



Lila Leigh Hunter

BEYOND THE KING'S CURSE

A Gate to the Worlds Story



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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

BEYOND THE KING'S CURSE

(Gate to the Worlds, #2)

By Lila Leigh Hunter

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many

long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Beyond the King's Curse (Gate to the Worlds, #2)

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Photo Description

A young merman seems to be floating calmly underwater—arms extended, eyes closed. His aquamarine tail is curved towards a golden coral formation. Sunlight is coming through the surface, shining on him like a spotlight.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Doesn't this merman look sad and lonely? Can you put a smile on his face?

*Matthew Arnold's 1849 poem *The Forsaken Mermaid* tells the story of a merman whose human wife leaves him and their children to return to life on the surface. The haunting final lines of the poem are:*

There dwells a loved one,

But cruel is she.

She left lonely for ever

The kings of the sea.

Perhaps the merman in your story is the same one from the poem; perhaps he is a different merman altogether. One thing is for certain: if mermaids keep falling in love with human men, as they do in fairy tales and princess movies, there are going to be a whole lot of single, lonely (and horny?) mermen left in the ocean.

What's a merman to do?

What will you write? My “favorite” would be a GFY, First-Time or Friends-to-Lovers type of story. But it's up to you! Sweet romance, kinky merman sex, ménage, MPREG, shifters, tentacle porn—all fine. My only requirement is that one MC be a merman and the other MC(s) be, if not mermen, at least non-human. And of course, a happy ending!

Sincerely,

Jane Harper

Story Info

Genre: historical, alternate universe

Tags: 19th century, curse, family, first time, friends to lovers, HEA, merman, mershark, m-preg, royalty, soulmates/bonded

Word Count: 26,730

A glossary of terms may be found at the end of the story.

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*“Yet, taught by time, my heart has learn’d to glow
For others’ good, and melt at others’ woe.”*

—Homer (8th Century B.C.)

Prologue

New London, Bermuda

17th Century

The midday sun shined brightly over the vast ocean when Tristan surfaced at the cove. The pink sand was crisp under his feet, and the soft breeze dried the last drops of water from his bare, pale skin. Tristan took a deep breath to clear his lungs before he looked around for his mother, but she was nowhere in sight. He entered the family villa he grew up in, stopping first at the kitchen for a treat. His mother always indulged him because at only eight in human years, he was still considered a merbabe. He found a loaf of freshly baked bread and a jar of spread sitting on the table along with a piece of candy wrapped in parchment. He loved sugary confections, especially because it helped remove the salty remnants of the ocean water from his mouth.

Tristan had been living with his father and six siblings in Mernovia for the last year, but he still missed his life above water. The underwater city had everything a young merbabe could ever need, and his royal status afforded him anything he could dream of, but he longed for his mother's love the most. He was the youngest son of the King of the Sea and his bride—Taithja. The king had been keeping watch over the new vessels arriving at the nearby coastal islands when he saw her reflection in the water. As soon as he surfaced and saw her beauty, his heart became hers forever.

Like every Sunday, Tristan swam many sea miles alone to see his mother and to attend afternoon church service. His siblings did not see the need to join as she was only their stepmother and a human, worshiping only one god. The new settlers had built St. George's Church under the Anglican faith, promising an afterlife in Heaven to those who believed. His parents' relationship had suffered since she joined the congregation, and his father had moved the family back to his kingdom to prevent any friction. The king loved her with all his heart and was willing to give their union his best, even when living apart.

The couple had married a month after Taithja's arrival to Bermuda, and then they had moved into the villa by the cove. Tristan had heard many stories about how her quick pregnancy had brought joy to the kingdom. It was common for merfolk to have children with humans, blessing the newborns with a soul. In his case, Tristan was a *numen*—the possessor not only of a soul, but of the ability to feel, absorb, and redirect energy. His mother saw his unique abilities as an

aberration capable of corrupting him. Even when she spent less and less time with him, Taithja was adamant in her desire to use her new faith to save his soul.

This day was a special day for Tristan. He was going to sing a solo during the service. He had been coming ashore to practice for the past weeks but had seen his mother only once or twice. She always excused herself, and Tristan felt terrible complaining about it when they were finally together. Like other merfolk, Tristan had a voice that was captivating and at times sounded mature beyond his years. Tristan liked the idea of many people believing he was older. He mimicked his siblings in hopes of being closer to them, but more importantly, to make his parents as proud of him as they were of his siblings' achievements.

For a moment, Tristan was concerned about his mother's absence, but he decided to clean up and get dressed for church instead of worrying about it. When he was done, he sat by the door and waited longer than he thought necessary. His mother had never been late to meet him for Sunday service, and Tristan's nerves were betraying him. He could see the web between his fingers trying to come through. Tristan closed his eyes and concentrated on maintaining his human form, not wanting to ruin his clothes. When he heard the church bells resonate, he ran so he would make it on time.

Tristan got to St. George's, but no one knew where his mother was. The choir director promised to help him search for her after the service finished, and he agreed. By the time his solo arrived, Tristan had to hide his hands behind his back to cover the changes starting to take over his body. The congregation gave him high praises, telling him his performance had moved them deeply.

He fidgeted, pacing back and forth, as he waited for the choir director. Together they searched the small town square and the surrounding shops without luck. They made it to the piers where the late afternoon activities were at their peak. Under normal circumstances, Tristan loved to visit the piers. He had always enjoyed watching people go about their days. For him it was very different from the formalities he experienced in Mernovia. Just like many of his people, Tristan wanted to stay ashore and live as a human, but their bodies needed to return to sea at least once every moon cycle. Tristan had hoped that he could stay home with his mother today, but it seemed as if his prayers were not being answered.

As Tristan was getting ready to go back to the cove's villa, a vessel's whistle caught everyone's attention. It was a large galleon, readying its sails.

Tristan turned in time to see his mother, facing the pier from the vessel's poop deck, wrapped in a strange man's arms. Tristan released the choir director's hand and ran down to the edge of the pier. Before he was able to jump in, the director held him by the back of his shirt.

"Mama, Mama, please do not leave," Tristan shouted as loud as he could.

Taithja simply turned around in the man's arms and hid against his chest.

As soon as Tristan's tears dropped into the water beneath the piers, a storm started to brew, and the water parted for the King of the Seas. Gasps traveled all around them as the colossal merman propelled his upper body above the waves. He approached, pointing his trident toward the pier as he ordered the man holding his son to release him. Tristan jumped into the water without taking the time to remove his clothes. It took him less than a minute to complete the task underwater and to swim to the galleon.

"Mama, please wait for me," Tristan pleaded as his father moved to his side.

"Tai, where are you going? Who is that man holding you?" the king asked.

"I am her betrothed, Juan Ortega de la Cruz, Captain of *La Aventura*," the man responded.

"That cannot be. Taithja is married to me."

"No, I am not since your pagan rite had no validity according to church's teachings. Tomorrow at sunrise, the vessel's chaplain will bless my marriage to the captain, and I will finally be able to save my soul," Taithja responded without any sympathy for her family.

"No blessing will rest upon you, but a curse instead," the king proclaimed.

"Please, Mama, I promise to be good," Tristan said between sobs.

"As you see, you are abandoning our loving family with your selfish actions. If you go through with this vile ceremony, your new husband will die within weeks, taking your soul with his last breath."

People started to run away from the spectacle as the skies got darker and the currents stronger. *La Aventura* was losing control, and the desperate shouts from the crew could be heard above all other noise. Tristan saw his mother kneel down in prayer as the chaos continued all around. He noticed a boy, probably in his midteens, strip as he was being chased around the galleon's deck. The boy jumped into the water, and Tristan could swear he saw a long caudal fin emerge before he disappeared from sight. Tristan returned his

attention to his father who started a circular motion with his trident, collecting strong winds around it. Every attempt Tristan made to reach his father was lost in the commotion.

“Only the sextant that guided you here in the first place will be able to find its way back to these lands, but not without the power of a love stronger than the one you are killing inside of me today,” the king said. “From this day forward, all the worlds and kingdoms will be hidden from each other. Death and oblivion will find anyone who tries to steal from me again, and your body will never rest in peace, Taithja,” were the king’s last words as he pointed the trident to *La Aventura*, making it disappear as it got engulfed in a bright light, strong enough to push Tristan underwater as the curse enveloped the realms.

Chapter I

Mernovia, Devil's Triangle

19th Century

The further he swam, the happier Tristan felt. The pressure of the water against his body combined with his speed gave him a rush. He zigzagged between the eelgrass meadows, causing the flounders and other schools of fish to move aside for him. His body was literally glowing with excitement, his tail lighting a trail behind him, enticing small creatures to follow as he moved further. He twirled freely and smiled when he saw his destination ahead.

He knew wanting to hide from everyone was juvenile, but Tristan preferred solitude. He was well past mating age, being over two hundred years old, but he had no desire to father any merbabes without a loving partner. Tristan was considered a very desirable mate even without High Court responsibilities. He thanked the gods the day his brother appointed him to the Mernovian Council instead of the Court—dealing directly with Mernovians was never his strong suit. Today not even the Council required his services. Tristan was sure they only tolerated him because he was the Prince Regent's half brother, not that the aforementioned brother had much time for him anymore. As the eldest son, Triton had had to step up after the kingdom learned about the repercussions of the king's selfish actions.

Their father had vanished after transferring all his responsibilities to Triton, who was now a loved and respected regent among their people. On the other hand, Tristan was treated as a pariah because of his parentage, a fact he had no control over. Sometimes he wondered how much different his life would have been if he had been a human like his mother. Two centuries later and he still missed her. No one had loved him the way she did, or at least the way he recalled that she did. Even his father abandoned him to nurse his own heart, leaving him behind to be raised by his siblings. Tristan could not even remember the last time he was touched or comforted by someone else. They all did their best, but he was as heartbroken as the king.

As if sensing his sadness, Tibs rubbed his long caudal fin against Tristan's aquamarine tail. The sharp surfaces glided against each other, making Tristan shiver. The thresher shark circled Tristan's body as they continued to swim along, farther from the palace and into the coral gardens. Tristan was enthralled

by Tibs's agility and the beauty of his skin. A dark shade of purple covered his trunk where a darker gray, rather than white, showed on his pectoral fins and belly. Tibs aligned himself under Tristan and nudged him. Tristan smiled and held his companion's dorsal fin. The shark swam faster as Tristan held onto his back. For a slim creature over seven feet long, he twisted and turned effortlessly.

Freedom. For those short moments when he let go of his past and his fears, Tristan felt free to be himself. He had nothing to worry about since he knew quite well that Tibs would always take care of him, just like Tristan had done when he found the shark injured by the reefs. They had been together since the day the curse descended over the realms. Tibs had been Tristan's salvation, giving him a reason to move forward every day. He was Tristan's best friend and silent confidant, but more importantly, he was the only one who knew the longing in Tristan's heart. Tristan would have given anything for the shark to be a mer, so they could talk with each other. For the most part, it seemed as if Tibs did not mind staying close to Tristan when he daydreamed about love and life.

He knew he was different, but Tristan still believed in finding the other part of his soul. The energy inside him needed to be complemented. He suspected there was more behind his powers than anyone thought. Tristan just wished to experience a love strong enough to change his life. He yearned for adventure, to be able to walk freely as a human, and to have a real purpose in life. If only he was strong enough to live up to his potential, he could learn to be happy all the time, not only when escaping the kingdom with Tibs by his side.

They were almost at their hideout on the other side of the coral gardens when the shark stopped abruptly and pushed Tristan back with his tail. Tristan tried to see what was causing the tension in his friend but was unable to observe anything in their vicinity. The big animal moved slowly from side to side as if stalking a prey. He was glad they were able to see in the deeper waters where the sun's rays did not reach. Most of the kingdom was lit by lanterns, much like those used by humans in their homes; the kingdom's were just kindled by glowing algae.

Tristan stilled as he started opening his body to the energies around them. He released an energy current, trying to pinpoint the reason behind Tibs's sudden change in mood. A slow hum escaped Tristan as his body connected with their surroundings. The high-pitched noise traveled through the waves, looking for a response, vibrating away from his body in search of a reason to be concerned. Tibs moved farther away from the reef with Tristan right by his tail.

He was in tune with the thresher as they continued moving in unison for several more minutes. Tibs stopped one more time, turning in the direction they came from. Tristan felt the loss of energy immediately. No matter what the problem was, it had disappeared without a trace.

Even without an imminent threat, the shark seemed anxious. Tristan extended his right arm, running his webbed fingers over Tibs's body, caressing him slowly as he had done many times before. He tried to relax and project the feeling to his friend. Of everything that resided within him, Tristan was most thankful for his ability to influence others without their knowledge. It was important for him to stop others from altering his balance and disrupting his powers to the point of being taken over by his gift. The shark came closer and bumped his head against Tristan's middle. He floated in place as Tibs tried to imitate him. Anyone looking at them would think Tristan was finally losing his mind. His family had asked him multiple times to stop spending so much time playing like a child. They did not understand how his friendship with Tibs had been formed in a moment of pain and despair.

Opening his arms wide, Tristan could feel the energy running through his body. He completely let go and followed Tibs's path. He felt it move from his tail to his upper body, his arms, and to the center of his chest. He closed his eyes and waited for it to be released to the water around them. Small waves came back to him as a response, almost as a hello. He loved the feeling of completeness he got when all his senses were working as one channeling his soul's energy. Tristan knew he could not escape permanently, but he enjoyed these moments in which he was in complete control. He enjoyed it for a couple more seconds before he let go of his connection with the environment.

The shark was part of that connection, and Tristan wanted more than anything to have the chance to communicate with him. "I think it is time to return, Tibs," Tristan wanted to say, but he just signaled as best as he could. The shark coiled around him twice more, before stopping by Tristan's side as if waiting for him to take the lead. Tristan was unable to interact telepathically with the shark but had learned how to do it using his body; small nods and facial expressions were all they had or needed. Even if they could go to the surface, he would not expect the shark to understand verbal commands. At first, he thought the shark understood him, but over the years, his theory lost its luster when Tibs never responded back.

Perhaps someday Tristan would be able to express his need for Tibs's company. Sometimes he wished he could use his energy to turn the thresher

into a lovely prince. *Yes, a prince*, he thought. His family would not allow him to be with someone without a royal claim. From an early age, Tristan knew he fancied males over females, and since many females left to live with human males on the islands' coasts before the curse occurred, mermen had taken each other as partners. Some were even able to procreate without the need of a female when they were in an interspecies relationship.

The thought of Tibs being a prince amused Tristan as they swam away. He could imagine his brother's reaction if he asked permission to court a mer version of Tibs. Triton would probably feed Tibs to one of his beasts and banish Tristan to live at the bottom of the Seven Seas. That sounded like a good place for him to be—no more Council or merfolk to deal with. Or maybe he should listen to his brother for once and start searching for a companion, even if it was for convenience, just like his sisters' unions. The difficult part would be to find someone that would not judge him for who he was or for what he could do.

Tibs grabbed Tristan's wrist with his caudal fin, bringing him back to reality and away from a strong underwater current. *Thanks, Tibs*, Tristan thought as he caressed the tail wrapped around his wrist. It felt rough as he moved his hand against the small scales, almost like a sharper version of his own tail. Surprisingly, the end part was soft and flexible. The smooth surface intrigued Tristan every time he had a chance to get close to it. He loved the feel of it on his skin. Over the years, Tibs had learned to trust Tristan's touch. He took care of Tibs's injuries when he was just a merbabe, and Tibs wasn't much older—from those injuries only a scar close to the shark's left eye was still visible. Everything else had healed with time. Tristan turned his palm up and used his forearm fin to continue the soft touches. Tibs moved his massive body around Tristan's, almost embracing him.

Tristan held the thresher awkwardly, pulling him closer against his chest. He needed the contact, his soul called for Tristan to be true to his gift. He rubbed his jaw against Tibs's underbelly as they synchronized their movements. The sensation was intoxicating. Tristan imagined this was what it felt like to find someone special to share life with. It was almost as fulfilling as when he absorbed others' energies. When they were close enough again, Tristan pressed his lips firmly against Tibs's underside. A current passed between them, causing Tristan to hastily let go of his friend. Tibs looked him directly in the eyes and fled before Tristan could react.

"Prince Tristan." The voice came to Tristan's mind, startling him. He calmed down in time to see a guard approaching him quickly.

“Yes,” he responded telepathically.

“You have been summoned by the Prince Regent. Your presence is needed in the Council’s main chambers immediately.”

“Very well. Please let them know I will be there as soon as possible,” Tristan responded as he turned, looking for Tibs. He hoped the shark had not gone too far. Tristan was not sure why he had had that reaction toward Tibs and wanted to be sure he had not pushed the thresher away.

“Pardon me, Prince Tristan... I was ordered by the Regent himself to escort you in.”

Nodding in agreement, Tristan followed the guard to the palace, but not without first taking another chance to search for Tibs.

Chapter II

Tristan had been out of sorts ever since he had left the corals. He was not sure if his reaction to Tibs had anything to do with his emotional state. He had played with the shark many times, but today, it was different. Tristan kept trying to identify the spark he felt when he kissed Tibs. It was innocent, but at the same time, Tristan felt it was important for their relationship—if you could call it a relationship. The shark's inquisitive look still puzzled him. Tristan had felt at peace for those moments when he was swimming freely with the thresher, and it seemed to him as if the creature enjoyed Tristan's company as well. They definitely had a connection, and Tristan's energy was picking up on it. The problem was the meaning behind it. It was definitely time for Tristan to start acting according to his age and royal status—maybe then, he would not be confused when connecting with other life forms.

"Is everything well, Prince Tristan?" the guard asked.

"Yes. I was just trying to figure out why I was summoned with such urgency," Tristan lied.

"I apologize for not being of much help, but I was not informed of the reasons."

"No need for apologies. I know your soul speaks the truth," Tristan said before stopping his communication with the guard.

With every sea mile traveled, Tristan's anxiety grew. He could see the palace in the distance, embellished by many gems and stones. The golden reflections from the façade's coverings made it look as if it was made out of solid gold. He knew humans were famous for their lavish constructions, but the majestic structures found underwater could compete with anything the humans had ever seen. Everything around was created centuries before, when the merfolk selected Mernovia as their home. The palace and every single dwelling had evolved from the sea floor itself. The fertile soil had provided them with everything they needed to live comfortably. Their lives were simple but opulent, and the High Courts and Mernovian Council had assured that everything showed the best of their civilization.

A colossal promenade provided a public area outside the palace's entrance, filled with ridges, reefs, and anemones. All creatures were welcome in Mernovia, but their royal family was held to a high standard. A collection of

ancient statues formed a path, which served as a route to worship the gods, with a statue of his father guarding the entrance. Tristan had grown up playing among the commoners, but as soon as the curse had been set upon them, nobody wanted anything to do with him. Many times, he was pushed aside as the reason his mother left—therefore, the cause behind the curse. On many occasions, not even his siblings wanted to be with him with the exception of Triton. He started isolating himself at a young age, and over the decades, he learned to enjoy being alone. Now he just spent most of his days in the Council chambers, and the rest of his free time, he searched for archaic shipwrecks to explore.

Lost in his thoughts, Tristan did not notice he was standing in front of the palace door. As soon as he tried to enter, he was overwhelmed by a wave of uncertainty deep in his soul, strong enough to paralyze him. He was supposed to be the most powerful merman in the kingdom, but had trouble controlling his powers. Therefore, he tried not to use them unless it was extremely necessary. Tristan finally moved, colliding with the guard escorting him—who seemed unaffected. The vibrations surrounding them were making it difficult for Tristan to concentrate. He was losing focus, and his gift was starting to take over. Tristan's tail started to glow as a symbol of his distress. Those around him began to panic, making it worse for him since he could feel their fear. Involuntarily, he started to release his powers, causing their fear to increase. Everything around him was starting to be pulled in by the whirlpools forming around him.

Other guards came out of the palace to investigate the cause of the commotion and alerted the elders. Tristan fought to shield himself from the exorbitant amount of negative energy around him until his brother arrived, then he let go as Triton swept him into his arms. His brother's body served as a grounding surface for Tristan to center in on. The currents started to calm as he began to feel faint, but his brother's strength safeguarded his body, giving him a chance to erect shields of his own. Several minutes later, Tristan was back in control. It had been years since the last time he had had an episode like that one. He released a small sigh and nodded to the Prince Regent, who allowed him to move out of his arms.

"What happened to you, Tristan?" Triton asked as he surveyed their surroundings for damage.

"I am not completely sure. As I was about to enter, I felt uncertainty coming in waves from all directions. I was not prepared to shield any emotions since I was just coming to the Council chambers," Tristan responded.

"This may be worse than I thought!"

"What do you mean, Triton?"

"Just follow me, everyone is waiting for us," Triton ordered.

As soon as they entered the great room, everyone got quiet out of respect toward his brother. The Council members were seated in their regular places at the end of the hall, and the Royal Court members were seated opposite them with Triton's golden throne in the center. Tristan swam to his spot with the Council and waited for the session to begin. Since it was an unscheduled meeting, no protocol was needed—a fact Tristan was glad for. He hated how the Council members tried to appear superior, even when working for a common goal. He was the youngest Council member, but the one with the highest rank among them. In reality, Tristan was second in line to be king, but he had no interest in taking the position—that was the reason he was in the Council and not in the Royal Court, which was formed by many of his family members. They were a monarchy created by gods to serve and protect their race.

In order to take part in the meeting, Tristan had to retract his shields. He was finally feeling well enough to let others connect with him. Tristan wanted to see if he could feel the same despair inside the Council chambers as he experienced earlier. He concentrated on his surroundings and visualized his protective barriers coming down. Slowly, he allowed for all the things around him to project into his soul. Sometimes he did not feel anything at all, and other times, everything spoke to him at the same time. The first thing he felt was a cold chill traveling through his entire body. The chill settled over his heart, making it difficult for him to keep his concentration, but he relaxed until he was able to compartmentalize the sensation.

Next, he heard voices arguing, but could not make out the exact words. It seemed as if they were coming from outside the chambers. Tristan placed his hands together and pointed his fingers away from his body. Once more, he concentrated on the voices and realized they were coming from above. He looked up suddenly, and a bolt of energy escaped his hands, rattling the currents around them. Everyone turned to him, questioning his actions. The elders' voices were silenced at his brother's command.

"What happened just now?" Triton asked privately.

"I heard voices coming from above... from the surface," Tristan replied with excitement. *"It is the first time in centuries that I have been able to."*

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I cannot tell you exactly what they were talking about, but I felt them, Triton.”

“Do you think you can try again, maybe track them?”

“Really? You want me to go?” Tristan asked with excitement.

Triton did not respond immediately, which probably meant he was communicating with someone else. Tristan was shaking with excitement at the many possibilities opening for them. He hoped someone had found a way around the curse. They had tried for many decades, but nothing seemed to help. A love stronger than the king's for Tristan's mother had not yet been found, and his father did not have the power to reverse it on his own—not that he wanted to. The selfish bastard wanted everyone to hurt as much as he did.

“Forgive me for the delay, brother. Can you please let the elders communicate with you, so we can discuss the reason behind this urgent meeting? Then we can talk about you going to the surface,” Triton asked with an official tone.

Tristan imagined he was projecting his thoughts to everyone in the room.

He did not have to wait long. He finished removing his shields rapidly and was surprised by the tension in the room. He had not paid much attention to the elders, and now he wondered if they knew exactly what was causing all the changes around them. His mind was quiet, no one was talking now. He considered starting to look into their minds without their knowledge. Everyone had an idea of what a *numen* was capable of, but they did not know how far his capabilities could extend.

“Do not even think about it.” The words came from Triton.

Tristan had to smile. His brother still remembered how much havoc he could cause when using his powers. He nodded, discreetly acknowledging his brother's command. Triton smiled back, reminding Tristan of all the trouble they'd gotten into while living in Bermuda as humans, or more accurately, all the trouble Tristan got Triton into. As the only two males out of seven siblings, they were together the most—even though Triton was a decade older than him. From stealing sugary confections to leaving the villa in the middle of the night to explore the island, Triton had always covered for him. Tristan looked at his brother and enjoyed his surprised face when Triton sensed the caring energies he sent to him.

As Tristan started to pay attention to the meeting, he heard his name mentioned. Council member Gregarious looked adamant about Tristan being the only one capable of accomplishing the task of going to the surface.

"May I interrupt this discussion?" Tristan asked as everyone in the room turned to look at him.

"I am sorry it took me a moment to join your discussion, but forces beyond my control played a part. Can the scribe summarize today's agenda for me?"

"You are the agenda for today, Councilman. Since our Prince Regent does not agree with our recommendation for you to be our emissary, we have been forced to use our power to issue the order."

Tristan had no idea why they needed him to be an emissary as that job was normally given to high-ranking guards or scholars. He did not even remember the last time an emissary was needed as they could not leave their kingdom, but on occasion, people had needed to be persuaded to appear in front of the Court or the Council. Tristan was just the Council's examiner, the one they called when they needed to know more than what someone was willing to tell. Tristan was able to tell with certainty if the person was lying, and if necessary, he was able to influence their decisions. Perhaps they needed him to do more than talking.

"I am sure our Prince Regent has a valid reason for denying your request, but I do not see a need for me to be ordered around. Can the Council not just extend a petition directly to me?" Tristan communicated as he projected his indignation to them.

"No need to display your powers, Councilman," Gregarious replied.

"I am not displaying my powers, Councilman Gregarious. They are simply part of me. I think sometimes you all forget that I am more than a Councilman. I am Prince Tristan of Mernovia, second in line to be king," he responded, intensifying his feelings.

Even being one of the receivers of his feelings, Tristan saw his brother smile. It was not often that Tristan used his position, but he needed to let them know he was more than just an errand boy. If they needed his help, they should have included him in the discussions before the Council offered their recommendations to the Prince Regent.

"We know exactly who you are," said Councilman Kjarini. *"That is precisely why we need you to visit your father and investigate the disappearance of our previous two emissaries."*

Councilman Gregarious added, *“He has been anxious, causing many quakes around the reefs. We are not sure what he is planning to do next, but Mernovia cannot afford another one of his selfish acts.”*

Tristan looked at his brother. He was not expecting this matter to be related to his father. No one had seen the king since Triton became the Prince Regent. Many believed he had forsaken his kingdom and returned to Mount Olympus, others murmured about the king losing his mind, and many other merfolk simply did not care what happened to him. Tristan believed his father was simply hiding in the reef below Bermuda, waiting for the curse to be broken. It was probably wishful thinking, wanting his father to redeem himself. Tristan knew deep in his heart that his father did not think about the repercussions of his acts; he was just too brokenhearted.

“We do not even know if he is still in Mernovia. I would not allow my brother to risk his life because many of you are scared of what ifs,” Triton said.

“I am sorry, brother, but I will need to disregard your opposition. Members of the High Court and the Mernovian Council, I accept your request to be Mernovia’s emissary. I will leave in the morning.”

Chapter III

Tristan fidgeted as he left the Council chambers. He had exerted his powers enough for one day, and the next couple of days would be challenging as well. Tristan could still feel the energy coming from the surface but was unable to distinguish any voices. His body was in overdrive, trying to deal with all the forces calling for his attention. Tristan shielded himself as he moved down the main corridor. He needed some time to think before he had to leave. He wondered if he needed a plan, or if traveling to the reef to see his father was enough. Who knew, maybe he just needed to concentrate enough and call for his father. Gods were omnipresent, so he was sure the king already knew of his trip.

“*Wait for me,*” Triton requested.

As always, Triton pushed past his shields. Sometimes he wondered if his brother had some hidden powers, or if he was just too stubborn to take no for an answer—probably a good quality for a Prince Regent. Closing his eyes, Tristan tried to keep his thoughts in check. He needed to be confident in order to keep his brother from interfering with his given task. Tristan slowed down but continued to swim toward his quarters in the palace’s private wing. His brother caught up with him but remained quiet at his side. Perhaps if he tried to outswim Triton, he could skip the conversation. His brother looked at him with amusement—*damn, the merman was good,* Tristan thought.

“*Hail to the Prince Regent,*” Tristan communicated to his brother sarcastically.

Triton spread his arms wide and bowed his head in response, his long blond hair—adorned with a thin crown—flowing with the movement. His eyes sparkled with the same mischief as Tristan’s. They may have had a father in common, but that was impossible to tell just by looking at them. Tristan’s black hair only touched the tips of his human-looking ears, and his pale skin contrasted with his brother’s sun-kissed coloring. Triton was a god in his own right while Tristan was just the son of a god. Even so, Triton never let this fact interfere with their relationship. The brothers enjoyed the easy camaraderie of the moment, knowing a serious conversation awaited.

As they entered his quarters, Tristan moved to an opening and sighed as he looked out over Mernovia. He loved his kingdom, but Tristan wanted more. He

wished to be free to rummage beyond their borders. Unfortunately, it had been centuries since the last time his need was satiated. His upcoming trip to the Bermuda reef was going to be the first time he ventured close to his old home; unconsciously, he had stayed away from the father that had abandoned them.

Tristan could feel his brother's uncertainty. He was staring at him from across the room, most likely trying to find a way to convince him to change his mind. Triton had tried many times to use his powers to reverse the curse, but it was impossible. Tristan understood the need to learn of his father's plans. Plus, Tristan had always felt responsible for the whole curse debacle. He had many times wished he could have done something to stop his father. Perhaps if he had just let his mother go, the king would not have showed up to his rescue. He could have acted as the powerful *numen* all believed him to be. Sadly, the time to hope for a different outcome had passed.

"Stop berating yourself, little fish," Triton said fondly.

"Really? You have not called me little fish in centuries. I see you are really trying to talk me out of visiting our father."

"Can you blame me? I may be the Prince Regent, but I am first and foremost your older brother. Can you at least take several guards with you? Please, do it for me."

Tristan's heart hurt at his brother's words. They had grown apart with time, both busy with their obligations, and Tristan perhaps bore most of the blame due to his quest for solitude. He never took into consideration what his siblings had lost when their father disappeared. Yes, all his sisters were married, but he wondered if they were really happy. With five sisters, he had plenty of nieces and nephews, but he only saw them once or twice a year. His brother was the only family member he saw regularly, but most of the time, it was just part of an official engagement. Triton was still single due to the shortage of maiden mermaids in Mernovia. Despite the insistence of the elders for him to produce an heir, Triton had held his ground. Just like Tristan, his brother believed in having a loving partner before increasing their family. Who knows, maybe his brother fancied men as well.

"I know you still see me as a merbabe, but, Tri, I am more than capable of taking care of myself. I am just going to the reefs to see our father. How much trouble could I get into?"

Before Triton could interrupt him, Tristan raised a hand to stop him, *"I am not referring to my lack of control. I know I have needed your help more than*

once, but trust me, my powers may be out of control sometimes, but they have never failed me."

"Very well, dear brother. You have my blessing, but please be careful and do not trust our father. We do not know how much he has changed over the years."

Tristan moved to Triton's side and hugged his brother, and for a moment, they shared a heartbeat. When they parted, Triton gave Tristan his conch shell, so he could control the waves if needed. He just nodded, but he was sure Triton could feel the tumult of emotions inside his soul.

"Where is that shark of yours? Are you taking it with you?" Triton asked.

Tibs. Tristan could not believe he had forgotten about Tibs for so long. He started moving from one side of the anteroom to another. Triton looked at him curiously but did not transmit a word to him. He wondered if the thresher was still at their hideout. He needed to look for him before he left for Bermuda. Perhaps it was a good idea to take Tibs with him. He knew the shark's loyalty was to him, but on the other hand, Tristan did not want to endanger his friend. Tristan would love the company and the chance to be free with Tibs—well, at least be able to pretend to be free.

"Something happened to Tiberius?" Triton asked with concern.

He stopped, placing the ensorcelled conch in a safe area in the wall, created to prevent important items from floating away. Then he addressed his brother. *"You know... you are the only one that calls him Tiberius."*

"That is what father named him, no? Now, do not try to change topics, little fish. I know you better than you think."

Tristan shook his head before stopping back by the opening, *"Not exactly. I guess you can say we had a disagreement earlier today."*

"How can you have a disagreement with a shark? Were you able to communicate with him after all?"

"We have our own ways of communicating," Tristan responded defensively.

It was true. He knew Tibs understood him to some extent. Now, he just needed to figure out what exactly the shark thought when he pressed his lips against him. Tristan shivered at the thought calling Triton's attention.

"Is there something you want to talk about?"

"No."

“Very well, Tristan. Please be sure to say your good-byes before you leave tomorrow.” With that last message, Triton left the room.

Tristan kept looking after Triton for several minutes. He would have loved to talk with his brother about Tibs, but what was there to talk about? How could he tell his brother without sounding pathetic? Tristan had more questions in his mind than answers. Yes, Tibs was his friend—shark or not—and he needed to say good-bye.

Before he could change his mind, Tristan exited his chambers in search of Tibs. It was eerily quiet in the palace, not even the wave vibrations brought any creatures' sounds with them. The algae-filled lanterns that lined the halls were on a higher setting as the night approached. His night vision was superb, but merfolk liked to hold onto some of their perceived humanity—especially those with a human parents like him.

He needed to figure out where Tibs could have gone. Even though they spent most of their time together, Tristan did not have any idea of what the shark did the rest of the time. The only thing he knew for sure was that Tibs normally hunted for prey when Tristan was attending to Council matters. He had seen the thresher swim in circles to drive schooling prey into a compact mass before using his long caudal fin to strike them. It was a beautiful dance to experience, but one he was not privy to often. As a merman, Tristan's diet consisted mostly of seaweed and underwater flora, but when in his human form, he loved sweets. Everything else he would eat, but sweets he would devour.

Thinking about sweets brought a smile to Tristan's face. He could almost remember the rich taste on his tongue. He hoped that when he had the chance to kiss a partner's lips, they tasted the same as the sugary confections he enjoyed as a merbabbe. An image of his lips against Tibs's skin came rapidly to his mind, causing Tristan to shake his head in an attempt to erase the confusing thought. If he was being honest, he would admit that his obsession with the shark was becoming worrisome. The first thing Tristan would do after returning from Bermuda was search for someone to share his life with, someone that he could communicate with—romantically or not.

For the moment, he just had to concentrate and find Tibs. Tristan wished he could track scents, just like the shark did using the snares under his snout, not that he was familiar with how the thresher smelled. He needed to move away from the palace. Perhaps returning to their hideout in the coral gardens would help him feel Tibs's energy. If not, he needed to swim farther into the deep ocean to see if the shark was keeping a distance from him.

After taking a moment to release some extraneous energy, Tristan continued his expedition. He swam closer to the gardens, letting his soul connect with the environment once again. He felt the sharpness of the water against his skin like a lover's caress. The movement of his tail gave him a sense of comfort, almost as if he was rocking in his mother's arms. Several schools of royal gammas moved aside for him while other creatures were attracted to his energy. Tristan was in perfect balance, at one with the deep sea and its creatures—a gift from his father.

The entrance to their cave lay ahead, but Tristan could not feel Tibs as he moved closer. He slowed down, looking around for any indication of his friend's whereabouts. Nothing—just a mix of his heartbeat and the current around him. He entered the space and continued his endeavor. In reality, the cave was nothing more than a big rock formation in which they used to hide from the rest of the Mernovians, a space just big enough for both of them to fit comfortably.

A ripple in the water drew Tristan's attention. As soon as the resulting wave made contact with Tristan, his senses went into high alert, his skin prickled, and his claspers readied for mating. It was the first time Tristan experienced a mating call. His body's temperature fluctuated, causing him to shiver. He swam erratically out of the cave, trying to figure out who was causing such a strong reaction. A rapid increase in energy provoked the currents, strengthening them and making it difficult for Tristan to gain speed. He needed to find his mate—he never imagined he'd be lucky enough to get one since he was half human.

He tried to concentrate on the feelings he was experiencing, but his instinct was starting to take over. It wanted to find his mate and claim it. *Oh my gods!* Tristan thought. He needed to control himself. He was not a senseless sea creature. Tristan was a royal prince with the ability to act rationally. He was not going to lose himself in someone he did not even know. He wanted the first time he mated to be meaningful and not just a quick event induced by the lust of the mating call. He had heard stories of how mermen just took mermaids on the seafloor and then left them after they copulated. Tristan wanted more than a release; his human side wanted a loving mate.

Even with this in mind, Tristan could not control his body. His nipples were hardening, and his claspers needed the aforementioned release. He had taken himself in hand before but never outside his quarters. Tristan was concerned about attracting predators or maybe other creatures looking for an opportunity to mate. Tristan swam in circles until he was able to calm the ocean currents

enough. It seemed as if his mate was getting closer. The sensations in his body kept escalating, and Tristan felt ready to succumb.

Another ripple formed, and he tried to outrun its wave but failed. This one felt like a caress, as if his mate was trying to help him calm down. A humming sound escaped Tristan's lips, producing a ripple to carry it. It was an involuntary answer to his mate, a sort of thanks for taking care of him.

No matter how much he wanted to go back to the palace, in his condition it would have been impossible. He was too distracted and too aroused to complete the voyage. He turned back, reentering the cave, at least in there he would have some sort of privacy. Tristan slowly caressed his chest, teasing each nipple with the tip of his nails. He brought his other hand up, wrapping it around his neck. He moved his head to the side, offering his neck to an imaginary lover. He was ready to belong to someone, to have a partner to take care of. His hand moved higher, to his jaw—to his lips. He slid the tip of his tongue over his index finger before sucking it inside his mouth. A spark of energy ran through his body as his tail started to glow. His other hand continued roaming down his chest, over his abdomen and to the sensitive spot where his human skin turned into scales.

Before he was able to touch his claspers, a final ripple shook the space, startling Tristan into creating a strong whirlpool. The fast moving water threatened to pull him in. Suddenly, he felt a strong impact against his side. It caused his body to float freely before hitting the sidewall at the back of the cave. Tristan felt disoriented by the impact. As he tried to figure out what had happened, he felt a familiar nuzzle to his ribs, revealing his savior—Tibs.

Chapter IV

Devil's Triangle

19th Century

This was it. Tristan straightened his shoulders and said his last good-byes to his brother, who was getting ready to take part in the early morning High Court proceedings. Tristan was prepared to fulfill his role as Mernovia's emissary with Tibs by his side, even when he was too embarrassed to look directly at the shark. He wondered how long Tibs had been in the cave before he saved him from the whirlpool he had caused like a foolish child. Tristan's face reddened at the idea of Tibs observing him as he tried to find his release by his own hand. He had left the cave without acknowledging the shark, but as soon as he left his quarters in the morning, the thresher was waiting for him as if nothing had happened.

He was probably making a bigger deal out of it than he should, but Tristan was still unbalanced after experiencing his first mating call. He was also disappointed because he was unable to locate his mate. He was tempted to return to the cave in search of his possible partner, but he had a commitment to carry out. It was not fair to find his mate and then leave him behind to go visit his father. His mate's welfare should be his first priority, and he had no idea if he would have to face any dangers during this trip. He just hoped his mate stayed in the area, waiting for him to return. In the meantime, he would have the satisfaction of knowing he was blessed with a mate, assuming his mate was male and willing to embrace his human need for love.

Tristan turned and waved to his brother one more time. For some reason, he wished his brother were taking the trip with him. He wanted Triton's steady presence there when it came time to see their father. He loved the king, but the merbabe he was the last time they met was hurt by his father's abandonment. He needed to stay rational and calm to get the information he needed. If his father continued to cause earthquakes, their structures could suffer, leaving many Mernovians unable to protect themselves against larger predators. Triton had shielded the kingdom from these events, keeping everyone calm, but Tristan's meeting with the king could change everything.

Tibs swam by Tristan, interrupting his mental rant. It seemed as if the shark was taking a protective stance in front of him. He stopped and looked around

for a threat but could not see or sense one. Everything around them seemed normal, just creatures following their instincts and some young mers playing around. Tristan remembered being that young and free. He was still young in merfolk years, but being a *numen* had taken a toll on him. The amount of energy running through his body all at once was exhausting, but he would not change it for anything in the world.

As the thresher moved further away from him, Tristan relaxed. Instead of following him, Tristan started to swim upward. Ever since the curse had begun, they could not surface, but he knew in order to reach the Bermuda reef, he needed to be on a higher level than when he was at Mernovia. The light penetrating the water made him long for a chance to surface, to feel the sun against his skin one more time. He stretched his hand out, pretending to reach for an imaginary exit, an escape back to a time in which life was nothing more than constant happiness.

He twirled several times and cut through some floating algae before increasing his speed. His hair rubbed against his ears as he propelled forward. Tristan kept his arms back against his body and used his tail to gain momentum. The up-and-down movement caused his body to become one with the currents as his long dorsal fin swayed from side to side, counteracting the momentum. He completed a three-hundred-and sixty-degree barrel movement and smiled at the dizzying sensation. He did it again and again until the water and his body created enough ripples to camouflage him.

Tristan released himself and allowed the current to take him away. He wondered what the Council members would think if they saw him playing games as if he were a juvenile mer. In reality, he did not care. He was happy for once, and that was all that mattered. He knew even the Prince Regent would have joined him if he had the chance. Tristan closed his eyes and extended his arms, floating away into nothingness. He hummed in contentment as his body moved further and further away from the ocean's floor. He twisted his body as he felt some more algae around him. Small fish swam by, rubbing against his skin. The movement surrounding him increased, reducing his speed until he realized he was trapped.

He moved desperately, trying to push away from his restraints. The more he struggled, the tighter they got. Tristan wanted to scream for help, but underwater it was impossible. No one was around for him to communicate with, and by the time he could reach his brother, it was going to be too late. Tibs was his only hope, but he was not sure exactly how far away he was. Plus,

he was unable to converse with him telepathically. He was trapped in some sort of underwater web. It was elastic enough to move with him, and it seemed to have a blue coloration. His arms were pushed and restrained behind his back. His tail was completely trapped, and his caudal fin was immobilized too. His upper torso was covered with tight straps, constricting his ribs and crushing his internal organs.

Suspended upside down, Tristan was completely incapacitated. With his mouth covered and his gills bound, it was almost impossible for him to breathe. He feared his human lungs would try to compensate, causing him to drown. Tristan tried once more to pull himself away but was only successful at increasing the number of tentacle-like ties around his body. He needed to concentrate, to use his powers and escape his predicament. Tristan started to feel faint as he tried to clear his mind.

A faltering flicker of energy gave Tristan the opening he needed. He let his body go lax and started absorbing his captor's energy as the creature tried to wrap more bands around him. As Tristan started gathering his powers, he felt fear around him, and it was not coming from himself. Something or someone was around, but it was not the owner of the feelers wrapped around him. The straps started to loosen with every bolt of energy that Tristan channeled. The currents surrounding him strengthened, cooperating with his escape. He twisted and turned until he felt the remaining energy leave his captor. It had not been his intention to kill it, but he knew it had been done when the creature released him.

Tristan tried to calm down enough to examine what just had happened but was met by two mermallions. The octopus mers were known mercenaries under the command of Pieuvre—a sea legend believed to be the most beautiful and dangerous creature beneath the seven seas. Rumors placed some of his mers in Mernovia after the curse took effect, but they had kept away from civilization.

“What do you want?” Tristan communicated harshly.

The currents around him were making it difficult for the mermallions to maintain their composure, giving Tristan the upper hand. He released more energy, making the assailants recoil. Tristan moved forward as the mers drew back. His tail was glowing, his hands sparkling with energy, as he became one with the sea. He did not need his brother's conch to control the waves, at that moment he was the waves. Tristan was a dangerous adversary when necessary; it just took so much out of him.

"You should be dead, not the cephalopod. He had never failed us before," one of the mers replied.

"And now what?" Tristan asked.

"You will die anyway," the other mermallion replied as he removed a rustic harpoon from a back harness, throwing it at Tristan.

Tristan felt the harpoon pass by as he moved to the side. The mermallion reached for another one, but failed his next attempt as his body was trapped by Tibs's long caudal fin, causing him to drop the harpoon. Tibs used his momentum to grab the second mer between his teeth. The mers struggled but were unable to pull away from the thresher. Tristan followed the action, ready to help his friend if necessary.

Tibs released the mer in his mouth just to grab it again and again. The mermallion's blood surrounded them as the shark continued his attack. Tristan had never seen this side of Tibs. It was as if the shark had been overwhelmed by instinct and was doing his best to survive. Suddenly, Tibs released the now lifeless mer and concentrated on the remaining assailant, who was nearly unconscious due to the amount of pressure he was under. Tristan moved closer to him and patted Tibs's fin. The shark reduced his hold on the mer just enough to give him the opportunity to regain some strength. Tristan was glad Tibs understood his request.

"Why do you want to kill me? Do you know who I am?" Tristan projected to the mer in hopes he was coherent enough to answer, but he was incapable of keeping his anger out of the question.

No response came from the mer. Tristan moved closer, but Tibs moved the man away from him as if trying to protect Tristan from another attack. Tristan moved again, but this time he got closer to the shark's dorsal fin. He placed his hand softly over the thresher and slid his hand all the way down to his tail. As he moved closer to the caudal fin, he slowed down, trying to reassure the shark. Tristan could feel Tibs's energy following the same path. His hand and the shark's energy traveled as one, surprising Tristan. He had heard of mates' energies moving as one but never knew that the phenomenon could happen between any others. By the time Tristan was close enough to the mermallion, he had almost forgotten what he was doing in the first place. He was channeling their joined energy, making the area around them ripple.

"Answer my question," Tristan ordered the mer without moving his hand away from Tibs.

Tristan could see the disdain in the mermallion's eyes and felt his animosity, but the mer kept quiet.

"Very well, time to feed the shark," Tristan said, taunting him.

"No!"

"Then answer me."

"Councilman Gregarious contracted our services and was very generous," the mer responded.

"Impossible," Tristan asserted with enough force to sway Tibs.

"You got us all trapped here. I'm surprised they did not contact us centuries ago."

"Liar. He would never do something so vile."

"Believe what you want, forsaken Prince."

Tristan charged the mermallion, causing his body to convulse. Tristan felt the energy that had been transferred into his body but was unable to stop the flow. The mercenary's heartbeat increased to a dangerous level, and Tristan saw his eyes rolling back. He was killing for a second time. He tried to center his thoughts unsuccessfully. The mermallion's heart stopped beating as the last charge of energy transferred. Suddenly, Tristan's body lost control, bending backward violently; it contorted, trying to channel the other mer's essence. As his powers released forcefully into the currents, everything around Tristan slowed down, and he floated away with the current.

Chapter V

Bermuda Reef

19th Century

Peace. Sunlight.

Everything surrounding Tristan as he floated away calmed him. The violence his body had just endured provided him with a sense of serenity he had never expected after killing two sea creatures. He was so close to the surface, he could almost make out the sun's shape. It had been two centuries since he last felt its burn, even if it was just through the water. As he tried to reach over with his hand, reality intruded. No matter how close it looked, it was still impossible to break the water's surface.

Closing his eyes, Tristan slipped back into oblivion.

A nudge to his side brought Tristan back. He wondered how long he had been adrift. There was no light shining through the water. It seemed as if he had continued on a straight path beneath the surface since his surroundings looked clear of any sea life. Another nudge made him sigh, but he did not try to see what was causing it. Finally, a familiar caudal fin wrapped around his waist and pulled him closer to the thresher's body. Tristan looked forward, and his gaze locked with Tibs's.

His body shivered as their scales came into contact. Tristan felt a now-familiar pull toward the shark. He had to have gone mad. He needed to stop acting as a maiden in search of her happily ever after—especially taking into consideration that Tibs was a shark. Perhaps his isolation was affecting his perspective.

“Such a lovely scene. I cannot believe Tiberius is still with you.” Tristan tensed as the words entered his mind. Tibs turned defensively toward their new companion, moving Tristan with him.

“Father,” Tristan responded reverently. The mer had not changed much since the last time he saw him. His figure remained imposing and regal. His blond hair flowed around just like Triton's, but Tristan could see some specks of gray mixed in. He had no idea of how old his father was, but he had never expected the king to display any signs of aging. He was the King of the Sea after all.

“Indeed, my boy. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” his father asked, moving closer to them. Tibs moved Tristan backward, trying to protect him. Tristan wondered if the thresher remembered who the older mer was. He was not sure how good a shark’s memory could be, or if they had any sense of time and relationship. The king had been there when Tristan rescued Tibs, but his fall and exile took place shortly after. The shark was most likely acting out of instinct once again.

Tristan pet Tibs’s fin as he tried to disengage from him. The shark was not letting go, and Tristan could see amusement on his father’s expression.

“Can you please let him know that you mean me no harm?”

“And how do you know if that is true? I am not sure what you are doing here. I may need to defend myself from you.”

“Father! I am here to talk to you, not to harm you.”

Unbelievable. Tristan never expected those words from his father. It had been two centuries since the last time they spoke, but he still respected the mer. He would never harm him. Well, unless it was in self-defense. And even then, he doubted that he was capable of defeating his father.

Tristan noticed his father frowning at the same moment Tibs’s grip on him got tighter. It seemed as if his father had been successful in communicating with Tibs, something he had never accomplished. Unfortunately, the conversation did not look pleasant. He knew his father reigned over all sea creatures, but he did not expect Tibs to challenge his father. Tristan wished he could talk with the shark directly.

“That is a stubborn mate you have there.”

He froze at his father’s words. Mate. It could not be. Before he could ask anything else, Tibs released him and swam away.

“Did you order him to go away?”

“No.”

“Then what happened? Why did he leave? Why did you say he is my—”

“Stop,” his father ordered, halting Tristan’s questions.

“I see some things never change. You are still a force to be reckoned with, but I am sure you did not come here to ask me questions about your friend.”

His father was right. The king probably used the term as a friendly endearment, and Tristan’s imagination took over. At least the other mer was

willing to listen to Tristan. He needed to concentrate on his task and worry about himself later.

"You are right, Father. I apologize for my lack of restraint," Tristan responded, followed by a bow. *"I am here as Mernovia's emissary."*

A staring contest between Tristan and his father took place for several moments. Tristan did not know if his father was trying to become reacquainted with him or if he was measuring him up as an opponent. Tristan felt a barrier being erected as soon as he stated his official status. *A miscalculation on my part?* Tristan thought as he tried to maintain a calm exterior. For an unknown reason, his energy levels were well balanced. The start of a possible confrontation with his father did not cause him to panic as normal. On the contrary, it was giving him strength.

"Several strong earthquakes have hit Mernovia in the last couple of weeks. I was sent to investigate the reason behind them. I need to know what has changed to have you causing so many tremors lately."

Tristan examined his father's face as he analyzed his words. The king's face did not provide Tristan with any answers, but he could feel the energy radiating around them. He knew his father was trying to figure out how much information he should give Tristan, or at least a way to lie to him in a convincing manner. As he continued to observe the mer in front of him, Tristan saw a deep hurt reflected in the King's eyes before he was able to mask it. No matter what, Tristan realized he would not get the answer he needed.

"I am sorry for causing such inconvenience to my kingdom. You can go back and tell the Court and the Council that I am well. My trust continues to be with the Prince Regent."

"Are you really well?"

"Do not question my words again, young mer. I am your father, but above all, I am your king!"

The power behind those words made Tristan quiver. He had never had such intensity directed at him before. His erratic movements caused the currents to ripple around them, and several whirlpools sprouted, forming a barrier between the two mers. The king could control all sea creatures, but Tristan was a powerful *numen* in his own right. And as far as he could see, his powers had become stronger in the last several days. The moment his father pointed his trident toward Tristan, a water barrier rose, absorbing the trident's powers.

“Very impressive, son,” the king projected telepathically, astonishing Tristan.

Extending his arms, Tristan regained control of the currents. Slowly, everything calmed, and he was once again facing a smiling king. Tristan was dumbfounded by his father's actions. He tried to rationalize what just happened and came up empty-handed. There was no explanation for his father's current mood swing or the display of power against Tristan. Something was really wrong, and he needed to know exactly what it was.

“I am glad to see you have learned to control your powers over the years. Please forgive me for my actions, but I needed to verify this fact before I could share with you what is going to happen when the curse is broken.”

Broken. Tristan's heartbeat sped up. Finally the time had come. The curse he caused would be broken soon. He needed to return to Mernovia immediately. Triton needed to hear the good news. As he looked at his father, he realized that once again, he had let his imagination run free. He needed to slow down and listen to his father.

“If it isn't too much bother, would you please share with me any information you may consider adequate?”

“You are a fast learner, dear son.”

“Thanks for the compliment, Father.”

“As you may know, the only way to break the curse is for Ortega's sextant to guide a love stronger than mine for your mother back here. I did not cause the quakes felt in Mernovia. The sextant's proximity did.”

The events were already unfolding. If what the king said was true, the barrier between the worlds and kingdoms would vanish within weeks, maybe days. Tristan's body vibrated as his energy increased. He could not hide his excitement. His father's gaze connected with Tristan's, and he felt the pain rotting the king's soul. Tristan realized how damaging his mother's refusal was. The king had loved with great intensity, and her rejection had cut him deeply.

“If it was up to me, I would keep this event from happening. Unfortunately, I cannot control love.”

Tristan closed his eyes, absorbing his father's words. Love had caused the curse, and it was the only thing strong enough to break it.

A sudden shift in the current startled Tristan. Several shadows passed over them, giving him chills.

“Your mother is back.”

“What?”

“Her remains just crossed over to our world. They are nothing more than ashes, scattered by the winds.”

Nothing came to mind at that moment. Tristan never thought about the possibility of seeing his mother once again. She was a fragile human after all, and two centuries had passed by, but in that moment, he felt her loss with all his heart.

He felt his father's pain gather as the king pointed his trident to the surface. The water parted around it, and a blinding light escaped from it. Tristan felt a strong explosion as it took place above them. Ships had likely been caught in his father's anger. There was nothing he could do to stop his father, but he concentrated in order to keep the currents calm and to protect the sea creatures.

Through the opening his father was maintaining, Tristan saw the skies opening, and several colorful creatures with wide wings came out from the clouds, roaring loudly. The dragons had returned. They flew around in circles, disoriented and looking for a place to land or prey to catch. The hidden island that belonged to other kingdoms started to show, full with lush vegetation and wild creatures. The worlds were taking shape within seconds. The Gate to the Worlds had been reopened.

With one more swirl of the trident, the king closed the seas once again. He looked exhausted if one could say that about a god. Immediately, Tristan noticed the variety of creatures traveling by them. It was as if they had never stopped mingling with each other—the veil had just kept them from seeing each other during the curse.

A hammer shark swam by, reminding Tristan of Tibs. He needed to look for his friend as soon as he had a chance. Perhaps his father could help him communicate with him. As he was preparing to express his request, the king interrupted his thoughts.

“Go, my son. Pay homage to the new King of the Sea. Triton will need you by his side.”

“Why? What should I—”

“I am keeping the humans away from our kingdoms unless their help is needed. Just be worried about other creatures since a battle for dominance will be brewing in the near future.”

“I need to find Tibs before I go. And I need you to tell me what to tell Triton and the others about all this.”

“You will know what to say when your words become needed.” His father’s last message reached him as a storm engulfed Tristan.

By the time the currents calmed, Tristan noticed the familiarity of his surroundings. He was on the outskirts of Mernovia.

The serenity and balance he felt when in his father’s presence dissipated, leaving Tristan worried about the events he just experienced. He started to swim back to the palace to speak with his brother, keeping an eye out for Tibs. Triton needed to know his father had relinquished his position. Plus, he had to be warned about the possible conflict. Tristan hoped to arrive in time to confront Council Gregarious about the mermallion’s accusations.

Twisting and turning with the currents, Tristan continued toward the palace. Suddenly he cut through a warm water current, and the effects of the mating heat took over his body. He could not believe this was happening to him again when he did not have the time to find and court his mate.

A figure breaking into the water from the surface made Tristan pause. He swam toward it and discovered a human—a very handsome male human—looking at him. Tristan shivered with need. He doubted the man was his mate, but the heat pestering him could not be ignored. Perhaps he should introduce himself and see if the man was his or not. At least his presence was proof of the end of the curse. Tristan smiled as he moved closer.

He witnessed the moment the human panicked.

Tristan moved quicker and grabbed the man’s hand. As soon as their fingers interlocked, Tristan felt the immensity of the love in the man’s heart. He broke the curse. Tristan wanted to know more, he wanted to bring the man with him to Mernovia. He had seen the awe in his eyes before the panic took over.

Pulling the man closer to his chest, Tristan gave him a reassuring smile as he pressed his lips against the human’s. A moan almost escaped Tristan. He was enjoying the man’s predicament. The human was not his, but the sensation of their lips pressing together was exquisite. For Tristan, this moment was closer than he had ever been to a real kiss. In all his years, he had never tasted another’s lips. He wished he could devour the man pressed against his chest since he could feel a great love in the man’s heart, but the need to find his true mate kept him from enjoying the moment. It almost felt as if he was cheating, and he had not even met his future partner.

The human pulled away from Tristan and tried to communicate with him. As far as he could tell, it seemed like the human wanted to go back to the surface. Displeasure radiated from Tristan, but he had no other option but to agree. He was not sure how long he could keep providing air to the man before he would lose consciousness. Tristan helped the man back to the surface, but before they surfaced, the merman pressed his front against the man's back and wrapped his arms around his waist.

“Now that you have come through the gate, the curse has been broken. A love stronger than the one the King of the Seas had for his wife, Taithja, has brought unity to the worlds once again. The veil between the worlds has fallen, but everything you see will continue to be hidden in plain sight from other humans,” he said telepathically to the man.

As soon as they broke the surface, they gasped for air, and immediately thereafter, Tristan dived back into the water, his heart pounding with happiness.

“Tristan!” A rich tone entered his mind, and he was lost.

Chapter VI

Tiberius could not believe his mate was embracing a human, kissing him as if they belonged together.

“Tristan!”

Now back in his mershark form, using telepathy again felt foreign to Tiberius after so many years of one-sided conversations. He remembered escaping the pirates minutes before the king's curse took over the worlds. After witnessing his transformation, a motley crew had kept him hostage on board of *La Aventura*. They had prevented his return to the underwater city of Allód, where he was the heir to the throne—a fact they ignored. As he jumped from the galleon's deck, Tiberius took his shark shape in hopes of evading being recaptured. His speed helped him move away from the chaos, but he got caught in the reef shortly after.

A brokenhearted Tristan disentangled him from the rock formation, but by the time he was nursed back to health, it was too late to return home or shift forms. With the king's blessing, Mernovia became his new home and Tristan his only family.

As soon as Tristan turned toward him, Tiberius saw the concern in the mer's eyes. He was probably readying himself for a fight, which was the last thing Tiberius wanted. Tristan squared his shoulders, making his lean muscles ripple. His pale skin contrasted beautifully with his aquamarine tail, and his short black hair framed his features perfectly. Tristan's posture projected confidence, but Tiberius knew him best. Behind his calm demeanor lay a storm of fears.

“Who are you?”

Having the opportunity to communicate with Tristan made him giddy. The mer's voice was familiar, but its effects on Tiberius's body intensified as the words reached him.

“I am Prince Tiberius Lir, heir to the throne of Allód. But to you, my love, I am simply Tibs.”

Tiberius kept his eyes locked with Tristan's, enjoying the multitude of expressions taking over the beautiful merman's face. For centuries, they had accompanied each other, always ready to spend their days together. As they grew older, Tristan's responsibilities increased, but the mer always took the

time to be with Tiberius. Not being able to communicate had been torturous. He had understood everything Tristan told him but could not reply as he was bound to his shark form. Now that he had regained his ability to shift at will, the mershark would do anything to conquer Tristan's heart.

"Preposterous!"

"I can only imagine your confusion. I am willing to do anything to show you that I am your Tibs."

The currents around them became agitated to match Tristan's mood. It was not the first time Tiberius had witnessed this event, and every single time, his heart saddened for his best friend. Tristan's inability to completely control his powers was reflected around them, but most importantly, it showed him Tristan's need to claim Tiberius as his *numina*—a *numen's* guardian, his soul mate.

"Ask me anything and you will see I speak the truth."

Tiberius waited patiently as Tristan battled to regain control of his powers. The moment the currents calmed, he knew Tristan could be receptive to his new identity. He was merely sixteen in human years when he was captured, but his father's savants had explained his future duties to him as they taught him how to fulfill them. The thought of not only protecting his soul mate, but also pleasing him, made the mershark shiver. Tiberius was destined to be king, but above all, he had been chosen by the gods to bear the *numen's* pups.

The intensity of Tristan's gaze captivated Tiberius. He wanted to get closer to the merman, to feel Tristan's arms wrapped around his torso. His body craved Tristan's touch; for the last two centuries that had been the only thing keeping him sane. Recently, he had trouble masking his need. He was sure the merman felt his want. Tiberius could still remember Tristan's pleasure vibrating through his body as he touched himself inside their cave the other day. The embarrassment the mer displayed as he left their safe haven showed Tiberius how much love and understanding Tristan needed.

"This is nothing more than a cruel hoax. Did Gregarious put you up to it?" Tristan asked as he swam toward the surface without waiting for an answer.

Concentrating, Tiberius allowed his shark form to take over again. The complete transformation took seconds, but for Tiberius, it felt endless. His body ached after two centuries in his animal form. Changing back to mer had been painful but welcomed. And now, morphing between his forms in such a short

period of time took more energy than he expected. He had stayed in his shark body too long, unable to shift due to the curse. He needed to build his stamina and pace his changes if he wanted to take care of Tristan.

He followed the merman, wrapping his caudal fin around Tristan's waist, bringing him closer to his body. Without letting go of him, Tiberius became a mershark. Tristan gasped and tried to move away, but he just hugged the mer even closer. His body vibrated with the full contact and the soft caresses of the afternoon breeze. He felt Tristan's rapid heartbeat against his chest and his ragged breath brushing his ear. Their bodies instinctively writhed as one, recognizing their connection.

"Tibs," Tristan said in awe.

"Yes, my love," Tiberius responded as he placed a soft kiss to the side of Tristan's head.

"But how?"

"The curse."

"All this time... you were... and I..."

"*Shhh*. I have you. Nothing else matters anymore."

Tiberius punctuated every word with a soft kiss on Tristan's jaw and neck. He enjoyed the little noises escaping the younger mer. Taking them as encouragement, he continued the slow exploration. He was getting lost in Tristan's smell and taste. His whole body was humming with sensation. The water surrounding them started to reflect the glow from Tristan's tail.

"Can I kiss you, my love?" Tiberius asked as he traced Tristan's lips with his thumb. "I have dreamed of this moment for years. I want to remove that human's taste from your lips."

Tristan tensed, and Tiberius realized his error immediately. He had no claim over the merman, at least not yet. Perhaps mermen could not feel the call of a mate as strongly as mersharks did. For years, he had known that Tristan was his, now he needed to explain it to his mate.

"How could you?" Tristan asked, taking offense.

"Please forgive me. I cannot even think when I am so close to you. I do not know if you can feel our affinity, but you are my mate. I am your *numina*, Tristan."

"How do you know? Are you sure—"

“You cannot even feel some tendrils of our connection? My body is burning for you. I need to taste you. I need you to claim me,” Tiberius said, his need pouring from his words.

He kept moving his hands up and down Tristan's back, caressing every ridge he had longed for over the years. Tristan's skin was pale and a bit cold. He rubbed his cheek on the side of the merman's face. Tiberius needed more contact, more from his mate.

“It was you igniting my mating heat. I thought I was going crazy,” Tristan murmured.

Those dark eyes were going to be the death of him. Tiberius's fin continued to curl around Tristan. The texture of his scales felt right, familiar. Their claspers were almost aligned, and he could feel the arousal pouring off both of them. Slowly, he moved his hand down his mate's waist, below the sensitive area where his skin met his scales. Tristan sighed, moving closer to Tiberius.

“The poor human needed some help breathing. I just lent him my lips,” Tristan said against his ear. “His love was strong enough to break the king's curse. I could not let him die...”

“I understand.”

“Although, he was really cute,” Tristan added cheekily.

“You are going to be in so much trouble, Prince Tristan of Mernovia,” Tiberius said before pressing his lips against Tristan's.

For a brief second neither of them moved. It was the first time their lips touched, and Tiberius wanted to savor the moment. Pulling Tristan closer, he started exploring his lips with the tip of his tongue, from corner to corner, parting them softly. As soon as his tongue made contact with Tristan's, he knew he had found the other part of his soul. He moved one of his hands back up Tristan's back until he reached the back of his neck. Changing the angle of the kiss, he pushed deeper into the other mer's mouth.

They were both panting by the time Tiberius moved back, holding Tristan's bottom lip between his lips. He let go and smiled. Without breaking eye contact, Tiberius rubbed the end part of his caudal fin against Tristan's behind, making him tremble. Since they had been together for the last two hundred years, Tiberius knew everything about Tristan, including his lack of experience. He had never been with anyone either, but he wanted more than anything to mate with Tristan. Tibs's instincts were calling to him, pressing him to change

into his shark side and bite the merman. To keep him in place as they became one—*numen* and *numina*, the perfect balance.

“Please,” Tristan pleaded.

Moving forward, Tiberius took Tristan's lips again. This time, he used both hands to angle the mer's head, deepening the kiss as he continued to move his tail, feeling Tristan's opening getting sleek as it responded to their connection. Tristan had his eyes closed and his arms loosely wrapped around the mershark's waist. He was giving himself to Tiberius, trusting him implicitly.

As his tail made contact with Tiberius's opening, their bodies fluttered in unison. The pleasure surrounding them magnified, pushing Tiberius for more. Tristan sighed around Tiberius lips, bringing him back to the moment. He could not let the mating heat control him. Tristan deserved to know how much Tiberius loved him. It might sound strange for the merman at first, but their friendship had meant the world to him. And ever since he had discovered Tristan was his mate, he had prayed to the gods for an opportunity to be with the merman. He was not going to ruin his chances for a partnership by taking more than what Tristan was ready to give.

Slowly, he released Tristan's body. He kept one arm around Tristan's waist, and with the other, he caressed his features. Placing a soft kiss to the merman's forehead, he waited for Tristan to open his eyes. A beautiful smile greeted him, and a soft blush covered the other mer's face.

“That was amazing. Why did you stop?” Tristan asked, biting his bottom lip.

“I am sorry, my love. I just needed to control the mating heat taking over my body. It is not fair to ask you to accept my advances without a chance to sort out your own feelings.”

Tristan tilted his head to the side and looked at Tiberius, as if trying to decipher a difficult puzzle. He had seen that expression on his face before; normally, when Tristan was ready to make a decision that would be irrevocable. The mershark did not move. He did not want to interfere. All he wanted was the chance to love his mate and find happiness. They both needed time to learn about the other. Tiberius had to find his family and see to his responsibilities as the heir to Allód's throne. Tristan also needed to tell his brother about the last day's events. Hopefully, soon they could have time for more.

Moving closer, Tristan placed a soft kiss on Tiberius's cheek. He could see the playfulness in Tristan's eyes. As soon as the mershark tried to kiss Tristan

again, the merman swam away, diving underwater. Tiberius laughed before following suit.

He chased the younger mer as he had done many times before. They turned and twisted, evading schools of fish and other sea creatures. Tiberius was glad to be in his mer form, it allowed him to move closer to Tristan and to fit through openings his thresher form was too big for. He was slower, but the agility compensated for his lack of speed.

On the seafloor, Tiberius spotted a shipwreck, and he knew Tristan would go to it. His mate loved to rummage through those in hopes of finding ancient treasures. They had done this before, but the joy pouring out of the merman was contagious.

Tristan entered what was left of the ship by a porthole, and Tiberius followed him closely. They swam around the cargo hold, down the galley, and passed the berthing quarters. Most everything in the wreckage looked ransacked and was covered in algae and corals. Pushing a door open, they entered what seemed to be the captain's cabin.

Tiberius observed the reverent way in which Tristan slid his fingers over the captain's desk. Even with the passage of time, the fixture looked elegant and sturdy. Tristan opened a drawer and looked over several objects. He then proceeded to remove a golden chain holding some type of large scale, encrusted with beautiful stones. Tiberius moved closer to his mate and put it around the merman's neck.

As Tiberius gazed back to the desk, he could imagine the man behind it, making plans to save his ship before the wreck, placing the chain in the drawer for safekeeping. Tiberius wondered if it was a storm or a battle that had brought them down. Whatever it was, he hoped the captain and crew were able to abandon the ship on time. Unfortunately, as they continued their expedition, they crossed paths with several of the men's remains. They paid their respects, exiting the vessel.

As they moved to the surface, Tiberius thought about his family. He needed to return to Allód as soon as possible. He could only imagine how much they had missed him all this time—probably as much as the families of those men buried in Davy Jones's locker.

Chapter VII

Mernovia

19th Century

Before Tiberius could return to Allód, they had to stop in Mernovia. Triton needed to be informed of the assassination attempt on Tristan and the possibility of insubordination among the elders. They trusted all the men forming the Council and the Court of Mernovia, and he had not thought it possible for any of them to be orchestrating an attack on Tristan or any other member of the royal family.

He was happy as they traveled back home. Yes, Mernovia would always be home even when he returned to Allód. Tiberius needed to find out how Tristan felt about moving with him. He knew the merman was not happy about being part of the Council, but he was not sure if his mate was ready to leave his family and live in a different kingdom. Perhaps they could move to Bermuda as humans and travel to both kingdoms when needed.

Tristan circling around him brought Tiberius back from his thoughts. He had been preoccupied most of the trip and had not realized they were almost at Mernovia. The trip had been relatively short since they were traveling with the currents in their favor, and they were only in the kingdom's outskirts when Tristan encountered the drowning human.

"Are you regretting coming here with me? If you want, we can travel to Allód first instead," Tristan said, reflecting his concern.

"I am sorry, my love. Please do not worry about me. My family can wait one or two more days to see me. As your soul mate and guardian, your safety is my priority even when we have not mated yet."

Tiberius felt the love radiating from Tristan. In that moment, he understood their friendship had been as important to Tristan as it had been to him. He took a moment to thank the gods before he moved closer to Tristan, placing a chaste kiss on the merman's lips. The mershark loved the way Tristan relaxed when they touched. His mate was finally finding his balance, and he was glad to provide him with it.

His happiness did not last. Tristan tensed once again, and Tiberius realized something did not feel right around them. Mernovia loomed ahead; no lanterns

were lit, and no one was around. It was as if their kingdom was deserted. No merfolk, no schools, nothing. Everything was lifeless. At least the palace still stood as a beacon in the darkness.

Before Tiberius could say anything, Tristan sped away. With nothing blocking their path, they made it to the palace entrance in no time. As far as they could tell, nothing looked out of place. Everything in the promenade and beyond seemed intact, but Tiberius did not want to take any chances with Tristan's safety.

"I think I should take my shark shape. It will give us a hidden advantage."

"But we cannot communicate if you do," Tristan said.

"We communicated without the need for telepathy for two hundred years, my love. I think we can do it again for a short time."

Nodding, the merman waited for Tiberius to complete his shift. The thresher offered his dorsal fin, and Tristan held on to it as they had done many times. Tiberius felt Tristan's fears as his own but concentrated on keeping his mate calm. Moving steadily through the halls, they kept their senses on alert for any danger. He knew Tristan would let him know if he felt anything out of place or someone coming toward them.

They went directly into the Court and Council chambers, but no one was in sight. The room was ready for a session to commence as if the members had taken the day off. Tiberius felt Tristan shiver and wished he could cradle the mer in his arms. The currents around them were responding to Tristan's agitation, but his body remained calm.

"We need to find Triton," the merman projected.

Tiberius agreed with Tristan even when he could not respond.

They approached the Prince Regent's wing where all the lanterns were still lit. Immediately, Tiberius felt someone's presence. Stopping, Tiberius tried to convey his findings to the merman. A soft caress on his fin let him know that Tristan felt the presence as well. A calming force surrounded them, and Tiberius realized Tristan was finding his center in an effort to protect them from the perceived danger.

"Triton?" Tiberius heard Tristan ask in a calm voice.

He was not sure how his mate was able to keep so calm and quiet. It was the first time he had seen him in full control of his powers. Tiberius was not sure if

it had anything to do with them acknowledging their connection, or if it was simply because the curse had come to an end.

A shadow moved ahead, but Tiberius was unable to make out a shape. No answer came back to them, but someone was still inside Triton's room. Cautiously, they continued forward. As they entered the anteroom, an impressive mermallion came out of the bedchambers. Tristan placed a water barrier between them before the mer could point his weapon at them.

"State your name and your business here," Tristan ordered.

"I should ask the same from you."

"I am Prince Tristan of Mernovia, and you are currently trespassing. Not only my castle, but my brother's private chambers."

"Your castle? I believe you said prince, not king, little merman," the mermallion said, projecting his disdain.

Tiberius felt his mate tremble with anger at the mer's words. He was ready to cross the barrier Tristan had erected, to go feast on the arrogant mermallion. His size was impressive and perhaps intimidating for most, but Tiberius's shark shape was a good match. As he tried to move forward, Tristan placed a hand on his fin to stop him. He felt the energy building inside the mer and waited for him to continue taking care of the situation.

"I see your pet shark wants to defend you. How sweet."

"Enough," Tristan said before raising his arms in the direction of the barrier.

The water forming the barrier contorted until it wrapped around the surprised mermallion, binding him. As they swam closer to the mer, Tiberius was impressed by the beautiful creature before them. Even with an angry look on his face, the mer radiated power, confidence, and an ethereal aura he had never seen before. Tiberius was enthralled with what he was seeing. In all his years, Tiberius never expected to meet such a magnificent specimen.

As far as Tiberius could see, there was no specific area on the mermallion's body where his skin met scales. His muscular chest and arms were adorned with intricate patterns, rising directly from his skin. Long claws made his fingers look elegant and deadly in contrast. Even with the water binding his body, it was impossible not to see the graceful movements of his tentacles and muscles. His features were soft but exuded masculinity. And from his head, two

tentacles flowed around in place of hair, with a crown that seemed like it was part of the mer itself.

"I am losing my patience," Tristan said, tightening the bindings around the mer.

"If you must know, little merman, I am Pieuvre, Protector of the Seven Seas."

The mershark was surprised by the mermallion's revelation. Since he was nothing more than a young mershark, he had heard about Pieuvre's legend. His beauty was only matched by his ruthlessness, and it was well known that his help came accompanied by a high price. The mermallions that attacked Tristan were part of his group of mercenaries. Tiberius was surprised the mer had not killed them by now.

"And the reason you are in my brother's quarters?"

Pieuvre moved forward, out of Tristan's bindings, without a problem. Tristan moved his webbed fingers in a "come here" gesture, forming the barrier once again. The mermallion smiled, crossing the cascading waters and causing Tristan's body to ripple like the currents.

"I was summoned by the King of the Seas to protect Mernovia, not two pretentious princes."

"As you can see, I do not need your help. Neither does Mernovia. Please feel free to leave. I am sure my father's summons were a mistake."

Tiberius sensed the tumult inside his mate. He was not sure how much longer Tristan would be able to control his powers. His tail was already glowing, and the currents were steeled, waiting for his command. Looking at the mermallion's face, Tiberius saw anger, almost as strong as Tristan's. Pieuvre was not happy with the king's request or their presence at the moment.

With nothing to lose, Tiberius shifted to his mer form to serve as an intermediary between the two mers.

"Tiberius!" Tristan admonished him.

"What do we have here?"

"Generalissimo," Tiberius addressed the mer with a bow. *"I am Tiberius Lir, heir to the throne of Allód. Tristan is my mate and Prince Triton's younger brother."*

“Not only beautiful, but also well-mannered. Such a pity that you are already taken.”

“Thank you for the compliment. Please forgive the prince’s rudeness, but we were attacked during our trip to visit the king, and now that we made it home, Mernovia is nothing more than a ghost city.”

“The city is safe, my dear. Everyone is under a sleeping spell. When I leave Mernovia, everything will return to normal, and no one will feel any different,” the mermallion explained only to Tiberius.

He was sure the mermallion was doing it only to irritate Tristan.

“Please, my love. Trust me,” Tiberius communicated quickly to the merman.

Tiberius felt a wave of calm surrounding him, and he smiled at his mate.

“Was the city under attack when the king summoned you?” the mershark asked for both mers to hear.

“Yes. Some of my men were trapped in Mernovia during the curse and were working as mercenaries. They were not under my order. Unfortunately, one of your council members conspired with them to assassinate the Prince Regent and your mate.”

Tiberius shivered at the mermallion’s words. What the mercenary had told them was true. The council member had tried to kill his love. Providentially, they had been able to escape without harm. He wondered why the king needed the mermallion’s help if he could save both of his sons.

“I investigated, tried, and executed the Councilman for his offenses, restoring peace to your kingdom.”

“Thank you, Generalissimo. We owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“We do not owe him anything. We do not even know if what he says is true.” Tristan started to get agitated again. *“Where is my brother?”* Tristan added.

“He is sleeping calmly in his bedchamber. I even removed his crown and tucked him in before I exited his bedchamber.”

Tristan tried to go into the bedchamber, but Pieuvre held his arm. Tiberius moved forward, ready to attack the mer touching his mate.

“Control yourself, little merman. You have more pressing things to take care of than a sleeping prince. Mernovia is safe and will stay that way for decades. A bigger threat is coming to the kingdoms, and we will need to work as one with the humans to stop the extinction of our people. When the time is right, you will hear from me again. In the meantime, procure all the allies you can find,” the mermallion told them before vanishing from sight.

They looked around for the mer, but he was gone. No trace of his presence was left. Tiberius closed the distance between him and Tristan, pulling the merman into his arms. His mate's body molded to his, and a small sigh escaped him.

“Come on, my love. Let's go check on Triton,” Tiberius said after kissing Tristan's forehead.

As they entered the room, life restarted around them. They could hear mers swimming and the currents rippling around them. Triton looked at peace, weighed down by blankets on his bed. His crown was safely placed by his side, attached to a small, jeweled box.

Staying by the door, Tiberius waited for Tristan to get to his brother's side. Softly, the merman placed a hand against Triton's arm, shaking him. It took a moment, but Triton opened his eyes. He looked first at Tristan, trying to figure out where he was and what was happening, and then at the mershark. Tiberius tensed as soon as Triton's gaze connected with his. The Prince Regent seemed to feel threatened by Tiberius's presence in his bedchamber.

“Triton, how do you feel? Are you all right?” Tristan asked, caressing his brother's arm.

“I am...”

“It is fine, Triton. Please take your time.”

“Gregarious, where is he? What I am doing here?” Triton asked, confusion etched on his face.

“Calm down, Triton. As far as we know, Gregarious was tried and executed for his attempt on your life and mine.”

Feeling Triton's eyes back on him, Tiberius swam closer to Tristan. Before he reached him, Triton had taken his shifted form, and many tritons were blocking Tiberius's path. The sea daemons were Triton's guards and were known as fierce protectors.

“Please shift again, Tri. Tiberius means no harm to us.”

A second later, Triton was back in his mer shape. He swam toward Tiberius and circled around him. Tiberius felt self-conscious about the inspection but stayed in place.

“Tiberius you said?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Tiberius Lir, at your service.”

“Prince Tiberius Lir, heir to the throne of Allód. Do not be modest, my mate,” Tristan reiterated with a smile on his face.

“Mate?”

“Yes, Tri. Tibs is my mate.”

It was the first time since Tiberius had shifted that Tristan referred to him as Tibs. The mer shark felt relieved, knowing that their friendship was still important to the merman. He closed the space between them, placing a soft kiss to the side of his mate's neck.

“Well, Tiberius. Welcome to the family. I am sure we will have time to get to know each other and talk about your intentions toward my brother very soon. Now, I have a kingdom to rule.”

“Before we let you be, I have to ask if you have spoken with our father.”

“Yes. The bastard named me king and ran to Mount Olympus before all hell broke loose. I still have no idea why the rush, though.”

“Congratulations are in order anyway, King Triton,” Tristan said, bowing to his brother.

Tiberius mirrored the gesture.

“Please let us know if you need our help with anything. I will report to the Council first thing in the morning, and then we will leave for Allód.”

“Do not bother reporting to the Council since it is no more. Feel free to travel without worry. By the time you return, I will have a new regent ministry appointed, and there will be a place available for you in it.”

Tristan nodded his understanding. Tiberius saw all the questions and hurt in his mate's eyes, but he guided him out of the new king's chambers before Tristan's powers could overtake him.

Chapter VIII

Tiberius placed his hand on Tristan's lower back to comfort them both as they approached his mate's quarters. A shy smile and a soft blush softened Tristan's features, bringing a jolt of happiness to Tiberius. He knew how hard Triton's dismissal had been on the merman, but he had to admit that the new king had had a rough day of his own. Maybe in the morning the brothers would have a chance to talk. For now, Tiberius wanted to keep his mate smiling.

The mershark was nervous for the first time in many years. He wondered if Tristan would allow him to stay in his bedchamber, or if he would need to return to their cave. When they first met, Tiberius always rested in Tristan's bedchamber. Unfortunately, as the years passed, he got too big to fit comfortably in the room. He had stayed outside the castle by the room's fenestrations until they discovered the cave. After they started seeing the place as their own, Tiberius started to spend his nights and free hours there.

Tristan opened the door, and Tiberius followed him through the anteroom, but then he stopped at the bedchamber's door, waiting for the merman to invite him in. Within seconds, his mate noticed his actions. Turning back toward him, Tristan extended his hand, guiding him inside.

It looked different than the last time Tiberius had been there. Now it had a more mature tone to it. There were no longer any childish items displayed, and a bed just like Triton's took center stage. He remembered his own childhood bed that had been in their Bermuda home when he was little. That was one of the many things he missed about living like a human. Tiberius used to climb under several blankets and curl up on his side every night. In his shark form, he only floated as he rested; nothing which would make him feel safe and taken care of had been available.

He imagined Tristan used several blankets to weigh himself down to the bed's surface, but he was sure the sensation was not the same. Looking around the room, he noticed several artifacts. He recognized most of them since he had been with Tristan during the expeditions when he had found them. Every object had an assigned location and was bolted in place.

A pair of arms wrapped around his waist from behind, and Tiberius instinctively moved to the side to accommodate the other mer and leaned his head back. Tristan placed a kiss on his neck, getting a soft moan from the mershark in response. Tristan's hands caressed his torso, and he could feel his

body relaxing against the merman. Tiberius closed his eyes and let the sensations come over him. He had never imagined being able to shift again, to have the chance to mate with Tristan.

"I love the feel of your skin against my lips, Tibs."

"And I love when you call me Tibs. It makes me feel like I am yours."

"You are mine. I can feel our connection getting stronger."

"Me too," Tiberius responded as he turned to face his Tristan.

Leaning forward, Tiberius captured Tristan's lips. It felt foreign but familiar to kiss the merman—definitely different from kissing above water. Now he could not taste his mate, and his lips felt cold to the touch. Even so, he still loved the opportunity to explore the lips he had longed for.

He trembled when Tristan caressed his dorsal fin. It was not as pronounced as when he was in his thresher form, but it ran the length of his spine. The merman held the back of his neck, deepening the kiss. He felt his body melt against Tristan's, and his claspers prepared for mating.

Tiberius moved back, his face reddened with embarrassment. He moved his hands to cover himself, but Tristan just smiled sweetly at him. He followed the merman's gaze and realized Tristan was as aroused as him. He had never been with anyone, but he had taken himself in hand before and had kissed some mers before the curse confined him to his shark shape. Tiberius had seen the way Tristan had touched his own body when he thought he was alone in the cave, but Tiberius had interrupted him before he could take care of his arousal.

Moving back toward Tristan, Tiberius placed a hand on the merman's chest, slowly following all the ridges on his hard torso. He used his nails to scrape over one of the mer's nipples and then the other. He loved the way his mate's body reacted to his touch. The emotions crossing Tristan's face encouraged Tiberius to continue his exploration. Now that he had the opportunity to touch Tristan, he was not sure how far he wanted to go. Tiberius did know he wanted Tristan to make him his, but tonight was not the right moment to consummate their mating. Perhaps one day they would have the chance to go to the surface and make love to each other. The thought made Tiberius smile. Love. The word had sounded foreign when he was trapped as a shark, but now he was feeling it every minute he spent with Tristan.

He placed small kisses down Tristan's jaw and neck, continuing down his shoulder and abdomen. Tiberius nuzzled Tristan's waist, playing with the

delicate scales coming directly out of his middle. It was something he had done many times as a shark, but now it felt more intimate than playful. Tristan held his head, encouraging him to move up again. Their mouths met again, and Tiberius surrendered to his mate.

Tristan took control of the kiss once again, and Tiberius loved it. Having his body pressed against Tristan's was an experience the mershark would always treasure. Mirroring Tiberius's previous moves, Tristan placed soft kisses all the way to his waist. He then turned Tiberius, surprising him when he started kissing the sides of his fin, using one hand to explore Tiberius's chest while the other one moved slowly up and down his tail.

The combination of sensations had Tiberius on edge. He had no idea how long he would be able to hold his release back. The mershark did not feel comfortable with such intimacy, even knowing they were mates. He needed to show some restraint if he wanted to have a real partnership with Tristan. The younger mer was pleasuring him when it was his task to pleasure the merman.

It took a minute for Tiberius to realize that Tristan was trying to communicate with him.

"Do you want me stop?" Tristan asked.

"No, please," he replied, transmitting his need.

"I am not sure what I am doing. Please let me know if anything makes you uncomfortable."

"I will, but I am the numina. I should be the one pleasing you, not the other way around."

Tristan placed his forehead against Tiberius's back and wrapped his arms around his waist.

"I want us to be happy, Tibs. I want to please you as well. Loving you will be my main concern from now on. Touching your skin, kissing your lips, everything we do together pleases me. Please, let me."

"All right."

"Do you want to stay here with me tonight? I think we should rest before we leave for Allód in the morning."

"I would love to."

*Allód**19th Century—two days later*

Tiberius knew leaving Mernovia, and especially leaving Triton alone, was not easy for Tristan. The next morning, the kingdom continued along as if nothing had happened. Life went on, and he was glad for it.

They had no trouble leaving Mernovia after speaking with Triton. He had lost some of his guards during the confrontation ordered by Gregarious, but overall, the palace did not sustain any extensive damage.

According to Triton, the ambush occurred as he exited the throne room. He had been pensive and did not perceive the mers' presence. They pushed him back into the room and tried to immobilize him. Triton unsheathed his trident before the assailants were able to take it from him, and killed everyone that came in contact with his weapon. His trident was not as strong as his father's, but the maneuver gave him enough time to call for his personal guard. The last thing he remembered, before Tristan woke him from his slumber, was a complete silence taking over as a beautiful creature entered the throne room.

They had talked more about their meeting with Pieuvre, and Triton could not believe the mermallion really existed. For him, the Protector of the Seven Seas was nothing more than a merbabes' tale. They did agree on the astonishing beauty of the mer. Even so, to Tiberius, the mer's beauty did not compare with the soft skin and full lips of his mate.

A mate whose mood had not improved in the last two days they had been swimming together. He knew his own nervousness was not helping, but he could not hide his feelings about returning to Allód after so many years.

He wondered about his parents and how they would receive him; if they believed him dead or just lost after the curse took over. Tiberius remembered his many trips between his kingdom and Bermuda. He loved everything the little island had to offer, especially its people. As a sixteen-year-old, he had several friends he spent his days with, sometimes even staying at their houses.

His family had their own villa several miles away from New London—tucked away on the other side of the reef. He was surprised he had never seen Tristan around. Perhaps they had crossed paths before, but he had not noticed. Tiberius had been a typical young mershark, training to be king someday. Most importantly, he was learning how to please his future *numen*, which brought him to practice with some of those aforementioned friends of his. Looking back

at it now, he realized he had done more with Tristan the night before than he had ever done before.

"I can feel your arousal, Tibs."

Tiberius blushed. He was lost in his thoughts when Tristan sent his words. He did not respond and just continued to swim forward.

"Are you going to make me chase you?" Tristan asked playfully.

Shivering at Tristan's words, Tiberius twisted and turned, trying to gain speed. They zigzagged around reefs, schools of fish, and many other sea creatures. The seaweed and algae slowed them down, but they used the currents to their benefit. Tiberius's heart was racing with excitement as he felt Tristan getting closer.

"Accept it, my love. You are not going to catch me," Tiberius taunted Tristan.

Immediately, the currents around Tiberius became agitated, and he felt them wrapping around his body. He tried to turn unsuccessfully. The mershark realized he was completely immobilized.

"You were saying..."

Tiberius let his amusement reach Tristan as the merman got closer to him.

"I surrender, my prince," Tiberius responded, letting Tristan feel his happiness.

"I do not think you have any other option, my prince."

"Oh, options I do have, my love. I just let you win."

Before he could shift to his shark form, Tristan pulled Tiberius into his arms. The currents settled, letting the mers embrace. Tristan took Tiberius's lips forcefully, and the mershark opened for him without a fight. They were getting used to kissing underwater. Tiberius loved the feel of Tristan's body against his own, and the hard lips were an added prize. By the time they separated, they were trembling with need.

They looked at each other and smiled. Tristan placed a chaste kiss on Tiberius cheek and tried to race ahead of him. The mershark used his long caudal fin to catch him and bring him back toward him. Without warning, he took off swimming with Tristan caught in his arms. He swirled them around, evading a field of jellyfish, and shivered when Tristan made the currents move faster.

As they swam past a rock formation, Tiberius stopped suddenly. What was once Allód's castle was now nothing more than a pile of debris resting ahead of them, covered in algae and sea critters. With his heart breaking, Tiberius released Tristan and swam toward the city's ruins.

Chapter IX

The closer to the castle they moved, the heavier Tiberius's heart became. Two centuries... he had been gone for way too long. His tears mixed with the sea as he continued to take in the state of his city. The last time he had been in Allód, the small kingdom was full of life and happiness. Normally sharks tended to stay isolated from others of their kind, but his family was the first to establish a kingdom more than a thousand years ago. They wanted to keep in touch with each other and to protect their lineage.

He had grown up as the heir to the throne, dividing his time between Bermuda and Allód to work on his education. His parents believed in cultivating all their shifted forms. Tiberius had learned how to battle as a mer, a human, and in his thresher form. He had only been sixteen in human years when the curse occurred, but he was treated as an adult with all the responsibilities of a future king.

Allód did not have separate structures for its inhabitants like Mernovia. Only the palace sat on its own, surrounded by caves. The reefs provided enough space for them to shift between their marine forms. Tiberius always longed to live in one of the caves when he was little—they felt intimate, and the families in them seemed happy.

His parents loved him and his two siblings, but the palace had not provided for a close-knit experience. Plus, he had spent most of his time with his father's savants, learning more about being a *numina*. His father was king, but his mother had been the real power behind the throne. They had done their best to keep their kingdom safe and their people happy.

After moving some rocks from the castle's front entrance, Tiberius and Tristan entered what was once a beautiful receiving area. Now it was nothing more than a collection of debris and old memories. Tiberius guided them deeper into the castle, stopping several times to clear their way. The sea had taken the structure back, and now other forms of life were the only ones taking shelter and calling it home.

A school of fish scattered as they entered the private wing. Tiberius thought about stopping by his parents' quarters but felt like an intruder just thinking about it. He swam toward his room instead after taking Tristan's hand for support.

There was no door in his quarters, but everything looked exactly as he remembered. So far, it seemed his was the only area not touched by the destruction. He wondered if it had been done on purpose. He felt Tristan squeeze his hand as they crossed the threshold. Tiberius used his free hand to trace over the surfaces. Everything in his room had a special meaning for him, from the collection of rocks in a display box to the comfortable blankets weighed down on the seating area near the room's fenestrations.

Tristan let go of the mershark, entering the bedchamber. Tiberius did not have a bed since he preferred to float free during his nights in the castle and save the cuddling for his soft bed on the surface. A small box Tiberius did not remember seeing before sat next to a display shelf. He picked it up, turning it to examine all its sides. It was encrusted with several jewels and the kingdom's seal on top. It felt light, perhaps it was empty, but Tiberius could not control his curiosity. He opened it and immediately regretted his decision.

Inside it was his mother's medallion. A female bust was its centerpiece, her eyes covered by a scarf, and her hair framing her soft features. It represented unconditional love, and his mother always wore it around her neck when they were in Bermuda. She said it was her lucky charm since her father gave it to her after their mating. Tiberius felt the box cutting into his fingers, but he was numb. He prayed to the gods for his mother's well-being.

"My prince," Tristan called softly through their link.

The simple endearment warmed Tiberius. They had been through so much during the last couple of days that he could not believe it had only been such a short amount of time. He closed his eyes as he felt Tristan's calming powers wash over him.

"Come here," he told Tristan as he extended his hand toward him.

As soon as their bodies pressed together, Tiberius sighed. He felt safe and loved in Tristan's arms. He let go of his pain, knowing his mate was there to hold him. They stayed like that until they felt some movement behind them. Tiberius placed the medallion alongside the large scale on the chain Tristan was wearing before they left the room in the direction they had come from.

When they exited the castle, two sharks were blocking their path. Tiberius tried to remember if he had seen them before but could not recall. They were thresher sharks as well, but they lacked the deep-purple coloring characteristic of his lineage. For a moment, he wondered if they were just sharks and not shifters, but there were not many as far as he knew. The mershark grabbed

Tristan's hand and tried to move forward, but they were stopped by the sharks once again.

"Do you know them?"

"I do not think so, but it has been a while."

"I was never able to communicate with you when you were in your thresher form, but I can try. Perhaps I can access their thoughts and memories..."

"You can do that? Did you access mine?"

"I tried, but it did not work," Tristan said sheepishly.

One of the sharks moved closer, stopping their conversation. Letting go of the merman's hand, Tiberius put himself between Tristan and the creature. He felt Tristan's annoyance, but he concentrated on the threat ahead.

As the shark charged toward them, Tiberius shifted forms, absorbing the impact when their bodies met. He hoped Tristan had moved away from them in time since he saw the second shark coming closer. Tiberius got his answer when the currents around them intensified, blocking the second shark's passage. He was still concerned about his mate, but he knew Tristan had enough control over his powers to take care of himself now. Still, the idea of them battling together once again brought a smile to Tiberius face. They were protecting each other, which filled the mershark with pride.

Without wasting another second, Tiberius swooped after the shark. He went below it, landing a bite to the shark's underbelly. The smell of blood lured him forward as he repeated the action. The shark hit Tiberius's side with his fin, making him disentangle his sharp teeth from the soft skin. He staggered sideways and into the path of the second shark. He looked for Tristan but could not find him. Using his muzzle as a weapon, he hit the incoming shark directly on the head and fell as the current rippled over them. Tristan was definitely still holding his side of the fight.

Tiberius bit one of the shark's caudal fins to pull him toward the surface. As he let go of the fin, the shark tried to put some space between them, but Tiberius followed him. His opponent surfaced with Tiberius right behind him. He opened his jaw, clashing with the shark's teeth. The force brought them both underwater.

Quickly turning around, Tiberius went after his opponent, but water bindings came out of nowhere, trapping both the other sharks. He had to smile at his mate's antics. Moving closer to the trapped creatures, he realized the

water around them was glowing, the light reflected in his mother's medallion, which looked as if it was traveling with the currents. The sharks were convulsing as if being forced to shift. In no time, two young mersharks were floating in place of the threshers.

One of the mers had an open gash in the side of his abdomen, letting Tiberius know which one he had bitten. Guilt for injuring one of his kin ate at Tiberius. The other one looked as if he was having trouble breathing, probably as a result of the altercation and the forced shift.

"Tristan," Tiberius called.

The bindings around the mers dissolved, but they did not try to escape. They looked more inquisitive than aggressive. The currents slowed down, shaping into Tristan. Tiberius could not believe his eyes. His mate had shifted from water to merman fluidly.

"I am here, Tibs," Tristan responded with an amused tone.

The mersharks looked as surprised as Tiberius.

"Wow. That was amazing, my love."

"I am not sure how it happened, but I saw one of them hitting you with its fin, and I lost it. Or should I say, shifted."

"No matter what, it was marvelous."

"What do you want to do with them?"

"Question them to start with."

Switching his attention back toward the newly shifted mers, Tiberius noticed their gazes had filled with panic. He was not sure if Tristan's shifting had anything to do with it, but now they seemed ready to bail.

"I am Tiberius Lir, heir to the throne of Allód. Please state your names," he said for all of them to hear.

The mers trembled at his words but did not respond.

"Now!" Tiberius emphasized.

Concern came over him. The mers seemed to get his messages but did not know how to respond. Tiberius considered that they might speak the language of a faraway land, but he had no way of knowing.

"Tibs," Tristan said, calling his attention. *"They do not know how to communicate. I think this is the first time they have shifted."*

"You are correct, young merman," said a female voice.

Tiberius turned immediately. He would recognize that soft, sweet voice anywhere. His mother was looking at him with a smile on her face. Swimming directly to her arms, Tiberius felt like a babe once again. He did not know how long they hugged, but by the time they separated, a small gathering had occurred.

"My son, where have you been?"

"I was captured by pirates on my way to the villa. I was able to escape, but the curse prevented me from coming back home. For the last two centuries, I have lived in Mernovia with my mate."

"Your mate?"

"Yes, Mother. Prince Tristan of Mernovia is my mate. Unfortunately, I was trapped in my thresher form, unable to shift or communicate. He is the only reason I retained my sanity."

He kept his gaze on Tristan as he spoke with his mother. Tiberius could see a slight blush covering his merman's face. Extending his arm to Tristan, he pulled him against his body. His mother smiled when she saw them together, but he could see some pain hidden in her gaze.

"Where is Father?"

"Your father was at the villa when the castle was destroyed. We had no idea what happened. Only in the last couple of days have we been able to shift and surface again. We did receive word that he is alive and well."

"Oh, Mother," Tiberius said before wrapping her again in his arms.

Tiberius took the time to explain to his mother and those gathered around about the curse and its implications. Now he understood why the young mersharks had attacked him. They had been born in their thresher forms and were defending their city. He wondered how many more had suffered the same fate.

"I am sorry to interrupt, but I think this belongs to you," said Tristan as he returned the medallion to Tiberius mother.

"No, my dear. We fixed Tiberius's quarters in hopes of his return. I left the medallion for him to find. It is his now, and I am honored that you are wearing it," she responded before kissing Tristan's cheek.

“Thank you, Mother, for your kind words. I think we will travel to Bermuda to look for Father and the others. I am sure Tristan would like to look for his own people as well.”

“Very well. We will wait for your word. I will work with the others to gather and teach the young mers how to shift and communicate. Unfortunately, we may need to find a different place to live. I am not sure how much longer these ruins will be able to sustain us.”

“After I return from Bermuda, I will take care of that. Tristan and I will leave immediately.”

Chapter X

New London, Bermuda

19th Century

A beautiful, clear night welcomed Tiberius and Tristan back to Bermuda. The stars lit their path as they swam toward the coast. The moon's silver reflection cast soft shadows ahead of them as the warm breeze kissed their bare skin.

Tiberius could not contain his happiness. He swam in circles around Tristan as he had done when he was in his thresher form. The trip to the sleeping island had been short and peaceful. They enjoyed each other's company freely for the first time in days. Their kingdoms seemed to be safe at the moment, and in the morning, they would seek the rest of his family and friends. For the time being, the night was theirs to enjoy.

Tristan stopped before they reached the reefs. Tiberius felt his mate's mood change, and he moved forward, wrapping his arms around him. He pressed his lips softly against the corner of Tristan's mouth. The merman gave him a forced smile, moving to rest his head against Tiberius's shoulder. He knew returning to Bermuda brought sad memories to Tristan, but he was adamant in his desire to replace them with new ones.

"Do you want to swim to your cove instead?" Tiberius asked softly as they looked into the reefs.

"I do not know if I am ready to step into that villa yet," Tristan responded with a sob.

His mate's voice hurt his heart, and a shiver ran through Tiberius's body as Tristan's breath caressed his neck. Tiberius wrapped his caudal fin around the merman, bringing their bodies closer. Now it was Tristan's turn to shiver.

"My parents' villa is on this side of the reef, but I only want to be with you tonight."

"Anything you want, my prince."

"Make me yours, my *numen*," Tiberius pleaded.

For a moment, Tiberius thought that Tristan had not heard him, but after a few seconds, the merman caught his lips in a punishing kiss—grabbing his head

with both hands, exploring his mouth, and taking control of his body and soul. The flavors of the sea, still present in their mouths, gave their passionate kiss a dirty edge. Tristan's feelings overwhelmed Tiberius. He wanted to be possessed by Tristan.

Tiberius moaned against Tristan's lips and rubbed his tail against the merman's engorged claspers. A groan escaped his lips, and he thanked the gods for their compatibility. The mershark would love to be taken in all his shifted forms, but unfortunately, Tristan would not survive a mating bite from his thrasher. At least their mer and human sides fit perfectly.

Letting go of Tristan, Tiberius went back underwater. As Tristan joined him, the mershark continued to explore his mate's body. Tristan scraped his nipples softly, making him tremble. He kept his hand on Tiberius, moving it up and down his chest. Then he circled him without losing contact. Tiberius's skin was oversensitive, responding to every single touch. He knew Tristan was as affected, too, because his tail was glowing beautifully, lighting up the water around them.

Tiberius flipped backward; stretching his body, he formed a perfect circle over and over again. Tristan passed through it, smiling every single time. They let their bodies touch from time to time, and they nuzzled each other's necks.

The mating heat was strong for both of them. Tiberius could feel the ecstasy of the mating ritual consuming him. Tristan took him back into his arms, and they continued to enjoy the friction of their tails, but Tiberius wanted more. He felt his opening preparing to receive Tristan. It was the first time for both of them in either shape, and he was starting to get nervous.

Propelling their bodies together, Tristan brought him back to the surface, kissing him until his body relaxed. He then kissed Tiberius's jaw and neck without stopping until he reached the mershark's nipples. He bit one and then the other, licking them afterward to take care of the sting. He continued to move down Tiberius's body, going underwater to place small kisses on his middle. Tristan wrapped his arms around Tiberius's lower section, bringing him closer. He rubbed his stubbled chin over the mershark's sensitive waistline, making him gasp with lust.

Tristan was now at a perfect angle to take him in hand. He wanted his mate to touch him, to make him spill his seed. Tiberius needed the release but was too embarrassed to ask for it. He felt his body starting to tense once again. Taking several breaths, he concentrated on the pleasure his mate was giving him.

“*Can I touch you, my prince?*” Tristan asked through their link.

“Yes!” Tiberius answered aloud. He laughed at his response. “*Yes, please,*” he responded telepathically this time.

Tristan’s hands slid down his tail, touching, caressing every scale on it. Tentatively, Tiberius felt Tristan’s webbed fingers tracing the edge of his enlarged clasper. The touch was soft at first, but then Tristan pressed against it with the palm of his hand, making Tiberius move against it instinctively. He placed one of his hands on Tristan’s shoulder, pushing him further down. Then he pushed himself underwater to be able to see what his mate was doing to him. Tristan looked up and smiled, making Tiberius’s heart burst with affection.

The merman rested his head against Tiberius’s abdomen while he cupped his mate’s jaw with his free hand, caressing his cheek softly. He was grateful for the contact. His body felt ready to give in to the sensation, and being touched by Tristan kept him in the moment. He felt Tristan’s fingers moving closer to his opening, making him quiver.

His body had readied itself to accept his mate. He felt the tip of Tristan’s finger trace circles around his opening. Tiberius’s heartbeat increased as his mate breached him for the first time. He tensed, even knowing Tristan’s digit could not penetrate him completely. As a *numina*, his opening dilated to receive his mate’s clasper and therefore, his breeding sperm.

“*Please, more,*” Tiberius begged Tristan.

The merman increased the pressure against Tiberius’s clasper, and at the same time, he inserted the tip of another finger into his opening. Tristan timed his movements, rocking the mershark’s body back and forth. As soon as a third finger entered him, Tiberius’s release overtook him. He felt it move through his body, heating every single part of his being. He shook with pleasure as Tristan continued touching him, softer now.

Slowly, Tristan removed his fingers from Tiberius’s body and moved up to catch his lips. The mershark felt his mate’s hardness against his sensitive skin, and a moan escaped him as they surfaced.

“Thank you,” Tiberius said against Tristan’s lips.

They stayed wrapped around each other, enjoying the breeze and the moment they had just shared. What Tiberius felt while being touched by Tristan was far stronger than what he had expected. Love. It was definitely love. They had become friends unexpectedly, and now they were mates—lovers.

“I want you to bite me,” Tristan told Tiberius as he tilted his head to the side, offering his neck.

The mershark's breath caught. It was an honor for a shark or their mate to show their mating bites when in their thresher form, but he never imagined Tristan would want to be marked by him. Even in his mer form, Tiberius had two rows of teeth, and he did not want to hurt Tristan. He hesitated, but when he looked up at his mate, he saw the raw passion and need behind Tristan's request.

Tiberius moved Tristan's dark hair to the side. He used his tongue to taste Tristan's skin before placing several kisses on the area he was going to mark. Closing his eyes, the mershark inhaled deeply, memorizing his mate's scent. He felt Tristan tremble under him. Swiftly, Tiberius wrapped his tail around the merman, offering comfort.

Instead of biting Tristan immediately, Tiberius explored his mate's torso, licking and caressing a path down the well-defined chest. His tail continued to rub around Tristan, causing the merman's tail to glow. Tiberius could tell the merman's powers were running through his body, looking for release. He wanted to pleasure his mate as much as Tristan had pleased him.

Sucking one of Tristan's scales in his mouth, Tiberius softly traced the underside with his tongue. Being underwater now, he could taste the seawater mixed with his mate's own flavor. He wanted to see Tristan's reaction to his touch, so he pulled him under the surface with him. Tiberius loved the surprise he saw in the merman's eyes, and how a soft smile graced his face as well.

Playfully, Tristan tried to escape Tiberius's hold, but the mershark did not release him. His mate wiggled his body, increasing the friction between them. Before Tiberius was able to react, Tristan shifted, merging with the currents. It felt as if the merman had melted away from his arms. Tiberius shook his head in disbelief before following the golden chain holding his mother's medallion and the scale to the surface—the only clues to Tristan's whereabouts.

As the waves broke against the shore, Tristan shifted back to his mer form, and as soon as the water retreated completely, Tiberius was greeted by his mate's human body. He laughed as Tristan tried to stand up to run away from him, but his newly shifted legs did not respond fast enough. Tiberius pushed himself forward, landing beside his mate as his shift took place.

Anyone passing by would see two naked men frolicking on the beach, but in reality, it was much more. Tiberius was ready to be claimed by his mate, whose happy grin matched his own. He straddled Tristan's lap and moaned when their

human cocks rubbed against each other. The sensation was different from anything he had felt before. Their members were hard and erect, even warm to the touch in contrast to their cool and elongated claspers.

Tiberius leaned forward, pushing Tristan flat on his back, before covering his mate's body with his and then kissing him deeply. Tristan's arms were all over Tiberius's body, feeling and exploring his new form. The mershark gasped as Tristan grabbed his ass, exposing his opening. The crisp air made his skin form goose bumps, and a shiver ran through him. He was still sleek and mostly stretched from their earlier play.

Needing friction, Tiberius rocked his hips harder against Tristan. They both groaned their pleasure as they moved closer to completion. Tristan rubbed circles against Tiberius entrance, breaching him with one long finger and adding a second right after. The mershark was lost in the sensation, trying to chase Tristan's digits but needing the friction against his hardness.

"Tristan, please."

"Get onto your hands and knees for me, my mate," Tristan ordered.

Without pause, Tiberius did as ordered. The position made him vulnerable but able to receive his mate. He felt Tristan pour water over his ass and opening, clearing some of the sand away from his body. He imagined his mate did the same to his cock since Tiberius felt the cool tip pressing against his entrance.

With a short thrust, Tristan pushed inside Tiberius for the first time. It took a moment for the pain to turn into pleasure, but his mate held still until the mershark got used to the invasion. Tiberius relaxed his muscles, causing Tristan to penetrate him deeper. He moaned and writhed under his mate, feeling their connection deepen.

One of Tristan's hands held Tiberius's hip as the thrusts intensified while his other hand caressed his back and ribs in a soothing motion. Tristan's desire washed over Tiberius, bringing him closer to his release. His cock bounced against his body every time Tristan pushed inside him. The sound of flesh against flesh surrounded them. Tiberius almost jumped out of his body when he felt Tristan's hand wrap around his member.

Tristan kept the pace instinctively until Tiberius let go with a wanton moan. His body shivered, and his toes curled from the force of his release. Seconds later, Tristan's own release coated Tiberius's channel, finally claiming him as

his mate. The merman collapsed against his back, pressing a soft kiss to the side of his neck.

For several minutes, they stayed together, loving each other under the moon's guidance. Carefully, Tristan pulled out of his mate. He sat on his haunches, bringing Tiberius toward his body. They kissed passionately until their bodies started to feel the mating heat once again. Tristan lay on his back with Tiberius covering his body, and as the caresses intensified, they rolled down the surf. Tiberius saw Tristan's powers shining behind his gaze. Immediately, Tiberius bit his mate's neck as they shifted back to their mer forms.

Finally, they were one—*numen* and *numina* in perfect balance. In the morning, they were going to meet their friends and family and bring their kingdoms back to their glory, but for the remainder of the night, they were going to love each other.

Epilogue

Devil's Triangle

19th Century—five years later

For decades, solitude had been Tristan's primary companion. He learned to love it, to crave it. Only his pet shark, Tiberius, had been allowed to partake in his adventures. Now, wrapping his fluid form around his mate's thresher body provided him with all he ever wanted. With another turn, another twirl, he comforted his mate.

The last year had been hard with Tiberius living as a shark. Tristan had missed his voice since the mershark had to shift forms to accommodate the pups' size during the last—of two—year of gestation, but at the same time, they were as connected as they once were—a merman and a shark living together, only this time they were more than best friends, they were lovers, mates, and each other's worlds.

Tristan was glad he was able to use his calming powers to soothe Tiberius's pain. He could only imagine what his body was going through at the moment. The merman had everything set in their Bermuda villa for their return later. He wanted Tiberius to take his time to recuperate, to get used to their new situation.

One more caress, a push, and the miracle they were waiting for started to unfold. The first pup was pushed from Tiberius's body. The young, independent thresher started to swim away, but Tristan guided the currents to keep it with them. Moments later, a second pup came to life—a dual blessing for all. It took almost two years for them to get to this moment, but Tristan would not have changed a thing.

As they had discussed earlier that year, Tristan guided the pups to Mernovia. They needed to be coaxed to shift in order to ensure their health and well-being. In the meantime, Tiberius would remain away until his instinct to attack the pups abated in the following hours.

Swimming away from Tiberius was one of the hardest things Tristan had done in his life. He wanted to stay with his mate, to protect him and hold him until it was time to go back home. Suddenly, the currents around them calmed. It was an odd sensation he had only experienced once before. He moved swiftly toward the pups, and within seconds, the mermallion was before him.

“Prince Tristan. May the gods bless your lineage.”

“Thank you, Pieuvre. What can I do for you?”

“You need to travel to the West Indies and find the pirate you saved. The world’s veil has fallen, and we will need his help to protect our people.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I am the Protector of the Seven Seas.”

“And?”

“Nothing else.”

“I will see what I can do. Today is not the day for this.”

“Forgive me, but if you want to protect your pups, you will need to do as I say.”

“And how am I going to know if this is not a scheme? That your men are not going to kill me as soon as I leave for the West Indies?”

“Follow the dragon’s scale around your neck, and you will find your way and the truth.”

“I will do as you say as soon as I have a chance to discuss it with Tiberius and—”

Tristan stopped his words as he realized Pieuvre had disappeared, and the scale charm felt heavy against his chest.

In the last five years, Mernovia had become home for the people of Allód. After their first time returning from Bermuda, talks took place between the kings. Triton extended the invitation for the mersharks to take up residence in the caves surrounding the city, and in exchange, Mernovians living on the surface moved to Allód’s inland community.

Triton continued to be the King of the Sea, and Tiberius became inland King of Allód after his father abdicated the throne. They shared equal rights over their people as both species were living as one, and other interspecies’ matings had even taken place.

“Who do we have here?” Triton asked Tristan as he and the pups entered the palace, bringing the merman out of his musings.

“King Triton, these are your nephews—Gael and Demetrius—heirs to the inland throne of Allód,” Tristan answered with pride.

“And to my throne as I do not have an heir. And I doubt you want to be King.”

“You do not have to name them your successors, Tri. You will find your mate when you least expect it.”

“I have no inclination to procreate an heir with a murderer who abandoned me without a word five years ago.”

Tristan saw the pain in his brother's gaze as well as the realization of what he just disclosed. Triton had never told him what had happened between him and Pieuvre before the sleeping spell took over the kingdom or discussed the content of the box left by the mermallion with Tristan's crown. More importantly, this was the first time Triton had acknowledged Pieuvre as his mate. The same mer Tristan had just spoken with.

Before Tristan was able to question his brother, the pups swam away, toward the coral gardens. *“We will talk later,”* he told Triton before he followed his sons. His sons. Tristan was mesmerized by the realization that he now had a family of his own. No longer was he the kingdom's forsaken prince. He rejoiced in the knowledge and the happiness the pups had enhanced with their birth.

He chased the pups around the palace's grounds and out into the fields, past the corals and into the caves. It seemed as if they were following a scent. Tristan smiled when they swam around the anemones and propelled themselves into a cave. The cave they now called home, the same one that had been Tristan and Tiberius's safe haven for centuries.

They explored the interior, following each other in circles. The pups looked identical, but Tristan noticed a small difference in their size. They shared Tiberius's beautiful deep-purple coloring and slim caudal fin.

Making the currents wrap around the pups, he guided them out of the cave and into the open sea. Sharks were born independent and ready to live without their parents, but mersharks needed to be taught how to shift and embrace all their forms. Tristan had learned a lot from his mother-in-law during Tiberius's gestation.

“Miss me, my love?” Tiberius asked, causing Tristan's body to shiver and glow at his words.

It was the first time in a year that Tristan had heard his mate's voice. He was relieved that everything went well with Tiberius's shift after the birth.

Tristan was reluctant to leave the thresher alone, but now, with Pieuvre's words still fresh in his mind and the knowledge of his imminent trip, he needed to accept it was the safest choice for all of them.

"They are beautiful," the mershawk added as he wrapped his arms around Tristan, catching his lips in a passionate kiss.

As they kissed, Tristan felt the pups swimming circles around them, and seconds later, he noticed Tiberius's shocked expression. When he turned to follow his mate's gaze, he found two beautiful merbabes floating by their side. They were surprised as they saw that their sons had taken Tristan's merman form, but instead of aquamarine, their tails were as purple as Tiberius's.

"Thank you," Tristan said to Tiberius as he looked over his family.

"For what?"

"For bringing happiness back into my life. I love you, my king."

The End

Glossary

Alternate history: a genre of fiction consisting of stories that are set in worlds in which one or more historical events unfolds differently from how it did in reality.

Caudal fin: the tail fin located at the end of a fish, which is used for propulsion.

Cephalopod: the most intelligent, most mobile, and the largest of all molluscs.

Claspers: a male anatomical structure found in some groups of animals, used in mating.

Davy Jones's Locker: an idiom for the bottom of the sea.

Devil's Triangle: the Bermuda triangle.

Dorsal fin: the fin located on the back that serves to protect the fish against rolling and assists it in sudden turns and stops.

Fenestration: window-like opening with no glass or other materials.

Forsaken: abandoned or deserted.

Generalissimo: a military rank of the highest degree, superior to field marshal and other five-star ranks in the countries in which they are used.

Harpoon: a long spear-like instrument used in fishing, whaling, sealing, or other marine hunting.

Mermallions: octopus mers.

Numen: the possessor not only of a soul, but of the ability to feel, absorb, and redirect energy.

Numina: a numen's guardian spirit

Poop deck: the uppermost deck at the stern of a ship, usually above the captain's quarters.

Prince Regent: a prince who rules a monarchy as regent instead of a monarch.

Savant: an expert or wise person, knowledgeable in a specific area.

Sextant: an instrument used to determine the angle between an astronomical object and the horizon for the purpose of celestial navigation.

Thresher: a long-tailed shark.

Author Bio

Lila Leigh Hunter lives in the Lone Star State and considers herself lucky for the love and support of her husband and four kids, even when they think she doesn't do anything around the house. Lila's number one fan is her mother, who listens to all her crazy ideas and pretends to agree with her. Lila Leigh is an architectural designer by trade and a writer by heart. Her love for writing is only surpassed by her devotion to reading. When outside of her cave, she likes to observe men and try to guess their stories. Sometimes she wishes the voices in her head were real; going out with the boys in her books sounds like a plan made in heaven.

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