

THE COLLECTOR:

*Eight
Arms to
Hold You*

ALLY
BLUE



Loose Id

THE COLLECTOR 4: EIGHT ARMS TO HOLD YOU

Ally Blue

LooseId®

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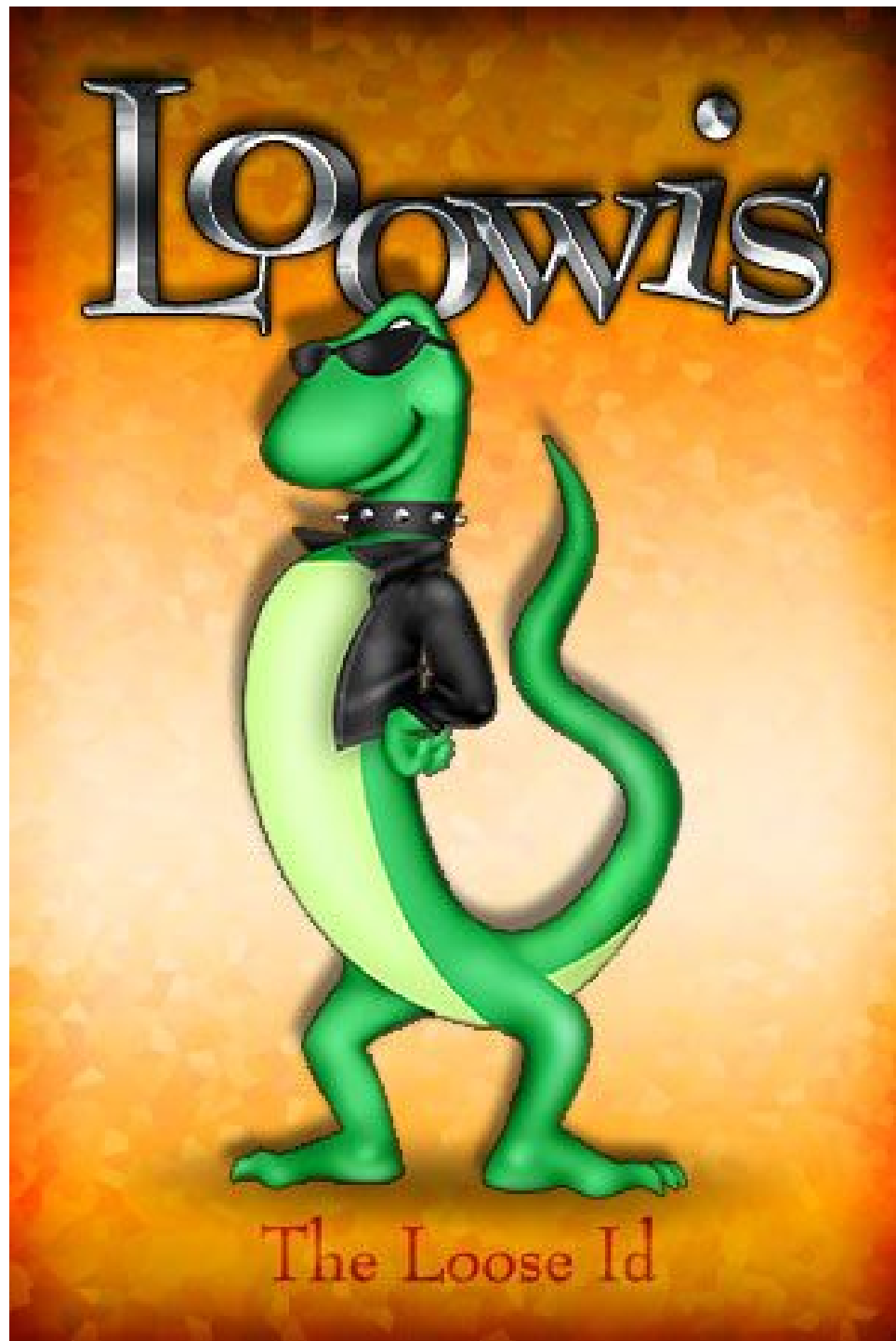
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Prologue

Zanzibar, November 1977

The island was tiny, barely a mile long and not even half as wide. No indigenous animal life larger than a lizard, precious little plant life other than bushes and a few stunted trees. No sign of human habitation. Yet Carson Cordova had been watching the island for three days, from the deck of his private research and retrieval vessel, *El Cazador*.

The ship was anchored five miles off the south coast of Zanzibar Island. Nothing in Carson's research for this expedition had led him to expect another island at this location. Certainly, nothing had prepared him for what he thought he'd seen three days ago through his binoculars.

"Sir, I have a report from the dive team."

Tirrell, the ship's communication officer. Carson suppressed a growl of irritation. "Take down the pertinent details and leave it in my office," he said without turning around. "I'll review it later."

Tirrell cleared his throat. "Your pardon, sir, but Dr. Solari says it's urgent. He insists on speaking with you immediately."

Carson's shoulders tensed. Hector Solari was his business partner and longtime friend. If he said it was urgent, it was. Carson lowered the binoculars, turned from the railing and started toward the bridge.

A junior communications officer whose name Carson couldn't remember handed him the radio without comment. He snatched it from the boy's hand and thumbed it on, ignoring the dark look Captain Heinz shot him.

"Hector, come in, it's Carson. Over."

A burst of static, then Hector's deep, calm voice riding a background wave of panicked shouts. "Carson, we've had an incident here. I think you should weigh anchor and bring *El Cazador* to our location. Over."

Carson frowned. "That's quite a thing to ask, my friend. Why? Over."

Silence. When Hector spoke again, his voice held a fine thread of excitement. "I believe we've found her. However she is ... shall we say, unexpectedly well-guarded. Over."

A jolt of adrenaline coursed through Carson's veins. He and Hector had spent the past eight years chasing a rumor whispered among the grizzled old men on the docks. A ship said to have gone down somewhere south of Zanzibar in 1880 with a hold full of diamonds stolen from Belgian-ruled Congo. No one knew the name with which the ship had been christened, but over the years she'd picked up the nickname *Lady Death*, due to the number of people who had died or disappeared trying to find her.

Carson turned his back on the furtive, curious eyes of the crew and lowered his voice. "Guarded by what? Over."

"Truthfully? I'm not certain. Carson, weigh anchor and bring the ship. We'll discuss what happened when you get here. Over."

"Very well. We will be there shortly. I'll expect a full report as soon as I arrive. Over."

"Of course. Over and out."

Carson handed the radio back over to the junior officer. "Captain Heinz, weigh anchor and sail for the dive boat's coordinates, *por favor*."

The captain fixed Carson with a steely glare. "At once, sir."

Carson bowed slightly, turned and left the bridge. A grim smile spread across his face. Carson found the captain's hatred of him amusing. He saw no reason for his crew to like him, as long as they got the job done, and they did their jobs well. Hector was the only man on board that Carson called friend.

Back on deck, Carson leaned against the railing, gazing out over the miles of cobalt ocean. The mysterious island lay just to the east of their course. They would pass it on the way to the spot where Hector and his team were diving.

Carson made up his mind to be on the alert. He wished he could convince himself that what he'd seen had been his imagination. But, he'd never been prone to such things, and he trusted his own senses. Something very strange was happening on that island, and Carson wanted to make certain that it didn't interfere with his recovery of *Lady Death's* treasure.

Carson heard the creak and groan of the anchor being hauled up. Not long after, the ship began to move. He lifted his binoculars and trained them on the island.

* * * * *

El Cazador eased neatly into position about forty meters from the dive boat. The smaller craft's engine roared to life. From his vantage point on deck, Carson could see Hector at the wheel, nudging the little boat close to *El Cazador's* side before her anchor even hit bottom.

Carson walked over to the head of the rope ladder that the crew slung over so that the dive team could come aboard. The men scrambled up the ladder as if demons were at their heels, chattering in Swahili and Arabic.

Hector followed more slowly, tying off the dive boat before climbing up the ladder. Carson greeted him with an embrace.

"Hector. Please, come to my office and tell me what has happened. The dive crew seems quite upset."

Hector's expression was grim as he fell into step beside Carson. "I can hardly blame them. What has happened today has shaken us all."

Carson glanced at his old friend as they left the open deck and started down the carpeted hallway to his office. To anyone else, Hector probably would have seemed perfectly calm. But Carson had known him since they were children. He saw the faint thinning of Hector's lips, the slightly too-wide eyes, the ashen tinge to his deep brown skin. Something had rattled Hector badly, a rare event indeed.

Carson didn't ask questions until they were behind closed doors. In the privacy of his office, Carson waved Hector into one of the plush leather chairs. He poured two glasses of bourbon, handed one to his friend and settled himself into the other chair.

"Tell me," he said.

Hector took a sip of his drink. "There's a ship there, in twenty-five meters of water. It's nearly intact. There's a large hole in the starboard bow."

"So she didn't go down in a storm. King Leopold's men sank her." Carson ran a thumb along the rim of his glass. "What happened down there, Hector?"

"We were attacked," Hector said bluntly.

Carson sat forward, eyes fixed on Hector's face. "Attacked? By who?"

"Not who," Hector answered solemnly. "What."

Carson frowned. "Explain."

"We were looking for a way into the hold when we were set upon by what appeared to be a group of giant octopi. They attempted to pull off our SCUBA gear and drag us away from the wreck." Hector swirled his bourbon in his glass, watching the amber liquid with a strange gleam in his eye. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Carson scoffed. "The giant octopus is hardly an aggressive creature, nor does it hunt in groups. You must have misunderstood their behavior."

"You weren't there, Carson. I was. They attacked each member of our group simultaneously and in an identical manner. Those of us who did not immediately withdraw were attacked again, with greater aggression." Hector fixed Carson with a piercing stare. "They were working together, Carson. Whatever is down there, I believe that they are guarding it."

If anyone else in the world had said that, Carson would have dismissed the idea immediately and fired the person who proposed such a thing. However, he'd known Hector for twenty-five years. He trusted his judgment.

"You think that these creatures are protecting the diamonds?" Carson asked.

Hector frowned, brow furrowing. "I suppose so. I can't imagine what else they could be protecting."

"Very well." Carson stood, set his glass on his desk and crossed his arms. "Tomorrow, I will dive with you. We'll go armed with spear guns. Two men will be posted as look-outs. We'll have to work out a signal that they can give if these ... unusual animals appear again."

"There's no hurry," Hector said, watching Carson a little warily. "We should take the time to study them. If we can understand their behavior, we can find a way to keep them from attacking us."

"No, we don't have that sort of time." Carson started pacing, tapping his chin with one finger. "We need to find those diamonds and begin the recovery as soon as possible."

"For God's sake, why?" Hector rose to his feet, looming over Carson with a scowl on his face. "I will not put the lives of my team at risk for your impatience, my friend." His eyes narrowed. "There's something you haven't told me. What is it?"

Carson held Hector's angry gaze without flinching. "That small island to the east. I've been watching it. I've seen some strange things there. I'm not sure what it means, but I will not have this treasure taken from me because my team are cowards."

Hector's expression turned thunderous, and Carson smiled inwardly. He knew better than anyone that Hector and the dive team were hardly cowards. But he also knew his friend. They'd both been brought up to hold honor and courage as all-important. Hector would certainly ignore the insult to himself, since he knew Carson didn't think him cowardly, but he would not allow his men to be disparaged so.

"Do not say such things about my team," Hector growled.

Carson spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "What am I to think, *amigo*?"

Hector glared. Carson met his angry gaze with cold, determined calm.

"Very well," Hector relented, clearly not happy. "We dive tomorrow morning, at first light. Every man will be armed. Four look-outs will be posted, not two." He shoved a thick finger against Carson's chest. "If any of my team is injured, I will hold you personally responsible."

Carson nodded. "Agreed."

Hector stared like he'd never seen Carson before. He seemed about to speak, but didn't. Turning away, he left without a word.

Carson went to the porthole and stood sipping his drink, wondering if he'd just lost the only true friend he'd ever had. The thought of the wealth waiting for him below the sparkling ocean surface took the sting out of that possibility.

Smiling, Carson sat down at his desk to plan the next day's dive.

* * * * *

The morning dawned fine and hot and breathless. No breeze stirred the calm waters, and the sea gleamed like a mirror in the early light. Carson stared at the smooth swells as he donned his gear on the deck of the dive boat. So many secrets lay hidden beneath that bright surface. Too many for one man to discover. It angered him sometimes, that there were so many wonders lost under the water, wonders he would never see.

But we have found Lady Death, he reminded himself. And I will have her.

"Carson. I wish you would reconsider this."

Carson turned to frown at Hector. "We dive as planned. Are the men ready?"

"Yes. But they're afraid."

"We are well armed, and this time we know what to expect. All will be well, my friend." Carson shouldered his tanks, glanced at the gauges and took an experimental breath from the regulator. Everything seemed to be in order. "How close are we to the wreck?"

"About one hundred meters. We will go down the anchor line and swim east along the bottom. The visibility is excellent and there's very little current." Hector shook his head. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"As long as everyone does as they are told and no one panics if we are attacked, we'll be fine." Carson smiled and clapped Hector on the shoulder. "Think of the diamonds, *amigo*. We are about to be very wealthy, you and I."

"You already have more money than any man needs, as do I. Is it truly worth risking our lives for more?"

"You're diving with me, are you not?" Carson pointed out.

Hector glowered, but said nothing. Carson smiled to himself. Hector could pretend all he liked, but his thirst for wealth was no less than Carson's.

Despite their grumbling and whispering, the team was ready to go within minutes. Drifting down the anchor line behind Hector, a spear gun in his hand and his dive knife strapped to his leg, Carson allowed himself a moment to wonder yet again about the island. He'd been watching it through the binoculars that morning, in the pre-dawn half-light. He'd seen a quick flash of white skin and pale hair as someone moved through the scrubby bushes in the center of the island. However, this time, he hadn't seen the strange transformation he

thought he'd witnessed before, when the unknown person plunged into the sea. This time, he'd seen a pair of dark eyes, staring right at him.

Somehow, someone else knew about his treasure. They must not be allowed to reach it before he did.

He hadn't told Hector what he'd seen that morning. His friend would have stopped the dive if he'd known that the weapons weren't only for defense against aggressive sea creatures.

At the bottom of the anchor line, Carson moved aside and waited for the rest of the team to finish their descent. When the entire group was gathered on the sea floor, they moved off to the east, with Hector leading the way and Carson behind him. Four of the men fanned out around the group to act as guards and lookouts. They were to bang their knife handles against their tanks if anything dangerous was spotted.

The swim to the wreck site passed without incident. The ship loomed out of the blue like a phantom, her bow pointing nearly due east. The mast and sails were gone, but the hull was, as Hector had said, almost completely intact. Carson felt a thrill go through him. The first sight of a lost ship never failed to excite him, especially when there was treasure to be found.

Following the plan they'd worked out earlier, Hector led the team on a slow circuit of the hull. They'd been unable to find a way into the hold from the deck, as the main stairway seemed to have been destroyed. Carson hoped that there would be a breach somewhere in the hull wide enough to allow them passage.

The hole in the bow turned out to be the only breach. Using hand signals, Carson instructed the men to widen the opening enough for the team to pass.

They were nearly done when Carson heard the frantic clang of metal against metal. He spun just in time to see the lookout's knife fall from his hand as an enormous octopus ripped away the man's mask and regulator.

Between one breath and the next, the water around them swarmed with huge blue-gray tentacled monsters. The fierceness of their attack was stunning, as was the extent of their coordination. They worked together with a synchronicity that was nearly telepathic, their movements eerily graceful. Carson found himself admiring the creatures, even as he recognized the need to destroy them.

Realizing that the spear guns would be useless at such close range, Carson drew his knife and slashed at the first octopus within reach. The blade caught it across two tentacles, clouding the water with blood. A chill raced up Carson's spine when instead of withdrawing, the thing tore the knife from his hand and tossed it aside.

Something niggled at his mind in that moment, a strange sense of familiarity that raised goosebumps on his arms. Carson stared hard at the beast floating in front of him. Its enormous black eyes stared back at him with far more intelligence than he liked.

With shocking suddenness, the feeling of vague recognition sharpened and solidified, and Carson remembered. His eyes went wide. However, before he could act, something smashed into his head from behind. The regulator was forced from his mouth, his mask knocked askew. He rolled in the water, dazed and unsure which way the surface lay. He saw the sun's disc wavering through the endless blue, then everything went dark.

* * * * *

When Carson came to, he was lying on his side on the deck of *El Cazador*, staring at the railing. He sat up, closing his eyes against the wave of dizziness that hit him. When the world stopped spinning, he cautiously opened his eyes again.

His crew was dashing around, shouting at each other in several different languages. Turning to his left, Carson saw two bodies covered with tarps. So, the monsters will kill to protect the treasure. Carson wasn't surprised. In a way, it made what he knew he had to do easier.

He levered himself carefully to his feet. The dizziness immediately returned, accompanied by a throbbing headache and nausea. Concussion, Carson realized. He took a moment to take stock of his body. He was in pain and felt vaguely ill, but the vertigo was already fading. Deciding he wasn't injured badly enough to remove himself from duty, Carson dismissed it from his mind.

Looking around, he didn't see Hector anywhere. He grabbed the first person to pass. "What in the name of all the gods is happening here?" he demanded. "Why is my crew behaving in such an unseemly manner?"

The young man -- hardly more than a child -- blanched, dark eyes wide and glazed with panic. "Sorry sir," he gasped. "The dive team, they say demons of the sea attack them, sir, they say we must leave this place at once!"

Furious, Carson slapped the boy across the face. "Get hold of yourself!"

The young man whimpered, but calmed. Carson grabbed both his shoulders. "What is your name, boy?"

"Khali," the boy said, pressing a shaking hand to his reddening cheek.

"Khali. Where is Dr. Solari?"

"S-sorry, sir, but, but he, h-he i ... Khali swallowed and cut his eyes to the side, toward the tarp-covered bodies.

For a second, Carson was frozen. Then he shoved Khali away and lunged toward the two plastic-shrouded forms.

Uncovering the first body, Carson recognized the guard who'd sounded the alarm when the octopi attacked. He covered the man again and grasped the corner of the second tarp. Slowly, reluctantly, he pulled it back.

Hector's sightless eyes stared at the sky, the corneas bright red with ruptured blood vessels. A livid purple mark circled his throat. In it were the clear imprints of suction cups.

Carson sat there on his knees, staring at the dead man who'd been his lifelong friend. An unfamiliar feeling welled up inside him. A lesser man might have called it guilt. However, Carson was not a lesser man, and he would not label it as such.

Gently covering Hector's face, Carson rose to his feet and whispered a prayer for his friend's soul. Then he turned to the task of reigning in his crew and making plans. Hector would be avenged, and Carson would have the treasure he sought.

* * * * *

At oh-three-thirty the next morning, Carson stood on the port bow with a group of five men. They'd been hand picked to accompany him to the mysterious island. The group stood in a grim-faced semicircle, listening as he reviewed the night's plan.

"Octopi are normally nocturnal," Carson said. "They should still be out hunting at this hour. By going in now and using oars instead of the motor, we can approach the island unnoticed, slip in and plant the explosives, and be gone before the creatures return. And when the explosives go off just after dawn, the things will have returned and should be sleeping."

The men all nodded. Carson noticed the furrowed brows and confused looks they gave each other, but paid no heed. They'd been told that the huge, intelligent octopi used the water around the island's rocky shore as a daytime resting place. Most of them, Carson could tell, found this explanation lacking. But they didn't question it, because Carson had promised them revenge against the things that had killed their comrade. For men like these, such a promise was enough.

They didn't need to know the truth. Carson didn't think they'd believe it anyway.

Carson clasped his hands behind his back and gave the men a stern glare. "Everyone must be absolutely clear on what we're doing. We must work quickly. Once the timers are set, we have a limited amount of time to get *El Cazador* to a safe distance. If anyone has questions, ask them now."

Silence. Carson hadn't expected anything else. He smiled. "Very well. Let's go."

One by one, Carson and his team slipped over the side of the ship and into the dinghy. Carson squinted out over the slow swells at the faint shape of the island to the east, a deeper black against the black of the night sky, blotting out the stars just above the horizon.

He fingered the butt of his pistol as the dinghy slipped silently through the water. In spite of the need for secrecy, a part of Carson yearned to meet one of his foes in human form. To look into human eyes as he pulled the trigger, and know that his enemy understood why he had to die.

Fifteen minutes of rowing brought the bow of the dinghy scraping the sand of a shallow bay on the western shore of the island. All but one of the men flowed out of the small boat and melted into the darkness, heading for the spots Carson had determined were best to plant the explosives. Carson himself hefted his backpack and started across the low hump of land to the opposite shore, the one he hadn't been able to see through his binoculars.

Once he entered the stand of bushes beyond the beach, he looked back. The man left with the boat was well-hidden, ready to take down anyone -- human or otherwise -- who discovered the dingy and attempted to raise the alarm. Nodding in satisfaction, Carson turned and began his trek to the other side.

The trip passed without incident. On the opposite shore, Carson checked his watch. He still had a few minutes to find a spot for the explosives and set the timer. The team's watches were synchronized, and every man was to start his timer at oh-four-thirty.

A quick survey of the terrain revealed a crack in the rocks that made up the eastern shoreline. Perfect. Looping his flashlight lanyard firmly around his wrist, Carson squirmed inside the opening and switched on the tiny light. And gasped.

The thin beam of light revealed a narrow cavern twisting into the interior of the island. The ocean whispered against the rock, the rush of the waves magnified in the confined space. A thin lip of stone ran alongside the water.

Carson could just make out a sharp turn in the path about ten meters along. A quick glance at his watch told him that he still had enough time to explore. Besides, the interior of the cave would be the perfect place to plant the explosives.

The rock path turned out to be uneven, slippery and extremely treacherous. Carson edged along with single-minded determination. He reached the bend in the path with five minutes left to set the explosives. Working quickly, he wedged the bundle of dynamite into a crack in the wall, away from the water. As he set the timer, his eyes darted between his work and the tantalizing length of path which continued past the bend, winding into the darkness.

He didn't notice the steps until he was turning to leave. Shallow stone steps, leading from the rock ledge into the water. He knew he had only minutes to cross the island and meet the rest of the team at the dinghy. But the steps called to him, whispering promises of discoveries beyond imagination in the black depths under the island.

For a second, Carson was torn. Then he remembered the diamonds, and Hector's dead face, and his decision was made. Turning his back on the potential mysteries of the cavern, he hurried along the ledge and out into the night air. He didn't look back.

* * * * *

The next morning, Carson took every experienced diver on board down to *Lady Death* with him. The team was nervous still, but none of them dared to protest. Carson thought it wise of them to fear him more than anything they might encounter in the sea.

As Carson expected, there were no further attacks. *Lady Death's* hull was breached and the diamonds recovered without further incident. The sight of the gems sparkling in the glow of their flashlights quelled any remaining protest from the men.

Carson and two of his team were halfway to the surface with the last of the treasure when Carson spotted furtive movement out of the corner of his eye. Glancing toward the motion, he was surprised to see three small blue-gray octopi hanging in the water, tentacles undulating. Their coloring, their stillness, and especially the quick minds behind those black eyes, marked them as the same type of beings that had attacked Carson's dive team before. Judging by their size, they were quite young.

Signaling the men to continue to the surface, Carson turned and swam slowly toward the creatures. He wasn't entirely sure why. Something about them stirred his curiosity. He'd most likely exterminated all but these few, and he felt a strong urge to learn what he could about the ones that were left.

Predictably, all three of the small octopi rocketed away into the depths the moment he started to move toward them. One, he noticed, lagged behind the others. It seemed slow and sluggish, as if injured. Moved by a sudden impulse, Carson followed. Before long, he'd caught up to the little thing. The creature was clearly struggling now, its companions long vanished into the blue. Marveling at how easy it was, Carson reached out and grabbed one slender tentacle.

Having seen the same thing on the island through his binoculars less than a week before, Carson was ready when the creature shifted and he found himself holding a bare human leg. In spite of his readiness, though, it was a shock to see the octopus gone and a small, naked boy in its place.

The child looked to be about three or four years old. His skin was pearly white, as was the long hair floating like a gossamer halo around his face. He looked like any other small child, other than his unnatural pallor and the gray-blue, octopus shaped birthmark on the inside of his right thigh. Only the eyes gave a hint of the creature Carson knew was still in there somewhere. Huge, solid black eyes, wide and bright and brimming with intelligence.

With no idea how long the child would remain in human form, Carson knew he had to act quickly. Yanking an empty gear bag free of his weight belt, Carson slipped the bag swiftly over the boy's body. The child fit neatly inside. He didn't even struggle, and Carson wondered what was wrong with him. He hadn't seen any obvious injuries.

Floating slowly to the surface with his latest treasure in tow, Carson hoped that the boy would live long enough to be useful. He had plans for the child.

The second his head broke the surface, Carson found himself surrounded by chaos. Voices shouted from the dive boat, hands reached over the side to take the bag. Carson held onto it as he climbed the boat's ladder, not wanting the little creature inside to be damaged.

He'd planned to keep this particular find secret, for the time being. However, no sooner had he laid the bag on the floor of the boat than it began to move. Soft keening cries sounded from inside, followed by distinct words in a language Carson didn't understand.

Every man on board went still and silent. Twenty pairs of eyes fixed on Carson's face. He clasped his hands tightly together, trying to resist the urge to kick the child into silence.

The ship's doctor came forward and opened the gear bag without a word. The boy inside sat up, looked around, and promptly curled into a ball with his knees folded against his chest and both arms wrapped around his head. Carson could just see the child's face scrunched up in fear, tears leaking from the big black eyes and rolling down the ghostly pale cheeks.

Gasps and murmurs broke out amongst the crew. Dr. Malaga rounded on Carson with a thunderous frown. "A child, Señor Cordova? Stuffed into a bag, like so much trash? Explain yourself."

Carson forced a smile through gritted teeth. If he didn't need the doctor's skills, he would've thrown the man overboard for his insolence. "I am very glad that you came today, Dr. Malaga. I found the boy floating in the water. He is exhausted, and quite possibly injured, though I saw no marks on him. I rescued him and brought him on board. He needs medical attention, food and water, and then we must find his parents. They must be frantic."

Dr. Malaga narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Carson schooled his face into a concerned, sincere expression. He may not be able to keep his little captive a secret, but he'd die before letting anyone else find out what the boy truly was. Not yet. Not until the time was ripe.

Finally, the doctor nodded. "Very well. I will examine him back on board *El Cazador*. In the meantime, I will speak with the child and attempt to find out where he came from, and where his parents are."

Carson raised his eyebrows, surprised. "So you speak the language the boy used a moment ago? I didn't recognize it."

"It's a very ancient form of Egyptian," Dr. Malaga said, crouching beside the child. "It's quite odd that this young boy speaks it, actually. I myself learned it from the only living master of the language, and I am not fluent. I may not be able to learn anything."

"Do your best." Carson managed to keep his sudden nervousness from showing. If the boy remembered what had happened, the explosion that had rocked the island at dawn, sending dirt and bits of wood and rock into the air and octopus parts into the water, the consequences didn't bear thinking of.

Putting the worry to the back of his mind, Carson focused all his attention on the doctor and the child. Dr. Malaga gave the boy a friendly smile and said something in the

same language the youngster had used before. The boy still looked frightened, but he sat up and listened.

The old man spoke slowly, hesitating at times, but his patient seemed to understand him well enough. The child answered with a rapid-fire string of words. His musical voice shook and his lower lip trembled as he spoke. His eyes still shone with tears, the lashes dark and wet. When he stopped speaking at last and curled up into a sobbing heap again, Dr. Malaga sat back on his heels, shaking his head.

"His name is Luke, I think," the doctor said. "It was difficult to understand him. He says that he was out swimming at daybreak and felt his mother and father die. He says their death made him weak. At least I believe that's what he said. I may be mistaken. It doesn't make much sense."

Carson kept his face carefully blank. "We should take him to Zanzibar, to the authorities there."

Holding his breath, Carson waited for the doctor to speak to Luke again. He was taking a huge risk, but it had to be done. If he didn't offer to turn the child over to the local authorities, even the crew's fear of him wouldn't save him from their suspicions. Languishing in a Zanzibar prison was a much worse fate than losing a potential key to previously inaccessible treasures.

Relief flooded through him at the unmistakable panic in Luke's voice when he answered Dr. Malaga's question. Some sixth sense had told him that the boy wouldn't want to go to the police, and apparently he'd been right.

The child took several minutes to wind down. By the time he stopped talking, he was sobbing again and Carson had no more doubts about the outcome of his impulsive kidnapping.

"Luke begs us not to take him to Zanzibar," Dr. Malaga said, looking grim. "He claims that the Zanzibar police fear his people. That if we take him to them, they will hurt him."

Keeping the gleeful laughter at bay with an effort, Carson put as much outrage into his voice as he could. "He's only a child! We cannot allow him to come to harm! There's only one thing to do. We must take him with us."

Dr. Malaga eyed him warily. "I am not sure that's a good idea. He's only a child, after all. Perhaps he's mistaken. Surely the police wouldn't hurt a helpless child."

"And you would take that chance?" Carson knelt beside Luke and laid a hand on his white-blond head. The boy whimpered, but didn't draw away. "I am not willing to risk it, doctor. I have always wanted a son. I will take this child with me, and raise him as my own."

The doctor opened his mouth as if to protest. Carson silenced him with a look. The man heaved a resigned sigh. "Very well. I only hope that you do not come to regret this one day."

"I certainly shall not." Smiling at the child, Carson patted his fine, silky hair. "Hello, Luke. You have lost your parents, I hear. Well, now you have a new father. I will take care of you, little one."

Luke regarded him with wide, curious eyes. Tilting his head to the side, he let loose what was clearly a story or explanation of some sort, though Carson couldn't understand a word of it.

"What is he saying, doctor?" Carson asked, chucking the boy under the chin. "We really must teach him English and Spanish."

"Hm, yes." Dr. Malaga frowned, bushy brows knitting in concentration. "Again, sir, I'm not certain that I'm understanding him correctly. He said -- I think -- that his people guard a great treasure. An idol made of lovely clear crystal, he says, that grants wishes. He says that they have guarded it for thousands of years. They've taken it away, to a new place, and he wonders if you will take him there. He says that his people will take care of him, if we can find them. He can't feel them like he could feel his mother and father, because he's still small and hasn't learned how yet." The doctor clucked his tongue sadly. "Clearly he's imagined the whole thing. The poor boy."

It certainly sounded like a young child's overactive imagination. Yet something about the story resonated in Carson's mind. The fierceness of the attack by the octopi, the way they moved in perfect synchronization. As if they could read each other's minds.

It wasn't much, but it fit the facts. Moreover, the child was undoubtedly of the same race as the strange shapeshifters who'd attacked the dive team. If Luke was correct about the psychic abilities of his people, perhaps he was correct about the idol as well. Carson had assumed they were guarding *Lady Death's* diamonds, but perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps they were guarding this mysterious idol all along. If so, it must be priceless. Surely, the creatures wouldn't have protected it with their very lives if it didn't hold immense value.

Carson almost laughed aloud at himself, considering with absolute seriousness the idea of people who could shift into octopus form and ancient idols that granted wishes. However, if it were true, it was worth pursuing. Even if it wasn't true, he still had in his possession a child who could shift at will into a sea creature. A boy still young enough to be molded into what Carson needed -- the perfect way to find and retrieve treasures beyond the range of diving equipment. Treasures no one else could find.

"Yes, the poor boy." Carson touched the little boy's downy cheek. "Such fun we shall have, you and I, young Luke. Such fun."

Luke blinked up at him. The little face broke into a tentative smile. In that face, Carson saw not an innocent child, but wealth beyond measure. He smiled back and patted the boy's blond head.

Chapter One

February 2006, Mississippi Coast

Austin Bell stood on the beach at the western tip of Cat Island, watching a late February storm roll in. The cold, damp wind numbed his cheeks and slipped its searching fingers through the holes in his jacket, but he didn't care. He loved it like this, when the winter winds whipped the Gulf into a frenzy and the waves loomed black and sinister in the half-light.

He'd been out there for hours, watching the sea rise and the sky darken and thinking about his life. His future, or lack thereof. Hurricane Katrina had taken the modest apartment building he'd lived in and flattened the resort where he'd worked teaching remedial SCUBA diving to tourists. Six months later, he still hadn't been able to find work that lasted more than a few days. He'd never been rich by any means, but in the past few months he'd learned the hard way what it was like to be hungry and homeless and desperate.

For a while there, he'd thought the bad days were over. The Acadian, one of the Biloxi casinos wiped out by the hurricane, was rebuilding. They had backers, big money guys from Birmingham. The place was going to be bigger and better than ever. He'd packed up his ancient pick-up truck and made the short trip from his home in Pass Christian to Biloxi, hoping to snag a construction job. A week later, he was working again, he'd rented a trailer on the outskirts of Biloxi, and life was looking up.

Then the bottom fell out. The backers got cold feet. With the money gone, the rebuilding project was off, and Austin found himself out of work once again, along with hundreds of others. He'd managed to sweet talk his landlady into letting him stay another month, but time was running out. In a few days, he'd be out on the street.

"Could sell Jess," he mused out loud to the rising wind. "Might bring a few thousand."

It wasn't enough. No amount of money could ever be enough to make him give up *Jessamine*. He twisted around to check the battered old runabout, which lay behind him in the lee of the little island. The choppy waters of the Mississippi Sound lapped against her sides.

He smiled. That old boat was all he had left now. Sometimes he felt like it was the only thing holding him together. Providing him with the means to experience the barrier islands on days like this one, when the sea turned savage and the raw wind was enough to knock him down. He thought he'd lose his mind if he couldn't have these little escapes.

As he turned back to contemplate the angry Gulf, Austin caught a flash of something pale out of the corner of his eye. Frowning, he squinted out over the roiling waves to his left. At first he saw nothing. Then, just as he was about to give up, it appeared again, much closer to shore. Something pallid, slender and sinuous, like a great tentacle.

"No fucking way." Shoving his hands into his jacket pockets, Austin jogged toward the bit of beach where the whatever-it-was seemed likely to wash up. "There aren't any cephalopods around here."

He was right. What he found rolling in the waves definitely was no sea creature. It was a nude man, pale as death and just as limp.

"Shit." Steeling himself against the inevitable shock of cold, Austin waded into the angry water, grabbed the unconscious man under the arms, and dragged him onto the beach.

Once they were beyond the reach of the high surf, Austin laid the young man gently on the sand and dropped down beside him, gasping for breath. The man was heavier than he looked, and dead weight besides. Blood poured at an alarming rate from a gaping wound in the man's right leg, just above the knee.

Austin didn't hesitate. He tore off his jacket, sweatshirt, and T-shirt, then rolled the T-shirt up and pressed it against the wound. He used the sweatshirt to tie the makeshift pressure dressing in place, then slipped his jacket back on. Pressing his fingers to the man's throat, Austin was relieved to feel a strong, steady pulse. The man's bare chest rose and fell evenly with his breathing.

Reassured that the mysterious person wasn't going to die on him just yet, Austin sat back and studied the young man. He was tall, long-legged and willowy, with the lean, sleek muscles of a swimmer. His skin was frighteningly pale, but a quick perusal told Austin that it must be his natural coloring. His lips had none of the unhealthy bluish tinge that would indicate hypothermia or hypoxia, nor the grayish undertone that went with massive blood loss.

That in itself was as big a mystery as what the man was doing here in the first place. It may be a subtropical region, but the surface waters of the Gulf of Mexico in February weren't exactly balmy. The usual water temperature hovered in the mid-sixties, cold enough to induce hypothermia with more than a few minutes exposure. And the wound in the man's leg had left a trail of blood on the sand.

Raising his head, Austin stared out over the waves. He couldn't see a boat anywhere, which meant either the man had been in the water a very long time indeed, or his boat had sunk. Or both. Austin figured he must've been out boating just past the barrier islands and gotten caught in the storm. Squalls rose suddenly here, and could easily catch the unwary off guard. No way could a naked, wounded man have survived for long in the cold and deadly currents of the open Gulf.

The sky overhead lit up, the lightning flash followed a second later by a deafening boom of thunder. Fat raindrops plopped onto the sand. Austin scowled. Somehow, he had to get the man he'd found into the boat and get him to the mainland. The guy needed medical attention, and fast.

"Okay, buddy," Austin said, crouching beside the young man. "Here we go."

Austin hoisted him onto his shoulders in a fireman's carry and staggered to his feet. As he made his way toward Jess, a gray curtain of rain rolled in from the Gulf. Within seconds, Austin was drenched to the skin. He gritted his teeth against the sting of the icy rain on his bare hands.

The trip across the spit of sand separating the Gulf from the Sound had never seemed so long. Austin knew it had only taken him a few minutes, but it felt like hours before he laid his burden carefully onto the padded seat in the stern of the boat. Austin climbed on board. He pulled the sturdy plastic cover over the back part of the boat and fastened it in place. Crawling under the cover, he dug a thick blanket out of the storage compartment under the seat and tucked it around the still-unconscious man.

He took a moment to make sure that the man was still breathing and the bandage was still in place on his leg. He seemed to be as stable as Austin could make him. Austin watched him for a moment, wondering again where he'd come from, and who he was. Now that the adrenaline rush had died down a bit, Austin couldn't help noticing that the stranger in his boat was quite attractive, in an unusual way. Straight white-blond hair fell in wispy layers around his face, catching in his long dark lashes and the corners of his wide, sensual mouth. Austin had to fight off a sudden wild urge to kiss him.

"Austin," he mumbled as he crawled out from under the tarp and jumped out of the boat, "you need to get laid."

He gave the boat a hard shove, pushing it free of the sand and out into the shallows of the Sound. Hauling himself on board again, he started the engine and headed the boat toward the mainland.

He tried not to think of how long it had been since he'd been with anyone, or the fact that the man in his boat was naked and gorgeous. It was just loneliness talking. He'd never even consider coming on to someone who'd been through what this person clearly had. Nevertheless, he couldn't stop the crazy hope that when the man woke and his injuries had been tended, he might want Austin too.

Guiding Jess as quickly as he dared through the increasingly rough waters, Austin laughed. "Yeah, sure. He'll wake up and be so grateful to you for rescuing him that he'll pay you back with a nice blowjob. Keep dreaming."

Unfortunately, having voiced the idea of the mysterious stranger sucking him off, Austin had difficulty not thinking of it. Giving himself a mental kick, he concentrated on keeping *Jessamine* upright and moving. The increasing effort of that task eventually dissolved the mental picture of the young man's pink lips wrapped around Austin's cock.

* * * * *

When he finally guided *Jessamine* alongside the tiny private pier just west of Biloxi, Austin heaved a sigh of relief. The worst of the storm had passed, but it had been a rough trip, and Austin was glad to have it over with. The rays of the setting sun spread red and gold from under the low-hanging fringe of black clouds. The Sound glowed an eerie greenish-gray in the evening light.

Quickly securing the boat to his landlady's pier, Austin unfastened the tarp covering the stern section and rolled it back. He held his breath, half-expecting the man on the seat to be dead after all. What he didn't expect was to see enormous, solid black eyes staring back at him, calm but wary, showing not a hint of pain or fear.

"Um." Austin wiped his hands on his soaking wet jeans, feeling awkward suddenly. "Are you okay?"

The man sat up, clutching the blanket around him. "I will be. Who are you?"

"Austin. Austin Bell." Not knowing what else to do, Austin stuck his hand out and smiled. "Nice to meet you."

Oh, smooth. Austin grimaced. He wished he wasn't always so bumbling and clumsy around people. Especially beautiful naked men who he found unconscious and bleeding on the beach.

The man's mouth curved into a faint smile, a hint of amusement sparkling in his eyes. "I'm Luke Cordova," he said, grasping Austin's hand in a surprisingly strong grip. "Thank you for helping me, Austin."

"Yeah, sure." Austin bit his lip, hoping he wasn't staring as blatantly as he feared. Luke's eyes fascinated him. He'd never seen eyes like that, a black so deep and pure that it swallowed the pupil completely. "Your eyes are so black."

Luke laughed, a wonderfully musical sound, and Austin realized he'd spoken aloud. A fierce blush burned in his cheeks. "Um. I ... My trailer isn't far. I'll take you there, and call the ambulance."

"No!" Luke's fingers tightened around his, and Austin blinked in surprise. He hadn't even noticed that their hands were still joined.

"You're hurt," Austin pointed out as Luke dropped his hand and curled his knees up to his chest. "That leg was bleeding really bad. You probably need stitches."

"I won't need stitches. I'm fine. I'm staying at The Waterview, I can walk from here."

Austin gaped. "Even if you weren't stark naked, which you are, I bet you can't walk very well on that leg."

"I can manage." Luke stared at Austin, his face set in a stubborn expression. "Maybe I could borrow some clothes?"

"I don't have any here."

"What about at your trailer? Surely you have clothes there."

They glared at each other. Austin sighed, tired suddenly. "Fine. My trailer's just across the road. If you can walk there, I'll give you some clothes and I won't argue about you walking to The Waterview, even though it's at least six miles from here. I'd drive you, but my truck died the other day."

Luke smiled. "Will you help me out of the boat?"

"Sure."

The second Luke stood, the blanket wrapped around his shoulders, Austin knew he'd been right. Luke's injured leg buckled when he tried to put weight on it. He gasped, his face going even whiter with pain.

Austin swiftly wrapped an arm around Luke's slender waist, steadying him. He tried to ignore how good it felt to have Luke's body so close to his. "See? I told you."

"So you did." Luke turned his wide, pleading eyes to Austin. "I can't go to the hospital, Austin. Don't ask me why. I just can't."

"Come home with me, then," Austin heard himself say. "I've got some first aid training. I'll clean and dress the wound, and feed you, and you can rest there overnight. Sound good?"

Relief flooded Luke's face. "It does, yes. Thank you."

"No problem."

They stood there staring at each other. Austin was painfully aware of Luke's arm resting across his shoulders. The temptation to kiss that sexy-as-hell mouth was strong. Using every ounce of mental strength he possessed, Austin managed to resist.

"Um. Okay." Austin cleared his throat. "Let's get you inside, huh? You must be exhausted."

"Yes, I am, actually." Luke smiled as Austin climbed onto the pier. "What brought you out t ... His brow furrowed. "Where was that? Where you found me?"

"Cat Island." Austin didn't comment on the revelation that Luke hadn't known where he was, but it piqued his curiosity even further.

"Cat Island." Luke took the hand Austin offered and stepped gingerly onto the pier with his good leg. "What brought you out there?"

“Nothing much,” Austin hedged, watching a grimace twist Luke’s features as his injured leg was forced to bear his weight for a moment. “I just like watching the storms on the Gulf, is all.”

“Lucky for me.” Luke glanced around as they made their slow way toward Austin’s trailer. “I hope your neighbors can be discreet.”

Austin laughed. “What neighbors? This stretch of beach has been more or less deserted since Katrina. Good thing, I guess. Me bringing a naked man home would sure as hell be great gossip.”

Luke tensed, but said nothing. Wondering what he’d done wrong, Austin stole a glance at Luke. His fine, straight hair had dried and now hung in shining sheets down to his shoulders, with shorter bits veiling his eyes and brushing his jaw. Behind the veil of hair, the man’s features were set in lines of pain. Unsure of what to say, Austin elected to keep quiet, and they walked the rest of the way to his trailer in strained silence.

Luke leaned against the side of the trailer while Austin dug his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. Snatching the phone book off the table, Austin wedged the door open with it and hurried back down the steps.

“Here,” he said, winding his arm around Luke. “Lean on me instead of using your bad leg.”

Luke nodded, secured his right arm around Austin’s shoulders, and let Austin guide him up the three steps into the trailer. Once inside, Austin helped Luke over to the threadbare old sofa and eased him down. Leaning back with a sigh, Luke closed his eyes.

Austin replaced the phone book on the table beside the phone, then shut and locked the door. “Let me get this wet stuff off real quick. I don’t want to drip on that wound while I’m dressing it.”

“Please do,” Luke said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile Austin wanted to lick.

The look in Luke’s eyes made Austin’s cheeks heat. He dropped his gaze when he felt his groin stirring. An erection was the last thing he needed right now. Stripping off his wet jacket, he threw it on the floor, then kicked off his sneakers and squirmed out of his soaked jeans.

When he turned back to Luke, he had to bite his tongue to hold back the exclamation that wanted to come out. Luke’s blanket had fallen open, baring his body completely to Austin’s very appreciative gaze. The sight made Austin forget he was standing there in nothing but a worn-out pair of pale blue boxers.

Austin glanced up at Luke’s face. The black eyes were closed, Luke’s breathing slow and even. He seemed to have fallen asleep. Hating himself, Austin let his gaze drift down Luke’s bare chest, over his flat belly, down to his exposed groin. His thick, uncut cock and smooth balls nested in a sparse thatch of fine pale curls. It seemed to be the only body hair he had, Austin noticed, sliding a slow look back up Luke’s body.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he got back to Luke's face and met a curious black-eyed gaze.

"Oh. Um. Sorry." Blushing furiously, Austin hurried into the kitchen and started digging in the cabinets, looking for the first aid kit. He cast around frantically for an excuse for his blatant ogling. "That mark on your leg," he blurted, remembering the odd blue-gray blotch on Luke's inner thigh. "What is it?"

"A birthmark, I suppose," Luke answered. "I've had it for as long as I can remember. Father says I had it whe ..."

He trailed off. Austin found the kit and backed out of the cabinet with it. "Yeah? Had it when what?" he asked, straightening up and peering over the counter.

Luke glanced at him, eyes wider than ever. "Nothing. Just ... I've always had it."

"Oh." Austin washed his hands, grabbed a dish towel and the bottle of sterile saline from the shelf beside the sink, and walked back over to the couch. He kept his gaze firmly fixed on Luke's face. "Okay, let's get that wound cleaned."

Trying not to think too hard about where he was, Austin knelt on the floor between Luke's parted knees. He focused with grim determination on the deep wound in Luke's leg, ignoring the tantalizing proximity of Luke's groin. Luke watched him, shoulders hunched. Opening the saline bottle, Austin held the towel under the gash in Luke's thigh and poured the sterile liquid over it. Luke hissed, fingers digging into the cushions.

"Sorry." Austin glanced up at Luke's face, then turned his attention back to his work. "This isn't as bad as I thought at first. It looked deeper before."

"It must have been the light." Luke's voice was tight with pain. He answered Austin's worried look with a faint smile. "It's all right. No way to clean a wound like that without it being painful."

Nodding, Austin carefully dried the wound's edges with a large square of sterile gauze. "How'd you get this, anyway? For that matter, how'd you end up in the water in the first place?" He didn't ask why Luke was naked, though he was dying to know. He didn't want to push his luck.

Luke's black eyes turned wary. "I was out with some friends on their boat. I fell overboard in the storm. I'm not sure what it was that cut me. Something in the water."

"Do you want to call them?" Austin asked, watching Luke closely. "You can use my phone."

"No, I ... I won't be able to reach them right now. I'll try in the morning."

The way Luke's eyes darted around the room gave away the lie, but Austin didn't press the issue. He'd only known Luke for a few hours. A few minutes, actually, considering that Luke had been unconscious during the long boat ride. He had no right to demand the truth if Luke didn't want to tell him.

Austin finished dressing Luke's wound in silence. Luke held perfectly still, but Austin saw his pain in the set of his shoulders. He could tell Luke had his guard up, and it bothered him. Something about Luke made Austin want to gain his trust. Austin had a feeling Luke trusted very few people.

"Okay, done." Austin smiled. "How's it feel?"

Luke flexed his thigh. "Better, actually." He returned Austin's smile. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Austin knelt there on the floor between Luke's legs, staring into Luke's bottomless eyes, knowing he should get up but unable to make himself move. His hand, he realized with a shock, still rested on Luke's thigh.

Luke licked his lips. "Austi ...

To his own surprise, Austin found himself moving his hand further up Luke's thigh. Luke let out a barely audible sigh. His eyes burned into Austin's. Those plush pink lips called to Austin like a siren song. Without considering what he was doing or why, Austin rose to rest one knee on the edge of the couch, leaned forward, and pressed a tentative kiss to Luke's mouth.

The second their lips touched, sparks jumped between them, and something inside Austin shifted. He felt as if his entire life had been leading up to this one moment, to this kiss that suffused his soul with a hot, fierce joy. Austin didn't understand it, but he knew that having tasted this, nothing else could ever replace it.

A small, needy sound escaped Luke's throat. His hands came up to clutch Austin's shoulders, his tongue flicking at Austin's lips. Fire shot up Austin's spine. Sliding closer without breaking the kiss, he tangled his free hand into Luke's baby soft hair. The other hand gently kneaded Luke's thigh, careful to avoid the newly bandaged wound.

"Oh God," Luke gasped. "Austin. Touch me."

"Are you sure?" Austin asked, even as his fingers brushed Luke's balls. "You're hurt."

"Yes." Luke sucked Austin's bottom lip into his mouth and let it go with a pop. "It's been so lon ...

"For me too." Watching Luke's face, Austin wrapped his hand around Luke's rapidly hardening prick. The way Luke moaned at the touch sent a spike of lust through his body. "God, you're gorgeous."

Luke stared at him from inches away, black eyes wide and hot. "I want you. Is that wrong?"

It was an odd question, Austin thought. Or, at least, it was odd for Luke to be the one asking it. After all, Austin was the one taking advantage of an injured man, not the other way around. Although the hungry look in Luke's eyes argued that Luke, at least, didn't think he was being taken advantage of.

"Wrong? Christ, I hope not," Austin said with feeling.

Luke let out a breathless little laugh, pulled Austin close and kissed him. Austin opened wide to Luke's questing tongue. In the morning, he might regret it, but right now, pure sensation had him in its grip. The taste of Luke's mouth, the feel of Luke's cock, hard and hot in his hand, the musky-sweet smell of Luke's skin, all conspired to erase rational thought and replace it with unadulterated need.

When Luke's fingers slipped into the opening in the front of Austin's boxers, he straddled Luke's lap to give him better access. The feel of Luke's long, graceful hand on his cock tore a groan from Austin's throat. His own hand tightened around Luke's shaft, stroking harder, encouraged by Luke's soft whimpers and the lusty roll of his hips.

The position was awkward as hell, and Austin's wrist began to cramp within minutes, but he didn't care. It had been months since his last sexual encounter, trading blowjobs with one of the Blackjack dealers from The Acadian. Consequently, it was only a few minutes before Austin felt the orgasm building low in his belly.

Luke seemed to be as close as Austin, judging by the way he thrust into Austin's fist, heedless of his injured thigh. Pulling Luke's foreskin back, Austin slipped an experimental finger just under the edge. He was startled but pleased when Luke keened, arched his back, and came in a warm slippery rush. His fingers spasmed around Austin's prick and Austin came too, his mouth still locked to Luke's in a deep kiss.

Luke seemed to be in no hurry to let Austin go. Not that Austin minded. He was happy to sit astride Luke's hips all night, cramped wrist and semen-splotched boxers and all. Luke's kiss had turned slow and soft in the aftermath of his orgasm, and Austin felt that he could gladly drown in it. The magic he'd felt flowing between them before was still there, its heat peaceful and comforting now.

Austin broke the kiss when worry over Luke's injury finally overcame the pleasure of Luke's mouth on his. Moving off Luke's lap, he flopped down beside him on the couch. "That was incredible."

"Mm." Luke smiled lazily. "It certainly was."

Propping an elbow against the back of the sofa, Austin drank in the sight of post-orgasmic Luke. A delicate flush colored his pale cheeks. His lips were swollen and red, his fine blond hair wildly tangled. A faint sheen of sweat gave his bare skin an ethereal glow. Austin thought he looked like a creature out of one of those fantasy books Aunt Jess used to read all the time.

Something must have shown on his face, because Luke laid a hand over Austin's, squeezing his fingers. "Austin? Are you all right?" He bit his lip, his expression guarded. "Do you wish we hadn't done that?"

"What? God, no!" Shifting closer, Austin gave Luke a reassuring smile. "I was just thinking how hot you look right now."

“So do you.” Luke leaned close and brushed his lips across Austin’s. “But you looked so sad just now. I know it’s none of my business, but you saved my life today. And you just made me feel like I’ve never felt before. I don’t want you to be unhappy.”

Austin stared, trying to read Luke’s face. Something in those black eyes made him want to tell Luke everything. To let Luke tell him everything would be okay, even if it was a lie.

What the hell. It’s not as if I have any deep dark secrets.

“I was just thinking that you looked like some kind of fantasy creature,” Austin explained. A strange look passed through Luke’s eyes and was gone before Austin could decide what to think of it. Austin took a deep breath and continued. “That made me think of my Aunt *Jessamine*, because she’s always reading those fantasy novels. Katrina completely destroyed her house, so she moved to Alabama to live with her sister. I miss her, is all. She and Uncle Ray raised me.”

Luke sat silent for a moment, studying Austin’s face. His thumb rubbed tiny circles on the back of Austin’s hand. “*Jessamine*. That’s the name of your boat.”

“Yeah. Uncle Ray named it after Aunt Jess. He left it to me when he died a couple of years ago.”

Austin was surprised but relieved that Luke hadn’t asked about his parents. He barely remembered them, but thinking of them still hurt. They’d abandoned him when he was seven, leaving him on Aunt Jess and Uncle Ray’s doorstep on their way to California to make their fortune. He hadn’t seen or heard from them since.

Some days he hated them. Other days he ached for the chance to have known them. Most days he didn’t think of them at all. His aunt and uncle had always loved and supported him, and he was grateful for that.

“How did he die?”

Austin blinked, jarred from his thoughts by Luke’s soft voice. “Uncle Ray? He was a diver on an oil rig in the Gulf. He had a heart attack at three hundred feet. They couldn’t get him to the surface in time.”

“I’m sorry.” Luke lifted Austin’s hand and kissed his palm.

Austin had to look away from Luke’s eyes. “So. Um. Are you hungry? I could fix some soup and sandwiches.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Letting go of Luke’s hand, Austin rose and headed into the kitchen. He washed his hands, then grabbed a dish cloth and dampened it with warm water.

“Here,” he said, walking over and handing the cloth to Luke. “To clean up with.”

Luke took the cloth with a smile. “Thanks.”

Back in the kitchen, Austin got out two cans of tomato soup, a pack of bologna, and the last of the bread. He watched Luke out of the corner of his eye as he opened the soup and started making sandwiches. Luke yawned and stretched, and Austin's cock twitched.

Stop it, he ordered himself. Just because you got each other off once, doesn't mean he's up to doing it again right away. He's been through a horrible ordeal. Let him rest and eat something, for God's sake.

The possibility of something more later on brought a smile to Austin's face.

A few minutes later, Austin carried a huge steaming mug of soup and two bologna sandwiches around the counter separating the kitchen and miniscule living area. "Okay, here you go, sandwiches and some hot ... Oh."

Austin trailed off, smiling. Luke was sound asleep, his head resting at an awkward angle on the back of the sofa. His hands were curled on his lap, his lips slightly parted. There were faint bluish shadows under his eyes. He looked young and fragile and exhausted.

A strange, tight feeling pulled at Austin's chest. He set the food on the counter and walked quietly over to the couch. Bending down, he put his arms around Luke and gently laid him down, tucking the pillow under his head and covering him with a clean blanket. He threw the musty, dirty blanket from the boat on the floor.

As Austin plucked the used washcloth off the floor where it had fallen, Luke stirred and mumbled something in what sounded like a different language. Austin leaned close, trying to make out the meaning of the strange words, but Luke sighed and fell silent, curling onto his side.

Austin knelt on the floor, studying Luke's face. "Who are you?" he whispered, stroking Luke's silky hair. "Where did you come from?"

And why do I already feel like you belong with me?

The question he hadn't voiced was the one he most wanted answered, and the one least likely to have an answer. Planting a soft kiss on Luke's forehead, Austin rose to his feet and went to wrap up Luke's uneaten dinner.

* * * * *

Austin woke the next morning with one numb foot and a crick in his neck from sleeping in the chair. He hadn't meant to fall asleep there. But the combination of the afternoon's exertion, a mind-shattering orgasm, and a hot shower had conspired against him.

Yawning, he carefully uncurled himself, contemplating whether to risk waking Luke by making breakfast now. His stomach growled its opinion on the matter. He glanced at his watch. Almost ten o'clock. He'd slept for over twelve hours, meaning Luke had slept even longer.

"Okay," he mumbled, standing up and stretching. "Food it is."

It wasn't until he'd gotten into the kitchen and started the coffee brewing that he noticed Luke was gone.

Somehow, it didn't surprise him, but it did hurt a little. Crossing back into the living area, Austin picked up the old blanket he'd thrown in the corner. It had come stains on it, plus it was musty from being stuffed in *Jessamine's* storage compartment for God only knew how long. The thing needed washing badly. Nevertheless, Austin buried his face in it for a moment, trying to catch a whiff of Luke's scent. The rich tang of semen hit his nostrils, and he couldn't help moaning.

"Stop being such an idiot," he scolded himself, even as he closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against the place where Luke's spunk had dried on the blanket. "You rescued him, he said thank you in his own way. Leave it."

Still clutching the dirty blanket to his chest, Austin headed for the closet where he kept his laundry basket. He dropped the blanket in the basket. As he turned to go back to the kitchen and pour himself some coffee, he noticed a scrap of paper sitting on top of his small chest-of-drawers. He picked it up, and his heart flip-flopped when he realized it was a note from Luke.

Austin,

Sorry to leave like this, without even saying goodbye, but I had places to be. God, that sounds horribly cloak-and-dagger. I don't mean it to. I borrowed some of your clothes, I hope you don't mind. I'll have them sent back to you as soon as I can, I promise.

"Thank you" sounds inadequate for all you've done for me. But thank you anyway, for everything. Especially for what we did together last night. I've never felt like that before. I wish we could do it again, and more.

Yours,

Luke

Austin frowned. Why couldn't Luke bring the borrowed clothes back himself, instead of sending them with someone else? And what did he mean he wished they could do it again?

"Why can't we?" Austin said softly, fingertips brushing the untidy scrawl of Luke's signature. "What's stopping you?"

The mystery was doubly frustrating because Luke obviously wanted to see him again, but didn't believe he could, and Austin had no idea why.

It took him several more minutes to remember that he knew where Luke was staying. He grinned. Either they'd be together again, or he'd get Luke to tell him why they couldn't. He preferred the first option, but he'd settle for the latter if he had to.

With a sense of hope, Austin thumbed through the phone book, found the number and dialed The Waterview.

* * * * *

Luke peered cautiously around the corner of the fourteenth floor hallway. No one was in sight, not even the bodyguard that usually stood outside Carson's door. Luke breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been half afraid Carson would have someone waiting for him. Waiting to take him to face his punishment.

Not that he could avoid it at this point. Not when he'd been missing nearly twenty-four hours without reporting in. But maybe he could steal a few minutes alone before telling his father he'd returned.

He ran down the hall, bare feet silent on the plush carpet. His wounded thigh hurt with a deep, nauseating ache. He ignored it as best he could, though the long walk had him limping more than a little. The spear gun had nearly severed his tentacle. He'd had to shift to human and back on the spot to avoid losing it right then.

Keeping one eye on Carson's closed door, Luke opened his own door using the extra key card he'd gotten at the desk. Safely inside his room, he stumbled to the bed and collapsed onto it. He lay still for a few moments, letting some of the tension run out of his neck and shoulders. Trying to get into the hotel without any of his father's goons spotting him was never easy, but he'd gotten very good at it over the years. He wanted to finish healing the gash in his leg before he confronted Carson. His father was already going to be livid at the news Luke had for him. Luke didn't want to make it worse for himself by letting Carson know he'd allowed himself to be wounded.

Lifting his hips, Luke slid out of Austin's jeans and laid them on the bed beside him.

Austin.

Just thinking of the man was enough to start a tingling ache between Luke's legs. He wished he hadn't had to lie to Austin about where he was staying.

Closing his eyes, Luke conjured the memory of Austin's face. The big brown eyes, the lusciously full lips, the tousled mahogany hair, the mocha skin that spoke of a Creole heritage. Luke found the contrast between Austin's dark hand and his own pale cock unbelievably erotic.

Before Luke fully realized what he was doing, he spread his legs and cupped his balls in his hand. The sharp twinge in his injured thigh brought him out of his dangerous fantasy.

"Can't think of that right now," he whispered to the ceiling. "Can't think of it ever. It can't happen again."

Doing his best to ignore the empty feeling that thought caused, Luke sat up and pulled Austin's sweatshirt off. He needed to heal that leg, right now. And to heal, he needed to shift again. It was dangerous, since his octopus form couldn't survive long out of the water. But it was the only way to finish the healing process. The shifts he'd already undergone since the injury had helped a great deal, and one more shift should heal it completely.

Taking a deep breath, Luke concentrated on making his body change. If he hadn't lost so much blood yesterday, if he wasn't already so damn tired, he could've just shifted the leg. But a partial shift took far more energy than a full one, and he wasn't sure he could do it right now. Forcing down the fear that always went along with changing outside the safety of the ocean, he shifted.

Within seconds, heat flashed through his thigh as the torn muscle and skin knitted together. Luke changed back to his human form immediately and lay gasping on the bed, heart racing from the exertion.

As soon as he felt strong enough to move again, Luke slid to the edge of the bed and stood up. His head whirled. It took several endless seconds before the dizziness passed.

"Dammit," he muttered. "Why does that keep happening?"

Lately, every time he emerged from the ocean and became human again, he felt sick and exhausted. Sometimes he had trouble breathing for a while. It was frightening and disturbing, and it was getting worse. Carson's doctors hadn't been able to find a thing wrong with him. Though admittedly, a great deal of his physiology was a mystery to them, so Luke figured it was likely they wouldn't be able to tell whether anything was wrong or not.

Once his head stopped whirling he did a few deep knee bends, testing his leg. It seemed good as new. Satisfied, he pulled a clean pair of jeans out of the drawer next to the bed and tugged them on.

He'd barely zipped up when his door flew open and hit the wall. Carson Cordova stormed into the room, dark eyes flashing. Luke gulped.

"Father," he said, marveling that his voice didn't shake. "I was just about to call you."

Without breaking his stride, Carson grabbed Luke by the throat and slammed him against the wall. "Where have you been?" he growled through clenched teeth. "I have been waiting for your report, boy. If your incompetence has cost me that ido ...

"No, Father!" Luke gasped. "No, the idol's there! They don't know anything, they haven't found it yet!"

Carson's handsome face flushed, eyes narrowing, and Luke realized his mistake. Too late, of course.

"They?" Carson asked, his voice dangerously soft. "Who is 'they'?"

God, please don't let him kill me. "Doctor Martin. Father, I think they've been tracking it as we have, but they don't know where it is, they don't, I swear! I can get it before they find it!"

"Martin. Of course." Carson sneered, his hand tightening around Luke's throat. "This is unfortunate, but we will deal with it. What I would like to know, my son, is where you have been, and what you have done."

Luke tried to draw a breath. It was like sucking air through a narrow straw. Black spots swam in front of his eyes. "Father, please," he choked. "I can't breathe."

For a second, Carson just stared, his face set in lines of hate and disgust, fingers tightening like a vice. Luke's vision began to narrow, and he wondered if Carson really would kill him this time.

Just as Luke felt consciousness slipping away, Carson let go. Luke dropped to the floor, sucking in great gulps of air. His head pounded and it hurt to swallow. He wondered if he'd have to shift again to heal whatever damage Carson had done.

Wouldn't be the first time, he thought bitterly.

"Tell me what happened," Carson demanded, as coolly as if he hadn't just nearly strangled his adopted son. "From the beginning. Leave nothing out."

Gingerly fingering the bruise he felt blossoming on his throat, Luke sat with his back against the wall. "I went down yesterday morning to look around the area where we think the idol is. The silt there is very deep, and there's a sunken ship partially buried. The idol must be there, Father. Everything leads there." The lie rolled off Luke's tongue easily. He'd had years of practice lying for self-preservation.

"How deep?"

"About eighty-four meters."

Carson nodded, hands clasped behind his back. "And what of my old nemesis, the good Professor Martin? You say that he hasn't found it."

"That's right." Luke watched warily as his father paced the room. "They're looking, but they're several kilometers off. As long as we're careful not to let them spot us, we can get the idol before they even find the right area to look in."

"And there, young one, is the crux of the matter. Being certain that they do not spot us." Carson stopped and pinned Luke with a penetrating stare. "Would that have anything to do with why you were missing for an entire day and did not report in?"

"No, they didn't see me," Luke answered, swallowing panic. It wasn't a total lie. Martin's people hadn't seen his human form.

He hoped.

"Then why could you not come back? Why could you not even call?"

Luke blinked up at his father, and realized with a sinking feeling that he had to tell Carson about his injury. If he didn't, he had no excuse for being AWOL. And he didn't want the caning his father would surely give him for that.

No way was he telling Carson about Austin though. He didn't want to put the man who'd saved his life in danger.

"One of their people shot a spear gun at me," Luke confessed. "It hit my tentacle. I made it to the beach at Cat Island, shifted to human and passed out. When I woke up, I shifted again and swam to the mainland, then stole some clothes and walked back here."

The lie slipped out smooth as silk. His education may not have been a conventional one, but he'd learned many useful skills, such as lying while looking the deceived square in the eye.

Carson smiled, a cold smile that sent chills racing up Luke's spine. "But Luke, you just insisted that they did not see you."

Luke pulled his knees up to his chest, his eyes never leaving his father's face. "They didn't see my human form. I'm sure they didn't even get a good look at my octopus form. Why would they try to spear a giant octopus? They're scientists, they wouldn't..."

Luke was abruptly cut off when Carson kicked him in the ribs. He curled up on the floor, trying to breathe through the blinding pain.

Carson leaned down and grabbed a handful of Luke's hair, yanking his head up. "Worthless child!" Carson hissed. "How dare you let them see you?"

Luke bit back the whimper of pain that wanted to come out. It would only make his father angrier. "I, I'm sorry, Father, I'm sorry, it won't happen again, I promise!"

"You're right, it won't." Carson slammed Luke's head against the wall, sending bright flares of agony through him. "Because if it does, you will not live to regret it. Remember that."

Luke couldn't answer. He collapsed in a heap when Carson let him go, and watched Carson's expensive leather shoes measure long strides across the carpet.

At the door, Carson turned. "You will report to my suite in ten minutes. You will brief the rest of the team, then we will decide on an approach that will prevent Martin from discovering the location of the idol. Thanks to your stupidity, we will need to be much more careful than we'd originally thought."

Luke kept quiet, huddling around his pain and the familiar helpless resentment.

Shaking his head, Carson walked back over and kicked Luke in the knee. "Pathetic. Clean yourself up."

Carson turned on his heel and left, slamming the door behind him. Using the wall as a support, Luke staggered to his feet. He took a swift inventory of how he felt. His knee twinged where Carson had kicked it, his ribs ached with every breath, and his throat felt like raw meat, but there didn't seem to be any real damage. At least Carson hadn't broken any bones this time. Shifting didn't always heal those right away.

Dragging himself into the bathroom to shower, Luke wondered what would happen to him if he left his father. It wasn't the first time he'd wondered. He'd had the same longing, rebellious thought every time Carson had ever hit him, or told him what a poor excuse for a son he was. He could remember sitting on the deck of his father's ship as a child, his lip split and one eye swollen shut, wishing he could escape. Just swim off into the deep where Carson's equipment couldn't take him, swim away and find ... Something. A vague half-remembered dream of family and love and belonging.

He'd never stopped wanting that. But, he'd never seen any hope of having it. He was, as far as he knew, unique, and that meant he'd always be alone. As difficult as life with Carson could be, Luke didn't know how to leave the only family he knew.

Now, for the first time in his life, Luke found himself seriously considering freeing himself from his father.

"I could do it," he told himself as he stepped into the shower. "I could leave, and live my own life."

I could see Austin again.

The implications stole his breath. Not only touching Austin again, kissing him and swallowing the sounds of his pleasure, but something more. He wasn't even sure what he wanted, just that he wanted -- needed -- to be with Austin. Only Austin. It didn't make any sense, but he couldn't deny how he felt.

Rinsing the shampoo out of his hair, Luke suddenly knew how he could free himself from Carson's clutches. Professor Andrew Martin, known as The Collector. The only person on earth that Luke considered a match for his father. Luke could recover the idol without his father's knowing and take it to Martin in exchange for the Professor's protection. He was as wealthy and powerful as Carson, but by all accounts a much gentler person. If he couldn't protect Luke from Carson's wrath, no one could.

It was a huge risk, and he knew it. He also knew Carson would have no further use for him once the idol was recovered. He had to act fast if he wanted to live past this expedition.

He did want to live, now more than ever. Closing his eyes, Luke leaned into the soothing spray of the warm water and let his plan take shape in his mind.

Chapter Two

Dr. Andrew Martin pulled his wool coat tighter around him, shivering in the biting February cold. Gazing out over the tiny mountain valley, he chuckled quietly to himself. If Phelan saw him sitting outside in near-freezing temperatures -- drinking, God forbid -- she'd never let him out of her sight again.

"It's a very good thing she's not here, then," he said aloud. Raising his mug of buttered rum, he silently toasted the sunset.

He'd been here at his newly acquired Tennessee vacation home for almost two months. *Sitting on the deck, drinking and watching the sunset instead of finding the idol*, he thought, not without a twinge of bitterness. It galled him to be forced to stay behind during any expedition, especially this one. The fact that he hadn't dived in twenty years and was rather prone to seasickness these days didn't make it any easier to be left out. But doctor's orders were, according to Phelan, indisputable. His doctors told him it was "inadvisable" to spend weeks on the open ocean in February, Phelan put her immaculately shod foot down, and that was that.

"Overly cautious bunch of pampered buffoons, the lot of them," he muttered, wrapping his hands around his steaming mug to warm them. "They'd never have survived some of the expeditions I've led."

At least Phelan was there to lead this one. In all the years he'd known her, Audra Phelan had never let him down. Any goal she set her mind to she accomplished, seemingly without effort, her brisk and businesslike manner rarely wavering. If anyone on this Earth could find the hidden resting place of the ancient idol -- and find the right people to recover it -- she could.

He hoped this challenge wouldn't be the one to finally prove too tough even for Phelan. They'd been searching for weeks, ever since he'd finally narrowed the location of the

idol down to the Northern part of the Gulf of Mexico. So far, no likely candidates had been found. In addition, Phelan had informed him two weeks ago that Carson Cordova was there ahead of them.

They were running out of time. Carson must not be allowed to lay hands on the idol.

A flat, tinny version of *Flight of the Valkyrie* interrupted Dr. Martin's thoughts. Setting his mug on the slate-topped table beside him, he picked up his cell phone and flipped it open, cutting off the music.

"The Collector here," he said, keeping his smile out of his voice.

"That's really not necessary, sir," Phelan told him.

He laughed at the long-suffering tone in her voice. "But Audra, I have so few amusements here, alone as I am."

"Of course. Sir, there is a man here you need to meet. How quickly can you get to Biloxi?"

Something in Phelan's voice sent excitement surging through Martin's blood. "I can fly down tomorrow. Is he the one we're looking for?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely. He has skills that make him uniquely suited to finding this particular artifact." Her voice dropped down low. "Sir, he's one of the protectors."

A frisson of excitement shot through Martin's blood. If this man was one of the mysterious race of shapeshifters who had once guarded the idol Martin sought, he would have an intrinsic link to it.

"How do you know he's one of them?" he asked.

"I saw him shift. We were one hundred feet down, when one of the men saw something in the water nearby. He shot it with a spear gun. When I looked, I saw a large, gray-blue octopus, a species definitely not native to the area. It was bleeding, and it looked as though its tentacle had been injured. As I watched, the octopus shifted into a human being and back again."

Martin picked up his mug and took a sip. The curl of steam from the hot liquid glowed golden in the level rays of the setting sun. "Did anyone else see?"

"I don't believe so. There were only four of us on that dive, and during the few seconds the octopus remained in the area, Jakes and Clark had their attention on Linville, who'd shot the spear gun. When we got back to the ship, neither Jakes nor Clark said a word. So either they didn't see what I did, or they're far better than I thought at being discreet."

"What about Linville?"

"He claimed to have seen a monster." Phelan's voice fairly dripped with disdain, and Martin smiled. His right-hand woman had no patience with hysterics, or with jumping to

unsupported conclusions. “Naturally, no one listened to him. He had an episode of nitrogen narcosis a couple of years ago, so of course the immediate conclusion most of the team drew was that this was another episode. I did not disabuse them of that notion.”

“Good. We’ll need to keep this bit of information to ourselves.” Martin tapped his foot on the wide boards of the deck. “I’ll have the plane prepared tonight, and fly out first thing in the morning.”

“Andrew?”

Phelan’s voice had gone tight. Martin frowned. “What is it?”

“There’s a complication.”

“What sort of complication?” An idea occurred to Martin, putting a knot of dread in his belly. “Audra. This man you’ve found. The shifter. What is his name?”

Phelan sighed. “Luke Cordova.”

Martin cursed under his breath. “Carson’s son.”

“He already knows about the idol, Andrew. He offered it to us, in exchange for his safety.”

“His safety from whom?”

“From his father.”

Leaning back in his chair, Martin closed his eyes. “Complication” was far too mild a word for this. Ever since he’d returned from Zanzibar with the boy nearly thirty years ago, Carson had kept his adopted son close. So close that few outside Carson’s crew had ever seen him. If Carson discovered what Luke had done, his fury would be murderous. Literally.

“Is Luke with you now?” Martin asked, setting his mug back down. “Being seen with him could mean your life, Audra. I am not willing to risk that.”

“He swam up to the yacht yesterday. He and I only spoke for a moment. No one saw us.” She paused, as if gathering her thoughts. “He had bruises, Andrew. Cuts. Burns, for God’s sake. We must help him.”

Martin rubbed his brow. It didn’t surprise him to learn Carson abused the boy. But it provided one more reason to tread lightly. He refused to risk Phelan’s life, and he’d just as soon hang on to his own skin for a while longer. Moreover, he didn’t want to put Luke in further danger, not after the boy had risked everything by approaching Phelan in the first place.

“Of course we’re going to help him,” Martin said. “I would, even if he were not the one destined to recover the idol. The fact that he is only makes me more determined.” He tapped his chin with one thin finger, brow furrowing. “How are we to set up a meeting with him? Is he able to get away from Carson?”

“Mr. Cordova is currently in California on other business.” Phelan spat the man’s name as if it were a rancid piece of meat. “His people watch Luke, but not as closely as their

employer would like. They're afraid of him, but they also believe him to be utterly under his father's thumb."

"Clearly he isn't, since he defied Carson so boldly. Yet he leads Carson's people to think what he wants them to." Martin laughed, the sound tight and wheezing. "It seems the boy has a gift for subterfuge. Excellent."

"Yes. Sir, you sound terrible, you're not outside are you?"

Martin smiled at the anxious tone to Phelan's voice. "I was watching the sunset, my dear. I'm going in right now, to prepare for tomorrow's trip. I'll see you at the airport, yes?"

"Yes, sir. *Redemption* is still anchored about thirty miles offshore. Simmons, Donaldson and I came back to Biloxi for supplies, and for me to contact you without danger of having our transmission intercepted. We'll be able to stay for a couple more days before it begins to look suspicious."

"Very good. I'll see you in the morning. Oh, and Audra?"

"Yes?"

"Excellent work, as always. What would I do without you?"

Phelan didn't answer that question, but Martin could practically see her glowing. For some reason, taking care of him made her happy. As making Phelan happy was one of his few true pleasures these days, he indulged it whenever he could.

"Thank you, sir," she said, brisk as ever. "See you tomorrow."

Clicking the phone closed, Martin sat in the gathering dark and thought. About Luke Cordova, and the idol they both sought. Right now, the boy cared nothing for the idol in and of itself; he was using it to bargain for his life. With a man like Carson Cordova as a role model, Martin wasn't surprised that Luke thought he needed a bargaining chip for his safety.

Martin wondered what Luke would say when he found out that he, not The Collector, was destined to receive the idol's gift.

He pushed to his feet, grimacing at the pain that seemed to permeate his entire body lately. *No time for that. There's work to be done.*

Draining the last of the cooling rum from his mug, Martin turned his back on the cold winter night and headed inside to prepare for the following day.

Chapter Three

“Stop right there.”

Luke stopped outside the door to his hotel room, his back to the mass of muscle and temper assigned to make sure he stayed in line while Father was away, and smiled. The man was almost too easy to manipulate. Schooling his face into an expression of cowering fear, he turned to face his latest bodyguard.

“I need to go for a swim, Mr. Taggart,” he said, making sure his voice had just the right degree of quiver to it.

“You just went yesterday,” Taggart growled. “Don’t push your luck with me, boy.”

“I ... I’m getting weak,” Luke insisted, leaning against the wall as if to emphasize his point. “Please, just a couple of hours. I need it. Father will be angry if I’m too weak to function when he returns.”

Taggart’s shaggy brows drew together in an expression of ponderous thought. Luke held his breath. Ever since he’d felt the first deep ache of exhaustion after spending time in his octopus form, he’d used his need to shift to secure blessed time alone in the ocean. He’d proposed the theory that extra shifts might strengthen him, and so far it had worked like a charm. If it didn’t work today, he wasn’t sure what he’d do. He’d never been good at sneaking away in human form, but missing his appointment with The Collector was not an option.

He’d taken a huge risk yesterday, approaching The Collector’s yacht in octopus form and shifting to human. There’d been no guarantee that he wouldn’t be shot on sight, or turned over to the authorities. Most people tend not to trust men who swim naked up to their boats.

He refused to consider the implications of his increasing loss of strength in human form, or the fact that the more time he spent as an octopus, the worse his weakness became. The overwhelming challenge of freeing himself from his father was enough for now.

“Okay,” Taggart said finally. “But I’m going with you. We’ll take the boat out into the Sound. Two hours, no more, or I get to take it out of your hide. Got that?”

Luke winced. Two days before, Taggart had caught Luke making an unauthorized phone call. Austin hadn’t answered, and Luke hadn’t left any message. A few hours later, covered with brand-new cuts, bruises and burns, Luke decided Carson must have hired Taggart for his sadistic nature. He’d even refused to let Luke shift to heal the damage, waiting until Luke could barely walk before taking him to the water and allowing him to shift. The wounds still weren’t fully healed, and they hurt enough to keep him awake at night.

Of course, his battered appearance had definitely swayed Dr. Martin’s assistant into agreeing to set up a meeting with her boss. Her reaction had been subtle, but he’d seen the way her brown eyes widened just a little, jaw muscles tightening when he emerged naked from the water and she saw the fresh burns marking his arms and chest.

Luke hunched his shoulders, letting Taggart think him completely cowed. “All right. Can we go right now?”

Taggart grunted and started down the hall. Luke trailed meekly behind. His heart raced and his hands shook. This wasn’t just a play for a little time to himself. His life hung in the balance, dependent on the outcome of today’s meeting. Everything had to be handled perfectly.

You can do this, he told himself. Hoping he was right, he followed Taggart out into the gray winter afternoon.

* * * * *

Jetting through the cold, murky waters of the Mississippi Sound, Luke could almost forget why he’d come here. The strength coursing through his tentacles was like a drug, filling him with the giddy joy that only came when he was gliding free and easy through the endless depths. He had to force himself to focus, to swim toward the yacht where The Collector waited.

Think of Austin. The only way to be with him is to do this.

A picture of Austin’s face floated to the forefront of Luke’s mind. Brown eyes glazed, cheeks flushed, plump lips parted. Luke could almost feel Austin’s cock pulsing in his palm.

The memory was enough to help him fight off the ever-present urge to just swim away and never return. Hanging motionless in the water, Luke stretched out his senses, located the yacht and shot off toward it.

He emerged near the back of the boat and peered cautiously up through the water. Audra Phelan stood beside the steps, a large blanket draped over one arm. Her dark hair was

wound into a long braid, the chill wind tugging stray strands loose to fly around her face. No one else was in sight. Luke shifted to human while still underwater and raised his head just enough to break the surface. The Sound was empty of boats as far as he could see. Breathing a silent thanks to the cold, rainy weather keeping most people off the water, Luke shimmied swiftly up the ladder and crouched on the deck.

Kneeling beside him, Phelan wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. "Dr. Martin is resting. I'll take you to the main cabin and bring him to you there."

Luke smiled at her. "Thank you for setting up this meeting, Ms. Phelan. You have no idea how much this means to me."

She returned the smile. "Of course. Follow me."

Rising gracefully to her feet, Phelan crossed the deck toward a carved wooden door. Luke managed to stand by holding on to the deck rail. Once his head stopped spinning, he staggered after her.

She frowned as she held the door open for him. "Mr. Cordova, are you all right?"

"Please call me Luke," he said, swallowing the nausea rising in his throat. "I'm fine. Just a bit tired."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow, but didn't question him. "Come sit down and I'll bring you some hot tea. Would you like something to eat?"

"No thank you. I'm not hungry." He stumbled on the last step down into the interior of the yacht. Phelan caught his elbow, and he gave her a shaky smile. "Again, thank you."

She guided him to a door on his left, opened it and led him into a cabin paneled in rich, dark wood. A porthole looked out over the Sound. Pushing him gently onto a plush leather sofa, she hurried over to a sideboard and poured steaming liquid from a large copper kettle into a deep mug.

"Earl Gray," she said, handing him the mug. "Sugar and cream?"

Luke shook his head. "This is fine. Thank you." He took a grateful sip, letting the warmth of it seep into him.

She nodded. "Would you like something to wear?"

"I'm fine. The temperature in here is quite comfortable, and the blanket's nice and warm." He smiled at her. "Thank you for that, by the way. I'm comfortable naked, but most people aren't particularly comfortable with me being naked while conducting business."

Phelan's laugh was unexpectedly warm. "Yes, well, one has to consider many unusual circumstances in my position. I'll go fetch Dr. Martin now. We'll be back in a moment; please make yourself at home."

Sinking deeper into the sofa, Luke sipped his tea and listened to the faint creaking of the boat as it rocked in the slight swell. It was all he could do to keep his eyes open, in spite of the excitement of his impending meeting with The Collector. Not for the first time, he

wondered why he felt this way after every shift. It couldn't be good, but he had no idea what it meant.

He shoved the niggling worry to the back of his mind when Phelan returned, followed by a man who must be The Collector. The man was tall, with thick gray hair neatly trimmed, but his limbs were thin and lines of chronic pain marked his face. He limped slightly, favoring his left leg. Luke could tell he'd once been a strong, vital man, and wondered what had caused his muscles to waste away and brought the sallow cast to his skin.

"Luke Cordova?" The Collector's voice was as clipped and precise as the rest of him, with an undercurrent of kindness that put Luke immediately at ease. "I am Dr. Andrew Martin."

"The Collector. I know." Shaking the hand Dr. Martin offered, Luke smiled at him. "I've been following your career my whole life, Dr. Martin. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Martin laughed, the sound low and mellow. "My reputation precedes me, I see. I am quite pleased to meet you as well, Luke. More than you know."

Dr. Martin seemed to sense that Luke wasn't comfortable with being called Mr. Cordova. He liked that. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, sir."

The Collector waved a dismissive hand as he settled into a chair, crossing his long legs. "Phelan tells me you are asking for protection from Carson."

"That's right." Luke twisted his fingers together, the thought of his father making him tense. "You've gone up against my father before. You know ... well, how he is."

"I do indeed." Steepling his fingers beneath his chin, Dr. Martin gave Luke a penetrating stare. "You believe your life is in danger, yes?"

"Yes, sir. He's always beaten me, my whole life, but it's been worse lately. He's been after the idol for as long as I can remember. As soon as he has it in his hands, he'll kill me."

"You can heal the damage he does to you."

"Yes, mostly. Sometimes it takes longer, like when he breaks bones." Beside the door, Phelan drew a hissing breath. Luke glanced at her, surprised. He'd nearly forgotten she was there. "In the last several weeks, though, I've ... I don't know. I'm not sure what's happening, but it's taken me several shifts to heal wounds that used to heal with one. And I've been so tired. Right now, I feel as though I could sleep for a week. Something's wrong with me, and I don't know what it is. I've tried not to let Father know how bad it is, but he's very observant and I'm sure he's seen. He'll use it against me. He'll wait until I'm worn out, then damage me so much that I won't be able to heal it without going into the ocean, an ...

"And he'll not let you take to the water and shift." Martin's eyes flashed angrily. "That man is a monster."

A bitter half-smile curled Luke's lips. "Some people would say the same thing about me."

“And they’d be wrong,” Dr. Martin leaned forward. “Phelan tells me you’ve offered to trade the idol Carson is hunting for my protection.”

“That’s right.” Luke held The Collector’s gaze without flinching, though his heart was galloping like a race horse. “I know you’re looking for the idol too, sir. I’ve seen your people near the site. You want it, and I can get it for you, if you’ll protect me from him.”

Martin’s face relaxed into a kindly smile. “My boy, I would protect you even without the idol. However, I believe it to be in your best interest to recover the idol. Carson must not be allowed to have it under any circumstances. You or your partner must be the one to first lay hands on it.”

Luke blinked. “My partner? I don’t have a partner, sir. I’m alone.” The truth of that was a constant ache in Luke’s heart.

“You don’t yet know the exact location of the idol.”

It wasn’t a question, and Luke saw no point in denying it. “Not yet, no. But I’m very close.”

Martin’s head tilted to the side, his expression curious. “How do you know?”

Luke hesitated, unsure of how to explain the way the idol called to him, a constant humming vibration in his skull. “I can sense it,” he said finally. “I can feel it in my head. Eventually, it will lead me right to it.”

“I see.”

Leaning back in his chair, The Collector fell silent, staring at the ceiling. Luke waited, relieved that the man hadn’t asked him how or why he felt the pull of the idol in his mind. It was a disturbing question, one he couldn’t answer. Thinking of it made his stomach flutter with a mixture of fear and longing, as if the knowledge were linked to something hidden in the depths of his mind. Some memory both terrible and enlightening. He didn’t feel ready to discuss it with anyone .

The seconds ticked past, and Luke grew restless. Beside the door, Phelan leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. She gave Luke a reassuring smile when he looked a question at her. *Wait*, she mouthed, as if reading his mind. Though he supposed it wasn’t difficult to see what he was thinking.

“I’ll need to leave soon,” Luke spoke up eventually. “My guard gave me two hours in my octopus form. If I’m late meeting him, he’ll torture me again.”

The Collector stirred, sat up and smiled at Luke. “Forgive me, Luke. I was planning our strategy.”

“Strategy for what?” Luke wondered, trying to hide his growing impatience. “And what did you mean before about my partner? Anyone diving to the site where I believe the idol is located would need several different specialty diving certifications. It’s in at least seventy meters -- two hundred feet, that is -- of water, quite probably deeper. And I can’t quite see

how we'll manage to avoid being discovered. Father's nothing if not paranoid when it comes to his treasures."

"Strategy for recovering the idol, of course. You're quite right about Carson. You won't be able to recover it in direct defiance of him. He's far too clever, and far too careful." Dr. Martin stood, grimacing, and moved to sit on the sofa beside Luke. "This is where your partner comes in. You and he will work together from within Carson's organization to recover the idol."

Luke's mouth fell open. "Sir, with all due respect, I can't put anyone else's life in danger for this."

"I already have someone in mind, actually," Dr. Martin said, ignoring Luke's protest. "Phelan, the file, please."

Producing a thin manila folder from inside her blazer, Phelan walked over and handed it to Martin. "Everything's in there, sir."

The Collector beamed at his assistant. "Thank you, Audra. Won't you sit down? You know there's no need to stand at attention all the time."

"I'm fine, thank you." Stepping back a pace, Phelan went still and silent again. She reminded Luke oddly of a much smaller, much prettier Taggart, though he got the feeling she was just as dangerous in her own way.

Shaking his head, Dr. Martin opened the folder. "Your partner, should he accept our offer, will be Austin Bell."

The name hit Luke like a brick. He licked his lips, unable to speak.

"Mr. Bell is an experienced diver," Dr. Martin continued without looking up from the papers on his lap, "with over five hundred dives logged, including two hundred at depths over three hundred feet or in wrecks and underwater cave systems. He has specialty certifications in deep diving, wreck penetration, level three cave diving, Heliox, and Tri-Mix. He also grew up diving in the Sound and in the Gulf, so he is familiar with the general conditions and underwater terrain here."

"No," Luke said, finding his voice at last. "I won't drag Austin into this."

Raising his gaze from the folder, Dr. Martin stared into Luke's eyes. "Austin has no job, and in a few days he'll have no place to live. He needs work, and is spectacularly suited to this mission."

Luke's stomach churned, and his palms were sweating. He wasn't sure if his reaction was the result of fear for Austin's life, or the possibility of seeing him again. "No, you can't..."

"And," Martin plowed on, "he is rather obsessed with finding you. I think he would accept my offer, if for no other reason than to see you again."

Oh my God, he knows. He saw us. The thought sent a jolt of adrenaline through Luke's body. "What?"

Dr. Martin smiled. "Don't worry, Luke. My intentions are nothing but honorable, I assure you."

"What do you mean he's looking for me?" Luke demanded, forcing the words out from between numb lips. "How did you know that ... that w ...

"It's all a matter of knowing who to talk to." Dr. Martin tapped a fingertip against the papers in the folder. "Austin's landlady saw you entering his trailer with him, and said you stayed the night. The next morning, Austin started calling all the hotels in the area looking for you. Clearly, he wants to be with you. And I believe you feel the same, yes?"

Luke closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands. *I've put Austin in danger. God.* At that moment, he wished he could go back in time and change everything. He'd gladly give up that soul-searing encounter if it meant securing Austin's safety.

Sliding closer, The Collector laid a cool hand on Luke's arm. "Luke, please trust me when I say that no one but you and Austin can recover this idol. You must do it, and Austin must be the one to help you."

"You're telling me that Austin and I have no choice in this," Luke said bitterly.

"You came to me, Luke. You do have a choice, as does Austin. I won't force either of you to do anything. But I believe this course of action to be the only one that will save you both."

"And you expect me to believe you came up with this whole plan since yesterday?" Luke shook his head, trying to keep his anger in check. "I don't know how you did it, Dr. Martin, but somehow you manipulated me into coming to you. And I fell for it."

Dr. Martin looked shocked, but something in his eyes told Luke he was at least partly right. "I've been planning the recovery of the idol for roughly two years now, that's true. But I did not anticipate your involvement, or Austin's, until yesterday."

Narrowing his eyes, Luke stared at the man next to him. His gut told him Dr. Martin was telling the truth.

You'll be working with Austin. You'll see each other every day. You can get to know him. You belong together, and this is your chance to be with him.

They belonged together. That simple truth resonated in him, and he knew he would do whatever it took to make that happen. And so would Austin.

"Okay," he said. "What do I do?"

The Collector smiled. "If Austin accepts our proposal, he will apply for a position with Carson's expedition. You and he will work together to pinpoint the location of the idol and recover it. I expect you'll have to keep communication with Phelan and me to a minimum, but when it becomes necessary to contact us, Austin will have to do it. Carson will be watching you too closely."

"You're right about that." Luke sighed. "Speaking of being watched, I need to get back." He stood, clutching the blanket around him and swaying a little. "How will I know if Austin agrees to this?"

"He will contact you."

"What if Father doesn't hire him?"

The Collector arched an eyebrow. "Does Carson do his own hiring?"

Luke grinned in spite of himself. "No. He has a foreman who does the hiring."

"And that foreman would be a fool not to hire Austin. Divers with his level of experience aren't easy to come by. Carson needs Austin's skills in this expedition."

The Collector seemed absolutely certain Austin would agree to this plan, and Carson's foreman would hire him. To his surprise, Luke found his own confidence in the whole thing growing.

"You have approximately twenty minutes to return to your guard," Phelan cut in. "You should go now."

Tension sang along Luke's nerves at the reminder of Taggart, and the necessity of returning to virtual imprisonment. "You're right. Thank you both."

"I will speak with Austin today," Dr. Martin said, shaking the hand Luke offered. "Hopefully he will be hired into Carson's team within the week."

"All right." Turning to Phelan, Luke shook her hand as well. "I hope I'll see you both again soon."

"As do I." Dr. Martin smiled, and Luke thought it seemed a little sad. "May we all find what we seek."

Luke started toward the door, then stopped and turned around. "Dr. Martin, please don't tell Austin about my ... my abilities."

The older man's eyebrows went up. "It's not my place to divulge such information, my boy. That is up to you."

Luke nodded. "Thank you."

Turning away, he felt oddly relieved. He'd already begun to think of Austin as belonging to him, so he knew he'd have to tell Austin eventually. But not yet. Not yet.

Phelan followed Luke out onto the deck, her low heels clicking on the wood. Luke wondered how she managed to walk around a boat in heels and make it look easy.

"Thank you again for taking me to him," Luke said, handing her the blanket and climbing onto the ladder leading into the water. "It's not exactly what I'd expected, but somehow I think this will work."

She smiled. "Goodbye, Luke. Be careful."

Climbing down the ladder, Luke slipped into the water, shifted, and shot off toward the spot where Taggart was supposed to meet him with the motorboat. This time, he couldn't

even appreciate the pleasure of gliding through the sea, and of truly belonging there. All he could think of was Austin, and what they were about to do together.

He hoped he was doing the right thing, and that he and Austin would both survive it.

* * * * *

Dr. Martin was standing at the porthole staring out at the light drizzle pattering on the water when the faint clack of Phelan's heels sounded behind him. "He's gone, sir," she said. "Shall I call Mr. Bell now?"

"I'll call him after we return to port." Glancing over his shoulder, he gave his assistant a smile. "Audra my dear, you should have been a detective. Finding Austin Bell was a brilliant bit of work."

"It wasn't that difficult. Apparently, going to the barrier islands alone and returning with a naked man isn't a usual occurrence around here. Austin's landlady was telling everyone who would listen. All I had to do was be in the right place at the right time, and ask the right questions." Phelan walked over to stand beside him. "Please be sure to emphasize the need for caution when you talk to Mr. Bell. It was far too easy to follow his activities since his encounter with Luke."

Martin laughed. "He had no reason to believe anyone was paying attention, or would think anything of it. I'm sure he'll understand that he needs to be careful during this mission."

Phelan glanced at him. "Are you sure he'll accept this offer?"

"Well, I plan to offer him a large sum of money, which he certainly needs. But the real draw for him will be Luke." Dr. Martin turned to look at Phelan. "I believe Luke and Austin are destined mates. The pull they feel to each other is too strong to be anything else."

"Are you going to tell Luke about his heritage?"

"Yes, of course."

"When?" Phelan's expression was solemn. "He deserves to know, Andrew."

"Yes, he does. But the timing needs to be right, if his mission is to succeed."

"Of course. It just seems wrong to keep so much from him."

Dr. Martin sighed. "I know, Audra. I feel the same. It saddens me that Luke knows nothing of his people, or what happened to them, and that I know but can't tell him yet. However, you know as well as I that the idol is the only thing that can help him now. If I tell him now about the history of his people, and what his adopted father did to them, how do you think he would react? What would you do, if you were in his place?"

"I'd kill Carson in his sleep," she said softly, staring out the porthole. "Austin's phone number is in the folder with the other information. I've contacted Simmons, who's watching him today. He tells me Austin is home."

“Very good. Thank you.” Dr. Martin laid a hand on Phelan’s shoulder. “Let’s get back to port now. I’d like to begin planning for when Luke and Austin retrieve the idol.”

“You’re that certain they’ll be able to find it?”

“I am. Now more than ever. Luke feels the call of the idol. He is still connected to it, as all of his people were. He and his mate will find it. I’ve no doubt of that.”

Phelan didn’t say anything else, but Martin knew what she was thinking. He could see it in her face. She’d been with him at the museum in Boston two years ago, when the strange woman had appeared from nowhere and set them on the path that ended here, in the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The woman whose name they’d never learned, who’d told them a tale no one but he and Phelan would ever have believed. A tale spanning thousands of years. A tale of magic, of duty and sacrifice, love and happiness and steadfast purpose, all cut short by the greed of one man. The man who’d murdered so many of her people in cold blood, and stolen one of their children.

Part of Martin wished he could tell the woman that Luke still lived. Another part of him was glad she would never see the abuse the boy had suffered at Carson’s hands.

With a soft sigh, Phelan turned from the porthole. Her dark eyes were wide and sad. “How long does he have, do you think?”

“Long enough. I hope.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Neither spoke. Eventually, Phelan gave him a faint smile and left the room, shutting the door behind her. Dr. Martin made his way to the sofa and sank into it. Closing his eyes, he said a silent prayer for Luke and Austin.

He knew they would find the idol. What he didn’t know was whether they would be able to recover it and get away without Carson finding out, or Luke’s eventual fate overtaking them.

The idol can save Luke, he reminded himself. It can save them both.

In his heart, he knew it was true. Resting his head against the back of the sofa, he put all worry temporarily out of his mind, and slept.

Chapter Four

Austin stood in front of the small metal trailer at the Biloxi docks, his knees shaking. He'd never been so nervous in his life. Whether because he was about to embark on what was essentially a spy mission, or because he was about to see Luke again, he wasn't sure.

Probably a bit of both.

He still couldn't quite believe he was here. When the distinguished professor and his assistant showed up at his trailer the previous day with their story of a priceless crystal idol lost in the depths of the Northern Gulf, he'd laughed. If they needed someone to infiltrate Carson Cordova's expedition and steal the idol out from under him, what would they want with Austin? Wouldn't they be better off with someone who had experience with undercover work?

Then they'd told him about Luke. About how Luke had come to Dr. Martin begging for his protection from Carson's escalating abuse and offering the idol in exchange, thus setting this plan in motion. How Austin's experience and credentials made him the perfect partner for Luke in this, since he wouldn't have to hide anything from Carson's inevitable investigation of him.

Hearing that had driven away the last of Austin's doubts. He'd gladly put his life on the line to help Luke escape from his father. If that meant the chance to pursue the sense of belonging he'd felt in Luke's arms, so much the better.

Of course, the half million dollars Dr. Martin had offered him didn't hurt. However, the money would mean nothing without Luke. It was strange, to feel so sure about something -- about someone -- based on nothing but a mutual hand job and a short conversation, but he didn't question it. He'd learned to take happiness when it was offered to him, and he wasn't about to turn away from something that felt so right.

The door to the trailer banged open, startling Austin out of his thoughts. A middle-aged man in a hunting vest and baseball cap jogged down the steps and crossed the oyster shell parking lot to where the fishing pier and restaurant used to be, giving Austin a narrow-eyed look on the way.

Quit standing here like an idiot, Austin admonished himself as the man passed him. *Just do it.*

Squaring his shoulders, Austin marched up to the trailer and tapped his knuckles against the door.

"It's open," a gruff voice called from inside.

Austin pulled the door open and stepped inside. A hulking man in worn jeans and a gray fleece sweatshirt leaned against a metal desk, his shaved head gleaming in the harsh glare of the fluorescent light overhead. Behind the desk, a woman with graying shoulder-length curls rested her arms on the large piece of paper spread out in front of her. Austin could see the edges of what looked like a map of the northern Gulf between the woman's muscular forearms.

Austin forced himself to smile. "Hi. I'm Austin Bell. I'm, uh, I'm looking for a job."

"We're not hiring," the woman told him. Her voice was flat, with a hint of accent Austin couldn't place.

Austin held the woman's gaze and managed to sound far more confident than he felt. "Word around town is y'all are running some kind of research expedition out past the barrier islands, in the deep water. I have specialty certifications in deep diving, wreck penetration, Heliox and Tri-Mix, among others. I've logged dives up to four hundred feet, and I've been diving in these waters all my life. I could be a lot of help to you."

They both stared at him, not saying a word. It was unnerving. Austin decided to let the desperation he'd felt for the last few months show through. "There's no work here right now. Nothing. I need a job, and I have skills and experience you can use. At least give me a chance, huh?"

The two glanced at each other. "Let's see your dive log," the man said, holding out his hand.

Digging the dive log out of the inside pocket of his jacket, Austin handed it over. The man's eyebrows went up as he flipped through it, and Austin fought not to grin. He was as good as hired.

The man handed the log to his female companion without a word, and stood staring at Austin while she looked through it. "He has a great many deep cave dives," she said, glancing up at her coworker. "That could come in handy."

"I have level three cave diving certification," Austin chimed in.

The man glared at him. Austin quieted down, but didn't drop his gaze. "Give us your address and phone number," the man grunted. "We'll think it over and call you."

Austin took the pen and notepad the man handed him and scribbled down his name, address, and phone number. "I'll be home most any time. If I'm not there, just leave a message."

"Give us a couple of days." Handing the dive log back to Austin, the man pocketed the paper with Austin's information on it.

"Sure thing." Austin grinned nervously at the glowering man and silent woman. "I'll look forward to hearing from you, M ... "

The man's brows drew together in a frown. "Smith. Mr. Smith."

"Mr. Smith. Okay." Backing toward the door, Austin nodded toward the woman whose name he still didn't know. "Nice to meet y'all."

Neither of them returned the sentiment. Austin opened the door and escaped into the thin February sunshine with a sense of relief. He hoped everyone he'd have to work with wouldn't be so unpleasant. It was going to be hard enough to keep his secrets without the extra tension of being surrounded by people like Mr. Smith and the unnamed woman.

Austin laughed as he jogged across the road and headed for the coffee shop across the street from the docks. "Mr. Smith" clearly wanted Austin to know he wasn't giving his real name, though Austin couldn't quite figure out why. Intimidation tactics, maybe. He could see why that would scare most people away.

Of course, Austin wasn't most people. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain, and he wasn't about to be driven away by a couple of frowns and a lot of reticence. Not that Mr. Smith and his companion knew that. Nor were they likely to find out, if they hired him, and Austin was confident they would. They were sure to have people on their team with deep diving experience, but he was certain they didn't have anyone who had his familiarity with the area.

"They'll hire me," he mumbled as he hurried inside the blessedly warm coffee shop.

"Hire?" A tall woman with short black hair turned from her work wiping down tables and grinned at him. "Austin, you found a job?"

"Hi Susan. Yeah, I think so. I hope so, anyway. They'd be nuts not to hire me."

She squealed and clapped her hands. "Cool! Sit, I'll get you an espresso, on the house."

Laughing, Austin gave her a brief hug. "Thanks, that'd be great."

She kissed his cheek and hurried off. Plopping into the nearest chair, Austin leaned his elbows on the table and smiled to himself. "Soon, Luke," he whispered. "Soon."

* * * * *

"Soon" turned out to be sooner than Austin thought it would be. The sun had barely risen the next morning when Austin was jolted from sleep by the phone ringing. Rolling onto his side, he groped for the receiver, fumbled it off the cradle and pressed it to his ear.

“Lo?” he mumbled, eyes still closed.

“Austin Bell?”

“Mm-hm.” Austin yawned and scratched his chest. “Who’s this?”

“This is Smith,” the voice said, sharp and clipped. “You’re hired. Be at the dock by ten. We leave for *El Cazador* at eleven. Don’t be late.”

“I’ll be there, sir. Thank...” The line went dead. Austin lifted the receiver and stared at it. “Thank you.”

Setting the receiver back in the cradle, Austin yawned again and stretched. He always slept nude, even in the winter, and the sheets rubbed wonderfully against his bare skin. The three thick blankets weighed on his body, creating a pleasant pressure against his crotch.

Closing his eyes again, he tried to recapture the fading remains of the dream he’d been having when he was so rudely awakened. He’d been dreaming of Luke. Luke’s body writhing underneath him, long legs clasped around his waist, black eyes wide open and staring into his. The image was incredibly vivid, making Austin’s cock ache.

In a few hours I’ll see him again, Austin thought, slipping a hand down to stroke his erection. He sighed and spread his legs, imagining Luke’s fingers wrapped around his shaft, squeezing and pulling, teasing his slit. *Luke. Need you.*

It didn’t take long before the orgasm curled at the base of his spine. Kicking the covers off, Austin gazed down the line of his body through slitted eyes, watching his hand on his cock and wishing it were Luke’s. He came after a couple more hard pulls, moaning Luke’s name.

He lay there panting for a few minutes. When he was able to move again, he hauled himself out of bed and shuffled toward the bathroom.

He chuckled as he turned on the shower. “You’ve got it bad, boy. Already imagining happily ever after with someone you barely know.”

He ignored the little voice in his head that insisted on reminding him of the danger he and Luke both faced. A danger they might not survive. Dwelling on that possibility wouldn’t help.

Pushing the thought firmly to the back of his mind, Austin focused on planning as much as he could for the coming days.

* * * * *

At five minutes till ten, Austin jogged up the steps of the unmarked trailer at the docks and rapped on the door. When Mr. Smith’s voice called to him to come in, he pulled the door open and eased inside.

“Hi, Mr. Smith,” Austin said, setting his duffle bag on the floor and plastering a smile on his face. “Thanks for hiring me. Y’all won’t regret it.”

The man picked up a stack of papers and handed them to Austin. "Fill these out. When you're done, hand 'em to Jones over there." He gestured toward a blank-faced young woman filing papers on the other side of the room. "She'll take your picture and issue you an I.D. badge. Always wear your badge, except when you're in the water. Got that?"

"Yes sir." Austin glanced at the papers as Mr. Smith headed for the trailer door. They looked like standard forms for any new hire. "Sir, do I need my dive equipment or do you issue equipment on board?"

"Got a snorkel and regulator?"

"In my bag." Austin nudged his duffle bag with his foot. "I brought my drysuit too. Wasn't sure if y'all would have extras."

To Austin's surprise, Smith smiled. It was rather grim and looked distinctly uncomfortable on his face, but it was a smile nonetheless. Austin hadn't thought him capable of it.

"Good man," Smith said, yanking the door open. "That's all you need. We have Heliox, tanks and all the gear on board. When you get your I.D., come out to berth ten. Taylor'll check your badge before you come aboard. Any questions?"

Austin shook his head. Smith left without another word. Glancing around, Austin found a folding chair and pulled it up to the desk. He grimaced as he started filling out the paperwork. The Biloxi docks had been mostly destroyed by Katrina. The shrimp boats lucky enough to survive the storm filled most of the few berths left, but Austin had seen no less than five boats with Carson Cordova's business logo on them. Five berths that were needed by locals, and taken by Carson. He had money; the local fishermen didn't. *And money talks*, Austin thought bitterly.

He remembered the two hundred thousand dollars recently added to his bank account, and it made him uncomfortable. He didn't want to be like Carson. Didn't want the money to change him.

It won't, he promised himself, and forced himself to focus on the paperwork in front of him.

A few minutes later, he'd finished filling out the forms. He stood up and cleared his throat to get the attention of the young woman in the corner. "Hey, Jones?"

She looked up, her expression radiating annoyance. "What? Oh, are you done?"

"Yeah." He handed the papers to her. "I guess I'm supposed to get my picture taken now."

"Stand over there," she ordered, nodding toward a blue screen on the opposite wall.

He obediently backed up against the blue screen. Jones picked up a digital camera and snapped a picture before his smile was in place. One look at her sour expression stopped him from asking for another take.

Can't be any worse than your driver's license picture, he thought as Jones plugged the camera into a computer to upload the picture.

A few clicks later, the young woman had a photo printed out and laminated. She slipped a lanyard through the slit at the top of the plastic and handed the new badge to Austin. "You're set. Whatever you do, don't lose this."

"I won't." Austin gave her his biggest, brightest smile, just to watch her scowl deepen. "Thanks. Have a nice day."

Jones stared at him like he'd just sprouted an extra head, then turned back to her filing. Biting back the nervous laughter that wanted to bubble up, Austin picked up his duffle bag and went out into the winter morning.

Passing several berths still undergoing repair, Austin found berth ten and headed down the pier to *El Cazador's* tender. When he got a good look at it, he let out a low whistle.

"That's not a tender," he muttered. "That's a damn yacht."

The impression didn't end when he showed his I.D. badge to the sharp-eyed security guard and stepped on board. The deck and bulwarks were rich, reddish wood. Polished brass fittings graced the hatches. Astern, Austin saw a rack of SCUBA tanks next to the top of a ladder that must lead to a diving platform. Everything looked expensive and well cared for.

A wiry white-haired man in a dark blue wool sweater and jeans led Austin to the forward cabin. Inside, Mr. Smith sat behind a plain wooden desk. He stood and came forward when Austin entered.

"Bell," the man said, shaking the hand Austin offered. "Sit down. I'll go over your duties with you on the way out to *El Cazador*. When we get there, I'll show you to your cabin and let you get settled. Dinner's at eighteen hundred sharp. You'll meet Señor Cordova then, so be on time. Any questions?"

"No, sir." Austin grinned, letting both his nervousness and his excitement show through. "I'm looking forward to getting started, and to meeting Señor Cordova and his ... his crew."

Austin tensed, hoping Mr. Smith wouldn't notice what he'd almost said. *You're not supposed to know Luke even exists*, he reprimanded himself, watching Smith's face.

Luckily, the man didn't seem to notice anything amiss. "Good. When you're dealing with the boss, be on time, be respectful, and keep your mouth shut unless you have a very good reason to talk, and you'll be fine."

Austin let out a shaky laugh. "You're making him sound a little scary."

"He is." Moving back behind the desk, Smith sat down and gestured toward the chair across from him. "Sit down, shut up and pay attention. We have a lot to go over."

Austin was happy enough to have something else to think of. The prospect of seeing Luke again threatened to take over his brain. Placing his duffle bag on the floor, he sat in the chair Smith indicated and prepared to listen.

* * * * *

By the time the tender pulled up alongside *El Cazador*, Austin had taken three pages of notes in the handbook Mr. Smith gave him and was feeling the effects of information overload. If he hadn't heard it all for himself, he would've sworn Smith was incapable of talking for that long without stopping. Luckily, none of it was terribly difficult. Most of his new job seemed to involve basic underwater salvage, which was fine with him. The more time he spent at depth, the better chance he had of finding the idol.

Provided, of course, he could talk to Luke regularly enough to gain information on where to look. There was even the chance that Luke might be his dive partner, at least on occasion. From what Dr. Martin had told him, Luke was kept a virtual prisoner on land, but was generally given his freedom while at sea. It made sense. After all, Austin figured, where would Luke go when they were thirty miles from land? He was as dependent on the ship and the dive equipment as the rest of them.

Once they boarded *El Cazador*, Austin discovered that the imposing vessel was even more richly outfitted than the tender. On the way to the lower decks where the crew cabins lay, Mr. Smith led Austin through upper decks that looked more like a five-star hotel than a working retrieval vessel. Plush carpet, fine furnishings and original artwork decorated the public rooms and unusually wide passageways. Austin stared with wide eyes and open mouth. He'd never seen such luxury on a working vessel before.

"Señor Cordova likes the finer things in life," Smith said, as if in answer to Austin's unspoken thoughts. He led Austin down a wide, curving stairway and a short passageway that opened up into a large recreation area. "This is the commons area for the crew. You got pool, darts, TV and DVD player, and a small library. Cabins are down the passageway on the other side."

Austin nodded nervously at a hard-looking man and woman playing a card game at a small table. "Cool."

"There's not a lot of down time, but when you're off your time's your own." Stepping through the hatch on the far side of the room, Smith led the way down a utilitarian hallway that looked more like what Austin was used to in a ship. "Your cabin's third on the left. It's not the Ritz, but you get a bunk to yourself and a private head. You do your own cleaning."

Austin blinked, surprised. "Wow. I've never been on a ship where I didn't have to share a cabin."

"Señor Cordova can afford it, believe me." Smith opened the third door on the left, revealing a small but pristine room. "Here you go, Bell. Home sweet home. Get your things put away, then come on out to the commons and I'll introduce you around."

"Yes sir." Austin smiled. "Thank you."

Smith grunted and left the room. Austin chuckled as he unzipped his duffle bag and started unpacking. When he first met Mr. Smith, he never would've guessed the man could be at all pleasant. He wasn't someone Austin wanted to spend his free time with, but as a supervisor, he was excellent. At least Smith knew his job, knew Austin's job, and was quite thorough at explaining it. Austin had sure as hell worked for worse.

If only Carson Cordova was as reasonable. Austin didn't hold out much hope for that.

* * * * *

Meeting the rest of the dive team, learning the layout of the ship and getting familiar with the equipment he'd have to use took up most of Austin's afternoon. His fellow divers were a more diverse lot than he'd expected. Six of the ten-member team were men, four were women. They represented five different nationalities and ranged in age from nineteen to sixty. A tendency toward suspicion and an ability to keep their mouths shut seemed to be the only common denominators.

Probably why they were hired, Austin thought as he headed back to his cabin to change for dinner. *Good thing I have the sort of experience they need, or I wouldn't be here. Wouldn't have the chance to help Luke. Maybe wouldn't ever see him again.*

The thought made Austin's stomach roll unpleasantly. He reminded himself that with any luck, he would see Luke in less than thirty minutes, and the sick feeling faded into a fluttering desire.

"Stop it," he ordered, frowning at his swelling crotch. "Maybe later."

Maybe, if he could get Luke alone, just for a few minutes, run his fingers through that soft, pale hair and kiss those beautiful lips, feel Luke's hardness in his palm and hear those low, sweet moans again ... "Stop thinking of that!" Austin muttered, wiping the sudden dew of sweat from his brow. "It's not helping. You have to stay cool, for Luke."

For Luke. For Luke's sake, Austin could control his emotions. He had to, or he and Luke were both dead.

The reminder of the danger he'd willingly placed himself in made Austin's burgeoning erection wilt immediately. Breathing a sigh of relief, Austin started stripping off his work clothes.

A few minutes later, washed and changed, Austin left his cabin and headed up the stairs to the main deck and the bright, spacious dining room. Mr. Smith had told him dinner was casual, but Señor Cordova didn't like work clothes at the dinner table. Lacking any real dress clothes, Austin wore new black jeans, black soft-soled shoes, and a dark red sweater that he knew looked hot on him. He wanted to make a good first impression on his new employer, but mostly he wanted to make Luke's black eyes burn with lust.

"Pathetic, Austin," he murmured as he jogged up the steps.

Mr. Smith met him at the door of the dining room. The man's brown eyes were solemn, his face blank. Austin's insides clenched, wondering if he'd already screwed up somehow.

"Bell." Smith gave him a curt nod. "Señor Cordova wants you to join him at his table for dinner."

Austin gulped. "Oh. Um. Okay. But, why?"

"He always invites new hires to eat with him and his inner circle." Turning and gesturing for Austin to follow, Mr. Smith started toward the other side of the room, where a round table sat next to the picture window. "He likes to get the measure of a person for himself, and he says dining with a person is the best way to do that."

"That makes sense," Austin answered, wishing his voice didn't sound so shaky.

Smith shot him a mirthless smile. "I won't lie to you, Bell. This is going to be one rough dinner. But you'll survive. As long as you're on the up-and-up, you got nothing to worry about."

Austin managed a laugh in spite of the sudden fear zinging through him. "Yeah."

Austin glanced around at the dining room as they crossed to the other side. It was laid out more like a restaurant than a ship's mess, with white linen cloths covering the square tables. The people he'd met that afternoon, as well as some he hadn't met, sat talking quietly. No one was eating yet. Austin wondered what they were waiting for.

At the round table, two men Austin hadn't met yet sat talking with the gray-haired woman who'd been in the trailer with Smith the day Austin applied for the job. All three looked up as Austin and Smith approached.

"This is Austin Bell," Smith said, slapping Austin on the back. "He's our new diver. Bell, meet Dr. Allen, Dr. Jurgensen, and Dr. Perez. They lead the scientific team. You won't see much of 'em after tonight, but when they tell you something you listen."

Austin smiled and nodded. "Hi. Nice to meet y'all."

"Bell, after dinner you're free to do pretty much what you want," Smith told him. "Stay out of areas marked 'restricted.' Report to the stern cabin at oh-six-hundred in the morning for your assignment. Got it?"

"Yes sir," Austin said, lowering himself into the chair Smith indicated. "Thank you, sir."

Smith nodded and walked off, leaving Austin alone with three silent, expressionless scientists.

Clearing his throat, Austin flashed his brightest smile at his companions. "So. Y'all lead the scientific team?"

For a moment, he thought no one was going to answer. Just when he was on the verge of trying again, one of the men -- Dr. Allen -- spoke. "Yes. And what do you do, Mr. Bell?"

Austin shrugged and tried to look harmless. "Me? I'm just a diver. I came begging Mr. Smith for a job, and he hired me."

Dr. Jurgensen raised shaggy white eyebrows. "And what do you bring to this expedition that Carson should allow your hiring?"

"Exactly what I was wondering," Dr. Allen agreed. "Do you have some special knowledge of the -- ow!" He frowned at the woman, Dr. Perez, making his jowls sag even further. "Why'd you kick me?"

She glowered at him, and he shut up. Austin didn't blame him. He'd have shut up too. The woman looked downright dangerous. She turned to him with a reptilian smile. "You were saying, Mr. Bell?"

Austin gulped. "Well, like I told you and Mr. Smith yesterday, I have lots of specialty diving certifications. Deep diving, level three cave diving, Heliox, some others. And I have hundreds of dives in these waters. That's why he hired me."

Dr. Perez nodded, still staring at him in a way that made him feel like he was under an X-ray machine. Dr. Allen sat glaring at her from under his lashes, clearly too afraid to say anything to her. Jurgensen, seemingly unconcerned with any of it, took a sip of his ice water.

Austin took a deep breath and let it out slowly, fighting the urge to get up and go sit somewhere else. Carson Cordova wanted him at this table, which meant he needed to stay put if he wanted to stay on this ship. And he did want to stay. Luke was here on this ship, and where Luke was, that was where Austin belonged. He knew it, deep in his bones.

"Good evening, my friends."

The voice coming from behind Austin was deep and rich, with a heavy Spanish accent. *Oh God, it's him. Carson Cordova.*

"Good evening, Carson," Dr. Perez said. The two male scientists echoed her.

Austin's heart rate tripled. Forcing his face into what he hoped was a relaxed expression, he turned to face his employer and enem and was instantly struck dumb. Luke stood beside his father, wearing snug black pants and a cobalt blue sweater that made his pale skin glow. Wisps of fine white-blond hair brushed his shoulders and caressed the curve of his jaw. His expression was placid, but his eyes blazed with a need Austin understood perfectly.

Austin wanted to throw Luke on the floor and have him, right then and there. He dug his fingers into the arms of his chair and made himself stay put.

Luke's adopted father smiled and took the chair beside Austin. "Mr. Bell. Thank you for joining me tonight. I am Carson Cordova. I assume you've met the good doctors?"

"Yes, sir," Austin answered, tearing his gaze from Luke with a huge effort. "It's great to finally meet you, sir. Thanks for inviting me to eat with you an ... He darted a glance at Luke, who had sat beside his father and was staring at the table. "And, um, everyone else."

Carson's handsome face twisted in a grimace. "This is Luke, my adopted son. You will have to work with him at times."

Heart hammering in his throat, Austin turned to look at Luke. "Cool. Do you dive, Luke?"

Luke glanced up at him, sensual lips curving into a smile. "Yes, I dive. I..."

"My son is certified, of course," Carson interrupted, running a big, square hand over the lapel of his dark gray silk suit. "But he does not often dive these days. His health is quite delicate. Ah, the first course has arrived. Excellent."

Two waiters in white coats set bowls of spicy tomato soup in front of the diners. As Carson turned to address one of them in Spanish, Austin watched Luke from the corner of his eye. Luke kept his eyes downcast, but Austin could see his hurt, his anger and resentment, in the set of his shoulders and the tightness of his jaw. He wished he could go to Luke and just hold him, stroke his hair and kiss his smooth, perfect cheek.

As if hearing Austin's thoughts, Luke looked up, and his gaze locked with Austin's. For one searing second, Austin felt as if he could see right into Luke's mind. It was strangely calming. He smiled, Luke smiled back, and he knew they were thinking the same thing.

Tonight.

Chapter Five

For Luke, dinner that night lasted eons. Predictably, Carson grilled Austin without mercy, inquiring with unfailing politeness about Austin's family, his friends, his prior jobs, his hobbies. Austin answered every question completely and without hesitation, and Luke found himself wondering which parts were fact and which were fiction. It jarred him to realize how little he really knew about Austin, and he resolved to ask Austin later if all the things he'd told Carson were true.

He tried not to think about the things he himself was keeping from Austin. *I'll tell him*, he promised himself. *When the time's right.*

During dessert, conversation moved away from Austin and on to other topics, and Luke's mind began to wander. Thoughts of the things he wanted to do with Austin pulled him further and further into his own fantasies, and he lost track of the conversation. Not that it mattered; his father rarely allowed him to speak anyway. Usually he hated how his father constantly interrupted and spoke for him. Tonight, however, he was grateful. Austin's presence at the table knocked his world thoroughly off center, and he felt incapable of coherent speech.

He's here, Luke thought for about the thirtieth time in the past hour, surreptitiously staring at Austin from under his eyelashes. *He's really here. Right here at this table. And I can't even touch him.*

They would rectify that situation later. Luke knew it, and the look in Austin's eyes said he knew it too.

At first, Luke wondered that the others didn't notice the energy crackling between him and Austin. To Luke, their attraction to each other was painfully obvious. It took him several minutes to realize that he didn't see Austin's emotions in his face; his blandly pleasant expression hadn't changed at all. He knew Austin wanted him -- needed him -- because he

felt it. Their mutual desire was like an exotic perfume whose scent only the two of them could detect.

If he hadn't been concentrating so hard on repressing the urge to launch himself into Austin's arms, Luke figured he would've been more curious about whatever was happening between the two of them. Luke had known he was gay since his early teens. He'd kissed a few men, and once he and one of Father's deck hands had jerked each other off. That was the extent of his sexual experience before Austin. He hadn't felt like this about the deck hand, or the few men he'd kissed before that, but that didn't mean much. Maybe it was normal to feel this way after a sexual encounter. Maybe everyone experienced this longing like an ache in their bones.

Some part of him, though, knew this feeling wasn't a common one. Instinct told him the unexplainable but undeniable bond he felt with Austin was rare and precious. Whatever happened to them in the search for the idol, Luke was grateful that he'd been gifted with this feeling, because it was the best thing he'd ever had.

"Luke!"

Carson's sharp voice startled Luke out of his thoughts. He looked up, and cringed inwardly at the cold anger in his father's eyes. "Yes, Father?"

Carson frowned. "Dr. Allen asked you a question, my son. You will answer when your betters address you."

Heat rose in Luke's cheeks. "I'm sorry, Father."

Carson made an impatient noise. "It is Dr. Allen you must apologize to, not I."

Nodding, Luke turned to face the doctor. "My apologies for my rudeness, sir. What was it you asked me?"

"I just asked what you were doing after dinner, actually." Dr. Allen looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I was wondering if you ... well, you know, if you needed to go swimming. You look a bit tired."

A thin growl trickled from between Carson's lips, and Luke's guts twisted. Dr. Allen would receive a pointed reprimand for referring, however obliquely, to Luke's shifting abilities in front of a new hire. However, the older man's inadvertent slip would make the beating Luke was already going to get even worse.

Luke glanced at Austin. His brow puckered in a slight frown, but he said nothing, and Luke was grateful for that. "I'm fine, Dr. Allen, thank you for your concern." Luke forced a smile. "I'm afraid I was just thinking and was not paying attention. It was rude of me. Again, I apologize."

"No need to apologize, my boy." Dr. Allen cast an apprehensive glance at Carson. "We all get lost in our thoughts sometimes."

Carson's eyes narrowed. For a moment, Luke thought his father was about to hit him right there at the table, something he rarely did, and never in front of a new employee. Then

Carson's face relaxed into a smile, and Luke breathed a silent sigh of relief. He'd still be beaten when he and Father were alone after dinner, but at least Austin wouldn't see it. Something told him Austin's tight control might shatter in the face of Carson's overt violence.

"Well. Luke and I have much to discuss, and I'm sure the rest of you are anxious to begin your evening off." Rising to his feet, Carson gave a slight bow in Austin's direction. "Thank you for consenting to share our table this evening, Mr. Bell. It is a pleasure to have you aboard."

"Thanks for having me, sir," Austin answered, scrambling to his feet. "I'm very happy to be here. *El Cazador* is a fantastic ship."

"She certainly is." Carson laid a hand on Luke's shoulder. "Come along, my son. We need to talk."

Luke didn't want to go. He longed to go with Austin to his cabin, to feel Austin's gentle caresses instead of his father's fists. *Later*, he promised himself. *Austin and I will be together, tonight, even if I have to shift first to heal myself. We'll be together.*

The thought brought him a measure of comfort. Pushing his chair back, Luke stood and smiled at the others. "Goodnight doctors. Austin, it was nice to meet you. I hope we'll be able to talk more soon."

Austin's eyes widened just a little. Luke couldn't tell if it was because he'd understood Luke's unspoken promise to see him later, or because he'd realized what Carson was about to do and was afraid for Luke's safety. Luke's father took his elbow in a firm grip and steered him out of the dining room, and Luke began the process of preparing himself mentally and physically for the pain to come.

* * * * *

Luke's head hit the edge of his father's desk with a resounding crack. He fell to the floor, agony flaring through his skull as his head bounced against the carpet. Blood splattered across the gray sisal. Luke stared at the bright red spots, wondering if he'd be punished for the stains.

"Stupid boy," Carson growled, pacing back and forth about a foot from Luke's nose. "You know Dr. Allen forgets himself at times. How dare you arouse his concern? In front of a new employee, no less. What if Dr. Allen had spoken of your ... affliction, and that boy had heard him? Everything I've worked for could have been destroyed. Do you understand that? Everything!"

That last was punctuated by a kick to Luke's stomach. He curled into a ball, coughing more blood onto the carpet. His ears rang, his vision fading in and out. The bright, flaring pain in his head told him his skull was fractured.

His father's Italian loafers stopped pacing and planted themselves in front of Luke's face. "Go to the ocean. Shift and heal yourself, then go directly to your cabin. You will take your meals in your quarters from now on. During the day, you will busy yourself with your research into the idol. You will dive as an octopus at night, and you will find my treasure or die trying. Do you understand?"

Pushing himself onto hands and knees, Luke nodded. "Yes. Sir."

"Good." Carson yanked Luke to his feet, dragged him to the door and shoved him into the hallway. "Get out of my sight."

Stepping back into his office, Carson slammed the door shut. Luke leaned against the wall, fighting to stay conscious. Keeping one hand on the wall, he took a tentative step in the direction of the ladder to the main deck. The floor tilted, the hallway swinging in front of his eyes, and he fell to his knees.

"Fuck," he whispered, tears of frustration blurring his vision. *Have to get up. Have to get to the deck. Need to shift. God, pleas ...*

Footsteps sounded in the passageway, coming toward him. Panic surged through him. Unable to stand, he started crawling away, toward the nearest empty room.

A gasp and the sound of running feet told him he'd been caught. With no way to avoid whoever it was, he sat down, resting his back against the wall.

"Christ, kid! What happened?"

Smith. His father's foreman. He knew exactly what had happened. Everyone on board knew. Carson hadn't bothered to hide it for years.

Luke laughed, sending fresh waves of pain through his insides. "I fell."

"Shouldn't fall so much, kid. Gonna get killed one day."

Surprised, Luke blinked up at Smith with the eye that wasn't swollen shut. Smith's stony face betrayed nothing, but Luke's instincts told him to trust the man. After all, Smith was one of the few non-scientists on board who knew Luke was a shifter.

"Help me get to the deck," Luke pleaded, his voice weak and breathy. "Please? Have to get into the water."

Smith's jaws clenched, but he nodded. "Sure. Here, hang on to me."

With Smith's muscular arm around his waist, Luke struggled to his feet. Vertigo whirled in his head. Swallowing against a violent wave of nausea, Luke clung to Smith and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

It took them nearly ten minutes to make it the few yards to the nearest stair and down to the main deck. Outside, Luke curled his fingers around the metal rail and breathed deeply of the salty night air. The damp cold felt soothing against his battered skin.

"Thanks, Smith." Luke managed a smile. "I'm okay now."

Smith nodded, turned and left without another word. Luke watched him go. He was a good sort, when it came right down to it. Not much to say, of course, but that wasn't always a bad thing.

Lowering himself carefully to the deck, Luke sat down and started pulling off his clothes. Normally he would've gone to the dive platform, but he didn't think he could make it that far. He'd just have to take the chance that the rest of the crew would stay below.

Stashing his clothes under a nearby tarp, Luke slipped under the railing and plunged naked into the ocean below. As soon as the icy water closed over him, he shifted. Instantly, the pain faded from his head and belly as the damaged tissues knit together. He glided into the inky blackness, reveling in the strength and energy of his octopus form.

I could stay like this forever. He often fantasized about that while swooping with effortless grace through the water. He'd always gone back to his human form in the end, knowing he didn't have the skills to survive as a full-time sea creature and unsure whether he'd be able to maintain that form indefinitely in any case. Now, he had a whole new reason to go back.

Austin.

The second he thought of Austin, the need to be with him tugged at Luke's insides. He obeyed that silent call without question, jetting back to *El Cazador* with a few pumps of his mantle.

Hanging underneath the ladder to the dive platform, Luke scanned the visible deck as best he could from underwater. No one was in sight. He shifted and shimmied up the ladder. Grabbing a thick towel from the hamper, he dried off as quickly as he could. He tolerated the cold much better than most people, but the wind was still chilly on his bare skin and dripping hair.

Wrapping the towel around his waist, he ran silently along the deck. It remained empty. Luke was almost to the spot where he'd left his clothes, and was starting to think he might make it all the way back to his room without seeing anyone, when a dark shape detached itself from the shadows and stepped in front of him.

"Shit!" Luke skidded to a halt mere inches from the person. "Sorry, I'm sorry, I was just going for a swim, I..."

"Luke?"

The soft voice stopped Luke's babbling cold. "Austin? What ... What are you doing out here? It's cold."

Austin laughed. "The wet naked guy is telling me it's cold."

Luke couldn't help smiling. "Yes, well. I have a high tolerance for the cold."

They stared at each other. Luke watched the questions in Austin's eyes melt into a white-hot lust, and was grateful. He wasn't ready to tell Austin about his shifter abilities. Not

yet. When Austin took that final step forward and folded Luke into his arms, Luke went gladly.

"Luke," Austin breathed, his lips just brushing Luke's cheek. "Christ, I need you so damn bad."

Threading a hand through Austin's hair, Luke kissed him hard, darting his tongue into Austin's mouth. "Come to my cabin with me."

Austin groaned, arching his neck so Luke could nibble it. "What if someone sees us going to your cabin? I don't want you to get in trouble. He'll hurt you."

Austin's protectiveness warmed Luke right to his toes. Smiling, he kissed Austin's jaw. "Father doesn't put a guard on my cabin when we're on board the ship. His cabin's on the upper deck, and we shouldn't run into anyone on the way. Most of the crew are sleeping. Only the night bridge crew is on duty right now."

Slipping his knee between Austin's legs, Luke rubbed his bare thigh against Austin's crotch. The sweet little whimper Austin let out made Luke want to throw him to the deck and have him right there. "Please, Austin. I need you." Luke bit Austin's neck, tongue flicking over the skin between his teeth. "Make love to me. Please. Please."

In answer, Austin captured Luke's mouth in a fierce kiss, one hand cupping the back of his head and the other firmly around his waist. "You don't have to beg me. Let's go."

It took a huge effort for Luke to let go of Austin. He wanted to fuse his body with Austin's and become one being. But they had to get inside, before anyone saw them. Taking Austin's hand, Luke led him to the nearest hatch. A quick look revealed an empty passageway.

"Come on," Luke said, tugging Austin inside. "My cabin's not far. Just around the corner."

Austin followed Luke in silence, their fingers laced tightly together. Luke's heart raced and his skin tingled, every nerve on high alert. The fear of discovery honed Luke's senses to razor sharpness. The scent of his excitement, and Austin's, rode the air.

They made it to Luke's cabin without incident. Flinging the door open, Luke dragged Austin inside and kicked the door shut. Austin was on him as soon as he turned around, kissing him like both their lives depended on it. Luke gladly gave himself up to it, opening wide to Austin's probing tongue. His towel came loose and fell to the floor, and he took advantage of his sudden nakedness by rubbing his rigid cock shamelessly against Austin's hip.

Austin shuddered and grabbed a handful of Luke's ass. "What are you?" Austin murmured, brushing his lips against the pulse point in Luke's throat.

Terror cut off Luke's breath and held him paralyzed. *Oh God, he knows.* "What?"

"What are you?" Austin repeated, pulling back to meet Luke's eyes. His smile faded when he saw Luke's face. "I just wanted to know if you're a top or a bottom. What's wrong?"

Relief made Luke's knees weak. He laughed, laying a hand on Austin's cheek. "Nothing. Nothing's wrong." Pulling back, he grabbed Austin's wrist and started backing toward the bed. "I don't know which I am, actually. I've never had sex before."

Austin's mouth fell open. "Really?"

"Yes." Luke sat on the edge of the bed, gazing with mingled amusement and apprehension at Austin's shocked expression. "Is that a problem?"

"No. No, of course not." Lowering himself to the bed beside Luke, Austin traced the outline of Luke's mouth with a fingertip. "It's just hard to believe someone as beautiful as you has never had a lover."

Warmth blossomed in Luke's chest. No one had ever looked at him the way Austin did, with a mix of reverence and heat that made his stomach flutter. Sliding a hand behind Austin's head, Luke leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Austin's mouth.

"I'm glad you're going to be my first," he whispered. "I want you inside me. Is that all right?"

He felt Austin smile against his mouth. "More than all right."

"Good." Luke ran his tongue over Austin's lower lip, then drew away and leaned back on his hands. "Undress."

Austin's gaze stayed locked with Luke's as he stood and quickly shucked his clothes. Luke's mouth went dry when Austin shoved his pants down, revealing a long, straight, thick cock, already leaking at the tip. Luke's palm still burned with the sense memory of Austin's shaft, the silky heat of it, the way it swelled and pulsed when Austin came. However, he hadn't gotten a good look before, and seeing it in all its naked glory was an entirely different thing.

Obedying the sudden urge welling up inside him, Luke slid forward and licked the little pearl of pre-come from Austin's slit. Austin groaned, hands sliding through Luke's hair. "Oh. Luke."

"Mmmm." Luke slid his lips delicately over the head of Austin's prick. He ran his tongue around the smooth glans and under the flared ridge, learning Austin's unique taste as his fingers rolled Austin's balls and stroked the soft skin on the insides of his thighs. Pure pleasure flowed over Luke in a wash of sensation -- the heat of Austin's skin, the musky smell of his desire, the sharp-sweet taste of him bursting on Luke's tongue. Austin's low moans provided the perfect soundtrack for Luke's explorations.

Austin let out a gasp when Luke dipped his head to suck gently on one of Austin's balls. "Oh God. Luke. Damn."

Pleased to have elicited such a reaction, Luke gave the same treatment to the other testicle. When he drew back and looked up, Austin's eyes were glazed, his breath panting from between slack lips. Luke loved knowing he'd done that to Austin. That he could make Austin feel that good.

Scooting into the middle of the bed, Luke leaned back on his elbows and spread his legs wide. The fire in Austin's eyes evaporated any self-consciousness Luke might've had. Under that hot gaze he felt beautiful and desirable, something only Austin had ever made him feel.

"There's lube and condoms in the drawer there beside the bed," Luke heard himself say, feeling vaguely surprised that he sounded so calm when his insides churned with nervousness and need. "Get them and come here."

Austin lifted an eyebrow, but opened the drawer and dug out a condom and a packet of K-Y, both stolen from the infirmary earlier that day. "Were you planning this?"

Luke's cheeks heated. "Not exactly. But I was hoping."

Smiling, Austin knelt between Luke's open legs, leaned down and kissed him. "Me too."

They both laughed, the sound dissolving into moans and whimpers as their kisses became more urgent. Luke dug his fingers into Austin's back, longing to feel the man's weight crushing him. "Austin, fuck me. God, please."

Rolling off of Luke, Austin ran his fingers up and down Luke's thigh in a light, teasing touch. "Lie on your stomach."

Luke obediently rolled over. Anticipation fluttered in his belly. He knew what Austin was about to do, and he wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. His body ached with a desire stronger than he'd ever imagined existed, making ordinary things seem layered with meaning. The sound of the condom packet ripping open seemed unbearably sensual.

The mattress moved. Luke felt Austin's hands on his thighs, gently urging them apart. His skin sizzled where Austin touched him. Austin moved behind him and he held his breath, expecting to feel Austin's finger breaching him. Austin's hands spread his buttocks, but what he felt teasing his hole was no finger. It was warm, slick and wet, and felt incredibly wicked and incredibly good.

"Oh, God!" Luke arched his ass into the air, searching for more of that wonderful sensation. "Oh, I, I didn't ... didn't know ... God, Austi ..."

Austin hummed and pressed the tip of his tongue hard against Luke's entrance. Waves of heat spread through Luke's body, centered on Austin's tongue easing him open, sliding inside him and sending him flying. He'd never imagined anything like this, even in his most fevered fantasies.

When Austin's tongue withdrew, Luke let out an inarticulate cry of protest. The cry faded into a harsh gasp when Austin's lube-slick fingers penetrated him, sending electric jolts shooting over his skin. The mattress dipped as Austin leaned over Luke's back to brush a soft kiss across his temple.

"Are you okay?" Austin whispered, pressing his cheek to Luke's. "I don't want to hurt you."

Luke wriggled, wanting Austin's fingers deeper inside him. "Not hurting me. Feels good. God, so good."

Austin's fingers pulled out, then returned, adding another digit. A fleeting pain zinged through Luke's stretched muscles, so brief he barely had time to register it before it was gone and the pleasure returned. He moaned and pushed back against Austin's hand, forcing his fingers in further. One fingertip brushed something deep in Luke's body, something that sent shockwaves through his blood. He bunched his fists in the sheets, shaking all over.

"Christ, Austin, fuck me, right now!" Luke's voice sounded desperate in his own ears, but he didn't care. He'd never needed anything as badly as he needed Austin inside him.

"Turn over again," Austin said, pressing a kiss between Luke's shoulder blades. "I want to see your face while I'm in you."

Luke managed to flip onto his back without dislodging Austin's fingers from his ass. He reached up and cupped Austin's face in his hands. "Kiss me."

Austin obliged, capturing Luke's mouth in a hungry kiss. "God, you're so fucking beautiful," he murmured. Pulling his fingers out of Luke's hole, he drew back enough to look into his eyes. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Holding Austin's gaze, Luke pulled his legs up to his chest. "Fuck me."

Austin's cheeks went pink. Leaning sideways, he grabbed the lube and slicked his latex-sheathed prick. Cockhead poised at Luke's entrance, Austin went still, staring into Luke's eyes.

"I've dreamed about this," he whispered, and slid his cock deep into Luke's ass.

Luke gasped at the sharp, hard stretch. "Wait. Wait."

Austin held still, stroking Luke's hair and brushing feathery kisses across his face. "It only hurts for a second. It'll pass." He nuzzled Luke's neck, his breath hot and fast on Luke's skin. "It's okay, Luke, it's okay, I'd never hurt you, not ever. Let me in, baby. Let me in."

The needy tremor in Austin's voice made Luke feel more wanted than he'd ever known he could. He kissed Austin's neck, tasting sweat and sea-salt and desire. After a moment, the tight burn in his ass eased, leaving pure need behind. Moaning, he canted his hips upward and wound his legs around Austin's waist.

Austin got the message. Watching Luke's face, he pulled partway out, then pushed slowly, relentlessly inside. Luke felt Austin's hardness filling him up, dragging across his gland and setting him on fire, and it was the best thing he'd ever known.

"God, you feel good." Austin's voice was rough, his eyes hazed with pleasure. "Not ... not gonna last."

"Don't try." Bracing his heels against Austin's back, Luke lifted his hips to meet Austin's thrusts. "Want it hard. Give it to me."

"Shit," Austin groaned, and slammed into Luke with enough force to push him several inches across the mattress.

Luke tightened his legs around Austin and hung on, bracing himself with a hand on the wall behind his head. He heard himself babbling, a string of inarticulate pleas and broken obscenities, and could hardly believe it was him, that he'd shed his usual careful and silent self to become this wanton new person.

In spite of how much he'd wanted this, he'd been a little afraid of it. Not so much of the pain, which had been no more than he'd expected, but of making himself vulnerable, physically and emotionally. Ever since he'd stolen his first porn magazine from a crew member when he was thirteen, he'd realized sex was about giving up a part of yourself. He'd always believed it would mean losing that part forever.

He'd never dreamed that giving himself could mean gaining so much more. That it could make him feel this complete.

"God. Close." Austin hooked an arm under Luke's knee, changing the angle so that he nailed Luke's gland hard with every thrust. "Gonna come."

"Oh ... Me ... me too," Luke panted. Wrapping a hand around his cock, he peeled the foreskin back and rubbed his thumb over the head. "Hard ... Fuck me ... harder ... Christ, yes!"

Pushing up on his hands, Luke's left leg slung over his shoulder, Austin pounded into Luke's ass in a punishing rhythm, and it was exactly what Luke needed. Tingling tendrils spread from his ass to his cock, up his belly and down his thighs. His legs began to shake, his balls drawing up tight as the orgasm built inside him.

Rearing up, he latched his mouth onto Austin's just in time to stifle the scream bubbling up from his chest. He came in a hot, sticky rush, coating his hand and belly, pushing his keening cries into Austin's mouth. His hips moved of their own volition, his hole clamping Austin's prick in rhythmic waves. Austin let out a strangled groan. He went still, his cock buried to the root in Luke's ass, shaft swelling and pulsing against Luke's hole as he came.

For a timeless moment, they held that position, Austin buried deep inside Luke with Luke's legs tangled around him, kissing soft and slow as they came down together. When the tightness ran out of Austin's body and he collapsed to the bed, Luke gathered him into his arms, holding him and whispering endearments against his sweat-soaked hair.

"Good lord, that was incredible," Austin sighed. Lifting his head from Luke's chest, he flashed a lazy, sated grin. "Was it good for you?"

Luke laughed. "Oh yes. Most definitely."

Austin's expression turned serious. "I just deflowered you. I wanted it to be special for you. I wanted it to be good. More than good."

A lump rose in Luke's throat. He caressed Austin's cheek, thumb stroking the corner of his kiss-swollen mouth. "It was amazing, Austin. Amazing. I never knew I could feel like that. Like I was flying. It was even better than..." He stopped, biting back what he'd been

about to say. Better than shifting, better than soaring through the ocean, better than being strong and free and alive.

“Better than what?” Austin asked, giving Luke a teasing smile as he slid carefully out of Luke’s ass. Removing the condom, he tied it off and threw it in the trashcan next to the bed. “Come on, tell me. It’s good for my ego.”

Luke returned Austin’s smile. “Better than anything,” he answered. Just because it wasn’t the whole truth didn’t make it any less true.

Laughing, Austin leaned in and kissed Luke’s lips. One kiss melted into another, and another. Luke didn’t want it to ever end. He didn’t have the words to describe how Austin’s kiss made him feel. Strong and centered and peaceful, as if he could do anything he put his mind to. This feeling, he knew, could become an addiction. Whether it sustained him or destroyed him depended entirely on what he did with it.

Luke smiled as Austin broke the kiss and cuddled against him, face buried in his neck. Luke was a survivor. He always had been. This thing with Austin, this unexplainable but undeniable connection, had the potential to make both of them stronger than they could ever be on their own. Luke was determined to make that happen. Resting his cheek against Austin’s hair, he closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

Chapter Six

Austin woke with a start some hours later. The room was pitch black and utterly silent. He lay staring into the dark, wondering what had woken him. Then a soft murmur sounded from somewhere beside him in the bed, and he realized two important things -- he was still in Luke's bed, and Luke was talking in his sleep.

Reaching blindly toward the sound, Austin wound an arm around Luke's waist and pulled him close, spooning his lover against his chest. Luke whimpered. His body trembled, his breath coming far too fast.

Austin frowned. "Luke?" he whispered. "Are you all right?"

If Luke heard, he didn't let on. Curling up tighter, he let out a string of words in a language Austin didn't understand, but had heard before. A language Luke had spoken the last time he'd been asleep in Austin's presence. Austin held his breath and listened.

The words tumbling lightning-quick from Luke's lips were soft and musical, but his voice held a thread of heartbreaking loneliness that made Austin want to shield him from the world. Austin listened as long as he could stand to, though he couldn't understand a word. But when Luke jerked in his arms and let out a quiet sob, he couldn't do it anymore.

"Luke," he said, gently shaking Luke's shoulder. "Wake up, okay? Wake up."

Luke went still. "Austin?"

The uncertainty in Luke's voice made Austin's chest hurt. "Yes. I'm here." He kissed the back of Luke's neck, rubbed his hand in slow circles over the tense muscles in Luke's abdomen. "You okay?"

Luke nodded, his hair tickling Austin's face. "I have nightmares sometimes. I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's okay." Austin stroked Luke's hip, marveling at the downy softness of his skin. "You were talking in your sleep."

Luke tensed. "What did I say?"

"I don't know." Sliding his hand up Luke's body, Austin caressed the curve of his shoulder. "You were talking in some language I couldn't understand."

Luke's reaction was startling. Breaking out of Austin's embrace, he shoved Austin's hands away and bounded from the bed with a squeak of springs. Austin heard the faint pad of bare feet on carpet. The lamp on the dresser clicked on, revealing Luke's wide-eyed, frightened face.

Blinking in the sudden brightness, Austin watched Luke pace the floor. "Luke? What's wrong?"

"You couldn't understand what I was saying?"

"No."

"Not any of it? Not even a little?"

"Not a word. It was some kind of other language." Sitting up, Austin reached out and grabbed Luke's hand as he passed. "Luke, what is it? Talk to me."

Luke stopped, staring at the floor. A veil of white-blond hair hid his face. With a sigh, Luke sat beside Austin, lacing their fingers together. "I've always had these dreams. But since we've been here, in the Gulf, they've been especially vivid. And they're always the same. Every time." Luke raised his face, pinning Austin with an intense stare. "They have something to do with ... He stopped, brow furrowing. "They're related to my past, Austin. I'm sure of it. But all I can remember when I wake up is random images. I wish I could make sense of it."

Austin brushed a lock of hair from Luke's eyes. "Maybe it would help if you told me about what you see in your dreams."

Luke was quiet for a moment, staring into the middle distance. Austin had the distinct feeling he was trying to decide how much to say. It hurt a little that Luke evidently didn't trust him enough to tell him the whole thing, but Austin suppressed it. *We barely know each other*, he reminded himself. *Give him time. You both have to learn how to be together, just like any other couple.*

"It starts out on an island," Luke said, his voice soft. "I think it's in the tropics somewhere. The water's so blue and warm. There are other people there, people I feel close to, but when I wake up I can never remember what they look like."

"What happens next?" Austin asked when Luke fell silent again.

"I get several flashes of this island and the people, like snapshots." Luke bit his lip, black eyes filling with sadness. "Then there's darkness, and a loud sound, like an explosion. And I hear screaming in my head, and the water's full of ... of dead bodies, I can't see them properly but I know they're the bodies of my family and friends."

"Jesus." Winding an arm around Luke's shoulders, Austin pulled him close and kissed his forehead. "That's awful."

Luke nodded and rested his head on Austin's shoulder. "I always wake up after that. But I wish I wouldn't."

"Why?" Austin asked, surprised. "I'd think you'd be glad to wake up after such an awful dream."

"Well, yes, I'm glad to be out of that part of it. But I feel like there's more. I feel like if I could only see it through to the end, what I'd learn would change everything." Lifting his head, Luke gazed into Austin's eyes. "This dream, it's important somehow."

"How so?"

Luke stared thoughtfully at their intertwined fingers. "I feel like I belong there, on that island in my dream, with those people. That feels very real to me, Austin. I think ... I think this dream is somehow connected to my past. I think it's trying to tell me what happened to my family, and why I..."

Luke abruptly broke off. He didn't move, didn't say anything more, but Austin felt the sudden tension rolling off him in waves. Austin frowned. "Why you what? Why you ended up with that complete bastard who has the nerve to call himself your father?"

Luke's head snapped up. He blinked, and nodded. "Yes. Yes, that's what I meant. The dream is trying to show me how I ended up with Father."

"So you think it's more than an ordinary dream? You really believe you have some sort of knowledge of your past locked in your head, and the dream is somehow expressing that?" The thought made Austin's heart race. He knew very little about Luke's past, but Dr. Martin had told him that Carson Cordova adopted Luke when he was a toddler, and that no one outside of Carson's inner circle had any idea where Luke had come from. Evidently Luke himself had been kept in the dark about it. Austin could only imagine how Luke must feel, believing the key to his past lay in his dream but unable to make any sense of it.

"I think so. Austin, I thin ... Luke stopped and pulled his legs up onto the bed, sitting cross-legged to face Austin. "The dreams have been getting longer and more detailed lately. More real, as if the things they're showing me actually happened."

"Oh, my God." Austin's eyes widened as the meaning of what Luke was saying came to him. "You think the dreams are actually suppressed memories."

"Exactly." Luke sighed. "But they're still just disjointed images, in spite of their clarity. They make no sense to me in any concrete way."

"Have you tried keeping a dream journal?" Austin wondered. "Maybe that could help you figure it all out."

Luke gave him a curious look. "A dream journal? What's that?"

"Basically it's just writing down your dreams as soon as you wake up. Keep a notebook and pen beside your bed, and the second you wake up from one of these dreams, write down every single thing you can remember." Lifting Luke's hand, Austin kissed the tips of his fingers. "Reading it later might trigger your memory. Writing it down in the first place

definitely solidifies it in your mind. I kept a dream journal for a while, after Uncle Ray died. I was having nightmares about drowning. The journal helped me work through all the shit behind the nightmares, and helped me get rid of them.”

“Maybe I’ll try that. I’d like to understand these dreams, and learn whatever it is they’re trying to teach me.” Luke laid a hand on Austin’s cheek. “I meant to ask you last night how much of what you told my father about your background was true. It’s such a sad story.”

Austin smiled. Curling his legs underneath him and turning to face Luke, he leaned forward and lightly kissed Luke’s lips. “It was all true. But I’ve never thought of it as a sad story.”

“But your parents abandoned you.” Scooting closer, Luke spread his legs and looped his calves loosely around Austin’s hips. “That’s very sad.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But Aunt *Jessamine* and Uncle Ray were wonderful to me. Aunt Jess still calls me every week, from her sister’s house in Alabama. My parents did wrong by me, but maybe I had a better life for it. I don’t know.” Austin wound his arms around Luke’s waist and pulled Luke up to straddle his lap. He grinned at the startled expression on Luke’s face. “I don’t feel like my life has been sad. And now I have you. That’s not sad at all.”

Luke’s blushing smile was something Austin wanted to see every single day for the rest of his life. “Austin. I’m so glad we found each other.”

“Me too. Come here.” Sliding his hand into Luke’s hair, Austin tilted his head and covered Luke’s mouth with his.

The kiss went from tender to hungry in seconds. Austin cupped Luke’s face in his hands and devoured his mouth. Luke’s tongue tangled with his, hot and slick and eager. Austin was hard in seconds. He rubbed his erection against Luke’s ass, drinking down Luke’s resulting whimpers like nectar.

“God, Austin,” Luke groaned, pushing his stiff cock into Austin’s belly. “I want you so bad.”

“Yeah. I want you too.” Austin licked a long line up Luke’s throat, thinking that ‘want’ was far too mild a word for what he was feeling. It went beyond lust, beyond any sexual desire he’d ever experienced. His bones ached with it, with a need so strong it overpowered everything else.

Right then, Austin’s mission had ceased to exist, Dr. Martin and Carson Cordova and the idol were forgotten. At that moment, Austin’s universe consisted of the man in his arms, and the burning need to hold him, love him and keep him and drive him out of his mind with pleasure.

Luke threw his head back and gasped when Austin’s fingers closed around his shaft. “Ah, God! Close. Gonna come.”

A sudden thought struck Austin, and he went with it. Letting go of Luke's cock and ignoring his mewl of protest, Austin pushed Luke gently onto his back. "Don't come til you're in my mouth."

Luke's eyelids fluttered, pale cheeks flushing. "Austin ... God, the things you do to me."

Austin's chest tightened. Lacking the words to tell Luke what he felt, he spread Luke's thighs and dove between them, swallowing his lover's cock to the root.

"Oh God!" Luke's fingers fisted in Austin's hair. "God. Fuck."

Austin hummed, making Luke squirm helplessly. Sticking a finger into his mouth alongside Luke's shaft, Austin coated it with saliva, then slid the slippery digit into Luke's hole. Luke bucked his hips so hard it nearly dislodged Austin's mouth from his prick. Austin held him down with an arm across his pelvis and kept sucking, pressing his finger deep to find the little hidden gland and stroke it.

When Austin wormed the tip of his tongue under the edge of Luke's foreskin, Luke nearly came off the bed. "Fuck! Fuck, God, coming, oh, oh fuck!"

A flood of warm semen filled Austin's mouth as Luke came, his wail muffled by the hand he'd pressed over his mouth. Austin swallowed every salty-bitter drop, loving it because it was a part of Luke.

Austin crawled over Luke's body, leaned down and kissed him. "Wow. I like making you come in my mouth."

"Mmmm." Luke wound both arms around Austin's neck and gave him a loopy smile. "That was amazing. I'd like to do that to you. Will you let me?"

Just the thought was nearly enough to make Austin come without even being touched. "Hell yeah, you can. If you're sure that's what you want."

"I'm sure." Luke sucked Austin's bottom lip like a piece of candy. "I want your cock in my mouth, Austin. I want to know what your come tastes like."

Austin tried to answer and couldn't, but Luke seemed to understand the plea in his eyes. Rolling Austin onto his back, Luke started kissing his way down Austin's neck and chest, detouring to suck each nipple briefly into his mouth. He trailed kisses, licks and soft little bites over Austin's belly, meandering his way to Austin's groin. By the time Luke's lips closed over the head of his cock, Austin was so close he had to fight off the orgasm that wanted to overtake him at the touch of Luke's tongue.

"Oh God," Austin moaned, fighting off the urge to shove his prick down Luke's throat. "God, yes, your mouth feels so damn good."

Luke looked up at Austin. The sight of him like that, luscious mouth stretched wide around Austin's shaft and black eyes hot with desire, was enough to send Austin over the edge. The orgasm hit him before he could utter a word of warning. He came so hard his vision sparkled, the world going gray around the edges.

Luke gagged, but quickly recovered and managed to swallow most of Austin's semen. The rest ran out the corner of his mouth and dribbled down his chin. He raised his head and gazed at Austin, panting for breath. With his hair mussed, his lips red and swollen, and come dripping down his chin, he looked unbearably sexy.

"That was fantastic," Austin said, answering the question in Luke's eyes. "You have a natural talent for cock-sucking."

Laughing, Luke went into Austin's open arms and kissed him, smearing both their faces with Austin's semen. "You taste wonderful," Luke murmured, licking the spunk off of Austin's lips. "I tasted my own once. It wasn't like yours."

The mental picture made Austin's spent cock twitch. "Shit, don't do that to me."

Luke widened his eyes. "Do what?"

"Make me think of you licking up your own spunk." Austin tucked a wayward lock of baby-fine hair behind Luke's ear. "Do you have any idea how hot that is?"

Luke ducked his head, hiding his blush behind a silky blond curtain. "I've never thought of myself that way."

Cupping Luke's face in his hands, Austin stared hard into Luke's eyes. "You are the hottest, sexiest, most gorgeous man I've ever seen. Don't you ever forget that."

Luke's smile lit up the room. "Okay. As long as you remember that I think the same about you."

"Deal."

"Good." Pressing a soft kiss to Austin's lips, Luke rolled off him and sat up. "It's nearly five a.m. You should probably go back to your cabin, before the rest of the crew wakes up. We can't let anyone catch you leaving my cabin."

The reminder made Austin's happy glow fade. "Yeah, you're right. I have to report in at six." Swinging his legs off the edge of the bed, Austin levered himself to his feet. "What're you doing today? And when can I see you again?"

"I'll be spending most of the day doing research in the ship's library and helping plan upcoming dives." Luke stood and started straightening the bedclothes. "Father's making me eat here in my cabin, so we won't see each other at meals anymore. We'll have to figure out a time when we can be alone together, and we'll have to be very careful doing it."

Austin's heart sank. "What about at night? I don't think I can stand to not ever see you, Luke. Besides, we have to be able to get together to talk about the idol, and plan how to get it. Right?"

"Of course." Straightening up, Luke came to Austin and wound his arms around Austin's neck. "I don't think we should spend the night together anymore," he said softly, resting his forehead against Austin's. "It's too dangerous. However, we could spend some time together each night in my cabin. To talk, and to d ... he kissed Austin's mouth, tongue pushing briefly inside, ... ther things."

Austin slid one hand into Luke's hair and the other down his back to squeeze his ass. "Sounds like a plan to me. You don't think we should use my cabin sometimes?"

"Too many other crew members are housed on your hallway." Luke arched his neck, humming as Austin kissed his throat. "The doctors are on this hall, but we won't see them if we time it right. And even if one of them catches us, they won't say anything to Father."

Austin drew back, surprised. "They won't? You're sure?"

"I'm sure." Luke's mouth curved into a bitter smile. "They feel sorry for me, because of how Father treats me."

"I don't blame them." Austin rubbed his cheek against Luke's, breathing in his scent. "Dr. Martin told me about how that bastard abuses you. I hope it's okay that he told me."

"It's okay. It's common knowledge on board anyway."

"I hate him for it."

Luke clutched Austin closer, hands caressing his back. "Come to my cabin tonight around eight. The doctors will be working until nine. We'll compare notes on the day's work, and start working on a plan. Were you able to contact Dr. Martin before you came on board?"

Austin nodded. "I left a message at the number Phelan gave me. She said it was a cell she used just for that purpose, in case your shithead father got my phone records. Not that he would have any reason to, but she figured we shouldn't take the chance."

"He's a smart man."

"He is."

They fell silent, staring into each other's eyes. Luke's face radiated indecision, as if he were trying to find the courage to tell Austin something. A secret he feared would drive Austin away.

Austin was speaking before he consciously acknowledged his decision. "Luke, whatever it is, you can tell me."

Luke's face went dead white, making his eyes seem impossibly huge and blacker than pitch. He licked his lips. "I..."

A knock at the door made them jump apart. "Hide!" Luke hissed, snatching a pair of jeans off a chair and pulling them on. "Whoever it is, I'll get rid of them. Just don't make a sound."

Austin gathered his clothes and ran for the tiny head. He left the door ajar just enough to see the cabin door. Luke came into view, shooting a glance at Austin before opening the cabin door.

Smith stood on the other side. Austin's stomach lurched.

"Good morning, Mr. Smith," Luke said with admirable calm. "How can I help you?"

Smith held out what looked like a pile of crumpled clothes. "Don't leave your clothes on deck when you change. You know what would happen if you let anyone else find out."

Luke winced visibly, and Austin frowned. *What the hell?*

"Thank you," Luke said, taking the clothes from Smith. "I'll be more careful."

"You do that." Smith's eyes swept the room, quick and efficient. Austin wondered if he imagined Smith's gaze lingering on his hiding place. "There's a meeting in the board room at four this afternoon, to go over today's dives and your research, and plan what you're doing tonight."

"I'll be there. Thank you."

Smith nodded once and left, pulling the door shut behind him. Luke sagged against it, shoulders slumped. Austin pushed the bathroom door open and walked toward Luke. A thousand questions echoed in his mind, but he didn't know how to ask any of them. He dressed in silence. Luke never looked up. After he'd pulled his shoes on, Austin wrapped his arms around Luke, tilted his chin up and kissed him.

"I'll see you tonight," Austin murmured.

Relief flashed through Luke's eyes, mingled with a contradictory disappointment. As if he wanted Austin to find out his secret, but at the same time was afraid of it.

Luke smiled and squeezed Austin's hands as he pulled away. "Okay. Be careful on the dive today."

"I will." Austin hesitated, not knowing exactly what to say. "Bye."

Luke bit his lip, grabbed Austin's head and pulled him into a deep kiss. Austin fell headlong into it, all his tension melting away under the touch of Luke's lips.

When they broke apart, Luke cracked the door open and peered along both ends of the passageway. "It's clear. Go. I'll see you tonight."

With one last press of hands, Austin slipped into the hallway. The door closed behind him with a faint snick, and he was alone.

He hurried along the hallway to the corner about twenty feet away, heart pounding. Rounding the turn that would lead him to the open deck, he halted in shocked surprise. Smith stood there, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, blank gaze fixed on Austin's face.

"Mr. Smith, hi." Austin's voice shook. He felt naked under the other man's penetrating stare. "I, I was just..."

"It's not safe," Smith interrupted. "For either of you."

Austin gulped. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do." Pushing away from the wall, Smith stepped closer. Austin tried not to cringe away from the man's looming menace. "You boys want to play house, that's none of

my business. Just be careful. You get caught, Luke suffers for it, and you're out on your ass. Remember that."

Austin gaped at him, stunned speechless. Smith turned on his heel and strode off before Austin recovered his voice. Austin sagged against the wall and listened to the blood pound in his ears.

"Shit," he swore. One night together, and the secret of Luke and Austin's relationship was already out. At least Smith didn't seem to have any intention of telling Carson, or anyone else.

Maybe we can use this, Austin mused as he headed out to the deck. Outside, he leaned against the rail and gazed out into the darkness. *Smith knows now that Luke and I are seeing each other, but he doesn't know we're planning to take the idol. As long as no one else catches us, we can get together without hiding from Smith, and he won't know it's about anything other than sex.*

It seemed like a perfect plan. Encouraged, Austin started back toward his cabin.

Chapter Seven

After Austin left, Luke went back to bed and tried to sleep some more. He would have to wait until after Austin left that night to go into the ocean to continue his search for the idol, and he wanted to get as much rest as possible before then. But it was no use. The sheets smelled like Austin, washing Luke in memories. Austin in his arms, between his legs, over and around and inside of him. Holding him, touching him, making him feel alive and whole in a way he'd never known, not even in the ocean.

It was heady and exhilarating and a little frightening, and not at all conducive to rest. After nearly half an hour of trying in vain to relax enough to sleep, Luke gave up. With a frustrated sigh, he got out of bed and went to shower away the smell of sex.

* * * * *

A few minutes later, clean and dressed and carrying a satchel full of notebooks and pens, Luke cautiously pushed open the door leading from the back hallway to the kitchen. The place buzzed with activity as the kitchen staff worked to prepare breakfast for the crew. Slipping into the midst of the chaos, Luke sidled up to the slender white-haired woman standing at the stove cooking *huevos rancheros*.

"Good morning, Annabelle," he greeted her, nudging her shoulder.

"You should be in your room, *chéri*," she scolded without turning around. "Your *père* will be most displeased if he catches you here."

"He'll only find out if someone tells him." Reaching around the Frenchwoman, Luke snatched a fresh croissant from the baking stone cooling on the stovetop and took a bite. "Is he in the dining room?"

“Non. He and those fawning scientists of his are in his office. I just sent one of the boys with their breakfast.” Annabelle gave him a stern look over her shoulder. “Always you defy your father in these small things. You should not do so, *mon cher*. If he finds out...”

“Don’t worry about me,” Luke interrupted, and gave her his best smile. “I’ll be fine.” Ignoring her skeptically arched brow, Luke nodded toward the large coffee maker, which was giving off a heavenly aroma of freshly ground French roast. “May I have a to-go mug of coffee to take with me?”

Annabelle sighed. “Yes, of course. Take another croissant as well, and some sausage and fruit. You are far too thin.”

Luke breathed a sigh of relief as he finished his first croissant and set about gathering a portable breakfast. Annabelle didn’t know his secret, and he couldn’t afford to let her find out. She and the kitchen staff never told his father when he visited the kitchen against orders, but none of

them were the sort who would be able to keep quiet if he told them he was a shapeshifter. Half would think him mad, and the other half would believe he was some sort of demon. Either way, the talk would eventually reach his father.

He wasn’t sure he’d be able to heal the damage at all if that happened.

Luke mulled over his situation as he took his breakfast and hurried through the maze of corridors to the library. For years, he’d told himself that Carson wouldn’t kill him, because he wanted the idol and only Luke could find it. Lately, however, he’d begun to doubt the truth of that. His father’s violence toward him had escalated alarmingly in recent months. More than once, Luke had truly believed he was about to die at his adopted father’s hands.

What if he’s close enough that he doesn’t need me anymore? Fear clutched Luke’s insides at the thought. He’d felt the pull of the idol in his mind growing stronger with each passing day. He’d done his best to lead his father and the dive crew in the wrong direction, while closing in on it himself during his lone nighttime dives. However, what if his father had found enough clues to pinpoint the location on his own, without Luke? What if its location was such that the regular crew could recover the artifact if they found it?

What if Luke had already become unnecessary?

“Stop thinking that way,” he muttered. “He can’t find it without me.”

Shifting the container of food and the coffee to his left arm, Luke opened the library door with his right hand and peered cautiously inside. It was empty. It usually was at this time of day. Luke crossed the room and set his food and satchel on his favorite table, next to one of the three portholes and hidden from the entrance by a row of shelves. Outside, the rising dawn outlined the deck in a faint white glow and tipped the choppy waves with light. The day promised to be a fine one, cloudless and clear.

A perfect day for diving, Luke thought, gazing at the brightening sky. He wondered what Austin was doing at that moment, and if he was thinking of Luke. A wide smile spread across his face at the thought of Austin. His lover. It felt good to be able to call Austin that.

“Stop daydreaming,” he said, chuckling at himself and his giddy state. “You have work to do.”

Luke took a sip of coffee from the extra-large travel mug. It was hot and strong, helping to clear the cobwebs from his head and focus his mind. He was nearing the culmination of his research, and needed all the focus he could get.

He’d spent years scouring online and paper news sources, blogs, and fringe group networks for any mention of the object. There wasn’t much. He’d traced its movements over the last quarter century or so mostly by following the trail of a group of mysterious “priests” who guarded a strange black chest rumored to contain an alien artifact. Sightings of the group were few and difficult to unearth, but Luke had eventually pieced together the path of their travels. Between 1977 and 1991, they’d journeyed in starts and stops from Africa to the coast of Florida, where the trail had vanished with a final sighting in St. Petersburg.

Luke had exhausted his resources for locating the idol. He knew within half a kilometer where the treasure lay. He lied to his father, pleading the need for further newspaper and online research, to buy himself time to achieve his true goal.

Ever since they’d arrived in the Gulf of Mexico and the idol began whispering in his mind, Luke had been driven to learn what he could about the object itself. Clearly, he had some innate connection to it. The fact that he’d immediately recognized the idol’s call for what it was told him that much. The question haunting his every waking moment was, what exactly was its connection to him, and to his past? The ancient artifact sang to him constantly now, a sweet heartbreaking music that spoke of home and love and high purpose. Its image crept nightly into his dreams -- a small octopus of diamond-like crystal, with eyes of pure, gleaming obsidian.

It couldn’t be a coincidence. Luke was determined to discover what it meant, and perhaps shed some light on the mystery of his own past.

Popping a piece of honeydew melon into his mouth, Luke went to the shelves of reference books and selected three large volumes on deep water salvage and seafloor topography in the Gulf of Mexico. He set the books on the table, then hurried over to the library door. Cracking it open, he glanced up and down the hallway. Empty. He could only hope it stayed that way. Normally, no one but he used the library in the morning, but there was always a first time, and now was not the time for an interruption.

Closing the door again, Luke took a slow, steadying breath. “You can do this,” he told himself. “You’ve done it the last two days.”

It wasn’t entirely reassuring. But he’d gone too far to turn back now. Fingering the lockpicking kit in his pocket, Luke ran to the locked door tucked into the left-hand wall, behind the shelves. The door led to Carson’s private library. Luke had spent the past two

days digging through his father's extensive collection of obscure books on myths, legends, and lost treasures. So far he hadn't learned anything of value, but he was positive he'd find what he was looking for if he kept trying.

Glancing over his shoulder, Luke pulled the kit out of his pocket and set about picking the lock. It wasn't difficult, since the lock was a fairly standard type. He'd taken the kit a couple of years ago from a crew member who'd been fired for stealing narcotics from the infirmary, and had taught himself how to use it. At the time, he hadn't had any particular use in mind for his newfound skill. Now, he was glad to have it.

When he felt the tumblers shift, Luke pocketed his kit and opened the door. He paused, listening for any sign of company. The main library remained silent. Slipping into the private room, Luke closed and relocked the door behind him, then turned to peruse the shelves lining the walls.

He'd already skimmed over a dozen books on African maritime myths and legends over the past two days, hoping to find some clue as to the nature of the idol. So far he'd learned a great deal about the rich fabric of African folklore, but he'd found no mention of an octopus-shaped crystal idol anywhere. He sighed. Breaking into his father's private library was dangerous. He couldn't keep doing it. Especially now that he had something to lose. Now that he had Austin.

"This is the last time," he promised himself. "If I don't find anything today, I'll get the idol first and try to learn about it later."

With his self-imposed deadline pushing him, Luke scanned the shelves he hadn't yet explored. He saw nothing promising. Squatting on the floor beside the far wall, he opened the cabinet underneath the shelf. His jaw dropped open when he saw the contents.

"Oh, my God," he whispered. "This is it."

Lined up in neat rows on the shelf were *El Cazador's* logs, from her launch in 1973 to the inception of computerized logs in 1995. Luke knew his father meticulously recorded all information gathered on his expeditions into the logs. Any specific information Carson had gathered about the idol would likely be in there.

Acting on a sudden hunch, Luke selected the logs from 1977 and clutched them to his chest. He shut the cabinet, stood and went to the door. Pressing his ear to the crack between the door and the frame, he held his breath and listened. Not a sound came from the library. Biting his lip, Luke unlocked the door and eased it open.

No one was in sight. Luke slipped out the door, shut it and locked it, and hurried back to his table. Only after he'd sat down and slid the logs into his satchel did he relax.

Grabbing a croissant out of the take-out tray, Luke opened one of the thick textbooks, set the first log from 1977 open inside it, and began to read.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Luke leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. He'd been through almost a year's worth of logs and had so far learned nothing about the idol. Most of the entries concerned the search for a sunken ship from the 1800s with a cargo of stolen diamonds. There'd been no mention of the idol at all.

Two more months worth, and he'd be done with the records from that year. He had an inexplicable but incredibly strong feeling that he was close to finding the answers he needed. That a few more minutes' reading would reveal a life-changing truth. Leaning his elbows on the table, he focused his attention once again on the log.

He'd barely started reading when he heard the library door open. Panic shot through him. He shut the log and shoved it into the satchel at his feet with the other logbooks a half second before Dr. Perez rounded the row of shelves. Luke's automatic smile froze to his face when he saw his father appear in the woman's wake.

"Good morning Father, Dr. Perez," Luke said, amazed that he sounded so normal when his heart was threatening to pound right out of his ribcage. "What can I do for you?"

"We are here to check on your progress." Carson frowned at the empty take-out tray and travel mug on the table. "You were told to take your meals in your quarters, Luke."

Luke bit his lip. "I stopped at the kitchen and took my breakfast with me so that I could spend more time on my research. I thought if I researched deep water salvage in an area of silt seafloor such as we have here, it would help us recover the idol more quickly. I know it's not an excuse. I let my enthusiasm affect my judgment. I'm sorry, Father."

For a moment, Luke's father stared at him with a dangerous contempt in his eyes. Luke kept his expression appropriately submissive and waited. With any luck, the mention of potentially finding the idol sooner would negate some of his father's anger.

Finally, Carson shrugged and turned to gaze out the porthole. "No matter. Have you learned anything useful?"

Relieved, Luke let his tense shoulders relax. "I'm not sure," he hedged. "I mean, I've found a few references that I think may be helpful, but I'll need to do a bit more reading to be sure."

"Have you found which area of the sunken ship contains the idol?" Dr. Perez asked, breaking her nearly perpetual silence. "The dive team is exploring the last unburied section of the ship today, but Smith tells me you don't believe it's in that section."

Luke fought to keep his calm mask in place. He knew time was growing short. Dr. Perez's unwitting reminder of that fact brought his constantly suppressed panic bubbling close to the surface.

"No, I don't," he answered. "I went through that section as best I could last night, and found nothing to suggest the idol's presence there. Of course, I can't be one hundred percent certain. The dive team's equipment should be able to tell us for sure."

“And if it is not there, where do we search next?” Carson turned around again and glared at Luke. “I have been very patient with you, my son. Do not make me regret it.”

Staring into his father’s harsh and unforgiving eyes, Luke felt a sudden surge of anger. He lifted his chin and met Carson’s gaze without flinching. “I’ll find the idol, soon. That’s a promise.”

And I’ll steal your treasure right out from under you, and be free of you at last. The thought gave Luke a jolt of fierce joy.

His father’s thin lips curved into a faint smile. “See that you do. Come, Dr. Perez. Let me retrieve the book I was telling you about and we will discuss it.”

Luke smiled and nodded at Dr. Perez as she followed his father between the bookshelves. His sense of relief was abruptly cut off, though, when he saw where they were headed -- Carson’s private library.

Luke watched, frozen, as his father took a ring of keys from his pocket, flipped through them until he found the one he wanted, then unlocked the room. He held the door for Dr. Perez, then followed her inside and shut the door behind them.

Time slowed to a crawl as Luke sat staring at the door. His pulse roared in his ears, and he felt too weak to move. *What if he checks the old logs, and notices a whole year is missing?* The possibilities made him sick to contemplate. The beating he’d surely receive would be the least he could expect if he were caught breaking into his father’s private room and stealing the ship’s logs. The worst thing would be losing the chance to recover the idol.

No, he corrected himself. The worst thing would be losing your chance to be with Austin.

He couldn’t let that happen. Couldn’t.

Of course, he had no control over the situation at the moment. He couldn’t do a thing until his father and Dr. Perez left, and he could get into the private library again. He took a deep breath and prepared himself to wait.

As if reading his mind, Carson opened the door at that moment and strode over to Luke. “Take what volumes you need, and go to your quarters.”

Luke swallowed the bile rising in his throat. “Father, I really feel that I should stay here. If I should need different books...”

His father’s fist slamming into his face cut him off. Luke’s head snapped back from the force of the blow. “Do as I say, boy!” Carson roared. “Go, now!”

Luke wanted to argue. Nothing, not even the throbbing pain in his head, was as important as returning those logs before they were missed. The look in his father’s eye stopped him. A cold, bright gleam that said maybe this would be the time Carson didn’t stop with a few broken bones, but kept going until the damage was too much to heal.

There’d been a few times in his life when Luke would have welcomed death, because it would mean release from his father. Those times were gone. He wanted to live, and he

wanted to do it on his own terms. Clamping down hard on his frustration, he stood and slung his satchel over his shoulder.

“Yes, Father,” Luke said. His voice shook with anger. Hopefully his father would mistake the tremor for fear.

Luke picked up his coffee mug, tossed the empty take-out tray in the trash, and started toward the library door. He felt his father watching him as he crossed the room. He kept his pace steady and his gaze on the floor, not wanting to give Carson any excuse to start hitting him again.

He made his escape without further incident. Out in the passageway, Luke hung his head so that his hair swung down to cover his bruised and swelling face. He clutched the satchel close to his body. A plan was already forming in his mind. If he could just find the idol’s resting place tonight, he could...

“Luke?”

Luke froze in his tracks. Acutely aware of his battered appearance, Luke raised his head and looked into a pair of wide, horrified brown eyes. “Hello, Austin.”

Chapter Eight

Austin stared, shocked to the core. Luke's left cheek was red, the skin broken, the eye swollen and already turning purple. He started to reach out and touch the bruise, then thought better of it. No one else was around at the moment, but they were in a public hallway. Anyone might happen along.

"What happened?" Austin asked, though a part of him already knew the answer.

Luke's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "Father doesn't like it when I talk back to him."

A sudden rush of fury turned Austin's vision red. "That fucking bastard. I'll kill him."

Luke's eyes went wide. "Austin, promise me you'll stay away from him. Please."

"You can't possibly want to protect him," Austin said, keeping his voice down with a monumental effort. "You wanted to escape him! You went to The Col..."

"Shhhh!" Luke glanced around the empty hallway. He leaned close, brushing Austin's fingers with the hand that wasn't clutching his satchel. "I'm not trying to protect him. I'm trying to protect you. He'll kill you and not think twice about it."

"All right," Austin said, feeling chastised. "But look, if I ever catch him hitting you, I can't promise I'll behave. It makes me crazy to think of anyone hurting you."

"I feel the same way about you. And that's why you can't do anything. That's why you can't touch him, you can't say a word, not even if he hits me right in front of you." Luke stared into Austin's eyes, his expression pleading. "I just found you, Austin. I don't want to lose you."

Austin's throat constricted. He longed to pull Luke into his arms and kiss him, but he knew he couldn't. Not in such a public place. "Let's go somewhere," he whispered. "I want you."

Luke's eyes went hot. "Me too. But we can't. Not now. I'm supposed to be in my cabin, and I'm sure Smith has you on assignment somewhere."

"He's got me teaching a refresher course on advanced deep wreck penetration in a little while. We're evidently exploring a shipwreck at two hundred and seventy five feet this afternoon." Austin leaned close enough to smell the clean scent of Luke's hair. He clenched his fingers to keep himself from burying them in those silky tresses. "Is that where the ... you know. Is that where it is?"

Luke darted a cautious glance around him. "We can't talk about this here. I'll tell you about it tonight. You're still coming to my cabin, aren't you?"

"Of course." Austin gave Luke a narrow look. "Luke, what aren't you telling me?"

"Later." Luke flashed a wicked smile that seemed defiant on his bruised and swelling face. "See you tonight."

With that, Luke squeezed Austin's hand and strode off down the hallway. Austin turned to gaze after him, admiring the graceful glide of the man's walk. A sudden vision of Luke naked beneath him flashed into Austin's mind. He stifled a moan. *Such a tight, sweet ass*, he thought, watching the ass in question disappear around a corner. *And I'm the only one who knows what it's like to be inside him.*

The thought was overwhelming. Austin leaned against the wall, shut his eyes and breathed deep, trying to get control of himself. The intensity of his feelings for Luke scared him. He'd never felt anything like it, and he didn't understand it. Strong physical attraction made sense. This obsessive need to be near Luke, to touch him and protect him, didn't. They barely knew each other. Austin's body and soul shouldn't ache for him like this.

"Bell!"

Austin jumped, eyes flying open. "Mr. Smith."

Smith's expression was as blank as ever, but his eyes snapped with anger. "Don't ever stare at him like that in public," he growled. "Most of the crew won't turn a blind eye."

Austin gulped. "Yes, sir. Sorry."

"Yeah, yeah. Now get your ass to the classroom. You've got two hours to brush up the dive team on deep wreck diving before we head down. The piece of ship you're exploring today is a whole lot deeper down than the one yesterday."

"Yes, sir." Austin risked a careful smile. "Thank you, sir."

Smith just grunted and brushed past Austin, headed for the ladder to the main deck. Austin sagged against the wall. His heart was racing and his knees felt like jelly. *You're on a spy mission*, he admonished himself. *You have to be more careful. Anybody but Smith probably would've turned you over to Cordova.*

The thought terrified him. Not for his own sake, but for Luke's. His gut told him that Carson Cordova would somehow blame Austin's behavior on Luke, and punish him for it. Austin would rather die than give Cordova an excuse to inflict further suffering on Luke.

When his legs stopped shaking, Austin pushed away from the wall and hurried toward the stairs leading down to the crew's living area. The dive team would most likely be gathered in the small classroom already. The entire team was certified in both deep diving and wreck penetration, of course, but it had been a while since any of them had been down further than one hundred and thirty feet. Since Austin regularly dove to two or three hundred feet in order to keep his skills current, he'd been ordered to give the team a quick refresher. He didn't mind. In fact, the idea appealed to him. He'd honed his teaching skills quite well in his former job, and teaching had always come naturally to him.

Just make sure you keep your guard up. These people may be your co-workers for a while, but they're not your friends. They work for the enemy. Remember that.

For some reason, the warning voice in Austin's head sounded exactly like Smith. Chuckling under his breath, Austin descended the stairs.

* * * * *

Austin climbed out of the water and onto the dive platform, shrugged off his BCD and tanks and leaned over the ladder. "Here, Collins. I'll help you up."

Collins shot him a glare that had probably sent many a newbie diver cringing into the corner in years past. "Fuck off, boy. I been diving since you were in diapers. I don't need your help."

Austin ignored him. Hooking a hand under one of Collins' arms, he steadied the older man as he climbed the ladder. From her spot behind Collins on the ladder, Chen planted one dainty hand on her colleague's butt and pushed, earning her a vicious growl from Collins. Austin bit back a laugh, thinking it was a good thing Collins was still feeling weak, or he probably would've started swinging at Austin and Chen both. Collins might be one of the oldest members of the team, but he wasn't someone Austin would've liked to take on in a fist fight.

"Quit your bitching, Collins," Chen scolded as she bounded onto the platform. "We wouldn't have done the gas sharing drill if Bell hadn't talked it up in his class. He saved your stupid life just as much as your partner did."

Collins glowered at her, but let her help him remove his tanks, which told Austin how bad he must feel still. The man wasn't one to show weakness, ever. "This team's been diving together for years, Chen. We don't need some fucking upstart to show us emergency gas sharing."

"Evidently we did." Jordan, the team leader, pulled herself onto the platform and gave Collins a stern glare. "I've been diving longer than you have, Collins. I know how we tend to get complacent after we've been down so many times we've lost count. Sometimes it takes new blood to remind us about safety." She turned a solemn look to Austin. "Thank you, Bell."

Collins would've died if you hadn't insisted we practice gas sharing with an unconscious partner."

Austin blushed. "I just suggested it, ma'am. You're the one who gave the order for the drill."

Jordan smiled, gray eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, it was a good suggestion."

Austin smiled back and ducked his head, feeling acutely embarrassed. "My Uncle Ray used to always tell me that the minute you start thinking you don't need the safety procedures, that's when the shit hits the fan."

Chen cackled. "Smart man." She pulled off her drysuit hood and started unwinding her long black hair from its braid.

"Where's Vonovich?" Austin asked, scanning the rest of the group for Collins' dive partner. "Is he okay?"

"He will be." Jordan nodded toward the bench beside the rail, where the young Russian sat shaking like a leaf, his knees drawn up to his chest. "I think that's the first time he's ever actually had to save another person's life underwater."

"At least he didn't start panicking 'til now," Collins mumbled in an uncharacteristic show of approval for his partner. "I'd hate to think my life depended on some kid who lost his damn head the second any little thing happened."

"Little thing?" Chen smacked Collins' arm hard, making him wince. "You passed out underwater, jackass! Maybe it was only a few seconds, but it's no 'little thing', especially at that depth!"

"Okay, okay." Collins shot the petite Chinese woman a fierce frown. "Don't hit me."

Austin bit the insides of his cheeks. The sight of the six-foot-four Collins cringing away from a five-foot-nothing girl less than half his weight was too funny. Of course, Chen was stronger than she looked. Her blows packed a surprising wallop.

Jordan laid a hand on Collins' arm. "Report to Dr. Tobias immediately. He'll probably want to send you to Biloxi for some tests."

"I don't need tests!" Collins roared. "I'm fine!"

Jordan gave a longsuffering sigh. "That's an order, Collins. Either you can go see Dr. Tobias willingly, or I'll have Smith drag your ass to him in cuffs. Your choice."

Collins' face went purple. For a moment, Austin was sure he was about to punch Jordan. He moved closer, noticing Chen doing the same thing on Collins' other side. Collins shot a sidelong glance at Chen, then at Austin, and deflated a little.

"Okay, dammit," Collins grumbled. "But when the doc gives me the all-clear, I'm going back down with the team."

Jordan gave him a chilly smile. "Of course."

Collins pinned Austin with a venomous glare as he left. Austin watched the big man lumber off. "Is he always like that?"

"Pretty much." Chen started peeling off her drysuit. "Well, I don't know about you guys, but I'm off for a shower before dinner. See you later."

"Yeah, see you." Austin waved to Chen as she left, then turned to Jordan with a smile. "I think I'll do the same, actually. Are we done for the day?"

Jordan nodded. "Yes, you've got the evening free. Meet me at the classroom at oh-six-hundred tomorrow morning for your assignment."

"Yes, ma'am. See y'all at dinner."

Jordan went over to sit beside Vonovich. Austin removed his drysuit, then took his equipment to the crewman waiting to rinse and store it. Pulling his clothes out of his locker, he dressed as fast as he could and hurried to the nearest hatch. The wind has risen while they'd been at depth, and the winter air was cold and knife-keen.

Inside, Austin wandered through the hallways toward the crew quarters, thinking of his first dive with Carson Cordova's team. Though definitely a taciturn bunch, they were also experienced and professional, and worked well together. Even Collins functioned smoothly as a part of the team at depth. His temper and surliness only came out when the dive equipment came off.

Under different circumstances, Austin would've enjoyed working with them. The shipwreck they'd explored on this dive was a sight to behold, her shattered hull sinister and compelling in the glow of their lights. As it was, the strain of keeping his true mission a secret spoiled any enjoyment he might have gotten from the dive. At least the necessity of keeping his attention focused during the dive made it easier to keep thoughts of Luke at bay.

"He must be taken care of."

Austin stopped walking so suddenly he almost stumbled and fell. The sound of Carson Cordova's cold tones was jarring, to say the least.

Austin looked around him, and cursed silently. He'd evidently taken the wrong turn somewhere and was now in an unfamiliar corridor. He glanced behind him at the stretch of blue-gray carpeted corridor. The hallway was relatively short, with a wide stair in the middle. It T'd into other hallways at both ends, and Austin guessed it must be one of the corridors connecting the two main ones that ran the length of the ship from bow to stern. He bit his lip, trying to remember how far he'd walked and which end of the ship he was closest to.

He started to creep away, not wanting to get caught here by Cordova. And stopped, frozen, when Dr. Perez's voice floated from a nearby recessed doorway. The door was cracked open just slightly, as if someone had carelessly swung it closed and it hadn't quite latched.

“Carson, you cannot simply kill the boy. As much as you like to believe otherwise, you are not above the law, and not everyone on this ship will help you cover up such a crime.”

“When I find the idol, I will be above all laws, both God’s and man’s.” Carson sounded dangerously certain, and Austin frowned. *What the fuck? Is he crazy?* “Luke is merely a tool, a means to an end. And he has become unstable lately. Defiant. I cannot allow it. As soon as the idol is in my hands, he must be eliminated.”

Austin leaned against the wall, feeling like he’d been punched in the gut. *I have to stop him*, Austin’s mind screamed. Fighting down the urge to run, Austin edged closer to the door. He had to find out more if he hoped to save Luke.

“I will be sure he is confined while you retrieve the idol,” Dr. Perez said, her voice distinctly chilly. “But I will not kill him for you. And my price for becoming an accomplice to murder will be an extra quarter million, and a one-way flight to Brazil.”

“Done. I will take care of Luke myself, Doctor. Only a coward would ask another to do such a thing.” Carson’s voice dropped to a silky growl. “It will be my honor, and my pleasure, to destroy the boy. He is an abomination, and has served his God-given purpose. Now come. We are about to acquire wealth and power beyond imagining, my dear. Let us retire to the lounge, and toast our imminent success.”

The sound of muffled footsteps from beyond the door broke Austin’s horrified paralysis. He sprinted to the nearby stair and ducked around the corner, crouching against the wall a few steps down. Seconds later, Carson Cordova and Dr. Perez came into view. They crossed the opening of the stairwell without glancing down.

Austin waited until he could no longer hear their footsteps, then bounded down the stair to the deck below. Turning into the portside passageway, he got his bearings and raced down the corridor toward his cabin. The temptation to run directly to Luke’s quarters and take him away from the ship right then was almost overwhelming. However, he knew that running through the ship with bare feet and wet hair, wild-eyed and desperate as he was, would arouse dangerous suspicion. He had to keep his head, or he and Luke would both die sooner rather than later.

I’ll go to Luke’s cabin later, just as we planned. I can tell him then, and we’ll work out an escape plan. Austin knew it was the right thing to do. The only thing to do, if he wanted to keep Luke alive long enough to get away. He wasn’t thinking of the idol anymore. Carson Cordova could have it, as far as he was concerned. All he cared about was Luke’s safety.

Resolved, Austin jogged toward his cabin. He had planning to do.

* * * * *

Dinner that night lasted eons. Austin forced himself to eat, even though his stomach churned and the food tasted like ash. He knew it would mean disaster if any of the crew

suspected something was off. Glancing at Carson Cordova from the corner of his eye, Austin fought back the urge to go right up to the man and rip his throat out.

Be cool, Austin, he ordered himself, letting loose an automatic laugh along with the rest of the dive team at one of Chen's dirty jokes. *Luke's life might depend on you not fucking this up.*

After dinner ended, Austin bid the rest of the dive team goodnight and parted ways with them at the crew's common area. Glancing around to make sure the hallway was empty, he sprinted past his cabin and up the nearest stairway to the main deck, where Luke's quarters were.

He tapped on Luke's door. "Luke, it's me! Open up!"

The door swung open. Luke stood in the doorway, looking pale and glassy-eyed. "Austin. Come in."

Austin slipped inside. As soon as Luke shut the door, Austin gathered him into his arms and kissed him. Luke sighed softly, his mouth opening to twine their tongues together. It felt heavenly, soothing the tension from Austin's body and the fear from his mind.

"God, I've missed you today," Luke whispered as the kiss broke. He clutched Austin close, burying his face in Austin's neck.

Austin held him, caressing his back in long, slow strokes. "I missed you too."

"How was the dive today?"

"All right. The shipwreck was interesting. Collins passed out for a few seconds while we were at depth, and now he's mad at me I think."

Luke pulled back, giving Austin a surprised look. "Why would he be angry with you about that?"

"While I was teaching that class Smith wanted me to do, I found out that the team doesn't do regular emergency drills, because they've worked together so long they don't think they need to." Austin shrugged. "I told Jordan they really needed to be doing regular drills, and I thought we should do one before we went down, especially since I'm new to the team. Turned out I was right. I think that pissed Collins off, since he was the main one who didn't want to do it."

Luke's expression was solemn. "Watch your back, Austin. Collins doesn't like to be shown up."

"I'll be careful, don't worry." Austin brushed his fingers over the bruise on Luke's face. "Luke, this afternoon, I overheard your father and Dr. Perez talking. They're planning t ...

He was still trying to think of the best way to say it when Luke said it for him. "They're planning to kill me, aren't they?" He gave a bitter laugh. "As soon as I find the idol for Father, he's going to murder me like he murdered my family. I've suspected as much for a while now."

Austin gaped at him, surprised. "Yes, that's it exactly. But what do you mean, he murdered your family?"

Luke stared into Austin's eyes, as if trying to come to some difficult decision. Austin waited. Finally, Luke took his hand and led him to the bed. They sat down side by side, fingers laced together.

"I stole the ship's logs from 1977 from my father's private library," Luke said, keeping his head down so that his hair hid his face. "I don't know what made me take that year and no others. Something inside me just ... just told me to. Anyway. I read them. Father is always very meticulous about the ship's logs, so it was all right there. He killed my family, and took me."

Austin shook his head, feeling stunned and sick. "I don't understand. Why did he do that?"

"My people lived on an island off the coast of Zanzibar. He...he was after the diamonds in the hold of a nearby shipwreck, and he thought they were trying to stop him from getting them." Luke lifted his head and met Austin's gaze. Tears spilled down his cheeks. "He ... e blew up the island, and ... nd they all died. He killed my family for diamonds, Austin. For fucking diamonds!"

Not knowing what else to do, Austin wound his free arm around Luke's shoulders and pulled him close. Luke molded himself to Austin, resting his head on his shoulder.

"Why did he take you?" Austin asked, thumbing the tears from Luke's face. "It couldn't have been from any sense of guilt. Not with the way he treats you."

Luke went rigid in Austin's embrace. Austin held on, kissing Luke's hair and caressing the satin-soft skin of his neck. "Luke, whatever it is, you can tell me. You can trust me. Please trust me. I want to help you."

Luke's fingers tightened around Austin's. "I'm afraid," he whispered.

"Afraid of what?" Letting go of Luke's hand, Austin lifted his chin and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. "I won't let him hurt you anymore."

"No, not that." Luke sniffed and wiped his eyes on the cuff of his shirt. "I'm afraid if I tell you, you won't want me anymore."

The idea was so preposterous Austin almost laughed. The mingled fear and need on Luke's face stopped him. He laid a hand on Luke's cheek and stared straight into his eyes.

"I won't leave you," he promised. "No matter what. Please tell me, Luke. Why did Carson Cordova take you? From what Dr. Martin told me, you were only a little kid. What could he possibly have wanted from you?"

Luke sat silent for a long time, fine tremors shaking his body. A horrible idea began to grow in Austin's mind as he watched Luke struggle with himself, growing paler by the second.

“Luke,” Austin said finally. “He didn’t ... I mean, he never ... Christ, please tell me he never touched you.”

Luke’s eyes went even wider. “No. Never like that.”

Relieved, Austin let out a whooshing breath. “Thank God for that. But, why did he take you? What did he think he needed you for?”

Luke disengaged himself from Austin’s embrace, stood and started to unbutton his shirt. “He needed me,” Luke said, his voice shaking, “because of this.”

Shrugging his shirt to the floor, Luke drew a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. A strange undulation ran down his left arm, and Austin cried out in shock. It should’ve been impossible, but there it was.

Luke’s arm was gone, and in its place was a sinuous blue-gray tentacle.

Chapter Nine

I will not cry, Luke swore to himself as Austin yelped and flinched backward, eyes huge and face blanched. *I am not a child, and I will not cry.*

His body, predictably, didn't listen. He hung his head to hide the tears that refused to stop and shifted his arm back to normal. Needing something to keep him from meeting Austin's stunned -- and, he imagined, disgusted -- gaze, Luke picked his shirt up off the floor and went to the closet to hang it up.

He lifted a blue plastic hanger, slid the shirt onto it and hung it on the metal rod, then set about fastening all the buttons. He worked slowly, deliberately, concentrating on slipping each button through its matching buttonhole. Keeping the despair at bay one button at a time.

Three more buttons, he thought numbly, wondering what he'd do when there were no more. *Two buttons ... on ...*

"Luke?"

Luke's fingers faltered. He went still. His throat felt dry and tight, and he couldn't speak. Austin's footsteps sounded behind him, coming closer. And closer. Then Austin's arms were around him, Austin's body was pressed to his back, and oh God it felt good. He leaned into Austin's solid strength, his relief so huge he thought he would burst with it.

"I was afraid you'd be disgusted, or scared. But I had to tell you. It wasn't fair to keep it from you any longer." Luke's voice was a hoarse whisper, still quavering with an excess of emotion. He laid his hands over Austin's and stared at their intertwined fingers. "Are you? Disgusted, I mean. I wouldn't blame you if you were."

Austin's lips brushed the back of his neck. "It was surprising. I had no idea such things were possible." He nuzzled Luke's hair, sending goosebumps racing along his arms. "But I'm not disgusted. Can you change completely into an octopus?"

“Yes. But it’s hard to do out of the water.” Turning in Austin’s arms, Luke stared hard into his eyes. “You’re really okay with this?”

Austin slid a hand into Luke’s hair and kissed him. “You could never disgust me, Luke. You’re beautiful.”

An unfamiliar feeling swelled in Luke’s chest. He thought he’d known something similar, when he was very small. But the memory was tattered and vague, and what he felt now was vivid and hot and immediate, and demanded expression.

“I love you,” Luke murmured, letting the words come before he could second-guess himself. “It’s crazy, I know, but I do.”

Austin smiled, erasing the last of Luke’s fear. “If you’re crazy, then we both are, because I love you too.”

He loves me. Luke’s joy bubbled up and spilled over, and he started laughing. After a second of shocked silence, Austin’s laughter joined Luke’s. They clung to each other, and the sound of their mutual mirth sent Luke’s spirits soaring. He didn’t think he’d ever laughed from sheer uncontainable happiness before.

As the laughter died down, Luke tilted his head and captured Austin’s mouth in a heated kiss. Austin let out a soft, needy sound. His mouth opened, his tongue snaking out to tangle around Luke’s. The soft, slick touch set Luke’s skin on fire.

Fisting his fingers in Austin’s shirt, Luke dragged him across the room without breaking the kiss. They fell onto the bed, mouths still locked together. Luke rolled and pinned Austin’s body with his.

“God, I want you.” Austin kicked his shoes off and hooked a leg around Luke’s back. He reared up and bit Luke’s bottom lip. “Fuck me.”

Luke’s heart did a funny little flip. “I ... I’ve neve ...

“I know.” Austin clamped one hand onto the back of Luke’s neck and used the other to tug down Luke’s zipper. He caught the waist of Luke’s jeans with his toes and shoved the pants and underwear halfway down Luke’s thighs, baring his ass to the cool air. “Please. I need it. Need you inside me, Luke, pleas ...

Luke moaned as Austin’s toe traced up and down his crease. “Oh. Clothes. Off.”

Unwinding his arms from Luke, Austin stripped off his sweatshirt. Luke rolled to the side and helped Austin squirm out of his jeans, then started to tug his own off. He’d forgotten he still had his shoes on. By the time Luke kicked off the tangle of socks, sneakers and denim, Austin had two saliva-slicked fingers buried in his own ass. The sight made Luke’s cock twitch.

“Jesus, Austin,” Luke breathed, leaning down to kiss the leaking tip of Austin’s prick. “You’re so sexy.”

Austin groaned, his free hand coming up to stroke Luke’s hair. “God, I hope you have more lube.”

Lunging across Austin's body, Luke yanked the bedside drawer open and fished out a packet of lubricant, congratulating himself on having taken a double handful. Austin pulled his fingers out of himself and stretched his arms above his head, watching Luke with glittering eyes.

Luke already had the bottle open and was coating his fingers with slippery liquid when a sudden realization lanced through the fog of lust in his mind. "I don't have any more condoms," he blurted out, even as he slipped a finger into Austin's hole. He sucked in a sharp breath, surprised by the hot, tight grip of Austin's body. "Oh, wow. Wow."

Austin's grin was wicked and lusty. "It's good, huh?"

"Yes." Licking his lips, Luke put another finger in and started working them slowly in and out, twisting, feeling the living silk of Austin's insides undulating under his touch. "God. Oh, God, I need ... I ... But we don't have ... Austi ...

Austin laughed, the sound low and rough, ramping Luke's excitement up unbearably. "In Aunt Jess's werewolf books, the wolves -- fuck, yes, deeper -- God ... they couldn't ... couldn't get diseases." He moaned, eyelids fluttering, as Luke pressed another finger into him. "You ... oh ... you're a shifter. Can you? Get ... get diseases?"

Thinking seemed like far too much work. But if Austin was going where Luke thought he was ... "Don't know for sure," Luke said, his voice tight with the need spiraling out of control inside him. "But I've never been sick. S ...

He pressed his fingers deeper, and brushed a firm little spot that made Austin yelp and claw the sheets.

"Bare," Austin gasped. "Now, Luke, now, fuck me!"

Unwilling to take his fingers out of Austin just yet, Luke grabbed the open packet of lube with one trembling hand and squeezed the rest onto his cock. He tossed the empty packet aside and scooted forward, spreading the lube over his prick with the hand not working Austin's ass open.

Grabbing the backs of his thighs, Austin pulled his legs up and apart, spreading himself in a wanton display that sent an electric jolt through Luke's body. "In me," Austin growled. "Hurry."

The raw lust in Austin's voice was too much to resist. Pulling his fingers out of Austin's hole, Luke took his cock in his hand and positioned the tip at Austin's entrance. His gaze locked with Austin's just as he pressed forward and slid inside, and a sweet, sharp ecstasy pierced him to the marrow.

Falling forward onto his hands, Luke stared down into Austin's eyes. Austin's legs wrapped around his hips, his hands came up to frame Luke's face. Neither said a word, but they didn't need to. Austin's heart and soul shone from his eyes, and Luke knew Austin saw the same things in his face that he saw in Austin's. Tenderness, passion, desire.

Love.

Leaning down, Luke melded his mouth to Austin's as he began to move inside him. Luke whimpered at the feel of Austin's body clutching him like a silken fist. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before, hot and tight and alive, so good it hurt, and Luke knew he wouldn't last long.

"S okay, baby," Austin breathed against his mouth, one hand stroking his hair and the other kneading his ass. "Let go."

Part of Luke's brain wondered idly if Austin was reading his mind or just his face and body language. However, he was too caught up in the sheer bliss of the moment to think too hard about it. He could feel Austin's hunger like a red mist in his brain, feeding his own excitement and sending him rushing toward a climax of epic proportions.

A few hard thrusts later, Austin let out a soft cry as he came, his semen spreading warm and wet between his belly and Luke's. His ass rippled around Luke's cock, tightening almost to the point of pain, and that was enough to tip the balance for Luke.

"Oh God," Luke whispered, and came in a rush that left him breathless. He buried his face in the curve of Austin's neck, clinging to his lover as his orgasm washed through him. He felt euphoric, lighter than air, as if he might float away.

"Mmmm." Austin's arms wound tight around Luke, keeping him close. "That was amazing."

"I don't think I can move," Luke mumbled, licking a trickle of sweat from Austin's neck.

Austin's laugh morphed into soft squeak when the movement made Luke's softening prick slip out of him. "Don't move then. Let's stay just like this all night."

Smiling, Luke lifted his head and kissed Austin's lips. "I wish we could. It's wonderful being with you like this."

Austin's smile faded. He trailed his fingers down Luke's cheek and over his lips. "I didn't want to have to think of your father again, but I guess we need to."

"No we don't." Luke rolled onto his side, taking Austin with him and holding him against his chest. "Not right now, at least. It can wait until morning."

Raising his head, Austin gave Luke a surprised look. "No, Luke, we need to leave as soon as possible. Tonight, if we can manage it."

"I haven't found the idol yet. I..." Luke stopped, afraid of saying it even though Austin knew what he was. He took a deep breath and forced himself to go on. "I shift and search for it every night. It ... it calls to me. I can feel it in my mind, leading me to it. I'm so close, Austin. So close. If I can find it tonight, we can leave tomorrow."

Austin was already shaking his head before Luke finished talking. "Let your father have it. It's not worth your life, Luke. Leave it, and let's get out of here while we still can."

Luke laid a hand on Austin's cheek. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it is." Turning his head, Austin kissed Luke's palm. "Nothing's more important to me than keeping you safe. Nothing. Let's just leave. Just take the tender and go."

"No," Luke said, wishing he could say 'yes' instead. "I have to get the idol."

Austin made an impatient noise. "Why, Luke? Why is that fucking thing more important to you than your life?"

Tilting his head back, Luke stared at the ceiling and tried to think of how to explain what else he'd found in the ship's logs. It sounded crazy, even to him, and he knew in his bones it was true. He couldn't imagine what Austin would think.

He just saw you turn your arm into a tentacle, he reminded himself. That didn't bother him.

Of course, believing your own senses is always easier than taking something on faith when it sounds completely insane.

Luke took Austin's hand, kissed it and pressed the palm to his cheek. "My father can't be the one to find that idol, Austin."

"Why not?" Austin scooted closer and slung a leg over Luke's thighs. "I mean it bugs me to think of that bastard getting the idol, but it doesn't have to make any difference to us if we don't let it."

"And it wouldn't, excep ... Luke trailed off, trying to find the right words.

Frowning, Austin rubbed his thumb across the corner of Luke's mouth. "Just tell me, okay? I swear I won't think you're crazy."

There he goes, reading my mind again, Luke thought, but didn't say it. "I learned something else from Father's logs. Apparently, the first person to lay hands on the idol is granted their heart's desire."

Austin started to laugh, then stopped, staring hard at Luke. "You're serious."

Luke nodded, caressing the curve of Austin's shoulder. "I'm the one who told him about the idol, and what it could do. The log said he questioned me about it through an interpreter, because I only spoke an ancient Egyptian dialect." Luke laughed, but the sound was sad. "My dreams are memories after all. It all happened, and now I've led Father straight to the thing my people protected for thousands of years."

"Jesus." Sliding his hand around the back of Luke's neck, Austin pulled him close. He leaned his forehead against Luke's. "You know it's not your fault, right?"

"Yes. I know. But it doesn't really make it any better."

"No, I guess it probably doesn't." Austin's fingers tangled into Luke's hair. "So you think it's true about getting your heart's desire?"

"It's true," Luke answered, leaning into Austin's touch. "I can feel it. I think I can even remember it, a little. My parents told me about it when I was small, I think."

"I still don't see why he can't get it, though. Isn't his heart's desire unlimited wealth? It would suck, but nothing would be any worse than it is now."

"He has money," Luke said. "He wants power. Unlimited power. And the idol can give him exactly that. I'm not certain what form that power might take, and I don't want to find out. Think of what that could mean, Austin. My father, with nothing to stop him from using the whole world the way he uses me."

Austin chewed his bottom lip. "Okay, I see your point. But Luke, he's going to kill you."

"He's going to kill me no matter what." Luke stroked Austin's cheek, the pad of his thumb rasping across the dark stubble. "Don't you see? If he gets the idol, he'll be able to find me no matter where I am. And he enjoys hurting me. What do you think he'll do to me if he gets the level of power he's after? If he lets me live, we both may end up wishing he hadn't."

The color drained from Austin's face as the truth of it hit him. "Oh."

"We can't let him touch it." Luke gazed into Austin's wide eyes and knew they understood each other. "I'll find it, tonight. I'll bring it up if I can. If not, you and I will have to go down together tomorrow and retrieve it."

"What does it look like?" Austin propped himself up on one elbow and toyed idly with Luke's hair. "And how big is it? If it's too big for one person to lift, it'll be a lot harder to bring up."

Closing his eyes, Luke conjured a mental image of the idol. "It's small enough to fit in your hand. It's made of clear crystal that looks like diamond but isn't. It's shaped like an octopus. It even has black eyes, like me. If what I've learned in my research is correct, whoever brought it from Zanzibar to the Gulf of Mexico had it in a box of some sort. A black box, no more than about eight inches square, made of an alloy that doesn't rust. I don't know how heavy the box is, or if it's even still there, so I'm planning to be on the lookout for either the box or the idol alone."

"Wow."

The strange note of awe in Austin's voice made Luke open his eyes and look at him. Austin was unusually pale, his eyes a little too wide. Luke frowned. "Austin? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just thought ... Austin shook his head, brow furrowing. "Never mind."

Luke didn't push, though he wanted to. "Okay."

Austin smiled, the half-puzzled, half-fearful expression melting from his face. "So what do we do if you can't bring up the idol tonight?"

"In that case, we'll meet at the dive platform tomorrow night and dive for it together. We'll bring it up, steal the tender and go."

Austin nodded. "I like it. Nice and simple."

Luke laughed without humor. "Yes, well, let's hope it is that simple."

"If it's not, we'll deal with it." Austin stroked the hair away from Luke's face, dark eyes warm and smiling. "What are you going to wish for, Luke? When you find the idol. What's your heart's desire?"

Winding an arm around Austin's neck, Luke pulled him close. "I already have it."

Austin let out a soft, startled sound. Sliding his hand around the back of Luke's head, Austin tilted his head and kissed Luke. As their tongues tangled and the kiss grew heated, Luke knew he was right. His heart's desire was right here in his arms.

* * * * *

The midnight sky was clear and cloudless, glittering with a million stars. Luke gazed at a tiny blinking light making its slow way across the horizon as he undressed and stored his clothes in an empty locker. He wondered what sort of ship it was, what sort of people populated it and whether they were happy.

"I'm happy," he whispered into the cold breeze, and smiled.

Taking one last look around the deck, he made sure he was alone, then climbed down the dive ladder and slipped silently into the water. The icy shock of it melted into a cool liquid caress when he shifted. He jetted off into the depths, following the unearthly singing in his head.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been swimming when the odd patch of coral came into view. Odd, because he'd not seen any other corals for miles around, and this particular species shouldn't have been thriving at nearly three hundred feet. Yet there it was.

This is it, he thought as the idol's song trilled and pulsed in his brain. *It's here. In this coral.*

Luke began swimming slowly around the patch of coral. Enough light filtered down from the full moon for his octopus eyes to pick out tantalizing openings here and there, but brief probing with his tentacles proved all to be empty. After having circled the structure twice, Luke settled onto the silt on the east side, feeling frustrated. The idol was here, he knew it, but he couldn't find it.

Luke blew a blast of water from his mantle in the octopus version of an angry huff. A cloud of fine sand rose around him. When it settled, he stared at the hollow he'd created in the sand at the base of the coral, hardly daring to believe his eyes.

A narrow opening shaped like an upside-down V gaped in the coral. An opening he'd missed before, because it had been buried in the sand.

Excitement jolted Luke into action. Using his tentacles, he carefully dug the silt away from the opening. After a few minutes' work, he'd uncovered enough of it to let him get in. Moving carefully to keep the sand from muddying the water too much, he slipped into the narrow opening.

Inside, the darkness was thick and nearly absolute. The faint light coming from the crack in the coral was enough for Luke to make out his surroundings, but only barely. The space was bigger than it looked from the outside, the sandy floor falling sharply away from the opening to create a rough bowl in the sea floor. *El Cazador's* entire dive team could have fit easily, with room to spare.

Pushing off the rough coral wall with one tentacle, Luke drifted in a slow circle, looking for the idol's hiding place. His brain buzzed with wild elation, yet he felt calm and clear-headed. He knew the idol was here; he just had to find it.

When he found the spot, he knew immediately. The opening in the coral looked exactly like the dozens of others he'd seen, but he felt its difference. The idol's call changed pitch, dropping to a soothing hum, and he just knew. Snaking a tentacle inside, he followed the upward curve of the little passage, feeling around the space as he went.

Just as his body pressed to the coral and he couldn't reach any further, he felt it. Something hard, smooth and flat. Artificial.

The black box. And within it, the idol.

He'd found it.

Chapter Ten

Skin against skin, bare and slick. Hard needy kisses tasting of sweat and desire, the air redolent of sex. Luke's arms and legs around him, Luke's soft sweet moans in his ear. Moving together in a languid rhythm, safe in the cocoon of their love for one another.

"Austin." Luke's whisper resonating in his mind, at once soothing and exciting. "I love you, Austin. Austi ...

"Austin?"

The voice was deep and heavily accented. Not Luke's. Austin jerked upright, dragging his eyes open with some difficulty. Nikolai Vonovich stood across from him at the dining hall table, carrying a loaded plate from the breakfast buffet and looking worried.

Austin managed a smile. "Morning, Niko. Sorry, I was kind of nodding off there."

"Yes, you were." Niko sat in the chair opposite Austin, brow furrowed. "Are you ill?"

"No, I'm fine," Austin answered with a dismissive wave of his fork. "Just sleepy. I was tossing and turning most of the night."

That, he thought, was putting it mildly. He'd drifted between half-wakefulness and vivid dreams all night long. Sometimes he couldn't even tell the difference. He'd lost count of the times he'd emerged from a vision of cold darkness filled with a weirdly beautiful singing, only to find that the song still echoed in his ears and the air wavered as if he were underwater. It was disorienting and more than a little frightening.

Grinning, Niko reached for the coffee pot and topped off Austin's half-empty cup. "Drink. Caffeine is a miracle drug."

Austin laughed. "That's the truth. Thanks."

"My pleasure." Niko ran a hand over his buzz cut and gazed at Austin with a strange shyness in his blue eyes. "I wanted to thank you for making us do that drill yesterday. It saved Collins' life."

Austin's cheeks heated. "You're the one who saved him," he pointed out. "Besides, I know you had to learn those things before you got your certification."

"Yes, but it has been a long time since I've practiced it, and we've never done a drill with this new equipment. Jordan just got it last month." Planting his elbows on the table, Niko leaned forward and stared solemnly into Austin's eyes. "I do not think I could have saved Collins if it were not for that drill. So thank you. I am in your debt, my friend."

Niko's sincerity warmed Austin's heart, but at the same time, it made him uncomfortable. He genuinely liked Niko, and accepting the man's heartfelt gratitude seemed disingenuous when his whole purpose on the ship was to steal the treasure Niko and the others were risking their lives to find.

"Just doing my job," he said, taking a sip of his coffee. He glanced out the large window on the other side of the room. Black clouds scudded across the morning sky. "Looks like a storm's coming up."

Niko nodded. "Yes. It's quite cold as well. It will be quite uncomfortable on the surface, I suppose. That is why it's good to be underwater."

Austin laughed, but his thoughts turned inevitably to Luke. He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes until he was supposed to meet Luke at his cabin. It seemed like forever. Austin was itching to know how Luke's search had gone the previous night, whether he'd found the idol, whether he'd been able to bring it up. When they could leave this place.

We can go away, he mused dreamily. Use the money Dr. Martin's paying me and buy a little house somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Someplace with a private beach, so Luke can spend time as an octopus. We can swim and watch the sunset and the storms on the water. We can make love on a blanket on the sand. No more Carson Cordova, no more beatings. No more worrying about money. Just Luke and me together, forever.

Austin became so lost in his daydreams, he forgot all about Niko until the man touched his hand.

"What are you thinking of?" Niko asked, his voice soft.

Still halfway in his daydream, Austin answered without thinking. "Luke." He froze with his coffee mug halfway to his mouth as he realized what he'd just said. "I ... What I mean is, um, what's the deal with him? Mr. Cordova's son, I mean."

Niko gave him a cautious look. "What do you mean?"

"I mea ... Austin stopped, thinking. *Luke said his father's abuse was common knowledge on the ship. Find out what they know, and how they feel about it. Maybe he has friends he doesn't know about.* He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "I saw him in the hallway yesterday, coming out of his father's office," he continued, figuring the small lie was

justified. "He had a black eye. I've seen this sort of thing before. I figure I know where he got that shiner."

Niko pushed his scrambled eggs around his plate, his expression troubled. "Do not ask questions about Luke Cordova, my friend. It's not a safe subject."

"Why not?" Austin pressed. "You're a good man, Niko. I know you don't condone what's happening to Luke. Don't you want to help him?"

"Of course I would help him if I could. There are many on this ship who feel the same." Niko made a helpless gesture. "But there is nothing we can do."

Austin looked straight into Niko's eyes with a challenge in his own. "What if you could do something? Would you?"

Niko stared at Austin in silence for a moment, then pushed his chair back and stood up. He leaned his palms on the table. "The beatings are becoming worse by the day. I fear for his life. If you know how to help him, don't wait to act, or you may be too late." He straightened up and gave Austin a grim smile. "See you at ten."

Austin watched Niko walk away, pondering what he'd just said. He sensed the truth of Niko's words, even though he knew he hadn't seen the worst of the abuse.

Too anxious to sit there any longer, Austin decided to head on over to Luke's cabin. At the morning's dive team meeting, Jordan had decided they would wait until ten to dive, saying she had to consult with Smith regarding the work plan for the next couple of days. That would give Austin two hours with Luke before he had to leave for the morning's dive.

The thought of the things they'd done the night before, and the things they had yet to try together, made him smile. Tossing back the rest of his coffee, he stood and strode out of the dining hall.

The passageways seemed endless, twisting like an expensively appointed maze. Austin felt unaccountably jumpy. The closer he got to Luke's cabin, the worse the unusual anxiety got. By the time he turned the corner to Luke's hallway, his heart was racing and his breath was coming short.

He frowned, wiping his sweating palms on his jeans. It didn't make any sense. Austin was a calm person by nature. He'd handled more than one diving emergency without losing his cool. So why did he feel so on edge just from walking to his lover's quarters?

Too much coffee, maybe. It was a perfectly logical explanation; he'd had four cups of strong black coffee, which was at least twice as much as usual for him. However, some sixth sense told him that wasn't it.

Something's happened to Luke. The thought was unbearable. Austin jogged the last twenty feet, glanced around to make sure the corridor was empty, and tapped on Luke's door.

Slow, heavy footsteps sounded on the other side, nothing like Luke's light, graceful tread. Before Austin could form any thoughts about what it might mean, the door cracked open and Smith's face peered out.

Austin blinked, shocked. "Smith. What are..."

"Shut up and get in here."

Swinging the door open, Smith clamped a big hand around Austin's wrist and dragged him inside. Austin gaped at him. He was about to demand to know what Smith was doing in Luke's room, when his gaze fell on the bed. With a soft cry of dismay, Austin crossed the room in a few long strides and sat on the edge of Luke's bed. Luke lay on top of the covers, half dressed and barefoot. His eyes were closed and he lay alarmingly still.

"What happened?" Austin laid a hand on Luke's cheek. The white skin was cold to the touch. "Christ, what's wrong with him?"

"I found him unconscious in the hallway. His hair's wet, I think h ... Smith stopped. When he spoke again, his voice was guarded. "He goes swimming sometimes."

Austin turned and gave Smith a sharp look. The man's dark eyes were hard and blank. *Does he know?* Austin wondered.

Luke murmured something Austin couldn't hear. Austin whipped around again, heart in his throat. "Luke? Jesus, are you all right?"

Luke's eyes opened, and he gave Austin a weak smile. "I'll be okay. Just tired. I always get this way after a shift. Getting worse, though. Never passed out before."

Austin drew a sharp breath. *Smith's here*, he mouthed silently, cutting his eyes to his left, where Smith stood behind him.

"It's okay, both of you know." Moving with painful slowness, Luke pushed himself to a sitting position. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and he leaned against Austin's shoulder. "God, I'm so weak."

Smith cleared his throat. "I have to go meet with your father, Luke. You okay?"

"Yes." Luke waved a hand toward the door. "Thank you for helping me, Smith. Now go on, I'm fine. I don't want you to get in trouble with Father on my account. "

Smith stood there for a moment, staring at Luke with an inscrutable expression, then turned on his heel and strode out the door without a word. It slammed behind him.

Austin stared after him, astonished. "What the hell's wrong with him?"

Sighing, Luke curled himself into Austin's embrace. "He worries about me. He just doesn't know how to say so, or what to do about it."

"He's not the only one." Austin wrapped his arms around Luke and kissed the top of his head. "I talked to Niko Vonovich at breakfast today. He said there's a lot of people on this ship who would help you if they could. Maybe we should take advantage of that."

"Defying my father is dangerous. I can't ask anyone else to do that."

"I know. I'm not saying we should necessarily. But if the opportunity comes up, and Vonovich or someone else offers, I don't think we should say no."

"I don't know, Austin."

Austin decided not to push it right then. *We'll probably be on our own anyway.* Tilting Luke's chin, Austin kissed his too-pale lips. "Why'd you pass out, Luke? Is something wrong?"

A crease appeared between Luke's brows. "I don't know. It's only started happening in the last few months. At first I'd just feel a little tired after a shift. But now it's gotten to where I'm so exhausted I can barely move after. I feel great while I'm in octopus form, but as soon as I shift back I feel terrible. I'm back to normal after a few hours of rest, but the amount of rest I need to recover is getting longer too. None of Father's doctors can figure it out. Of course it doesn't help that my physiology isn't exactly human."

Fear fluttered in Austin's belly. "When we get out of here, we'll ask Dr. Martin. Maybe he can help."

"I hope so." Luke smiled, tracing the line of Austin's jaw with his fingers. "I found the idol, Austin. I know where it is."

Austin's mouth fell open. "Really? That's fantastic!"

"It's inside a patch of coral at three hundred feet." Luke took Austin's hand, lacing their fingers together. "It's still in the box, inside a compartment in the coral. I couldn't get it out. We'll need tools to chip away the coral so we can get to the box."

Austin nodded. "Okay. We'll go down tonight and get it, then take the tender straight to the mainland. When would be the best time?"

Luke's eyes narrowed in thought. "I'm always in my cabin by seven anyway, and right now I'm supposed to be confined to quarters except when I'm doing my night dives. You're free after dinner, and Father would have no reason to come looking for you. Why don't we meet at the dive platform at eight tonight? The forecast is for forty degrees and rain, so the crew will be inside."

"That's perfect. By the time we surface, everyone else should be asleep except the night bridge crew. We can take the runabout and be miles away before anyone notices." Lifting their joined hands, Austin kissed Luke's knuckles. "We can pack our stuff and leave it in the lockers."

"Good idea." Luke leaned close and rubbed his cheek against Austin's. "Just think, Austin. This time tomorrow, we'll be free. We can go anywhere we want. Do anything we want. We can be together all the time."

"I know." Austin buried his nose in Luke's hair and took a deep breath. Luke smelled like the ocean, and his skin was sticky with salt. "I can't wait to get you out of here. Get you somewhere safe, where I can take care of you and have you all to myself."

Luke laughed, the sound low and husky in Austin's ear. "I need a shower before I go to sleep. Want to join me?"

The seduction in Luke's voice started a hot glow in Austin's groin. "Sure you feel up to that?"

"Well, I'm sure I need to sleep for a few hours. And I'm sure I want to get clean before I get in bed." Luke bent and kissed Austin's throat, the touch of his cool lips and the faint flicker of his tongue sending shockwaves down Austin's spine. "But I'm still so weak and tired." Luke's fingers crept up the front of Austin's shirt and slid over his chest, thumb rubbing his nipple into a hard nub. "I need your help." Luke nipped Austin's earlobe, making him hiss. "Won't you help me shower, Austin?"

Growling, Austin grabbed Luke by the waist and rolled him over, pinning him to the mattress. "You," he breathed, lowering his mouth to brush Luke's, "are an evil tease."

Luke grinned, dark eyes dancing. "Who's teasing?"

Austin groaned as Luke's hands slid down his back to squeeze his ass. "You were unconscious a few minutes ago. We shouldn't do this."

"I want to." Holding Austin's gaze with his, Luke wrapped his long legs around Austin's waist. "What we're about to do tonight is dangerous. We have to face the fact that we might not survive." He raised a hand to caress Austin's face. "Love me, Austin. Right now." Pulling Austin's face to his, he licked Austin's bottom lip. "Please. I need you. I love you."

Luke's mouth pressed to Austin's, tongue pushing in, and Austin's misgivings melted away. Cupping Luke's cheek in his palm, he closed his eyes and took the kiss deep.

They undressed each other in between kisses and caresses, tossing their clothes in a heap on the floor. Leaning across Luke's nude body, Austin reached into the bedside drawer and fished around until he found one of the little lube packets Luke kept in there. He scrambled to his feet, then helped Luke stand and wrapped both arms around him, running his hands down the curve of Luke's bare back.

"Lean on me," Austin murmured, nuzzling behind Luke's ear. "I'll help you into the shower."

Luke slipped an arm around Austin's waist. "Will you wash me?"

"Are you kidding?" Turning to walk backward, Austin wrapped his arms around Luke and walked them toward the bathroom. "Just the idea of washing you makes me hard."

Grinning, Luke snaked his free hand down to give a couple of hard tugs on Austin's cock. "I see that."

Austin laughed and kissed Luke's smiling mouth. Luke opened for him with a soft sigh, and they stumbled through the bathroom door locked into a deep kiss. Not wanting to let go, Austin fumbled behind him for the shower controls and managed to get the water on. Steam billowed out. Luke whirled them around, pushing Austin against the wall and pressing their

bodies together. Austin moaned into Luke's mouth and rolled his hips, loving the feel of Luke's erection against his.

Breaking the kiss, Luke reached over and adjusted the water temperature. "In," he ordered, giving Austin's balls a light squeeze. "God, I need you."

Austin stepped into the shower, taking Luke with him. Luke pulled the plastic curtain shut, enclosing them in a magical white space of steam and water and desire.

Austin claimed a hard, wet kiss, then turned Luke around, took Luke's hands and planted them on the molded white fiberglass above his head. He set the packet of lube on the shelf beside Luke's shampoo.

"Don't move," Austin murmured, brushing his lips against the back of Luke's neck. "Just feel."

He picked up the soap and rubbed it between his hands, then set the bar back in its place. The thick, creamy lather smelled of mint and greenery. Pressing himself against Luke's back, Austin slipped his arms around Luke and began slowly washing his chest and abdomen.

Luke let out a soft gasp as Austin gently pinched a nipple. "Austi ...

"Right here." Austin dropped an open-mouthed kiss on Luke's shoulder. He wrapped his soapy fingers around Luke's prick, smiling at the way Luke keened and thrust into his hand. "Be still, baby. You don't want to come just yet, do you?"

Luke shook his head so hard strands of dripping hair slapped Austin's cheek. "N ... no. Want you inside me."

"Let me wash you first," Austin whispered, stroking Luke's shaft from root to tip. He ran his thumb around the edge of Luke's foreskin where it had peeled back to expose the head of Luke's cock. Luke let out a little cry and sagged in Austin's arms. Austin held him close with an arm around his waist. "Are you okay? We don't have to do this here."

"Fine, I'm fine," Luke panted, his body trembling against Austin's. "I ... I feel stronger. You make me stronger, Austin, please, want your cock in me now, to make me strong, God, pleas ...

Luke's breathless pleas made Austin feel hot and tingling all over. Letting go of Luke's cock, Austin tilted his head back with a hand under his chin and kissed him, shutting off the babbling flow of words. "Let me finish washing you, Luke. Let me touch you."

Luke whimpered but didn't protest. Grabbing the bar of soap again, Austin worked up a copious amount of frothy, fresh-scented lather between his hands. The bar slipped from his grasp, and he let it fall to the shower floor. Pressing his palms flat against Luke's sides, he ran his hands over Luke's ribcage, into the hollows under his arms, up over the sleek muscles of his arms to his long fingers where they clenched against the shower wall. He covered Luke's hands with his for a moment before tracing his hands back down Luke's arms and over his shoulders to wash his back. Luke's skin slipped silky soft under his slippery hands, the hard

muscles of his back rippling under Austin's touch. Austin could smell Luke's arousal, could practically feel the force of Luke's need beating at his brow.

Obedying a sudden keen urge, Austin sank to his knees behind Luke. He planted a soft kiss on one firm buttock. The water pounded on his back and cascaded down his ass, teasing him with its intimate caress.

"Spread your legs," he said, staring up through the steam at the graceful curve of Luke's back.

Luke obediently slid his feet apart. He leaned forward, resting his elbows against the wall, and peered at Austin from under his arm. "Austin?"

Austin smiled at the shy request in Luke's voice. "Yes." He retrieved the soap from the shower floor and began lathering Luke's legs. He took his time, moving with agonizing slowness over the taut muscles. The fine hairs tickled his palms. When his fingers hit the curve of Luke's ass, Austin kept going, spreading his fingers to cover Luke's buttocks. His thumbs traced up Luke's crease, brushing the tight little hole.

Luke let out a low moan. "God, Austin ... O ...

"Mmmm," Austin rumbled, enjoying the way Luke shook as he rubbed his thumb in tiny circles against Luke's entrance. Cupping a hand under the flow from the shower head, Austin gathered a palmful of water, then another and another, to rinse the soap from Luke's ass. "Brace yourself."

Luke twisted around enough to give Austin a dazed, puzzled look. "What?"

In answer, Austin spread Luke's buttocks and flicked his tongue over Luke's hole.

"Oh God!" Luke wailed, clawing the shower wall. "God, Austin, yes, yes, mor ...

Austin hummed and stiffened his tongue, circling the tip against Luke's tight entrance until the muscles relaxed enough to let him in. He moaned when his tongue slid inside. Luke tasted sharp and smoky and just a little sweet, the remains of soap a faint trace of bitterness overlaying Luke's natural flavor. Austin dug his fingers into Luke's buttocks, thumbs spreading them wide. He felt drunk and dazed, wanting to drown in Luke's intoxicating taste, in his sweet lusty noises, in the wet heat surrounding them. Thoughts of the adventure to come fell away, lost in a haze of pleasure and need.

"Austin, please," Luke panted. "So close. Gonna come. God, hurry."

A vision of himself plastered against Luke's back, pounding into him, sent a wave of heat through Austin's blood. The mental image pulled him to his feet and guided his hand to the packet of lube waiting on the shower shelf. Ripping it open, he squeezed the contents onto his fingers. He reached up to shove the showerhead aside to keep the lube from washing away, then shoved two slick fingers into Luke's ass.

"Oh!" Luke gasped, head falling back. "Oh. Oh. Yes."

Austin added a third finger, his need urging him on. He latched his mouth onto Luke's neck, sucking gently so he wouldn't leave a mark. His fingertips brushed Luke's gland, and Luke arched against him, moaning, one hand reaching back to tangle into Austin's hair.

"Are you ready?" Austin whispered, though the answer was crystal clear in Luke's gasping breaths and the way his hole pulsed around Austin's fingers.

Luke swallowed, throat working. "Yes. Oh. Austin. Fuck me. Fuck me. God please!"

The quaver in Luke's voice set Austin on fire. Spreading Luke open, he positioned his cockhead at Luke's entrance and pushed. They moaned in concert as he slid inside, seating himself deep in Luke's body. Austin wound one arm around Luke's hips and the other around his chest, keeping him close. It felt so right to hold him like that, with Luke's hand clenched in his hair and his cock buried in Luke's body, making love in the steam and the heat.

Austin dropped a hand down to grasp Luke's cock. He curled his fingers around the wide shaft, tearing a guttural cry from Luke's throat. The sound of it sent electric jolts through Austin's bones. His hips jerked, moving his cock inside Luke and making them both gasp. Luke whimpered and pressed back against Austin, and Austin's tenuous control dissolved. Keeping one arm firmly around Luke's hips, Austin began fucking him in short, quick jabs, stroking his cock in a hard, staggered rhythm.

Luke flung his head back, tendrils of dripping blond hair clinging to his cheeks and neck, black eyes wide and unseeing. His chest heaved, panting "oh ... oh ... o ... with every thrust of Austin's prick into his ass.

As Austin's orgasm coiled in his gut, time seemed to stop between one thrust and the next. He had all of eternity to memorize this moment. Each detail etched itself into his brain with cut-glass clarity -- the hiss of the shower's spray, the smell of mint soap and cock, the faint musky-sweet taste of Luke's anus lingering on his tongue. Luke's mouth was open, a lock of pale wet hair caught in the corner. A droplet of water gathered where the fine strands curved against Luke's skin. It rolled down his cheek, hung glistening from his jaw for a trembling second, then fell in slow motion to shatter against his shoulder, and time lurched into motion again.

"Ooooooh, oh God!" Luke cried, and came, fucking Austin's hand as his release pulsed out of him. The way his ass tightened in rhythmic waves brought Austin to the edge and pushed him over. His vision blurred and his body shook as he came deep inside Luke's body.

Lifting his hand, Austin licked Luke's semen off of his fingers. Luke turned his head and planted a wet kiss on his lips. "You taste like come," he murmured, licking at the corner of Austin's mouth.

"Best taste in the world." Austin pulled his cock carefully out of Luke's ass, turned Luke around and gathered him into his arms. "Especially when it's yours."

Luke laughed, the sound husky and breathless. Winding his arms around Austin's neck, he tilted his head and covered Austin's mouth with his. The kiss was lazy and unhurried, flavored with the sharp tang of Luke's semen.

"Mm," Luke hummed, licking his lips as the kiss broke. "I love kissing you, Austin."

"I love it too." To illustrate the point, Austin did it again, delving his tongue deep into Luke's mouth. He wished they never had to stop. Luke's kiss was addictive.

Luke raked his fingers through Austin's hair. "How long before you have to go?"

Austin glanced at the waterproof dive watch he still wore. "More than an hour. How do you feel now? Are you okay?"

"I feel wonderful." Drawing back a little, Luke gave Austin a wide smile. "I knew I'd feel stronger if you made love to me, and I do. You're good for me."

Austin returned Luke's smile. "I'm glad." Reaching across Luke's shoulder, Austin snagged a bottle of pale green shampoo off the shelf. "Let me wash your hair."

Luke's smile widened. "I'd like that."

"So would I." Opening the shampoo bottle, Austin poured a dollop into his palm. The tart scent of apples rose to mingle with the steam. Austin spread the shampoo between his hands, then buried his fingers in Luke's fine, soft hair and worked it into a thick lather.

Luke closed his eyes, neck arching as he leaned into Austin's touch. "Feels nice."

"Mm-hm." Austin massaged Luke's scalp in slow circles. "I love the way your hair feels. So soft." He combed his fingers through the wet, slippery strands, gently working out the tangles. "Rinse."

Reaching up, Luke adjusted the shower head and leaned his head under the spray. Austin watched, fascinated by the flow of water through Luke's gleaming hair, the way Luke's fingers methodically washed the lather out. When Luke was finished rinsing, Austin turned the water off. Luke's eyelids fluttered open, and their gazes locked.

They moved at the same time, meeting in another searing kiss, hands caressing bare, wet skin and twining in each other's hair. Austin clutched Luke close, wishing he could crawl right inside him and become a permanent part of him. The very real possibility that this might be their last time together niggled at the back of Austin's brain. He wished it would stop. The thought of losing Luke made his insides knot.

"We'll be okay," Luke whispered, stroking Austin's neck. "We'll get the idol and take it to Dr. Martin, then we can go away. Disappear someplace, just you and me."

"I hope so. I think we have a good chance." Austin kissed Luke's flushed cheek. "But how can you be so certain?"

"I believe it," Luke said, staring into Austin's eyes, "because I have to. I need to. Because if we don't make this happen, there's nothing left."

Austin's chest went tight. Without a word, he pulled Luke closer and rested his head in the curve of Luke's neck. Luke's arms went around him, fingers tracing up and down his spine. They stayed that way for a long time, without speaking. Just holding each other, taking silent comfort in one another's presence.

When Austin left Luke's cabin almost an hour later, he carried the warmth of Luke's body and the taste of his kisses with him.

Chapter Eleven

Luke dreamed. The usual dream of blue water and bluer sky, warmth and peace and the sense of belonging he ached for in his waking life, all shattered by the cruel man who'd stolen his family and his history from him. Apparently, knowing the real story didn't change the dream that had haunted him for as long as he could remember.

But this time, the dream was interwoven with other visions. A view from the deck of *El Cazador*, the water black and angry under an ominous dark gray sky. The porthole of a cabin, rain pinging off the glass and veiling the world beyond. His own face, wet and flushed, mouth open and eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Though he'd never seen it, Luke recognized that last image. The shower that morning. Austin inside him, Austin's arms holding him close, the glorious feeling of rightness and completion that had filled him.

Luke wondered why he was seeing the scene through Austin's eyes, reliving Austin's memory rather than his own. The question nagged at his mind enough to bring him fully awake.

Luke yawned and stretched, taking stock of how he felt. In spite of his restless sleep, he felt wide awake and invigorated. A vague soreness in his anus served as a pleasant reminder of the morning's lovemaking. It also reminded him of the question that had woken him -- why had he been dreaming Austin's memory?

Sitting up in bed, Luke glanced out the window. Rain fell in a solid gray curtain, reducing the world outside to a watery blur. *Just like in my dream*. Something about the realization troubled him. Deep inside, he knew his dreams were somehow tied to waking reality, but he couldn't see the connection. He felt as though the answer were just beyond his grasp. That he would see it if he only let himself.

A soft knock on the door interrupted his musings. Luke glared at the door. "Yes?" he called. "Who is it?"

"Tamika, from the kitchen," a lilting feminine voice answered. "Annabelle sent me to ask if you want a late lunch."

Luke glanced at the clock. Four thirty; he'd slept nearly all day. He hadn't snuck into the kitchen, nor had he called for a meal like he usually did if he was confined to quarters. He laughed. Annabelle was such a mother at heart.

"Just a second," he called. "Let me put something on, I'll come to the door."

Jumping up, Luke pulled on a pair of jeans, then went to the cabin door and opened it. A tall, full-figured young woman stood on the other side, glancing nervously up and down the hall. He smiled at her. "Hi, Tamika. What's on the menu today?"

"We have potato soup," she said, dark eyes darting between Luke's face and the carpet under her feet. "I can make you a sandwich to go with it. We have some fresh tomatoes and Swiss cheese from a grocery run to the mainland yesterday."

The thought made Luke's mouth water and his stomach rumble. "That sounds wonderful. I can come to the kitchen and get it, though, no need for you to bring it."

Her eyes went wide. "Oh no, don't do that! Your father's in the dining room right now having coffee with Collins, he might catch you!"

Luke frowned. "Why isn't Collins diving?"

She glanced around again, then leaned closer. "I heard he was on medical leave for a heart condition. Some of the divers were talking about it at lunch. They said Collins passed out underwater yesterday, and the doc found out he has an irregular heartbeat, so he can't dive anymore. But the regular dive was canceled today anyhow 'cause of the weather."

"Oh. I see." Luke bit his lip. "Well in that case I suppose someone will have to bring some food to me here. I hope it's no trouble."

She gave him a shy smile. "No trouble at all. I'll be back in two shakes."

Tamika hurried off down the hall. Luke shut the door and leaned against it, thinking hard. Collins could be a vengeful bastard when the mood struck him, and his reasons weren't always logical.

Pushing away from the door, Luke wandered over to the window and leaned his elbows on the sill, staring out into the late afternoon gloom. Worry for Austin churned in his stomach. Stuck here in his cabin, there was nothing he could do to warn his lover of the possible danger. He hated feeling so helpless.

Luke wasn't sure why he was so anxious about the situation. Austin was smart enough to watch his back, and perfectly capable of looking after himself. He'd no doubt heard about Collins' heart condition, and would be keeping an eye out for any possible retribution.

"He'll be okay," Luke said aloud to the rain pelting his window.

He could only hope he was right.

* * * * *

Austin pushed his chair back from the table. "God, I'm full. That was fantastic."

Chen grinned as she twirled the last of her linguine around her fork. "The boss may be a dick sometimes, but you have to admit he feeds us well."

"True." Jordan downed the last of her iced tea. "I'm going to the library to find a book. It's a perfect night for reading."

Ever the gentleman, Vonovich stood when Jordan did. "Goodnight, ma'am."

Jordan smiled and patted his cheek. "Such a sweetheart. Goodnight, Niko. See you in the morning."

Chen snickered at the blush coloring Niko's cheeks. "Well, I'm off to the lounge," she said, rising from her chair. She reached up and pinched Niko's cheek. "Goodnight, *sweetheart*."

Niko's blush deepened. He shot her a dark look as she walked away. "I am going to the commons to watch a movie. Would anyone else like to come?"

Austin glanced at his watch. His insides lurched. Only half an hour until he and Luke went after the idol. He needed to pack his belongings before meeting Luke at the dive platform.

He smiled at Niko. "I think I'll head on back to my cabin and read a little, then go to bed. I'm wiped out."

"Didn't even dive today, Bell," Collins said, speaking up for the first time that evening. "What the fuck you got to be so tired about?"

Austin gave the man a keen look. His eyes glittered with malice, and his thin lips were curved into a smirk. *What's he up to?*

"Just didn't sleep well last night, that's all," Austin answered, keeping his tone casual. Deliberately turning his attention away from Collins, Austin stood and clapped Niko on the back. "Night Niko."

"Goodnight Austin. Sleep well." Niko smiled and wandered over to the next table, where the rest of the dive team sat.

Austin turned and walked as calmly as he could out of the dining hall. He could feel Collins watching him, the back of his neck prickling with the intensity of the man's gaze. He was relieved when he reached the passageway outside the dining hall, where Collins could no longer see him.

Austin hurried to his cabin. Inside, he pulled his duffle bag out of the tiny closet and started stuffing his clothes and toiletries into it. Earlier that afternoon, he'd sneaked out to the dive platform and stashed a bag of various excavation tools in his dive locker along with

his drysuit. After one last look around his cabin to make sure he had everything, he slung his bag over his shoulder and opened the cabin door.

Keeping his bag hidden behind his body, Austin took a good look up and down the hallway. The sounds of a car chase floated from the commons area, along with whoops and laughter. Probably Niko and some of the others watching a movie. The other end of the passageway was empty. Slipping into the hall, Austin slid his cabin door silently shut and ran to the stair at the end of the corridor opposite the commons area.

Austin bounded up the steps and stopped at the top to peer cautiously around the corner. The short passageway to the deck was empty. Heart pounding, he hurried to the hatch that led to the deck. Almost there.

He relaxed a little when he stepped out into the darkness. The rain had slowed to a light drizzle, blown nearly sideways by the icy wind. Austin hunched his shoulders against the cold.

When he reached the dive platform, the bulk of the ship provided shelter from the wind. Austin dropped his bag on the deck and rubbed his hands together to warm them. He looked around. No sign of Luke. But then again, Luke wasn't likely to be standing out in the open.

"Luke?" he called softly, squinting into the shadows between the lockers. "Are you here?"

"Yes."

Austin focused on the spot where the sound had come from. Luke rose like a specter from behind the hamper containing the clean towels. He ran to Austin and threw himself into Austin's arms. Winding a hand into Luke's silky hair, Austin covered Luke's mouth with his.

The kiss was deep and sweet and longer than was really safe under the circumstances, but Austin couldn't have stopped if his life depended on it.

When they broke apart, Luke let out a happy sigh. "God, I'm glad you're here."

"Me too." Austin held Luke tight, burying his face in Luke's neck and soaking up his scent. "Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"No. Did you?"

"No. Everyone's cozying up to watch TV and read." Austin drew back enough to see Luke's face. The black eyes stared back at him, pools of liquid darkness in a ghost-white face. "Let's get going. Help me get my gear on?"

"Of course."

Reluctantly letting Luke slip from his arms, Austin went to put his bag in his locker. He took out the bag of tools and his drysuit and started stripping down to his underwear, stuffing his clothes into the locker atop his duffle bag. "Jesus, it's freezing out here."

“Thirty-seven degrees Fahrenheit. I’ve no idea what the wind chill is.” Luke helped Austin don the drysuit, then turned to heft tanks of air and Heliox from the rack. “The water temp is seventy-two though. Actually a bit warmer than it’s been lately.”

“Good.” Crouching on the deck, Austin began hooking up the regulator and the apparatus allowing him to switch his breathing mixture from air to Heliox while at depth. “I can move faster if the water’s a little warmer.”

Luke tugged his sweater off over his head and put it in Austin’s locker. He started to take his pants off, then stopped, staring at Austin with a strange look on his face. “Austin, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, just make it quick.” Austin shot Luke a quick, nervous grin. “You’re not getting cold tentacles, are you?”

Luke burst into startled laughter. “No. I just thought of something. It’s ... interesting. And possibly very helpful.”

Austin raised his eyebrows. “What is it?”

Luke ran a hand through his hair. His brow creased in thought. “All day today, I’ve been getting flashes of things in my sleep, like snapshots. Views from the ship’s deck, and from inside a cabin.”

“You’re dreaming of *El Cazador*?” Austin pushed the button on the back of the regulator to check the airflow, then took a couple of breaths through it.

“I dreamed of making love in the shower,” Luke said, his voice so soft Austin barely heard him. “Only I saw it through your eyes.”

“That’s weird, but kind of sexy. I’m not sure how that’s helpful, though.” Switching to Heliox, Austin checked the flow from that tank. “I was thinking of the shower a lot today, actually. The regular dive was canceled, so I had lots of time to think.”

“Austin.” Taking Austin’s hand, Luke pulled him to his feet. His gaze held Austin’s, bright and intent. “Have you had any such strange visions? As if you were somewhere else, seeing through someone else’s eyes?”

The memory of those strange half-waking moments, when he would have sworn he was deep underwater if he didn’t know better, came to Austin in a rush. A chill ran up his spine.

“Last night, I kept dreaming of ... I don’t know what it was,” Austin said. “I felt like I was underwater. There was this weird noise, like singing, only it was inside my head.”

Nodding, Luke laid a hand on Austin’s cheek. “That’s the idol. It sings to me, Austin. I think that last night, you heard its singing too. Through me.”

Austin shook his head. “That’s impossible,” he insisted, in spite of the inner voice whispering that Luke was right. “People can’t read each other’s minds.”

“I’m not a person, Austin.” Luke’s voice was calm, but tinged with bitterness. “I can turn myself into an octopus. You would’ve called that impossible before yesterday.”

Austin swallowed. "Yes, but..."

He stopped, clutching at Luke as the world shifted dizzily around him. Luke's face was still there, solid and real, but overlaying it like a mist was an image of himself. The drysuit was there, the regulator clutched in one hand. He closed his eyes, but it didn't shut out the vision of his own shock-bleached face.

That, more than anything else, forced him to admit the truth .

Luke's lips pressed soft kisses to Austin's eyelids. "Did you see?" Luke asked, stroking Austin's hair.

Austin nodded and opened his eyes. Not trusting himself to speak, he stared into Luke's eyes, trying to convey without words the mix of confusion and elation he felt. Luke smiled, and Austin felt a sudden rush of love mixed with fear and excitement. It felt almost as if it were coming from somewhere outside himself.

"Oh my God," Austin whispered, eyes widening as the truth struck him. "You're doing that. You're showing me what you feel."

Luke nodded, his face lit with the excitement of discovery. "I'm going to try something else. Tell me what you see."

Luke's eyes went blank and distant. Austin let out a gasp when an image of vivid blue water and high, ice-capped mountains swam into his vision. "I see ... Christ. Mountains. A narrow lake or something."

Luke laughed. "It worked!"

"What worked?" Austin demanded, puzzled and a bit frightened by the whole thing. "What the hell was that?"

"A memory. That was when Father took his mistress on vacation in Norway, when I was seven. I was supposed to stay in my room, but I snuck out to see the mountains. I just wanted to see if I could show you my memories telepathically." Smiling, Luke cupped Austin's face between his hands. "See if you can do it. Show me something."

"I don't know how."

"Don't try," Luke said, his words reverberating in Austin's mind. "Just think." Luke kissed Austin's lips, tongue flicking briefly out. "Think of what you want to show me. Anything."

"Okay." Drawing a deep breath, Austin shut his eyes and conjured a mental image of the first thing that came to his mind -- Luke. Luke naked underneath him, face contorted with pleasure. Austin let his love for Luke flow into the image, wondering if Luke would be able to feel it as he had felt Luke's love.

Luke's soft gasp told him everything he needed to know. Opening his eyes, he met Luke's awestruck expression with one of his own.

"This is amazing," Austin murmured. "I can't believe it. It's insane."

“Yes. But it’s true.” Pulling Austin close, Luke kissed him again. This time, when Luke’s tongue slid into his mouth, Austin felt the echo of Luke’s excitement in his mind. “Don’t think too hard about it, Austin. Just let it happen.”

Austin cupped Luke’s head in his hand and sucked his bottom lip like a piece of candy. “Why is this happening to us, you think? Is it because of you being a shapeshifter?”

“I believe so. I think my people had some sort of psychic connection to each other. I remember things sometime ... Luke trailed off, brow furrowing. He shook his head. “We don’t have time to worry about that right now. Let’s get the idol and get back to the mainland. We’ll figure it all out later. Okay?”

“Okay.” Putting the provocative questions of how and why to the back of his mind, Austin kissed Luke once more and reluctantly let him go.

With Luke helping him, it didn’t take Austin long to get the rest of his gear on. Within minutes, he was standing at the dive ladder, watching Luke skin out of his clothes. He knew he should be getting in the water, but he couldn’t resist the chance to bask in the sight of Luke’s nude body. The clouds that had shrouded the sky all day were breaking, and Luke’s bare skin shone pearlescent in the shifting moonlight.

“You’re beautiful,” Austin said as Luke slipped off his underwear and stuffed it in the locker.

Luke let out a soft laugh. He shut the locker, walked over and kissed Austin’s forehead. “So are you.” Picking up the little bag of tools sitting on the deck, he handed it to Austin. “Go on and get in the water. I’ll follow you.”

“Okay.” Austin grabbed the back of Luke’s neck and pulled him into a hard, deep kiss. “I love you,” he whispered when they broke apart.

Luke smiled against his mouth, fingers tracing the line of his jaw through the drysuit hood. “I love you too. Go.”

Letting go of Luke, Austin climbed awkwardly down the ladder. He had clamped the mouthpiece of his regulator between his teeth and was just about to drop into the water when he heard a sound that made his blood run cold.

“Luke,” Carson Cordova’s voice floated down from the dive platform. “I have been searching everywhere for you. Come with me.”

Oh God, no. No. Austin grabbed the rungs of the ladder hard, pressing himself close to the side of the ship.

“I was just about to shift and dive, Father.” Luke sounded admirably calm. “I’m very close to finding the idol.”

“So you keep assuring me. You may dive later. I need to speak with you for a moment.”

Silence fell. Austin stared up at the opening in the rail a few feet above him. He could just make out Luke’s profile. Moving as slowly and silently as he could, Austin laid a hand on

the buckle of his BCD. He would ditch the equipment, he decided, and run up the ladder to Luke's rescue. No way was he letting that bastard hurt Luke ever again.

Luke's eyes cut sideways, his gaze locked with Austin's for a searing second, and Austin froze. Suggestions wormed themselves into his brain, telling him to go, to get the idol, that Carson didn't suspect anything, that Luke would be all right and would find him in the water.

I'm not leaving you, Austin thought desperately. *I don't even know where the damn thing is anyway.*

"Let me get my clothes," Luke said. "You should go on inside, Father, it's cold out here. I'll meet you in your office."

Shaking on the dive ladder, Austin closed his eyes and let Luke's thoughts flow into him. There were no words, just knowledge. If he could get his father to go back inside, Luke would join Austin immediately in the water. If not, Luke would guide him to the idol through their newly-discovered psychic connection. But no matter what, they had to act right now. They were out of time.

"You'll forgive me, my son, if I brave the cold to wait for you." Carson's voice was hard as steel. "Now dress."

Austin felt Luke's spike of panic clearly in his mind, and knew what it meant. *His clothes are in my locker. If he opens it, his father will see my bag there, he'll see my drysuit's gone, and he'll know. Fuck.*

"I, I undressed inside," Luke stammered. "I'd forgotten. I'm sorry."

Carson made an impatient noise. "Whatever has been causing you to become ill and weak lately is clearly affecting your mind as well."

"Yes, Father." Luke's voice held a thread of hope. "Perhaps if I shift just for a few minutes, it would..."

"No." Carson's tone brooked no argument, and Austin's heart sank. "Get a towel then, and come along. You may come back and shift when we have finished speaking. You must find the idol tonight."

With one swift glance down at Austin, Luke moved away from the rail. The towel bin squeaked open and slammed shut, then heavy footfalls sounded across the deck. Austin heard the sound of a hatch opening and closing, and dread settled over him like a blanket. He was alone in the cold winter night, with the weight of his and Luke's future on his shoulders.

For several minutes, he clung to the ladder, paralyzed by fear and indecision. He knew what Luke wanted -- for him to go into the depths and retrieve the idol. To get it safely out of Carson's reach, for Luke's sake, for his own sake. For the sake of the whole world. Austin could already see the idol's resting place in his mind, could feel the pull of it through his connection with Luke. He could find it. He no longer doubted that.

What he didn't think he could do was leave Luke in Carson Cordova's clutches. Maybe Luke was right and Carson didn't suspect anything. After all, he'd told Luke he could come back after their talk, shift and dive for the idol. With any luck, Luke would be able to catch up with Austin on the way to the coral patch where the idol rested, and they could recover it together. Their plan could still work out, even if they were forced to abandon all their possessions and swim straight to the closest oil rig. However, Luke's father would almost certainly beat him again, and the thought of it was unbearable.

As Austin hung there, trying to decide what to do, a wave of mental images hit him so hard he nearly fell off the ladder. His fingers spasmed on the metal rail, holding on automatically as the pictures flooded his mind. Carson Cordova sitting across an expanse of fine mahogany desk, frowning as Luke spoke words Austin couldn't hear. Luke's long fingers spreading a seafloor topography map across the desk, pointing at a spot indistinguishable from all the other points on the map. Carson standing and pacing behind the desk, nodding thoughtfully.

The images eased Austin's mind. *Maybe he did just want to talk to Luke. Probably about where he thinks the idol is.* Austin drew a deep breath, shut his eyes and thought out toward Luke. He felt foolish, having believed all his life that mind reading was impossible. But he couldn't deny the evidence of his own experience. Somehow, he and Luke could read each other's minds. There would be time to freak out over it later. He hoped. Right now, they both had to survive the night, and they had to recover the idol before Carson could. This strange psychic connection Austin and Luke evidently had was their only tool for achieving that goal right now.

Feeling the bright thread of Luke's consciousness winding through his own, Austin concentrated on their plan. *I'm going down. Stay focused on the idol's call, and I think I'll be able to find it. And please, please be careful. Don't let him hurt you. Please.*

A wave of gentle reassurance washed through Austin, telling him Luke was all right and would be joining him underwater shortly. Relieved, and feeling a bit stronger, Austin put the regulator in his mouth, pushed off from the ladder and plunged into the cold sea.

Chapter Twelve

Luke's stomach churned as he followed his father through the passageway and up the stair to his office on the upper deck. Carson never once turned around, but Luke felt the weight of his anger nonetheless. Worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, Luke stared at his father's ramrod-straight, expensively tailored back. He hated it when Father shouted at him, beat him and told him he was worthless. But he'd learned to fear these silent moods more than anything else.

At the back of his mind, Austin's terror and worry hung like a black vapor. Luke kept his thoughts calm, sending out a thread of reassurance to his lover. No matter what else happened tonight, Austin could not be allowed to follow him with intentions of rescue. If he did, they were both as good as dead. Father believed himself to be close to finding the idol, possibly close enough that he could find it even without Luke's help. Discovering that Luke and Austin had plotted against him, or even simply that they'd been together, could push Carson to murder them both.

A couple of crew members walking down the hallway glanced at Luke as he and Carson passed, but said nothing. Seeing Luke walking around in nothing but a towel wasn't terribly unusual, even in winter. Everyone on board knew that he swam in all weather and in almost any water temperature over fifty degrees. The few who knew the secret of his shifting abilities knew why he did so; the others just thought he was slightly unhinged and had an unnaturally high tolerance for cold.

Luke's apprehension escalated when he stepped into his father's office and Carson locked the door behind them. The older man didn't speak. He turned around, very slowly. Luke backed away when he saw his father's face. The man's dark eyes burned with a fury hotter than Luke had ever seen there before.

"Father, please," Luke quavered, holding a hand palm-out in front of him. "Don't. Please don't."

In answer, Carson strode forward and punched Luke in the stomach. Luke fell to his hands and knees, gasping for breath. The towel came loose and fell to the floor.

"Did you truly think you would keep your little secret from me?" Carson growled. "It is bad enough that you are a sodomite." He spat the word as if it were poison. "But to indulge your sick proclivities under my very nose, and believe you could get away with it?" A leather-shod foot connected with Luke's jaw, sending him sprawling. "I think not."

Luke curled up on the floor, one hand covering the place where his father had kicked him. A sharp, searing pain throbbed through the bone. *Hairline fracture*, Luke thought with a strange sort of calm. It wasn't the first time.

What scared him was the hollow feeling that it just might be the last time.

"Please stop," Luke pleaded, ignoring the high, piercing pain lancing through his jaw with each word. "It's a mistake. A mistake. I, I don't know..."

"Yes you do!" Carson roared, silencing Luke's protests. He started pacing, expensive shoes thumping the carpet. "Collins saw that *puto* Bell exiting your cabin this morning. Do not try to deny it."

Oh God. Adrenaline coursed through Luke's body, making his mind race. The pain faded into the background. "He, he knocked on my door. He was lost, he thought it was Smith's office. I gave him directions."

Luke's father stopped pacing and stood with his back to Luke. Luke watched him. In the unexpected quiet, he reached for the first calm, rational memory he could think of in relation to his father -- the two of them perusing a map of the Gulf floor at the start of this expedition -- and sent it out to Austin's mind. Sending a memory had worked well before. He hoped it worked this time. The overwhelming terror and worry flooding from Austin through their psychic connection eased somewhat, and some of the tension melted from Luke's body. As long as Austin was safe, and free to recover the idol, that was all Luke wanted right then.

Luke barely stifled a startled cry when Austin's thoughts coalesced in his mind. Austin was going to continue the dive as planned. Luke managed a smile. Good.

Sending out a pulse of reassuring thought to his lover, Luke focused his mind on the idol and steeled himself for what he fully expected to be the worst beating of his life.

"He did not lose his way," Carson said finally, his voice dangerously calm. "He came to you and had you like a woman." The shiny leather shoes shuffled around, the tips inches from Luke's nose. "A *woman*!"

The word was punctuated by another kick in the face. Luke felt his partially fractured jaw shatter, felt blood fill his mouth and trickle down his throat. He coughed and spat it out,

keeping his brain resolutely focused on the idol. *Can't think of anything else. Austin can't know this is happening.*

Big, square hands hooked under Luke's armpits, hauling him to his feet. "You have shamed me for the last time, boy," Carson growled. "You will beg my forgiveness, or you will not live to earn my wrath again."

Hope surged through Luke's heart. If his father was giving him even a slight chance at surviving, then he still needed Luke to find the idol. It galled him to beg forgiveness when he'd done nothing wrong, but Luke knew he had no choice.

He met his father's murderous gaze without flinching. "I'm sorry I've shamed you, Father," he whispered, his voice slurred. The broken ends of bone ground against each other, sending waves of agony through him. "Please forgive me."

Carson's lips curved into a cold smile. "I am glad you have seen reason, my son."

Luke blinked in surprise as his father let go of him and stepped back. "Thank you ... Father. M-may I dive now?" Speaking hurt so badly Luke had to fight to remain conscious, and he could barely understand himself, but he knew better than to remain silent.

"You may, when I am finished." Crossing to his desk, Carson opened a drawer on the far side and started rummaging through it. "There is still the small matter of your punishment."

A cold knot of dread formed in Luke's gut. "Father ... Wha ...

The words dried up in Luke's throat when his father's hand emerged from the desk drawer clutching a short but thick police club. Luke backed up as his father stalked toward him, but there was nowhere to go, and soon enough his back hit the cherry-paneled wall.

"You will live to find my treasure, thanks to your ability to shift," Carson said softly. "But you cannot defy me; you cannot behave like a degenerate whore, and expect to escape punishment." He smiled, shark-like and menacing. "Just remember, my son, that I forgive you for your transgressions."

The first blow broke Luke's arm. He concentrated on the image of the idol, and soon it was the only thing he could see.

* * * * *

Darkness surrounded Austin on all sides. The only sound was the whoosh and bubble of his own breathing through the regulator, the only light provided by the bright dive light he held. Floating weightless in the cold blackness, the rays from the dive light sparkling off phytoplankton and the occasional fish, Austin felt like a tiny white star glowing in the vastness of space.

Ever since he'd jumped off the dive ladder into the black and ominous sea, Austin had been plagued with a sense of impending doom. He tried to ignore it, attributing the feeling to an unavoidable worry over Luke, and to diving to nearly three hundred feet at night without

a partner. He'd never gone diving alone before. Diving without a partner, especially to the depths he was aiming for, was against every safety rule he'd ever learned. However, he had no choice. Luke's urgency about finding the idol right away had come through loud and clear over the strange connection between their minds. They had to retrieve it, tonight, or they were both dead.

In a contest between the possibility of a diving accident and the certainty of losing Luke forever, the latter won hands-down as the outcome he'd most like to prevent.

The back of Austin's neck prickled, as it had done several times on the way down. He turned in the water to scan the emptiness behind him. A few points of greenish luminescence dotted the endless expanse, but otherwise the water behind him remained empty.

He tried not to worry that there hadn't yet been any sign of Luke. *It hasn't been that long*, he reminded himself. *He has to wait to leave until his father's ready to let him go. Otherwise, that bastard Cordova will be suspicious.* Austin didn't have to be told that arousing the elder Cordova's suspicion could be deadly.

Austin swam on, following the weird siren song of the idol. It was disorienting to let himself be guided not by a compass or an anchor line or a concrete visual, but by a noise in his head. However, he felt completely certain of his direction, and he trusted Luke. Right now, his and his lover's survival -- and the success of their quest -- depended on Austin not over thinking things. Austin was a born survivor. He let himself be guided, and kept his questions locked firmly away.

Long minutes passed. Just when Austin was beginning to wonder if he'd gotten lost and would simply keep plowing into the dark until he died, a faint orangish patch appeared in the wide beam of his dive light. It expanded and became clearer as he drew nearer, and soon resolved itself into a large mound of coral hunched on the sea floor.

Austin whooped around the regulator in his mouth. This was it. The hiding place of the idol.

It took him only a few moments to find the entrance to the cavity inside the coral. He hung in the water, forcing himself to be still and study it. The aperture would be barely wide enough to get through with the tanks. He'd have to enlarge it.

Hooking the dive light onto his weight belt, Austin opened the equipment bag and took out a medium-sized pick. He swung the heavy point at the coral on one side of the opening. A large section of it crumbled away, clouding the water with a fine, chalky orange dust. Chunks of the material floated to the sea bottom.

A few more well-placed blows doubled the size of the opening. Austin shoved the pick back into the bag and swam through the widened entryway. Inside, the coral formed a vaulted chamber in the shape of a rough circle. The water inside was still and clear. Openings of various sizes pitted the walls. Austin drifted to the center of the space, trying to trace the thread of the idol's song with his mind.

It wasn't as strong as before. Austin's brow furrowed. *That's not right. It should be getting clearer, not fainter.*

He thought out to Luke, wondering why he wasn't able to "hear" the idol as clearly as he had before. A flashflood of panic and fear pulsed through his connection to Luke's mind and was gone before he time to react. Shaken, Austin shot a frantic barrage of half-formed questions to Luke.

After a few seconds that seemed more like hours, Austin felt Luke's touch in his mind, showing him where the idol rested and urging him to hurry. The faint thread of fear running through Luke's thought clutched at Austin's insides, but he ignored it. Luke was alive, and he was on his way. Every second brought him closer. Austin could feel it.

Forcing himself to relax, Austin swam across to the hole in the coral where the idol lay hidden. As he laid his hand on lip of the opening, the music in his skull peaked in a gorgeous harmony, then settled into a soft hum. *It's really here*, he thought with a sense of wonder.

Austin checked his Heliox level and his dive watch. Plenty of Heliox left, but if he didn't hurry, he would have to decompress on the way to the surface. Opening the equipment bag, he pulled out a smaller pick and went to work.

The coral was just as soft and chalky here as it was at the cave entrance. Within a few minutes, Austin had chipped away a large, ragged hole. Through the murk his efforts created in the water around him, he saw something smooth and black within the space. A sharp thrill of excitement shot through him. Dropping the pick, he reached in with both hands and pulled out a small black box.

He held the box in one hand and shone the dive light directly on it with the other. The container was fashioned of something that seemed to be metal. It felt solid and heavy, the surface reflecting the light with a soft, diffused glow.

It's here, Luke. I've found it. I have it. The thought Austin sent to Luke was full of awe as he stared at the box, rubbing a corner with one gloved thumb. He wondered if Luke would be able to see it through his eyes.

Austin was opening his bag to put the object in when he heard the unmistakable sound of another breathing apparatus behind him. Apprehension tightened his insides. *Luke doesn't need dive equipment.* Dropping the bag, Austin turned in the water as quickly as he could, just in time for a hand to rip his regulator from his mouth.

Adrenaline coursed through Austin's veins, slowing time to a crawl and bringing everything into sharp focus. Grabbing the person's wrist in one hand, Austin twisted the way his uncle had taught him. His assailant's grip loosened. Austin snatched the regulator back, put it in his mouth and cleared the water out.

Only then did he glance at the face of the person who'd attacked him. Austin's heart skipped a beat.

Collins hung in the water, wearing a thin wetsuit with no hood or gloves. Bluish spots mottled his fingers and ears, and his eyes glittered madly behind his mask. His free hand gripped a large dive knife.

Oh fuck. Austin lunged for the knife, but Collins was too quick. Using Austin's grip on his other wrist for leverage, the man swung around, swinging the blade in a tight arc. The razor-sharp metal sliced through the arm of Austin's drysuit and dug into his flesh. He cried out around his regulator, his fingers automatically uncurled from Collins' wrist, and Collins was free.

Ignoring the curl of blood rising from the new wound to cloud the water, Austin made another grab for Collins' knife hand. The older man twisted away as quickly as an eel. Before Austin realized what he was doing, Collins clamped one hand around the thick tubing feeding Heliox from Austin's tank to his mouth and severed it neatly in two.

Instantly, a cloud of bubbles filled the coral cavern as the gasses began free-flowing from Austin's tanks. It would empty in seconds. He needed another source of Heliox and air, and the only other tanks that could possibly help him were on the back of the man who'd just tried to kill him.

Fighting off the first stirrings of panic, Austin reached down, snatched the pick off the sand and swung the flat at Collins' head. The metal connected with a dull thunk that reverberated through the water. Collins went instantly limp.

Dropping the pick again, Austin let his regulator fall from his mouth and grabbed the spare one connected to Collins' tanks. He unbuckled his BCD and weight belt, unclipped the dive light and looped the lanyard around his wrist, then let his own tanks and equipment fall to the sandy sea bottom. Thinking fast, Austin hefted Collins' limp frame, holding him under the armpits with one arm and using the other hand to make sure the regulator stayed in Collins' mouth. Even though Collins had attacked him, Austin had no desire to return the favor. He wanted the man to live to see the inside of a prison cell. Thankful that he'd widened the entrance into the cavern, Austin hauled Collins out into the open water and started making his way to the surface.

It wasn't until the patch of coral had begun to fade into the dark that Austin realized he'd left his equipment bag with the idol in it behind. At that moment, Collins tensed and began to struggle in Austin's grip.

In the ensuing struggle to hang onto Collins and the tanks they both needed to live, Austin thought desperately out to Luke. *Hurry. I need you.*

With his attention focused on Collins' grasping hands, the kick to the groin took Austin by surprise. Paralyzing pain flared through Austin's body. Collins broke free, tearing the regulator from Austin's mouth. Another well-aimed kick landed on the side of Austin's head. He felt himself tumbling through the water, the world wheeling crazily around him. By the time his vision cleared, Collins was swimming toward the surface, his flippers reflecting quick glints of brightness from the dive light still looped around Austin's wrist.

Pointing the beam of the dive light at Collins' rapidly fading form, Austin began swimming after him, breathing out in a slow, steady stream. He definitely didn't want to rupture a lung while ascending if he could help it.

It wasn't long before Austin's lungs began to burn, and he knew he was out of time. As his vision tunneled and his ears started to ring, he wondered if Luke would ever find his body.

Through the inky water above, Austin thought he saw a flash of something pale rocketing toward him. He wondered if he imagined the familiar presence in his mind as consciousness began to fade.

Chapter Thirteen

With a final swing of the police club, Carson cracked Luke's femur. Luke lay still on the floor. Broken bones shifted every time he moved, in too many places to count. The pain was so huge he was beyond feeling it. He counted that as a blessing, especially when Carson grabbed him by one bruised and bloodied leg and dragged him out the office door and into the hall.

"Go to the water," Carson snapped. "Find my treasure, then come back and lead me to it. If you touch it, I will know, and you will die slowly. If you succeed, I will be merciful and allow you to live. Go, and do not show your face to me until you have found the idol."

Aiming a final kick at Luke's side, Carson stalked back into his office and slammed the door behind him. Luke lay there for a moment, gathering his strength. He sent cautious feelers out through his connection with Austin. A sense of discovery and excitement floated from Austin's mind to his, and Luke knew Austin had spotted the coral patch. He smiled to himself in spite of his battered face.

It didn't take long for Luke to discover that both of his legs were too badly broken to hold his weight. Gritting his teeth against the blinding pain in his fractured arm, he began inching along the passageway on his elbows. His progress was painfully slow, and he found himself wishing someone would come along and help him.

Normally, when his father beat him bloody, then sent him to shift and heal, Luke didn't want anyone to see him. This time there was so much more at stake than his personal dignity. He didn't even care that he was stark naked in the middle of the hallway. The need to get into the sea and find Austin obliterated any embarrassment he might have felt.

Sheer determination brought him to the head of the stairwell within a couple of minutes. He stared down the steep flight in despair. The thought of Austin galvanized him into action. Forcing himself into a sitting position, Luke planted his hands on the edge of the

top step and slid his legs around to rest his feet on the third step down. He bit his lip as the pain threatened to overwhelm him.

You can do this, he told himself. *You have to.*

Moving as carefully as he could, Luke slid his hips over the edge and started to lower himself down to the next step. As he settled into a seated position on the second step, Luke let out a short, rough laugh. It would be slow going, but it looked like he might actually make it.

He managed to navigate three more steps in that fashion. As he lifted his weight onto his hands to negotiate the fourth step, grimacing with the increasing agony in his broken arm, his palm slipped in the blood coating the stairs in his wake. He tried to catch himself, but his arms were weak and shaking from pain and blood loss. One buttock hit the edge of the next step down and slid off, and he went tumbling down the steps.

He landed in a heap at the bottom, fighting to breathe through the pain. The world went gray around him, static hissing in his ears. He clawed his way stubbornly to full consciousness. He had to get to the water. Had to help Austin. Focusing on that goal, Luke planted the knowledge of the idol's resting place in the forefront of his mind and started crawling forward again.

A cry and a soft curse in Russian came from behind him. Footsteps pounded toward him, and it was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard. Someone knelt beside him, gentle hands eased him onto his back. Luke looked up through his swelling eyelids into Niko Vonovich's shocked face.

"My God," Niko exclaimed, sounding stunned. "Who has done this to you?"

"Father." Luke coughed, sending a spray of bloody spittle onto his chest. "Help me," he begged, his voice almost too slurred to understand. "Need to get ... to water ... dive ... please, help me."

Niko shook his head. His eyes were huge, his face gray as he swept a horrified gaze over Luke's battered body. "I could damage you if I tried to move you. You need to get to a hospital on the mainland." Reaching into his pocket, Niko pulled out a small two-way radio. "I will call Smith. He'll know how to help."

Luke almost protested, but thought better of it. Smith knew he was a shifter, and knew he needed to get to the water to heal the damage Carson had done to him. Resting against the floor, Luke listened as Niko called Smith and explained in shaky tones what had happened.

A matter of seconds later, Smith came pounding down the hall at a dead run. He skidded to a stop and crouched beside Luke, assessing the damage with his usual stony calm. His gaze lingered on Luke's crotch, where his testicles had turned purple and ballooned to the size of grapefruits. A muscle in Smith's jaw flexed.

"Help me get him up," Smith said to Niko. "We have to get him into the ocean."

Niko's mouth dropped open, his eyes saucer-ing. Luke would've laughed if he hadn't needed all his concentration to keep from screaming when Smith hauled him to his feet.

"But, but he's severely injured!" Niko protested, even as he slipped an arm around Luke's waist and helped Smith carry him toward the closest hatch. "He needs to go to the mainland! We should call the Coast Guard, have him airlifted out of here."

"There's no time to explain," Smith growled. "You'll just have to trust me on this, Vonovich."

Niko glared at Smith, but didn't argue. Luke was glad. He didn't have the luxury of time. He had to get in the water soon, or it would be too late. He knew he had internal injuries and was losing blood at an alarming rate. A sticky stream of it ran down the backs of his thighs, courtesy of his father's brutal attempt to show him the error of his "sodomite impulses".

It seemed as though hours passed before they made it to the deck, though Luke knew it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. Smith and Niko lowered him gently to the deck, where he lay panting.

Niko let out a soft, shocked sound. "Smith, my God, he's bleeding from..."

"I know." Leaning down, Smith stared straight into Luke's eyes. "He won't get away with this. Not this time."

Luke managed a weak smile, but couldn't find the breath to speak. He grasped Smith's hand in his, trying to convey his thanks through the touch.

The corner of Smith's mouth hooked into a faint smile. "Go. We'll be at the dive platform waiting, okay?"

Luke nodded. As he pulled himself under the railing and slid over the edge, he heard Smith barking orders at Niko, telling him to get his ass to the dive platform. There was a brief, bright pain as Luke broke the surface of the water. Then the sea closed over him, cradling him in its cool embrace, and he knew everything would be all right.

He shifted, then hovered motionless as his body healed, the hard burn of tissues knitting themselves together moving through him like a wave. When it faded, the familiar heady strength of his octopus form flowed into him. He started swimming, following the mingled threads of the idol's song and Austin's mind.

The spike of fear from Austin was shocking in its suddenness. *Hurry*, Austin's thought pleaded. *I need you*.

A vision sprang into Luke's mind -- Collins, the hard glint of obsession in his eyes, locked in a desperate struggle with Austin. Luke felt the regulator being ripped from Austin's mouth, felt the ghost of the blow to Austin's head, and knew he had only moments in which to act.

Luke shot off toward Austin as fast as he could go. It only took a couple of pumps of his mantle before Collins came into sight. Luke swept a keen-eyed gaze around the surrounding

area, and quickly locked onto Austin. Austin was following Collins up to the surface, a steady stream of bubbles trailing from his mouth. The rapid play of images in Austin's mind told Luke exactly what had happened, and what he needed to do.

Luke swiftly closed the space between himself and Collins. The man caught sight of him just as he whipped two tentacles around each of Collins' wrists and a third around the man's throat. Collins' eyes went wide, the regulator falling from his mouth as he let out a gurgling scream. The temptation to squeeze until Collins' neck snapped was strong.

A gloved hand on his tentacle caught Luke's attention. He turned and looked into Austin's eyes. Austin had taken up the spare regulator on Collins' tank and was breathing through it, hanging onto Collins' BCD with one hand. Blood flowed from a cut in his arm.

Austin shook his head, cutting his gaze toward Collins, and Luke understood. Austin didn't want him to kill the man, even now. Luke turned back to Collins. He'd stopped screaming and hung motionless in Luke's grip, staring glassy-eyed at him. Luke reluctantly unwound his tentacle from around Collins' neck.

Reaching between Luke's and Collins' bodies, Austin retrieved the regulator that Collins had dropped and stuck the mouthpiece between the man's slack lips. Collins' teeth clamped automatically onto the molded rubber. His eyes remained blank, and one side of his mouth drooped around the mouthpiece. Luke was sure he must be sucking water into his lungs along with air -- a quick perusal showed that the man hadn't bothered with Heliox -- but he couldn't bring himself to care. His tentacles still itched with the need to strangle the bastard.

Austin's soft touch on his mantle made him turn to face his lover. Austin's dark eyes locked with his, and a barrage of surprisingly focused thought flowed from Austin's mind to his. Austin had left the idol behind in the aftermath of Collins' attack; they would have to go after it.

Luke wrapped a gentle tentacle around Austin's wrist, the touch helping to clarify his thoughts even with the drysuit between them. In answer to Luke's silent question, Austin grabbed Collins' air gauge and shone his dive light on it. He shook his head, and Luke cursed inwardly.

There wasn't enough air in Collins' tank to supply both him and Austin for a trip back to the coral patch, then up to the surface. They'd either have to cut Collins loose, killing him, or Austin would have to surface with Collins while Luke went after the idol. Luke didn't much like either option, in spite of the fury that nearly blinded him every time he thought of what Collins had done.

To Luke's surprise, Austin pulled off one of his gloves and stroked the tentacle around his arm with his bare fingers. Instantly, Austin's thoughts sharpened and solidified in Luke's mind, telling him to retrieve the idol while Austin continued to the surface with Collins. Luke didn't like it, but he knew it was the only real option. He wound the end of his tentacle around Austin's fingers and gave them a light squeeze.

I won't be far behind you, Luke thought, hoping Austin would understand him. *Smith and Vonovich are on the dive platform. They helped me.*

Austin's eyes narrowed behind his mask, and Luke caught the thread of Austin's worry loud and clear. Luke sent out a wave of reassurance to Austin, reminding him that he was all right, and promising he'd tell Austin everything later, when they were safe.

In answer, Austin smiled around his regulator. Luke unwound his tentacle from Austin's wrist and let go of Collins' arms as well. Moving behind Collins, Austin wrapped an arm around the man's chest and started kicking slowly toward the surface. His gaze held Luke's for a brief moment, and the sense of love that passed between them sent Luke's spirit flying.

Stroking one last caress down Austin's leg, Luke turned and jetted off into the depths.

* * * * *

To Austin, the trip to the surface seemed to last forever. It wasn't the first time he'd had to help another diver surface. But he'd never had to assist someone who had tried to kill him only minutes earlier. He kept expecting Collins to snap out of his strange stupor and attack again. It wasn't until Collins began to kick weakly with his left leg, his entire right side hanging limp, that Austin realized no attack would be coming.

He knew a stroke when he saw one. It seemed Collins' heart condition had caught up to him. Austin couldn't work up any sympathy.

His head broke the water's surface about fifty yards from *El Cazador*. Inflating Collins' BCD all the way and hanging onto him with one hand, Austin began swimming toward the ship, one arm firmly around Collins' chest. He breathed a sigh of relief that the waves and wind had calmed somewhat.

The swim was a hard one. By the time Austin reached the dive ladder, his limbs were heavy with exhaustion. He pulled his dive mask off and slipped it over his arm, then grasped the ladder with one hand and hung doggedly onto Collins with the other. He wondered if Smith and Niko were still on the dive platform. No way could he climb the ladder while carrying Collins' dead weight.

He felt the touch of Luke's mind a split second before the tentacle slid up his thigh. The appendage shrank and drew back, and Luke's blond head broke the water surface a second later.

"I have it," Luke said, a huge smile lighting his face as he lifted Austin's bag from the water. Planting a quick, salty kiss on Austin's lips, Luke tied the bag's drawstring around a rung of the ladder. "Let me go up first. Just in case."

Austin nodded, too tired to speak. He watched Luke climb gracefully up the ladder and disappear over the edge onto the dive platform. For a moment, his chest constricted with the

fear that Luke would vanish into thin air, never to return. Then Luke's head popped over the edge again, white-blond hair shining in the moonlight, and Austin sagged in relief.

"We're sending a rope down for Collins," Luke called softly. He swung himself back onto the ladder and scampered down again, a knotted loop of thick rope in one hand. "Help me get his equipment off."

Hooking a leg around the side of the ladder, Austin worked the regulator's mouthpiece loose from Collins' teeth. He unbuckled Collins' BCD and let the equipment slip into the depths. Collins let out an incoherent croak, left hand grasping blindly at nothing. Together, Luke and Austin worked the looped rope over Collins' head and underneath his armpits. Luke gave the rope a sharp tug. It hitched, the slack swiftly taken in, and Collins began to rise into the air in a series of quick jerks.

Austin watched, feeling an undeniable satisfaction every time Collins' body hit the side of the ship a little too hard.

"Are you all right, Austin?"

Luke's voice was soft and full of worry. Austin gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm okay. Tired. You?"

Luke's eyes took on a haunted look. "I want to get out of here. I never want to see this ship again."

Austin didn't ask any more questions. The horribly vivid images flitting through his lover's mind told him all he needed to know. Reaching out to briefly caress Luke's cheek, Austin pulled his flippers off and started up the ladder.

When he reached the top, Niko was bent over Collins' recumbent form, shining a penlight into his eyes. Smith stood over them both, back to the wall, shaved head gleaming as his eyes scanned the deck in a continuous sweep. He didn't seem the least bit surprised to see Austin.

"He has suffered a stroke, I believe," Niko clicked off his light and rose slowly to his feet. "He should go to the mainland for treatment."

"He should go to prison," Luke said, stepping onto the deck with Austin's bag in his hand. "He attacked Austin. He tried to kill him."

"Like your father tried to kill you?" Niko eyed Luke warily. "Smith said you would be healed when you returned from the ocean. I did not believe him. How is this possible?"

Luke bit his lip. His hand slipped into Austin's, curling their fingers together. "It's difficult to explain."

Niko frowned, but before he could ask any more questions Smith broke his silence. "I called the Coast Guard. They're on the way."

Austin gaped, surprised. "You're helping us?"

Smith nodded. "Never did approve of how your father treated you, Luke. This time he went way too far."

Luke glanced around. "I'd better get dressed."

As Luke hurried to the dive locker and started pulling his clothes on, Austin turned to Smith. "How bad was it this time? What did the fucker do?" He wasn't sure he was ready to hear it, but he had to know.

Smith studied Austin's face for a moment before answering, as if judging his ability to take the news without freaking out. "Broke both legs, one arm, his jaw, and several ribs from the feel of it. Blacked both eyes. Injured some internal organs, going by the bruises on his back and stomach. And he did ... other things this time."

A sudden flurry of mental images from Luke told Austin exactly what Smith meant. Austin shut his eyes, fighting a wave of nausea. *That bastard. I'll kill him. I'll fucking kill him.*

"I'm mostly healed now." Luke pulled his sweater over his head and sidled up to Austin again, winding their fingers together. "I still have some bruises, and it feels like some of the rib fractures aren't completely healed, but I'll be fine. Another couple of shifts should do it." He frowned. "The Coast Guard will never believe that I was that badly injured and healed it in such a short time."

"That's not the only thing your father can be arrested for. He's neck deep in so many illegal activities I don't even know where to start." Smith's dark gaze locked onto Luke, sharply appraising. "You're not wiped out like you've been lately after shifting."

Luke looked startled for a second, then laughed. "You're right. I'm a bit tired, but it's not nearly as bad as usual." Beaming, he flung both arms around Austin's neck and kissed him soundly on the lips. *It's you, Austin*, Luke's thought said. *You make me strong, just like I said before.*

Austin didn't even care that they had an audience. He wrapped Luke in his arms and held him close, letting himself sink into the kiss.

"Disgusting!"

Carson Cordova's venomous tone sent Luke and Austin scrambling apart. Austin pushed Luke behind him and glared at the man standing just inside the hatch with a pistol leveled at him. "You're not touching Luke ever again, you fucking monster!"

Carson laughed. "You lie with men and use them as you would a woman. And this time, what you have taken to your bed is not even human. Yet you call me a monster."

"If the label fits," Smith growled, a thread of hot fury slithering through his cold voice.

Without warning, Carson fired the pistol at Smith. The sound of it boomed through the still air. Blood sprayed from Smith's thigh where the bullet hit, and he went down, clutching his leg. His face twisted with pain, but he remained silent. Carson seemed disappointed by that.

Behind Austin, Luke cried out and started to rush forward. Austin stopped him, one eye on Carson's pistol. Luke may be able to heal a bullet wound and he may not. Austin didn't want to find out.

"Have you found my treasure?" Carson asked, settling his dark gaze on Luke.

Austin stared. The man's arrogance was unbelievable.

"No," Luke lied without hesitation. "Find it yourself. I hope you choke on it."

"Ah, but you forget, your life depends on finding that idol." Pacing closer, Carson favored Austin with a cruel smile. "And now, the life of your *puto* depends on it as well. I know that you know where my treasure is. I suggest you retrieve it immediately. The Coast Guard will most likely be here soon. I wish to have the idol in my hands before they arrive."

Austin glanced at Luke. Luke didn't take his eyes off his father for a second, but his fingers grasped Austin's and held on, his grip almost painfully tight. Austin concentrated on the turmoil in Luke's head, trying to make sense of it. Broken bits of memory and emotion swirled in a wild maelstrom, bombarding Austin's mind with swift flashes of things that made him marvel at Luke's continued survival, not to mention his sanity.

Austin knew Luke's mind was at war with itself, part of him wanting to risk death by spitting in his father's face and part wanting to go along with Carson's demands in order to try to keep Austin safe. When he drew a breath to speak, Austin had no idea what he was going to say.

Before Luke could utter a sound, Carson let out a shout and dropped the gun to the deck. Austin stared, stunned. Niko stood behind Carson with a long, wicked switchblade pressed to his throat. Carson's left arm was twisted up behind him.

Smith dragged himself forward and grabbed the gun. "Good work, Vonovich." His voice was calm, if a little breathless.

Niko grinned, but kept his attention firmly on his captive. "Austin, bring me something to restrain Mr. Cordova with."

"Yeah, okay." Reluctantly letting go of Luke's hand, Austin jogged over to the bin against the wall and started digging around for the bungee cords he knew were in there. He shot a wondering glance at Niko. "How the hell did you do that?"

"I'd gone to the linen room inside to get a blanket for Collins. When I returned, Mr. Cordova was here holding a gun on you." Niko shrugged, the knife point never wavering from Carson's throat. "It is a good thing that I always carry my knife."

Three cords in hand, Austin hurried back to Niko's side. "So, how do we do this?"

"I will hold him," Niko said. "You tie his wrists together with one cord. We will then bind his ankles with one, and secure wrists and ankles together with the third. Then he will be immobilized."

Nodding his understanding, Austin reached for the wrist Niko held pressed between Carson's shoulder blades. He'd just gotten a good grip, when Carson jammed his other elbow

into Niko's ribs. Niko gasped, the blade coming away from Carson's throat just a tiny bit, but it was enough. Before Austin quite knew what was happening, Carson twisted from Niko's grip and spun around. The blade grazed his neck, sending a river of blood running down to soak his shirt, but he didn't slow down. He wrested the switchblade from Niko's hand and landed a punch to the temple that knocked Niko flat, then hurled himself straight at Luke.

Austin was after Carson before he consciously realized it. Carson tackled Luke just as Austin grabbed hold of Carson's wrists. They crashed to the deck in a heap, with Luke on the bottom. Carson snarled and struggled wildly in Austin's grip, his eyes fastened with murderous intent on Luke's face.

"I should have killed you years ago," Carson spat.

Austin tried to hold on, but Carson was too strong for him. The older man jerked his hand free and brought the knife down, aimed at Luke's heart.

The blow never landed. A long blue-gray tentacle which had been Luke's hand seconds before whipped around Carson's wrist, holding the knife at bay. Quicker than thought, Luke flipped Carson onto his back, sending Austin tumbling. Luke landed hard on Carson's stomach. He held both of Carson's wrists against the deck, one in a human hand and the other in a tentacle. Scrambling forward, Austin swiftly wound the bungee cord he still held around Carson's ankles, then sat on the man's knees to hold him down.

Carson bellowed and bucked under Luke and Austin's combined weight, letting out a string of curses in Spanish. Luke shifted his weight, bending his leg up. Austin was shocked when Luke brought his knee down hard into his father's groin, instantly silencing the man's protests.

"Shut up." Luke's quiet voice shook with the fury Austin could feel boiling inside him. "You stole everything from me. My home, my family, my history. Everything." His tentacle tightened around Carson's wrist, causing the fingers to darken. "I should kill you right now. I want to kill you."

Peering around Luke's shoulder, Austin saw Carson staring at Luke with eyes full of hatred. "You would not dare," Carson growled.

Luke went perfectly still. A lifetime of anger and resentment and helplessness burst from his mind, and Austin realized with a thrill of fear that Luke was on the verge of deliberate murder.

"Don't," Austin whispered. "You're not like he is. The Coast Guard's coming. Don't kill him."

Luke didn't speak, didn't move, but Austin knew he'd heard. The seconds stretched on and on while Austin waited to see what Luke would do. Austin shot a glance at Niko. The man rolled onto his side, moaning and holding his head, and Austin felt a measure of relief.

Luke turned his head, glancing over his shoulder at Austin. Carson reared up, shaking loose of Luke's grip, and plunged the knife hilt-deep into Luke's belly.

Luke fell onto his back, his father rolling with the movement and keeping the knife lodged in Luke's abdomen. Luke made a soft, distressed sound which was almost lost in Austin's anguished cry. His tentacle morphed back into a hand and grabbed his father's wrist, trying to pull the knife out. Carson held doggedly on, grinning madly as the blood began to pool under Luke's body.

"Stop!" Austin cried, letting go of Carson's feet to wrap an arm around his neck. He pulled with all his might, forcing Carson's head back, but the knife remained buried in Luke's body. "Fuck you, bastard, you can't kill him!"

Carson's chest heaved with gurgling laughter. He dragged the knife upward, and Luke screamed. Austin echoed it, Luke's agony reverberating in his skull. "God, stop! Stop!" Austin begged.

"You heard the man."

Smith's voice was soft and calm, and very close. Austin glanced to his right. Smith knelt on his good knee, bare-chested, a strip of torn shirt tied off above the gunshot wound in his other leg. He had the pistol aimed right at Carson's head.

"Take that knife out," Smith ordered, "and back off. Austin, get off him so he can do what I told him to."

One look into Smith's cold eyes told Austin that Smith wouldn't hesitate to fire if he needed to, and he certainly wouldn't miss. Nonetheless, letting go of Carson's throat and backing away was the hardest thing Austin had ever had to do. He scrambled over to sit at Luke's side, placing one hand on Luke's chest and holding Luke's hand with the other.

Hang on, Austin told him silently. I'm not going to let you die.

Luke didn't speak, just pressed Austin's fingers. His chest hitched in shallow, rapid breaths. Austin held on, and hoped that he could somehow lend Luke some of his strength.

Carson glared at Smith. Without a word, he sliced the blade deliberately upward, tearing another scream from Luke.

The thunder of a gun fired at close range hit Austin's eardrums, and everything went silent. Austin lunged forward before he'd consciously realized what had happened and caught Carson's falling body, keeping him from landing on Luke and thus driving the blade in further. Blood poured from a hole in the side of Carson's neck. Austin stared numbly at it. *It's so small*, he thought, letting Carson's limp body fall to the deck. *I thought it would be bigger.*

He turned back to Luke, to find that Smith had already pulled the knife from Luke's belly. "Take him into the water so he can shift," Smith ordered.

Austin nodded. The static silence that followed the gunshot was fading, and everything sounded as if his ears were stuffed with cotton. As he slung Luke over his shoulder and staggered to his feet, trying not to let Luke's gut-wrenching scream slow him down, Austin saw Carson glaring at him, mouth working as if he wanted to curse them both. The

unnatural limpness of the man's limbs told Austin that Smith's bullet had paralyzed him. Austin took a fierce satisfaction in that.

Austin hurried to the top of the dive ladder as quickly as he dared. Taking a deep breath, he leapt through the opening in the railing and into the sea.

He hit the surface hard enough to hurt. Salt water burned its way into his sinuses. Without his mask or his light, he couldn't see a thing, but he imagined he could feel the warmth of Luke's blood filling the water around him. *God, please let him be all right.*

The unmistakable touch of a tentacle on his cheek was the most welcome sensation Austin could imagine. He turned to plant a kiss on the cool, velvety flesh. He didn't care that it wasn't familiar human skin. It was Luke, and that was all he needed to know.

Luke shifted back to human and surfaced after only a few seconds, which surprised Austin. "It doesn't take long to heal knife wounds," Luke told him, winding an arm around his neck and kissing the end of his nose. "It's the blunt trauma and the broken bones that take the longest."

Snaking his free arm around Luke's waist, Austin pulled him close and kissed him. "I was so afraid I was going to lose you," Austin whispered, shaking now with reaction.

"Me too. I really thought he was going to kill me that time." Luke nuzzled Austin's cheek. "Let's go back up. I lost my clothes in the shift, I need to put on something else before the Coast Guard arrives."

"Okay." Brushing a swift kiss across Luke's mouth, Austin let him go and moved aside so he could ascend the ladder. "Where'd you put the idol?"

"In your locker." Luke glanced over his shoulder as Austin swung up the ladder behind him. "I hope the Coast Guard won't keep us long. I just want this to be over."

Austin nodded his agreement. He followed Luke up the ladder and onto the deck.

At the top, Austin gathered Luke into his arms, needing to keep him close. They kissed, and for a few shining seconds Austin forgot all about Carson and the idol and everything that had happened. They were alive, and Luke was finally free. Right then, that was all that mattered. They could worry about the rest later.

Chapter Fourteen

The Coast Guard arrived ten minutes later. By then, Luke and Austin were both dressed again and were tending Smith's wound as best they could. Luke figured no one could blame them for ignoring Carson and Collins for the time being. Niko was weak and headachy and a bit nauseated, but insisted on helping anyway.

It took surprisingly little time for the six enlisted personnel who came aboard to examine the injured and load them onto the Guard vessel. Some of the crew, who had evidently come onto the deck after the first gunshot and hidden in the shadows, came forward to tell the officers what they had witnessed. Their statements, along with Smith's claim that Carson had been involved in illegal operations, were enough for the Coast Guard to bring the ship into port. *El Cazador's* night bridge crew was ordered to follow the Coast Guard vessel to the Biloxi docks. Luke, Austin and Niko went aboard the Coast Guard vessel with Smith.

Back at the docks, Smith, Carson, Collins and Niko were taken by ambulance to the hospital, while Luke and Austin were escorted to the local Coast Guard station for questioning about the night's events. Smith had told them when he called that Carson had beaten Luke, and that it hadn't been the first time, so the officers in charge spent quite a while questioning him about it. Luke found the ordeal nerve-wracking and exhausting, especially when they asked to photograph his injuries. He dutifully pulled off his shirt to display the livid red bruises on his chest and abdomen, the only signs left of the beating his father had dealt earlier.

There was no trace left of Carson's attempt to eviscerate him. Luke was grateful for that.

The sun was peeking over the horizon when Luke and Austin arrived at Austin's trailer. Austin paid the driver and led Luke inside, where they dropped their bags and collapsed side by side on the sofa.

"I'm wiped out," Austin mumbled, putting an arm around Luke's shoulders. "What a night."

"Mm-hm." Luke cuddled into Austin's embrace, keeping one hand on his duffle bag where the idol rested in its case. "We really did it, Austin. We have the idol."

"And more importantly, that thing that called itself your father is going to prison, if he recovers enough. I hope."

"Smith said Father was involved in all sorts of illegal activities. He wouldn't make that accusation unless he had solid proof." Luke kissed Austin's neck, tongue flicking out to taste the remains of salt water on his skin. "We should go ahead and call Dr. Martin."

"Yeah." Austin buried his hand in Luke's hair and tilted his face up for a kiss. "Mm. You taste like salt."

Luke laughed. "So do you."

"Want to have a shower before we call?"

The idea went a long way toward eradicating the exhaustion that had crept up on Luke during the interrogation. He smiled. "Let's go get clean."

Austin smiled in a way that set Luke's heart thumping. They moved at the same time, mouths meeting in a deep kiss that sent strength flowing through Luke's limbs. He melted into it, letting Austin's touch carry him away.

The shrill sound of the phone ringing made them break apart. Austin wrinkled his nose. "Hold that thought."

He jumped up to answer it. Luke curled against the sofa cushions and let himself stare at Austin's ass. *So hot.*

Austin raised an eyebrow, and Luke knew Austin had picked up his thought. It was a wonderful feeling, having that connection. Luke smiled.

Austin picked up the receiver and pressed it to his ear. "Hello?"

Luke watched with interest as Austin's eyes went wide. Standing up, he wandered over and put an arm around Austin's waist.

"Yes, we just got in," Austin said to the receiver. His gaze locked with Luke's. *It's Phelan*, Austin mouthed.

Luke blinked. How did she know they were back?

"How did you know we were back?" Austin echoed into the phone. A moment of silence went by. "Oh, I see." He put a hand over the receiver. "She's been staying on the yacht at the docks. One of her crew saw *El Cazador* come in and saw that asshole Carson

being taken to the hospital. She was going to leave a message on my machine to call her, but we were here.”

Luke nodded. Removing his hand from the receiver, Austin asked, “So should we come back to the docks, or what?”

Luke waited while Austin listened to Phelan. He was happy to have the mission over with, and elated to be finally free of his father. In addition, he had found the love of his life. None of it would have happened without Dr. Martin bringing them together to find the idol for him.

The idol belonged to The Collector. He deserved to have it. But, Luke couldn’t deny that he wanted it. Wanted to lay his hands on it, to touch it, to learn whatever it had to tell him.

“Okay, that’s fine,” Austin said. “We’ll see you then. ‘Bye.”

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Luke smiled at Austin. “What did she say?”

“She’s coming to get us in four hours.” Setting the receiver in the cradle, Austin wrapped his arms around Luke’s waist and pulled him close. “Dr. Martin’s at his place in New York, he’s sending his private plane down to get us and take us up there.”

Luke’s chest tightened with a strange sense of loss. He ignored it. He had no right to the idol, no matter how much it still called to him. Forcing a smile, he laid a hand on Austin’s cheek.

“That leaves us lots of time.” Luke pressed a lingering kiss to Austin’s lips. “I loved shower sex with you. Let’s do it again.”

The growl Austin let out went straight to Luke’s crotch. Burying his hands in Austin’s hair, he captured his mouth in a hard kiss. When they broke apart and Austin pulled him toward the bathroom, Luke let thoughts of the idol slip to the back of his mind.

* * * * *

Austin hefted his bag over his shoulder and stared wide-eyed at the three stories of ivy-covered brick in front of him. “Wow.”

“Yes.” Luke took Austin’s hand, intertwining their fingers. He rubbed his thumb over the back of Austin’s hand. Austin’s skin was warm against his. “This place is beautiful.”

“You’re both welcome to stay as long as you like.” Phelan walked up to the door, heels clicking on the flagstone path. She rang the doorbell. “Dr. Martin was thrilled that you were able to recover the idol so quickly.”

Luke’s fingers tightened around the handles of his bag. The idol sang to him from inside, telling him to claim it, that it was meant for him. It was becoming more difficult every minute to resist that seductive whisper.

The door swung open, revealing a tall, hulking man with thinning white hair and a deep tan. He smiled and stood aside. "Dr. Martin is in his study. He's expecting you."

"Thank you, Jonathan." Phelan laid a hand on Jonathan's arm. "Is he all right?"

A solemn expression passed over the man's face. "Better than yesterday."

Phelan nodded. Turning to Luke and Austin, she motioned them to follow her. "Come in. Leave your bags here, Jonathan will have someone take them to your room. Bring the artifact with you."

Luke exchanged a curious glance with Austin as they walked past Jonathan into a huge, marble-tiled foyer. He could tell Austin was also wondering what exactly ailed The Collector.

Letting go of Austin's hand, Luke set his bag on the floor and unzipped it. He dug through the clothes, removed the small black box containing the idol, and tucked it protectively under his arm.

He and Austin followed Phelan up a wide marble staircase that curved past an enormous picture window looking out over a wooded slope. At the top of the stairs, she turned left down a paneled hallway. Thick dove gray carpet muffled their footsteps. She opened the second door on the left and ushered them in. The room was small, but the high ceiling and large arched window lent a sense of open space. Afternoon sunlight poured in, slanting through the half-closed woven blinds and setting the pine walls aglow. Dr. Martin sat in an embroidered wingback chair, a book open on his lap. He looked up and smiled when they entered.

"Gentlemen. Welcome." He set the book aside and stood slowly, grimacing. His gait was stiff as he walked toward them. Holding out a hand, he shook with each of them. "Please come in and sit down."

"Shall I leave you alone, sir?" Phelan asked, clasping her hands behind her back.

"No, no. Please stay." He laid a hand on Luke's shoulder as they walked inside. "Phelan tells me you had quite an adventure recovering the idol. I'd like to hear about it."

Luke sat on a small loveseat with Austin, the box containing the idol in his lap. "It's a long story, sir. Suffice to say, we successfully retrieved the idol, and my father got what he deserved."

The Collector's keen gaze pinned Luke, making him feel naked. He resisted the urge to squirm like a child.

"I've had people keeping tabs on Carson and the others ever since Phelan called me this morning," Dr. Martin said. "Mr. Collins is expected to recover enough to face trial. Dr. Perez turned herself in and confessed to taking part in Carson's plan to kill you, Luke. She's in police custody now."

"Good." Austin put a possessive arm around Luke's shoulders. "What about that bastard Carson?"

Dr. Martin gave them both a solemn look. "Carson died about an hour ago. He was comatose and on a ventilator. The police were never able to question him. A better end than he deserved, if you ask me."

Luke stared at his lap, not sure how to feel. Part of him, of course, was relieved that Carson Cordova was gone forever. However, a small corner of his mind wished that his father had lived to face trial for his crimes. Luke's guts still burned with fury at the man who had taken so much from him. Death seemed too good for him.

Austin's arm tightened, his mind touching Luke's with a soothing caress, and Luke knew he understood. He squeezed Austin's thigh in silent thanks.

"There was no will," Dr. Martin continued. "You are Carson's only legal kin. Everything he had will go to you."

Luke shook his head. "I don't want it. Any of it."

Dr. Martin nodded. "That's your right, of course. You may give your father's assets away in any way you see fit. I'll have my lawyers handle it for you, if you wish."

"Thank you," Luke said. "I'd appreciate that."

"What about Smith?" Austin asked. "Is he okay?"

"I visited with him in the hospital," Phelan told them. "He'll be fine. But he will likely be going to prison."

Luke sat forward, distressed. "Why? He saved our lives! He's done nothing wrong!"

Phelan brushed a strand of straight dark hair out of her eyes. "I'm sure you were unaware of this, Luke, but your father was involved in the theft of a great many priceless artifacts from private owners over the years in addition to his legal treasure hunts. Smith was involved in Carson's illegal recovery operations for years. There was no way for him to turn Carson in without giving away his own involvement. He knew exactly what he was doing."

"Oh my God," Luke murmured. "I had no idea."

Austin let out an angry huff. "It's not fair. We'd probably both be dead if it wasn't for Smith and Niko."

"I feel certain that the authorities will be willing to plea bargain, considering all the stolen property that Smith can help them recover for the rightful owners." Dr. Martin crossed his legs and steeped his fingers under his chin. "Speaking of stolen property, Luke, are you ready to collect your treasure?"

Luke blinked. "My treasure? What do you mean? I thought we were retrieving it for you."

"You did, in a way. I have every intention of keeping the artifact in my private collection, for my own reasons." Dr. Martin pointed a long, thin finger at Luke. "But the true value of the idol lies in what it can do for you."

“Oh!” Austin exclaimed. “You’re talking about its supposed ability to give whoever first touches it their heart’s desire.”

The older man nodded. “Exactly. That treasure is for Luke to claim.”

Luke swallowed, his heart racing suddenly. “But we thought you would want that for yourself. We thought you’d want ... He stopped, not sure how The Collector would take what he’d been about to say. That he and Austin had believed Dr. Martin would use the idol’s power to heal himself of whatever affliction he suffered.

Dr. Martin’s lips curved into a sad smile. “I have no wish to waste the idol’s power on healing this old body. The power of the idol belongs to you, Luke.”

Luke turned to meet Austin’s gaze. In his lover’s dark eyes, Luke saw the same stunned look he knew he himself wore. *I can have my heart’s desire. Anything at all. Anything.* The enormity of it was overwhelming.

“I can’t imagine anything else I could want,” Luke said softly. “My life is my own, for the first time. And I have Austin. There’s nothing else I need.” He turned back to Dr. Martin with a smile. “Thank you, sir, but I have my heart’s desire right here.”

The Collector and Phelan exchanged a glance loaded with meaning, and Luke’s stomach dropped into his feet. He reached for Austin’s free hand and held on tight, waiting for whatever bad news their host had to tell them.

“There’s something I need to tell you, Luke,” Dr. Martin said, his voice very gentle. “Something you need to know in order to make an informed decision about the idol.”

Luke licked his dry lips. “What is it?”

Dr. Martin clasped his hands together in his lap. “You’ve been feeling tired lately, yes? After you’ve spent time in your octopus form.”

“Well, yes,” Luke admitted. “For a while there it was terrible, and getting worse. But this time I was barely tired at all. Being with Austin seemed to give me strength.”

“Mates,” Phelan mused, almost to herself. “You were right, sir. Destined mates.”

Austin shot her a curious look. “What?”

“Have you found yourselves knowing what the other was thinking?” Dr. Martin asked. “Feeling what the other was feeling?”

Luke and Austin exchanged a look. “Yes, we have,” Austin answered. His eyes went wide. “Oh my God. It’s just like in all those shapeshifter books, isn’t it? Luke and I are mates, born to be together. Only I don’t remember anything about psychic connections.”

Phelan smiled. “Fiction doesn’t always reflect reality. Besides which, Luke’s people didn’t start out as shapeshifters. They were made that way through the power of the idol.”

Luke shook his head. “Wait, I’m getting confused. What do you mean, they were made? How do you know this? And what does it have to do with my being tired after a shift?”

Sighing, Dr. Martin leaned back in his chair. “A woman came to me two years ago while I was in Boston on business. She had been looking for me because of my reputation for finding lost artifacts. She was very ill, and wanted to tell her story to someone who would believe her before she ... changed.”

“Changed?” Austin’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“She was one of a very ancient race,” Dr. Martin continued, ignoring Austin’s question. “Your race, Luke. They were originally ordinary people, residents of Egypt in the age of the first Pharaohs. This woman told me that no one was certain precisely when or how the idol was discovered, but her forebears were appointed as its guardians. When Christianity came to Egypt, the Protectors - as they came to be known - wished to keep the idol out of the hands of the Christian church. According to the woman, the idol sensed what needed to be done, and turned the protectors into shapeshifters, changing between human and octopus form. Similar to true were-creatures, but not precisely the same. My research into the subject has led me to believe that the idol had a different shape prior to this, and molded itself into an octopus shape when the Protectors took that form .”

“Wait a minute,” Austin said. “I thought it could only give the heart’s desire to the first person who touches it? So if that’s already happened, how could Luke get his wish granted?”

“It will only grant the heart’s desire once, that’s true,” Phelan answered. “But apparently the idol is able to manifest great power on its own when the situation calls for it, such as was the case when Christianity first came to Egypt. If the church had discovered the idol, the protectors would have been killed and the idol taken or destroyed. It had to be hidden, and the ocean was the one place the church couldn’t follow.”

“If the idol can change people into shapeshifters, why couldn’t it do something when my people were attacked and murdered?” Luke demanded, feeling anger rising inside him. “Why didn’t it drive my fa ... Carson Cordova away from them? Why didn’t...”

He stopped abruptly, leaving the thought unfinished. *Why didn’t they find me? If some of them were still alive, why didn’t they use the idol to find me and save me?* Austin pulled him closer and kissed his hair, and Luke was grateful for his silent support.

“The idol does not respond to human demands, or so I’m told. It acts on its own, or not, until it is touched for the first time.” Dr. Martin uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “There’s something else. In return for granting the heart’s truest desire, the idol demands a sacrifice. Loss to balance gain.”

“What sort of sacrifice?” Luke asked, not sure he wanted to hear.

Dr. Martin gazed at him with sadness in his eyes. “When they became shifters, your people sacrificed their homes, their families, everything they knew. They gained healing powers, their shifting abilities, and a strong psychic connection with each other. But to get that, they had to give up everything else. Even though they didn’t ask for what happened, they accepted it voluntarily, which meant they accepted the idol’s terms. Do you understand?”

Luke nodded, chewing his bottom lip. "I have nothing I wish to gain, and the only thing I have to lose is Austin. I'm not willing to risk that."

"That's quite a story," Austin interjected. "But what's it got to do with Luke now? That woman in Boston was the last of Luke's people, right? And she's gone."

"But not dead." Luke stared at The Collector as a suspicion began to grow in his mind. "You said she changed. Not died, but changed. She became an octopus permanently, didn't she?"

Dr. Martin nodded. "Indeed she did. I was with her when she shifted for the last time and swam away. She told me that it was a fate which eventually overtook all of them. The ones who were mated changed more slowly, but over time they all changed." The older man paused, a strange gleam in his eyes. "She was going to join the rest of her people. She wouldn't tell me where they were, but she seemed certain that at least a few of her people still lived."

Luke stared as the implications of this sunk in. When he spoke, his lips felt numb. "I'm going to change. Being with Austin does make me stronger, but it's not enough. I'm going to become an octopus one day and never be human again. I ... I could find my people. But I'd lose Austin. Oh."

Dr. Martin's expression was sorrowful. "It's a terrible choice, my boy. I'm sorry."

Luke didn't answer. Laying his head on Austin's shoulder, he shut his eyes and conjured the mental image of the island from his dreams, the tall, black-eyed people who knew and loved him. *I wonder if I'll still dream of them.*

Tears slipped down his cheeks, and he couldn't tell if they were tears of joy or sadness. Because he'd made his decision. It hurt something vital in him to know that his people still lived, somewhere in the vastness of the world's oceans, and he would never be able to see them, to touch them and feel their minds intermingling with his. He would mourn the loss of his octopus form, and the soaring bliss of flying free through the water. However, in Austin, he'd found a love that filled every corner of his being. He wasn't about to give that up for anything.

Sitting up and opening his eyes, Luke met Dr. Martin's sympathetic gaze. "I know what I want, sir. What do I do?"

The Collector smiled. "Simply touch it. It will know your heart's desire."

Luke nodded. Taking a deep breath, he set the black metal box on his lap and pressed his thumbs against the edge of the lid, pushing upward. After a moment of resistance, the lid sprang open, and Luke gasped.

The object inside looked exactly as it had in his dreams -- pure, clear crystal, smooth and flawless, shining in the afternoon sun. Its eight limbs curled toward its mantle in perfect symmetry. Its huge obsidian eyes contained an almost sentient glitter.

"Wow," Austin breathed. "It's beautiful."

Luke didn't answer. The idol's black eyes, shining with promises and secrets, pulled him like a magnet.

"Go ahead, my boy," The Collector said softly. "Touch it."

Slowly, reverently, Luke lifted the little octopus from its nest of sculpted black metal and held it in his cupped hands. The sunlight fell into it and emerged in a brilliant rainbow that stained Luke's fingers blue and yellow and violet.

I want to be with Austin, for the rest of our lives. Whatever that means, whatever it takes, I want it.

The crystal grew warm in Luke's palms. He felt a faint vibration thrill through it, then suddenly brilliant images exploded in his mind's eye and he cried out.

He was vaguely aware of Austin's hands on his cheeks, Austin's panic flooding into him through their psychic connection. He knew Phelan was leaning over him, demanding that he speak, he heard Dr. Martin advising them both to remain calm and wait. But he couldn't answer. The idol played a rapid-fire slideshow of his lost past in his brain, and he was helpless to do anything but watch it.

In his mind's eye, he saw the years of his early childhood flash by, from his birth through the three short years with his family to the day he was taken by Carson Cordova. Names and faces burned themselves into his brain, along with scenes of the life Carson had stolen from him. He saw himself as a baby, sitting on his mother's lap while she fed him bits of fruit and cooked fish, and he smiled through his tears.

The barrage of images stopped as suddenly as it had started. Luke blinked away the blur of tears and gave Austin a weak smile.

"Luke?" Austin stroked his face, brow furrowed in worry. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He kissed Austin's lips, then turned to address Dr. Martin. "It showed me my life before Carson Cordova. Why did it do that?"

Dr. Martin shrugged. "I'm not sure. Perhaps to give you some comfort in your decision?"

Luke considered that. "Maybe. I do feel ... more peaceful now. I've always wondered about my past. Now I know. And I know I won't ever wonder about what I gave up to be with Austin."

Austin brushed a stray lock of hair out of Luke's eyes. "So did it work? Did you get what you wanted?"

"I think so." Luke placed the idol gently back in the box and closed the lid. "Let me see."

Focusing his mind, Luke tried to shift his arm into a tentacle. He couldn't do it. Even though he'd expected that -- had hoped for it, in fact -- it was still a shock. But when he thought of the man beside him, who'd become more vital to him than anything else in life, he knew he'd made the right decision.

"It worked," he said, smiling at Austin. He took Austin's hand, winding their fingers together. "I'm human now. Just human. We can be together always."

Austin's fingers traced the line of Luke's jaw. A hint of sadness peeked out from behind the joy in Austin's face. "You won't ever be able to shift again. You won't ever know your people. I'm sorry about that."

"I'm not." Turning his head, Luke kissed Austin's palm. "No gain without loss, Austin. That's how it works. I don't regret this."

Austin didn't say anything, but his mind pulsed with a happiness that Luke could feel like a physical touch. A happiness that Luke shared. Apparently their psychic connection remained. Luke didn't know why that was, but he was glad of it.

Fabric rustled as The Collector stood and walked over to them. "I hope you will still agree to allow me to keep the idol in my vault."

"Of course." Luke handed the box to Dr. Martin. He glanced up with a smile. "Thank you, sir. For everything."

Dr. Martin returned his smile, eyes shining. "My pleasure, my boy. Phelan and I will be leaving you now, to take the idol to my vault. Jonathan will be up shortly to escort you to your room."

With a slight bow, Dr. Martin made his way to the door and left, with Phelan at his heels, and Luke and Austin were alone.

"I can't believe I'm really human now," Luke murmured. "I don't have the words to tell you how that makes me feel."

Austin caressed Luke's face. "You don't need words."

It was true. Cupping Austin's face in his hands, Luke brought their mouths together in a kiss that said it all.

* * * * *

Andrew Martin smiled as he shut the study door behind him. "I do enjoy seeing two people so in love, don't you?"

"Yes, sir." Phelan shot him a keen glance as they descended the staircase together, headed for the basement vault where The Collector's most precious treasures resided. "This one's the fourth. Have you any clues as to the location of the next piece?"

"Not yet." Andrew smiled and took the arm Phelan offered him when his feet faltered on the stairs. "Give it time, my dear."

She was silent, her throat working, and Andrew knew what she was thinking. That he might not have much time left. He knew that, and accepted it. All he could do was continue his quest as best he could, and hope he would live long enough to see it completed.

“Whatever time remains to me, I will devote to this venture. It will be the one truly good thing I’ve ever done.” He patted her hand. “Let’s not think of my illness right now, Audra. We’ve helped another couple find love with each other. Let us take joy in their happiness.”

Phelan gave a brave smile that didn’t fool him for a second. “Yes, sir.”

They made the remainder of the journey to the vault in silence. Phelan squeezed his hand and left him at the vault door. He smiled at her retreating back. She knew he sometimes preferred to do this alone, and she respected that wish.

Andrew keyed in the lock code. A green light winked, and the door swung silently open. The lights flickered on overhead when he walked in. He crossed to the glass-front display case. Inside, other artifacts occupied three of the spaces. Fishing a key out of his pocket, he unlocked the case and opened the door.

“One more piece of the puzzle,” he whispered as he lifted the crystal octopus from its case and tucked it into an empty space in the display. Four pieces found. How many more to go? He wished he knew.

Closing and locking the display case, he stepped back and took a good look. The octopus sparkled in the lights. Its black eyes seemed to offer the redemption he craved.

One step at a time, he told himself. You’ll get there.

He’d found four of the items he’d made it his mission in life to recover. Four couples brought together in the process. Some days, that was the only thing that kept him going.

It was time to begin the search once again. Turning on his heel, he left the room and locked the door.

 THE END 

Ally Blue

Ally is a married mother of two, living in the mountains of North Carolina in the U.S.A. She is a registered nurse by trade and a writer of man-love by inclination. Her husband is a freelance artist, and their children have apparently inherited his artistic tendencies. Thankfully, they have also inherited his singing voice instead of Ally's, which her family will confirm can peel the paint off the walls.

Ally wrote her first story -- a slash fic -- in the fall of 2003, after discovering the joys of reading male-on-male sex starring her favorite hotties, who shall remain nameless. She has since branched out into original character fiction, mostly male/male love stories. Her short stories have been published in the e-zines Forbidden Fruit and Ruthie's Club, and she won third place in the Torquere Press 'Melt' short fiction contest in the summer of 2004.

In addition to writing, Ally enjoys traveling, collecting dragons, and trying to scare herself. Her favorite authors include Stephen King, Clive Barker, and Laurell K. Hamilton, and she is a rabid fan of horror movies.

Ally adores music, particularly Radiohead, Placebo, and Beck. She plans to have her iPod surgically implanted as soon as someone invents a way to do that. Hopefully this will mean the end of playing CDs and her children can finally stop telling her to turn the volume down.

Visit Ally on the Web at <http://www.allyblue.com> or you can email her ally@allyblue.com.