



# *Awakenings*

SCARLET HYACINTH

# *Awakenings*

SCARLET  
HYACINTH

## ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the South African Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

**WARNING:** The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated and is punishable by imprisonment and a fine."

Cover Artist: Reese Dante  
Editor: Monti Shalosky

Awakenings © 2011 Scarlet Hyacinth  
ISBN # 9780986981920

**Attention Readers:** This book uses US English. Thank you.  
All rights reserved.

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED:** This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission. All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental. The Licensed Art Material is being used for illustrative purposes only; any person depicted in the Licensed Art Material, is a model.

**PUBLISHER**  
  
<http://www.silverpublishing.info>

## NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your purchase of this title. The authors and staff of Silver Publishing hope you enjoy this read and that we will have a long and happy association together.

Please remember that the only money authors make from writing comes from the sales of their books. If you like their work, spread the word and tell others about the books, but please refrain from sharing this book in any form. Authors depend on sales and sales only to support their families.

If you see "free shares" offered or cut-rate sales on pirate sites of this title, you can report the offending entry to [copyright@silverpublishing.info](mailto:copyright@silverpublishing.info)

Thank you for not pirating our titles.

Lodewyk Deysel  
Publisher  
Silver Publishing  
<http://www.silverpublishing.info>

## DEDICATION

For all the great people at Silver Publishing  
who made it possible for me to share this story with my  
wonderful readers.

## PROLOGUE

Chrys laughed as he rolled among the corals with Jaden. His twin gave him a disgruntled look. "Damn it, Chrys. You always cheat."

Chrys shrugged and flipped his tail at his sibling. "Not my fault you suck at everything."

A flash of hurt swept over Jaden's face and Chrys immediately became alarmed. His emotionally fragile twin often let random words hurt him. He hurried to wrap his arms around Jaden, trying to comfort his brother. "Hey, I'm kidding. Just kidding."

A wicked grin appeared on Jaden's face, the only warning Chrys had before Jaden pushed him down in the sand. Jaden landed on top of Chrys and rubbed a fist of sand against his skin. "Who's the sucker now?"

Chrys wanted to get angry, but instead he started to giggle. They both dissolved into laughter when they found each other's ticklish spots. Sand caught in their hair and rubbed against their tails as they rolled around in a merciless battle for dominance.

The impromptu game ended when Chrys felt someone's eyes on them. He stopped teasing and looked up toward the palace columns. A tall, golden-haired boy stood there, watching them with wide eyes.

"Hello," the boy offered. He seemed older than them, maybe by a few summers. His body had started to fill out, offering a view of what he'd soon become.

Chrys stared at the boy, uncertain. His eyes went to the pendant hanging at the older mer's neck. He felt his brother tense, realization striking both. This wasn't just any boy, but the crown prince of Atlantis, Aurus.

In a flash, Chrys leapt off the ground and faced Aurus in a defensive stance. Another mer approaching them, a high-ranking noble heir at that, spelled trouble with a capital "T". Chrys didn't even want to imagine what mayhem a prince could cause in their lives. They had already enough problems without Aurus involved, too.

Neither he nor Jaden replied. Aurus just stood there, his tail moving leisurely, as if he had all the time in the world. "I'm Aurus," he said. "I didn't know anyone else knew about this place."

Chrys understood what the prince was getting at. A few years back they'd discovered a private spot in the gardens, hidden from the sight of anyone else. They liked to come here. No one insulted them when they were all alone. They could be themselves, play, and have fun. "Well, nobody's been here in forever, so we kind of claimed it as our own." It came out more belligerent than Chrys would have liked. After all, the garden belonged to

the king, and by extension, the prince. Chrys and Jaden didn't have any right to be here.

"Oh," Aurus said. The confidence of his stance faded into hidden awkwardness.

"We'll go," Jaden said. "Sorry for intruding."

They grabbed the few items they'd brought and went around Aurus, prepared to leave their hiding spot behind. Chrys wanted to cry. Where would they go now? They didn't have anyone but each other here at the castle. They weren't allowed anywhere. Even servants shied away from them.

"Wait," Aurus suddenly said. "You don't have to go."

Chrys turned toward Aurus and gave the prince a confused look. "Are you sure?"

Aurus shrugged. "If you want to, you can stay with me, or come here later. I don't mind." He paused then spoke again. "I've been away from Atlantis and don't really know a lot of people around here."

Chrys gaped at Aurus. "You do know who we are?" He half wished he hadn't asked, but really, there was no point in trying to make a friend if that person later abandoned them.

Aurus nodded. "You're the sons of Lord Malach."

"And you don't mind?" Jaden asked.



"Why would I?" Aurus replied. "I think the way they treat you is foolish and cruel."

Aurus sounded so serious and decided, it warmed Chrys's heart. For the first time in many years, Chrys smiled at someone other than his brother. "Okay," he replied. "We'll stay."

## CHAPTER ONE

*A few years later*

Aurus snuck through the palace, rapidly swimming toward the garden. Impatience swelled inside of him at the knowledge of who waited for him. He needed to get to his sweet love as quickly as possible.

Being inconspicuous wasn't easy when one had a gold tail, but he managed to do it. Some of the soldiers turned a blind eye when young men made their escape for a night of debauchery, but going to see Chrys was a different thing entirely.

Anger and shame filled Aurus and he berated himself for his cowardice. He shouldn't have to hide his friendship with Chrys. They weren't doing anything wrong. He hadn't even touched Chrys sexually. Then again, if the king had a say in things, Aurus would never even get the chance. All because of some illusionary curse. How could anyone think someone as pure and perfect as Chrys could bring the wrath of the gods upon them?

One would think that his people would have more enlightened views. Atlantis had once been the academic center for the entire world, its libraries famous for the wealth of knowledge within. In many ways, it still was, as

the Atlantean University received students from all over their world. How could his people be so wise, yet so arrogant at the same time?

Even Lord Malach, Jaden and Chrys's father, seemed to believe the same awful thing about his two sons. It made seeing Chrys very difficult, but thankfully, Jaden helped out, distracting his father.

Since the fateful day they'd met, the three of them had become inseparable. Aurus had been taken with the two young mer, and they'd instantly become friends. Jaden, the quiet, reserved twin, and Chrys, the impulsive brother with a temper that could scare a shark away. Aurus loved both deeply, but somewhere along the way, his affection for them had changed.

He still looked upon Jaden as his little brother, but he wanted Chrys as a lover.

Jaden had seen through his feelings. He'd agreed to help him and give him some alone time with Chrys. It wasn't a great arrangement, and Aurus missed seeing more of Jaden, but at least he got some privacy with Chrys.

When he reached the garden, a slender figure swam toward him. "Aurus? Is that you?"

Aurus's heart clenched at the sight of Chrys. Gods, Chrys was beautiful. His long, azure tresses seemed to flow like the very waves of the sea. Deep turquoise eyes

reminded Aurus of the starlit sky on the surface. And that tail... hundreds of nuances of blue-green glittered on those beautiful scales and Aurus ached to touch them, to see if they felt as smooth and soft as they looked.

Aurus pushed back his arousal and swam toward Chrys. His friend was too young for things like that. He needed to wait a bit longer. "Hi, Chrys."

Chrys's beautiful lips twisted into a wide smile. He pounced on Aurus and wrapped slender arms around Aurus's torso. "I was worried you wouldn't be able to come," he mumbled against Aurus's skin.

Aurus swallowed at the feel of Chrys's skin making contact with his own. "I had some trouble, yes," he replied, breaking away from Chrys. Even if Chrys kept their tails apart, the position conjured too many ideas in Aurus's mind.

At least he hadn't lied to Chrys. 'Trouble' didn't even cut it. Aurus needed to stop thinking about licking every inch of Chrys's skin and find a solution to get them out of there. Any idea he'd come up with had been sabotaged by either Lord Malach or the king. The men seemed to have a sixth sense and, with the increase in guards in the palace premises, Aurus had been unable to secure them a way out.

Unfortunately, Chrys interpreted Aurus's tense stance in the wrong way. He gave Aurus a hurt look, his

blue eyes begging for an explanation. "What is it? Why are you shying away from me? Is it... is it the curse?"

Aurus reached out to his friend and winced when Chrys quickly swam off. "It's not like that. Chrys, come back here."

Chrys shook his head and, before Aurus knew it, he disappeared behind a large purple coral. Aurus cursed under his breath and followed. As he ventured into the labyrinthine garden, he saw a flash of blue tail to his right. A red sea whip blocked his vision and Aurus lost sight of Chrys again. He called out, knowing their time together was limited. He couldn't bear the thought of hurting Chrys.

To his surprise, he found Chrys waiting just a few feet farther, gently caressing the flowery tubes of a sun coral.

"There you are."

"Do you hate me?" Chrys asked.

"Of course not," Aurus replied. He joined Chrys by the coral, hesitating slightly. The gods only knew how much he wanted to touch Chrys. But Chrys was so young, damn it, just seventeen summers. The very idea of pushing Chrys into something he wasn't ready for made Aurus's stomach turn.

"You do," Chrys whispered. "Otherwise you wouldn't be acting like this. I can tell."

The defeat in Chrys's voice made Aurus's decision for him. His body moved, as if of its own accord, and his arms went around Chrys. "You have it all wrong."

This time, he didn't even try to control himself. His tail touched Chrys's, as gently as possible so as not to scare the younger mer. Chrys tensed but didn't move away. "A-Aurus? What are you doing?"

Aurus buried his face in Chrys's hair, rejoicing in its scent. Chrys smelled like the sea at night, like life and a warm breeze on sandy beaches. "You really don't realize how beautiful you are, do you?" he whispered in Chrys's ear.

Chrys didn't reply. Instead, he shifted in Aurus's embrace and turned to face him. Their eyes met and Aurus's heart did a little flip at the sight of the green flecks in those beautiful blue orbs. His reluctance vanished and he wrapped his tail around Chrys's. Chrys gasped when their scales rubbed against each other. The delicate sound aroused Aurus even more and he pressed his lips to Chrys's, taking possession of the other mer's mouth.

He didn't know how long they stood there, kissing deeply, their tails entwined. All too soon, a familiar voice interrupted the moment, "Chrys. Chrys!"

Aurus broke away from the other mer and turned to see Jaden appear from behind a giant anemone. Jaden was

Chrys's twin, but even if they looked a lot alike, they weren't identical. Unlike Chrys, Jaden's hair and eyes were green and his tail shone in gentle tones of emerald. And yet, Aurus didn't feel attracted to Jaden at all. Or at least, he didn't think so.

"What is it, Jaden?" Chrys asked, panting. Jaden looked away from them, his face flushed. He remained silent, looking embarrassed. "Jaden?" Chrys insisted.

"It's Father," Jaden said, taking a deep breath. "He's looking for us. He seems angry."

Chrys nodded and Aurus's heart fell. Chrys turned to him and their lips met in a brief peck. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

A dark premonition suddenly swept over Aurus. He gripped Chrys's arm, stopping him. "Don't go," Aurus said. "Something's wrong."

Chrys gave him an apologetic look and freed himself from Aurus's hold. "I can't *not* go. I'll see you later, all right?"

Aurus wanted to say something else, to stop Chrys, but nothing came out. Chrys blew him another kiss, then he and Jaden disappeared beyond the corals. For a few seconds, Aurus stared at the spot Chrys had vacated. He wanted to go after them, but what could he do? Going against Lord Malach would make things worse when he

didn't yet have an actual solution.

That night, the rumor reached his ears. Chrys and Jaden had been banished from the court. They would not be allowed back into Atlantis until the curse was broken. Aurus had lost them both.

\* \* \* \*

*Five years later*

"They're a disgrace to our people. You have to push them into turning, or I will."

"But, my King... they're young, still. It's just a slight delay."

"You've told me that a million times, Malach. A slight delay is one, two summers. They're already twenty-two and they're still nulls."

Hidden behind the large doors of his father's office, Chrys winced at the anger in the king's voice. It was unprecedented for a member of the royal family to visit a minor noble. And yet, the king had come. That spoke volumes of the seriousness of the situation.

Chrys and Jaden had just recently celebrated their birthday. They were at an age where they should be engaged in courtship and training to join their army.



Instead, they remained hidden at their father's estate, away from the eyes of their world, a disgrace, like the king said, and all because their powers simply refused to manifest.

The strange thing was that their mother had foretold them having magic. Childbearing parents could sense the power of their unborn babies, and she'd said that one of her precious twins would have power over jade and the other over chrysocolla. But she'd died while giving birth to them. In his dark moments, Chrys felt almost thankful for the fact that she hadn't lived to see her sons end up with this curse upon them.

Jaden gave him a frightened look. "What are we going to do, brother?" he whispered, his tail twitching nervously.

"I don't know," Chrys replied. "If Father doesn't manage to convince His Majesty..."

"Even if he does, it's only a matter of time until a summons comes once more," Jaden said. "We've run out of time, Chrys."

Chrys sighed and nodded. "This is such a disaster. Why us, Jaden? Why us?"

Mermen came into their powers in their early years. Their names, chosen at birth according to the element they would later control, depended on what the childbearing parent said. But Jaden and Chrys had reached twenty-two

summers with no sign of their magic manifesting.

Their father, Malach, chose to call it a delay. Others, like the king, thought it brought shame on the entire Atlantean nation. Most of the mer called it a curse, and refused to have any contact whatsoever with Jaden and Chrys.

In general, mer folk didn't like twins much. It wasn't entirely unusual for them to be born, but they were never identical. The fact that Jaden and Chrys couldn't use their powers only cemented their belief that something was very wrong with the two brothers.

It was absurd. Chrys knew if they'd just be given a chance, they'd manage to awaken their elements. One method to nudge them into attaining their powers lay in the lessons soldiers took to control their shifting abilities. 'Lessons' was a bit of a euphemism, though. Mer could only learn to change their tails into legs through sexual tutoring. Unfortunately, that was off limits for both Chrys and his brother as no one wanted to touch a cursed twin.

"Your Highness," their father said, "courtship is difficult in this situation. I need more time."

Even without seeing Malach, Chrys could hear the misery and dejection in his sire's voice. He closed his eyes at the pain that shot through him. They'd been the one to cause that sorrow.

The king laughed. "Courtship? Who would willingly take one of your offspring to their bed? Pay someone, ask a servant. I don't care. You've had enough time."

Chrys barely managed to suppress a gasp. The king couldn't be serious. A merman's first time was vital for his or her future development, almost sacred. They couldn't just choose a random person to do it. And even if they did, it was doubtful the man or woman would agree.

A new wave of pain swept through Chrys. He knew who he wanted to show him the magic of the shift. There were two persons in his mind when he dreamed of swimming to the surface, and one of them, Jaden, was his dear twin. The other, Aurus, haunted every second of his days and nights, like an impossible fantasy. The man didn't even know Chrys existed, not anymore, after all these years. He had hundreds of beautiful men and women vying for his attention. How could Chrys compete with that?

If only Jaden could teach him... but no! Jaden was his twin. Such a thing couldn't exist between brothers. Chrys shouldn't let despair get to him and taint the feelings he had for Jaden.

Jaden's low voice snapped him out of his musings. "Brother, come. We can't stay here any longer."

Jaden sounded even more alarmed. What had Chrys

missed while lost in his thoughts?

"Jaden? What's wrong?"

His twin pulled him away from the door and out into the corridor. "Didn't you hear? The king wants Father to teach us. Tonight."

This time, Chrys couldn't contain his horror. "What?" he asked, voice trembling. "That's... that's not possible." He couldn't even fathom his father touching him... like a lover. Just the thought nearly made him lose his breakfast.

"I know," Jaden replied with a choked sob. "It's horrid."

A sense of urgency filled Chrys at the mere thought of such a thing happening to them. "We need to leave. We can't stay here any longer."

Jaden nodded, and together, they swam faster. "I'll go to the kitchens to grab some supplies," Jaden said. "You pack something. We don't have much time."

Chrys's heart thundered as his twin disappeared in the direction of the cooking area. Pushing his terror back, he rushed to the sleeping area. His first stop was their father's chambers. He slipped inside, thankful the king's retinue kept everyone distracted. Shame and guilt swept over him as he scanned the room. He hated what he was about to do, but he didn't have any choice.

Chrys detected his sire's stash of gold with reasonable ease. He'd seen Malach retrieve coins from there many times. He grabbed the purse, mentally apologizing to his father.

Moving as quickly as possible, he left the bedroom and headed toward the quarters he shared with his twin. Nobody stopped him on the way and he guessed all the servants were busy in the receiving area. He hoped his brother wouldn't have too much trouble in the kitchens. This might be their only chance to stop the king's atrocious plan.

Mind whirling, he proceeded to pack a few essentials. Their blades went into the bag, along with the purse of gold, a map, and a few items of clothing. The waters were warm in this area, but the gods only knew where they'd have to swim to get away from his father's guards. There were dangerous creatures out there, but they'd have to chance it.

Seconds after he finished, Jaden burst in the room. He carried a bottle of sweet juice, a few algae breadsticks, and some fruit. That would have to do. They could forage easily enough once they got far enough away. Hunting would be harder since they'd have no means of cooking the fish.

"Ready?" Jaden asked.

Chrys nodded. He hastily packed their supplies into another bag then locked the door and blocked it with a table. Perhaps it would stall their pursuers.

Jaden opened the window and Chrys swam to his brother's side. He swallowed nervously. Guards surrounded their small villa, and beyond the transparent dome the ocean surrounded them, silent and dark, both welcoming and gloomy. Could they even survive out there?

His remaining hesitation dissipated when he heard his father's voice in the corridor. Jaden gasped. "Hurry. Perhaps we can sneak past the soldiers unseen."

Chrys took a deep breath and slipped out the window, his twin following behind him. The small villa was surrounded by picturesque corals, and somehow they managed to find hiding spots and dodge the guards' vigilant gazes. Escaping through the actual gate would be impossible, but Chrys and Jaden knew of another route, through the coral garden and down into the caves beneath the villa. They'd snuck out that way before, although on those days, the guards had been less numerous. Damn the king for his cruelty.

Chrys squeezed his twin's hand, finding comfort and strength in Jaden's presence. "We'll get out of here, brother," he whispered. "We'll escape."

Jaden offered him a small smile and Chrys focused

on their mind link. As twins, they shared a bond more powerful than any elemental magic. Together, they sent out a call to the sea creatures, asking them for aid. They waited together, hidden in a small niche of coral and occasionally taking a peak outside. Acutely aware of each second that passed, Chrys knew that soon, their father would find them.

To Chrys's relief, their call was answered. A huge *shroin* whale suddenly appeared, its humongous form shadowing the small villa. Dangerous sea creatures rarely ventured into close proximity of mer homes, so the guards became alarmed.

Chrys heard them try to reach out to the magnificent leviathan, to convince it to stand down. All mer could speak to the children of the sea. Generally, whales did not attempt to attack settlements and were quite cooperative with their people. However, Chrys and Jaden's bond with the creatures went beyond that of usual mermen. Chrys thought it was the Sea Mother's way of compensating for their lack of magic. He knew the whale wouldn't leave. She'd come to help them and, until they escaped, she would brave the danger of the mer soldiers.

The whale let out a bellowing cry, so loud it shook the dome surrounding their home. "*You're free,*" she said to them. "*Go.*"

Chrys focused on his mind link to the sea creature.

"Thank you, friend," he replied.

Together with Jaden, he snuck out of their hiding spot while the large mammal distracted the guards. They swam to the coral garden and found their way inside. Once safe, they spoke to the whale again, "*Go. They will hurt you if you stay much longer.*"

The whale cried out once more, making Chrys smile. "At least we'll always have the Sea Mother," Jaden whispered.

"Yes, little brother," Chrys replied. "We'll always have her—and each other."

Sorrow weighed on his soul as he glanced one last time to the house. He shook himself and pulled Jaden away and into the passage. It would be better this way. Their father wouldn't be forced into doing something abominable. Perhaps, with luck and the help of the Sea Mother, they'd find a way to be free of their curse.

\* \* \* \*

Jaden sighed as he leaned against a rock and absently nibbled on a piece of cheese. He grimaced at the taste, never having been a real fan of processed algae. Of course, such trivial things didn't matter now. They were lucky enough to even have a little bag of supplies and to



have escaped their home in one piece.

Jaden shuddered at the thought of what could have happened had they not been able to leave the mansion. The very idea of his father tutoring him made him sick to his stomach. The king must be beyond furious with their situation if such a thing had occurred to him.

At that thought, Jaden felt a surge of shame. If the king had suggested Jaden and Chrys touch each other instead, Jaden would have gladly done it. It was sick that he even considered it, but he couldn't help it.

He stole a guilty look at his twin, sweeping his gaze over Chrys's body, so much like his own, yet so very different. Thankfully, Chrys looked in a different direction, scanning their surroundings for any approaching intruders. Little did Chrys know that his worst enemy, the wickedest mer out of all of Atlantis, was his own twin.

Not that Jaden would hurt Chrys, at least not physically. If Chrys ever found out about Jaden's cravings, they'd be forced to separate, which would automatically hurt them both. Jaden would do anything to keep that from happening.

Anyway, he knew Chrys would never look at him that way. His twin would never even consider that Jaden might want such a thing. Chrys was too wrapped up in his feelings for Aurus to think about that, a fact which made

Jaden both very happy and exceedingly sad.

Of course, Aurus was also out of Chrys's reach. If only they hadn't been separated five years ago... Jaden felt certain his twin would have, at least, broken free of this peculiar curse by now.

His twin's voice snapped him out of his musings. "Jaden?" Chrys said. "Are you okay?"

Jaden blinked, confused about Chrys's concerned expression. He realized he'd been so lost in thought he hadn't heard Chrys call out to him the first time. "I'm fine. Just a bit tired, I guess."

Chrys nodded, obviously guessing Jaden's fatigue wasn't physical. Chrys leaned against Jaden, placing his head on Jaden's shoulder in a casual gesture. "I wish things were different."

Jaden swallowed around the sudden knot in his throat. Taking a deep breath, he forced his suddenly racing heart to calm down. "Yeah," he replied. "Me too."

Chrys had no idea how much Jaden wanted that.

They rested a while behind the rock, and Chrys grabbed a piece of cheese as well. Jaden finished his own and spent the rest of their rest time watching his twin's lips, aching to feel them on his own and hating himself for it.

When the time to go finally came, Jaden pushed all the sinful thoughts out of his mind. They needed to focus

on finding shelter. Their father and the king's guards would be looking for them.

"So where to?" he asked his twin.

"I have no idea... maybe we should try one of the villages farther west."

Jaden frowned. "That would take us close to Atlantis. Wouldn't it be risky?"

"It's not a perfect plan," Chrys mused, "but we don't have much choice. I'm pretty sure there are patrols all over the coast. We might manage to lose them if we go that way."

Jaden didn't know if that was the case, but Chrys did have a point. They couldn't just wait around, hoping to somehow find a miracle cure. "Okay," he told his twin. "Let's go."

As they started on their way once again, Jaden vowed to do whatever was in his power to keep his twin safe and happy.

## CHAPTER TWO

Chrys swam deeper and deeper, his muscles straining as he attempted to escape. Despair pushed him forward, making him move faster than he'd ever thought possible. His brother raced by his side, body taut and tense with effort. They swept through the waters like arrows, the panic growing with each second that passed.

Following Chrys's plan, they'd gotten too close to the capital, stupidly believing they wouldn't be spotted. They'd been half right. The patrols must've been too concerned with securing the trade routes to focus on two little mer. Bandit attacks quite often caused problems, as well as the occasional anomaly in the migrational patterns of dangerous sea creatures. Either way, the Atlantean guards completely missed Chrys and Jaden. That was the good news. The bad news nullified its value. While they hadn't run into any sharks, octopi, or jellyfish, they seemed to have stumbled on a greater danger.

The mer patrols were right to be apprehensive. Bandits watched from the shadows, always waiting to strike. Jaden and Chrys had been unlucky enough to draw their attention. Their bags now lay abandoned somewhere behind them, and the thieves were gaining on them, so close Chrys could almost feel their repugnant touch.

An arrow swished past, missing Chrys by inches. Chrys cursed and swam left. They moved in zigzags, but grew tired. They tried to lose their pursuers, but the bandits didn't let up.

Finally, the thieves' aim struck true. A sickening fleshy sound echoed in Chrys's ears. For a second, it didn't quite process, but then pain engulfed him, hot and sharp. Chrys cried out. He tried to push forward, but every time he moved his tail, bolts of agony shocked through him. Blood mixed with the water around them, and finally, his body refused to cooperate.

Jaden let out a curse and took hold of Chrys's arm, supporting him, wordlessly forbidding him from giving up. Chrys tried to obey, but it hurt too much. It would be pointless to continue and he'd just slow his twin down. The entire thing had been his idea, after all. He couldn't bear the thought Jaden would have to pay for his rashness.

"Go, Jaden. Leave me."

Jaden's eyes filled with tears and he shook his head. He pulled Chrys away from the clear path. They hid behind a large coral and Jaden checked on Chrys's wound.

The arrow had embedded itself between two large, azure-colored scales. Chrys covered his mouth to choke his whimper when Jaden pulled it out. The wound would seal itself as the scales healed, but for now, it hurt like a bitch.

Of course, if the bandits caught them, Chrys wouldn't have the chance to heal up.

The loud chuckle that sounded above them didn't come as a surprise. Jaden tensed, but didn't try to flee either. It would be futile. They'd been caught.

A tall, red-headed merman grinned at them. "Look what we have here. Two cute youngsters, just for our enjoyment."

"Please, let us go," Jaden said. "We don't want any trouble."

Even as Jaden spoke, Chrys knew what the thief's reply would be. "I think not," the tall merman said. The red scales of his tail flashed threateningly. "Jasper, come on. They're here."

Another merman, one with dark orange hair, appeared from beyond the coral. He smiled at their captor. "Good job, Dially."

The new arrival—Jasper—swept his gaze over them. Chrys shuddered under the appraisal. He could see a dark promise in the man's eerie eyes. Jasper leaned toward them and cupped Jaden's jaw. "What a pretty thing you are," he said.

Chrys snarled at Jasper, pushing the other merman's hand away from Jaden. "You keep your filthy fins to yourself."

"Oh... so you like to hog all the attention. No worries. I like you both."

Jasper lunged at Chrys, and his larger body hit Chrys hard. The thief's tail rubbed against Chrys's wound and he let out a cry of pain and disgust.

Jasper chuckled and swept his hands over Chrys's scales. Chrys tried to move away, but the thief immobilized him with ease. Sobs echoed in Chrys's ears and he realized his twin was crying. Or maybe they both were. The other mer—Dialy—had turned his attention to Jaden, and Chrys was aware of every unwanted touch on Jaden's body the same way he felt his own abuse.

Jasper's fingers prodded at the end of Chrys's tail and Chrys felt an unwilling bolt of pleasure sweep through him. He hated himself for responding to his abuser, but his body didn't want to obey his mind and heart. Nobody had ever touched him there. He'd tested it once or twice, curious, but the sensations had confused and scared him.

Such touches went beyond mere tail contact. As a curious young mer, Chrys had touched his twin's tail many times. He didn't count those innocent caresses as sexual, though, and neither had dared to go too far back then. And then there had been Aurus and their stolen moments in the coral garden of the palace. But Aurus hadn't touched him in his most intimate spot, the tiny opening between the large

fins of Chrys's tail. It was something kept for each mer's first time. Chrys hated this thief might be the first one to do it.

Thankfully, Jasper didn't try to steal his way inside Chrys's body. Instead, he rubbed at the spot and whispered in Chrys's ear, "Come on, pretty thing. Shift for me."

Stimulation through pressure or slight penetration would have caused a sexually-experienced mer to turn into his legged form. The channel beyond the small hole hid particularly sensitive nerve endings. Chrys, however, did not shift.

He somehow found the energy to snort. "I can't," he told the bandit. "I don't know how."

Jasper laughed. "Are you kidding me? Someone who looks like you, and at your age? Don't be ridiculous."

"Jasper," Dially piped up, "I think he's telling the truth."

Chrys took advantage of the moment and pushed the thief away. He rushed to his brother's side and wrapped his arms around Jaden.

"Are you okay, Jaden?" he said.

Jaden nodded. "Chrys," he murmured, "I don't want them to touch me."

Dially gave Jaden a disgruntled look, but didn't comment. Jasper didn't show the same restraint. He swam



to Chrys's side and gripped his arm, squeezing hard, before looking at both mer and realizing for the first time that they were twins. "Jaden. Chrys. You're the sons of Lord Malach, aren't you?" he growled.

Chrys tensed. He considered denying it, but the thieves weren't fools. They'd already found out the truth. What would Jasper do to them now?

"Of course," Dially said. "No wonder they didn't attack us with their elements. They have no magic."

"Gods..." Jasper grumbled under his breath. "I almost cursed myself." He glanced toward Chrys and Jaden once more, shaking his head. "Such a waste."

More mer showed up from behind the corals. "Jasper?" one of them called out.

"They're the sons of Lord Malach," Jasper said.

Whispers of discontent swept over the gathering, clearly illustrating the mer thieves' opinion of Chrys and Jaden. "Let's just drop them in the pit," someone said. "The sharks will surely be interested in their blood."

Death loomed. Jaden trembled against Chrys and his own fear echoed his brother's. "Look, you don't have to kill us," he said and marveled his voice didn't shake. "Maybe we can be useful. We know our way around Atlantis and the palace."

Jasper seemed to consider Chrys's words. "So you

want to live?"

Chrys nodded. Of course he did. What kind of question was that?

"Very well," Jasper said. "You can come with us. Maybe your talents will come in handy. But touch any of us and you'll die in a very slow and painful way."

Chrys couldn't suppress a shudder. As DIALY pulled them up and they were surrounded by hostile mer, he wondered if they'd ever get out of this one alive.

\* \* \* \*

The bandits tugged Chrys and Jaden along through dark current paths avoided by the patrols. Jaden knew that any wrong movement would get them both killed. At least the curse had been useful in one respect. The two mer had not managed to take advantage of them sexually. Even those few touches DIALY had forced upon Jaden's flesh made him want to hurl.

As if knowing what Jaden thought, DIALY turned toward them and gave Jaden a dark look. "Don't even think about escaping. I won't have any qualms about killing you."

Jaden didn't answer. He didn't doubt DIALY spoke the truth, but neither did he want to look more pathetic than he already did. He met DIALY's eyes, not giving the other

mer the satisfaction of letting him know how much Jaden feared him.

"We get it," Chrys replied. "We're not stupid."

"You were stupid enough to come this way," Jasper laughed.

Jaden ignored him. "How's your tail?" he asked his twin in a whisper.

"Much better," Chrys answered. "The wound seems to have sealed already."

Jaden nodded, although he felt a bit put out the bandits hadn't even bothered to check. They should have ensured Chrys didn't have any bloody injuries, if not for Chrys's sake, then for the safety of them all. Even if these waters weren't infested with too many predators, an errant shark could always pop up, drawn by the scent. That would be the last thing they needed at the moment.

Thankfully, nothing like that happened. They reached the bandits' hideout without incident. Jaden noticed with a start that it was located in the proximity of the Forbidden Zone. Atlanteans usually avoided the area, purportedly haunted by a dangerous monster. Hundreds of years ago, the ruling monarch had mysteriously forbidden any access, warning the mer an intrusion would be punishable by death.

The words slipped out of his mouth before he could

stop them. "Isn't this too close to the Forbidden Zone?"

Jasper chuckled once again. "Don't tell me you actually believe that wives' tale. We've been here for years now without seeing anything."

"Even fish are rare," Jaden noticed.

Jasper missed the hidden meaning of Jaden's observation. Sea creatures avoided this area, and that spelled trouble for anyone who didn't.

"Well, if it comforts you, we don't actually go inside. We're close, yes, but not close enough for it to be a peril."

Jaden surmised that the bandit leader did indeed have at least a degree of apprehension regarding the mysterious monster that supposedly lurked in the murky depths. A spark of satisfaction briefly flitted through him and he almost smiled. He didn't say anything else, though, knowing he'd already pushed his luck. Besides, something told him it wouldn't be wise to dwell too much on the topic of the beast.

It soon became apparent the group of bandits was much larger than Jaden originally thought. Tens of mer emerged from the abode-like structure, greeting Jasper with loud shouts and imprecations. Men, women, and children jeered at Jaden and Chrys.

"You found yourself a boyfriend?" someone asked.

Jasper's voice sounded flat when he responded. "Hardly. Everyone, meet Jaden and Chrys, sons of Lord Malach."

The raucous chaos turned to deadly silence. Jaden felt the weight of the hostile gazes more acutely than ever.

"What did you bring upon us?" one of the mermen asked. "We have to get rid of them now."

"They can be useful," Jasper said calmly. "As long as you don't touch them, you'll be fine."

"Why should we receive them here in the first place?" another countered. "What if they do something to the children? Maybe they'll extend the curse to them."

"We'd never do anything so horrible," Jaden shot back. He wouldn't wish this fate on his worst enemy. They'd grown up with sneers and glares, powerless and rejected. The only ones who'd ever shown them kindness had been their father and Aurus.

Unfortunately, his outburst drew the crowd's attention. "Look, it speaks," a mermaid said. Her red hair seemed to be liquid flame and her eyes burned Jaden as she spoke.

"Settle down, Magma," Jasper warned. "We'll keep them around temporarily. If we have any trouble, they're dead."

The tone seemed to pacify the disgruntled bandits.

And yet, as their guards forcibly pushed Jaden and Chrys inside the hideout, Jaden sensed something was not right. And it didn't have anything to do with the thieves. He had a feeling that in the dark waters beyond hid a mystery that could consume them all.

\* \* \* \*

Within the darkness, the beast slept the dreamless slumber of a creature lost in hibernation. There were no feelings, no regrets now, just instinct and the occasional desire to feed. Rarely did it wake, and once it took care of its survival urges, it went back to its lair and slept once again.

Ages passed it by, and with it, memories faded. The beast forgot who it had been, or why it had come to be here in the first place. It only recalled that this abyss belonged to it and would continue to remain so until the world died.

Its power cast aside all living things until nothing survived around it but the familiar feel of protective rock. Enclosed in its cave, the beast remained asleep until, finally, something awoke him.

The Atlanteans had become more and more daring. A group had settled close to its lair, probably thinking they could outsmart the beast, or something just as ridiculous.

For a few moments—which must've lasted at least a few years in the pathetic timeframe of the Atlanteans—the beast considered going out there to kill them. But it would be an effort, and the creature was weary of eliminating intruders.

Time continued to fly by, the Atlanteans showed no sign of wanting to leave, and the creature grew angry. It would no longer wait. The mer would die for their foolishness.

And then, something happened the beast did not expect. A light seemed to shine from the direction of the Atlanteans and, for the first time in ages, the creature felt drawn to something that was not food. In its mind, it could almost see them now. Two young mer joining the ranks of the foolish intruders.

Both were powerful, but the beast felt the pull of one in particular, a soul in pain and need, vulnerable and ripe for the picking. As much as it regretted not having both mer, the creature focused its efforts on that one, sending dreams of darkness and calling the mer to him. It was only a matter of time until his prey succumbed.

\* \* \* \*

*A few weeks later*

Chrys slipped into a dark alley, his heart thundering in panic. Behind him, a group of soldiers swept over the main street. Of course, they couldn't possibly know his location, but if they found him, he was dead.

His hand clutched the small poster he'd managed to retrieve. He still couldn't believe it. The annual masquerade ball held at the palace was just two weeks away. Officially, it celebrated the king's rule but, in fact, it represented an opening for all mermen who'd come of age to find their tutors. Chrys and Jaden had never been allowed to go to one. Perhaps this could be their chance.

A thousand sea horses fluttered in his belly when he swam out of the alley and headed toward their hideout. If nothing else, he could see Aurus. Gods, how many years had passed since he'd last seen his impossible love?

They'd shared one kiss, just one passionate moment the day Jaden and Chrys had been banished from the royal court. Chrys could still remember it, Aurus's taste on his lips, his tongue taking possession of Chrys's mouth, his golden scales rubbing against Chrys's tail. It had been the most amazing thing in Chrys's life. But the same day, mere hours later, they'd left the capital. Chrys had lost all contact with Aurus, Jaden's presence the only thing that kept him sane. He'd heard at some point that Aurus had been sent to the Atlantean University, supposedly to learn the ways of



their neighboring races. The Sea Mother only knew how that experience had changed him.

Maybe it wasn't too late. After all, it would be a masquerade ball. Young men and women often asked honored soldiers to initiate them. Aurus had been attracted to Chrys once. If Chrys could get to him, maybe he could convince the other mer to teach him, to show him how to shift. His face flushed at the thought of having Aurus touch him intimately once again, and he covered himself better with the cloak. It wouldn't do to draw attention to himself by being aroused in the middle of the market.

A stream of people blocked his path, slowing him down. By the time he returned to their hiding spot, his enthusiasm started to melt into uncertainty. There were so many ifs to his idea, so many variables and things that could go wrong. How would Jaden react?

It didn't help that their choice of a haven wasn't very conducive to optimism. He swam outside the dome that protected the capital city of the mer. Once he got out of sight of the capital, he veered off the main current road and made his way down toward a hidden ravine. Sea creatures passed him by, shoals of fish scattering as he swam onward. Thankfully, there were no predators around here, and the few dangerous animals ignored him.

Finally, he reached his destination. The structure lay

hidden beneath a rocky outcropping and it served as shelter to criminals and outlaws, the same bandits Chrys and Jaden had accidentally run into a few weeks back.

Jasper had agreed to let them stay as long as they paid the price. A price in coins—which Jaden and Chrys had to steal, since the money from their father had long ago vanished into the thief's coffers.

It was a lesson in humility that not even criminals wanted to touch them. At least, they were no longer prisoners and could move in and out of the safe house pretty much as they pleased. The one condition was that when one of them left unsupervised, the other needed to stay behind. Obviously, Jasper didn't trust them not to attempt an escape.

Chrys entered the shelter and the thieves glared at him, muttering under their breaths. Chrys kept his head down, pushing back his anger. It wasn't his or Jaden's fault for not having magic. They'd tried everything, but no one wanted to help. How could they fight against something they had no knowledge of?

He slipped into the small room he shared with his brother.

"Where have you been?" Jaden growled at him the second he opened the door. "Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?"

Chrys wrapped his arms around his twin. "Sorry, Jaden." He retrieved the poster and showed it to his brother. "Look what I found."

Jaden took the paper and scanned its contents. His body tensed and he broke away from Chrys. "Are you mad?" he said, glowering. "We'll be caught!"

"No, we won't, not if we're careful," Chrys replied, keeping his voice low and soothing. "This is our chance, Jaden. You have to see that."

Jaden pushed away from him and swam to the other side of the room. His scales turned dark green in agitation, like they did when he was angry. "Our chance? Our chance to do what? Die?"

Fury flared inside Chrys. "What do you want to do then? Stay here forever? Not even these men will touch us, not that I want them to. Or maybe you'd prefer to go back home and ask Father to do it." Jaden winced and Chrys immediately felt guilty for snapping at his twin. "Sorry, Jaden. I shouldn't have said that."

Jaden shook his head and didn't reply. Awkward silence stretched between them for a few moments, until Jaden spoke again. "It's because of him, isn't it? Because of Aurus."

Chrys looked away from Jaden's knowing eyes. "It's because we don't have any choice."

Jaden sighed. "Very well, brother. We'll go. We'll need help to sneak inside, though."

Chrys nodded, conflicting emotions of guilt and satisfaction swirling inside him. He retrieved the purse of gold from his coat and threw it to his brother. "I lifted it off a merchant today. It should be enough to convince Jasper to help us out."

Jaden weighed the purse in his hand and hummed thoughtfully. "I do hope you're right, Chrys, because if we're making a mistake..."

Chrys hugged his twin once more. "It'll be all right, Jaden. You'll see. We'll be just fine. We'll finally get to see Aurus once again."

There was something in Jaden's eyes when Chrys said that, something that unsettled Chrys deeply. All of a sudden, Chrys didn't think this entire plan had been such a good idea after all. If he went off with Aurus, what would Jaden do?

"You'll find a tutor as well," he offered lamely. "You'll see."

Jaden didn't answer, but Chrys knew his sibling well and felt his twin's pain and discomfort. It was something he'd experienced more than once in the past. Jaden always waved it off, and under normal circumstances, Chrys didn't insist.

This time, though, something didn't feel right. With a jolt, he realized that even as children, he'd always been closest to Jaden. When Aurus showed up, they'd just included him in the group. But slowly, Jaden had somehow been pushed aside. If Chrys gave himself to Aurus, the separation process would be complete. Jaden would be left all alone.

He also realized he didn't want Jaden to be taught how to shift by any filthy old soldier. Jaden deserved better. He deserved to be loved, just like Chrys loved him.

Understanding it didn't help him at all, though. He wanted to be with Aurus, but he cared for his twin as well. He couldn't see any solution out of the predicament.

In the end, it all amounted to a big "if". He'd deal with things as they came. At this point, he couldn't turn back or wait any longer.

\* \* \* \*

That night, Jaden lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling in silence. His twin lay cuddled by his side, so close Jaden could feel Chrys's hot breath on his skin. Their quarters were small and cramped, unsurprisingly the worst of the entire hideout. They'd only received their own room because everyone else felt reluctant to share any sort of

living space or be in close proximity with them. In consequence, they only had one bed, and that led to very tortuous nights for Jaden.

While Chrys slept on obliviously, Jaden couldn't help but feel tormented by his twin's heat. As always, Chrys was so close, and yet, so far away. In moments such as these, though, restraint translated into agony. Touching Chrys would be so easy. His twin might not even know it, or if he did realize, Jaden could blame it on a random motion while twisting in bed. The temptation was so strong, Jaden couldn't put it out of his mind. He slept poorly, and when he did, he always dreamed the same things: Chrys, over and over, glaring at him angrily, turning his back on him with disgust.

No, he couldn't take advantage of Chrys's vulnerability. He'd have to satisfy himself with merely watching his twin. In his sleep, Chrys looked so beautiful and peaceful, and for once not troubled by their disastrous circumstances. Jaden couldn't steal that away.

In a sense, he envied his twin's restful slumber. Lately, an unsettling gloom encroached upon his nights, and Jaden didn't know what to think of it. The nearness of the Forbidden Zone made him nervous, yes, but he hated the idea he'd turned into a coward. He loathed jumping at shadows and having nightmares about things that would,

most likely, never come to pass.

Chrys's new plan, though, made Jaden wonder if he'd be able to get any sleep for the next few weeks. He could already see them trapped in the dungeons, slain at the hands of the king's guards, or worse. But he had to do this for Chrys, and for Aurus, too.

Sighing, Jaden tried to force himself to rest. Just when he thought he'd succeed, a small moan tore through his consciousness. He tensed and his eyes shot to his twin. Like before, Chrys clung to Jaden, but the peaceful expression had vanished, replaced with something that looked like pain. Concerned, Jaden pressed his hand to Chrys's shoulder, intent on shaking his twin out of the nightmare.

But then the worst possible thing happened. A gasp escaped Chrys's lips, and he actually leaned into Jaden's touch. His tail rubbed against Jaden's and when their scales made contact, Jaden bit his lip to suppress a groan. Pleasure shot through him and he answered the intoxicating motion, thrusting back against his twin.

Chrys's moans turned louder, incomprehensible mutters, out of which Jaden could only catch a few random words. The occasional "yes" spurred Jaden on, his mind melting at the sensations that shot through him. There was no awkwardness, no fumbling. They simply fit together.

How could they not? They'd been born that way.

He thought he even heard his brother call out his name, and realized in glee he'd been worried for naught. Chrys wanted him, just like he wanted Chrys. They'd be all right.

And then, among all the yeses and mores, Jaden understood one other word. *Aurus*. His brain instantly cleared, the haze of pleasure disappeared, his irrational hopes dashed. Of course. Of course his twin wouldn't have a dream about him. It had all been an illusion.

For the first time in his life, Jaden couldn't look at Chrys. If he stayed in this room, he'd die of heartache.

Carefully slipping out of the small bed, Jaden headed toward the door. After a final glance in his twin's direction, he went out. By now, he knew Chrys could take care of himself and the bandits would not bother him. At this point, they'd been separated many times because of their individual expeditions into the Atlantean capital. But where to go? Where could he possibly find refuge when nothing went as he wanted it to? His heart hurt, and he couldn't figure out any solution out of this inescapable situation.

The call from the distance returned and Jaden threw an angry glare toward the Forbidden Zone. Someone or something wanted him to go there. Very well. He'd go, and



if the beast ate him, so be it.

Not allowing himself to change his mind, Jaden swam toward the dangerous abyss. He idly noted that the closer he got, the more barren the entire area seemed. In the end, there were no fish or vegetation left, only rock and sand. The darkness, though, seemed to have a life of its own, and Jaden shuddered, already regretting his decision.

He looked back, hesitating. Now that he'd left the bandits' lair, he could think with a clear head and realized he'd been very foolish. If something happened to him, Chrys would be very sad. Worse, the bandits might accept them now, but they could very easily change their minds. Chrys could be hurt if Jaden left him on his own, and Jaden wanted to avoid that at all cost.

And yet, even full of doubt, Jaden found himself swimming farther, closing in on the proverbial area of no-return. He stopped when the rock beneath him broke off and a deep chasm cut in the very bowels of the ocean floor.

His mad courage deserted him and Jaden didn't dare to go exploring farther. He probably wouldn't be able to, anyway. The pressure would get more powerful as he descended and, even for mermen, that could be deadly.

Instead of taking such a foolish risk, he sat down at the edge of the ravine. "So, what now?" he shouted. His voice echoed against the rock below, disappearing into the

void. "What do you want?"

He didn't receive a reply, yet for some reason he felt a satisfied, unseen presence. Frustrated beyond belief, Jaden lay down and absently stared upward. It was so dark down here that even he, with his mermen eyesight, couldn't see very well. For some reason it comforted him. It made him forget how dirty he was inside, so dirty that all the waters of the ocean couldn't cleanse him.

"You know," he absently started to speak. "I'm in love with my twin. Yes, my twin brother. Crazy, isn't it? You can come out and eat me now, I deserve it."

Again, silence was his only answer. Jaden would have been frustrated but he sensed the creature still lingered there, in the waters beneath. He decided he didn't particularly like the thought of facing a monster anyhow, but if it wanted to hear him rant and rave, Jaden could give him that.

"It's been like that for as long as I can remember. I mean, at first, it was normal sibling love." He paused, wondering how much a creature would understand, before realizing the entire thing was absurd and stupid. The beast might be listening to Jaden's voice in preparation of attacking him. Strangely calm at the thought, Jaden didn't try to flee. Instead, he continued, "Well, I'm not sure you know, but with us, feelings toward brothers should be pure,

chaste. I can't think of Chrys as just my twin, though. I want more. It hurts so bad that he can't give me more, and that I have to hide it from him."

Warmth invaded him, as if the presence tried to comfort him. The arousal he'd experienced rubbing against his twin returned with a vengeance. Jaden found himself lightly touching his own scales, imagining Chrys's hand on them.

The dark force seemed to egg him on, pouring sensual energy inside him. With his right hand, Jaden tweaked his nipple. In his mind, Chrys did everything. With the forbidden power there, invading him, it didn't even seem so far-fetched.

Pleasure swept through him as he explored his own body. He saw Chrys on the bed, gasping, rubbing against him. He dreamed his sibling's beautiful lips mouthed his name, "Jaden". Chrys had woken up and touched Jaden while fully aware. And someone else lingered there, too. Aurus, perhaps... and the presence. The presence! Oh, Sweet Sea Mother!

Jaden yelped, suddenly aware of what he'd said and done. What was he doing? Anyone could be down there, and if they found out about his secret they could use it against him and Chrys. How could he act so shamelessly?

"I have to go," he said hastily, his body still buzzing

with unfulfilled arousal.

Nothing and no one tried to stop him as he swam out of the Forbidden Zone. By the time he made his way back to the bandit hideout, he felt a bit calmer. Thankfully, Chrys still slept and Jasper didn't comment upon Jaden's departure. Jaden lay down next to Chrys and closed his eyes. This time, when sleep took him, he dreamt of darkness engulfing him whole.

## CHAPTER THREE

*A few weeks later*

Chrys felt excited. Tonight, they'd finally put their plan into practice. At last, he'd get to see Aurus after so much time spent apart. He burst into their small room, ready to hammer out the final few details with his twin.

The place was empty. Chrys frowned. Where could Jaden have gone, now of all times?

Confused, Chrys swam out into the hallway. He admitted being separated from his twin frightened him. Their circumstances had forced them to spend more time apart, as they'd gone to do their commissioned tasks for Jasper. The possibility existed that the bandit could have sent Jaden out, but Chrys doubted it. He'd noticed Jaden had been disappearing a lot lately, off to Sea Mother knew where. It mostly happened at night, when they were supposed to be sleeping. Chrys had tried to follow his twin once, but he'd been stopped by the ever-watchful bandits who kept to the rule religiously. One of them needed to be under supervision at all times.

He wondered if Jasper knew where Jaden could be. After all, the thief leader had a knack of controlling everything within his reach.

Swallowing against the knot in his throat, Chrys went in search of Jasper again. The older mer had only just dismissed him after informing him everything was in place for their little mission. Jasper didn't like to see him, or be in his presence, so searching the bandit leader out could lead to unpleasant consequences.

Jasper remained right where Chrys left him, conversing with his so-called lieutenant. The two thieves spotted Chrys and gave him twin looks of disgruntlement. "What are you doing back?" Jasper asked.

Chrys forced himself to face the other mer calmly. "I just thought you might know where Jaden is."

Jasper had the audacity to chuckle. "Lost him, have you?"

Dialy just rolled his eyes. "He left while you were talking to Jasper."

"Where?" Chrys cried, hating the desperate sound of his voice. "Where did he go?"

"Why haven't you asked him?" Jasper said, his voice tinged with amusement. "You must have noticed he leaves quite regularly."

How could Chrys explain he felt uncomfortable pushing his twin into a confession Jaden did not want to make? If his brother wanted him to know, Jaden would have said so already. But Jasper would laugh at Chrys if he

said that. "I noticed," he answered, "but it's not exactly like I can go with him."

It didn't answer the question directly, but thankfully, Jasper didn't prod. Alas, the answer he gave Chrys couldn't be more horrid. "He went to the Forbidden Zone," he told Chrys. "We have men watching him but, so far, he seems to just go in, stay inside for an hour or so, then leave again."

Chrys gaped. No wonder his twin hadn't told him about it. "But it's dangerous! He could get killed down there."

Jasper shrugged. "I don't care." Chrys wanted to protest, to kick and scream, but Jasper stopped him with a dark glare. "Just this once, we'll go after him. He would probably return on his own, anyway, but we can't risk a delay."

Chrys nodded and sent a mental prayer to the Sea Mother to protect his twin. What could Jaden be doing there? Why would he go to the Forbidden Zone when all their lives, they'd been told what a peril it represented? Chrys couldn't understand, and the idea Jaden could have died without Chrys even being there made him cold inside.

\* \* \* \*

Jaden sat on the edge of the ravine, absently staring

into the darkness. In the abyss beyond, lay the Forbidden Zone.

As apprehensive as he felt about it, he found the solitude strangely comforting. With the weight of the soon-to-come masquerade ball bearing down on him, Jaden was choking. He could no longer withstand the watchful eyes of the bandits. Chrys's optimism had become somewhat tiresome, as well. Perhaps it was easier for his twin, since the person he loved would be at that ball, within their reach. But Jaden's heart's desire would be forever forbidden. Jaden couldn't even risk revealing his feelings, lest he be parted from Chrys.

And yet, even with everything that had happened, Jaden found a weird calm in this Forbidden Zone. The lingering presence within seemed to watch him still, but Jaden never once felt any hostility come from it. He didn't know how he even realized it, for no beast had ever shown itself. But Jaden did indeed sense it deep inside.

Since that first night, Jaden had continued to come here, every time leaving one more piece of him behind. Before long, he'd spilled all of his secrets into the darkness, to whoever may be listening. A rash, foolish action, it soothed some of his pain.

"The party is today," he said out loud. "Chrys is going to meet with the prince. And I'll be left out of it, as



always." Jaden sighed. "Am I selfish for feeling like this? I don't know what to do."

Unsurprisingly, he received no reply, but inside him a warm wave of affection surged. Whoever watched—the mysterious beast or someone else entirely—cared about Jaden. That made all the difference in the world. Soon enough, Jaden would not have his twin anymore. Chrys's affection would naturally go to Aurus. At least he wouldn't be left all alone.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you so much."

A voice stopped him from saying anything else. "Jaden! Jaden!"

Jaden easily recognized his twin's call. He felt a restlessness he knew couldn't be his own. The bandits must've followed him when he came here, but didn't dare go after him when he entered the Zone. Perhaps it would be best if Chrys remained outside also. He didn't want to risk making the beast angry.

He sighed and directed a regretful glance toward the darkness beneath. "Sorry," he whispered, not even sure why he apologized. "So sorry."

With that, Jaden swam off toward his twin. He met Chrys halfway and realized that, indeed, his brother had joined him in the dark waters. The bandits had not come after them, though. Perhaps they'd felt the beast's silent

warning.

Chrys's arms wrapped around his neck and squeezed him tightly. "You fool," he whispered. "How can you risk your life like this?"

"I'm perfectly safe," Jaden replied, although in truth, he couldn't be one hundred percent sure of it. "There's nothing here that can hurt me."

Chrys broke the embrace and scowled. "What about the mysterious creature? Even Jasper and the others are frightened."

Jaden offered his twin a smile. "I'm not them, and neither are you. It doesn't want to hurt us. Can't you feel it?"

At first, Chrys looked puzzled, but then, his eyes widened in astonishment. "You're right," he said. "How come I didn't sense it before?"

Jaden shrugged but didn't answer. He suspected Chrys had been too preoccupied with thoughts of Aurus to be receptive to the call coming from the darkness.

"Well, anyway," Chrys continued, "we have to go. We'll return here later, okay?"

Jaden nodded, a small surge of excitement swelling inside him. He didn't know what would happen today, but it might very well change his life.

\* \* \* \*

Deep within the cave, the beast stirred, discontented. Its prey had once again escaped. The beast had been waiting for the little mer to trustingly enter its lair. Then he would be captured and... no one would ever see or touch him again. The beast would make sure of that.

For the moment, it would wait for the mer's return. It had no doubt this would, indeed, happen. Atlanteans were nothing if not resourceful, and this youth, while naïve, knew his way around the sea. Fortunately, that wouldn't help him when he finally succumbed to the beast's pull.

\* \* \* \*

"All right. You can go inside the palace through the left servants' entrance. I've bribed some guards to let you in. Don't take your mask off, no matter what happens. Remember, after you get in, you're on your own."

Chrys nodded as he took in Jasper's instructions. To Chrys's surprise, the thief had agreed to help them out with no reluctance. In fact, he seemed quite excited about the idea of unleashing Chrys's curse on an unsuspecting mer soldier. Chrys didn't know if he appreciated the thought, but at least it got them Jasper's cooperation.

Jaden fidgeted, his scales changing color in his nervousness. He would be joining Chrys inside the palace. Guilt twisted inside Chrys once more. He shouldn't be dragging Jaden into this. They risked a lot, more so since Jasper refused to stay behind to ensure they actually had a way out. Chrys counted on getting to Aurus and perhaps enlisting his love's help. But what if he couldn't get to Aurus? What if Aurus had found someone else and forgotten about Chrys and Jaden?

Chrys took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. They couldn't back out now, with everything set and ready. All the arrangements had been made. If push came to shove, they could always summon a whale. He snorted at his own thoughts, drawing Jaden's attention to him.

"I'm glad you think this is funny," his sibling said. "We'll be caught. I just know it."

Chrys gave his brother a smile he didn't feel. "We won't. Have faith. The Sea Mother is by our side."

Jaden ceased his protests. They proceeded to put on their masks and costumes, graciously provided by Jasper in exchange for a generous amount of coin. Chrys admitted that, if nothing else, their stay in the slums had taught them the vital skill of thievery.

Distantly, Chrys wondered why the bandits had been so accommodating about the masquerade in the first

place. They'd never let him and Jaden go anywhere together, and now they'd suddenly changed their minds. Chrys had a very bad feeling. Once they left the ball, they couldn't return to the thieves. Even Jasper couldn't keep the others' hostility at bay forever. His cohorts must have gotten tired of Chrys and Jaden's presence and intended to get rid of them.

They left the room and silently headed outside to where the band of thieves waited. The hideout seemed to have completely emptied. Chrys frowned. Obviously, Jasper wanted to help Chrys and Jaden into the ball so he could use them to get his men inside the palace. How many Atlantean nobles would lose their valuables today?

Chrys felt guilty about helping the bandits, but at this point, he'd become an outlaw himself. He counted his blessings that he was alive, and made a mental note to find some other refuge after the party.

Silence reigned as they left the thieves' hideout and infiltrated the city. It was easy enough to enter Atlantis, but the palace would be a different matter entirely. Guards surrounded every section of the citadel, vigilantly supervising the long trail of carriages. Sea creatures of all sorts pulled the coaches, braving the line of guards. Chrys swallowed against the knot in his throat at the sight, and his heart clenched. So many people seemed to be lining up for

the prince's attention. What chance did Chrys have to get to him?

Strangely enough, Jaden encouraged him. With a swish of Jaden's tail, a ripple of water swirled to Chrys, hitting him hard. "Don't look so down, now," Jaden said. "We're going to see your boyfriend. Cheer up."

Chrys glared at his twin, but inside, he felt thankful. Jaden's smile did wonders for his mood. He focused on his task and on listening to Jasper's advice. After a thorough explanation of the guards' shift patterns, Chrys took Jaden's hand. He was as prepared as he would ever be.

Jasper made good on his promise. The soldiers didn't blink an eye when Chrys and Jaden passed through the servants' entrance. Following Jasper's directions, they lost themselves in the throng of busy staff. Once inside, it got even easier. The belligerent, uptight soldiers no longer watched them, so Chrys could relax a bit and simply remember.

He'd lived here once. He'd swum through the corridors and played with Jaden out in the corals. Even with all the hatred looming over them, they'd had some good years. Back then, it had been his home. It couldn't have changed that much.

As they advanced through the palace, more and more memories assaulted Chrys, some useful, others just

happy or sad. He found he had no difficulty in finding the right way, or in dodging the guards. Some things couldn't be forgotten, and Chrys had learned his lessons well.

At first, Jasper and Dially stayed with them, asking questions about where the coats and treasures might be. Chrys felt relieved when they finally left. He didn't want to see them ever again.

In the end, the weeks they'd spent stealing turned out to be quite helpful. Even with all the soldiers, they managed to sneak into the party hall unseen. Once inside, they became just two more guests, young men browsing for people to take their virginity. They'd have to pretend they were younger, but Chrys thought they could pull it off. After all, who would even imagine the cursed sons of Lord Malach would dare to come to this party?

Still, as they mingled with the crowd, he couldn't avoid feeling nervous. He scrambled for a neutral topic of conversation, something to take his mind off his fears.

"What do you think we should do after the party?" he finally asked Jaden. Having fucked up once, with his crazy plan of coming close to the citadel, he needed some sort of idea as to where to go next.

Ignoring the question, Jaden smiled at him. "Come on. I'm sure we'll find someone around here that can give us a hand."

Chrys's anxiety turned even more acute. His foolhardy plan could go wrong in so many different ways. Why had he ever thought it would be a good idea? "Do you think so?" he asked his brother. "I'm starting to doubt it, myself."

Jaden shrugged. "There's no reason why we should doubt ourselves now. We're here. Let's have fun and find our tutors. With luck, we won't ever see you-know-who again."

Chrys sighed. He understood what his twin meant. Chrys didn't hate the thief leader, but the mere memory of Jasper's touch made his skin crawl. He didn't doubt Jaden felt the same about the bandit lieutenant.

Before Chrys could say anything else, Jaden nudged him with his hip. "Look," Jaden said. "There."

Chrys followed his twin's gaze and his breath caught at the sight that met his eyes. Aurus wore a beautiful black and gold vest adorned with threads of priceless gems. A warrior's belt encircled his waist, covering the upper end of his tail. Aurus's golden scales shone in the light of the chandelier, drawing all gazes. He looked amazing.

Aurus's mother, Queen Agate, presented someone to him, a pretty mermaid with a pinkish tail. A handsome, red-tailed mer joined her, openly flirting with Aurus. Chrys felt humbled and disillusioned. He didn't have a chance.



It might be better this way. Chrys didn't want to believe it, but all the other mer could be right about him and Jaden being cursed. The last thing he wanted would be to accidentally draw his misfortune onto Aurus.

Besides, as a crown prince, Aurus would be expected to sire heirs. Technically speaking, male mer could also bear children, but Chrys wouldn't be seen as a very appropriate parent for a future king or queen. This was hopeless.

Fate seemed to enjoy playing with Chrys. For a brief moment, Aurus turned toward him and their eyes met. Chrys stared into those familiar golden eyes, entranced. His heart pounded and he went back to when he'd been a young boy, in love with the unattainable prince.

Queen Agate drew Aurus's attention to the mermaid and the moment broke. Aurus looked away from Chrys, and just like that, Chrys made his decision. He had to leave, before he did anything stupid—well, more stupid.

"We should go," he told Jaden. "There's nothing for us here."

"Go?" Jaden repeated. "But Chrys..."

Chrys gave his twin a pleading look. He really didn't want to get into a debate now. He knew it would mess things up. Nothing he'd done or decided made any sense. At least, he'd gotten to see Aurus. Chrys had a

feeling it would be the last time that would happen.

"All right," Jaden murmured. "We'll leave, if that's what you want."

"It is."

They turned and headed back the way they'd come. His heart heavy with loss, Chrys forced himself to act normal and continue on his way. He wouldn't look behind. He'd lost Aurus all those years ago. Then again, maybe he'd never had him in the first place.

A heavy hand landed on Chrys's shoulder, freezing him in his tracks. "Hold it right there. Where do you think you're going?"

\* \* \* \*

Aurus couldn't believe his eyes. After all this time, he stood in front of his lost love, Chrys. Of course, *in front* was rather incorrectly putting it. He faced Chrys's back, with Chrys trying to get away. Chrys turned toward him, and Aurus almost recoiled as he met his love's eyes once more. There was fear, disquiet, and despair in those blue orbs, an array of emotions that struck Aurus hard.

By Chrys's side, Jaden looked just as frightened. Aurus knew he needed to get both twins away from the ball. It was only a matter of time until someone discovered them. What had Chrys been thinking?

"Come," he said brusquely. "This way."

He pulled Chrys along through the crowd, knowing Jaden would follow. They reached the large arched doors that led into the gardens. People spilled over the balcony and into the corals, but Aurus knew he could find private areas among the less frequented spots. He led Chrys and Jaden away from the palace, carefully avoiding anyone who would try to engage him in conversation.

They lost themselves in the maze of corals and escaped the hustle and bustle of the party. Aurus stopped his rushed race and turned toward Chrys. In one swift motion, he snatched Chrys's mask away. "What do you think you're doing? Do you have any idea how many people are out there, looking for you?"

Chrys bit his lip in a gesture so painfully familiar it hurt Aurus deep inside. "I just... I wanted to see you." He shook his head and looked away. "No, that's not true. I wanted you to teach me, to help me..."

An unwilling pang of arousal shot through Aurus, but he ruthlessly squashed it. "Why were you leaving then?"

"It's wrong," Chrys cried. "It's unfair of me to risk your life, your powers like this."

Jaden let out a choked sound of disbelief, making his twin turn toward him. "I'm sorry, Jaden. I know we always said we'd never give up, that we'd find a way. But

not even Jasper would touch me. Perhaps they've all been correct."

After a few long seconds, Jaden sighed. "We should leave. There's no point in taking useless chances."

"Wait, back up," Aurus replied. "You're not going anywhere. And who's Jasper?"

Chrys shrugged. "Just this guy who helped us sneak into the palace. Aurus... you're a prince. I'm a pariah, an outlaw now, too. It was a dream, nothing more."

Chrys's low, resigned answer did nothing to cool Aurus's temper. "I won't accept that," Aurus growled. "I refuse."

Chrys broke away from him and swam to Jaden's side. "Please, Aurus. Let me go. You deserve better than a life haunted by someone like me. I consider myself lucky. We've had some happy moments and I will always remember them." Aurus shook his head and opened his mouth to speak but Chrys didn't give him the chance. "I came here tonight hoping to seduce you, to make you mine. I realize now how selfish, how stupid it was of me. I'm so sorry, Aurus."

"You do realize that nothing you say will convince me to let you go, right?" Aurus replied.

Chrys's eyes went wide. "Aurus..."

"No. No more words. I've heard enough." He cut the

distance between him and Chrys, gripping the younger mer's shoulder as they faced each other. "I've known you were meant for me since before we even came of age. I'm not letting you deny that."

Chrys gaped, as if he wanted to protest. Aurus pressed his mouth to Chrys's in a possessive kiss. Chrys tried to struggle, but Aurus held him trapped, and soon, Chrys melted against him.

When the kiss broke, Aurus felt Jaden's gaze on them. In a weird way, it didn't make him feel uncomfortable. As he looked up, Jaden gave him a cheeky smile. "I'll stand guard."

Something indecipherable swept through Aurus upon meeting Jaden's green eyes. He didn't have time to dwell on it, though. Shaking his head, he said, "Either way, it's not safe to stay here. Anyone could come by and see us."

"But where can we go?" Jaden asked.

"Where have you been hiding all this time? I know you left your father's mansion months ago."

Chrys frowned at Aurus. "We can't go there. It's even less secure than the palace." Aurus didn't like the sound of that, and made a mental note to inquire more into this precarious shelter, and the infamous Jasper.

"Let's take each step one at a time," Jaden

suggested. "First, we need to get out safely, and then we can worry about the rest."

Aurus admitted he couldn't see any other solution, either. Usually, he didn't act with such rashness but they didn't have much choice. His father would be coming to look for him any moment now, and him seeing Chrys and Jaden here would be nothing short of disastrous.

Thankfully, Aurus had learned a thing or two while he'd been away at training, including new stealth techniques. In spite of the heavy guard, he managed to lead the two young mer out of the castle and into the streets of Atlantis unseen. He procured cloaks to shield them from onlookers and they left the beautiful homes of the nobles behind.

Out of other options, Aurus decided to choose an inn for their temporary hideout, naturally, in one of the poorer sectors of Atlantis. He knew of one in particular that fit the bill. Once a respectable establishment, the inn in question now catered to a seedy clientele. Occasionally, nobles did show up, when looking for an illicit little romp. For them, the brothel provided specific quarters and services. Aurus himself had gone there when he'd been younger. The best thing about the place had to be the secrecy it provided. Aurus hoped it would help, if only for a few hours until they could come up with a plan.

This time, he had no intention of losing Chrys or Jaden. Both men belonged by his side, even if Chrys would be his lover. He didn't dwell too much on what would happen should Jaden want anything different.

\* \* \* \*

Jaden swam closely behind Aurus as they entered a suspicious-looking building. He felt relieved they'd managed to get out of the palace, but this place seemed just as dangerous. He couldn't understand why Aurus shifted into his legged form just as they entered the establishment.

Aurus seemed quite adept in this magic and had no trouble with the spell. One minute he was swimming alongside them, golden tail occasionally touching Chrys's, the next he was walking on two legs, a pair of tight, full-length trousers now complementing the golden vest from the party. Unlike other races, Atlanteans did not wear shoes, but they did share the same propensity for fashion. Aurus's choice of clothing seemed elegant and noble, just like the man himself.

Jaden thanked the Sea Mother for Aurus's foresight in stealing the cloaks from the castle. Otherwise, no one would have mistaken Aurus for any other noble. Even if Aurus didn't flaunt it, everything about him screamed

prince. As it were, the coats at least hid his rich garments and the weaponry engraved with the symbol of the royal house.

But Jaden forgot all about that the moment they actually got inside. The atmosphere hit him like a physical blow. An amalgam of mer, both male and female, drank, laughed, and flirted openly, some even bestowing lascivious caresses on others. A portion of those present were in their shifted form, like Aurus, whereas the rest remained in their Atlantean one. Jaden sensed an unspoken code in that distinction and he didn't like it at all. Even the water smelled differently, and it reminded him far too much of the moment he'd almost been raped by Dially. But they couldn't leave, not if they wanted to stay together.

A pretty mermaid swam toward them, greeting them with a smile. "Welcome. Can I get you anything? A room, perhaps?"

"Yes, thank you," Aurus replied. "A room will do nicely. Make it a suite if you have one available."

A suite? There were suites in this place? Gods, where had Aurus brought them? The answer soon presented itself clearly enough. A brothel.

Jaden fought to keep his anger and—he admitted—apprehension in check. It wouldn't do to look afraid in a place like this. In spite of everything, Jaden suspected



everyone came of their own free will, and looking fearful would draw unnecessary attention upon them.

Besides, his duty seemed simple enough. If Jaden guessed right, the segregation inside the brothel held a very simple explanation. The shifted ones were the patrons, while the mer in Atlantean form were service providers. It made sense they wouldn't want to give up the goods without being paid.

He hated even having to face this but, by this point, he'd seen the uglier parts of Atlantis. He'd carefully avoided this sort of place while on his missions to get money for the bandits, but no one could ignore it altogether.

Truth be told, Jaden knew he shouldn't even feel this way. In general, his people were quite open and unashamed about sexuality. However, Jaden and Chrys had yet to experience their first shift, and being in an atmosphere that oozed sensuality made him feel both frustrated and scared.

Other than making a positive comment on "the quality of the gentleman's company", the mermaid didn't pay any attention to Chrys and Jaden. She led them through a winding hallway to a door that lay hidden from the main room. The mermaid opened it and they followed behind her, ascending a peculiarly lavish staircase.

They reached yet another corridor, this one

decorated as beautifully as the ones in the palace had been. Ornate doors marked the entrances to the rooms, carved with the symbol of their goddess. The stone moved aside, allowing them to pass, and Jaden marveled at the sight before him. Not even at their father's estate had he seen such luxury.

Something about it made Jaden uncomfortable. As much as he trusted Aurus, he didn't know what the other mer planned. More and more, he felt like an intruder, stealing from his twin and Aurus's private time.

As the mermaid left, the door closed behind her, leaving Jaden to look around in dismayed frustration. He figured out the suite had two rooms with a bathroom in between and instantly understood. Yet again, he'd have to accept watching from the sidelines and faking happiness for the sake of his sibling.

"I'm going to go next door," he said, carefully masking the hurt in his voice. "Let me know when it's time to go."

"Jaden..." Chrys tried. He looked conflicted, his gaze continuously moving from Aurus to Jaden. "Maybe we should talk."

Jaden just smiled. He refused to spoil this moment for his sibling. He knew how much Chrys loved Aurus and the other way around. The two were made for each other,

and Jaden wouldn't stand in their way. "Later."

With a little wave, he left the room and rapidly swam through the bathing chamber into his own quarters. The large bed in the middle was, like most Atlantean resting spots, a huge shell with soft coral pillows. Jaden sat down, feeling awkward and alone in the huge shell. Would this be his life from now on? If so, Jaden didn't know if he wanted to live it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Chrys helplessly watched his twin shoot out of the room as if a kraken chased him. "We shouldn't let him go like that," he told Aurus.

Aurus sighed. "I know. I hate doing this to him. If you have any suggestions, I'm open to a change in plans."

Chrys wished he did indeed have an idea, but nothing occurred to him. His biggest fear had come to pass. Being with Aurus again would tear him away from Jaden.

Why did it have to be like that? Chrys's affection for his twin should be different from his love for Aurus. Why did he have such conflicting emotions? After all, brotherly love didn't have anything to do with lust and passion. Or did it?

The thoughts led his mind on a dangerous trail. He imagined his sibling finding a lover, perhaps in this very establishment, and it disturbed him greatly. Sure, Jaden deserved love, but... but what? Sweet Sea Mother, he hated this complicated situation.

He didn't understand anything anymore. How could he be so selfish and want to keep his twin all to himself? More importantly, why? They'd talked about finding tutors for so long. Even in the bandits' den, Chrys had acknowledged the reasons for Jaden's sorrow. In fact, only

now, when faced with the obvious segregation, did he finally realize the extent of what he could lose.

Aurus's warm arms wrapped around him, anchoring him in a world that suddenly didn't make sense. "Shhh... it'll be fine. You'll see. We'll find a way."

Chrys would have protested, but one of Aurus's hands swept down over his back to the upper end of his tail, distracting him. The scales there didn't have the same sensitivity as the ones below, but still... this was Aurus. The slightest touch drove all hesitation out of Chrys.

His mind whirling with confusion and guilt, he let Aurus soothe him and take away the pain. Aurus's skilled touch swept away the ache, leaving behind the arousal and the love. It would be okay. Aurus would make it so.

Their lips met in a kiss that tasted like tears and uncertainty. The water around them turned lava-hot as Aurus coaxed Chrys's lips apart. Their tongues met, and Chrys melted against Aurus as the older mer took possession of his mouth. Chrys clung to his soon to be lover, pulling Aurus closer, aching to be one with the other man.

Chrys's tail rubbed against Aurus's legs, entwining their fins as their souls had long ago done. Their hearts beat as one and the kiss went on and on, branding Chrys inside out. But Chrys wanted more. He needed more. Tearing at

the golden vest, he brutally pushed the material aside with his hands. Chrys moaned, feeling his oversensitized scales burning, yearning to reveal the treasure hidden beneath Aurus's clothing.

"Please," he cried against Aurus's lips. "More."

Aurus gave in to Chrys's plea. Almost instantly, Aurus's hands returned, resuming their shameless mapping of Chrys's scales. Chrys allowed himself to do some exploring of his own. At first hesitant, his fingers trailed down Aurus's shoulder, reveling in the feel of the hard muscle and hot skin under his touch. Aurus's kisses grew more passionate, a feat Chrys wouldn't have believed possible if not for the clear evidence to the contrary. Encouraged, he went farther down, reaching the soft curve of the other man's buttocks. The tight trousers would have to go, Chrys thought, and as soon as possible. Chrys needed to feel flesh, not fabric.

Aurus didn't do what Chrys had in mind. He pushed Chrys down on the bed, and Chrys fell upon the coral pillows, surprised. Aurus gave him a wicked grin and licked his lips. "Not to worry," he whispered. "I know what you need."

He lowered himself over Chrys, slowly pressing kisses down his abdomen until he reached the upper edge of Chrys's tail. Chrys forgot to breathe when Aurus's

tongue came out to tease at the light blue scales. The touch of the older mer's hands had felt heavenly, but this... this felt so much better.

"Aurus," he whimpered. "What...?"

"Hush. Just lie down and enjoy," Aurus said.

Chrys obeyed, clutching at the soft covers to prevent himself from moving. Satisfied, Aurus returned to his task. He took it slow, licking each individual scale, driving Chrys wild in the process. By the time Aurus reached the lower end of the tail, Chrys trembled, desperate and wanting. He felt like he would burst, the emotions and sensations too much for his body to contain.

Aurus's finger teased at Chrys's hole, drawing a gasp out of the young mer. A light push and Chrys felt the digit slip inside, penetrating his opening. He tried to calm down, to let go like Aurus said, but it was easier said than done. He tried to prevent it, but a brief flashback of Jasper's attack flashed through his mind.

Chrys tensed and the light intrusion became uncomfortable. Aurus immediately sensed his distress. The digit left Chrys's channel and Aurus moved upward, covering Chrys's body with his own. He took Chrys in his arms once again and met his eyes, his golden gaze shining with strength and decision. "What is it? What's the matter?"

Ashamed of his own hesitation, Chrys didn't want

Aurus to know about the unfortunate episode. After all, nothing had come of it. By rights, Chrys probably made a big deal out of nothing. "I'm fine," he replied. "You just startled me, that's all." Too bad he couldn't shake the creepy feeling.

A frown creased Aurus's beautiful features. "Don't lie. Don't ever lie. Whatever happened, you know you can trust me."

"I do... it's just not important."

"It obviously is if you're hiding it from me," Aurus replied. The gentle but stern tone made Chrys fidget and feel uncertain. He trusted Aurus, but he didn't know how the older mer would react when he found out what had happened. A small trickle of doubt lingered somewhere deep within him. Powerless, cursed with the mysterious inability to use his element, Chrys would go insane if Aurus rejected him because of Jasper.

"Chrys?" Aurus kept his voice low and soft. "It's okay. You don't have to tell me. Let's just rest here for a while, all right?"

Chrys gave him a silent nod, feeling awful about the entire thing. He'd obviously broken the mood and made Aurus uncomfortable through his distrust.

Perhaps it was fitting he wouldn't be able to consummate his bond with Aurus tonight. After all, he'd



been uncomfortable with the idea before, and not because of Jasper. His concern for Jaden returned full force and he broke from Aurus's embrace.

"I'm going to check on Jaden," he said.

Chrys left the bed and swam to the adjoining bathroom. He knocked at his twin's door, hoping his coddling wouldn't bother Jaden too much. Jaden might be younger, but he hated being reminded of it. The moments when Jaden truly showed his fragility, though few and far between, made Chrys even more protective.

"Jaden? Brother?"

No response came from the other side. Chrys knocked a little louder, wondering if maybe his twin had fallen asleep or the door somehow muffled the sound of his voice. It wouldn't be uncommon, since Atlantean doors were made out of stone and moved through complex mechanisms.

But Chrys suspected Jaden's silence had nothing to do with any particularity of Atlantean industry. Unable to keep his fear in check, he entered the room only to find it empty.

His brother had disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

Aurus entered the quarters temporarily housing Jaden to find Chrys frozen in his tracks, staring at the

empty room. What in the Sea Mother's name had happened?

"Chrys? Chrys?"

The young mer didn't answer. Other than the slight twitch of his tail, Chrys seemed completely still. Aurus gripped Chrys's shoulder and made a futile attempt to get the young mer's attention.

Aurus forced himself to think calmly. There had to be a reasonable explanation behind this. If anyone had come to take Jaden, they would have had to get past Aurus and Chrys. Most likely, the youth, embarrassed about the entire situation, had run off on his own, a very unwise course of action given the circumstances. Still, Chrys would know where Jaden might have gone, if anyone did. Therefore, Aurus needed to get Chrys out of his trance.

He turned Chrys toward him and squeezed his lover's arm harder than he would have liked. "Chrys, snap out of it. I need you to tell me where Jaden might have gone."

For a few seconds, Chrys blankly stared at him. Then he blinked, his eyes clearing up, no longer seeming so dazed. Instead, a crushed look of despair crossed his face and Aurus's heart clenched when big, fat blue tears flowed down Chrys's cheeks. The water around them swept the drops away as they fell.

"He left," Chrys murmured. "I just knew it. I knew this would happen."

Aurus had no idea what his lover meant. "Did you have a fight?" he asked softly. "Come on, Chrys, work with me. We have to find him." Every second that passed increased the danger for Jaden. For the first time, Aurus realized how much he truly cared about the younger twin.

Chrys pushed Aurus away and shook his head. For a moment, Aurus thought Chrys didn't know anything about Jaden's location. To his surprise, Chrys headed toward the door, "I know where he is," he said. His voice sounded strangely calm now, but also aloof, almost distant.

Aurus opened his mouth to ask, but Chrys didn't give him the chance. He rushed out of the room before Aurus could say anything. Cursing to himself, Aurus followed. He didn't dare risk losing both twins.

He caught up with Chrys easily enough but the mermaid hostess intercepted them. Even if they'd hardly used the suite, they still needed to pay for it. Aurus didn't argue, paying the woman for the service and her silence. Before they left the establishment, Aurus asked, "The other boy with me? Did you see him since we entered the suite?"

"I did, sir," the mermaid replied courteously. "He left just a few minutes ago."

"Was he alone?"

The woman nodded. "I would've stopped him, but I didn't want to interfere."

"That's all right," Aurus replied. "I'll find him. Thank you."

Aurus followed Chrys out of the brothel. He only hoped Chrys did indeed know where to look for his twin.

\* \* \* \*

Jaden wrapped himself tighter in the cloak, berating himself for his foolishness. He shouldn't have left the brothel, he knew that now. But he'd been so ashamed of himself, so scared he would be discovered and his secret would come out.

He hadn't lasted long in the room on his own. The first gasp that reached his ears crumbled his resolve, and he'd needed to go see with his own eyes what caused it.

He regretted it now. The sight of Aurus making love to Chrys would be forever branded in his mind. He wished he could say he felt disgusted. Instead, envy filled him, not just over Aurus but his sibling as well.

Because Jaden now realized he wanted Aurus, too. As if lusting for his own twin wasn't enough... when had things gone so wrong? Why did he have to desire such sinful things? He couldn't live like this any longer,

especially now, when Aurus had taken Chrys as his lover. It hurt too much.

The thought prompted Jaden to run away, much like a few weeks back. It had seemed like the right thing to do, but now, he realized it had been stupid.

Unfortunately, unlike then, Jaden didn't think he could return. He'd been so lost in his thoughts he'd completely messed up. He couldn't remember where he'd come from and, as he advanced, he dug himself deeper and deeper. If the brothel had been shady, this area of the capital seemed even worse. Jaden felt like he would be attacked by the Sea Mother knew how many bandits at any moment now.

By a miracle, Jaden spotted the dome in the distance. The dome marked the exit out of Atlantis and could be seen only when very close to it. Someone—or something—had guided him this way, taking him to the gate closest to the Forbidden Zone.

He managed to dodge the guards at the city exit easily enough, and breathed a sigh of relief when he was out. The water around Atlantis welcomed him. And besides, Chrys would know where to find him if he went to the Forbidden Zone.

How odd that such a dark place had become a sanctuary for him. He couldn't explain it, but something

wanted him there, needed him, just like he needed love and warmth. He'd stopped questioning it long ago, and felt grateful he had a place to run to when things got bad.

Unfortunately, in his excitement, Jaden forgot one thing. The path toward the Forbidden Zone took him dangerously close to the bandits' hideout. Jasper had told them they were on their own to get out of the city, but that didn't mean they'd been freed.

Jasper came out from behind a large coral, followed by Dially and a number of other mer. Jaden froze in his tracks, fear surging inside him.

"Well? How did it go?" he asked Jaden.

Jaden hesitated, glancing forward nervously. If he tried hard enough, he could still make his escape. "Uhh... okay, I suppose. Chrys left with someone," he replied vaguely.

Jasper arched a brow. "And you came to let us know, I take it."

Jaden nodded as he started to swim toward the group of bandits. He needed to get the moment right. Otherwise, they would catch him, maybe even kill him. He didn't know why he felt this urgency, but he somehow knew his fate would be sealed should he leave with them.

"I see," Jasper said. He reached for Jaden and, at that moment, Jaden shot forward.

He dodged Jasper and Dially, flashing through the water with a speed only despair could give him. At one point, one of the bandits nicked him with a sharp weapon, but Jaden didn't let it discourage him.

"Get him, you fools," Jasper shouted.

Jaden struggled to break free of the trap and more bandits popped up in his way. Finally, he ended up cornered against a large rock, no longer able to swim away. Judging by the dark threat in Jasper's eyes, Jaden figured the price to pay for his stupidity would be high.

It occurred to Jaden that they were still very close to Atlantis. Atlantean soldier patrols still watched these paths. Personally, Jaden would rather take his chances with the guards than wait around to be killed by the bandits.

He opened his mouth and yelled, "Please! Help me! Please."

To his shock, a deafening roar drowned out his shout. It came from the distance and Jaden quickly identified the Forbidden Zone as the source. The water rippled around them and Jaden felt power wash over him like a tidal wave, so intense it made him cry out. And yet, it didn't hurt. Rather, his nerves sang with confused energy. He swore he could feel an almost physical touch caress his skin.

The bandits didn't have the same reaction. They

dropped their weapons, their hands trembling, their complexions going pasty. Some of them lost control of their limbs, others even fainted.

Jaden hated to see anyone in such a poor state, but he now had a chance. No matter what, the beast had given Jaden the opportunity to escape. Jasper, busy emptying the contents of his stomach, didn't even look at him. Jaden didn't hesitate, he took off. He'd wasted enough time with the bandits. Now, he'd finally see who—or what—had helped him get out of his predicament.

\* \* \* \*

Aurus used his considerable expertise to get them out of the city posthaste. In maybe fifteen minutes, they'd left Atlantis and headed toward the Forbidden Zone.

Chrys could feel his sibling's presence straight ahead, guiding him like a beacon. It seemed to shine even brighter than before. Or, maybe Chrys's panic made it so? Chrys didn't know. The thought of Jaden leaving made him want to scream, cry, and die.

He forced himself to focus and think coherently. "There are bandits around here," he told Aurus. "I think maybe we should find an alternative route."

Aurus gave him a thoughtful look. "Well, that's easy



enough. We just go around the corals into the next current. But... Chrys, I'm not sure Jaden knows that path."

A terrible thought passed through Chrys's mind. Jasper would be watching the main road. What if Jaden had been trapped by the bandits? Sweet Sea Mother... he hoped not.

His terror increased tenfold when a loud roar echoed against the rock, sweeping over them with the strength of a thousand leviathans. For a few seconds, darkness encroached on Chrys's vision, and he heard Aurus gasp at his side. But then the feeling of death and dread vanished as if it had never been.

"What just happened?" Aurus asked.

Chrys couldn't say he knew, he'd only experienced a similar feeling once, when he'd followed his sibling into the Forbidden Zone. It hadn't been so powerful or strong then, but it had been there, somewhere at the edge of his consciousness. Jaden had told him the creature hidden in the abyss meant them no harm. If not, what did the sudden outburst mean?

"I'm not sure," he replied. "But we have to go, now."

They didn't have time for detours. Trusting Aurus to protect him if need be, Chrys shot forward, quickly swimming toward the Forbidden Zone. He needn't have

worried about the bandits. A few minutes later he saw them ahead, lying sick or unconscious amidst the corals.

Chrys scanned the area for his twin and decided he had also been spared. He sensed his sibling's direction, Jaden's energy calling out to him. He hoped he'd be able to reach Jaden before they entered the Zone. These past few weeks had been thoroughly confusing. Jasper's presence aside, Chrys had felt odd and apprehensive about the party, even about seeing Aurus. As much as he wanted the older mer, giving up Jaden scared him witless.

Knowing Jaden had been going to the Forbidden Zone without him frightened Chrys even more. What did his twin find there? And why did the beast spare them when it had obviously taken the bandits out?

So many questions, so few answers. Chrys needed to have a talk with Jaden, to understand what was happening to them. He feared he might not get a chance. With every second that passed, Jaden slipped farther away from him.

Behind him, Aurus followed in silence. His love's presence comforted and guarded him, shielding him from anything that might attack them. He thanked the Sea Mother for that, at least. If Aurus had rejected him—Chrys didn't even want to think about it.

Unfortunately, in spite of their haste, they didn't

manage to catch up to Jaden. The pair reached the Forbidden Zone without seeing any sign of the other mer. And yet, Chrys knew without a doubt Jaden had gone in there.

"Chrys?" Aurus asked. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

No, Chrys didn't know. In fact, he could bet money on the contrary. Whatever lay there, waiting in the shadows, wasn't very friendly. But he couldn't leave his twin all alone, especially not in these circumstances.

"We don't have a choice."

Aurus let out a sigh and pulled Chrys back. "You're right. At least stay behind me. I'll protect you."

Chrys didn't protest. A part of him wanted to send Aurus back, to keep him safe from the beast. But he needed the older mer and doubted he could make Aurus leave.

They entered the darkness and Chrys focused on trying to find his twin. "Jaden," he called out. "Jaden, are you here?"

\* \* \* \*

As he swam through the Forbidden Zone, Jaden found himself gripped by a peculiar feeling. Many times, he'd acknowledged the danger of his incursions. But the

silence that always greeted him upon his arrival had been both a disappointment and a relief. Scared to see what actually lay in the abyss, he wondered what kind of creature had the power to do so much damage through one simple roar.

Even as he acknowledged this, though, Jaden knew he couldn't turn back. The pull was far too powerful. The only thing he could compare it to would be the confusing emotions he felt for Chrys and Aurus. If this thing could heal him of that sinful love, Jaden would gladly give himself to it.

A distant call reached out to him. "Jaden! Jaden are you here?"

Two voices called him, so familiar it was nearly painful. Jaden hesitated, no longer certain of what he intended. After all, he'd stood by Chrys's side all these years without faltering. He'd known his desires could never come true. He didn't have to give up. They were twins, and that still meant something. Even if the older mer, Aurus, didn't love him, he cared about Jaden as an older brother would. Jaden would be satisfied with any scrap of affection the two could throw his way.

A threatening rumble sounded somewhere behind him, low and animalistic. Jaden immediately realized it was too late. He turned and his blood froze in his veins at the

sight that greeted him. Two orbs were shining in the gloom, their silver-black glow sending eerie ripples through the darkness. Jaden tasted terror in his mouth when he met the gaze of the beast. Sweet Sea Mother, those eyes alone seemed as large as Jaden's head. The darkness was too deep to see much of anything, as if the shadows came from the creature itself. It made sense given that, at this depth, mermen should have been able to see with ease. What kind of beast could have this sort of power?

The thing made no motion to reveal itself to Jaden, just waited there, those eerie eyes keeping Jaden frozen in place.

The sound of a familiar voice reached his ears once again. "Jaden!" Aurus said. "Answer me. Come on."

It was closer now, and Jaden knew that in a few minutes his twin and Aurus would be there. The beast hadn't eaten him yet, but that didn't give him any guarantees as to what would happen later. The last thing Jaden wanted was for the most important people in his life to die because of his foolishness.

The creature's intense gaze left Jaden and turned in the direction of the voice. The low, feral rumble warned Jaden he needed to do something, fast. "No! Please, no!" he cried.

The beast hesitated at Jaden's protest. However, the

plea had an unexpected side-effect. It brought Aurus and Chrys to their position even faster. Jaden couldn't see much of anything, but he practically felt them there.

"Jaden!" his twin gasped. "What's the matter?"

A burst of golden magic illuminated the area, sending rays of light through the water. Some of the shattered rock beneath them turned to sheer gold. Not that this mattered. Aurus's spell revealed what waited in the abyss. Not knowing what the abyss held had been terrifying, but realizing it suddenly became worse.

Jaden faced the reptilian face of a great, black dragon. Aurus's magic shed limited light on the area, so only the head became visible. From his standpoint, though, Jaden could see its body went deep into the wide chasm beneath.

The beast was both terrible and beautiful. Its black scales glittered in the pale light and its powerful eyes held some sort of magic inside them.

Aurus spoke first, the only one who had the ability. "Jaden, come here. Slowly."

But Jaden couldn't move. His muscles refused to obey him. Not one to be deterred, Aurus prodded once again. "Jaden." Through the corner of his eye, Jaden saw the older mer begin to swim toward him.

The beast opened its terrifying mouth, revealing

sharp fangs. Jaden wanted to tell Aurus to stop but he didn't get the chance.

In one terrible instant, the beast emerged from its hiding spot, a hellishly beautiful apparition that seemed to come from Jaden's very nightmares. In one surprisingly swift motion, it lunged for Aurus and Chrys.

Aurus cursed and created a shield around them, but the gold shattered like glass the instant the creature touched it. The dragon swept Aurus up, then Chrys, analyzing them with its eerie silver-black eyes.

Fury flooded Jaden. He'd come here. He'd awakened this beast. His twin and Aurus didn't have to pay the price. But what could he do? He had no magic and no weapon that could possibly hurt the dragon. All he had at his disposal was rock and sand. Well, that would have to do. In the end, any other weapon, magic included, would have as much effect on the dragon's hide as the rock—none.

He felt a small tinge of distress at the thought of harming the great beast but pushed it away. As if that would ever happen. No, what Jaden needed to do—and could do—would be to provide a distraction for Aurus and Chrys to escape.

Jaden grabbed a couple of rocks from the ground. Taking a deep breath, he propelled himself upward,

swimming as quickly as he could. Once at eye level of the beast, he shouted, "Hey! I thought it was me you wanted. You got the wrong one."

Angrily, he threw the stones straight at the dragon's eyes. Unsurprisingly, they had no effect whatsoever. They did, however, draw the dragon's attention.

The beast's eyes fixed in on Jaden and he froze. He watched in confusion as it dropped Aurus and Chrys. Before he knew it, Jaden found himself trapped in the tight grip of the monster, helpless and fighting a battle he knew he couldn't win.

\* \* \* \*

As he held the struggling merman in his clawed paw, the beast felt something inside of him stir. What a foolish boy, to attack one as powerful and deadly as him. Why? Why risk certain death? Foolish, yet so brave. And so very lonely.

That pain had awoken the dragon, and it had lain there, waiting for the right moment to make its appearance. After so many years of slumber, the mer twins had drawn him out of his lair. Now, the moment had finally come, the moment when the dragon could claim its prize.

The young mer tried to fight but his efforts were useless. A beautiful catch, his prey, even if he lacked power. The beast hadn't seen such beauty since... he



couldn't remember. Why couldn't he remember?

Distant images of the past flashed through the dragon's mind. A different time, when the beast had been more than a beast, when it had also been a man. The wriggling body in his paw reminded him of life itself, of the promise of sensuality. The mer, however, seemed oblivious to all this. Jaden—yes, Jaden was his name—glared at the dragon with beautiful green eyes. More than any magical attack the Atlanteans could come up with, that jade-colored gaze pierced the beast's armor and he recoiled, dropping the merman from his grip.

Taking advantage of his distraction, the small merman slipped away, calling out to the other two, "Hurry. Let's go. I don't know what's wrong with it, but we—"

Before the merman could even finish the phrase, Vaar—he remembered his name now—grabbed Jaden again. Memory swept through him, bringing with it the identity hidden beneath a layer of instinct. In a flash, he knew himself again, the same Vaar who'd gone into slumber so many eons ago.

It didn't matter anymore. He'd found something worth living for and he wouldn't let go. "You're coming with me," he growled at Jaden in dragon tongue.

The boy's eyes widened, confirming that his message had been conveyed. Vaar smiled to himself. He'd

been correct then, about this boy being special. Otherwise, he could have never understood Vaar's words. The other two—Aurus and Chrys, if Vaar had heard correctly—tried to get Vaar's attention, but Vaar had what he wanted. Jaden would soon learn what that meant.

Vaar briefly considered taking young Chrys and the prince, as well. Beautiful in his own right, Chrys possessed the same latent power flowing through his twin's veins. But Vaar well remembered what Jaden had told him about Chrys and young prince Aurus. The best thing he could do at this point would be to separate the two brothers. Jaden needed a new life, apart from the hurtful existence he'd lived at Chrys's side. At the same time, Chrys needed Aurus.

Vaar may have been a beast, but he understood Jaden's loneliness. It called out to Vaar in a way nothing else had in all his long years. Perhaps the young mer fought him now, but soon that would change.

Swimming out of the sand and rocks, Vaar extended his wings. He stretched them a bit to get a feel of their use after so long, completely ignoring Chrys and Aurus. When Aurus threw a magical ball at him, he swept his tail through the sand, showering them with debris.

Jaden gasped and cried out at the sight. "Please... stop! Don't hurt them. Do whatever you want with me, but

don't hurt them."

Vaar swept a claw over Jaden's delicate cheek. "Don't worry, beautiful Jaden. I won't harm them as long as they don't interfere." He waited until Aurus and Chrys swam out of the sand and then rumbled again, "See? They're just fine."

Sweeping the two mermen in his other paw, he placed them out of the way, behind a rocky outcropping next to his former lair. "Tell them to stay there and to shelter themselves in energy. It's not safe to be out in the open when I take flight."

Jaden hesitated, obviously not knowing if he could trust the dragon or not. "My treasure, let me put it to you this way. When I launch myself out of the water, I will cause shockwaves able to shatter the ground. The land is more resistant there and it can block the crush of water. The shield of gems will protect them if there are rock slides. Obey!"

Jaden nodded and told the other two mermen to stay put. Vaar saw Chrys in tears, trying to protest, and he hesitated. Maybe he should take them all, after all.

But then Aurus held Chrys down, and a shield of gold wrapped around them. No longer being able to see the two mer thankfully eliminated the temptation.

Satisfied, Vaar tested his wings once more, and

launch himself from the ocean floor, using his wings and his hind legs to propel himself out of the water. As predicted, the sheer energy of his motions made the earth crack and creatures scatter in terror. In the distance, the city of Atlantis shook, and Vaar's keen hearing even caught a few screams from mermen who were probably close to his position. He kept a tight leash on his power and held Jaden against his chest, shielded by his large paws.

Vaar finally burst out of the water and, for the first time in millennia, saw the sun. A beautiful sight, especially after the darkness at the bottom of the ocean—but it didn't compare to the treasure he'd stolen from the sea.

## CHAPTER FIVE

When the world stopped whirling around him, Jaden concluded he'd finally died. The dragon had eaten him and he was dead. A low rumble and the nudge of a claw snapped him out of his confusion. Jaden cracked one eye open and gasped. The dragon really had flown them up out of the water! They soared in the air, the ocean glittering blue beneath them.

Jaden didn't know where to look first. He'd never seen the sun, not really. The rays made their way through the thick curtain of water, but he'd never been allowed to go to the surface. All mer could breathe on the surface, but only trained soldiers or the Atlantean University students ever went there. The way the sun shone over the waters reminded him of the sparkle of jadeite, so amazing and familiar, yet so foreign. Jaden wanted to touch it, to see it up close.

A thick claw shielded his eyes, blocking his vision. "Don't look at it. Your eyes aren't accustomed to so much light. You'll get used to it in time."

In time? What did the dragon mean by that? How long did he intend to keep Jaden prisoner? For the first time since exiting the water, Jaden realized his predicament. Alone, out of the ocean, in the hands—err... claws—of a

monstrous beast, he had no escape.

Crying out, Jaden struggled in the dragon's hold. He twisted his tail uselessly, frightened when he didn't meet water.

"Shhh," the creature crooned. "It's okay. We'll find ground soon and you can shift there."

Jaden thrashed harder. "I can't shift! I don't know how. Let me go! Let me back into the water!"

For a few seconds, the dragon was pensive. How Jaden knew that, he couldn't understand, but he somehow did.

"You're right," the magnificent beast rumbled. "I forgot. You've never been with anyone."

Panic shifted into anger and Jaden pounded the thick scales of the dragon's chest. "Yes! I've never been with anyone! What do you care? Who are you to question my life?"

The dragon didn't reply, but Jaden sensed the response lingering between them. Who was this creature? What did he want? And how would Jaden ever get out of this mess?

\* \* \* \*

Vaar's powerful wings led them unerringly within

sight of a distant island. Movement in the water and small beings running around on the beach made him halt and hover in the air. *Impossible*. How much time had passed that these lands had been taken over by living beings?

"You can't possibly consider taking us there?" Jaden said.

"When I went into slumber, this place was uninhabited," Vaar answered, disgruntled.

Jaden snorted. "Well, it's not anymore. Everyone knows the Atlantean University is built there."

Vaar sighed. It made sense the world had changed while he slept but he still hated knowing he was ill prepared for taking care of his treasure. "No matter. I'll find a different spot."

He could do it, too. His species had power and magic the likes of which few races could ever compete with. He never made promises he couldn't keep.

Unfortunately, not even dragons could escape the petty rivalries and ambitions that plagued most nations. For this reason, Vaar and others like him had been exiled by the dragon king. Ghaankeloalitoth feared their power and raw wildness and banished them, keeping only those willing to bend to his will. There had been no home and no rest for black dragons, the harbingers of death and destruction.

But no longer. No longer would Vaar be alone and

scorned. Not now that he'd found his treasure. Perhaps he'd be able to start over, to build a new life. Now, he just needed to find them a shelter and build them a nest. In time, perhaps he'd even teach Jaden how to shift. In time...

He considered his options and decided he needed to go much farther to be safe. If this island had become inhabited, its surroundings would most likely be within the damn Atlanteans' control. Then again, the weather in this area was very friendly and it made sense it would attract the populace.

The automatic conclusion was that he needed an area inaccessible enough to scare others off. At the same time, it had to be beautiful and near a body of water in order to make a good nest for them. He wanted his treasure to be comfortable and happy.

With his list in mind, Vaar held Jaden tightly and veered off westwards. The Windswept Sea extended far beyond the territories now held by the Atlantean nation. It surrounded the main continent from three directions, more like a never-ending ocean than a sea. Vaar briefly considered finding shelter on the continent but decided not to risk it. His kind rarely ventured there and he didn't know what races now inhabited the area.

As a dragon, Vaar still knew of several lairs that should have withstood the passage of time. Even if the



idyllic setting on the island had been convenient, his other homes would work out just as well, perhaps even better. After all, the whole purpose was to take his treasure out of Atlantean lands.

"Where are we going?" Jaden asked, still trying to wiggle free of Vaar's grip.

Vaar rumbled in amusement. "I would advise you to be still. Falling from this height is very dangerous." Jaden paled, and Vaar felt disgruntled when he realized his treasure had taken his words as a threat. "Don't worry," he said. "I won't let any harm come to you."

"I don't understand," Jaden replied softly. "What do you want with me? Why did you call me?"

*You will find out soon,* Vaar thought. He didn't give Jaden a reply, though. Instead, he continued flying steadily, careful to protect the young mer from the increasingly cold winds. At last, he felt Jaden fall asleep in his grip. Vaar smiled to himself. He'd build a home for Jaden yet.

\* \* \* \*

Even beneath the shield of gold, Aurus felt the powerful departure of the dragon. His heart fell at the knowledge that the creature had taken Jaden with it. This was his fault. If he'd paid more heed to Jaden's feelings, if

he'd understood how the young mer felt... Aurus had basically pushed Jaden away to sate his selfish lusts within Chrys's body. They paid the price for that now. The beast had taken advantage of Aurus's foolishness to lure Jaden here.

It was too late for regrets, though. Aurus held Chrys tightly against him, hating the pain radiating from his young almost-lover. At first, Chrys tried to break free of his hold, hitting the shield of gold with balled fists. Eventually, he surrendered and collapsed against Aurus. Burying his face in Aurus's hair, he wept, powerful sobs shaking his whole body.

Aurus wanted to soothe his lover, but he couldn't find any words that would make a difference. Instead, he gently caressed Chrys's hair, all the while keeping the barrier up and protecting them from the aftermath of the dragon's flight.

His magic told him when the ripples died out. Aurus focused, pushing the golden sphere they were incased in forward. He heard the rock protest and knew some of the stone and debris around them must have fallen on top of the shield. It wasn't too difficult to break through it, and he soon managed to effectively release them from the trap.

Just in time, too, as a prolonged stay in the golden sphere could have led to a very unfortunate suffocation.

They burst out of their entrapment into a Forbidden Zone that looked worlds apart from the one before. The darkness had all but faded with the departure of the dragon, the main source of the magic that had created the unnatural gloom. Unsurprisingly, the area around them had been completely leveled, as if a powerful wave swept away everything in its path. The rocky outcropping they'd been hiding behind survived, in spite of its being damaged. Aurus suspected the dragon had known this would happen and chose to hide them there on purpose.

Why would the creature do that? It didn't make sense. Why would it want to save their lives when it could have very well destroyed them?

"I don't think the dragon wants to hurt Jaden," Chrys said out of the blue.

"What?" Aurus asked in disbelief. His lover must be in shock. Perhaps the beast had taken Jaden to feed on later. Aurus shuddered at the thought. Chrys's denial couldn't be healthy, but neither would Aurus discourage that hope. "What do you mean?"

"I think I could feel it. In my head, like a presence," Chrys tried to explain. "Do you understand?"

Strangely enough, Aurus did. At one point, he'd felt a darkness inside him, something strange, but at the same time, familiar. Had it been the dragon? If so, why could

they feel it in their minds?

Chrys must have read Aurus's confusion. "It doesn't matter why. We have to go find Jaden."

Aurus nodded. "Can you feel which way they went?"

For a few seconds, Chrys hesitated. "I can," he finally said. "But I have a feeling it won't be so easy."

Aurus understood what Chrys meant. The dragon would be flying at great speed. Even if Aurus and Chrys swam at their fastest, they would still be unable to reach it.

Time was of the essence. The twins had never been apart for an extended period of time, so Aurus couldn't rely on Chrys's directions forever. The innate pull Chrys felt for his brother might not be enough if they didn't hurry.

"First things first," he told Chrys. "We need supplies."

"But we can't go back to Atlantis. They'd catch us."

In truth, Aurus could have snuck back inside the palace, but it would take too long. "Which direction did they take?"

With no hesitation, Chrys pointed west.

"If memory serves," Aurus said, "there are some villages that way before we enter foreign ocean. We can stock up there."

Chrys nodded enthusiastically. "Let's go."

Wrapping their torn cloaks around them, the two mer followed the elusive path of the dragon. Aurus found it necessary to avoid the main trails as the patrols were more frequent than usual. He briefly wondered what had become of the thieves. He'd have liked to give them a lesson they'd never forget. Even if Chrys hadn't explicitly told him, he knew the thieves were the cause of the young mer's reluctance to be intimate. Their punishment would have to wait, though, until Aurus got Jaden back.

As it turned out, the presence of the Atlantean soldiers made Chrys and Aurus's progress slow. They tried to move as quickly as possible but the tense and difficult race against the dragon proved too much for Chrys. He did his best, obviously wanting to reach his twin, but the strain took a toll on him.

Several times, Aurus considered stopping, but decided against it. Chrys would refuse, and feel offended by the suggestion. They continued on their quest for hours on end, until Aurus could no longer take Chrys's tired pants. Knowing they would not be able to reach Jaden that night, Aurus called a halt. "We need some rest," he said, "and food. If we exhaust ourselves, we won't manage to rescue Jaden."

"But Aurus," Chrys protested, "we need to hurry."

"I know, love," Aurus answered. "Above all else,

we have to keep calm and maintain our focus. You're our only guide to Jaden, and if you become too tired, you won't be able to direct us."

"I would feel Jaden even if I was being chewed on by a shark," Chrys snarled angrily.

Aurus mentally sighed, hating himself for his lack of tact. "Don't say such things. Remember, Jaden is relying on us, and I suspect we have a long way ahead of us."

This time, Chrys didn't say anything. He sat down, leaned against a dull rock, and wrapped his arms around his tail.

"I'm going to get us something to eat, okay?" Aurus said.

"How are you going to do that?" Chrys asked, sulking. "We're nowhere near a village."

Aurus let out a low laugh. "I'll do it the old fashioned way. Hunting."

Chrys blinked at him in obvious surprise. "And then what? We'll eat it raw?"

Aurus grimaced at the thought. "Of course not. See if you can't find any plants around here to spice it up. I can cook it with my magic."

Now that he'd been given a task, Chrys seemed to liven up. He left his spot next to the rock and began to scan the area for edible plants.

The bottom of the Windswept Sea abounded in fauna and flora that could be used to create nutriments for the mer. The beautiful corals and anemones aside, there were all sorts of sea flowers and phytoplankton, as well as *janian* fruit. Although rarer, the sweet berries added an extraordinary taste to the main diet of the mer.

Hunting turned out to be a bit of a challenge because Aurus needed to keep an eye out for any predators that could harm Chrys while he worked. Thankfully, Aurus had chosen their so-called camp well. In no time, he managed to catch a couple of fish, enough to last them for a few days' journey if cooked properly. He returned to the tiny cave and saw Chrys sorting through a bunch of sea plants. He'd even found *janian* fruit.

"Excellent," Aurus said. "You're really good at this."

Chrys offered him a small smile. "Jaden and I used to pick things like this to avoid running out of supplies."

Just like that, they fell into strained silence, reminded of why they were there in the first place. But Aurus refused to let pessimism rule him. "Come on," he urged Chrys, "let's cook this."

His slight enthusiasm drew Chrys's interest. Pleased, Aurus summoned his magic and created a golden bowl for the fish. He placed his catch into the bowl along

with a few vines of red lotus. The plant would serve to both spice and preserve the fish, so it'd keep for several days.

Once the ingredients were added, Aurus focused and turned the golden bowl into a tight circle, encasing them inside. Finally, he applied pressure, squeezing and releasing in several steps. The process would make the lotus disintegrate and the fish steam up, cooking the dish.

Chrys watched him in fascination, and Aurus felt a bit proud at his lover's expression. Truly, his skills at cooking weren't all that good, but they were necessary for every soldier who might one day have to live off the sea.

Finally, their meal was complete, nothing fancy, just run-of-the-mill fish sticks. Still, they were warm and the lotus gave them a pleasant, spicy flavor.

In silence, they began to eat. Aurus found himself hungrier than he'd thought at first and he devoured several of the sticks before he finally felt full. When they finished, they tore a bit of material from Aurus's cloak and wrapped up the remaining food.

"Let's get some sleep," Aurus told Chrys. "We'll leave again in a few hours."

Chrys nodded and cuddled by Aurus's side. As they lay together in their little sheltered cave, Aurus kept watch, questions swirling through his mind. *Where are you, Jaden?*



\* \* \* \*

Jaden awoke to the feel of cold water lapping against his skin. He sighed in contentment, loving the way it swept over his scales. The slow whisper of the soft wave acted like a balm for his soul and mind.

Allowing himself to float in the comfort of the welcoming water, Jaden realized he hadn't taken a few moments to simply relax in a long, long time. He couldn't wait to tell his brother and Aurus about this place.

Awareness sparked in his consciousness. Something wasn't right. The water felt too cool and he couldn't tell Chrys and Aurus anything. The two mer had been left behind when the dragon kidnapped Jaden from the sea.

Jaden's eyes shot open and the memories of the past day flooded his mind; the party, the brothel, running away, and meeting the dragon. He'd seen the sun for the first time from above the waters. He recalled the beast flying over the Windswept Sea, talking to Jaden in that peculiar language of the dragons. At some point, Jaden must have fallen asleep or unconscious. Where was he?

He looked around, trying to figure it out. His eyes widened at the sight of his current location, some sort of endless underground cave. A clear river provided the water

to the pool Jaden swam in. The walls of the cavern looked to be sculpted out of priceless gems, mirroring Jaden's with an enchanting shine. Through an opening beyond the end of the pool, Jaden caught sight of a different room, light falling on what looked like a peculiar bed. It was all so foreign, and yet, so beautiful.

"I'm glad you like it," a husky voice said.

Jaden yelped and turned to face the source. A dark-haired man emerged from the shadows, smiling. "I thought you would be uncomfortable waking up someplace else—at least until you shift and I can teach you the benefits of a real bed."

Jaden gasped with dismay and outrage. He flushed at the daring words. "What...? Who in the world are you?"

The man chuckled. "You may call me Vaar. And you know very well who I am."

Jaden had the distinct feeling he did, indeed, know the dark man. Even if he could only see the stranger's face and not the rest of him, it didn't take much to figure out his identity. "The dragon."

"Right on the first attempt, sweet Jaden." The so-called Vaar smirked.

Jaden hated the shudder that swept through him at the sight of that wicked grin. "Where have you taken me?" he asked, proud his voice didn't tremble.

Vaar's smile widened. "Can't you guess?"

"Don't answer a question with a question!" Jaden shot back. By rights, he should be cowering in fright, but for some reason, he didn't fear this man... dragon... whatever he was.

Vaar's expression softened. "My apologies, my treasure. I couldn't help teasing you." He took a few steps forward, revealing the entirety of his body.

Jaden gulped and hastily looked away, not that it helped any. The man's nudity had forever branded itself into his mind. His torso looked like sculpted marble, each muscle perfectly defined with almost painful precision. The coppery disks of Vaar's nipples perked up in the cool, damp atmosphere of the cave, begging for attention. And between the powerful, muscular thighs, a mouthwatering, hard cock pointed accusingly straight at Jaden.

Jaden closed his eyes, willing the image away. If only forgetting could be that easy. He had no luck, not when he could feel the heat of those burning, coal-black eyes searing into his skin.

Jaden submersed, hiding in the sanctuary of the liquid. Even if it didn't feel like the sea, the temperature too low, it still provided him with a measure of safety. He wasn't unfamiliar with the cold. In Atlantis, it had always been much warmer, but not so in deeper waters and next to

the Forbidden Zone.

Furthermore, in the pool, he understood himself, what he wanted and needed. He already had enough difficulty accepting his attraction to Chrys and Aurus without adding the dragon to the mix. Not to mention that he needed to find a way out of here. By now, Chrys would be worried crazy. Jaden only hoped Aurus would stop Chrys from doing anything foolish.

All of a sudden, warm arms pulled him against a strong chest. Taken by surprise, Jaden gasped and tried to pull away. The dragon, however, held him tightly.

"Don't be scared, treasure," Vaar rumbled. "I won't hurt you."

Vaar's rough hands caressed the top scales of Jaden's tail. Arousal shot through him, for once guilt-free. He melted against Vaar, his entire body aching for something he couldn't really understand.

"It's okay," Vaar said. "Hold on to me."

Jaden obeyed. He didn't know why, but he did. He wrapped his arms around the man's neck, feeling more confused than ever. Vaar didn't speak. Instead, he walked toward the edge of the pool, slowly exiting the water.

Jaden panicked when the air hit his tail. He struggled again, yearning for the soothing familiarity of the water.

"Shhh," Vaar whispered in his ear. "Didn't you want to know where you are? I'm merely showing you."

Curiosity replaced panic. "A-All right. But you'll take me back afterwards?"

"Of course," Vaar replied. "The water is there for you, after all."

Vaar carried Jaden out of the pool room and into a hallway. Beyond, Jaden caught a glimpse of another luxurious chamber, but Vaar didn't linger there. He slowly progressed down the hall, holding Jaden tightly to his chest. All the while, Jaden did his best to distract himself from the feel of Vaar's arms around him by admiring the dragon's lair. It was miraculous that such a beautiful place had been created by nature. The walls of the passage occasionally changed from stone to reflective gems, recreating the mirror effect from the pool room. Alas, even the cave seemed to conspire against Jaden as, through that peculiar looking glass, he saw himself, held in the arms of a naked Vaar.

Jaden snapped his eyes shut, not understanding his own behavior. He shouldn't be acting like this, damn it! He should have fought Vaar, cursed him, and tried to break free. Instead, he allowed the dragon to charm him with beautiful, shiny stones.

"You're thinking too hard," Vaar said. "I assure you

I mean you no harm."

"Then why did you bring me here? What do you want with me?"

He half-expected Vaar to remain silent. Instead, the dragon replied, "To be my companion, my mate, my treasure."

Jaden gaped. Surely Vaar couldn't mean what Jaden thought he meant. They'd only met today, at least, face to face. Such a commitment required not only passion, but understanding, acceptance, love.

Vaar knew all the truths in Jaden's heart, all the shameful secrets, all the hidden lusts. Jaden had spent a long time with the dragon, back when Vaar laid hiding in the depths of the ocean, still in beast form. How could Vaar want him when he knew all that? Was Vaar really the dragon or was he someone else entirely? The latter idea terrified Jaden.

Vaar must have felt him tense up. "I know it's a lot to process right now," he said. "We'll talk about it later."

Jaden wanted to protest but Vaar didn't give him the chance. A few seconds later, the dragon stepped out of the cavern and onto a cliff edge. "Look," Vaar said. "This is our home."

It disturbed Jaden to hear Vaar say "our home" so casually, as if Jaden had already accepted it. It also

frightened him, more so because he no longer had the certainty that this was truly his dragon. Jaden couldn't deny a sense of familiarity, but things simply didn't add up.

Vaar cuddled him closer, rubbing his hands up and down Jaden's arms. "Sorry about the chill. It can't be helped when we're so high up."

The phrase and the touch effectively drew Jaden out of his musings. He forgot all about his doubts as he obeyed Vaar and looked. A gasp escaped him when he took in the incredible, daunting beauty of the view. The dragon's lair seemed to rest at the very top of the highest mountain in the world. Cloud formations floated around the cliffs, creating silvery, hypnotizing shapes. Beneath them, Jaden spotted a green, lush land, and beyond, the blue sparkling of the ocean.

"Is that the Windswept Sea?" he asked breathlessly.

He felt Vaar nod. "It is. These lands have belonged to my kind for many centuries."

"You mean there are other dragons around here?" Jaden scanned the neighboring cliffs curiously, but couldn't see any sign of inhabitants.

"No. There aren't," Vaar replied with a sigh. "Let's go back in. It's too cold."

Vaar remained silent as they passed through the hallway and Jaden had the disquieting feeling he'd asked

something he shouldn't have. When they finally reached the pool, Vaar deposited Jaden in the water and turned to leave.

"Wait," Jaden said, reaching out to the dragon. "I'm sorry if I offended you. This is truly a beautiful place."

Vaar gave him an inscrutable look, and then, to Jaden's relief, smiled. "You didn't offend me, my treasure. Just reminded me of something unpleasant."

"Something unpleasant?" Jaden repeated, confused.

"Don't worry about it," Vaar said. "I'll bring you something to eat. You must be starving."

Jaden wanted to pry further but he realized he was, indeed, very hungry. He nodded at the dragon and, with another small smile, Vaar disappeared into the hallway.

\* \* \* \*

Vaar cursed to himself as he left Jaden's pool room. He hated showing weakness and vulnerability, least of all to his treasure. He'd vowed to protect Jaden and the young mer didn't need to be burdened with Vaar's stupidity.

And yet, he couldn't help his melancholy. Jaden's words had stirred an old wound inside him, a hurt that had never really healed. As much as he hated to admit it, he'd never gotten over his exile or the reason for it.

How could he? He was still the same black dragon, the same creature that killed any living thing with a touch. Even the day before, when he'd flown over the forests of



Dragon's Ridge, he'd seen trees die as he passed by.

He'd spent the past day focusing on getting his powers under control, and he felt satisfied he'd managed to achieve his goal. But no matter what happened, no matter how many barriers he put up, the darkness would slip out eventually.

He couldn't understand why the three mer had been immune. Everything else died at one touch of a black dragon's magic. His hibernation had effectively polluted that section of the Windswept Sea with the deadliest of poisons. When he'd gone into slumber and lost his grip on his magic, wildlife had died, plants withered, even the very ground had shriveled in the aftermath.

Eventually, he'd have to explain it to Jaden. The young mer wasn't afraid of him at the moment, but what would he think once he found out?

Frustrated and angry, Vaar went to the part of the cavern that served as his sleeping area. He had hundreds of furs gathered there to serve as a warm, comfortable bed. Vaar rarely used it. When he slept, he preferred to shift into his dragon form. That could be a problem in the future. Of course, Jaden might refuse Vaar's touch altogether, in which case all of his careful preparations would be for naught. For decades, before his hibernation, he'd prepared for this moment, stocking each of his lairs with comfortable

beds, washing areas, and beautiful ornaments. Jaden would want for nothing.

Finally reaching the cooking area, Vaar scanned through the crevices that served as storage and identified the fish he'd prepared the day before for Jaden's dinner. He'd gathered some other meats and fruit to add to the sea food. Perhaps Jaden would appreciate the variety.

With exquisite care, he readied a tray for his treasure. In the end, what did the rest of the dragons matter? Vaar had Jaden now, and the young mer would certainly understand the situation. Wouldn't he?

Feeling a bit better, Vaar took the tray and left the room. He found Jaden in the exact same spot he'd left him, still staring at the doorway.

"Is everything all right, sweet Jaden?" Vaar asked.

Jaden blinked at him. "Yes... I'm fine. I was just... you seemed upset about something."

Vaar felt warm inside. His treasure had been concerned. "It's an old memory, nothing more," he replied. "I'll tell you about it sometime if you like."

Jaden nodded, but didn't prod further. He stole a look at the tray in Vaar's hands. "Is that for me?"

Vaar almost blushed. He'd completely forgotten about Jaden's food. "Quite so, my treasure," he answered. He knelt on the floor, snickering to himself when Jaden

quickly looked away. His mate had a very cute blush. Vaar wanted to tease him further.

In all seriousness, he needed to fashion some clothes for himself and his treasure. He couldn't have Jaden looking so embarrassed and uncomfortable all the time. Besides, the chill of the cave couldn't be good for the mer. Vaar couldn't risk Jaden coming down with an illness.

Jaden swam toward him and chose a piece of fish, gobbling it up hastily. He eyed the venison and the *nabalka* apples with suspicious eyes. "What are those?"

"Meat and fruit native to the region," Vaar replied. "Try them."

To Vaar's delight, Jaden did. He hesitantly bit into a piece of fried meat and his eyes widened. As he chewed, he let out a moan that made Vaar's dick swell and harden even further. "Mmmm... this is good," Jaden said between bites.

Vaar watched his mate eat small pieces of venison and fried fish. When Jaden finished his meal with an apple, Vaar decided to broach the topic that still concerned him. "How's the water?" he asked. To him, any temperature felt all right, even if degrees of comfort varied. He needed to know if Jaden felt too cold, though. After all, the spring originated from a glacier at the top of the mountain.

"Well... it is a little cool," Jaden admitted.

Vaar nodded, expecting the reply, but satisfied

Jaden had been honest. He slowly slipped into the water next to Jaden and pulled the young mer toward him once more. "I'm afraid you'll have to sleep in the bed until I can figure out a way to heat the pool permanently."

He didn't think breathing fire would help much, since it might get the water too hot or make it evaporate altogether. He'd have to do it carefully and with Jaden out of the pool.

"That's not necessary," Jaden started to protest. "I'll get used to it. I've been in cold places before."

"There's no reason for you to suffer the slightest discomfort. Don't worry," Vaar said. "It's just a temporary thing. I know you're most at ease in water. "

Jaden still looked doubtful, but Vaar added, "Trust me, okay?"

Jaden scanned his face, those beautiful green eyes reaching out to Vaar's very soul. Much to Vaar's surprise, Jaden buried his face in Vaar's chest and muttered, "Okay."

Smiling, Vaar carried Jaden out of the water and into the bedroom. He wiped Jaden down with one of the furs, knowing the makeshift bed could be scratchy if wet. Jaden would probably be surprised at the change between sleeping in the water and this new bed, and in normal circumstances Vaar wouldn't have suggested it. As it was, he wanted to make the best of the situation and limit

Jaden's discomfort as much as possible.

When he dried his mate's tail, Vaar thoroughly massaged each scale. He hid a smirk as he watched Jaden try to suppress his arousal. Truly, he had no intention of attempting intimacy so early, but Jaden might prove too tempting.

At last, he deemed Jaden dry. He placed the young mer on the makeshift bed, covering him with the furs. At first, Jaden seemed uncomfortable, unaccustomed to the sleeping accommodations. Vaar made a mental note to procure an Atlantean bed as soon as possible. He'd slept in water before and he wouldn't have too much trouble adjusting to it again.

Finally, Jaden's eyes drifted shut. Vaar pressed a kiss on his treasure's forehead and left the room. He still had many tasks to accomplish before Jaden awoke.

## CHAPTER SIX

Aurus scanned the road and discontent filled him. Two guard patrols watched the entrance and exit to the village, with several more occasionally sweeping through the environs. He and Chrys couldn't possibly sneak inside and get some well-deserved rest at an actual inn without risking capture. Cursing, Aurus snuck back into the shadows and stealthily made his way to the spot he'd left Chrys.

"Well?" the young mer asked.

Aurus shook his head. "No luck. Sorry."

Chrys's face fell. Aurus knew his lover had been hoping to recover strength at an actual civilized establishment and perhaps purchase some supplies. Even if they could handle food easily enough, they didn't have clothing or any type of personal care items. Furthermore, their only weapon, Aurus's magic, powerful in itself, wouldn't help them in a tougher confrontation. Alas, they'd lost his sword in the havoc caused by the dragon. Soon, they'd leave Atlantean lands and enter even more dangerous grounds—cooler waters infested with predators.

Sighing, Aurus sat down on a rock and pulled Chrys onto his lap. "I think my father must be looking for me," he confessed. "That's the only explanation I can find for the

patrols."

He had expected the king to mobilize his troops in order to find Aurus, but he'd underestimated the speed with which this could be done. If he'd known how quickly it would happen, he'd have returned to the capital to grab some supplies before leaving. In the chaos, they might have gotten away unseen.

"It's okay," Chrys murmured. "We'll get by somehow."

They rested for a little while in the same spot and took their leave after grabbing a small bite to eat. They bypassed the village without looking back. Aurus hated it, but he couldn't take such a huge chance.

When they'd left the danger zone, Chrys spoke once again. "I think Jaden and the dragon must've stopped, because I feel him closer now. We're going in the right direction."

Aurus didn't like tearing the thread of optimism, so he nodded in silence. In truth, he suspected the dragon had taken Jaden to dry land, which meant they were still very far away from the right location. The only landed area Aurus knew of close by was the Atlantean University, set on an island to the north. The dragon couldn't have taken Jaden there.

Chrys wrapped an arm around his waist and gave

him a sad smile. "I know what you're thinking. We're still a long way from them. Believe me, I can feel it. But at least if they've stopped, we'll reach them eventually."

The young mer wanted to say something else, but let out a little gasp.

"What is it?" Aurus asked, alarmed.

Chrys swam away from Aurus and threw over his shoulder, "Nothing. Let's go."

In spite of Chrys's speedy retreat, Aurus sensed something hidden behind the weird behavior. He knew Chrys well and he could tell the younger mer was aroused. It showed in the way his nipples peaked, and in the sinuous motions of his body. Even his scales seemed to shine more brightly, begging for Aurus's touch. Perhaps Chrys might feel the need for intimacy, but didn't want to initiate anything with his twin still missing.

Sighing, Aurus followed behind Chrys. He very much desired finishing what they'd started back in the capital, but the circumstances weren't very conducive to doing so. Maybe after they completed the mission, they'd finally manage to figure out their emotions.

\* \* \* \*

Jaden awoke to the unfamiliar feel of a rough cover



on his skin. He tried to move, only to realize he couldn't swim away from wherever he was. The material scraped along his scales, sending shocks of pleasure through him.

The spongy corals at home had been nothing like this. He never should have agreed to stay in this perverted bed. How had he even managed to fall asleep? He couldn't fathom it now.

Rushed footsteps alerted him to a new presence in the room. "Treasure, what's wrong?" the now-familiar voice asked.

Jaden peeked out from under the furs to see Vaar scan the room angrily. He realized the dragon must have thought he was in danger or something along that line. His face flamed at his own stupidity. It was just a bed cover. He could have pushed it away with his hands. Why in the world did he get so worked up?

"Nothing," he replied, trying to keep his voice matter-of-fact. "The bed is just scraping my scales."

That seemed to take Vaar by surprise. "My apologies, Jaden," he said. He made his way to the bed and removed the furs. "I didn't realize they'd frighten you."

"I'm not frightened!" Jaden shot back angrily. He wasn't a pathetic child, damn it! "Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not," Vaar said softly. He sat down on the so-called bed next to Jaden and cupped Jaden's face.

"Treasure, are you all right?"

Jaden stared at the dragon in disbelief. What kind of question was that? He'd been kidnapped from the only home he'd ever known, taken away from his family and brought to a foreign, strange place—to live with a man who caused even weirder feelings to swell in his chest. How could he possibly be all right?

Vaar winced and Jaden realized he'd said everything out loud instead of keeping it in his head.

"Jaden," Vaar replied, "I realize you don't like me very much at the moment, but you have to understand I only did what was best."

"What was best?" Jaden parroted. "And who gave you the right to decide that?"

"You did," Vaar answered calmly, "when you came to me."

Jaden felt the blood drain out of his face. He didn't want to talk about all that. In fact, he'd have preferred if Vaar hadn't been the beast who had listened to Jaden's confessions. How could Jaden even look at the man now?

To Jaden's shock, Vaar hugged him tightly and pressed a light kiss against his temple. "It's okay. I'm not angry, upset, or disgusted because of what you told me."

"I don't understand..." Jaden choked out. Tears filled his eyes and he struggled to keep them at bay. He

would not cry. "I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you do," Vaar told him. "We both know all about Aurus and Chrys."

Jaden couldn't bear hearing anymore. It hurt too much and he felt too ashamed. "Stop!" he cried. "Leave me alone!"

"Treasure..." Vaar tried once again. "Let me speak."

But Jaden didn't want to hear anything. "No, I don't want to listen. Leave me be. You can't possibly know anything about me and my family. You're nothing but a beast."

He froze as the words escaped his lips. Immediately, he wanted to take them back, but... too late. Vaar gently released him from the embrace. He didn't say a word, but Jaden sensed the dragon's hurt.

"Vaar... I..."

Vaar didn't give him the chance to apologize. He swept Jaden up into his arms and said, "It's a good thing you woke up. I have the water ready for you."

The sudden change in topic didn't even register in Jaden's brain. Only when Vaar walked them into the pool room did Jaden understand what the dragon meant.

Gently, Vaar put him down next to the little indoor pond. "Test the water," he said. "I don't want it to be too

hot."

The last thing Jaden wanted was to test water, but he did it anyway. He slipped his tail into the pool experimentally and his eyes widened at the pleasant temperature. "How?" he asked as he slid into the comforting warmth.

Vaar nodded toward the wellspring that fed the little lake. Jaden saw that a ruby red gem had been placed in front of it like a filter. "I figured if I heat the gem with my fire, the water might come out hot. I'm glad it worked."

Jaden smiled at the dragon. "Thank you. This feels great."

Vaar shrugged. "It's the least I can do. After all, I did take you from your home."

Jaden tried to come up with an apology, anything that would fix the situation. Nothing came and before Jaden could figure things out, Vaar turned on his heel and left the chamber.

When Vaar finally got out of sight, Jaden broke out of his shock. "Vaar, wait! Vaar!" he shouted.

But the dragon didn't return.

\* \* \* \*

Vaar hastened out of the pool room, cursing his idiocy. How could he have believed Jaden would ever come to care for him? He'd not even told Jaden about his

powers and the mer thought him to be no better than an animal, an evil monster.

He felt his claws emerge, Jaden's words replaying in his mind, over and over. *"You're nothing but a beast. You're nothing but a beast."* Gods, he needed to get out of there before he did anything stupid. He'd never hurt Jaden, of course, but shifting where Jaden could see him would merely scare the mer even more.

Vaar rushed through the corridor and out of the cavern. He magically shielded the mouth of the cave, just in case some foolish excuse for a dragon happened to intrude on his territory. Finally, he released the tension inside him, closed his eyes, and let the change flow over his muscles.

He felt the shift as he grew larger and larger, the dark magic of his beast side exploding as it took over. For once, Vaar let it go. He needed to calm down to make things right with Jaden. He wanted to think that he still had a chance, that it was just too soon for Jaden to accept him. To succeed, he had to take it slow and get rid of all his anger.

Vaar allowed himself to become one with the dragon. When he opened his eyes once again, he emerged different; crueler, rougher, much like the beast Jaden thought he was, but still Vaar.

The dragon spread his wings and launched himself

into the sky. He soared high up, making sure he stayed away from the vegetation. In his current mood he'd make the entire forest shrivel and die. Vaar soared for the longest time, the freedom of flight soothing the wound in his heart. There was no shame in being like this, he told himself. Other people simply did not understand. His powers had helped him many times and would continue to do so.

He'd get Jaden to see, eventually. He couldn't expect the young mer to accept him from the very beginning.

A sudden feeling of wrongness intruded upon Vaar's mind. Vaar immediately stopped mid-flight, tilting his head as he tried to detect what could have happened. Anger and fear swelled inside him when he realized he'd left Jaden all alone in the cave. The barrier would keep anyone out, but what if there had been an earthquake or something like that? What if the water became too hot for Jaden? Jaden couldn't shift and he wouldn't be able to escape.

Vaar turned back, sweeping through the clouds with the speed of lightning. As he flew, different scenarios of dread passed through his mind. How could he have left Jaden alone for so long? Even when he'd gone hunting, he'd only left the cave for maybe fifteen minutes, acknowledging the risk. But now, he'd allowed his

frustration and fury to get the better of him.

It seemed to take forever to get back. When he finally landed in front of the cavern, his concerned eyes scanned the mountain. Nothing seemed out of place. Every rock was exactly as he'd left it, and the magical barrier still protected the opening.

Vaar entered the cavern, rushing to find his treasure. He didn't know what could have happened, but the disquiet refused to vanish.

In a few seconds, he reached the pool room. He heard the gasps and cries even before entering. His blood ran cold and his vision dimmed but he kept going.

Jaden lay on the floor, wriggling impotently, desperately reaching out toward the entrance. His emerald hair looked sweaty, his alabaster skin bruised. His tail had bloody spots, several scales having suffered from the rubbing against the rough floor. Vaar's heart just about broke at the sight.

When Vaar entered the room, Jaden gasped. "Vaar. You came back."

"Of course I did, Jaden," Vaar managed to reply as he rushed inside. "What happened?"

"I wanted... I wanted to come after you. I felt bad for what I said. But I couldn't shift. No matter what I did, I couldn't shift."

"Oh, my treasure. You shouldn't have pushed yourself. Don't ever do something like this again."

"But you were so angry..." Jaden let his tears flow.  
"And you left me."

"I will always come back for you, Jaden. Always."

Vaar picked Jaden up, wincing as his mate let out a little gasp of pain. Jaden clung to his neck and Vaar stepped back into the pool, knowing the water would soothe the young mer. The warm liquid embraced them and Vaar felt Jaden relax. As tenderly as possible, Vaar cleansed the hurt scales, paying close attention to any sound that came from Jaden.

The wound didn't appear to be as bad as he'd thought. In a few minutes, Vaar deemed Jaden as healed as he could be. He made a mental note to acquire some medical supplies as soon as possible. In time, the injury would close by itself, courtesy of Jaden's merman nature.

Satisfied, Vaar held his mate to his chest and leaned against the pool end. "Sleep, treasure," he murmured into Jaden's hair.

Jaden didn't protest and Vaar surmised that the young mer still hadn't gotten over the emotional exhaustion of the past few days. As Jaden cuddled against Vaar and surrendered to sleep, Vaar vowed to never disappoint his mate again.



\* \* \* \*

When Jaden opened his eyes once again, he thanked the Sea Mother he wasn't in the disturbing, rough bed. The familiar feel of water surrounded and soothed him. It felt good, especially combined with the warmth of the strong, solid chest behind him.

Jaden wiggled and let out a startled gasp when powerful arms tightened around him. "You're awake," a husky voice rumbled in his ear.

A brief flashback of his argument with Vaar swept through Jaden's mind. "I'm sorry," he whispered against Vaar's chest.

Vaar shifted them in the water, making Jaden's tail touch Vaar's lower body pleasantly. He gazed up at the dragon and it startled him to see a smile on the other man's face.

"In your own way, you were right," Vaar said.

Jaden opened his mouth to protest. Vaar had been nothing but kind to him. Even in dragon form, he'd comforted Jaden. It had been unfair of Jaden to brand Vaar as an animal, and even more unmerited for Vaar to admit it.

When Vaar left, Jaden had felt as if the one thing true and stable remaining in his life had vanished. His love

for Chrys would never diminish, of course, but it would also remain as impossible as always. And Jaden now acknowledged the bond between him and the dragon, the connection that had formed the very first moment he'd heard Vaar's call.

How could he have ever doubted it? No one in the world knew Jaden so well, anticipated his every need, and could be so gentle and powerful at the same time. Jaden had felt it, many times. He'd known that by going to the Zone, by showing the beast in the shadows everything he was, he'd surrendered a part of his own soul. Right now, he couldn't bring himself to regret it.

Vaar shushed Jaden, placing a finger on his lips. "I know I hurt you," the dragon said. "I took you away from Chrys, the one being you love most in the world."

Jaden tensed at the mention of his twin. He tried to pull away, but Vaar wouldn't let him. Vaar *did* remember Jaden's shameful secret.

"I have a little confession to make," Vaar murmured. "I sensed you and your brother when I was deep in sleep. I knew you two were special and that I had to have you from the very moment you approached my lair."

Jaden couldn't believe his ears. Did that mean Vaar wanted Chrys as well? Doubts reemerged, painful and wicked.

"But, Jaden, it was *your* loneliness that made me awaken," Vaar continued. "I believe that. Your soul called out to mine."

It was odd to hear the dragon, the dark beast from the abyss, speak such heartfelt words. It didn't fit at all with Jaden's previous view on things. Then again, what did he know? His life seemed to be made up of a string of inexorable errors.

"I just can't... I'm not sure I can be what you want me to be," he replied hesitantly.

Vaar released him from the embrace and forced their eyes to meet. Those dark orbs burned into Jaden and he found himself falling into the fathomless depths. "You and I, we fit together," the dragon said. "Chrys has Aurus now, and as much as it may pain you to admit it, you can't ever be a part of what they have."

It should have hurt. Indeed, Jaden felt the familiar pang of sorrow at those words. Strangely enough, though, it seemed dulled, as if through a fog or a thick veil. "Will you stay with me?" he asked, clinging to Vaar tightly, knowing this moment was important, that it would change his very existence.

"Of course, treasure," Vaar replied with a smile. "You belong to me now." This sounded annoyingly like the high-and-mighty dragon who'd stolen Jaden from the sea.

Somehow, though, it comforted Jaden. In the end, Vaar was right. Chrys had Aurus, and Jaden needed to get used to that thought.

Jaden admitted he agreed with Vaar. Two lonely souls could comfort each other, perhaps even find love. Why should Jaden deny himself this chance?

"I think maybe... I do," he answered.

Nervous seahorses fluttered in Jaden's belly when he witnessed the play of emotions on Vaar's face. The dragon's eyes burned into Jaden's very soul. "Tell me again," Vaar growled, his voice nearly animalistic.

Jaden realized with a start that Vaar had given him the chance to back down. But he didn't want to. He ached to have the dragon touch him, to feel loved and desired.

"I do belong to you," he whispered softly. "Show me what it's like."

A second later, Vaar's lips crushed Jaden's. Surprised, at first Jaden couldn't quite bring himself to fully enjoy the kiss. Maybe he shouldn't let the dragon sway him so easily. Was he using Vaar by accepting this? Did he just want love, any love, not Vaar's specifically? He didn't know, but the only way to find out would be to surrender.

Vaar's tongue prodded Jaden's lips open and he eagerly complied, accepting the silent order. He moaned at the feel of the dragon's mouth, gentle, yet commanding,

and so very perfect. Just like that, Jaden forgot all about his doubts and let himself feel. He buried his hands in Vaar's dark hair and discarded all restraint. He truly didn't know if he loved Vaar, but he could no longer deny the powerful, unbearable attraction between them. It had been strong enough to awaken Vaar from his slumber. How could Jaden possibly resist it?

The kiss seemed to go on and on as Jaden learned his dragon's flavor. Vaar tasted like fire, ash, with a dark, mysterious streak. Jaden could easily lose himself in Vaar and disregard everything else.

With every second that passed, Jaden's previous reluctance vanished. His hands dared to leave Vaar's hair and slowly made their way across the dragon's shoulders. The feel of the flexing muscles under his touch emboldened him and he explored further, mapping Vaar's back with his fingers.

When the kiss finally broke, Jaden was breathing hard, his entire being hot with desire. Vaar briefly met his gaze and gave him a tender, if slightly strained, smile. "Will you let me teach you, treasure?"

Jaden understood what Vaar meant. Nothing sounded better than to have Vaar touch him, guide him through his change.

He felt a measure of apprehension at the knowledge

their coupling could hurt Vaar. If the curse on Chrys and Jaden did exist, as the king thought, such consummation might bring about disaster upon Vaar.

"Are you sure?" he asked the dragon.

To Jaden's surprise, Vaar actually chuckled. "Are you serious? There's nothing I want more in this world."

Jaden heard no amusement in that laugh, only pure arousal and a touch of disbelief. Still, he wanted to make sure Vaar understood the possible consequences of this decision. "But remember what I told you. I could be cursed."

Vaar cupped Jaden's cheek and pressed a light peck on his lips. "You're not cursed. Never believe that."

"That's what my father and everyone else believes," Jaden replied. He didn't know why he insisted. By rights, he should be glad Vaar didn't shy away from him like everyone else. But, truth be told, he didn't think he could bear it if he accidentally injured the dragon.

Vaar's expression turned angry and Jaden winced at the intensity of his fury. "They are fools," Vaar snarled. "No one in his right mind would think such a thing of you."

Vaar took a deep breath, obviously sensing Jaden's distress. "If it makes you feel better, there are very few things in this world that can hurt me. And don't you think it's foolish to fear their prejudice? If you don't trust

yourself, could you ever believe such a thing of your brother?"

Vaar's words made so much sense and hurt at the same time. It *was* stupid prejudice, yes. But why had everyone rejected them, then? Why had they become outcasts? Only Aurus and Vaar seemed to believe he and Chrys weren't abominations or failures.

Jaden forced the memories back. It didn't matter anymore. He had the chance for a new life now and he'd take it. "You're right. I'd never believe that of Chrys. I'm just being silly."

Vaar brushed his lips over Jaden's cheek again, pressing light kisses over his face, gently making his way to his ear. "So? Will you allow me the honor to become your tutor?"

Vaar nibbled on Jaden's earlobe and all rational thought flew out of Jaden's mind. His arousal—which had faded during the serious conversation—returned with a vengeance. "Yes," he gasped. "Yes, please."

Those words seemed to flip a switch inside Vaar. He let out a growl and pushed Jaden back against the wall of stone. His hands urgently mapped Jaden's scales until he reached the lower end of Jaden's tail.

Jaden tensed at the first touch of the intimate spot. Dyal's assault on him ran through his mind, the way the

bandit had held him down and fondled him. But Vaar's touch proved to be so very different that the memory soon faded.

Vaar placed soft kisses on Jaden's collarbone while his finger penetrated Jaden's opening. He went slowly, each motion arousing untouched nerve endings inside Jaden. Jaden cried out and clung to Vaar, his mind short-circuiting at the excruciatingly pleasurable onslaught.

Over and over, Vaar continued to tease him. The dragon repeatedly bit down on Jaden's neck, and Jaden felt flashes of heat with each touch of his lover's mouth. Vaar's tongue descended, engulfing Jaden's nipple in hot, dark flame. Jaden gasped, rubbing against Vaar shamelessly, wanting more.

Vaar growled in obvious approval. His mouth abandoned Jaden's nipple, making him cry out in protest.

"Please..."

Vaar grinned at him. Seconds later, he dived in the water, completely submerging. It surprised Jaden, even if he'd known Vaar had basically lived underwater for hundreds of years, or more, if one judged by the age-old stories of the Forbidden Zone.

All rational thought flew out of his mind when Vaar's tongue prodded his opening. If the dragon's fingers felt amazing, Jaden considered this to be even better. His



lover licked him, slowly pushing into him, and something grew and spread inside Jaden. Every inch of his body gradually ignited, awakening to a new life. It frightened Jaden, but he accepted it all the same, trusting Vaar to guide him, to keep him safe.

He could almost hear the dragon's soothing murmur in his mind, even if Vaar couldn't speak out loud. Tears filled Jaden's eyes and he embraced the emotions and the physical pleasure. The fire inside him grew more and more, engulfing his every pore until it became too much for Jaden's innocent body to contain. With a shout that echoed off the cave walls, he found his peak.

A heavy dam broke inside him. Jaden felt a wave of power sweep over him, the most amazing sensation he'd ever experienced in his entire existence. He remembered occasionally catching a glimpse of it, like the time Chrys had unknowingly rubbed against him. Those elusive moments had teased him, giving him a taste of what he could never have. But now, the power and the pleasure came to him, tamed, yet wild, swamping him in their intensity.

Jaden's vision went white, then cracked, and his eyes could only see beautiful, vibrant green. Frightened, he let out a harsh gasp. Vaar's arms immediately wrapped around him and held him close.

The strong voice of the dragon whispered in his ear, "That's it, treasure. Let it come. Accept it."

Jaden obeyed. He opened himself to the overwhelming sensations, finding comfort in Vaar's solid strength. With Vaar as an anchor, he accepted the gift given by the Sea Mother.

When the high finally began to dwindle, Jaden's vision cleared and he squinted, trying to figure out what had happened. His tail felt weird, unfamiliar, not his own. His body buzzed and he didn't know what to do with himself.

He looked around and panicked when he realized he'd been transported to a different place. Green gems surrounded him, covering every bit of solid matter in sight. "What? Where?"

"It's okay," Vaar said soothingly. "It's just your power, manifesting itself for the first time."

Jaden gaped at the sight. He reached out to touch the gem and gasped when he heard it sing inside him. His element. Jade.

His mind whirling, he experimentally tried to move his tail. The motion jostled his body differently and Jaden looked down. Through the water, he could see two legs where his tail had been. A couple of greenish scales lined his new limbs, extending into thin fins across his ankles.

He should have been surprised, or scared, or shocked. He probably would be soon, but for now, happiness prevailed and he couldn't contemplate other emotions. "I-I... I'm not cursed."

"Of course not," Vaar purred. "I told you to trust yourself."

Jaden realized he could feel Vaar's hard length against him. Arousal swept through him once more and his own shaft hardened. Unfamiliar with the feeling, Jaden reached out in front of him to touch it. He sucked in a breath when his fist enclosed the hard flesh. Easy access genitalia certainly had perks.

Vaar skillfully moved against him and Jaden grasped Vaar's cock in his fist as well. He rubbed their two dicks together, his body guiding him where his mind could not. Vaar growled his name, thrusting into his fist. "Fuck, Jaden. I want you so bad."

Barely registering the dark promise in those words, Jaden nodded. He knew there would be more. All mer were educated in issues of sexuality. Even so, nothing Jaden had been taught compared to this. If Vaar's first touches had been exquisite, Jaden couldn't even fathom how intense the actual coupling would be.

He didn't want to halt the pleasant friction between their cocks but the decision was taken out of his hands.

Vaar growled and flipped Jaden over. The motion interrupted Jaden's previous activity but he forced himself to remain silent and wait.

The feel of the gemstones against now scaleless skin distracted him and he ended up surprised when a finger invaded his back passage. It reminded him of the previous invasion of his body, the one that had unleashed his first, explosive climax.

The finger went in easily, Jaden's body taking Vaar's assault with greed. Jaden pushed his ass up, wordlessly begging for more. And Vaar gave him more. He thrust two more fingers inside. This time, the penetration hurt a bit, no longer quite so pleasant.

"My apologies, treasure," Vaar rumbled, his voice turning nearly dragon-like. "I just can't wait much longer."

If he went by the sheer ecstasy Vaar had gifted him with before, Jaden could manage to take a little pain for his lover's benefit. Perhaps it would be more than a little. His lover was very gifted in the manhood department, and surely being speared by such a shaft would hurt. But Jaden trusted Vaar and knew the dragon would make the experience beautiful, regardless. "It's okay. I'm fine. Go on."

He expected Vaar to take his pleasure at once, but Vaar took his time preparing Jaden. Soon, the dragon had

Jaden mindless with lust, aching to be filled, to be taken and fully owned by his lover.

Vaar finally granted Jaden's pleas. He removed his fingers from Jaden's channel, leaving him strangely bereft. His lover's cock rubbed against his backside and the head of the shaft nudged against Jaden's opening. With a sure, powerful motion, Vaar thrust inside.

That one single movement almost made Jaden come again. The delicious burn and the intimate connection molded into a beautiful, indescribable sensation. Jaden somehow managed to restrain himself and thrust back against his lover. He wanted to make this last, to surrender everything he was and would ever be to Vaar. They'd spent so little time together, but Jaden instinctively knew Vaar would love and protect him. He felt it deep inside.

Vaar took what Jaden offered and gave back so much more. Jaden sensed the dragon's fire, his power and passion, flow over them both. He heard a silent oath in each motion, the promise of love, protection, and safety. Entwined with that pledge, Jaden identified a desire more powerful than anything in this world.

Vaar's dick hit something inside Jaden and stars burst in his vision. Dimly aware of his magic breaking loose again, he couldn't have held it back if he'd tried.

Vaar continued to fuck him and Jaden's mind began

to swirl, to reach out, higher and higher. He wanted the entire world to know who he belonged to, to acknowledge their bond. Their union made him feel cherished and happy, like he'd never been before. And when he came, he screamed, everything inside him broadcasting the most beautiful experience in his life.

A vision of two other men joining their bodies deep under the surface of the sea nudged his mind. It should have surprised Jaden to feel Chrys and Aurus so deep inside, but it didn't. Instead, he embraced it, accepting the emotions and sensations that came with it. He felt Vaar do the same, and just like that, in one perfect moment, four people became one.

\* \* \* \*

Chrys chewed on his piece of fish, not really tasting it or realizing what he was doing. His mind focused on one thing; finding his twin and clinging to their bond.

Three days had passed since the fateful encounter with the dragon, yet Chrys's connection with Jaden held. They had a trail to follow. Too bad it led them through dangerous waters, full of deadly predators and sweeping, treacherous currents.

They'd managed to avoid engaging any creatures in

battle. Aurus had guided them on a safer, detoured route. But the whole thing took too long and Chrys desperately needed to see his twin.

Two things comforted him in his plight. The first one was, as always, Aurus. Always Aurus. His lover took care of him, didn't berate him for his impatience, soothed him when he wept. At the same time, he didn't discard Chrys as useless or weak. Even on his chosen safe trails, he pushed them as far as they could go every day.

The second thing was the peculiar knowledge that no harm had come to his twin. Chrys felt Jaden in his mind even now, stronger than ever. With each moment that passed, Jaden's emotions reached out to Chrys more and more. His brother experienced gratitude, awe, doubt, and a fair amount of lust.

Chrys didn't understand the sudden outburst of emotion. It frustrated and angered him that he'd never experienced it through Jaden before. The only explanation could be that his brother had shielded himself on purpose, and now the shield waned.

As if brought about by Chrys's thoughts, a wave of arousal swept through him, not his own, but Jaden's. He gasped quietly, trying to smother the sound. He didn't want Aurus to hear, didn't know what the other mer would think if he found out.

"Chrys? What's wrong?" Aurus asked.

"Nothing," Chrys whispered. Another tremor shook his body. He could almost feel a ghostly hand caress his scales. Aurus's approach made things worse. The foreign arousal found an echo and tied into his feelings for the older mer.

"You've been acting weird," Aurus said, giving him a concerned look. "Please tell me what's going on, love."

Unable to hold back, Chrys shot forward. His body felt feverish and he couldn't tell which emotions were his and which belonged to Jaden. Chrys had tried to hold back, wanting his first time with Aurus to be special, not shrouded by Jaden's disappearance. He couldn't do it any longer.

"Aurus," he gasped out longingly. "I'm sorry." He rubbed his tail against Aurus's, moaning as their scales came into contact.

"Chrys?" Aurus's voice sounded husky and a little choked when he spoke. "What are you doing?"

"I can't take this," Chrys replied. "I need..." He didn't know what he needed, what he wanted. He felt wrong, itchy, and his entire body buzzed with energy he couldn't get rid of. "Help me."

Comprehension dawned on Aurus's face. "Is it Jaden?" he asked neutrally.



"Jaden, me, you, the dragon. I don't even know any more," Chrys panted, his words coming out in a slur. "I can't deal with this." Chrys would have been scared had he not felt so aroused. He could feel Jaden's excitement inside him, and it should have frightened, angered, and disgusted him. It didn't. Why? Why did the dragon's touch on Jaden's body feel so good?

Could Jaden be under some sort of evil spell that echoed over Chrys? Chrys didn't even want to think about the possibility. Jaden had told him the dragon didn't mean them any harm, and anyway, he doubted dragons could use that sort of magic. From what little Chrys knew about them—and what Aurus had told him—he'd kind of figured out that draconic magic focused a lot on the destructive forces of nature. That much was clear, simply from the way all life had vanished in the Forbidden Zone. Manipulation or illusion didn't fit in. And yet... how could he explain this weird arousal?

He whimpered in distress, confusion mingling with an ever increasing lust. The situation upset him, but the escalating need erased all reason. His pent-up desire and emotions broke free and he snagged Aurus's lips in a desperate kiss.

At first, Aurus tried to pry him off, but the older mer's determination didn't last. Aurus attacked Chrys like a

starving man would a feast. Their tongues battled for dominance until finally, Chrys yielded to the more experienced Aurus, allowing his lover to take the lead.

Aurus did, and the kiss grew gentle, less savage. Chrys still felt the foreign pleasure at the back of his mind but he became too focused on Aurus to think about anything else.

The older mer wordlessly directed them off path, taking Chrys to a large, porous coral. Hardly a luxurious, romantic setting, but to Chrys, it couldn't have been more beautiful. He felt drunk on the knowledge that he'd finally be one with Aurus like he'd wanted for so long.

Even if they'd done this before, the heat Aurus's touch left behind still surprised him. Each individual scale burned, the sensation electrifying and exciting. But Chrys needed more. Aurus seemed to agree and progressed down Chrys's tail until he reached Chrys's nether opening.

Chrys took a deep breath and tried to relax. This time, he refused to be denied. When Aurus's finger penetrated his passage, he couldn't help a small moan. Was it pleasure? Was it pain? He didn't know. The boundaries between sensations blurred together.

His lover didn't cease the passionate assault. He thrust the digit in and out of Chrys's passage, massaging the sensitive walls, coaxing Chrys's body to yield further.

Aurus leaned over Chrys and lapped at the delicate blue scales of Chrys's tail.

The touch of his lover's mouth drove Chrys wild, making the flame inside him blaze even more intensely. When Aurus reached the very end of Chrys's tail and nibbled on the sensitive fins, Chrys thought he'd explode into a million pieces.

But the feeling continued to grow, never once waning. Surely, his body couldn't contain such bliss. Energy sizzled over his nerve endings, unfamiliar and potent. Aurus thrust his tongue into Chrys's nether opening and Chrys couldn't take it anymore. A whirlpool of pleasure and power swallowed him whole, and this time, Chrys really did explode, the climax washing over him with an almost ruthless intensity.

Everything around him ceased to exist, Aurus the only thing anchoring him to reality. His eyes became blind to all the colors that had once inhabited his world. All he could see was blue, so much blue. It swirled around him, burning him from the inside out. The color of the sea, and yet not.

Chrys allowed the sensory overload to wash over him, embracing it, pushing away his fear and restraint. He was meant to have this precious gift. He instinctively knew it. He would not insult the Sea Mother by retreating from

her power.

Taking everything in stride was easier said than done. The energy felt too intense and Chrys feared his body would fail, that it wouldn't be able to withstand the shock.

Aurus held him close, whispering sweet words in his ear. Chrys followed Aurus's voice and rode the wave of his first orgasm, allowing it to flow over him, rejecting the panic. Nothing would spoil the moment. Wrapped in his lover's embrace, he fell into ecstasy, abandoning all feelings of rejection and hurt.

The beautiful, overwhelming assault seemed to last forever, and at the same time, not long enough. Finally, the pleasure spiraled down and Chrys's vision returned to normal. But as he took in the sight of the previously brown coral, Chrys was shocked to find himself still surrounded by blue. Everything had been turned into pure chrysocolla stone.

His element, just like his dead mother had once said. At last, his magic had emerged.

Chrys would have wept with happiness, but he refused to spoil the moment with tears. At last, he'd managed to reveal his magic. All the people who'd wished him and Jaden ill had been wrong. He wasn't cursed and he could be with Aurus without fearing for his safety.

Another amazing discovery broke through his joy.

His tail had been replaced by a pair of legs. He registered other changes about his body, all of them very pleasurable.

Aurus seemed entranced with the same thing.

"You're so beautiful, love," Aurus whispered in Chrys's ear. "So very beautiful."

"Thank you," Chrys managed to say. "You're quite dashing yourself. Now shut up and touch me."

Aurus smiled and fondled Chrys's cock. "Your wish is my command."

Giving Chrys a heated look, the older mer guided him to wrap his newly acquired legs around Aurus's waist. Aurus had shifted into his legged form as well. The new position made Aurus's hard length prod against Chrys's backside.

Chrys ached to have Aurus inside him, but they couldn't rush it, lest they spoil the entire experience. Indeed, Aurus reached down and Chrys felt a finger penetrate his virgin channel.

Chrys buried his face in Aurus's neck, letting the other mer prepare him. It just felt so good, and Chrys found himself thrusting against the invading digit. When two other fingers joined the first, Chrys moaned and rubbed his body against Aurus's. He didn't know how much longer he could take the sensual torture.

Thankfully, Aurus soon deemed him ready. The

three fingers left Chrys's channel and Aurus positioned himself at Chrys's hole. Ever so slowly, he pushed inside, spearing Chrys with his hot, hard shaft.

At first, Chrys tensed. The unfamiliar burn startled him and Aurus's dick proved much thicker than his fingers. His hesitation only lasted a few moments. Aurus and he were meant to be together. Their bodies fit as one, and Chrys didn't need to fear a thing.

He bore down on the hard cock, taking his lover's flesh inside him. Aurus's full length impaled him and Chrys let his instincts take over. He rode the other mer, reveling in the feeling of fullness, of being one with the man he loved.

They moved together in perfect synchrony, dancing to the rhythm of the oldest dance in all existence. Chrys was distantly aware of his own voice screaming, "Please! Harder! More!" A small part of him acknowledged the noise could draw dangerous creatures in their direction. The thought sobered him a bit and he found the presence of mind to bite down on Aurus's neck, muffling his cries against the other mer's skin.

His show of aggression turned Aurus on and his lover increased the speed and strength of his strokes. With each thrust, Aurus hit a spot inside Chrys that made the pleasure escalate even further.

His power burst out of him, wild and uncontrollable, and flowers of chrysocolla stone bloomed around them. They grew beautiful and strong, larger and larger as Chrys surrendered more and more to the ecstasy. When Chrys found his peak, the gem flowers blossomed around them, a beautiful new garden in a barren wasteland.

Chrys came and another cry of passion echoed inside him, washing over him like a waterfall. Aurus emptied his seed inside his passage, and the sensation of another man filling his body at the same time hit Chrys. When he collapsed in the older mer's arms, his nostrils were invaded by the scent of two other lovers. Jaden. Jaden and the dragon.

Chrys could no longer find the energy to doubt or be scared. Jaden *was* his brother and sharing sexual experiences should've been awkward at best. Instead, it prolonged the pleasure, drew it out, making it so much better. He knew Aurus felt the same. Chrys could sense it in the other mer's mind, body, and soul.

When the afterglow faded, Chrys silently cuddled in Aurus's embrace. He closed his eyes, too tired to understand the ramifications of the new discovery. He'd deal with it tomorrow. For now, he'd enjoy the moment of happiness while it lasted.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The next day*

Jaden stared at the landscape beneath him, squinting to see if he could spot a black dot in the distance. There was no sign of Vaar anywhere. Clouds surrounded the cliffs and the forests below seemed to mock him.

Vaar had left in the morning before Jaden actually woke up. The night before, he'd told Jaden they needed more supplies and he'd be out for a little while. This proved to be unfortunate, because Jaden needed him most right now.

Jaden rubbed his hands across his arms, his teeth chattering. He felt colder than he should, even taking into account the low temperatures this high up. He bundled up in the rough fur, thankful for the heavy material. It helped very little, however. If anything, the sensation of chill intensified. It made no sense, and it unsettled him. He probably should've gone inside the cave, but something wouldn't let him leave.

Now that he'd accepted he belonged with the dragon, his mind had cleared. The haze of lust had vanished and Jaden could see things he hadn't originally been able to focus on.



He realized, in many ways, he'd been rash to accept the dragon so easily. At the same time, he trusted Vaar. The way Vaar had touched him, held him, taken him the night before couldn't hide any deception. In time, they would get to know each other more deeply and intimately.

Giving up on his past life wouldn't be as easy. His twin would come for him, Jaden knew it. Chrys loved him, even if not the way Jaden wanted.

He'd realized just how far Vaar had flown them, the implications of the knowledge finally clicking in place. If Chrys and Aurus did come after them, they'd have to pass through many dangers. Jaden couldn't let that happen.

He'd been so lost in his own confusion and dilemmas, he'd let his brother down. But he wouldn't lose hope yet. Aurus was a skilled warrior. He'd protect Chrys. Vaar would come back soon and Jaden would ask him to go after the other mer. He could find his twin through their innate bond, which seemed to have strengthened. *Just a little while, just a little while.* Sea Mother, why did Vaar take so long?

After what seemed like an eternity, Jaden finally spotted the much-desired black dot. It grew larger and larger, and Jaden's heart beat faster at the sight of the magnificent dragon. The beast sped up its approach and Jaden took a few steps back from the cliff ledge, giving his

lover space.

Powerful wings brought Vaar closer and closer until, at last, he reached the mountain. Jaden suppressed his enthusiasm and anxiety and watched his dragon land and shift. He needed to keep a cool head if he wanted to help Chrys.

Vaar made his way to Jaden's side, a worried frown marring the handsome features of his face. "Jaden, what are you doing outside?" he asked. "It's dangerous for you to be here when you're alone."

Jaden felt the slight reprimand in the words. He understood Vaar's concern, but this had been too important for him to lay back and relax in the cavern. "I'm sorry," he replied. "It couldn't wait."

Vaar nodded. "I could feel your anxiety. Tell me. What is it?"

Jaden wished he knew. In fact, he had a sneaking suspicion he did, indeed, know, but it didn't help him much. He couldn't explain it. He couldn't even fully acknowledge it. He felt weird, as if his body itched to be someplace else.

"Jaden, what's wrong?"

"Chrys and Aurus... they're in danger. We have to go after them."

Vaar looked surprised. "How do you know this?"

"I'm not sure. I suspected they'd come after me, but

I didn't realize how much danger they'd be in until now. Sea Mother, I'm so stupid."

"You're not stupid," Vaar soothed him. "The fault is mine. I didn't think of this before. We'll leave at once."

Jaden could barely believe his ears. "Really?"

"Of course. But first, you have to bundle up better. Your lips are turning blue."

Jaden doubted very much that any clothing could help him at this point. "It's not the cold here," he whispered. "Something's going on with Chrys and I'm feeling it the way he is."

Vaar opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind. Without another word, he shifted into dragon form. A large, black paw grabbed Jaden, and with a jolt, his body was invaded with heat.

"Which way, treasure?" the dragon rumbled.

"Toward Atlantis," Jaden replied quietly. He sensed his twin somewhere east of their current position.

Vaar launched himself into the air once again. Jaden hoped they'd reach Chrys and Aurus in time. He would never forgive himself if something happened to the two mer.

\* \* \* \*

Aurus was tired and hungry. They'd run into a current of cold water that chilled them to the bone, effectively draining their energy and eliminating their chances of catching new food. Now, with their supplies low and no medical items to help them, the situation looked very glum.

Knowing Chrys would have less resistance to the low temperature, he insisted the young mer use both cloaks. Chrys had reluctantly agreed, but the result meant they both froze their asses off. The flimsy material did very little to protect Chrys anyway.

Chrys's movements had grown sluggish, slow. If every inch of Aurus felt heavy and sore, Chrys would be even more affected by the chill.

"Chrys," he called out, knowing he needed to keep Chrys focused somehow. "Do you know anything at all about the dragon?"

Aurus had asked the same question many times, only to be snapped at by the younger mer. If something could rile Chrys up and draw him out of the haze, inquiring about the dragon should do it.

Aurus held his breath when Chrys didn't immediately answer. In fact, he showed no sign of having heard Aurus. "Chrys?" Aurus prodded, unable to keep a tremor out of his voice.

Chrys continued to swim by his side, his blue tail sending ripples of the cold water toward Aurus. Aurus started to get significantly alarmed but then Chrys spoke at last, "I let him down," he said.

"What?" Aurus asked. "What do you mean? Who did you let down?"

It didn't take a genius to figure out who Chrys referred to, but Aurus needed to keep Chrys talking and swimming if they ever wanted to get out of this current in one piece.

"Jaden," Chrys clarified. "I let him down. In my heart, I knew something wasn't right, but still I pushed him away."

Even if the entire point of the conversation had been to get Chrys to speak, Aurus hated the pain in the young mer's words. "It wasn't your fault," he whispered. "You couldn't have known what would happen."

Chrys let out a choked sob. "I didn't know a lot of things. I was too busy being excited about the party to see his sorrow, his loneliness. If I hadn't disappointed him, he would have never gone to the Forbidden Zone in the first place."

"You never explained why he went there," Aurus said hesitantly. Perhaps it would do Chrys good to let the pain out, share the load with someone.

"To be honest, I never quite figured it out," Chrys replied. "I realized he was going somewhere but he refused to tell me, and I couldn't follow him. Remember, we were being watched by those bandits."

Aurus nodded. Chrys had eventually explained that the bandits they'd found unconscious had kept the twins prisoner for the past weeks, forcing them to steal in order to survive. He'd also told Aurus that the band leader, Jasper, had attempted to force himself on Chrys, but backed off upon realizing who they were.

"I only found out he was going to the Forbidden Zone the day of the party," Chrys continued. "I went after him and met him there. He told me the beast in the shadows didn't want to hurt us. I could feel the same thing but I didn't know what it meant. And even then, I didn't care enough to ask."

Chrys's agitation grew with every word. "Every time, I told myself that after the ball, I'd talk things out with Jaden. We'd fix the rift, be like we once were. I never did."

"Why?" Aurus asked. He had a feeling therein lay the key to Jaden's disappearance. Jaden and Chrys had always been inseparable as children. The fact that they'd become distant to each other, especially in such difficult circumstances, was odd, indeed.

"I-I... don't know," Chrys stammered. He sounded

honest, if very hurt. Aurus had always been able to read the twins well. He suspected Chrys knew and, perhaps, wanted to forget.

A loud, screech-like roar interrupted the conversation and sent shivers down their spines. With the reverberations of the sound came a wave of deadly chill. It shocked Aurus they could even feel an increase in chill in such cold waters, but they did, nevertheless.

Chrys gave Aurus a wide-eyed look, sorrow temporarily shrouded by fear. "What is that?"

The monstrous sound echoed again and Aurus suppressed a wince. Perhaps it was better that Chrys didn't yet realize what creature approached them. Panicking wouldn't help either of them.

Since they'd left friendly waters behind, they needed to be on their guard. The possibility of running into a dangerous predator increased with each passing moment. The cool water helped, to the extent that few truly fearsome killers of the deep enjoyed low temperatures. However, Aurus hadn't expected having the misfortune of meeting the worst one of all.

The saurion—or great sea-serpent—was a rare creature, all but extinct now in the waters of the Windswept Sea. Few were those who'd seen it, and fewer still had survived the sight. Aurus had never met one, but during his

studies he'd been instructed in its abilities and weaknesses, or lack of thereof. The saurion had impenetrable scales and its eyes could hypnotize its prey. Whenever it was around, the water turned frigid in reaction to the chemicals in the body of the great beast. Only one creature could defeat the saurion; the dragon.

Aurus would very much like it if the beast they pursued made an appearance now. They could find Jaden and get out of their predicament, all at the same time. Naturally, things didn't happen like that in real life.

Aurus desperately scanned the surroundings for some place they could take shelter. There were no caves or stone formations big enough. His gaze fell on a small crack in the ground, barely big enough for one of them to fit in.

He pulled Chrys to the crevice and gestured for the young mer to get inside. The atmosphere grew chillier with each breath they took. They were running out of time. "Go on," he told Chrys. "Hide there."

The saurion would probably be able to get Chrys out of there, but it was better than nothing. "But... what about you?"

"I'll distract it," Aurus replied simply.

Chrys shook his head, his voice trembling as he spoke. "No. No. I refuse. I can help. My magic works now."



Aurus met Chrys's azure gaze, his heart constricting at the disbelief and agony he read in those blue orbs. "Please, Chrys. You're not a soldier. There's no time. Please, do this. For me."

Chrys opened his mouth, obviously intending to protest, but Aurus silenced him with a kiss. "It will be all right," he whispered. He very much doubted that was the case. Not even an entire battalion of Atlanteans could defeat a saurion, let alone a single soldier. For Chrys's sake, Aurus would die trying.

Finally, Aurus could make out the form of the great serpent looming ahead. Its sinuous body slithered through the waters, heading straight toward them. Aurus swam away from Chrys's hiding spot and summoned his magic. His element answered his call and Aurus manifested a spear of gold. He prepared himself to throw it at the beast when he saw Chrys emerge from the crevice.

The saurion's gaze fixed upon the younger mer. Aurus let out a gasp of terror. "No, Chrys! Run."

But Chrys didn't listen. He waited there, frozen, watching the serpent approach. Aurus swam toward his lover, but he'd never manage to save Chrys. "Chrys!"

\* \* \* \*

Chrys winced but ignored Aurus's shout. He hated doing this to his lover, but he had no choice. He couldn't

wait around and watch Aurus die. Their only chance was Chrys and Jaden's ability to sway aquatic creatures. Chrys didn't know if it would work on the serpent, but he needed to try.

The saurion continued its approach and Chrys shivered. He held his ground and sent his message out. *"Please, stop! We don't mean any harm. We just want passage through your lands. My brother is in trouble and we wanted to help."*

The serpent didn't seem to hear. Chrys took a deep breath, pushing away the terror he felt at his imminent death. His connection with his twin pulsed, and Jaden's power swept over and mingled with his, giving Chrys the strength he needed.

Chrys focused on that bond and tried again. *"Please. Don't hurt us."*

The saurion didn't slow down, but Chrys felt the change all the same. It still approached, but the chill dwindled and the numbness started to leave Chrys's body.

When the great snake reached him, terror nearly made him keel. With the saurion right there in front of him, this didn't seem like such a good idea after all. The creature swiped his long forked tongue toward Chrys, and only fright prevented him from recoiling.

"You reek of dragon," the saurion said, its speech a

strange mix of hissing and grumbling.

Chrys swallowed around the knot in his throat. Saurions were notoriously violent, particularly against their natural enemies, dragons. Chrys processed the information and realized something else. "I-I can understand you," he said with a gasp.

The snake's unblinking eyes analyzed Chrys with frightening intensity. "So it would seem," the saurion hissed.

Aurus reached them and took position in front of Chrys, shielding him from the saurion's gaze. Chrys felt the great snake's amusement. "What do you possibly believe you can achieve, puny worm?"

"I'll die before I let you get Chrys," Aurus replied. Apparently, he understood the saurion, as well.

The great snake chuckled. "No need. You are in luck. You two bear the mark of a black dragon."

Chrys had no idea what that meant, or why it was relevant. He remembered the wave of power he'd experienced in Atlantis, and how they got away unscathed when the bandits had all lost consciousness. He recalled the feel of the second man emptying his seed, and wondered how it could be possible for them to have such a bond with the dragon.

It didn't matter. The saurion almost seemed friendly

and he gestured for the two of them to get on his back. "You are going west, yes?" When Chrys nodded, the creature continued, "I can take you to the edges of my land. From there, you're on your own."

"Th-Thank you," Chrys stammered. He gave Aurus a shocked look, not sure what to believe of this sudden development.

Aurus seemed just as surprised, but nevertheless climbed on top of the saurion. Chrys followed his lover's example and almost gasped when his tail came into contact with the snake's skin. He hadn't expected the saurion's scales to be so soft. Unfortunately, he couldn't shift, since, unlike Aurus, he didn't own any clothing.

If the saurion noticed Chrys's predicament, he didn't comment. "Hold on," the great snake hissed. "Use the fins."

It was surprisingly easy to follow the saurion's instructions. Even with the smoothness of the great snake's scales, Chrys could cling onto the saurion's side fins and lean on Aurus. The creature's motions didn't even seem abrupt. It deliberately swam slowly for their comfort.

"Why are you helping us?" Aurus asked.

"Foolish little mer," the snake hissed, still sounding amused. "You don't know when to listen and be silent."

"Because of what you said about the black dragon," Chrys said. "But I don't understand. I thought saurions were

the natural enemies of dragons."

"Of most dragons, yes," the great snake replied.

"Not so with the black ones."

"But why?"

This time, the snake didn't reply. Obviously, he had exhausted his supply of conversation for the day—or perhaps the decade. Chrys didn't push it. He knew they traveled through dangerous waters and making the saurion angry would very likely lead to them being eaten.

His curiosity dissipated when he felt a bright, shining power not far in front of him. It approached, getting closer and closer, until Chrys finally realized what it was. Jaden.

"Wait!" he told the saurion. "Wait!"

"Don't presume to order me around, little mer. I—"

The saurion stopped his speech and his muscles tensed as he felt the presence as well.

A shadow loomed over them, great and threatening. A powerful splash reverberated all around them, sending dark power through the ocean. The sea serpent managed to withstand the assault and Chrys clung to it with all his might. He buried his face in Aurus's shoulder, his magic instinctively emerging, creating a protective shield of gems around them. It met Aurus's gold, but instead of clashing, the two elements bonded, protecting them from the

shockwave and debris.

In spite of his lack of magical experience, he knew when the danger passed. He lowered his shield and Aurus did the same with his. He could hardly see a thing in the sudden darkness, but in his heart, he knew what to do. He focused on the connection he sensed inside, and the gloom began to dissipate. Chrys gaped as he watched the black dragon appear once more in the depths of the sea.

\* \* \* \*

Out of all the possible things that could have happened, Vaar had never expected something like this. The two mer he'd come in search of climbed off the saurion, giving Vaar a wary look.

Chrys's eyes widened and Vaar realized the young mer must have spotted Jaden.

"Jaden!" Chrys cried out. He looked like he wanted to swim toward them, but Aurus held him back. Vaar was thankful for the prince's intervention. The situation was quite volatile, and Vaar needed to make sure they were all safe before proceeding to figure out their complicated emotional dilemma.

Jaden protested, hitting at his chest with tight fists. "Let me go. Chrys is down there."

"Give me a minute, treasure," Vaar replied.

Jaden had briefly blacked out during their journey

and Vaar figured it happened due to Chrys's meeting with the saurion. He didn't want to take a chance with his treasure's life.

"Greetings, friend," he rumbled to the sea snake.

"Greetings," the saurion hissed back. "I found two things that belong to you."

"I see that," Vaar replied. "You have my thanks."

The voice sounded familiar to Vaar's ears and he knew he'd heard it before. Truth be told, it was very likely that Vaar had once known this sea snake. Saurions used to belong to dragon kind but, due to their peculiar form, they had been shunned by their people. Of course, the real reason lay deeper, in the same court intrigues that led to Vaar's own exile. This was the main reason behind the enmity between the now distinct races.

Black dragons were the only ones excluded from this vendetta, as they suffered from the same treatment. Upon their exile, they had formed a pact with the saurions, to aid each other in any way they could. Vaar had never thought it would one day help him so much.

Vaar remembered a time when things had been different. Perhaps, once, he'd even seen this particular saurion on a daily basis. He couldn't exactly ask, as many dragons had abandoned their identities after leaving their former homes. Vaar had been one of them, and he wouldn't

have come out of his slumber if not for the appearance of the two young mer in his life.

"It is as we once promised," the saurion answered.

Reassured the sea snake remembered as well, Vaar released Jaden from his grip. Jaden immediately shot toward his twin. Vaar watched the reunion between the two brothers and felt a pang of distress. He could never have Jaden all to himself. How would the two other mer react to his new relationship with Jaden?

Mentally shaking himself, Vaar directed his attention toward the saurion. "I trust you are well," he said.

"As well as can be expected," the snake responded. "I just came out of hibernation, so I'm quite hungry. I have to say, your friends are quite interesting."

Vaar understood what went unsaid. The saurion had almost eaten Chrys and Aurus. Chrys and Jaden's ability to understand Vaar seemed to extend to all dragons, saurions included, and it had saved them from certain death. "If you like, you can come with us to my island," he offered. "There is plenty of food."

"Thank you, but no. You know my kind are not comfortable on land. I will find my own prey."

Vaar took that as the opportunity to say his goodbyes. As much as he'd have liked to find out more about the saurion, his priority was the three mer. "You are



always welcome with us."

"Thank you. Perhaps we will meet again soon."

With that simple farewell, the saurion departed, leaving Vaar with more questions than answers. Meeting the sea snake brought back many memories he'd have preferred to forget.

"Come," he told Jaden and the others. "We should return home."

"Home?" Chrys repeated. "Where is home?" Chrys looked doubtful, but Vaar wasn't insulted. After all, Chrys didn't know him.

"My island," he replied.

"It's okay, Chrys," Jaden coaxed. "It's perfectly safe."

Aurus looked like he wanted to protest, but this time, he didn't get the chance. Jaden pulled Chrys toward Vaar, the smile on his face so wide it made Vaar's heart hurt. "Chrys, this is Vaar. Vaar, my twin, Chrys."

"We've met before," Vaar replied. "But it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance officially."

He grabbed the two mermen in one paw, mentally chuckling when Chrys yelped. On the ground, Aurus summoned his magic. "Do stop fretting, Prince," he told the older mer. He took Aurus in his other paw and held the three mer against his chest. "Now close your eyes and hold

on tight."

The mer silently obeyed and Vaar propelled himself toward the surface. The ground shook and the water rippled with the whirlpool of power. This time, though, Vaar swam more slowly, no longer in a rush. He had three mer to protect and didn't want any harm to come to them.

He burst to the surface and launched himself into the air, his wings quickly taking him up into the clouds. Chrys let out a shocked sound, much like Jaden had when Vaar first stole him from the sea. This time, Aurus spoke, "Don't look at the sun, love. You'll get used to it in time."

Vaar felt a bit amused that Aurus said exactly the same thing Vaar had a few days back. Jaden must have realized it as well and let out a soft laugh.

"What's so funny?" Chrys asked, outraged.

"Nothing," Jaden replied, still chuckling. "Nothing at all."

As he reached the island, Vaar took notice of the fact that the vegetation showed no signs of withering. In the Forbidden Zone, Vaar's powers had killed off every living thing. Even here on the island, it had always happened. But not anymore.

He'd noticed this phenomenon just that morning, when he'd been out to hunt. The darkness inside him no longer seeped out. It had been tamed by Jaden's love. He

only hoped that now, with Aurus and Chrys here, he'd be able to keep hold of this love.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

They reached the dragon's cave in record time. The two other times Jaden had flown with Vaar, he'd blacked out. Now, he admired the beauty of the Windswept Sea and Vaar's island from up above. His twin's warmth by his side made it all better, both of them now in Vaar's strong hold.

Once they landed reality began to settle in. Vaar released them and shifted. Aurus followed the dragon's example, exchanging his tail for the golden-clad legs. The shock hit Jaden when he started to turn into his legged form and felt his twin do the same. He understood they'd both learned how to shift, which meant, like Jaden, Chrys had bonded with someone. Of course, a part of Jaden had known already, since the moment he'd first consummated his union with Vaar. He'd felt Chrys's pleasure as well as his own, and accepted it. Seeing it, right in front of him was, however, very different.

As realization struck, they both stopped their shifting and stared at each other, uncertain what to do next. Vaar noticed the slight awkwardness and gestured for Aurus to take Chrys. "Why don't we go inside and talk there? You'll probably be more comfortable in the water."

Not to mention Jaden wouldn't be forced to change shapes and present his nudity to his twin. Unlike Aurus, he

hadn't figured out how to preserve his clothing in between shifts. Vaar claimed it would all come in time, at least for Jaden. Apparently, dragons didn't bother with things like that.

"This is one of the lairs I kept for when I would find my fated mate," Vaar explained. "The land has belonged to my kind since ancient times, although black dragons were rare even back then. I'm not sure what happened to the rest of us."

"It's very beautiful," Chrys offered.

Vaar led them through the corridor and pointed out several chambers. "There is a sleeping area, as well as a chamber that serves as a kitchen of sorts. The bathing room is this way."

They entered the now familiar pool room and Vaar gently placed Jaden in the warm water. "Would you like anything to eat or drink?"

Jaden almost laughed at the sight of his reclusive lover playing host. He wished he could help Vaar, but he had no idea what to say. Now that they were together, Jaden quite honestly didn't know what to do. He'd been so happy about the reunion with his twin he'd practically forgotten the root of all his problems, his inappropriate affection for Chrys and Aurus.

Aurus placed Chrys in the water then turned toward

Vaar. "Actually, I'd like to see your kitchen for a minute, if that's all right with you."

Jaden gaped at the older mer. He was even more surprised when Vaar agreed. "Certainly. Right this way." After throwing a comforting smile toward Jaden, Vaar led Aurus out of the pool room. Jaden and Chrys were now all alone.

"They left on purpose," Chrys said, "to give us time together."

Jaden gritted his teeth, annoyance warring with fear inside him. His twin would ask him what he'd been hiding all this time. Jaden didn't think he could wall himself up again. His magic had broken free, and the bond between the two of them had grown even stronger.

With a flash of insight, Jaden understood. He figured out why they'd been powerless in the first place, why their magic refused to manifest. It had been his fault, for pushing Chrys away, for shielding himself from the one mer who was basically the other half of him.

No longer able to contain his emotions, Jaden lunged for his twin and wrapped his arms around Chrys. "I'm so sorry. They rejected us because of me. And the saurion could have eaten you and Aurus because of my thoughtlessness. I'm sorry. So sorry."

Chrys gently caressed his hair, murmuring in his

ear, "Stop talking nonsense. How could you possibly be to blame? Our power simply took time to appear, that's all. And you're not thoughtless. You couldn't have been expected to come after us when you were still overcome with accepting your emotions for Vaar."

Jaden tensed. So his twin had sensed his confusion. How much did Chrys know, exactly? Did he realize the reason for the rift between them? Jaden didn't think so. At the same time, he was somehow certain Chrys did indeed understand that Jaden had once set a barrier between them. After all, how could he not? The difference in the intensity of their connection was staggering.

He broke away from the embrace and met Chrys's blue eyes. "Chrys, listen to me. It really was my fault, and you know it. You realize it now, don't you? You can tell that I pushed you away."

Chrys winced, but nodded. "I don't care about what happened, about what everyone said about us. I just want to know why. We were so close. Why did you shut me out? Was it because of Aurus?"

Jaden saw a flash of doubt in his sibling's eyes. He didn't know if he should take the chance to explain. It meant risking their whole relationship, throwing away the one chance he had to keep seeing Chrys. A different time, Jaden would have shied away from it. But now, he couldn't

lie. Chrys would see right through him.

"Because of him, and more," Jaden replied hesitantly. How could he explain what he felt for his twin without disgusting him?

"M-More?" Chrys's voice trembled and his nervousness made Jaden even more anxious. He had to say or do something now, before he lost every ounce of courage he'd mustered.

Jaden looked at his twin's face, so much like his own, yet ten times more beautiful. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. They were so close now and Jaden could smell Chrys's intoxicating scent, mingled with a tinge of Aurus and Vaar's. Sea, sun, and darkness, all mingled together.

His element whispered in his mind and Jaden realized no words would convey the emotions in his heart. He pulled Chrys close and pressed his mouth to his twin's.

Sensations and feelings exploded in Jaden's mind, a whirlpool of confusion, fear, and want. Jaden couldn't tell which were his and which belonged to Chrys. His twin tensed and Jaden began to pull away. His secret out now, he braced himself for the rejection that would follow.

To Jaden's shock, Chrys hauled him back. The other mer parted his lips and his tongue prodded at Jaden's lips. What had begun as a chaste kiss turned into a frantic



meeting of mouths and Jaden surrendered to the desire he'd suppressed for so long.

Their tails rubbed together, driving Jaden wild with lust. His twin seemed just as excited and their tongues tangled in a sweet battle for domination. Neither won, or maybe both did. It didn't matter. Jaden had just received the greatest prize of all, his brother's heart.

\* \* \* \*

Vaar stood in the hallway, silently watching the twins in the pool. He should have been jealous. Instead, arousal singed him, hot as hell. He wanted to touch his treasure, touch both young mer, take them in his arms and possess them. His aching cock demanded action.

But Jaden and Chrys needed to be alone, at least for a little while, and Vaar needed to deal with Aurus.

"Did you know about this?" Aurus asked darkly.

Vaar arched a brow. "I knew about Jaden's feelings, yes. Why? Does it bother you?"

"Maybe," Aurus replied. "I don't know."

Vaar mused over the mer's reply. There was something more there, he could feel it. If nothing else, Vaar could try and figure out. "Come on," he told Aurus. "Let's leave them alone for a bit."

He led Aurus toward his bedroom and laughed when the other man gave him an ugly look. Apparently,

Aurus preferred to call the shots. "Give me a second. I still need to put something on."

The mer looked away, but not before Vaar noticed a blush staining Aurus's cheeks. Smirking, Vaar scanned through the room to find a pair of rough cloth pants. He rarely used clothing, and the few items that had survived the passage of time no longer qualified as appropriate wear. Vaar thanked the gods for even having those. Hard enough to keep his arousal in check, being naked in the presence of a very handsome mer did not help his resolve.

Once decent, he gestured Aurus toward the kitchen. He found a couple of apples and offered them to the mer. Together they sat on two rocky ledges that served as chairs. "Tell me," Vaar urged the mer.

Aurus bit down into the apple and glared. "Why should I?"

Vaar arched a brow at him. "Perhaps because I may be the only one who can understand?"

Fruit juice seeped down Aurus's chin, drawing Vaar's gaze. Vaar forced himself to focus on the matter at hand and not on how much his body needed release.

Thankfully, Aurus seemed to believe him. "The thing is, I've known both of them since we were kids. As we grew up, I started to feel attracted to Chrys. I loved Jaden, but like a brother. Or so I thought." He paused and

bit down on the apple once again, gathering his thoughts. "When we met again, after years of being separated, things were so different. And then, you came along and took Jaden. I was crushed. I had no idea, until that moment, how much he meant to me. It's so odd, so confusing."

Vaar nodded in understanding. It was, indeed, very confusing. Vaar had only wished to find one person, one soul who could understand him, accept him, and complete him. Now, he felt this peculiar attraction for three people. Even with all the centuries he'd lived, he couldn't fathom it.

"I know what you mean," he offered. "Black dragons aren't affectionate by nature. Meeting Jaden was strange enough. I never thought I'd actually find my mate." Vaar stopped speaking, uncomfortable with how much he revealed. The words seemed to pour out of him, like a dam had been broken. "I knew you and Chrys were special as well, but you loved each other, while Jaden and I were all alone. I didn't realize how much I'd like for things to be different until Jaden told me you were in danger." Aurus looked shocked, and the embarrassment Vaar felt over saying such things became overrun by satisfaction.

"Oh..." the mer said.

"It's all right if you don't feel the same," Vaar hastened to add. "We just have to find a way to make Jaden and Chrys happy."

"They can't live without each other, I know that now," Aurus confirmed.

Vaar considered the situation, fighting to come up with a plan. He'd have very much liked to keep the three mer to himself, but that would be greedy, and he didn't think it would make the others happy.

A moan sounded from the direction of the pool area, effectively dissipating Vaar's good intentions. Aurus's groan echoed Vaar's every thought. "Oh, sweet Sea Mother. They aren't helping my resolve."

Vaar met the mer's eyes, silently asking him for permission and advice. He rarely questioned himself or relied on the wisdom of others. He'd lived for so long, and learned so much in his many years. But this time, he admitted Aurus knew the twins better. He couldn't take any chances with hurting the two mer.

Aurus got up and took a deep breath. "You really do care, don't you?" he asked, his golden gaze unreadable.

The sudden shift in conversation surprised Vaar, but he nodded. The mer made his way to him and seated himself on Vaar's lap. "What are you doing?" Vaar managed to ask, proud when his voice sounded calm.

"It's clear enough," Aurus whispered, "that all of us feel this weird bond. We should get to know each other a little better, don't you agree?"

Aurus's hand massaged Vaar's dick through the coarse material of the pants. Vaar cursed, bolts of lust shooting through him. They shouldn't do this, not until they'd straightened everything out. It would only add to the confusion. "Aurus..."

The mer prince nuzzled his neck, sending ripples of pleasure through Vaar. "It's the first time you ever said my name. I like how it sounds on your lips. Vaar..."

Vaar could no longer hold back. He was, to a certain extent, an animal, and therefore a creature of passions and instincts. Growling, he wrapped his arms around the mer and crushed his lips to Aurus's.

With Aurus, he didn't need to take it slow. He could tell his partner had sexual experience. While Jaden had been shy and uncertain, Aurus knew exactly what to do. Vaar didn't hesitate. He plundered the mer's mouth, relishing the addictive kiss of the prince.

His hands traveled over Aurus's muscled back, clutching the other man's buttocks and pulling him closer. Aurus moaned when Vaar's fingers rubbed against his crease. Vaar wanted to tear apart the material of Aurus's pants and bury himself inside the mer's hot body.

Aurus, however, had something else in mind. He tore their mouths apart and pressed hot kisses down Vaar's neck. Vaar threaded his hands in Aurus's golden hair,

aching to pull those sweet lips back to his. Something kept him from doing so, however, and he allowed Aurus to take the lead.

The mer slid off Vaar's lap and knelt at his feet. He undid the clasp that held Vaar's breeches and started to lower them. Vaar eagerly helped him, wiggling a bit to free himself from the constraining material. Aurus tugged them off altogether, releasing Vaar's dick from its confines.

When Aurus's fist closed over his erection, Vaar groaned at the exquisite feeling. "Gods, yes, just like that."

The mer gave him an evil grin. "I'm only just beginning."

Aurus lowered his head to Vaar's shaft and lapped up the precum already gathering at the tip. Vaar almost swallowed his tongue at the sight of the prince of Atlantis pleasuring his cock. He could have come right then and there, it looked so incredible, but he held back. He wanted to feel Aurus's warmth surround him. He ached to fuck his lover's mouth and have Aurus swallow his spunk.

Clinging to his resolve proved quite difficult. Aurus teased him, licking and nipping, massaging his testicles in slow, sensuous motions. Vaar's control finally broke. "Enough," he snarled. "Suck me."

Aurus's eyes shone brightly, the fire of lust igniting them with an otherworldly flame. Without a word, he

complied with Vaar's command. He took Vaar's cock all the way to the root, a considerable feat given the size of Vaar's erection. Even back when he'd lived with his kin, few had been able to swallow him whole.

All thought scrambled when the mer began to suck in earnest. Each motion made Vaar's pleasure soar even higher. Trusting Aurus could take it, Vaar began to thrust, fucking his lover's face. A moan signaled Aurus enjoyed and got off on Vaar's dominance, and very much loved sucking dick.

In that moment, a feeling niggled at the back of Vaar's mind. With difficulty, Vaar tore his gaze from Aurus and looked up. Chrys and Jaden stood in the doorway, gaping at them.

Vaar froze when he looked into Jaden's eyes. He didn't know what to say, how to explain. Arousal had basically short-circuited his brain and reason eluded him. He didn't want to apologize, because that, in itself, would be wrong. He felt a connection to Aurus. He refused to spit on the gift the mer prince gave him.

Jaden and Chrys took pity on him. They walked inside the room, naked, their hard cocks clearly illustrating how much the scene aroused them. "You don't mind if we join you, right?" Jaden said.

The words sounded confident, but Vaar heard a

touch of hesitation regardless. The shadow of doubt vanished when Chrys wrapped his arm around his twin's naked waist and drew him closer. "It's not nice to play without us."

Aurus released Vaar's cock, and Vaar gasped in protest. Jaden grinned at him, and Vaar vowed to teach the three mer a little lesson in withholding an orgasm.

Ignoring Vaar's frustration, Aurus got up and replied, "Well, you were the ones who started it."

Yes, Jaden and Chrys had started it all, not only this little make-out session, but the whole emotional quandary they were involved in. But they were all together now, and Vaar would make the best of it. They'd manage to sort things out eventually.

Vaar pulled his pants up, arranged his scant clothing to cover himself, and shot to his feet. "This started a long time ago," he said. "We're just clarifying it now."

This had begun before he even appeared in the lives of the three mer. Jaden had suffered in shamed silence for so many years, but that would change now. Together, the four of them would start anew.

Even so, Vaar half-wished he'd stayed quiet, because the tone of sexual teasing vanished. Everyone took a moment to acknowledge the importance of what they were doing. Gods, sometimes he hated being wise and



responsible.

"You're right," Jaden answered. "Can we make it work?"

Vaar certainly wanted to, but he waited for the others to answer.

"You know we can," Aurus replied with a smile.

Chrys licked Jaden's neck. "Stop worrying, brother," he whispered. "We'll be fine."

Jaden gasped and Vaar's cock, which had softened a bit, turned rock hard once more. Thank the gods for Chrys's intervention. Vaar's rational part quickly lost ground. He wanted to touch, to kiss, to fuck, and to own.

"Perhaps we should take this someplace else," Aurus said. "I really like your kitchen, but it's not my idea of romantic décor."

"The bedroom it is, then," Vaar growled. Moving faster than the eye could see, he grabbed Chrys and Jaden and draped the two young mer over his shoulders.

"Hey!" Aurus protested. "What about me?"

"You should hurry," Vaar teased, "or else I'll eat them all up."

Jaden chuckled and Chrys let out an appreciative hum. "The sight is really nice from here, by the way. Hurry up, Aurus."

Vaar carried the twins to his bedroom and dumped

them on the furs. Thank the gods he'd crafted his makeshift bed to be extra large. It would easily fit the four of them.

Chrys rolled around, apparently testing the feel of the rough covers on his skin. "This is very different from Atlantis."

"You should see how it feels on your tail," Jaden said with a grin. He climbed on top of Chrys and pinned his twin down. "Revenge!"

Vaar got rid of his pants while he watched Jaden assault Chrys's mouth. If that was Jaden's idea of revenge, Vaar couldn't even fathom what a gift of thanks would look like. He heard Aurus come in and let out a soft growl, "Sweet Sea Mother... they're so beautiful."

"They are, my dear Prince Aurus. They are indeed."

\* \* \* \*

Chrys writhed against the furs, the feel of his twin's mouth on his own sinfully delicious. He couldn't believe he'd never realized the true extent of their bond. How had he ever shut this desire out?

Jaden may have thought he was the only one to blame for their separation, but Chrys knew differently. He'd been just as guilty. He'd instinctively replaced Jaden with Aurus, too afraid to admit what he felt for his brother. And all this time, he hadn't seen that Jaden suffered in silence because Chrys denied them both.

But no longer. Their bond was finally complete, whole and pure once again. Chrys would always be grateful, and he'd always have a special place in his heart for the two men who made it possible, Aurus and Vaar.

He sensed their gazes, hot and branding, lustful and wanton. It should have felt odd, but it didn't. His connection to Jaden extended to the other two men, albeit in a different way. Aurus had always been his ideal lover, the one man who'd cared about them when everyone pushed them away. And Vaar... Vaar was something else entirely. The darkness to Aurus's light, a force that could undo and save at the same time. Chrys had witnessed the extent of Vaar's power. He also understood the gentleness and love hiding behind that rough, dark exterior. The four of them fit together.

The kiss broke and Jaden lifted his head, smiling down at Chrys. The ends of his green locks tickled Chrys's legs, occasionally brushing against the side scales. "I love you," Jaden murmured.

Tears welled up in Chrys's eyes, but he refused to cry. He'd wept enough for an entire lifetime. Now, he'd finally found his happiness and he'd grab it with both hands. "Love you, too," he answered.

Footsteps closed in and Chrys looked over Jaden's shoulder to see Vaar and Aurus approach. Jaden turned and

said, "What are you waiting for?"

"Maybe a special invitation," Aurus replied, wiggling his eyebrows.

Jaden twisted once more and the motion made his ass rub against Chrys's dick. Chrys bit his lip to suppress a groan. In his twin's eyes he read a lustful intent, a wicked desire to have the four of them together. Yes, they could give Aurus the special invitation he wanted.

With a single gaze, Chrys understood what Jaden wanted to do. Jaden got off him and Chrys rolled over, shifting his position to be on all fours. He prowled over to the two standing men, smiling when his twin did the same. It was a weird way to move, since he'd just gotten the hang of having legs, but he figured it out easily enough. His body knew what to do, and strikingly, he didn't find it awkward in any way. The passionate gazes of the two men were too intense to even consider such trivialities.

Chrys stopped just before he reached the end of the furs and crooked one finger in invitation. "Come on. Don't tease."

Jaden leaned back and flipped his hair, exposing his nakedness for everyone to admire. "We've waited long enough."

The two men decided they agreed. With a growl, Vaar pounced, attacking Chrys with the full ferocity of his

kind. No sooner had Chrys's back hit the furs than Vaar took possession of his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye, Chrys managed to see Aurus sweep over Jaden before Chrys surrendered to Vaar's assault.

Chrys had kissed two men in his life—three if he counted Jasper, and he didn't. Vaar proved different. He tasted familiar, yet unlike anything Chrys had ever experienced. Aurus had been passionate and possessive, but at the same time, gentle. With Vaar, all those things blended into a perfect model of dominance. Chrys could do nothing but submit and allow Vaar to take everything he wanted.

When Vaar kissed him, a waterfall of emotions cascaded over Chrys. He tasted Aurus and Jaden in Vaar's mouth. Strangely, he could identify his own flavor, most likely from Vaar's perspective. Everything melded together, the onslaught effectively making Chrys's brain shut down.

Vaar flipped him on to all fours once again and Chrys pushed his ass up, aching to be filled and possessed. Lips pressed against his own, this time Jaden's. His twin gasped, and Chrys felt Aurus prepare Jaden for invasion. Vaar pressed one digit inside Chrys's channel. It unerringly hit Chrys's special spot, making him moan into his twin's mouth.

As the kiss broke, Chrys reached for Jaden, aching

to touch someone, anyone, to contribute in their shared pleasure. "Don't," Vaar growled in his ear. "We have plenty of time. Don't rush it."

Chrys whimpered and nodded. He remained on all fours, offering himself to Vaar. He held Jaden's gaze, loving the way his brother's green orbs deepened with lust and love. Through the furs, their fingers interlaced, the brief contact anchoring them both in a world that turned to pure fire.

Chrys didn't know what to look at, what to feel anymore. He watched and sensed Aurus move behind Jaden, caressing the curve of his twin's back and spreading Jaden's ass cheeks. Vaar held Chrys with a hard, sure hand, biting down on his neck and back. Vaar's every touch sent fire licking across Chrys's skin. The conflict between the touches of the two men made Chrys's mind whirl.

A slap landed on Chrys's bottom and he yelped in pleasure-pain. Chrys and Jaden gasped at the same time, and Jaden's hold on Chrys's fingers tightened. "It feels odd," Jaden murmured.

"I know," Chrys somehow managed to reply.

"It's all right, my treasures," Vaar rumbled. "Just accept it."

Another finger penetrated Chrys's body, or was it two? Chrys couldn't tell. He could no longer distinguish

what was happening to him and what his brother experienced. The fire in his body grew, until his eyes misted over, clouding with the familiar bluish tinge. Chrys clung to Jaden's hands more tightly, refusing to let go. He wanted to feel his lovers inside him before he came.

Vaar's fingers abandoned Chrys's opening. A thick cock nudged at his entrance, and Chrys let out a moan of need. "Please..."

With a low growl, the dragon slowly impaled him, his hard shaft spearing Chrys, splitting him in two. Once Vaar had fully embedded himself, Chrys felt another cock breach him, over and through Vaar. He cried out, the disembodied penetration as powerful as Vaar's material one.

He thought things couldn't get any better, but the two men started a steady rhythm, fucking him and Jaden in tandem. The pleasure assaulted Chrys from four different directions. He felt two dicks thrusting into him at the same time, and his own dick buried in two willing bodies. He had no idea how such a thing could even be possible but he followed Vaar's advice and accepted it.

He lost himself in the bodies of his three lovers, opening his soul to the rush of feeling. The boundaries between reality and dream blurred, just like those between Chrys's heart and those of his men. With each and every

thrust, everything turned better, their union climbing to sheer and pure perfection. It became too much, too beautiful, and Chrys couldn't hold back anymore.

With a choked scream, he exploded, his power blasting out of him as he found his peak. He felt another orgasm burst out of him, but couldn't tell if it came from him or Jaden. He didn't know. Two cocks pulsed inside him, filling him with hot jets of cum. The magic of four souls blended as one, echoing inside Chrys like a single entity.

Chrys's vision cleared and he realized in awe that Vaar's bedroom now looked completely different. If it had been beautiful before, it now looked simply indescribable. Jade, chrysocolla and gold mixed together in a new, unique element, thin threads of black arching through it like tree branches. It now covered most of the furs and the floor of the cavern.

Chrys summoned his magic back and restored the furs. He gasped. Somehow, he'd managed to control the magic of his three lovers as well.

"Don't be surprised, treasure," the dragon whispered. "We are now one. It's only natural that our elements have bonded as well."

Chrys couldn't find enough strength to muster a reply. He collapsed on the furs, exhausted. Jaden fell by his



side and they cuddled together in a warm embrace. Vaar and Aurus shielded them from each side, and the dragon covered them all with one of the pelts.

Feeling protected and happy, Chrys closed his eyes and relaxed. In a few seconds, he surrendered to sleep.

## CHAPTER NINE

*A few weeks later*

Aurus watched the twins roll through the grass, laughing. It strangely reminded him of the day he'd first met them. There was a big difference between then and now, however. Both Jaden and Chrys had become his lovers.

They'd been on Vaar's island for three weeks. Vaar had shown them around, taking them through the deep forests and down to the beautiful beach. They'd explored the beautiful land together and made love in the water and on the white shores. Throughout it all, they were getting to know each other. The affection and passion between them grew day by day. Aurus still couldn't believe it.

By his side, the dragon shook his head. "Stop fooling around," he told the twins. "You'll hurt yourselves."

The tone held both love and concern. Aurus marveled at how the fierce beast that had terrified Atlantis for hundreds of years could end up being so warm and caring inside. The twins looked up and grinned sheepishly.

"Don't worry so much," Chrys said. "We'll be fine."

"This isn't Atlantis, Chrys," Aurus reprimanded. "There are dangerous plants around here."

Chrys and Jaden sighed. "Okay, okay," Jaden agreed. "We get it."

Vaar laughed and shared a look with Aurus. Aurus knew what his dragon lover thought. In many ways, the twins were still very childish. It only made Aurus—and Vaar, as well—want to protect them more. "Don't pout, treasure," Vaar said. "Come, we'll go to the beach. It's safer there."

Chrys and Jaden immediately brightened up. They made their way to Aurus and Vaar, wide smiles on their beautiful faces, hands clasped together.

"I like that plan," Chrys said.

Aurus's gaze took in the sight of the twins and he swallowed as lust swelled inside him. By now, he knew better than to try to resist its pull. His lovers would sense it anyway. "Come here," he beckoned.

Chrys and Jaden obeyed. They pressed their warm, slender bodies against him. Jaden took Aurus's lips in a sweet kiss and the second twin nibbled on his neck. "You're insatiable," Chrys muttered.

"How can we not be with such beauties around?" Vaar offered. "I want my kiss now, please."

Chrys laughed, and Aurus caught sight of him pouncing on Vaar. For a little while, they drank in each other's tastes, leisurely kissing. But Aurus decided he

needed more, and for that, the beautiful white beach was a more appropriate setting.

Aurus lifted Jaden in his arms and carried him through the foliage. Even if he hadn't spent so much time on the island, his sense of orientation helped him map everything out in his head and he had no trouble finding his way. Behind him, Vaar followed carrying Chrys.

Aurus placed Jaden down when they reached the end of the forest. In the distance, the water of the Windswept Sea shone brightly, as if the sun sent a myriad of gems scattering over its surface. Jaden bounded down the little hill, laughing as he played through the sand. With a happy yelp, Chrys followed behind his brother.

"They're hopeless," Aurus said, shaking his head.

Vaar wrapped his arm around Aurus's waist. "That they are, but we wouldn't have them any other way."

Together with his dragon lover, Aurus joined the twins on the beach. He discarded his breeches, loving the way the hot sun caressed his skin. The sand felt warm and soft underneath his toes, and Aurus understood why the two young mer liked to play in it so much.

Vaar took off his pants as well and dumped them on the ground. They sat down next to each other, watching Jaden and Chrys laugh and roll together in the sand. "They never really had a childhood," Aurus said. "I'm glad they

can be happy now."

He leaned against Vaar's muscled shoulder, reveling in the intimacy of the moment.

"Sometimes I wonder if they aren't too young," Vaar mused.

Aurus nudged Vaar with his hip. "Hey, now! What's all that? So you're ten times older than the three of us put together. Who cares? Certainly not us."

For a few seconds, Vaar didn't answer. "I suppose," he finally said. "You need someone to protect you."

Aurus smiled, knowing Vaar needed them as much as they did Vaar. As if guessing the topic of their conversation, the twins stopped their playful banter. The sibling battle turned into lovers' caresses. Aurus's mouth watered as he watched Jaden and Chrys kiss and rub against each other.

"I guess they're not so childlike, after all," he noted.

"Quite right," Vaar replied, all doubt gone from his voice, replaced by desire.

The dragon got up, obviously intending to join Jaden and Chrys in their sexual frenzy. But then he tensed and looked up at the sky.

"Get Jaden and Chrys and hide," he threw at Aurus.

Vaar's voice held urgency and Aurus shot to his feet. "What is it?" he asked as they raced down the beach.

The twins must have heard them or felt their anxiety as they broke apart. When Vaar and Aurus reached them, Chrys inquired, "What's wrong?"

"Something's coming," Vaar replied. "Go with Aurus and find shelter."

Jaden's eyes went wide. "But what about you? We can't leave you."

Vaar pressed a chaste peck on Jaden's forehead and squeezed the twins in his arms. "Don't worry," he whispered. "I'll be fine."

Breaking the embrace, Vaar turned toward Aurus. Aurus's heart fell at his lover's expression. Whatever the dragon sensed, it had to be bad. "I'll protect them with my life," he told Vaar.

"I know," Vaar answered. "Take care."

Aurus took Chrys and Jaden and led them away. Just as they went up the hill, Aurus instinctively felt the change in Vaar. His lover had shifted into his beast form. The moment they entered the forest, Chrys and Jaden pulled away from his hold.

"We can't go any farther," Jaden protested. "We have to at least know what's going on."

Aurus took a deep breath, struggling against an avalanche of emotions. On one hand, he had to keep the twins safe, on the other, he couldn't leave Vaar behind.

Loving three men sometimes proved very difficult.

The choice was taken out of his hands when a cloud of dark spots appeared on the horizon. He cursed, knowing it would be useless to go farther away from the beach. Motion would draw attention to them and if Aurus had guessed right about the sudden intruders, it would only make things worse.

They hid inside the heavy foliage. Aurus held Chrys and Jaden close and kept a watchful eye on the beach. Vaar launched himself into the air and hovered in one spot, waiting.

Aurus's eyes finally confirmed the approaching forms as dragons. Unlike Vaar, they didn't seem black, but from the distance, Aurus couldn't be certain. The horizon darkened from the number of the flying beasts and Aurus counted at least a few dozen of the creatures coming in fast.

As much as Aurus would have liked to help Vaar with this battle, he knew he'd just be in the way. He'd be useless against something so powerful and would only make things harder.

As if the dragon battalion didn't suffice, the water suddenly began to ripple. Aurus gaped as hundreds of mer emerged from the sea.

His father had come for him.

\* \* \* \*

Vaar glanced toward his enemies, anger and hatred coursing through his veins. The past few weeks had been too good to be true. Animals no longer died, plants bloomed and flourished. At last, his curse had been lifted. In his moments of doubt, he'd been waiting for something to go wrong, to separate them. Now, it had finally happened. But Vaar would die before he allowed any harm to come to his three lovers.

Why had his people come now, of all times? Why couldn't they just leave him be? According to the terms of the exile, the banished dragons were allowed their lairs, and this island had belonged to the black dragons for a long, long time. He hadn't broken any rules. What did they want with him?

Then, Vaar saw it. The sea opened up to reveal the army of mer. *Of course*. Aurus was prince of Atlantis and the king would undoubtedly want him back. He must have talked to the dragon sovereign about the need to eliminate Vaar.

A smart strategy, since even with all the mermen of Atlantis, Vaar would most likely still win. It would be difficult and he'd end up injured, exhausted, maybe on the brink of death, but he'd win. Not so with dragons. Only one creature existed in this realm that Vaar could do very little against—his king.



For the first time in too many years to count, Vaar felt trapped. His situation defined the meaning of "impossible odds". He wouldn't have minded so much if he'd been alone, but he had three loved ones to protect.

He watched the mermen approach and he threw a shield around the island. It took quite a lot of magic to surround it in a protective screen, but it would keep anyone but the dragon king from entering.

At first, the mermen didn't seem to notice, but once they came closer, they immediately recoiled, Vaar's dark power pushing them back.

"There!" one of the Atlanteans shouted, pointing to Vaar.

Vaar flew higher up, knowing the mer would start to attack him with their elements. Indeed, several started to summon their magic, spears of different colors appearing in their hands. Strikingly enough, the assault didn't begin. A tall, white-haired mer lifted a hand and spoke out, "No. We wait."

Vaar easily identified him as the king of Atlantis. He looked much like Aurus, but there was something in his bearing, in his voice, that Vaar loathed. This man had wanted to hurt Jaden and Chrys. Vaar would make him pay.

Vaar shook himself, knowing that surrendering to his instincts now would only bring about disaster. The other

dragons were very close now, and the Atlantean king obviously expected them to do his dirty work. Vaar wouldn't allow the mer to get his filthy hands on the twins and Aurus. If all else failed, he'd swamp the water with his power and kill the entire mer army. His lovers would hate him for it, but he'd most likely perish in the process anyway.

The dragons took their time in approaching, deliberately making an entrance or pointing out they didn't consider Vaar a threat. "Greetings," he rumbled. "It is an honor to have you here."

"Greetings, Vaarlieongshaolith," the dragon king replied. Vaar mentally winced upon hearing his full name for the first time in centuries. Only those belonging to their race could speak the full, elaborate names, and Vaar had long ago given up on it. He'd left it behind the day he'd been exiled.

"My name is Vaar now, Sire," he answered calmly.

"I see," the king replied. He seemed just as Vaar remembered him; cool, collected, the same Ghaankeloalith Vaar knew and hated. "Very well. I suppose you realize why We are here."

"Actually, I don't, Sire," Vaar answered. "To my knowledge, I have done nothing that goes against Your commands."

Ghaan ignored him. "King Diamond has brought to Our attention that you lived within the borders of Atlantean lands for the past few hundred years."

Vaar wanted to laugh. "Nobody said I couldn't." As a matter of fact, Vaar had been granted permission to use the area by the ancestor of the current merman king. Apparently, the Atlantean had conveniently forgotten about that. "I had an agreement with the mer to establish my lair there."

For a few seconds, Ghaan paused. The dragon king would know if Vaar didn't speak the truth. Vaar found it annoying they danced around the real issue.

"This is true," Ghaan said at last. "However, you also kidnapped King Diamond's son."

"Not so," Vaar answered. "I have no need to kidnap mer princes."

He deliberately phrased his reply in an ambiguous way, since he had, indeed, stolen someone. Only Jaden was not a prince, and therefore, Vaar didn't lie.

Ghaan seemed annoyed. "Is Prince Aurus here or not, Vaar?"

"He is," Vaar replied reluctantly, "but he stays because he so desires."

He loathed having to be respectful to their dreadful excuse of a sovereign, but he didn't have much choice. The

dragon king was the one creature in existence that could withstand the power of Vaar's death magic. The royal line belonged to blessed, fae dragons, immune to all spells. No element or enchantment could hurt them, only physical force. Vaar might be larger and more powerful from a physical standpoint, but his claws and jaws were no match for the strong fae magic.

"You must return him to his father at once," Ghaan rumbled.

"Aurus is not an object," Vaar shot back. "He goes where he wants to. I cannot order him to stay or to leave."

"Vaarlíongshaolith..." the king began threateningly, "I am sick of the impudence of your kind. Our nation has been at peace since your exile—and the moment you appear once more, we risk war."

This time, Vaar couldn't suppress his laugh. "War? How exactly do you risk war? You can crush the Atlanteans by yourself. They are not a threat to dragon kind in any way."

Why were they playing this game anyway? They all knew why Ghaan had come here in the first place, to get rid of Vaar.

Vaar understood now why the island had been so barren and unlivable. Most of his kin had already been killed after being cast off. Vaar and the saurion had

probably been among the few who'd gotten away, saved by their choice to go into slumber.

Vaar held his tongue with difficulty, trying to figure out a way to get his lovers out. Ghaan would very likely kill him and hurt the three mer just out of spite. He would have tried to block the dragons' way with his own body, but the island was surrounded by Atlanteans.

"Be silent!" Ghaan growled at him. "You've gone against the Great Dragon Nation for the last time. Die now."

That was the only warning Vaar got before his king sent a wave of magic toward him. At first, Vaar managed to dodge it and retaliated with his own power. He didn't get the chance to see if it had any effect, because the second blow hit his wing. A third and a fourth came, showering his body with shocks of pain. From every direction, the dragons assaulted Vaar. Vaar tried to resist and fight back but it was hopeless.

A powerful spell from Ghaan cut off his breathing and drained him of all energy. Defeated, Vaar collapsed from the sky and fell into the sea.

\* \* \* \*

Jaden watched in panic as the battle raged on. Blasts of magic filled the sky, surrounding Vaar in an eerie spectacle. But Jaden had no eye for the beauty. He could

only feel Vaar's pain, anger, and hatred.

Vaar was fighting a losing battle. A powerful blow from the leader of the attackers took out the final remnants of his resistance, and Vaar fell, his majestic body sinking into the sea with a sickening splash.

Jaden stared at the spot where Vaar's body had disappeared for the longest time. He couldn't believe his eyes. He simply refused to think Vaar was gone.

"Jaden!" A voice reached out to him, warm and concerned. Jaden turned to look at Aurus. The heartbreak he could see in the older mer's eyes drove a knife through his chest. The numbness and shock vanished and he finally acknowledged what had happened. "Vaar!" he cried out. "Vaar! Vaar..."

He repeated his lover's name over and over, the dragon's absence a physical pain more acute than anything he'd ever experienced. He shouted until his throat was raw, hoping that perhaps it might bring his lost love back to him.

Aurus wrapped his arms around Jaden, rocking him gently. Jaden buried his face in Aurus's shoulder, while Chrys hugged him from behind. The knowledge of Vaar's sacrifice tore Jaden apart. The dragon had left them in Aurus's care, knowing it would most likely come to this.

"Breathe, Jaden," Aurus murmured in his ear. "Breathe and focus."

Jaden did his best to comply. He realized his connection with Vaar remained in place. That meant his dragon lover had to still be alive. "We have to save him," he told Aurus.

Chrys and Aurus nodded at the same time.

"Perhaps if we try hard enough, we can lend him our power," Chrys suggested.

Jaden had only done something like that with his twin, but it would be worth it to try. "Okay. Let's do it."

Ignoring the mer and dragons currently circling the island, Jaden, Chrys, and Aurus positioned themselves in a triangle and took each other's hands. Jaden thought about Vaar, about his black eyes and mysterious smile. He recalled meeting Vaar, back when the dragon had been just a presence, a distant entity. He remembered their first kiss, their first time together and the way Vaar had taught him how to shift. Images of the four of them together flashed through his mind's eye, their love and union solidifying their bond.

His magic answered his call and Jaden flooded the connection to Vaar with it, gasping as two more streams of power joined his.

Jaden's eyes filled with tears when Vaar responded, the dark flame he identified as his lover. Their powers fed the black fire and it flared brighter than ever. Jaden

collapsed on the grass, his body exhausted, but his mind still bonded with Vaar's.

His vision cleared just in time to watch the waters part and see Vaar emerge from the dark depths once more. His appearance sent powerful waves crashing against the shores, making the army of mer scatter in panic. The dragons seemed shocked, having believed they'd taken Vaar out.

They were in for a very nasty surprise, Jaden thought. If Vaar had been tremendously powerful before, he now had three lovers to back him up—and it showed. Vaar's black skin seemed to be bathed in a weird blue-green glow, and a thread of gold whispered around the scales on his back. He'd also become larger, more imposing, double the size of what he'd been before.

"I won't let you hurt them," Vaar growled.

"You can't stop me," the dragon king shot back.

The dragon king sent a bolt of magic, but when it hit Vaar it just dissipated like a wisp of cloud. The shield Jaden and Chrys held up could not be breached so easily. "Go on," Jaden whispered. "We're here for you."

Vaar couldn't have heard him, at least not with his normal senses, but he must have felt Jaden's encouragement. With a mighty roar, Vaar summoned his own magic. This time, Aurus's power fueled Vaar's, making



the darkness black-gold.

Jaden held his breath when Vaar sent a blast toward his king. The other dragon didn't move, believing himself immune. Jaden didn't doubt it had been so before. He'd seen Vaar's magic hit the king with absolutely no effect.

This time, when the spell struck, the dragon let out a howl of agony. For a few seconds, Jaden thought the rest of the beasts would attack, but they didn't. Instead, they formed a wide circle, creating an arena.

Through his connection with Vaar, Jaden absorbed the knowledge of what would happen. The blast that had hurt the king meant a challenge, a challenge for the rule of the Great Dragon Kingdom. It was no longer only about them, but about the fate of all the dragons out there.

All the while, the army of mer were organizing themselves once more, preparing to descend upon the island. Vaar's shield had faltered and nothing stood between the army and Jaden, Chrys, and Aurus. Vaar had his claws full with fighting the dragon king. They needed to find a solution on their own.

Panic swelled inside Jaden and he squeezed his twin's and Aurus's hands hard. He might be exhausted, but he didn't have a choice but to use his abilities once more. *"Help us,"* he sent out to the creatures of the sea. *"Help us, please."*

Over and over, they repeated the chant. They called out to anyone who might aid them, opening their hearts to the Sea Mother. A cold wind began to blow, sweeping over them. The waters rippled once again and a loud screech-like roar pierced Jaden's hearing.

A snake-like head emerged from the deep—the saurion.

As the great serpent advanced, a frosty layer covered the surface of the sea, expanding around the island at great speed. The Atlanteans screamed in panic, lunging for land, but they didn't get the chance to find refuge. The cool waters numbed their bodies and they floated uselessly, their powers and elements worthless against the magic of the great snake.

"Please, don't kill them," Jaden begged the saurion.  
"They are our kin."

"As long as the king is alive, he will never stop hunting you," the saurion hissed back. Nevertheless, he did as Jaden asked. The chill in the water decreased as the ice vanished.

With the immediate threat neutralized, Jaden directed his attention to the skies. Vaar still battled Ghaan, but this time, he was visibly winning. The saurion cheered Vaar on with a hiss. "That's it! Take him out. Make him pay."

Jaden definitely agreed. He disliked violence, but Ghaan deserved it for what he'd done to his people.

A spiral of gold-black formed in front of Vaar. Larger and larger it grew until it almost covered the sun. Roaring, Vaar sent the projectile toward his king. It struck true, engulfing Ghaan in a whirlpool of darkness.

When the magic dissipated, the defeated dragon fell into the water. Immediately, the saurion headed toward the spot where the former king's body had vanished. Jaden experienced a brief chill, wondering what the saurion intended, but pushed it out of his mind. It didn't matter anymore. Vaar had won.

The other dragons surrounded Vaar and flew around him in a weird dance as they acknowledged Vaar as the new king. It was fascinating, if a bit frightening. What would happen to them now that Vaar had become dragon royalty?

Vaar disengaged himself from his new subjects and flew down. He landed on the beach and shifted. His hair had blond streaks through it now, and his dark eyes showed occasional speckles of blue and green. Jaden realized Chrys and Aurus's appearances had also changed, and he guessed his own had as well. Each of them now boasted the color of all four elements in one way or another.

Ecstatic, Jaden abandoned his hiding spot and

bounded down the hill toward his lover, Chrys and Aurus by his side. Aurus got to Vaar first and pounced on their dragon, hugging him tightly. Chrys and Jaden reached them at the same time and joined the embrace.

It felt so good, so incredible to be in Vaar's arms once more. They'd only just made love a few hours before, but years seemed to have passed. To think they'd been so close to losing this... Jaden couldn't even bear the thought.

They broke away from each other and Jaden threw a gaze toward the sea. At some point, some of the mer had washed up on the beach—most likely the saurion's doing. Among them, King Diamond.

"I have to talk to my father," Aurus said softly.

"You have the backing of the dragons now," Vaar answered. "There's nothing he can do. But go on."

Aurus walked toward the barely conscious mermen. Jaden watched his lover help King Diamond up, rubbing his arms to cast away the remnant of the chill. In Jaden's opinion, Diamond didn't deserve the kind consideration, but he couldn't blame Aurus for it. Diamond *was* his father, after all.

Finally, the king recovered. Jaden stood close enough to hear the conversation and it didn't please him. "You have to come home, son," Diamond said in a broken voice. "Your place is in Atlantis."

Aurus shook his head. "My place is where my heart is, with Vaar, Jaden, and Chrys."

Diamond's eyes widened. "You cannot be serious. Son, you need a proper mating, not this mockery."

Aurus sighed and Jaden's heart hurt for his lover. He wondered how his own father would take their new relationship. Not too well, Jaden guessed. "Please, Father, leave before something worse happens. You've caused enough pain for the day."

"Aurus! You have a duty to Atlantis. Don't turn your back on me."

"I have a duty to my heart and my lovers," Aurus replied. "The rest doesn't matter."

Aurus got up, leaving the king standing in the middle of the beach, alone. With a final cry, Diamond shouted, "If not for me or Atlantis, for your mother. Come home, Aurus."

Jaden clenched his fists, fighting a surge of hatred. What a low blow. How could Diamond use Aurus's mother to blackmail him?

Aurus turned slowly and gave his father one last look. "I might, one day, when we are all welcome there."

Jaden very much doubted that would happen too soon. Chrys and he had suffered the opprobrium of the Atlanteans for the better part of their lives, while Vaar had

basically been the monster in their nightmares. How could the mer nation understand the connection between these three outcasts and their prince?

In spite of the family bonds, Jaden knew it would take quite a while for Aurus to forgive the king for what he'd done. Diamond's intervention had almost caused Vaar's death, and it wouldn't be something easy to forget.

In the end, all that lost its importance when Aurus joined them once more. "So what now?" he asked.

Vaar stared at the sky, where the dragons still soared. "Good question. I have no idea."

## EPILOGUE

The capital city of The Great Dragon Kingdom was everything Chrys expected and more. Built on the shore of the Windswept Sea, the main keep hid countless treasures and priceless artifacts. Now, that very same keep had become Chrys's home, and a gilded cage.

Chrys leaned against the solid marble banister and sighed. The view from the balcony of their room was beautiful, but Chrys couldn't really appreciate it, not anymore. The rock felt cool under his touch, chilling him to the bone—and Chrys just wanted for someone to make him warm again.

They'd been living at the dragon king's palace for the past month, setting things in order, righting the wrongs left behind by Ghaan. Vaar's first decision as acting sovereign had been to rescind the order branding black dragons and saurions as the shame of their nation. Vaar had also chosen to act only as regent until Ghaan's son, Roan, came of age. Chrys couldn't agree more. He'd met Roan, and he liked the young dragon. In fact, Roan didn't seem to hold any resentment against Vaar for killing his father. Ghaan's dethronement had been long overdue. It would take time, but slowly the dragons would begin to forget and rebuild.

As a prince, Aurus had knowledge of the rulings of a royal court and helped Vaar with his new duties. The dragons didn't appreciate receiving commands from a mer, but they couldn't do anything about it. Vaar's power now flowed through Aurus, and through Chrys and Jaden as well.

Even with the shared connection, Chrys sometimes felt abandoned, or rather, useless. The Great Dragon Kingdom fascinated him, but he never got to be alone with Vaar and Aurus. Thankfully, he had Jaden. Without his twin's presence, Chrys would've probably lost it already.

As if summoned by Chrys's thoughts, Jaden stepped onto the balcony. "Hey," he greeted. "What's with the glum face?"

Chrys sighed again. "You know as well as I do. They're taking forever today."

Jaden joined him next to the banister and stared out toward the horizon. It was almost dusk, and the glow of the dying sun painted the distant waters of the Windswept Sea in brilliant colors. "That's true," Jaden replied. "Things are complicated now. They have a lot of responsibilities."

Chrys realized that, of course, and he hated being so demanding. The Dragon Kingdom had literally split into pieces as many had trouble accepting Vaar as a rightful ruler. Even those that had disliked Ghaan had their



misgivings. Chrys would hear them from time to time, when they didn't realize he was around. *"What could be Vaar's agenda?"* they asked themselves. *"How do we deal with this?"*

It upset Chrys greatly, and he just wanted to go home to their little paradise island away from everyone else. That was unlikely to happen, at least, not anytime soon. Even after Roan took the throne, Vaar would be required to stay by the new king's side, to act as an advisor. All duties aside, Vaar wanted to build a new, safer world for dragons, to find all the survivors of Ghaan's rule and reinstate them in their society. An astronomical task, in and by itself. Chrys would have liked to help out, but instead, he remained trapped in his chambers, useless.

Jaden wrapped his arm around Chrys, bringing their bodies together. "We're young now and can't be expected to know the inner workings of the courts. That's why we should study, so we can aid them in the future."

Chrys felt himself flush at Jaden's gentle reprimand. Vaar had assigned a tutor to teach them everything about dragon culture, from their alphabet and traditions, to the different species and the history of their kingdom. Chrys tried to assimilate all the information, but he'd begun to believe it would all be for nothing and they'd never get to use it. He berated himself for his own childish behavior.

The last thing Vaar and Aurus needed was to worry about Chrys's foolish sulking.

"I get it," he told his twin. "I won't skip lessons anymore."

"Don't worry, you didn't miss much today," Jaden replied. "The tutor seemed distracted."

Chrys gave Jaden a knowing look. "Or maybe you were."

Jaden stuck his tongue out at him. "At least I'm trying."

At the blatant challenge, Chrys glomped his twin and they fell on the balcony floor with a painful thud. Chrys attacked Jaden's ribs, mercilessly finding his sibling's ticklish spots. Jaden tried to fight back and move away, but he remained helpless in front of Chrys's assault. Howls of laughter filled the air as they rolled around, forgetting for a few moments where they were and who might be watching.

When they stopped, Chrys collapsed on top of his twin, nuzzling Jaden's neck. "You know," Jaden said all of a sudden, "they said they'd come back for dinner. It's way past that time now."

Chrys lifted his head to look at his twin. He could tell Jaden was scheming something. "And what do you suggest?"

Jaden wiggled his eyebrows at Chrys. "We call

them back."

Jaden pushed Chrys off, and this time, Chrys let him. Whatever his sibling had in mind, it would be very interesting and exciting. Jaden had proven to be very creative in the bedroom, and both were young men with healthy sexual appetites. Because of Vaar and Aurus's ghastly schedules, they didn't get to be together as much as they'd have liked, in bed or out of it.

Chrys and Jaden couldn't fuck during their free time because their emotions automatically transferred into Vaar and Aurus's minds, sabotaging any chance of concentration. Today, that would work to the twins' advantage. Their lovers wouldn't be able to stay away.

Jaden pressed his lips to Chrys's and they shared a slow, relaxed kiss. The moment quickly grew more passionate when Jaden reached for Chrys's tunic and began to unbutton it. As the material parted, he slipped his hands inside to caress Chrys's skin. Chrys shuddered, his twin's touch making pleasure flow through him. Their little roll around had made him hard, if not exactly desperate, but the arousal was increasing, especially when Jaden reached out to tweak his nipple. The nub responded, peaking into Jaden's touch.

When the kiss broke, Chrys let out a moan and lowered himself to the ground, allowing his twin to do

whatever he wanted. Jaden straddled him and began to remove Chrys's clothing. The first piece that went was the tunic, then the boots and breeches. Finally, Jaden had Chrys naked. The cool marble floor made Chrys shiver and Jaden gestured for Chrys to lie down on the clothing.

Smiling at his brother's thoughtfulness, Chrys obeyed. He'd given up trying to explain his relationship with Jaden to anyone that wasn't the four of them. No one but the four of them would ever truly get it. The dragons considered it weird and Chrys couldn't make them understand. They'd never feel the unique combination of love, passion, concern, gratitude, and desire, or the strong, unbreakable bond between Chrys and Jaden. To an extent, Chrys pitied them.

As he relaxed on the layer of clothes, Jaden pressed kisses down his chest. He flicked his tongue over Chrys's nipples, and Chrys cried out. He'd never realized how sensitive the little nubs could be before beginning the four-way relationship. The pebbled tips seemed to have a direct connection to his cock, and each touch of Jaden's tongue made Chrys's dick throb.

Jaden chuckled against Chrys's chest and the vibrations sent further pleasure through Chrys. His twin abandoned his nipples and licked down Chrys's abdomen. Jaden made his way lower and lower until he reached the

place Chrys wanted him most. Jaden's mouth hovered over Chrys's cock, and he briefly hesitated.

Chrys knew what the problem was. Even if he often initiated sex between them, Jaden still showed the occasional doubt. Part of Jaden remained scarred from the time he'd been forced to hide his affection for Chrys. In many ways, Chrys had gotten the better end of the deal. He knew Jaden loved him—in more than a brotherly way. Jaden, on the other hand, often fell into confusion and uncertainty.

"It's all right," Chrys told Jaden. "I want this. I do."

Jaden's green eyes met Chrys's, holding his gaze. After a few moments, he offered Chrys a sheepish smile. "Sorry. You know how I am."

"You don't need to be afraid, Jaden," Chrys replied. "We're together now, just like we always wanted. Nothing can ever part us again."

Jaden didn't answer, but Chrys felt his twin's emotions and knew his words touched Jaden's heart. And then Jaden's smile turned into a wicked grin. "Don't think I forgot about this," he said as he encased Chrys's cock in a tight fist. "I can't wait to taste you."

Chrys groaned. "Come on, Jaden. Suck me."

Jaden lowered his mouth onto Chrys's dick and ecstasy exploded through him. The feel of sinking into that

wet cavern seemed to get better every time. Jaden knew exactly where and how to touch Chrys. He alternated slow motions with fast ones, taking Chrys deep and then moving back up lazily. He bobbed his head up and down Chrys's shaft, driving him wild. His warm palm teased Chrys's sack and rubbed the light scales across Chrys's perineum. The ends of Jaden's hair fell over Chrys's legs, lightly tickling his side fins. Chrys could just lay there and take the pleasure his brother so skillfully offered. In his heart, though, he knew they both needed something else to make the moment complete. Now, Chrys could only hope Aurus and Vaar answered the summons.

\* \* \* \*

Vaar smiled at the red dragon representative, forcing himself to be calm and hospitable. "I'm very pleased about your visit. I trust we'll be able to build a better nation together."

The meeting went on forever, with dragons from all over the kingdom showing up unannounced. It bothered Vaar they did not respect the most common courtesy of announcing their visit at least two days prior, but he'd let it slide with a slight reprimand. He needed these people if he wanted to achieve his goals.

Aurus's presence kept him sane. Without the mer prince, he'd have snapped and growled at three quarters of

the important diplomats. Aurus had proven invaluable, and his education at the Atlantean University and experience as a prince provided him with a stunning amount of information regarding the rulings of their kingdom. Aurus was acquainted with almost everything about dragon culture and had no trouble with diplomatic settlements, often surprising the representatives with this extensive knowledge.

The red dragon took his leave and a green one stepped forward. Vaar sighed and looked outside. The setting sun mocked him. They'd promised the twins to spend the evening together, have a romantic dinner. There was little chance of that happening. A sudden burst of pleasure made his eyes widen and his cock harden. Next to him, Aurus let out a quickly-masked gasp. Vaar focused on his connection with the twins. Jaden and Chrys must have started the party without them.

He sensed the two brothers touching, kissing, and rubbing against each other. Conflicting emotions swamped him, Jaden's slight hesitance sticking in the forefront of Vaar's mind. And then bliss took over and Vaar felt a wet mouth engulf his cock. Naturally, it wasn't happening to him. The twins were the ones fucking, but through them, Vaar experienced every sensation as if it were his own.

Vaar couldn't have focused on the green dragon if

his life depended on it. He spouted some random excuse—he didn't even know what—and got up. Without hesitation, he made his way out of the meeting room. He heard Aurus say something, and then the mer prince rushed after him.

"Such naughty boys," Aurus panted as they made their way toward their quarters.

"Indeed," Vaar replied. "Thank the gods."

Vaar and Aurus needed the twins to help them through these difficult times. Jaden and Chrys felt abandoned and useless when, in fact, they provided refuge, a shelter. When Vaar and Aurus returned from a difficult day at court, they found comfort in the twins' arms.

It took far too long to get to their chambers, but finally, they burst inside the room. At first, Vaar didn't see the two brothers, but then a moan came from the balcony. They made their way over, only to be presented with the sexiest display in existence. Jaden was sucking Chrys's cock, those pretty lips wrapped around his brother's dick. Chrys seemed completely lost in the pleasure. He fucked his sibling's mouth with abandon and didn't even realize Aurus and Vaar had arrived.

Then, Chrys opened his eyes and zoomed in straight at the two of them. "V-Vaar... Aurus..." he said in choked voice. "Come on."

Jaden abandoned his task and turned toward them.



"Thank the Sea Mother. I thought you'd never leave that blasted meeting room."

He sounded far too coherent for Vaar's taste. He lunged and lifted Jaden in his arms. A balcony was no place for what he had in mind. Aurus grabbed Chrys, who let out a sound of protest upon being denied his impending orgasm.

"Not to worry, treasure," Vaar told the young mer. "You'll get your prize soon."

He dumped Jaden on the bed and rushed to retrieve the bottle of oil they kept within reach at all times. The mer had self-lubrication to a certain extent, but Vaar preferred to err on the side of caution. He poured a generous amount of the liquid into his palm then tossed it to Aurus.

Jaden and Chrys positioned themselves on all fours, their eyes glazed with passion and the knowledge of what would soon come. Vaar thrust one finger inside Jaden, then another, thoroughly preparing his lover for invasion. Aurus busied himself with doing the same for Chrys, and Vaar grinned at the mer prince. It felt good to let go after such a tiresome day.

Within a few minutes, Vaar and Aurus had the twins begging and pleading. Vaar crooked his fingers inside Jaden, tormenting the young mer's sweet spot. Jaden sobbed his name, thrusting back against Vaar's fingers.

Vaar deemed Jaden prepared and knew the exact moment Chrys was ready as well. Retracting his fingers, he changed Jaden's position to face him. "Suck me," he growled at his lover.

Jaden let out a little whimper, and lowered his mouth over Vaar's erection. Vaar hissed when Jaden started to suck him. Jaden's motions became sloppier, a bit less focused, but that didn't make it any less pleasurable. He took Vaar's cock all the way to the back of his throat, his moans escalating, even if muffled by the dick in his mouth.

Vaar fucked Jaden's face and glanced toward Aurus, wordlessly communicating what he wanted. The mer prince obeyed. He handed the lubricant to Chrys and turned, exposing his ass to the second twin. Chrys poured oil on his fingers and his hands trembled slightly as he proceeded to prepare Aurus. Watching Aurus's body swallow Chrys's digit almost pushed Vaar over the edge. He buried his fingers in Jaden's hair, stopping the young mer's motions. There was only so much that he could take before he lost it.

Lust gave Chrys incentive and skill, and he soon had Aurus loose and ready for invasion. Vaar gestured, lining them up in the right position, directing Jaden to sit first, with Chrys behind him and Aurus after that. "Go on," he told Chrys. "Fuck him. Fuck his ass."

Chrys didn't need to be told twice. He positioned his

cock at his twin's hole and pushed inside.

\* \* \* \*

Jaden cried out when his twin's cock penetrated him. They'd only fucked like this a handful of times. Vaar and Aurus's presence drove all the lingering misgivings away, and in moments such as these, Jaden could really see and feel that Chrys loved him in a more than platonic, sibling way.

How could he doubt, after all, when Chrys's cock invaded him, spearing him like a hot brand? It felt so amazing, to be connected with his brother in the most intimate way two men could ever be.

As Chrys pushed all the way in, he stopped and buried his face in Jaden's hair, whispering, "Love you, so much."

Jaden would have liked to reply but he felt Aurus move behind Chrys and impale Chrys's ass. Jaden gasped at the increase in sensation. Every cell in his body awoke, the magic of his three lovers sizzling against his skin.

Finally, Vaar thrust inside Aurus and the four of them were one. They moved in perfect synchrony and Jaden forgot about everything but the here-and-now, lost in the beauty of their connection. Through this simple, physical act, the thrusts in tandem made Jaden be fucked by three dicks. Through their bond, Jaden felt the sensations

and emotions echoed in his three lovers. Chrys moved inside him, his breath hot on Jaden's sweaty skin. Their legs rubbed together with Aurus's, scales and fins touching in an intimate caress. Jaden sensed every motion, from Aurus's hold on Vaar's cock to the powerful thrust that echoed in his own body.

Time and space ceased to have meaning and Jaden's body sang, the need to come growing into an almost unbearable flame. His heart beat in rhythm with those of his lovers, and his every breath followed the moans and gasps coming from his men.

His men... he'd never thought a bond like theirs could exist between four people, but it did. How could he still have problems trusting? Never again, Jaden told himself. He'd never doubt Chrys loved him, or that Aurus and Vaar needed him. They would be together forever, and Jaden couldn't be happier about it.

He didn't know how long it lasted, but all too soon, Jaden surrendered to the overflow of emotions. When his orgasm came, it wiped away everything except his lovers' presence and passion. He felt them flood his anus with three jets of cum and his mind melted. Reality faded and he gave up on consciousness, falling into exhausted sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Aurus's orgasm hit him like a tidal wave. Crushed

between Vaar's hard body and Chrys's slender perfection, he felt everything his three lovers did. No barrier existed between their minds, nothing to keep them from fully bonding.

The transcendental experience drained him and he fell onto the huge bed, wiped out. Chrys and Jaden were already out for the count, Vaar the only one still awake. Even the great black dragon—now a sovereign—collapsed, ending up cuddled next to Aurus.

Vaar fell into slumber as well, and Aurus smiled. So much had happened, and they could've lost everything so many times. His life had changed radically, although somehow, he'd still ended up royalty. In the process, he'd earned the most valuable gift of all, a connection that could defeat even the most powerful creature in existence.

Aurus lowered his head onto Vaar's shoulder and sighed in contentment. He still missed life in Atlantis sometimes, but as long as he had his lovers, he could live with that. Perhaps, one day, he'd return to see his mother, but the Atlantean lands had long ago stopped calling to him. Jaden, Chrys, and Vaar were his home now.

Maybe, in the future, they'd even have children running around, filling the castle with laughter. He didn't know if it would be possible between the mer and a dragon, but he certainly hoped so. Time would tell.

Outside, the sea swallowed the last remnants of the sun. Through the open balcony door, Aurus caught sight of the first rays of the moon. He closed his eyes and relaxed. Tomorrow would be a new day filled with more paperwork, visiting dragons and, most importantly, lots of love.

THE END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scarlet Hyacinth was born in 1986, in a Romania still struggling under the weight of the communist regime.

As a young girl, she started studying the English language and fell in love with books. She grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of book and of course, stumbled onto romance.

After a childhood spent devouring hundreds of pages of fantasy literature, Scarlet found her calling when a dear friend of hers—the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction—proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turns out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams and reading yaoi manga, she started writing M/M fiction. The rest, as they say, is history, or rather, lots of hard work and sleepless nights. Today, she can only say with a smile that nothing is impossible and that no matter what others say, you can achieve your dreams if you work hard enough.

Email:

[scarlet.hyacinth@gmail.com](mailto:scarlet.hyacinth@gmail.com)

Website:

<http://scarlethyacinth.webs.com>