, to reacquaint himself with his lover's body in every single way possible.

But he was more than a little aware of his brother's presence, and he couldn't launch himself into the sexfest he had in mind while in public.

As if guessing his thoughts, Aquan cleared his throat. Caspian looked at his brother over Stefan's shoulder, earning himself a smile from the older mer prince. "Go on ahead," Aquan said. "It looks like you two need some time to yourselves."

Rick waved from the helicopter, probably telling them the same thing. Leaving aside the awe at finally seeing Aquan and Rick agree even on the slightest of issues, Caspian didn't delay on taking them up on the offer.

"Thanks," he shouted. "We'll see you later."

He blew Phil a kiss and the dolphin did a small dance of joy.

"Go on," Phil said. "I think I might hunt down Marilla."

Caspian laughed, and hand in hand with his life mate, dove into the water. He loved the feel of the webs between Stefan's fingers rubbing against his. It was sensual, yet somehow warm and comforting, chaste, but filled with promise.

As it turned out, Stefan wasn't in a very chaste mood. As soon as they were far enough away from their brothers, Stefan started swimming faster, pulling Caspian after him. Caspian eagerly went, his heart already hammering with anticipation.

They came to a small, underwater cave that had once been home to a shoal of fish. Surrounded by corals and underground vegetation, it had become the perfect hideaway, especially since, all things considered, it was pretty close to the surface. The moment they were inside, Stefan pulled Caspian into his arms. "I need you so badly," he said. "You're even more beautiful now than when I left."

"Stefan," Caspian whispered back. "Oh, Stefan. Touch me."

Stefan pinned Caspian against the wall of the cave. Their tails tangled underneath the water, their scales rubbing together. Caspian gasped in pleasure, holding on to his lover's shoulders, moaning as every inch of him flared to life. Stefan took advantage of Caspian's distraction and crushed their mouths together. Many things had changed during the past years, but some always remained the same. Stefan's taste, his passion, the mastery with which he took possession of Caspian's mouth—they never faded, never dimmed. If anything, it all got better. Caspian easily succumbed to the kiss, his tongue gliding alongside Stefan's. His lover sucked on Caspian's slick muscle, all the while exploring Caspian's body with his strong,

talented hands. When his fingers found the very first scale in Caspian's tail, Caspian's entire body shuddered in pleasure.

Stefan broke the kiss and his lips zeroed in on Caspian's ear. He licked and nibbled on the delicate membrane, making Caspian writhe and cry out. Around them, the ocean stirred, the currents responding to the magic in Caspian's voice. More importantly, Stefan's libido reacted to it too, and he grunted, trying to move faster against Caspian's tail. It was not enough, not nearly enough, and Caspian knew exactly what they both needed to feel complete.

The ocean had left them with the ability to briefly take on human form. It had been meant to assist them in rebuilding what had been destroyed, but it had other advantages too.

Closing his eyes, Caspian willed his tail to split into legs. The transformation flowed over him smoothly, leaving him with human-like limbs. Changing shapes didn't hurt anymore, at least, not when he was in the water. He'd had a lot of practice in the last couple of years, both out of necessity, and for recreational purposes.

Because, the most important benefit of his transformation was that it also gave him a very human, and right now very hard, cock. Well, to be true, if only he'd been able to shift, it wouldn't have been much fun at all—but Stefan had already followed Caspian's example, and Stefan's hard dick didn't delay in nudging Caspian's hip, eager to point it out. To top it off, the ocean had given them an added bonus. At the very core, both Caspian and Stefan remained merfolk—as eloquently proven by the fact that they could still breathe underwater—which meant Caspian had the best of both worlds. It wasn't a good idea to swim deeper into the ocean—the high pressure could harm them in this form, but deep sea exploration wasn't the point of them changing shapes.

Of course, Caspian hadn't been exploiting the potential of that gift too much lately, and he proceeded to fix that serious error. He reached for Stefan's cock, gripped it in his hand, and jacked it softly. Stefan growled at him. "Oh, sweetheart, you're playing with fire."

Caspian laughed. "We're a few hundred feet below the water's surface, lover," he said teasingly. "I couldn't play with fire if I wanted to."

He rubbed his thumb over the head of Stefan's cock, fascinated with the consistency of the precum already gathering at the tip. Even if he'd long

ago stopped being the wide-eyed confused virgin, touching Stefan always brought him back to that very first moment, the first time Stefan had breached his body intimately.

Caspian's anus clenched at the memory, aching to be filled, to receive Stefan's hard dick. However, Stefan had other ideas. He took hold of Caspian's hand and actually pulled it off his dick. "Not just yet, Caspian," he said. "I want to love you. My way."

A whimper escaped Caspian at the promise in Stefan's voice. He nodded, thankful for the water that supported him when his knees gave out. Stefan's stormy gray eyes—no longer shielded by glasses—had gone almost black with lust. "God," Stefan whispered. "If you could see yourself. You drive me crazy."

Stefan maneuvered Caspian to lie down on the sand of the algae bed they kept in their little shelter. Caspian eagerly complied, although he couldn't help but gasp when the surface of the makeshift mattress came into contact with his legs and ass.

Stefan shot him a knowing grin. "You haven't shifted since I left, have you?" he asked, his voice full of gravel. "I knew it."

It was true. During Stefan's absences, Caspian rarely shifted to his legged form. Stefan been gone for a whole week this time around—which meant that Caspian's lower half had become particularly sensitive. And Stefan knew it, damn him, he knew it and unashamedly took advantage of it.

No sooner had Caspian settled down on the algae bed than Stefan proceeded with a maddening sensual assault. He stole a brief, nearly chaste kiss, which induced a false sense of safety in Caspian's mind. After that, though, Stefan went straight for the gold.

Bypassing Caspian's chest and abdomen—and more worryingly, even his dick—Stefan settled himself over Caspian's legs. With another wicked smirk thrown Caspian's way, he started to lick Caspian's right foot.

Sensation exploded over Caspian as his lover found the most responsive areas in his body and mercilessly exploited them. Stefan sucked on every single toe, and swirled his tongue over the arch of Caspian's foot. He fellated it the way he would have with Caspian's dick. Coincidentally, every flick of Stefan's slick muscle triggered shocks of pleasure all

throughout Caspian's body, all of which pooled straight into his aching cock.

Caspian couldn't help it. He cried out and writhed and begged, needing more, needing Stefan to touch him all over. Thankfully, Stefan had the foresight to hold Caspian's legs down, preventing him from escaping—or doing something idiotic like kicking Stefan in the face.

And he wasn't done with Caspian, not by far. When he released Caspian's right foot, he directed his attentions to the left—whereupon the torture started all over again. After that, he licked a trail of fire up Caspian's leg, over his thigh, then back down, like he wanted to trace every single tendon. He spent an indecent amount of time in the hollow of Caspian's knee, driving Caspian wild.

At last, Stefan reached the area where Caspian needed him most. He stabbed his tongue into the slit of Caspian's dick, moaning as he took in Caspian's precum. The vibrations would have made Caspian come, but his lover evilly gripped the base of Caspian's dick, squeezing his testes and keeping his climax in check.

Caspian had long ago decided that having outer genital organs was probably the best thing about humans. At a time like this, though, it certainly didn't feel like it. He buried his fingers in Stefan's hair, wanting nothing more than to start fucking Stefan's mouth. But as always, he was putty in Stefan's hands. He ended up completely at Stefan's mercy, hanging on for the ride as Stefan sucked and licked and teased. His dick throbbed with the need to come. Every single inch of skin buzzed with sexual energy. Caspian felt it in every fiber of his being, from each individual lock of hair, to his toenails.

He was so lost in the pleasure that for a moment, he didn't even register that his lover had released his dick—at least, not until Stefan flipped him onto all fours. Instantly, his brain—or maybe his libido—focused on the potential of the position. He pushed his ass out, wiggling it invitingly. “Please, Stefan,” he somehow managed to say. “Fuck me.”

Years ago, when they'd first made love, Caspian hadn't even been able to speak, to tell Stefan how much he wanted this. Hell, the terms “cock” and “fucking” had been unknown to him. After his many visits inland, however, he'd learned the value of dirty talk when it came to pressing Stefan's buttons.

Just like Caspian had known would happen, Stefan released another one of his trademark groans. In response to Caspian's pleas, he spread Caspian's ass cheeks and stabbed his tongue straight into Caspian's hole.

Caspian's entire world went white. He clenched his fists in the algae mattress, now struggling not to come instead of reaching for his climax. Even as Stefan wormed the slick muscle inside him, Caspian craved a more fulfilling penetration, the only one that could satisfy his desperate yearning for Stefan.

He ended up cheating, just because he couldn't withstand the torture for much longer. "Stefan," he sang. "Please, take me."

Caspian never used his voice to coerce his lover into anything. However, when he'd gotten it back—the moment the Sea Witch had been turned into a snake—he'd found it aroused Stefan a lot. It worked this time too.

Stefan lifted his head, and the water stirred anxiously around them as the other man held onto his hips. Something thick and blunt nudged at Caspian's opening, and then Stefan pushed inside him in one smooth thrust.

They both groaned at the same time. Caspian could never get enough of the sweet burn that unavoidably appeared when Stefan took him, that pleasure-pain that made him feel so alive. Stefan went still inside him, as always mindful of Caspian's comfort—but he needn't have worried. Caspian started singing again—although it wasn't entirely intentional on his part. He cried out a litany of his lover's name, needing Stefan to move, to do something, anything.

Stefan instantly responded. "I love your voice," he murmured as he pulled out of Caspian and thrust back inside. "I love you. So much."

Caspian could never get tired of hearing those sweet words. He wanted to say the words back, but he couldn't. Even his feeble attempts melted into incoherence when Stefan hit his special spot, over and over again, harder and harder, and always, always deeper.

In the slight light permeating through the waves, surrounded by the ocean, claimed so utterly and completely by his lover, Caspian felt like he'd fallen into a dream, one of wild passion that he never wanted to wake up from. Even if he had regained his voice, he could only use it to moan. His rational side had short-circuited, leaving only lust and want behind.

To his credit, Stefan wasn't much better off either. Gradually, his thrusts became harsher, more frantic, almost violent. Caspian loved it—he always reveled in seeing Stefan let go, lose control and simply be himself. It made their coupling all the more precious to him, so much deeper and truer than a simple carnal union.

Lost in it, lost in Stefan, Caspian moved with his lover, impaling himself on Stefan's dick, becoming a vessel of their shared pleasure. At this point, Caspian felt like he couldn't breathe, like his lungs couldn't take air, or his gills had somehow stopped working. Intellectually, he realized this was not the case, but in spite of that knowledge, he felt crushed under the overwhelming assault of Stefan's passion, breathless, living and dying, his only anchor his own need for Stefan. The heat of Stefan's erection branded him from the inside out, filling him to the brim. He didn't even know where Stefan ended and he began, but that didn't scare him. It felt right, like it always had been between them, like he'd known it would be from the moment he'd acknowledged Stefan as his true love.

It had taken them so long to reach this point in their lives, one when they could at last take refuge in their desire for one another without fearing what tomorrow would bring. They'd endured pain, sacrifice, loss, and they'd carried burdens that shouldn't have been shouldered by a few individuals alone.

But right then and there, none of it mattered—nothing except the two of them, the rhythmic beating of their hearts, the blaze of passion that rose between them higher and higher with every motion of Stefan's pelvis, with every lustful cry and passionate moan.

Caspian didn't know what finally pushed him over the edge. It could have been that one last thrust that unerringly hit his prostate. It could have been the sound of Stefan's voice in his ear as the other man whispered his name. Or maybe it was the moment when Stefan's lips pressed against Caspian's shoulder in a gesture so gentle it belied the nearly violent unleashing of their desire. Poseidon, it could have been all or none of these things.

Whatever the case, when Caspian's orgasm flowed over him, it did so naturally, a burst of life and passion that sent his entire body into a frenzy of ecstasy. His cock jerked, and his cream burst out of him, spreading all

around them in the water. Stefan thrust inside him one last time and pumped him full of his seed.

The knowledge of his lover's climax made Caspian's own even better, impossibly more intense. Their joint cries wrote a symphony that held more magic than Caspian's voice ever could. Sensation and emotion came together in a perfect blend that drugged Caspian, sending him into a world where only he and Stefan existed.

Their union held pleasure and love, in its purest form, and a single tear slid down Caspian's cheek, drifting away into the sea. That tear no longer hid sorrow, though—just nearly worshipful affection and the gratitude that they'd been given the chance to have their own fairytale, instead of succumbing to the fate of Caspian's ancestor.

With an ocean of feelings pulsing in his heart, Caspian shuddered through the waves of his orgasm, every single spasm cleansing him of whatever doubts and fears might have appeared during Stefan's absence.

When he at last returned to consciousness again, he slumped down on the algae bed. The moment Stefan slid out of him, he melted into his merman form, too spent to hold on to his human one.

A few moments later, Stefan curled by his side, his tail straight against Caspian's. When their scales rubbed together, the contact brought a sensation of contentment and intimacy, making Caspian even more aware that their connection went beyond the physical.

At last, Caspian remembered his need to reply to Stefan's confession. "I love you too," he said, his voice a little hoarse from his cries, but more certain than ever.

Stefan chuckled, and his eyes glittered with mirth and affection. "I know, my little merman. I know."

As they settled down in the silence and safety of the cave, Caspian closed his eyes and smiled to himself. His ancestor had once been told merfolk didn't have souls, but Caspian knew it wasn't true. His soul had just been waiting for its other half, and now that they were together, nothing would separate them ever again.

ALANA ANKH is a hopeless romantic. Once upon a time—no, not in the Stone Ages, but when Alana was a nosy teenager—she lived and breathed mainstream romance, but after she discovered m/m.... Well, her fate was sealed.

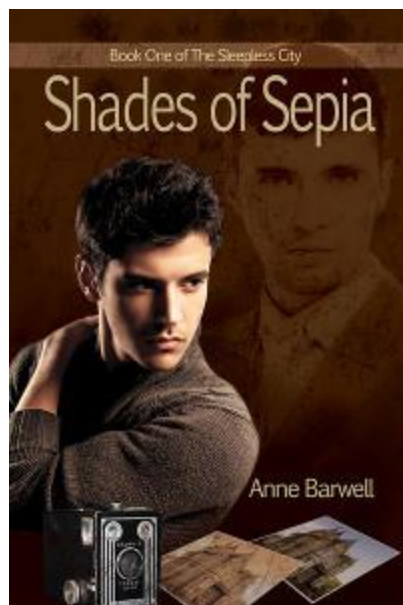
Regardless of the genre, Alana thinks love can be painful, heartbreaking, but also fun, corny, and a little silly. Love is different for everyone and anyone—and in her books, she tries to celebrate that.

Alana also loves sci-fi, fantasy and paranormal. But even if her boys have scales, fur, claws, fangs—or whatever else occurs to her—they're really very nice people. Most of the time. Well.... Most of them are nice, but all of them deserve love and a HEA.

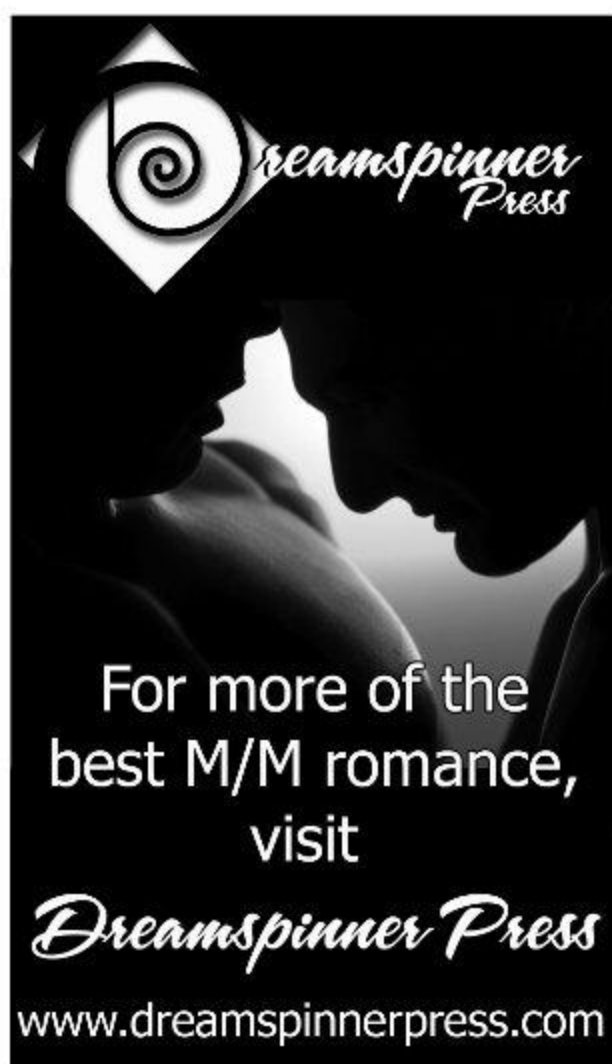
When Alana isn't feeding her addiction to happily-ever-afters and hot men, she's randomly slaying monsters in MMORPGs or thinking up the next idea to share with readers.

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