



# Sinister Seas

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** Aria has shunned the human world since her love for a human prince brought fear and danger to her people. She believes she is safe under the sea—until a witch imprisons her family, steals her tail and sends her onto land on wobbling legs in search of the Forgotten Prince. It's been ten years since Caspian left the sea to make his way in the human world. Better that than lose his soul a little more each day to the princess who considers him nothing more than a feckless friend. But when she comes to him for help, he finds he is still helplessly under her spell. This time, he vows, he'll weave a spell of his own.

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

## Prologue

“It is mine now. Everything is mine.”

The attack came with no warning, no hint of impending danger.

A burst of blinding white light shot from the gray-scaled fingertips, black claws guiding the spell toward its target.

Aria dove down, beneath the opening of the coral structure from where she had watched the carnage of Timarra unfold. Her mother, captured, demanded she hide, like a coward. She had to preserve her place as heir, survive to bring her kingdom and people back from this ruthless attack.

Coral exploded above her, raining debris down through the water faster than she could navigate to avoid it. Sharp bits and pieces knocked into her back and arms. A large chunk smacked her on the back of the head, and sparks erupted in her line of vision. Or maybe that was the residual flash from the spell.

Whatever it was, it left her vulnerable for a split moment. A split moment and Dima had her in her sights.

The witch appeared in front of Aria, long black hair coiling and spreading around her face like pet eels. Her black eyes glinted with malice, her smile filled with terrible mischief. The scales on her forehead and cheeks caught the flickering reflection of the moonlight that reached them below the water's surface.

“Sweet little princess, whatshall I do with you?”

Aria darted away. Seaweed cinched around her tail and halted her with a sharp tug. The sea witch’s magic sent strands of kelp to restrain her wrists as the creature herself swam slow circles around Aria.

“You may have outsmarted that octopus and human wizard duo, but me?” The witch laughed, released a ripple of bubbles from her lips. The gills along her neck flexed. The humor ended so suddenly the scales along Aria’s tail and those that painted her arms tingled in warning. Dima snaked around to come in front of Aria again, this time so close Aria leaned away from her. The kelp bindings tugged her back in place.

“No, no, no.” The witch drew one pointed nail along Aria’s jaw. “I’ve got a use for you. Something that will benefit us both. See? I’m in need of someone who escaped me long ago. Someone with whom we both have a mutual acquaintance. Return him to me, and I’ll set your mother and sisters free. I’ll cease my destruction upon this kingdom.”

“I’ve bargained with a trickster before. It’s no bargain at all.”

“One way or another, you will do my bidding, little princess. The future of your family is entirely up to your willingness to agree.”

To prove her point, she swirled one long-fingered hand, creating a churn of water that flashed with colors and light. Aria got her first glimpse of her family, trapped within a cage of kelp. Sharks circled the cage, snapping at the random arm of greenery that fluttered in the undersea currents.

“All I have to do is send a single spell and that cage comes down. Those boys are starving, and merpeople are a delicacy they don’t often have the chance to indulge in.” The witch cut a hand through the projection and instantly formed another image.

Only this time, it wasn't a vision. The ringlet glowed with power, throbbing slowly, like it had a heartbeat of its own. "What will it be, princess?"

The importance of her family's well-being was ingrained in her. There wasn't a thing she wouldn't do for them, for her mother, after the near-destruction she had caused only a decade earlier through her own recklessness.

Slowly, she drew her attention from the golden circle to meet the ashen eyes of the sea witch disguised as a mermaid.

"What are your terms?"

A pointy-toothed smile crept over the witch's scaly lips. "Smart girl." Dima flicked her fingers and the unbroken golden band separated at an invisible closure. "You have experience in the human world, and that experience will serve you well in fulfilling my terms."

One of the kelp bindings forced Aria's arm out. The more she resisted the motion, the tighter the binding wound around her until her fingers tingled from the lack of circulation. The treacherous weed forced her wrist into the open ring.

"You have seven days, princess. Seven days to bring him back to me."

"Who?"

Even as she asked the question, dread filled her belly. There weren't many merpeople she knew who possessed magic. They were as rare as kingdoms in the vast ocean. She knew who it had to be.

The ring—manacle, she realized—snapped shut. The metal seared her skin as pain ripped through her, agonizing, soul-splitting pain as her bones and skin were forced

into a transformation. Scales tore from her flesh. Her tail split down the middle, muscle and tissue shredding apart only to weave and form the very limbs she'd learned to despise.

The witch watched her forced transformation with an evil gleam in her soulless eyes. Her tongue flicked out to lick thin lips. Was she enjoying Aria's agony?

The gills along her neck shrank until Aria found herself choking from lack of water, then choking from too much water when new lungs demanded air. Panic swelled in her gut.

She stared, wide-eyed and puffy-cheeked, at the witch.

"The Forgotten Prince. Return him to me by sunset of the seventh day and your family will be free."

The witch flicked her hand. The kelp bindings released Aria.

## Page 2

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She clawed at the water with unwebbed fingers, clumsily pulling herself toward the glow of moonlight that rippled over the surface of the sea. Her legs, weak and shaky from both pain and discord, kicked her upward. A deep burn spread through her chest. That burn reached her eyes and crept into her head.

Air. She needed air. Surface air.

Just as she thought she would give in to the urge to suck in a breath—watery or not—her head broke the surface. She coughed and gasped and gulped in lungful after lungful of salty air, dimly felt the gentle spray from the waves coat her tongue. Tipping her head back, she spread her arms out, letting the gentle rhythm of the water hold up her aching body as her lungs recovered.

Dear gods, what had she agreed to?

Would she truly give one person over to save her family?

“Caspian.”

His name left a bittersweet taste on her tongue. Memories tumbled around her mind, memories she’d thought long since shut out of her head and her life. Ever since her heart led her astray and nearly brought war down on her people, she’d learned to leave him where he belonged.

In the past.

Well, there was no better time to confront the past than the present.

Aria twisted in the water and tested the strength in her legs. Weak, yes, but this wasn't the first time she'd worn something other than her tail. The last time she had legs, she'd mooned over a ruthless human prince. She'd learned to run for her life on these same two legs.

She caught the glittering lights of the coastline and began the long swim to shore. With any luck, it would be late enough that the docks would be empty.

If not, she'd have to pray her stealth was good enough to skate around the guards who would just as quickly spear her through the heart as misplaced love had.

## Page 3

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### Chapter One

Ledgers and more ledgers.

Night and day.

Jotting down inventory lists from his ships. Making mental notes of whenever he felt one of the merfolk cross the invisible barrier he had erected around the village. His paranoia had receded over the last decade, but his guard never dropped.

Two nights ago, that barrier hummed with warning. A creature of the sea had trekked ashore, and now roamed somewhere through the village streets. He hadn't felt the hum of that creature returning to the water, nor had the tingle along the back of his neck ceased since that night. Sleepless nights.

A hesitant rap on the door drew his shoulders taut, but he continued to scribble inventory down. "Come in."

The heavy wooden door opened on creaking hinges. He sensed the essence of his right-hand man, Brack, inch into the office. "Sir? I don't mean to disturb you."

He didn't lift his eyes. "If it's one of the women from the brothel, I'm not interested in entertainment tonight."

The silence that ensued finally drew his attention from his writings and to the balding man nervously playing with a tweed cap between his hands. "It's not one of the women, sir. I-I mean, she's a woman, but not one of those women." His wary gaze



darted over his shoulder then back. “She said to tell you, ‘A siren’s voice and a generous heart.’ I’m not sure...”

Caspian straightened in his chair, Brack’s quiet mumble fading on the words he remembered from so long ago. From a time before turbulent emotions and seas.

“Sir?”

He blinked and pressed up to his feet. “Send her in.”

Brack nodded once and disappeared. Caspian tucked his pen in the spine of the ledger and closed the thick book as the door opened once again, this time allowing a cloak-clad figure to enter his dimly lit office. He caught Brack’s shadow as the man closed the door, leaving Caspian alone to face a ghost from the past.

Plastering on a smooth grin, he leisurely rounded his desk. “Well, well. If it isn’t the last person I’d expect to find walking the docks.” He came to the front of his desk and leaned back against it, crossing his ankles. The woman had yet to lift that silly hood from her face, but the familiar salty scent of the ocean clung to her, threatening to return him to a time...a place... “You still have a bounty on your head in this part of the world. So, what brings you searching my wharf for a ‘mindless fool’?”

Parting words.

Only ten years ago, rage and disgust and hurt sharpened those two words into a verbal blade that left a scar on him. One that, gauging by the edge he heard in his own voice, remained all-too raw.

The woman beneath the oversized cloak finally lifted the fabric from her head. He had prepared himself for the sucker punch he knew seeing her again would deliver.

It delivered, but not in the way he was expecting.

Caspian tucked a hand under his arm and tapped a finger on his bottom lip as he scrutinized his long-lost friend. Aria had certainly seen better days. Her deep red hair hung in limp tangles around a sallow gray face. Purple tinged her lips and the vibrant life in her green eyes appeared to have been snuffed behind a dull evergreen.

She looked nothing like the rebel mermaid he'd once known.

"It's been a while, Casp." The length of felt covered Aria's hands, but he noted the way they twisted in constant motion beneath the fabric. "I was looking for you."

Caspian snickered, settling his mask of laid-back cockiness firmly in place. He'd built himself a reputation in this village. He wasn't about to let Aria be privy to anything to the contrary. In one easy motion, he pushed off his desk and crossed the small space between them. The closer he came, the stronger the scent of ocean, beach, and seaweed. And illness. Merfolk weren't accustomed to nurturing a human form. He'd expect this from any other merperson, but not Aria. Not after her short stint as a human.

Shoving the near-instinctive concern for her aside, he circled her slowly. "What could possibly bring you to these docks? Surely you don't seek to stoke an old flame. He's since married and I believe his wife has given him three boys."

He dared touch her hair, his connection airy and almost imperceptible. A flutter of magic fled his fingertips, weaving into the poorly kept strands. The princess of the sea had no clue of the danger she could find herself in on land. Tracking Aria, as much as he hated to have any connection to her, would ensure her safety. At least until he found out why she'd paid him a visit.

A decade later and you still care enough, no matter what she did to you.

“I heard you’ve made quite a life for yourself on land. And a name. But”—she turned only enough to catch sight of him over her right shoulder—“your place is not here. You’re a prince.”

Caspian laughed and swung out his arms. “A prince indeed! A prince of the docks.” He stepped back and dipped into a deep bow. “Welcome to my land, princess. I know it fails to meet the grandeur of your underwater kingdom, but this is my world. My piece of it, in any case.” Straightening up, he leaned close to Aria, taking a short breath of her scent as he noted the hollowness of her eyes. The woman needed a meal, or a dozen. “And no one can tell me what to do here.”

Aria let out an exasperated sigh. “Still the same carefree spirit you’ve always been, I see.”

He shrugged nonchalantly, circling her small frame once more before taking up his lazy stance against the front of his desk. “Why would I change, princess? I rather enjoy who I am and would change for no one. Unlike some.”

He leveled a hard glower at her as he crossed his arms over his chest, softening the edge of his words only with a tilt of his lips. Her sickly pale cheeks managed to conjure some semblance of a blush at his shameless dig. “I’m certain you didn’t seek me out to reminisce about our lost friendship. So, why do you seek my attention?”

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At least she had the decency to lower her eyes beneath his inquiry, which didn't bode well for the reason behind her presence. He doubted she had forgotten the results of showing her true form to the now king of these lands, and the consequences of her actions.

“There is upheaval underwater and your presence is requested.”

Caspian narrowed his eyes, rapping his fingers against his forearm. He hadn't acquired the title Forgotten Prince through chance. After his parents died and their kingdom was destroyed, he escaped to a life as an average merperson living peacefully under Queen Taelyss's rule.

The only person he'd confided his past to was the very woman who shunned him. The same one who stood before him, requesting his return to the sea.

He huffed. “Not likely. Sorry. My responsibilities here are great.”

Aria twisted her hands beneath the cloak more furtively. A familiar expression crossed her face, tight-lipped and nostrils flaring. The stubborn princess crested a wave of emotion before the pitiful human form drowned it again.

“It's my mother. And sisters.”

Well, that was a joke.

Caspian waved a hand carelessly and moved back to his chair, and the daunting ledger he really needed to attend to. “Little princes, your mother is a goddess. There's

little to nothing that can pose a threat to her.”

“The witch...”

His head shot up and he froze, his body caught in a partially crouched position. His ass hadn't reached his cushioned seat when those two words spilled from her lips with haunting speed and cold resonance.

Aria continued to fidget, a characteristic that seemed as much beyond her awareness as the impact of the damaging words that could so thoughtlessly fall from her mouth. The grey tint of her skin paled until he worried she might pass out on his office floor.

“She has my mother and my sisters. They need your help.”

He managed a grunt before forcing his body to relax, to sit. “Dima has nothing but ill intent, and I won't return to the waters to feed her ego while she destroys innocents. My apologies, princess. This is one battle I will not entertain.”

Aria rushed to his desk as he threw open the ledger he had been working on before her unexpected interruption. She snatched the pen he picked up and braced herself on locked arms over his ledger. Without missing a beat, he opened his drawer and retrieved another pen, earning a frustrated growl from his unwanted visitor.

“I don't ever recall you being selfish. Foolish, perhaps, but never selfish. You are a prince. That comes with responsibilities that are not here, in this warehouse on these human docks, Casp.”

Caspian spared her a short glance before lifting one of her balled fists off his ledger and placing it on his desk beside the tome. Her accusations made him bristle, her barbed tongue a threat to his carefully woven control.

Despite the heat of his blood, he managed a rakish smile, winked, and began scribbling in the journal.

“Ahh, we change over years, princess. Perhaps I am foolish. And selfish. Raucous. Careless.” He tapped the length of the pen against his chin. “Oh, right, not careless. Carefree. But while we’re throwing insults, I don’t ever recall you to be a woman to barter one person for another. Yet here you are.”

He caught her furious gaze and watched the short-lived fire in her eyes snuff out beneath a veil of shame. His smile stretched, though it felt brittle. “And as you may have forgotten, my title was lost many years ago, along with my parents and my kingdom and my people. I have no responsibilities to a royal position I don’t possess and, honestly, have no interest in reinstating.”

“Bastard!”

Caspian chuckled, the cool edge of the sound wiping the last of her fury away. He sat back in his chair and lifted his hands, palms up. “Nowthat is a title I adore.” He cocked his head to the side and lowered his hands to flatten them on his desk. “Especially after a romp in a woman’s warm bed.”

Aria’s eyes widened and her white lips parted on a gasp. He had never spoken to her so crudely. She shoved herself off the desk, tossed the pen down, and stormed to the door. Caspian laughed at her back. Laughed until the door slammed shut, rattling the single window in its pane.

Alone, his laughter ceased instantly. He sank down in his chair and pinched his forehead, the ache growing behind his eyes triggered by the sting of guilt. He really didn’t need to dig his point in with that last comment, but he couldn’t help himself. Not when he finally had the upper hand after so long. Seeing Aria after all these years sparked that old flame, and the bitterness she sowed with her caustic words as she

ended their friendship.

Ten years since he'd left the haven of Queen Taelyss's kingdom that fateful night, and traipsed onto forbidden soil.

He'd drowned himself in work, building his fortune, building his name and reputation, both with businessmen and lovely ladies. He'd earned the reckless King Jethro's respect after salvaging a royal ship that had been damaged in a wicked storm. Apparently, the cargo was worth more than the lives lost to the sea.

Anything to keep Caspian in the villagers' good graces and hold suspicions at bay. He rather liked his place among the humans. His own little piece.

And, in a matter of minutes, that piece he cherished so dearly had been breached by the very person he once fled. Never in all these years had he expected Aria to come back to land, and certainly not to ask for his return to the sea.

She wasn't asking for you to return, fool. She wants you to sacrifice yourself to Dima in exchange for her family.

Damn him if that sense of responsibility didn't niggle at his conscience.

Smacking his hand down on the arm of the chair, he groaned. "You still have no clue, do you, princess?"

He shoved up to his feet. Maybe he needed some female entertainment after all.

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### Chapter Two

“Five days. Five.”

It had taken her two days to find Caspian. Ridiculous, when one considered the relatively small confines of the village and the castle that overlooked it.

Aria hugged herself against the chilly night air. The cold that was nothing to the merfolk could be deadly to her more fragile human form. The drafty cloak couldn't shield her from the ice that tangled around her spine, or the circle of heat that burned around her wrist. A physical reminder that her time ticked away.

Being in the village of Alamari brought back dark memories. She had secretly hoped seeing Caspian would give her some small measure of hope in this dismal situation.

Well, seeing Caspian definitely brought something—despair that she would fail in her mission and lose her family.

“What a jerk,” she murmured.

Handsome. Utterly handsome jerk.

Ten years had been unfairly kind to Caspian, as had two apparently well-muscled legs and clothing. His jet-black hair in its carelessly mussed style. Those deep azure eyes. He'd always carried himself as strong and proud as the prince he denied he was, but there was something about the way his presence filled that human office that made her skin tingle and her blood heat. His legs filled his pants perfectly. She couldn't



help herself when she stole a glimpse of the tease of scale-free skin beneath the open V of his button-down shirt. He'd grown into himself, and into a human body beyond what she would have imagined.

It wasn't any wonder human women fawned after her prince.

Aria came up short. Pedestrians bumped into her arms as they sidled by to go about their business, their faces pinched with disgust.

Her heart sank.

He's not mine. He never was.

And he made his total disdain for her clear with his chides, jabs and painful stares. Words and actions she'd never imagined he'd direct at her.

"I deserve it."

"Hey, will you move out of the way?" a man barked. He shoved into her shoulder, knocking her off balance and sending her stumbling into the side of a building. A couple scowled as they passed her, keeping their distance as though she carried a disease.

Gods, she'd forgotten how cruel this world could be, especially to the less fortunate. How dangerous.

Lifting her head, she caught the glow of the castle on a distant cliff, gaslight lanterns flickering in the ocean breeze. Dread poured into her chest and weighed down her legs. She'd escaped the prison that elegant facade hid behind stone walls and stained glass windows. So much beauty in this village, until the sun went down, exposing a vile underbelly.

Aria turned into an alley before another wave of pedestrians could sweep her aside. She hesitated, eyeing the questionable characters that loomed in shadowed doorsteps or huddled in clumps around crackling fires that sent up sparks from metal barrels.

Slowly, Aria wove her way down the alley, passing its occupants without making eye contact. Women, men, children. Scraps and rags for clothes. Smudges of dirt on faces and matted hair beneath threadbare scarves and hats. Rats scuttled about, snatching up crumbs left by hard rolls and old meat some of the lucky homeless found to nibble on. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she had yet to eat more than a few slices of rancid meat since washing up on shore. She'd forgotten how fragile the human body was compared to that of merfolk. Two days of no food was too long, and if the expression she'd caught on his face during her brief encounter with Caspian told her anything, it was that she was far from presentable.

Once, he had a twinkle in his eye when I was near.

She'd squandered their bond.

She'd been so preoccupied with learning about Caspian's life in Alamari that she'd forgotten to be wary of the dangers returning to this seaside village presented. Her face was known to many, although it was far from the glamorous sight it had been when the horrid prince—now king—courted her. She'd seen a few random signs, encouraging the hunting and maiming of merfolk to keep the village safe from savages.

Savages.

Like her people cared to come ashore and wreak havoc on the humans.

As she passed one of the warm barrel fires, a bone-rattling shudder swept through her. Her teeth clattered and she sought the heat at a barrel with only a few strangers

gathered around it. Wiggling her fingers at the fire, the first hint of a grin tugged at her lips. She'd been hiding since crawling onto the sandy beach, naked and cold. She'd dug the cloak out of the trash and washed it as best she could in the sea. She had nothing else, besides a scavenged pair of slippers with holes in the toes and soles. A cloak and slippers, and a ticking time bomb pulsing around her wrist.

The bracelet glinted in the firelight as the sleeve of her cloak slipped back. She immediately lowered her hands, shaking the cloak back into place, but it was too late. A pair of unsavory men emerged from the shadows like tarry figures, slinking through clueless folk. Trying to keep her welling panic under control, Aria tugged the felt cloak tightly around her, turned, and headed toward the street.

“Aw, no, precious thing. You ain't going away that fast.”

Strong hands came down on her shoulders, stopping her escape. She tried to shrug the man off, but another snatched her arm and shoved the cloak sleeve back, revealing the cursed bracelet.

“Lookie here, Gavon. How much do you think that'll get us?”

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Aria yanked her arm, but the man's hold was too tight. The malnourished and weakened state of this human body provided no hope of a positive ending. Not when the man gazing at the bracelet like he'd found a treasure chest of gold twisted her hand in search of the clasp that would free the priceless object. Sadly, it was a cursed bracelet. No clasp. They'd have to cut off her hand to get it. She doubted that would stop them.

"A hot meal and a warm woman," the man holding her shoulders said, then snickered. "I'd take this one, but she's cold, even through the cloak." A sharp sniff alongside her hood made her cringe. "And in need of a bath. Precious, would you take that off your little wrist? It really doesn't belong there."

Aria tried to twist free again, but the men's holds only strengthened. Other outcasts in the alley had stepped away to watch the display from a safe distance. She knew from her last jaunt in Alamari that those less fortunate souls kept their heads down in situations like this. Self-preservation, or some such nonsense. Humans didn't lend aid if it might cause them harm, too, even if they had nothing to lose.

"She don't speak English, huh?" the wrist-holder taunted, lifting malice-filled eyes to the shadow that hid her face beneath the hood. His lips stretched in a brutal smile with missing or rotted teeth. Sores dotted his lips and oozing wounds pocked his cheeks. "Girl, you don't take it off, we'll take it off for you." He pulled out a stained blade and held it up for her to see. "However we have to get it off."

Aria hissed, twisting violently beneath the hands clamped down on her shoulders. She managed to free herself, but the ghastly man with the knife dug his fingers into her wrist and jerked her closer.

“Let go!” she shrieked, pulling at her arm while dancing around, trying to keep out of the other man’s grip. He came up behind her again, snagged her about the waist, and lifted her off her feet. “Stop! Put me down!”

“Sure. Just one moment.” The knife wielder gave her his back as he tucked her arm under his own, trapping it against his body. She kicked at his legs and hips, prepared to scream in agony when the rusted metal blade touched her forearm.

“Pardon my interruption, gentlemen, but I do believe such atrocious actions are punishable by death, should the king hear of them. He prefers to reserve such pleasures for himself.”

Aria gasped at the sound of the familiar voice, jerking her head around.

The arms holding her waist disappeared, as did the knife from her skin.

Caspian caught her beneath her arms, keeping her from a less than elegant fall on her ass. His easy smile hid the glint of anger in his expression from anyone who didn’t know what to look for. He settled her on her feet and swung a black walking stick with an intricately carved silver pommel with seeming negligence.

The two men backed away slowly, the knife-wielder having dropped the blade. The onlookers sunk deeper into the shadows of the alley, clearly hoping to escape Caspian’s sharp gaze.

“Gentlemen, I hope this was a mere misunderstanding on my part,” he told the receding men.

The brute who had picked Aria up nodded furiously, but didn’t speak.

“Y-yes, s-sir. All a mis-mis-mis...” the knife-wielder stuttered.

Caspian inclined his head, prompting, “Misunderstanding?”

The man muttered a squeak, followed by a quick nod.

Caspian glanced down at Aria. “These two men weren’t about to cut off your hand, were they?”

She blinked. How much had he seen? And how on this blasted Earth had he known where to find her?

His eyes narrowed so slightly she wasn’t certain she caught the gesture.

A loud tap resounded from the buildings that lined the alley as he knocked the tip of his walking stick against the ground. Slowly, he tilted his head back to eye the men.

She followed his gaze and suppressed the urge to slap a hand over her mouth when a stream of alley rats scurried from the shadows and crevices to swarm over her assailants’ legs. They screeched and shrieked, flinging themselves backwards.

One slammed into a barrel, knocking the fire-filled canister over. A lick of flame caught the edge of his tattered shirt and quickly engulfed his body until he was a howling, writhing heap. The second man bolted down the alley, but only made it a few feet before the rats tripped him, and he pitched forward. The rodents covered him.

“Hmm.” Caspian shrugged. He pressed a hand to Aria’s back and guided her around the fallen men, away from the sight that elicited shocked gasps and screams from onlookers and the men alike. “Due justice.”

Aria waited until they were moving through the throngs of pedestrians before she stopped. Caspian cast her a chiding glance and continued on his way without waiting.

“What did you do?” she demanded, earning quirked brows from a few passersby. With a huff, she hurried to catch up with him, grabbing his arm. “How did you know I was there?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” He flashed her a grin. “I was on my way to find some pleasurable entertainment when I heard what I believed to be a damsel’s cry of need.”

She threw a hand towards the alley. “I don’t see anyone helping those men in distress, and their howls are far more terrorized than mine.”

“Well”—Caspian angled the orb of his stick over his shoulder—“you can always return, if my interference was not welcome.” He paused long enough to tap a yellowed sign pinned to the outside wall of a shop. She didn’t need a closer look to know it was a reward post for merfolk. They remained scattered throughout the town, a decade after the king’s mer-hunt began. “Still a hot commodity around these parts, though rumor has it they’ve become awfully scarce to the point people believe most have been killed off.”

The dark curl of his lips was crafted perfectly to match the malice exuded by the villagers, but the shadows that filled his eyes when he cut his gaze to hers were anything but malicious. If she dared to believe this new Caspian might actually care, she’d suspect pity edged his smile.

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“Where have you been staying the last two days?” he asked, breaking the strange silence between them. She’d barely realized her heart hammered in her chest, completely mesmerized by his smoldering expression and acute focus. The shift from jokester to interrogator threw her off her guard.

“Um.” She cleared the knot from her throat and whirled her hand around, unable to hold his probing gaze. “I, um, have been keeping to the alleys. Trying to keep my head down.”

“And essentially starving to death.” His eyes could have burned straight through the cloak and her skin to the core of her body. He let out a sharp sigh. “Come. You’ll soon get yourself killed on these streets. They weren’t pretty ten years ago, and have only worsened. Scoundrels and thieves scour these parts like sharks, and a woman alone and weak is a target for any hungry monster.”

She bristled at the cut. “I am not weak.”

Caspian stilled her hand when she moved to throw off her hood. He clicked his tongue in warning, his gaze shifting to a group of men as they walked by. The men tipped their heads in silent acknowledgement, and Caspian returned the gesture, following them with his eyes until they were almost a block away.

His expression hardened and his eyes bored into hers. “You are far from appearances, princess. If you catch my drift. Do not draw attention to yourself. Now, since I dare not leave you on the streets, I invite you to my home. You can have a hearty meal and a warm bed, fresh clothes, anything you so wish.”



Aria fell into those azure eyes, the flicker of deep sea and the inhuman stretch of his pupils before they rounded out again. A whisper of the old Caspian, the merman who had been her closest friend. Her confidant. Something fluttered in her belly as his grip loosened from her forearm and his bare fingers brushed across her knuckles. A familiar tingle slid over her skin, one he always seemed to ignite.

One she never paid heed to. Until now.

“Or you can argue with me and run away, forcing me to leave you to your personal doings.”

She glanced down at their fingers, his thumb tracing her palm while he held her hand with surprising tenderness. She nodded, nostalgia sweeping over her and cinching something inside her. The burn, similar to when she was forced into this human form underwater, spread from the center of her chest...

“Breathe,” Caspian whispered.

Aria gulped in a lungful of air, the world spinning. Gods, this was not how she planned to deal with her current situation.

“Okay,” she whispered back.

His lips quirked in a quick half-grin before he straightened to his full height, a head taller than she. The air around her instantly warmed and a sense of security folded over her shoulders. How much of that sensation was magic? One of the many secrets he confided to her all those years ago. His magic was something altogether rare and powerful, might even rival her mother's.

She blinked and tilted her head, clarity cutting through the mist of her mind. “Did you kill those men?”

His lips widened into a smile and his brows lifted. “Oh, princess. Not proper conversation for a lady, or the streets. I imagined you smarter than finding it necessary to question the situation and my motives. Should I set up camp here for the evening or shall we continue?”

Aria grumbled to herself, finding this version of Caspian both irritating and rather appealing. “Lead the way, good sir.”

He chuckled, a throaty, delightful sound that skittered down her spine and left her knees weak. He offered his arm, which she accepted, and they started the climb up the hilly road to the castle. The closer they drew to the horror-filled hallways and deceptively welcoming ornaments that comprised the gorgeous building, the more her anxiety swelled.

“I hope I’m not impeding your entertainment tonight,” Aria said, trying to quell the tightening in her chest. Not that Caspian’s choice of entertainment was a topic she cared to discuss. Ironically. “I find it difficult to believe you seek entertainment of the female kind when you could easily settle down with a woman and not pay for pleasure.”

He playfully tapped the walking stick’s ornament against her knuckles. “We have not seen each other for the better part of ten years and you wish to discuss my choice of sexual pleasure? Still shameless and unfiltered, I see.”

“Still flamboyant and a showoff, I see.” After a short laugh, she sobered. “Ten years of paying for a woman, Casp. That’s a lot of coin.”

“Casting coins at nothing is far better than pursuing pleasure where it is unwanted. Promises and wishes and happily-ever-afters. You are particularly versed in how well those turn out.”

The castle loomed as they approached the outer wall, a mixture of torches and electrical lighting casting eerie shadows on the battlements. The king's crested flags hung from each turret, a vile reminder of the pain her poor choices had caused her. She cast a hidden glance up at Caspian.

The pain her poor choices caused others.

As she opened her mouth to question their direction, Caspian steered her down a narrow alleyway, between nicely kept doorsteps and flower boxes. They walked in silence, her thoughts roiling, the tension growing in the muscles of his arm. She weighed the benefits and risks of voicing the questions she wanted to speak, or keeping quiet. After all, she'd come in search of Caspian at the whim of the sea witch to save her family.

She inched closer to the man leading her from one nightmare and probably straight into a new one.

Here in Alamari, the beasts so rarely looked like what they truly were.

### Chapter Three

Nothing could have prepared her for the simple beauty that was Caspian's human-realm home. Simple in the earthy brick cutter wall of a single-story home, the east side coated with creeping jasmine blooms and the west trimmed with saw grass. A simple wooden door opened into an indistinct room, furnished with a sofa, dining table, and some other odds and ends.

The view, on the other hand, was anything but simple.

Caspian managed to create an abode on the precipice of the cliff that peered out over the ocean unobstructed. The rich scent of seawater soothed the ache in her soul and made her yearn to return to the water. Give up the legs and weak body for her tail and scales. The water was fraught with danger, but nothing near as perilous as that to be found on the land.

Aria stood at one of two windows on the west side of the house, gazing out at the darkened waters that rolled beneath a silver sheen from the moon. The waves were gentle, an illusion that concealed the turmoil that boiled underneath.

"It's safe to remove your cloak, Aria."

Caspian's voice, lacking all insult and sarcasm, snapped her out of the ocean's trance. She hesitated before pushing the hood back to reveal what she knew to be a sallow face caught somewhere between human and mermaid. She didn't understand why this change was so incomplete when the last time she came to land she looked as human as the next woman.

If she were honest, now she looked like a sea monster with stringy red hair and a gray-blue tint to her skin

Slowly, she turned from the window and hugged herself. Caspian placed a dish piled high with shellfish and greens and chunks of cooked red meat on the small dining table. A fork and knife flanked the dish, and a shimmering glass filled with something red caught the candlelight.

He arched a brow and motioned for her to sit. "There is no one here to hide from."

Aria frowned, slipping quietly onto the chair. Her mouth watered and her stomach rumbled loudly as the scents of seasoned food filled her lungs. She picked up a shrimp, looked it over, and shoved it, tail and all, into her mouth.

A moan escaped her lips as the succulent sweetness of the crustacean conquered her taste buds. "Oh, wow." She picked another one off the plate and devoured it faster than the first. "Mm. Delicious."

Caspian chuckled and shook his head. "I've learned a few things about the kitchen since coming here."

Another shrimp became victim to her ravenous hunger. She pointed to the plate, shamelessly asking with a full mouth, "You cooked this?"

"I did."

Aria rolled her eyes to the ceiling, moans of delight fleeing her throat. "Amazing."

"Glad I can appease your appetite, one way or another." He braced his arms on the back of the chair across from her. "What are you hiding beneath the cloak, Aria?" She paused, a chunk of chilled roast meat between her fingers, and looked up at him.

His fingers were steepled, his eyes sharp. “Besides the cursed bracelet.”

As she swallowed the food in her mouth, a bitter taste welled up in the back of her throat. “Nothing.”

“Then why haven’t you shed the cloak?”

“Does it bother you that much?” She began to unfasten the hooks down the front of the cloak. When she reached her belly, exposing a long slash of bare skin, Caspian threw up a hand to stop her.

“You’ve had nothing other than that flimsy piece of material? No clothing?” He pushed off the chair and groaned. His disgust made her close the cloak twice as fast as she had opened it. It wasn’t like he’d never seen her skin before. “For gods’ sake, why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“We weren’t on the best of speaking terms back at your office, if you’ll recall.”

Caspian snorted a laugh, crossing the short distance to a door. “And who’s at fault for that, princess? It hasn’t escaped my notice that you’re here not to make nice with me, but to do a sea demon’s bidding.”

He disappeared into the darkened room, leaving Aria staring at the fabulous feast before her while her appetite failed.

“I’ll run a bath for you when you’re through eating,” he called to her. “And be sure to eat, princess. Your appearance depends on nurturing your human form, if you’ve forgotten. I have my man gathering a few items of clothing for you from a local seamstress. If you’re going to traipse around this godsforsaken village like a fool, then you might as well dress and look the part. Though”—he popped his head from the room—“I’d highly discourage reckless wandering. Yours is a face hard to forget

and the king will surely hear of your return from scavengers seeking hefty coin in reward.”

With a deep sigh, Aria picked through the rest of the dish of food while she listened to water run in the adjacent room. She wondered when Caspian had sent his manservant to arrange clothing for her. A soft yellow glow slid into the main room from the half-open door. Fragrant scents she wasn’t familiar with soon wafted into the main room, scents that calmed her enough to finish the plate of food and follow the sound of running water.

Caspian looked up from his perch on the edge of a copper tub, untidy locks of jet-black hair hanging over his forehead. The sleeves of his button-down shirt were rolled up past his elbows, showing off well-toned forearms. He’d always had a toned and muscled torso. Most mermen did, but his appeal had definitely grown over time. His shirt hung open over his chest, and her gaze drifted to the well-formed curves of his pecs before lifting to the gold medallion that hung around his neck. A single jewel, one she couldn’t quite discern, glinted in the artificial light.

“Test the temperature. Let me know if you wish for cooler or warmer.”

Aria stepped up to the side of the tub and dragged her fingers across the surface. The water was lukewarm, comfortable considering the ocean’s water was usually cool. Even so, her flesh erupted into tiny bumps, which Caspian must have noticed on the small sliver of skin where she’d pulled up the cloak’s sleeve. With a nod to himself, he twisted the faucet toward a red line. Steam began to rise from the water pouring into the tub.

“Caspian.” The soft tone of her voice brought his attention to her, a faint crease between his brows. She mustered a small smile. “Thank you. For your kindness.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

A rap at the front door shattered the moment, a moment that started to brew with intensity over the course of seconds.

Caspian stood up and brushed his wet hands on his pants. He didn't spare her a glance before leaving the room to answer the door. With her throat tight and her mind turbulent, she shed the cloak and stepped into the tub. The temperature stung her sensitive skin as she sank into the water, soaking in the sweet-smelling oils and herbs that danced over the surface. Tiny buds, leafy stems, and petals of flowers she didn't recognize. Nothing from the sea.

When she lowered her shackled wrist into the water, her skin prickled and burned with a revived burst of pain.

A muffled shriek squeezed through her lips. She scrambled to climb out of the tub.

A strong hand pushed down on her shoulder, keeping her in the water.

"It'll pass. Her magic doesn't like mine, but it's also draining you of more life each day. Deal with the pain until my spells counter hers."

Caspian's soothing assurance helped her settle deeper into the water as she breathed through the scalding pain that radiated up her arm. His fingers loosened on her shoulder before releasing her completely. Instinctively, she curled her legs up and hugged her arms over her breasts, pointedly aware of her human nakedness in Caspian's presence.

"I might be a bastard, princess, but I'm not a pervert. Your body is safe from my



eyes.”

His steady footsteps receded from the room, his words stinging her just as potently as the cursed bracelet. She didn't understand why because the reasons that did come to mind were absurd.

Maybe they aren't. Maybe they're the most logical reasons.

As the water soaked into her skin and the pain began to subside, she closed her eyes and settled her head against the edge of the tub. For a long while, she listened to Caspian move about the small house and imagined what he was doing. Cleaning? Arranging sleep areas? How many beds were in this abode? It was small, far smaller than she expected to house the Forgotten Prince. She'd expected a lavish place full of priceless decor that spoke of the money and reputation he was said to have amassed in Alamari. Lavish would have fit this new personality of his, too.

Instead, his humble living quarters matched the tastes of the humble merman she'd considered her best friend once upon a time. A prince hiding as a simpleton of the sea whose heart beat with empathy.

She often wondered how he would have been as a true prince. A king.

Whatever spells Caspian had spun into the water worked on the bracelet, and her body.

For the first time since her return to this hellish place, she closed her eyes and let dreams sweep her away.

### Chapter Four

Waves lapped against the rocky cliffside, the white foamy crests left between the jagged boulders emitting an everlasting scent of salt. The soothing sound of the water smacking the rocks was a lullaby to him, an ancient song he yearned to experience, not simply hear. Every evening, when he visited this small haven, his secret little hideaway, his skin tingled with the familiar transformation of tiny scales, only to stop before the moonlight could flash off their iridescent surface.

Tonight was no different, but the weight of the past sat heavy on his shoulders. He thumbed the medallion around his neck, feeling the power resting in the unseen engravings he had locked between two circles soldered together. A protection spell, one that helped him keep his human form while warding away curious mortals who might catch onto his...gifts.

Magic in Alamari wasn't looked upon with a smile or joy. In fact, it held a place in the ranks with merfolk.

Unless you counted the bastard magician-wannabe the king employed. A sly manipulator who knew the power of illusions.

Caspian sat on the edge of the cliffside opening, his booted feet dangling over the sheer drop to the rocks and swirling waters below. Dima wanted him to return, and chose to use Aria as her pawn. Smart demon. No matter how much time stretched between them, never could he cast Aria aside. Sure, he adopted a bluntness and taunting edge with her, but it didn't change the very real fact that he could never hurt her. Never turn his back on her, not when she needed him most.

Dima wasn't a demon to be challenged. She was a demon to be feared. She was a mermaid whose head the villagers might rightfully seek for some reward. He had escaped her once, but as always, the past had a humorless way of catching up with him.

Only now, he'd grown into his magic, his power. He knew his own capabilities.

"What are you planning, monster?" he whispered to the rippling waves with the shimmering surface and eternal wonder.

His thoughts were disrupted by the nearly imperceptible scrape of rock from the tunnel at his back. Allowing his aquatic sight to subsume the restrictions of his human vision, he tipped his head down and sideways, scanning the tunnel from the corner of his eye.

The scent hit him first.

The heat struck his blood next.

Casting his highly sensitive vision aside, he turned back to the ocean view. Unfortunately, not only did the hard, uneven surface beneath his ass make for an uncomfortable seat, but now the way his cock rose added to the tension burning over his skin.

"Always inquisitive," he said quietly, letting the ocean breeze carry his voice. "I see you found my secret pathway."

"It wasn't hard."

Caspian nodded once. No, it wasn't hard, unless he cast an illusion spell over the trap door. Which, this evening, he hadn't. He didn't think Aria would care to explore.

Sadly, his subconscious must have hoped otherwise, because he would have spelled the damn door if he really wanted to be left alone. Just like his subconscious didn't want to leave her to the rats in this evil village after their encounter at his office. He would've left the tracking spell uncast, not twined it through her hair. He wouldn't have left shortly after she stormed out, following her at a distance to ensure her safety.

Closing his eyes, he silently begged for a small measure of strength against the only weakness he'd ever suffered.

The scent of her freshly bathed skin and the heat of her presence curled around his back, embracing him in her dangerous presence as she came to a stop behind him. He'd learned his lesson. He wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

"May I sit?" Aria asked.

Caspian shifted over a few inches. He motioned with a flick of his wrist to invite her to seat herself on the ledge beside him. "I gather you have more covering your body now?"

"Your clothing options were generous. Thank you."

The opening wasn't wide, forcing them in close proximity. He stole a shaded glance as she sat, noting the deep blue gossamer skirt of the dress she'd chosen. There wasn't much material to hide the shapely curve of her legs, and the bodice certainly did its job overly well when it came to tracing her narrow waist and full breasts.

As his inspection reached the silver-studded neckline, he turned his attention back to the waters. No need to sprinkle tinder onto the slow-burning fire of his desire.

"How did you find this place? Conveniently beneath your house?"

He chuckled. "I found this place first, and built on top of it. Worked some magic to make the pathway. A nice little spot."

Aria leaned forward. "You've found a gem on the side of the cliff that can't be seen from the village." She pointed to the light-dotted coast about a mile away. "And surely no one there can see you."

"I've cast this opening in a concealment spell. Even if someone used a telescope, they'd see nothing but a jagged cliff. Last thing I care to deal with is some explorer moseying into my home."

"Do you miss it?" A forlorn sigh sounded from his left. "The ocean and the worlds beneath?"

Caspian braced his hands on his knees and tilted his head toward her.

He expected Aria to have healed some after the meal and bath. He hadn't expected the magic to work so potently.

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The woman sitting beside him was as stunning in human form as she was in her siren's skin. Her creamy pale skin glowed with a healthy sheen, no longer a cross between a corpse and a fish. Her eyes, even from the side, caught the light of the moon and shimmered a radiant green. Shimmered, like the lucky strands of her fiery red hair plaited in a simple braid over her shoulder.

The unexpected sight struck him deep in the chest, robbing him of his next breath. He dug his fingers into his knees in a poor attempt to ground himself. Aria had always been a beauty. She was a demigod, after all. But her beauty was something beyond natural. Beyond divine.

The awe and pain he felt was so strikingly raw she might as well have dug her claws through his sternum and ripped his heart out all over again. It was a stark reminder of why the prince of Alamari fell for her all those years ago when she made the deal with the eight-legged whelp of a witch and a human wizard. Aria didn't need her voice to woo the human. Then again, the princeling needed little to be wooed aside from a pretty face, lush breasts, and a place to warm his cock. Caspian could never bring himself to ask whether Aria had given herself to the beast beneath the crown. The jealousy that roused whenever he thought of the two of them together had been crippling, sickening. He could handle her with another merman, someone who would respect her and treat her like the princess she was.

That person was never Prince Jethro. King Jethro, now.

Her profile glowed like an ethereal being come to grace his cavern. It took him longer than he cared to admit to regain his composure and control of the conversation.

“Why did you come here, Aria? What have you engaged in with Dima?”

Aria lowered her head, her fingers tangling in her lap, that blasted bracelet a blistering reminder that, again, she wasn't here for him, but to use him. “Would you believe me if I told you I wanted to come here before Dima came to my mother's kingdom?” Hesitation resonated in her every move until she finally looked up at him with saddened eyes. “That I wanted to reconcile?”

He thought about that for a moment before shaking his head. “No. I wouldn't.”

“Why?”

“Because, princess, ten years is a long time to decide to reconcile differences. It's an awfully long time to hold a grudge. I let the past go many years ago.”

“That's why you remain here? In Alamari, of all places?” She flung a hand to the cliffside and beyond. “That castle perched up on the top of the hill there isn't a constant reminder of why our friendship ended? Your dealings with the very king who threatened our people, our race, isn't a thorn in your side? Evidence of the evil that lurks above the surface of the water?” She shook her head. “I don't understand how you could let something go years ago, yet insist on remaining in the dark heart that is the very root of all our troubles. Many might consider you a traitor.”

“Pity.” He drew out the word and forced a tight smile. “There is more to my decision to stay in Alamari than you obviously are aware of. Jumping to conclusions is never a safe tactic, don't you agree?”

An endearing flush brushed over her cheeks. Her luminescent gaze widened, those lush pink lips parting on a soft gasp. Caspian quirked a brow in question before shrugging.

“Must I remind you that I tried to warn you of Jethro’s intentions? That he was seeking you for nothing more than your beauty and would have had you executed the moment you were of no use to him, as he had with his previous mistresses? Did I not try to warn you of what I saw him engage in, the ruthless torture of animals, humans, and creatures alike? Did I not warn you that should your true identity become known, you would be in peril?” He straightened his back and rolled his shoulders. “You insisted I was a jealous imbecile. That I knew nothing. That I couldn’t know what true love was because I didn’t have the mind to care about settling down. I knew nothing because I was a foolish boy prince who thought playing a simpleton was my answer to the problems I didn’t want to face.

“Little did you know, princess, that I walked these streets with you. I watched the horrors Jethro enforced behind the closed doors you were forbidden to pass through. I saw the blood and the bones and the flayed skin. I saw more than you will ever know.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “How is that so, Casp? You said you never came on land before.”

He raised a finger. “Ah.” And wagged it back and forth. “That particular admission came long before your rendezvous with the darling Jethro. You were my friend, Aria. My dearest friend. Of course I’d check into a man, a mortal at that, whom you claimed to love. You didn’t like the information I returned with, is all. And you didn’t give my news much heed, casting it in my face.”

Aria’s shoulders slumped and she turned back to the ocean.

“So, tell me, why would I believe you seek me out now to reconcile if it were not for your benefit in what I believe is a very dangerous game? Why don’t we forego the pleasantries and get right down to the truth.”



“Why did you come back to Alamari?” she asked.

“Answer my question first.”

If she knotted her fingers any more, they’d certainly break at the joints.

“I honestly don’t know when she arrived, only that one night, we were watching a vocal performance and toward the end, our castle crumbled like the ocean floor shifted violently. Her trident vanished from her hand and waterspouts erupted from the ground, separating us. I tried to escape, but Dima caught me. She gave me one chance to save my family. I had seven days to return you to her.”

“What happens to your family if you fail?”

“She has them confined, surrounded by sharks.”

Caspian snorted. “Sharks might be a desired demise if Dima gets what she wants.”

“What do you mean? How could death by sharks be desired?”

“Trust me, princess. Dima’s promises of release from one hell will result in capture and torture on a new level. You think Jethro is bad? Mix magic into the punishment.”

“I don’t understand. What is it she wants with you? And why my family?”

“Okay.” Caspian laughed briefly, earning a less-than-impressed glower from his two-legged sea goddess. “You really shouldn’t have to ask that second question. Your mother is a goddess. What better leverage than bartering for the life of a deity? The power of a deity? But your initial question? That answer is very convoluted and a topic I’d rather steer away from.” He kicked the cliff’s side with his heels. “At its simplest, I possess magic and power. It’s apparent she wants it.”

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“Is that why you came here after our falling out?”

Pain flared in his chest, a familiar ache he wished he'd never feel again. It threatened his carefully constructed persona and attitude.

“I came here after our falling out, as you so charmingly call it, to protect the people your actions placed in danger. I warded the entire shoreline around Alamari to detect when merfolk left the water, voluntarily or not. Sailors craving a heavy pouch of coin hunted ferociously. So while you took the situation lightly, I've tried my damndest to save those who have paid the price for your stubborn, ill-fated love affair.”

He leaned closer to her, but kept his attention on the ocean. The tension around her was enough to tell him she didn't like the turn of their conversation.

“Do you know how the sailors smuggled unfortunate mers into the village? Folded and stuffed into iceboxes. Dismembered and descaled like fish. I'd curse those ships when they left the docks, and they found a fate worse than the torture and horror they put those merfolk through, I assure you. Those not killed before the ships returned to port were often held captive in old whiskey barrels. Those, I saved. When I could. One time, a ship had a dozen younglings, Aria. Children. Alive, thankfully, but terrorized. Do you know what happened to that ship and the sailors aboard?”

He lifted a hand, fingers closed, palm up. With a sharp breath, he flicked open his fingers, releasing a dark blue fireball from his palm. In a blink, the magical orb winked out.

“I set it on fire. Burned the ship and the crew and listened to their screams of agony

with a smile while I tried to comfort those children. I entered the water that night. The one and only time I returned to the sea and my true form. To make sure they were safe. I left them at the edge of Timarra and waited until I saw an adult cross their paths. That, Aria, is the reason I came here. To these very shores. Not to make a fortune and reap the rewards of my reputation as a womanizer. That, little princess, is all a show because my priority is to protect the people of the sea, whatever the cost to me.”

Every muscle in his body had grown stiff and agitated as he unleashed the pent-up anger he’d stifled for so long. He couldn’t stop himself from twisting, bringing a knee onto the rocky tunnel floor, and turning Aria’s face to his with the tip of his finger under her chin. The color had drained from her beautiful face, and the luminescent glow dimmed behind her irises.

“Tell me, Aria. What price are you willing to pay to protect the people of sea? What sacrifices are you willing to make for the sake of the merfolk?”

The gentle slope of her throat moved with a hard swallow. Her gaze lowered to his mouth. If his blood didn’t seethe with anger from the injustice brought down on the merpeople through Jethro’s cruelty and infatuation with a beautiful mermaid, he might have taken that cue and indulged himself. But as he held her chin steady, her gaze shifting back up to his, he realized any hope of fanning the flames of his passion would lead to his downfall.

Without speaking, she lifted her chin off his finger, eased back enough to climb to her feet, and hurried down the tunnel toward the house.

With a twirl of his fingers and a brush of magic, he sent his next admission to her ears on a soft breeze. “But I left the water because of you.”

Aria.

His one and only weakness.

A weakness he knew would send him back to the ocean's depths to face a demon from his past.

He was a prince. A forgotten prince. But he would sacrifice himself to save his people.

To save Aria.

### Chapter Five

Sleep eluded her, leaving her to toss and turn in the narrow bed Caspian had hastily made up for her for the night. He'd returned to the house long enough to tell her where to sleep—a room barely the size to accommodate the bed—before he left again, disappearing into the night.

His admissions haunted her in the hours leading up to dawn. The truths she'd refused to see or think about, believing he'd left the sea—and her—for personal gain. She'd always known in her heart Caspian never thought of himself first.

Tears coasted across her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She had no right to indulge in a pity cry. Not when she was to blame for the terrifying chain of events that had led them here. Whether Dima was part of that chain, she didn't know, but her entrance into Aria's life was enough to make her wonder if Aria led Caspian to do something to draw the witch's attention.

"I left the water because of you."

The whispered confession played havoc with her mind and the tender emotions that somehow found their way to the surface. Had Caspian truly admitted that? Or had her ears played tricks on her in her rush to escape the brutal reality of his disclosure. Why would he leave the sea because of her? The ocean was immense. Surely there were places he could have gone, land not being one of them.

The first rays of sunlight filtered through the east-side windows, casting the wood-plank floors in shades of brown. Dust drifted through the rays like snow. Aria

climbed from the bed, fatigue wrapped tightly around her body, and shuffled into the main room.

“Caspian?” She crossed the room to peek into the only other bedroom in the house, glancing into the empty bathing room on her way. Both rooms were empty. She leaned against the doorframe. The corners of her mouth pulled down, the weight of disappointment heavy on her heart. She’d have to check the tunnel. Maybe he had returned to his cliffside to ponder the surf.

A glint of silver caught her eye as she started to push off the doorframe and head toward the closet-like space that concealed the trapdoor. A plate on the small dining table held a pile of cured meats and shelled eggs. A piece of paper beside the plate rerouted her path. As she drew closer, she noticed the small bowl of jam and the slices of bread tucked beneath the meats.

Pretty cursive looped in a short note across the paper.

You will find fruit and juice in the icebox. Be sure to eat your meal. Do not wander the village streets alone. I’ll return later this evening.

Caspian

Sadly, the tossing and turning and lack of sleep on top of the distress caused by Caspian’s unfiltered revelations did little to help her appetite. The food smelled delightful, but her stomach clenched at the idea of actually eating anything. She managed to swallow a few bites of bread and jam, a single boiled egg, and a crispy piece of bacon before the handle on the main door jostled.

Fear staked her where she stood, watching in horror as the handle moved and the lock turned. In the last seconds before the door opened, she broke free of her paralyzing fear and bolted into the bedroom. She crouched behind the mostly closed door and

peered through the crack. Sunlight cast the intruder in silhouette, making it difficult to discern features. He was shorter than Caspian, stockier, with a heavy step and a burlap sack dragging on the floor beside him.

“Miss?”

Aria recoiled from the crack, hoping the sunlight hadn't given her hiding spot away. The man grunted when he lifted the sack and dropped it onto the dining table. The plate and utensils clattered. The man returned to the door and closed it quietly, twisting the bolt to lock it from within. As he turned, she recognized him.

Brack. Caspian's manservant.

He removed his tweed hat and rubbed his forearm across a forehead that glistened with sweat. He was dressed in a similar fashion as the day before, brown pants, a tunic shirt and a brown vest. His leather boots were less than clean, with caked mud, roughened edges and cracked soles. The laces were frayed.

A disheveled man, a shocking contrast to Caspian.

“Miss? It's, uh, Brack. Caspian sent me to check in on you. Make sure, er, that you're fairing well? I brought fresh meat he plans to prepare for dinner.” The man cleared the rasp from his throat with a few coughs. “Sorry, miss. I didn't mean to frighten you.”

Slowly, Aria stood up. She continued to monitor Brack as he tugged the sack open and pulled out three large paper-wrapped items. He paused long enough to read the note on the table. He rubbed a hand over his balding head and turned about with a worried crease deepening across his forehead.

“Be here, be here, be here,” he muttered. A nervous tick jumped in the corner of his

mouth. Would Caspian harm this man if he believed his employee lost her? “Miss?”

“I’m here,” Aria finally said, stepping around the door and pausing in the doorway.

Brack shuffled backward, hitting the table with his legs. His eyes went wide.

Aria frowned and lifted her hands in front of her. No. Her skin hadn’t taken on that sickly gray. She touched her neck, seeking any reason for the man’s startled reaction. Nope. No scales.

“I-I’m sorry. Is something wrong?” she asked, tracing the human lines of her face with her fingertips. No sign of mermaid.

Brack stuttered a few breaths, then offered an awkward half-bow. “I...I wasn’t expecting...I wasn’t sure...”

Her brows furrowed in confusion. “What were you expecting?”

When he straightened, obviously fighting to get some dignity in his composure, the stray rays of sunshine brought the rosy hues of his face to life. She couldn’t help but grin at the man’s bashful glow. He appeared so harmless, with his nervous ticks and stutters.

“Caspian once told me about you. Daughter of a deity. He failed to tell me how beautiful you are. Rumors in Alamari don’t do you justice, highness.”



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“Aria, please. No formalities necessary. And thank you for the compliment.” She hesitated, then motioned to the sack. “Can I help you with that?”

Brack jerked, seeming to have forgotten the sack, and gathered the three large packages against his chest. “Oh, no, no. Not at all. Caspian wishes for you to rest and eat. He has a few ships coming to dock today, but hopes to be through with work before the sun sets. If there is anything you need, I’m at your service.”

Aria crossed to the table and peered into the sack. A bunch of potatoes and root vegetables. A few items of lighter fare, fruits and cheeses. Two loaves of bread wrapped in cloth. A click and smack, a muffled clatter, came from the kitchen area. She had yet to explore that space. She never explored Jethro’s castle, fearing his wrath if he found her wandering the grounds. Her mother’s stories made her believe human life was a mixture of ancient times with modern amenities. Simplicity and convenience all in one. According to her mother, Alamari was one of many villages to be found on a separate realm, a place unreachable to mortals of other realms. As confusing as her mother made it sound, her curiosity often left her wondering how advanced other realms were compared to the one she knew.

She never shared the secret of traveling between realms.

Brack returned to the main room, brushing his hands on his pants. “Sit, miss. Please. Caspian won’t like that you aren’t eating. It helps you maintain your human appearance, right?”

Aria stiffened as she met Brack’s innocent gaze. A long stretch of unnerving silence passed as she played his question over in her head. Well, if he heard the rumors about

her, he knew she was a mermaid. Caspian most likely confirmed the rumors, especially if he trusted this man.

With a tense nod, Aria took a seat at the table and gingerly picked at her food. Maybe her appetite would return.

“How long have you known Caspian?”

“Oh, about ten years.” He dug into the sack and began to load up an arm with produce. Aria stared at him, another piece of bacon between her fingers. He chuckled. “Yes, ten. He had just arrived on the docks, looking for work as a manager to oversee inventory. Lucky for him, the old manager came down with fever and happily handed off his position...for a piece of the earnings until he recuperated. Well, the old man never quite got over his fever, suffered a stroke, and Caspian built a name for himself faster than any manager before him. He stopped three shipments of weapons from being smuggled into the village and intercepted two additional shipments of smuggled spices. All within the first year. Earned a seat at the king’s table, he did. And the king’s trust. Quite a feat, considering the king’s reputation for torture.”

Brack’s proud smile faltered. He dropped his gaze and busied himself with unloading the produce. “Sorry, miss. I shouldn’t bring up such topics.”

Aria plastered on a smile. “It’s okay. It happened a long time ago.”

“Long time, aye, but your name is still on the tips of tongues and the king reminds his people often of rewards for the capture and maiming of you and yours. Some believe his wife’s jealousy over your rumored beauty—no rumor, or my eyes lie to me—refuel the hunt for you when it starts to die down. Others believe the king himself mad with jealousy, hence the reason he...well, that’s not a wise conversation to indulge in.”

Brack hoisted the armful of produce and disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Aria to suffer the icy reminder of the past. Misjudged emotions. A false love that left her scarred inside.

“How does Caspian keep the trust of Jethro when he releases merfolk? Surely, after a decade of this charade, the king has begun to think something about Caspian is unusual?”

“Caspian doesn’t discuss the darker side of his dealings, miss. Not with me. He told me once, long ago, to trust him and not to question his motives or his choices. To understand that things happen without explanation and the less I know, the better it would be for me. I have a daughter, you see. She was only twelve when I first met Caspian, so I took his words as a warning and valued his secrecy. Never has he let harm come to me or my daughter. I believe he intervened a few times, but I never inquired, nor did I care to. My daughter is now happily married with a little one, far away from this wretched village.”

Curiosity had always been a weakness of Aria’s. “Then why stay? Surely there is nothing holding you here? Caspian would understand if you decided to leave. To follow your daughter and be closer to your grandchild. Wouldn’t he?”

Brack chuckled as he returned to the sack and dumped the rest of the contents on the table.

“Caspian is a good man, miss. A dearly good man with a selfless heart. He has tried to get me gone several times over the last couple of years, but I stay. I don’t wish to leave him to find another man he can trust as he trusts me. I owe him so much, and he will never accept anything material. So, I give the only thing I can that I know he appreciates and that’s my loyalty. Maybe when he finally decides to give up the dock life and settle down with a woman, I will find it time to part ways.”

The man's brown eyes landed on her at the mention of a woman, a silent implication in the wistful gleam in his irises. A flicker of something warm—hope?—stirred in her belly.

“Ah, but that is neither here nor there. Eat up, miss. I've filled your ear and distracted you from your meal enough.”

“Not at all, Brack. I'm enjoying this conversation.” She took a bite from a slice of cured meat, her appetite making a comeback. “Would you be kind enough to tell me one other thing?”

Brack flashed her a bright smile, laying stalks of celery in the crook of his elbow. “I can try, miss.”

After a couple more bites, allowing him time to put the last of the produce away, she gained the courage to move ahead. “What has Caspian told you about me?”

When Brack returned this time, he carried two glasses of sweet wine. He placed one in front of her with a friendly nod. She thanked him, sipped, and sighed with delight. Human food was definitely a treat.

The man took the seat across from her and contemplated his answer, rolling the stem of the wine glass between his thumb and forefinger. Aria picked patiently at her food, savoring the strong flavors mixed with the more delicate essences. As the minutes stretched, she waved her question aside.

“Nevermind. It's not right of me to put you in the position of breaking Caspian's confidence. My apologies.”

“It's not that.” He sighed and took a hearty drink of wine, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth when he was done. He lifted his gaze to hers and shrugged, a look

of regret on his face. “You see, he confides much in me, but too much drink can make a tongue loose. Too loose. Has he spoken of you? Aye, he has. But to what extent would he have shared such confidences had he not been drunk? So, you see, I feel I can’t disclose much to you other than that he does speak of the friendship you once shared every now and again.”

Their friendship. A friendship she took for granted and cast to the bottom dwellers without a thought as to how her actions would hurt him. Well, ten years older and ten years wiser, she was beginning to understand regret with a clarity she cared not to admit.

“Would you mind walking with me to the docks when we’re done here? There’s some things I need to discuss with Caspian, sooner than this evening.”

A frown pulled at his full lips and a crease formed between his brows. He shook his head. “There’s been an uptick in activity from the royal guards this morning. I’ve been trying to find out why, but haven’t been fortunate. Caspian assured me there were no unusual ships coming to port today. He does not want you leaving his house without him, and I must say I agree. I’m aware he has some special”—Brack wiggled his fingers over his wine glass—“abilities that are far more helpful in protecting you than my fists.”

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Recalling the abilities Caspian used last night in the alley, she merely nodded in agreement, taking her fill of wine. He hadn't admitted to using his magic, and certainly not in such a brutal manner, but she couldn't deny it. He'd saved her arm, maybe her life, when no one else dared cross that line.

Had news of the strange deaths reached the castle? Was that why there was more activity today?

As the sun rose higher in the sky, and the morning glare dulled into an even light, anxiety crept through her. She needed to keep busy. To do something to keep her mind off Caspian, and the possibility of trouble finding him at the docks.

She finished her wine and dabbed her lips with the napkin Caspian had left under the plate. "Brack, how good are you in the kitchen?"

The man stuttered, dribbling wine down his chin. He made a quick attempt to mop it up with his sleeve.

"Why do you ask?"

Aria shrugged. "Since I can't go out and the day is still new, perhaps you can help me keep my mind off things until Caspian returns. I have no skills in a kitchen. I've never cooked a dish in my life. But Caspian's been so generous that I want to make him a meal for when he comes home." She pushed her dish aside and folded her hands together on the table. "And I need your help, if you can."

"Well, then." Brack clapped his hands together and rubbed them enthusiastically.

“The kitchen is my specialty. You know, I taught Caspian everything he knows about cooking a fine meal. I will have you whipping up delights to rival his in no time!”

### Chapter Six

The chest hit the dock with a loud thud that reverberated up through his feet. The waves had kicked up during the day, crashing against the piers and spraying over the rock walls. The scent of electricity and salt warned of an impending storm, the occasional rumble of thunder lighting fires beneath sailors' asses.

Caspian hooked his thumbs on his leather belt, his patience wearing thin. He sat on needles all day, his attention continually veering from the job at hand to the woman waiting in his home. Aria was dangerous to him in more ways than he could name. The distractions that burdened him were hers alone. The increase in the number of royal guards patrolling the streets of Alamari didn't sit well with him. When two came knocking on his office door a few hours ago, they left him bristling with anger, concern and curiosity.

What in the name of the gods was going on?

Keeping his impassive mask in place became a chore as one of the filthy mates fumbled with a large key. The man kept looking out at the roaring sea, apprehension clear on his face. His partner fidgeted, discomfort apparent in his darting eyes.

"You are my last ship and this is the last item I need to document. I don't care to be stuck here when this storm rolls in. Surely you men wish to find yourselves swimming in mead and nuzzling a wanton's breast, yes?"

The prospect of feminine charms always brought men like these to attention.



The one who handled the key seemed to find his balls and his aim. He popped the latch on the padlock and tugged the bulky thing off the hook.

He exchanged a satisfied, toothless grin with his partner, and the two men lifted the lid.

“Found it floating on the surface. Looks like sharks had at it.”

Caspian somehow managed to keep his shudder hidden beneath a faint sheen of magic. The sway of his feet, though, he wasn't sure about. The docks, the ships, and the two silly smiling men in front of him faded from his awareness as his gaze focused on the mutilated corpse stuffed in the chest.

“...much is the king offering for these? ‘Cause that tail is pretty.”

He barely processed the man's inquiry as he crouched down on his haunches. Infusing his muscles with another bout of strengthening magic, he kept himself from falling on his ass and looking the fool in front of these two imbeciles.

For long breaths, he stared in disbelief. The familiar iridescent patches of scales along gray-white arms. The ridges along the back. The tail. The multihued coloring, dulled in death, tapered to a once majestic feathery tail, stuffed haphazardly into the chest. There was no doubting a shark had attacked, and judging by the different sizes of the bites and chunks missing, he ventured to guess at least three sharks.

He reached forward, intending to move the tangled mess of lavender hair aside, but hesitated.

He knew who this was. He didn't need confirmation.

The scales and tail alone were markers of a single family.

Pressing his lips together, he lowered his head and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Fuck.

“Um, sir?”

Caspian growled under his breath. He couldn't let Jethro get his hands on this chest. On the body inside.

“Close the lid,” Caspian demanded. The men followed his orders immediately, eyes wide. He pressed up off his haunches, swallowing back the bile that rose in his throat. His gaze shifted to the darkening sky and the white caps the storm had pushed to shore. This was no coincidence. This storm drank from the power of the gods, the grief of a mother.

This storm promised revenge. Destruction.

Caspian was all the more happy to let it happen.

He flicked his hand in a motion for the men to follow him. “Bring it to my office. I will pay you the reward. Then, off you go and be sure to keep quiet about it. Men know the price for a mermaid, and they'll just as soon slit your throat for your coin than cheer you for a successful find.”

“But doesn't the king—”

“The king will receive the chest,” he snapped. The icy tone shut the men up. They fell into silence, their muffled grunts and heavy breaths the only assurance they continued to follow his lead. Inside the warehouse, he motioned to the floor. “Leave it there. Come with me.”

He led the men up the stairs to his second-story office. Their excitement prickled along his back, dense yet silent. He never glanced over his shoulder, never spared the two men a moment, his mind a whirlwind of fury, worry, and a slight edge of panic.

When he reached his desk, he made it seem like he was unlocking a bottom drawer while he manifested a pouch of coins. He lifted the velveteen bag, intoning a spell of secrecy, and dropped it on the desk, allowing the men to hear the jingle of coins and the weight with which it met the blotter. Their expressions spoke of their elation.

“The full reward for your find is there. I will be sure to notify the guards so they can retrieve the chest and deliver it to King Jethro. Your job here is complete.”

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The toothless man lunged forward, snatched the pouch, and opened it to see the contents. His partner looked on and laughed.

“Look, Badger. We’ve got ourselves a good night,” the toothless man rejoiced. He held up the pouch to Caspian and bowed his head. “Nice doin’ business with yeh.”

Caspian forced a tight grin and waited for the men to leave the warehouse before he hurried down the stairs. Locking up the doors, he set a ward to ensure no one could enter and used his magic to move the chest to his office.

He closed the office door. Locked it up tight.

And set the chest in a small alcove at the back of the room.

He didn’t need confirmation of who suffered such a horrendous end, but he needed to see if there was any message attached to the body. Bracing himself against the traumatic sight, he opened the chest and, ignoring the familiarity, unfolded the mermaid’s corpse.

There, in typical Dima fashion, a cruel message. A small, delicate piece of coral tied around the mermaid’s neck with a strand of seaweed. The hum of power radiated off the piece, taunting him to unravel the spell and reveal the message.

He cut through the seaweed, pocketed the coral and gently settled the mauled body back into the chest. He didn’t bother closing the lid, unwilling to contort the body as the sailors had. Instead, he wove a thick illusion spell over the alcove, hiding the chest behind the vision of a wall and hastened to leave.

By the time he reached the open field between the village and his cliffside home, the wind hit in gusts and whistled with ominous promise. The waves had grown, filling the air with mist. Lanterns blew out along the battlements of the looming castle, to be replaced by electric lanterns imperious to the bluster. Shouts from guards echoed down the hillside, carried on the wind.

Figures moved about in his house, the glow of interior lights casting silhouettes against his curtains. The faint scent of spices mixed with the salty air, but his stomach revolted at the thought of food. A pat on his hip pocket reminded him of the devastation he would be forced to deliver. As soon as he unraveled the message.

Keeping his head down, he slipped into the house and went straight into the bedroom, ignoring Brack's cheerful greeting. He went to the trap door and descended into the tunnel beneath his home, casting a sealing spell around the door to ensure his privacy. He barely noticed the crash of the waves that echoed violently through the stony passage. Water crested the lip of the tunnel and seawater trickled inland, his boots splashing through shallow rivulets. Removing the coral from his pocket as he reached the end of the passage, he conjured up a rope of seawater. Wrapping the liquid about his arm like a snake until he had enough to form a sphere in the palm of his hand, Caspian dropped the coral into the orb.

Ribbons of smoky essence flowed from the enchanted coral, twining around the watery sphere. The coral disintegrated, the acid of Dima's spell eating away at the precious object.

The ribbons unfurled, revealing a message in metallic gold script.

Four days, princess. The Forgotten Prince is mine.

A ravenous hiss erupted from the sphere. The ribbons exploded within the reinforced watery walls, oozing red streaks into the crystalline blue.

Caspian countered the terror spell embedded in the message and released the sphere, bloody water pouring through his fingers to splash over his boots. The tick of what was left of the coral bounced over the floor. He didn't bother with it. He couldn't be bothered with it.

Right now, he needed to return to his house.

He needed to figure out how to hurt Aria the least with his grim news.

\* \* \*

“Sir?”

Brack was waiting for him in the bedroom when he returned to the house. Caspian glanced at the closed door behind his man. The nervous furrow of his brow and the unconscious tug at the corner of his shirt gave away the man's uncertainty.

Slowly, Caspian closed the trap door and toed the area rug over it, his focus never leaving his right-hand man. “What is it, Brack?”

“Your entrance. Miss Aria was speaking to you and, well, it was as if you didn't hear her,” Brack said quietly. “Everything fares well tonight?”

Caspian nodded. “Meddlesome sailors. All is well. You can assure my guest she is at no fault for my poor behavior.” He shrugged off his jacket and draped it over a single chair in the room, then started unbuttoning his shirt, pausing to cast Brack a stern look. “I'll be right out.”

Once the man left, Caspian tugged his shirt over his head, grimacing at the faint scent of death that lingered on the threads. He shed his trousers and changed into a casual pair of deerskin pants and a string-neck tunic. It would be a battle to keep the events

from the dock out of his expression completely. A strange, distant grief touched his soul. There would be no easy way to deliver the news.

Aria and Brack stood by the dining table, set with a meal fit for a king. Soup in a ceramic pot, roasted vegetables and potatoes, a seasoned hump of meat. Three places were set, and three glasses of wine filled.

Aria rounded the table and greeted him with a shy smile, her fingers tangled at her waist. Such a beautiful sight, with her red hair tied back in a long tail, strands brushing her creamy skin and brightening her green eyes. The light hue that colored her cheeks matched the pink of her lips. He'd be lying to himself if he said he wasn't tempted to taste those lips, even if only for one time. Magnetic, beneath the water as she was above.

He wondered how she saw him.

"I won't take credit for the masterpieces on the table. I think I got in Brack's way more than I helped, but I tried my best to give you something for your generous hospitality. I know..." Her smile faded and the soulful look she pinned on him niggled at his heart. "I know I'm not deserving of your kindness, but I appreciate it. And I...I miss our friendship. I do."

Caspian watched her, judging her words against the glow of unabashed truth and vulnerability in her eyes. If there was a single way to tell she lied, it had always been through her eyes.

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Right now, there wasn't a speck of dishonesty there, but a whole lot of regret. And the faint sweep of exhaustion.

"Being close to you, regardless of the years that stretched in absence, has filled me with such warmth and has brought back so many memories..." Her fingers knotted until white. "I miss it. Knowing I can trust someone."

Gods help him, she threatened to shatter his resolve. His lips curled and he nodded in acceptance. How could he not?

"Let's take it slow. See where things go. You came here with a goal, remember? And a timeframe. That doesn't elude me, but I once knew you utterly well, even at your worst, and I know you speak the truth," he said softly, his words for her ears only. Her smile grew and her thick lashes lowered. She began to lean toward him, a familiar action from long ago when she'd drop her forehead to his chest. However, she caught herself and seemed to shake free of sweet nostalgia. He straightened his shoulders and spread his arm invitingly toward the table. "Let's not put all of your hard work to waste, letting such a fabulous meal go cold."

He had to force each bite down his throat. Yes, it tasted great, but as the evening wore on and the cheerful banter circled the table—he put on his best smile and entertaining jibes—he couldn't get the vision of death out of his head for long.

Each time he looked at Aria—which seemed to be more often than not—guilt taunted his conscience. The longer he waited to tell her, the worse it would be, for them both.

"We didn't make a sweet to finish the meal, but"—Brack rubbed his round belly and



sighed with satisfaction—“I’m not sure there’d be room.”

Aria stood up and began to gather the empty plates. Caspian waited until she reached the kitchen to lean close to Brack.

“I need to speak with her about a situation that arose tonight. I wouldn’t ask you if you would mind taking your leave otherwise. Not after you did me such a huge deed, spending the day watching over her.”

Brack waved a hand and smiled brightly. “No deed at all, sir. She’s quite a stunning woman.” He stood up and poked two fingers at his chest, over his heart. “Here.”

Caspian shared a small grin. “No argument from me.”

Aria returned, wiping her hands on a dishrag. Her brows arched and surprise crossed her expression. “You’re leaving? So soon?”

Brack laughed and nodded, grabbing his tweed hat off a small table by the front door and tugging it onto his head. “Aye, miss. The hour’s late and I haven’t been home to tend to the livestock. Perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow?” He cut a questioning look at Caspian.

“I’ll check the books.” Caspian slid back his chair and climbed to his feet. “Thank you for a wonderful dinner, Brack. And your time today. It’s much appreciated.”

After a few shared words between Brack and Aria, minutes Caspian used to pour two snifters of brandy, Brack left. Dread seeped into the air, a lick of chill that teased the nape of his neck.

Aria lowered the rag to the dining table and met Caspian in the center of the room. She eyed the drink he held out to her. “Is everything okay, Casp?”

“No.” He pressed the snifter into her hand. “Here. You might need it.”

If walls could shift and close in on him, they did that now. He felt the effects of tension prick through his body and tighten in his chest. Aria took the snifter, her arm stiff as her fingers wrapped around the glass.

“There are a few things we need to discuss. Tonight.” He settled his gaze on her. “Openly and honestly.”

A sickly glow fell over her skin. She sipped the brandy, scrunched her face, and took a deeper drink.

That makes two of us.

“I’ve nothing to hide, Casp. I’ve been forward with you from the start.”

“You have, yes.” He pulled deeply at his own brandy, letting the burn reach his belly before continuing. “I, on the other hand, have not.”

### Chapter Seven

Hours of laughter and fun quickly faded. The look in Caspian's face, the haunted shadow in his eyes, set her entire body on edge. He hadn't fooled her over dinner, but she cast it aside, wanting to believe his dour mood stemmed from issues at the dock. Hoping those sailors struck a nerve and that his dark countenance was not due to something more dire. Yet, as dinner continued, she couldn't help but notice the strain in his smile. The faint lines at the corners of his mouth that appeared when he forced an expression he didn't quite feel. No smile reached his eyes, which remained stormy. On occasion, she caught him lost in thought, but held her tongue despite the need to understand what was happening.

Wind rattled the door in the jamb, an ominous warning rapping at the wood. Beyond the cliff, the waves crashed with renewed violence. She hoped Brack made it home before the rain came in. She smelled the moisture in the air, the electric herald of a brutal pounding.

The brandy in the glass.

The solemn weight around Caspian.

"Does it have to do with you going directly to the tunnel?" Aria asked, breaking the silence that seemed to go on endlessly.

Painfully.

Caspian motioned to the sofa. "Let's sit."

She nodded, allowing him to guide her to the small cushioned seat. It was a narrow piece of furniture, and when he took the seat beside her, his knee rested against hers. A strange, pleasant sensation slipped through her, a tingle and a flutter that caught in the back of her throat. She kept the newfound heat that settled in her core to herself, dismissing it as burn from the brandy.

“You asked me yesterday what Dima wanted with me.”

“You said it was convoluted.” She lowered the glass to her knee and tried to read his expression. “Do you have some connection to her?”

He lifted his snifter, muttered, “In essence,” and drained the brandy.

Raindrops pinged against the window. Over the water, the first bolt of lightning illuminated the bellies of dark, stirring clouds. Aria’s skin pebbled with tiny bumps and an uncomfortable tingle trekked down each vertebrae. A frighteningly blank expression shrouded Caspian’s face, leaving her with the feeling she sat beside a stranger.

Such a volatile contrast to the reaction of her body to the simple touch of their knees.

“How...what is your connection with her?”

Caspian raked a hand through his hair, but the mussed locks fell back over his forehead.

“I never told you about my parents.” He leaned forward to place his empty snifter on the narrow table in front of the sofa, then remained hunched over. He folded his hands between his knees and shook his head. As Aria watched him, foreboding made her heart race. “The full story about me.”

“The Forgotten Prince. You did tell me.”

“No, princess. I told you who I was by name, but never divulged much about my past. As I said last night, it’s...convoluted.” His head dropped and his shoulders tensed. “You always took the Forgotten Prince title with few questions attached. So unlike you.”

“Because I respected your privacy. I believed if there was a story to be told, you’d tell it when you were ready. As time went on, I thought it was nothing more than that. A title.”

“The story of what happened never reached these waters. Surprisingly.” He blew out a breath, tapping his index fingers together. “I’m sure your mother heard of it. Little eludes the gods.”

Aria pressed her lips together, trying to think of stories her mother used to share about the sea gods and goddesses. The ups and downs of their rules. There were a few vague stories surrounding untimely falls of kingdoms and the destruction of overbearing sea gods. She had mentioned something about the lost child of a god from a distant realm, but never in detail.

Caspian had lost his parents. He was a prince of the sea, but that didn’t mean his parents were of godly descent. There were many kingdoms in the seas across worlds and realms that had mortal rulers.

For some reason, that conclusion didn’t sit well with her. The idea of Caspian as a mere mortal entity suddenly felt...wrong.

Caspian had always possessed a magnetic allure. A resonating power below the surface of his skin. Something magical and immense. They were the very things that attracted her to him, but her young head had been too captivated by a mortal man to

care about the heat her friend stirred inside her, a heat that ignited now.

“I came from a kingdom across the sea and from another realm. It was an aquatic realm, very few humans. Very little land. A peaceful realm, honestly. Small. We integrated with the humans there, with a foundation of mutual respect.” He scowled. “Nothing like here. We protected the mortals. They protected us. Every once in a while, someone with ill intentions came along. Creatures of all kinds can move between realms, if they have magic to open portals and the power to hold those portals open.”

Aria swirled the brandy in her snifter, but didn’t indulge in another drink. She wasn’t sure she cared to let the alcohol infuse her blood enough to make her indifferent to the story he had begun to share. As it stood, the muscles in his forearms strained with the flex and release of his entwined fingers. The medallion dangled from its thick chain around his neck, swaying hypnotically. A new bauble, something he never wore beneath the surface. She barely caught herself from reaching over and touching the strange disk, its edges rough, the obvious marking of a soldered seam.

“I guess the story begins when I was born. But the pertinent details come when my home, the kingdom ruled by my parents, was destroyed. As all great downfalls go, my parents ruled with a strict hand, but open hearts. They believed the best in all. The good. So when a stranger came along needing help, they offered to help. Our doors were open, our home offered, and friendship blossomed. Unfortunately, my mother had been too kind to see that the friendship she shared with the stranger was one-sided. The start of the end.”

Aria’s throat tightened. “The stranger?”

Caspian licked his lips and tipped his head to look at her. “Dima. She’d come in hopes of seducing my father. To bear a child of magic. What she wasn’t prepared for was his rebuff and the extent of my own magic. You see, my gifts are rare. So rare

that even gods pray to the entities of fertility to give them a child of elemental powers. As you are aware, most children of royals of the sea or gods are granted one, possibly two, of these elemental gifts.”

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Aria's brow furrowed. "Actually, my understanding is that only children descended from gods are granted elemental powers. Magic, like the magic you have, is found in royal children."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "You have magic that derives from the water. Your elemental power."

"I wouldn't consider it a power. I'm a poor conductor of my magic. I frolic in my daydreams too much, according to my mother." Aria laughed quietly and shrugged. "Guess performing magic tricks was never my strength. I prefer watching in amazement at what others can do. Your talent has always been captivating."

She nudged his shoulder with her own, a playful gesture she hoped would lighten the thick, suffocating air around them. "Especially when you created those waterspouts and filled them with lightning. You gave me a storm of my own, right down to the tiny licks of flame and the clouds and...the..." Her eyes lowered, memories sweeping through her mind. Of the times when Caspian controlled the waters to create magnificent obstacles and illusions. He brought elements—elements—into some of his displays. Magical displays he shared only with her. "Oh, gods."

She blinked before daring to meet his gaze again. His brow lifted.

"Your magic. It's not just magic. It's elemental. And multiple elements." Her lips moved, this time silent, until she was able to form the words. "You're not just a prince. You're agod. The Forgotten Prince of the Lost Kingdom Astauria. The gods' paradise. Only the most powerful gods and goddesses can visit Astauria."



“That last part is a rumor, as you might imagine. Astauria is a place like any other. Dima is no goddess. She’s an exiled sea demon who takes the form of a mermaid. It’s her basic form, but not what she truly is. However, she possesses magic, dark magic, that she’s become skilled enough to weave into elements. She dwells at the bottom of the oceans, wreaking havoc on kingdoms unprotected from her wiles. She has a small following, but she prefers to work alone.”

“Then why is she searching for you?”

“Because I’m the only one who can set her free. She’s been cursed to remain bound to the ocean, unable to take any humanoid form. She gains her most potent resources from human life essences. Something about a mortal’s soul calls to her darkness. A beacon of light, an intoxicating and addicting ambrosia. She needs humans to strengthen her powers, and she’s been refused such allowances. So, she seeks the only means to end her incarceration.” Caspian’s eyes lowered again. “It was my father who cursed her after she left a trail of blood and body parts along one of our pristine beaches. The blood of innocent humans. It turned our shores red.”

Aria sucked in a deep, controlled breath, trying to wrap her head around this new information. Caspian, her once beloved friend, wasn’t just a prince, but a god. An immensely powerful god, if his small displays to her many years ago were any indication. His secrets, though not terrible, dug a proverbial claw into her heart. He hadn’t been able to trust her. Why did it hurt so much now, all this time later? Especially when she had proven all too well he couldn’t put his faith in her fickle heart. But that was before she’d learned better.

Slowly, she pushed off the sofa and crossed to the window. Rain pummeled the glass and pelted the tall grass flat. The darkened waters roared below the cliff, whitecaps thick and large atop vicious waves. She swore she could feel the vibrations of their rage through her feet when they crashed into the rocky cliff.

Cold seeped into her skin. She hugged herself, unable to shake the chill and the sinking churn of her stomach.

“What happened to Astauria?” Aria asked quietly. She couldn’t look at him, not when she felt the pain of failing to earn his full trust. Right as he’d been, why did it feel like betrayal?

“It fell. After the massacre, after my father denied her advances, she sought me. I was the son of god and goddess. She’d seen me practicing my magic, honing my powers. She knew what I possessed and saw a different opportunity, but I knew what she was after and didn’t give her what she wanted. I had just learned of the bloodshed and when she approached me, I cast her away. Literally. With a whirlpool of lava.”

All this time, and she never realized. Never put the obvious together. He never performed magic in public, but didn’t shy from it with her. How had she not suspected? Her curiosity usually got the best of her about everything and everyone. Except Caspian.

“She retaliated, drunk on a power high from all the human life essence she devoured. Dima possesses a scream like a banshee, only the damage her scream produces is a hundred times worse. We didn’t know. Weren’t prepared. The ocean floor cracked. Opened up wide. Lava spouted through the cracks, melting all in its path. That’s how it started. The floor swallowed parts of Astauria in fiery wrath. Our guards attacked and were mercilessly slain by sharks. Our castle crumbled. One of the jade bricks crushed my tail in my escape. Another stone knocked me in the head. I lost consciousness.

“When I awoke, I gazed upon a nightmare.”

The click of glass drew her attention. Caspian was pouring himself another brandy.

“My mother was dead. My father barely alive. Yes, we’re gods, but we’re not indestructible. Dima’s screams somehow countered their attempts to protect themselves, cutting through their power and mine. My father warned me of the curse and the role I would play, and commanded I leave. He died in his determination to force me to flee. When I made my way through the devastation Dima’s vengeful attack left, I couldn’t recognize our kingdom. There was nothing left but thick streams of blood dispersing through the undercurrents, the bodies of our merpeople—or what was left of them—and mountains of rubble that used to be homes. I escaped, using my drained strength to conjure spells to keep her from tracking me. I struggled to wash away the blood trail left by my wounds. It took me weeks from that day to finally arrive in Timarra. To you.”

Caspian twisted around, resting a hand on the table with the brandy decanter. His eyes brimmed with a sorrow and grief so stark it scalded her skin. She had never once seen such vulnerability in him, and certainly didn’t expect this degree of regret. He tossed back the shot of brandy in one gulp, placed the snifter on the tray, and hesitantly approached her.

Did he really think she’d run after his admission?

Did he think, after all this time, that she’d see him as anything other than a magnificent man with the potential to save all merfolk?

“I’m sorry, Aria. For bringing her to your home. I should never have stayed as long as I had, but I couldn’t help it. Yes, I was a fool.” He offered a sad grin. “A blinded fool. I thought I had erased my tracks, but I should have known she would never give up her hunt for me as long as the curse remained. You and your family were never the ones Dima sought, but you’re the perfect bait to get what she wants. Me.”

“We’ve been estranged for years. How could she think this horrible plan would work?”

Caspian rubbed a hand over his chin and jaw. He tilted his head, his gaze drawing her in. Open and unfiltered. No mask. Nothing hidden. “Because you have always been my one weakness, Aria. From the first day I saw you, I’ve loved you unconditionally. I just never believed she’d find me, find you, and learn the truth.”

Her jaw slackened, her lips pulled apart on a gasp. Love. All this time, he loved her?

As if to answer her unspoken question, he reached out and brushed his knuckles over her jaw. Traced the bone of her cheek with the same fire-tingling caress. She found herself dipping her head into his touch, a touch brimming with possibilities and promises. A touch that defied any of the playful jabs of her youth.

Her heart spoke to her now. Cooing with delight.

Her heart responded to his confession with a lifetime of joy.

Why did she not listen to her heart all those years ago?

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

“I’m sorry. For everything,” he murmured. “I had no right to come into your life the way I did. Under the circumstances that plagued me. What I did was selfish. Irresponsible. I ran from the problem and the problem caught up with me. I had no right to...fall in love with you.”

“Yes,” she whispered, catching his hand before it could drop from her face. “Yes, you did. You do. Dima might have found us, but she hasn’t done anything that can’t be reversed. Not yet. I have four days to come up with a solution. Those were her terms.”

Pain sliced through his expression and darkened his eyes. He lowered his hand against her resistance, but folded his fingers around hers. “Dima...doesn’t follow terms, Aria.”

Gods above, grief almost drowned the sound of his voice as he said bleakly, “Come. I’ve something to show you. At the docks.”

Aria didn’t move when he turned away. “Do you see the storm outside?”

He didn’t look out the window. “There’s a reason for it.”

\* \* \*

The rain barely touched them, except for the few drops his magic allowed so as not to draw attention to their dry appearance in a massive storm. Aria kept the new cloak Caspian provided clenching tight to her body, the deep hood pulled over her head. She stayed close to the man in the long, hooded trenchcoat, following his steps across the

water-sodden ground and the streams between the cobblestone pathways. Electric lanterns lit many doorways, while others remained dark. Even the lanterns around the castle grounds were only sporadically lit. Flagpoles creaked and the wind howled through the rows of houses and shops, banging signs against walls and rattling loose shutters. Malice and danger struck down from the swirling black clouds in thin, webbed lines of electricity.

The streets were abandoned. Not a single guard. Not a single villager or animal.

No one.

Nothing.

Caspian squeezed her hand. She sidled closer to him, quickening her pace to match his long-legged strides. The determination in his steps did little to ease the nerves that swirled through her belly.

They didn't slow until they reached the landside entrance of Caspian's warehouse. Aria took a moment to stare out at the harbour, at the furious waves pouring up over the bank and rocking the piers. The ships and boats bobbed and swayed, the smaller vessels taking on spurts of water that crested their hulls.

Lightning struck a ship's main mast. The crack of solid wood splitting followed a bright explosion of blue-white sparks. The rain did nothing to snuff out the embers as they fell over the wet, rolled sails.

The first flash of fire erupted barely a breath later.

"Come." Caspian tugged her hand, leading her into the dry warehouse. He closed the door behind them, snapped his fingers, and created a glowing coil of firelight at his fingertips.

“The ship—”

“Will attract attention. Rain won’t put that fire out.”

“Deity fire...”

Had her mother and sisters escaped? Was this storm her mother’s doing?

She keeps the waters calm. Not violent, and certainly not at a strength like this.

Dima. The storm had to be her doing.

Caspian brought her up the stairs to his office, locking the door behind them and murmuring an incantation. His ease with magic and spells was intriguing. He seldom spoke when he spun something underwater, but here, if he wished it, all he had to do was touch it, whisper words, or imagine it and it manifested.

No wonder his presence overpowered a room.

The coil of light snuffed out. A single electric lamp popped to life, spreading a dull yellow glow over the dark, shadow-infested office.

Caspian said nothing as he brought her to the back of the room, but his steps turned heavy when they approached a plain, unmarked wall.

The wooden planks at their feet wavered.

“Dima doesn’t follow terms,” Caspian whispered, raising his hand to the wall.

The illusion vanished. The smell of seawater and something...off invaded her nostrils.

Her gaze dropped to the bulky object on the floor in the small alcove.

And a piercing scream exploded from her chest.



### Chapter Eight

Caspian threw up the silencing spell a fraction of a second before Aria's scream left her lips, echoed by a ground-rumbling boom of thunder. The storm would have muffled much, but the anguish laced in that heart-wrenching sound could have sliced through the wind and rain.

Aria collapsed to her knees and gathered her sister's body into her arms, against her chest. She sobbed, her tears scorching his soul. She rocked like the motion would bring her sister back from the dead, but the milky protein coating her once blue eyes and the waxy yellow-gray of her skin did not lie.

"Stacia," Aria cried, brushing lavender strands of hair back from her sister's forehead. Caspian bit the insides of his cheeks to keep his anger and his grief, grief for Aria's loss and his own, at bay. Slowly, he lowered to his knees beside Aria, resting a hand on her shoulder. Her head jerked to him, her nose pink and her eyes glowing bright green with swirls of flashing gold. Her power. "She did this? The witch did this to my sister?"

Caspian nodded. "I'm afraid she did."

Another pained wail poured out of Aria as she lifted her face to the ceiling. Her entire body trembled with her cries.

Jagged lightning cracked and popped across the sky outside, the piercing white glow pulsing through the windows. Caspian glanced over his shoulder, brows furrowing. The lightning didn't disappear, continued to blaze. He turned back to Aria.

Bolts of gold skittered across her skin, breaking free from the tears streaming from her eyes.

His heart could have stopped as lightheadedness overcame him.

Without a logical thought in his head, he cupped her face and pulled her close, countering the energy from her tears until the lightning outside faded.

It took a few moments for her eyes to focus on his. For her to calm enough to see through her grief.

But the instant she did, Caspian leaned in and brushed his lips across hers, tasting the salt from her tears.

Her sobs softened. Her whimpers quieted.

He didn't press for a full kiss. Now wasn't the time. He sighed and pressed his forehead to hers, the tips of their noses brushing.

"A sea demon possesses no morals. None. Her word is worthless. She will strike down another of your sisters each day until I've returned." With a deep breath, he said, "And I will. I can't bear to see this happen to you. It's not your battle to fight, and I've placed you in the middle of it all. Stacia's death, her blood, is on—"

Aria pressed a finger to his lips, silencing him. "No. Her blood is not on your hands. It's on Dima's, and Dima's alone."

A minute tilt of her head with a caress of her breath across his lips weakened him. Her finger slipped along his jaw, down the side of his neck, and her hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“We go together. I won’t let you go alone,” she murmured. “We’ll fight her, you and me. As one.”

“Aria, I won’t allow it.”

Aria leaned back enough to catch his gaze. Fresh tears shimmered along her eyelids and clung to her lashes, but the lightning bolts in her irises were gone. Her lips quivered, and when she next spoke, it was from between clenched teeth.

“She killed my sister.” Aria looked down at the woman in her lap. “Killed her with such brutality. Sharks!”

“Listen to me,” Caspian begged in his most reasonable tone, but his darling princess was already shaking her head. “Yes. You’ll listen to me. I forbid you to return with me. I won’t allow Dima to use you against me. I won’t let her hurt you, too, because she will. She will mercilessly torture you to tear me apart until I do what she demands. And I would, because Aria”—he forced her to look at him, straight in the eyes—“if something happens to you, it will destroy me.”

His throat was raw as he spoke the truest of truths directly into her soul.

“A decade, a century, gods hear me, a millennial could pass, but my heart will always, always belong to you. You can hate me with every fiber in your body, call me the biggest fool to ever live, and it won’t change a thing. Never has a day passed that you haven’t plagued my mind. I stare into the sea every single day and night, and think of you. I’ve had solace knowing you are alive, even if you’re not with me.”

He lowered his hand to hers, resting on the thin, slick scales of Stacia’s belly. Aria’s chin creased and trembled, but she managed to keep her tears from spilling. The strength swelling inside her astonished him.

“We can’t stay here. The fire on the ship will draw guards, if it hasn’t already. And I think you created a phenomena in your grief that might raise a few brows.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll explain later, when we’re home.”

Aria sniffled, dropping her gaze to her sister’s body. Caspian released her hand and she tenderly traced the sharp contours of Stacia’s cheeks, the ridges along her forehead.

“I promise you, I will avenge your death. She will pay, Stacia. I will make certain of it, to the fullest extent,” she swore quietly. Caspian silently agreed. “She needs to return to the water. A proper burial.”

“Of course.”

“I won’t leave her here.”

Caspian stood up and held out his hand. “I’ll return for her once I have you home. I’ll bring her to the tunnel under my house by water. It’s the safest way.”

Aria nodded. She hesitantly lowered Stacia to the floor, crossing her arms over her chest and smoothing her lavender hair over her shoulders. She took a few moments to neaten the fan of the multi-hued tail and finally closed her sister’s eyes. After another lingering stare, she accepted Caspian’s hand and he pulled her to her feet.

“How did you find her?” Aria asked, a hand against his chest.

“I didn’t. She was brought off a ship. The sailors said they found her floating on the water’s surface. She was already dead.”

She scowled. “They brought her here for the reward. They’re no better than the witch who murdered her.” She glanced up into his face. “Did you do anything to them?”

“I was in shock when I realized who they had and what had happened. I cast a spell on the coins to keep them quiet about what they’d found, but my priority was getting her body up here where I could protect her until I told you.” He took her hand from his chest, kissed her fingertips, and motioned to the door with a jut of his chin. “We must go.”

As he released all the warding spells, he became aware of the shouts and screams

from beyond the sanctuary of his office. A horrifying crackle, followed by a thunderous boom that shook the walls. Glass exploded somewhere nearby. Caspian shifted, keeping his body in front of Aria's as they crossed to the door. He unlocked the door and pulled it open.

Smoke billowed up from the warehouse's ground floor. Small curls of fire followed the seams between the wooden planks along the walls. Two of the windows he could spot from the top of the stairs were blown out.

Aria fisted his coat at his back. "Caspian, my sister."

He surveyed the fire, the damage, listened for the loudest commotion, and quickly came up with a new plan. "Wait here."

Smoke seeped into the office, climbed along the ceiling in tufts of black. The air filled with the overwhelming smell of bonfires. Heat began to rise in the previously protected area. Caspian gathered Stacia's body, eased her over his shoulder, and hurried to the door.

"Stay close," he told Aria, leading the way down the smoke-shrouded stairway. She held his coat at the waist, keeping up with his rushed pace. Fire consumed one wall of the warehouse, eating up inches by the second. The storm pounding outside seemed to fuel the flames rather than quench them.

A beam overhead snapped and crashed down, bringing a chunk of the ceiling with it. Aria gasped, jumped against his back as he shielded her from the spray of sparks. Rain poured in through the gaping hole, sizzling as the drops hit the burning wood.

"Hey! He's got a mermaid!"

"Stop them!"

Caspian spun to face the shouts. Royal guards stormed across the ground floor of the warehouse, waving their arms to disperse the smoke.

“Caspian,” Aria breathed.

“This way. Hold tight.”

He turned on his heel and, after ensuring Aria’s grip, ran through bursts of flame and patches of slick water. He kept the side entrance blocked from the outside, locked from within.

Creaks and yawns from above warned of an imminent collapse. The guards yelled for him to stop, to surrender, their demands lost in a cacophony of barks and screams.

“Keep up, princess!”

He punched his hand out in front of him and released a strong blast of air toward the exterior door.

The metal door tore off its hinges and flipped over and over, landing somewhere in the stormy night. The barrels and crates that had blocked it lay strewn across the grass and muddy path.

As soon as Caspian stepped outside, he twisted, grabbed Aria around the waist, turned her away from the building, and released a burst of fire that engulfed the interior.

The guards’ barks and screams turned shrill and agonized.

He caught Aria’s shocked gasp as he grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward a far pier. The wild wind and pelting rain helped hide them as they escaped the villagers

and guards trying to put out the ship fire. Stacia's weight didn't hinder his speed, but he slowed to place a concealment spell over Stacia's body.

“Hold it.”

Caspian skidded to a halt at the end of the head of the pier as two new guards marched toward him. He heard the familiar click of guns being loaded at his back.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

“What did you do with the mermaid? You just had it,” one guard asked, lifting the barrel of his rifle and aiming it at Caspian. He whipped his arm around, holding Aria close to his back.

“Absurd. If I just had a mermaid, don’t you think I’d still have it?” Caspian asked, a cocky smile stretching his lips. He tipped his head and threw his voice for Aria to hear. “When I say go, get into that water as quick as you can. It’s deep at the wall.”

She nodded against his coat.

Caspian saw more figures emerging from the grass and pathways between his and the next warehouse. The activity on the pier had drawn attention from the burning ship as well.

The guards had almost reached them. Caspian lowered his arm around Stacia’s tail to make it look like he was pressing a hand to his stomach.

“Gentlemen, if we wish to discuss what it was you thought you saw, perhaps I could suggest taking this up somewhere that’s dry and away from the blazes happening a short distance away?” Caspian asked. He flipped his hand, palm up, in a nonchalant motion. “It would be far less dangerous, and more appropriate for this young lady.”

The two guards rounded him and Aria, their guns never lowering.

“If she’s one of your trollops, Caspian, rain won’t hurt her appearance.”

He bristled, his smile growing taut. “All women deserve respect, regardless of their

choice of occupation.”

One of the guards juttred his rifle toward Caspian’s shoulder. Instead of striking him, the barrel jabbed into Stacia’s concealed body. The crease between the guard’s brows deepened and he went for another jab. Caspian twisted at the waist, pulling his shoulder back.

“What in the name...What are you?”

Guns rose as more guards reached them, and almost a dozen rifles pointed at Caspian and Aria. Palm still raised, Caspian began to conjure the elemental power of air in a translucent orb.

“Seems we might have a problem,” Caspian taunted. He squeezed Aria’s hip. “But what is a problem you can’t fix?” He uncovered Stacia’s body, using the sudden appearance of a mermaid flung over his shoulder as a distraction for Aria. He hissed, “Go!” wasting no time in drawing more power, building his attack larger and larger as the guards either gasped in surprise and backed away, or held steady in their aim. “Is this what you were looking for?”

He spun around, using leverage from the speed to propel Stacia off his shoulder and into the water. Aria was halfway down the pier when she evidently heard the splash, stopped, and turned to see what had caused it.

Her hood blew off her hair.

“It’s the one the king has been searching for!”

Caspian lunged between a pair of guards and released a blast of power that rushed from him like a bomb, leveling everything in its path.

Aria cried out.

He glanced back in time to see a red splotch spread out over her belly as she toppled into the water.

The rush of air climbed the streets of the village, but he was already diving into the water. Aria struggled weakly in the current, her dress and cloak weighing her down. He reached out, ripping off the cloak, tearing into the dress and shedding it from her body, leaving her in thin underclothing as he brought her to the surface for air. She gulped in a breath and winced, curling into his shoulder, pressing her head against his neck.

“Casp.”

“Shh.” He pressed a hard kiss to her cheek and whispered, “Sleep.”

She didn’t make a sound as she fell under his spell.

He had to get her back to the house, however long his home remained safe. The sea was no place to bleed. It had been years since he last transformed, but he gladly opened himself to his natural form. The twisting and tearing and molding of bones and cartilage, muscles and tendons could not match the intense urgency that overcame him, panic at the thought of Aria losing more blood. His hands, the partial webs between his fingers and the dark blue claws at the tips, cradled his princess as he surrounded her head with a bubble to provide oxygen for her lungs.

The waves pushed Stacia’s body closer to them. With one hand wrapped around the corpse’s arm, one arm pinning Aria to his chest, he tested the strength in his tail before maneuvering beneath the water’s surface at a bullet’s pace, away from the docks.

### Chapter Nine

“He is mine, princess. He belongs to no other but me. And tonight, I’ll show you how true my words ring as I tear you limb from limb. I will keep you alive to watch me feed each part to my pets. And I will force you to witness the magnificence of an all-powerful god breaking into tiny pieces until there is nothing left but the shell of a prince.”

She couldn’t escape the kelp bindings. She couldn’t fight the magic that held her prisoner. Caspian, perched on a rock, looked on, his face void of expression. His entire body appeared lax. Uncaring.

But the vicious battle in his eyes speared her heart.

Whatever spell Dima wove, she made him a prisoner within his own body.

The witch swam closer, the kelp forcing Aria to recline horizontally. Her pointed smile and dark eyes filled Aria with terror.

She flicked one of her serrated claws against her front teeth and laughed. “Relax, little princess. I’m going to take my time and savor every moment of your death...”

Aria jolted upright in bed, cold sweat pouring down her face and plastering a nightshirt to her body.

“Easy, princess.”

The deep, familiar voice instantly put her fear to rest as she realized she wasn't about to be hacked to death by Dima's nails. No. It was a nightmare. Nothing more.

Caspian lowered himself to sit on the edge of the bed and held out a mug. "Here. Drink this. It's some concoction of Brack's that he insists is vital to promote healing."

"Healing?"

The discomfort hadn't registered while her mind reeled from the nightmare, but at the mention of a wound, flash memories swarmed her, casting aside the dreamy haze and leaving her with full clarity. She pushed the blanket down enough to lift the edge of the nightshirt and see where a patch of white cloth had been taped to her belly. No blood drained through and she didn't feel pain. Just a little soreness.

She started to peel back the tape around the cloth, but Caspian stopped her. "Let it be for now. You were shot."

When he removed his hand, she tugged off the tape and lowered the cloth. Caspian sighed and shook his head, but a half-grin curled the corner of his lips.

A pink circle marred her skin, but there was no hole. No stitches or salves. Just a discoloration that remained the only evidence of her ordeal.

"I think it looks good."

Caspian leaned forward. His grinned flattened as he repositioned the cloth dressing to see more of her skin. A furrow appeared between his handsome brows. "Well, that's impressive." He removed the rest of the tape and brushed a finger over the raised circle of flesh. "Healed completely."

"Why do you seem surprised? You helped, didn't you?" When his azure gaze lifted to

hers, she had her answer in the silent way he sought something unknown in her eyes. “Idid this?”

“You possess more than one elemental gift, Aria. What other gifts do you possess that we don’t know about? You have the gift of water, and fire as well. At the warehouse, right before I kissed you, you were crying lightning pearls. In your anguish, you sent immense lightning to the ground and it didn’t end until I stopped it.” The same finger that brushed over her healing wound traced her brow, tender and filled with wonder. “The fire that started in the warehouse was started by you. And before you allow yourself to feel guilt, I never cared about it. I wouldn’t go back, even if I could. But I, too, unleashed damaging powers that will come down on me sooner rather than later. It’s only a matter of time before the king puts the pieces together.”

This revelation floated around her head. She’d caused that terrible fire? She’d produced lightning? How was that even possible, considering she was merely a daughter of the sea? How was it possible, even with the emotional trigger, to create something so magnificent and destructive when she could barely control a wave or create magic with water?

“What damage did you do?” She straightened up, diverting her attention from the strangely unsettling development about her own gifts, taking the mug from his hand and inhaling the spicy scent. “Was my sister...”

“She’s in the tunnel. I would not leave her behind.”

“Thank you.” She took a sip of the warm brew and scrunched her nose. “Ugh, this is terrible.”

Caspian chuckled. “Seeing how well you’ve healed yourself, I’d say you don’t have to finish it.” He took the mug from her and placed it on the floor. “You don’t seem too interested in your new gift.”

“Do you have such a gift?”

“Not to that extent. At least, not that I’ve honed in a controlled environment.”

“But if something impacted you emotionally, do you think you could do the same damage?”

Caspian sighed. “Let’s say I don’t care to find out.”

“I’ll accept that.” Aria threw off the covers, twisted to get her legs next to Caspian, and scooted to the edge of the bed. “I think I’m in need of a bath.” She pulled a strand of seaweed from her matted hair. “Terribly so.”

“I’ll run one for you.”

Aria followed him with her eyes as he left the room, mug of foulness in hand. She took a deep breath of his lingering scent, clean, fresh, with a dash of something spicy. Maybe clove or cinnamon. When she heard the bath water run, she climbed up and stretched her muscles, stiff from the ordeal. Dried seawater left her skin feeling tight. Judging by the sound of the rain hammering down on the roof—this bedroom held no windows—and the occasional rumble of thunder mixed with the darkness that consumed the small home, sans a single light in the main room, she surmised she hadn’t been unconscious for long.

Caspian remained in the bathroom as she crept out of the bedroom. Yes, the storm still roared, virile and healthy. What chaos had they left behind at the docks? What damage had he caused that could be worse than her apparent lightning attack?

Curious, she moved on silent steps to the front door and pulled it open.

A small crack was all she needed to witness, with eyes and ears, the horror.

Fire, orange-yellow flames, spread through the village. Billowing black smoke filled the sky, but cast little protection from the rain. Lightning struck at random, setting a new building aflame with every bolt. Terrified screams and cries poured into the night.

The castle, alive with activity, belched out guards to lend aid.

Aria closed the door and pressed her forehead to the wood. Caspian’s home was far



off track from the village, but the battle of the elements wouldn't promise safety here.

A comforting hand settled on her shoulder. The heat and strength of Caspian's body surrounded her, assured her in the silent manner they had always shared, only now, she sensed a deeper bond, the one she'd been blind to when they were friends. She turned into him, utterly aware of his nearness, the thrumming connection between them.

His hand slipped down her side to rest on her hip. "We won't be able to stay here long, though I'm quite certain the guards and villagers are too busy with their own woes to chase us down anytime soon. I've already sent Brack away with enough coin that he won't have to worry about expenses for the rest of his days. He'll be off to see his daughter, no doubt. This storm is potent, princess, fueled by emotion. The fire. The rain." His other hand came under her chin, lifting her face to his. "Once you have your bath, we'll leave."

Aria fell victim to the emotions brewing in his eyes and the overwhelming desire that ran rampant through her body. Pushing up onto her toes, cupping his face, she brushed her lips across his, craving the taste, needing his touch, wanting more than she'd ever wanted before.

Wanted everything, and wanted it all from Caspian. Only from Caspian.

She leaned back enough to capture his darkening gaze. "Why did it take me so long to figure this out?" She pressed herself flush against him, biting her lower lip as the full connection flared between them. "To figure out it was always you?"

"Time is irrelevant to us, and the whys no longer matter." He sank his hand into her hair, his fingers gently fisting against her scalp. The prickles of discomfort quickly melted into pleasure. "Despite the circumstances, we're together again."

She closed her eyes, drinking in the sparks that tingled along her lips from his nearness. “Do you think we were ever meant to be apart?”

“I do. But that time is over.” He gave her hip a gentle squeeze. “Your bath.”

Aria dipped her head, pressing her cheek to his shoulder, and rested there for a few heartbeats. Caspian reluctantly released her when she rounded him. His hand slipped from her hair, across her face, and down her arm as distance grew between them. His gaze followed her, scorching paths along her back until she closed the door to the bathroom.

There was no delight to be had soaking in the warm water with its luscious scents of vanilla and jasmine. No delight in picking seaweed from her hair. She bathed quickly, washing away the grit and grime left on her human form from the ocean and cleaning up the mess the salt left in her hair because the only delight to be had was that which Caspian offered.

She climbed from the tub. Ignoring the rack of clothing options, she toweled her hair to get most of the moisture out and tucked the damp towel around her breasts.

Caspian stood by the window, peering into the night as fiery destruction crept closer to the outer walls of the castle.

“This village is plagued with evil. Manipulation and greed. However, I’ve made sure those worthy of survival are given a chance. The majority of the survivors will be those who lived in alleyways. Those who understand pain and suffering and who will be more attuned to the needs of others.”

“Children?”

Caspian turned his back to the window—and came up short of an answer, his mouth

open to speak, but no sound came out. His gaze perused her from head to toe, lifting to her face after a few tenuous seconds.

“I would never allow children to suffer,” he rasped, quickly closing the distance between them. The predatory glint in his eyes stunned her, causing her stomach to flutter uncontrollably. The sensation rose to her throat, leaving her essentially breathless. His hands dove into her hair and the way he stood, a leg on the outside of hers, his body not pressed to hers, left her anticipating his next move. “Not for the consequences of the adults.”

Aria nibbled her lower lip, tentatively placing her hands against Caspian’s chest. The solid muscle that met her palms sent a shiver of excitement along her body. Hard, thick muscle that caused her lungs to tremble and her breathing to turn faint.

“Alamari burns beyond that window, princess,” he said huskily. “Are you seeking to start a new blaze?”

She plucked open a button on his shirt.

“I think the blaze has already started.”

### Chapter Ten

Caspian responded with a crushing kiss, one that pulled a moan deep from within her chest. Desire racketed through her, sapping her strength. The possessive sweep of his tongue left her poised on her toes, barely able to keep her knees from buckling. An intoxicating mixture of tenderness and hunger met her primitive need with each kiss. Years of suppressed emotions, unknown feelings, intense love poured out of the prince as he dropped an arm around her waist and tugged her against him, right off her toes.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he moved, his kiss deepening, melting from strenuously controlled to something bright and feverish. Something that rivaled the fire that now burned Alamari to the ground.

Lost, so delightfully lost in his kisses. So engulfed in his passion.

He might as well have floated on air for how skillfully he glided through the main room to his bedroom. Even as he sat on the edge of the bed, he adjusted her body, her legs, not once disrupting the starved kiss she refused to end. He tasted too good, an elixir of magic and heat. A potent essence of electric tingles and airy caresses, his sexual prowess evident with each touch of his fingers, each brush of his knuckles. His cock pressed hard against her upper thigh, his pants a barrier she desperately wanted gone.

She may not have much experience with sex, and certainly not much in human form, but the way her core throbbed and ached and itched, she doubted the act in mer-form could match the way her human body felt right now.

Caspian growled against her mouth a second before he pulled back. The separation wrenched at her heart and left her breathless and craving more. His eyes swirled like an ocean whirlpool, a stunning azure-gray-turquoise blend that glowed in the dark.

“Why did you stop?” Aria dropped her hands to the hem of his shirt and tugged it upward. “Don’t stop.”

He allowed her to remove his shirt, but when she fumbled with the fastener of his pants, he stopped her. “Savor it, princess. Savor every moment.”

His fingers unfurled from her wrist and dipped under the towel. Brushed lightly against her thigh. His lips touched her collarbone as his fingertips slid through her slick folds.

“Caspian.”

She grabbed his shoulders and held tight, tremors coursing along her legs as he stroked the sensitive crease and teased her clit. His mouth kissed along her neck, his teeth nipping her skin every few inches, making her moan. No, that was the magic he worked between her legs. Slow, gentle strokes and circles that made her nerves hum louder and louder. Pleasure, raw and untainted, mounted as he touched her like a man who knew his lover’s body better than she did.

If there was anything more perfect than this, than the way he touched her, kissed her, seduced every wild inhibition locked deep inside until she wanted so badly to cry out, she couldn’t imagine what it might be.

“Ah, my princess likes this, hmm?” Caspian teased, his voice rough and thick with desire. The tip of his finger circled her entrance before testing her body, pressing deeper. A faint grumble rolled up from his chest, a sound that shocked her with its sensual vibration.

“Yes.” His finger slid out, through her crease, playing her clit until she dropped her head back with a sigh. “You do.”

“Yes, yes, I do.” As he removed his hand from beneath her towel, she lifted her head and caught his gaze in the dark. “I don’t think there’s anything I couldn’t like about you, my prince.”

“Shall we put that to the test?”

He gave her no time to answer, twisting over the bed until her back connected with the mattress. His hips rested in the cradle of her legs, the heat of his cock pressed against her core. He smoothed her hair back from her face, those stray locks that had fallen across her forehead in their heady endeavor. The towel tugged against her back before it loosened from around her breasts and the cool air of the room kissed her skin.

Cool, until the warm, rough skin of Caspian’s palm cupped one breast and he flicked a thumb across her nipple.

She sucked in a sharp breath through clenched teeth.

Was this what she once cast away for a human man? This intense, delicious, magnificent creature who tended to a body that responded so powerfully to his ministrations?

Aria turned her face into his palm and kissed his hand. “What do you plan to do, Caspian?”

“Now, princess. That curiosity of yours.”

She didn’t wait long before his mouth closed over her nipple and sucked gently. She

gasped, drew up her knees and arched off the mattress, a strained moan clawing up her throat. She sank the fingers of one hand into his hair, soft, thick strands of silk, and clung to his wrist, his palm still against her cheek.

When he moved to the other breast, she was panting. Her legs trembled, matching the irregular patter of her heart.

She thought he'd finally come up to her, kiss her mouth, make them one at last.

Oh, how wrong she was.

The heat of his mouth left her breast and trailed down her belly, his tongue licking and swirling over her skin. The mattress shifted and his body slid lower, the weight of his hips leaving hers.

Aria lifted her head and watched the shadow of his form settle between her legs. "Caspian?"

"Say my name again. In a few minutes."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Wha—ohh!”

Aria flung her arms back, grasping for the pillow. Caspian’s tongue slid over her clit, through her slit, and back again. Magic. Whatever it was he was doing, he cast her into a different world, a different mind, one that threatened to tear her from her body and send her flying into the stars.

And she did fly with the stars when Caspian sucked her clit and unleashed a storm of pleasure that outdid the one punishing the world outside.

Bowing off the mattress, she cried out, “Caspian!”

That wicked mouth of his continued to suck, that tongue to lash until her entire body shuddered with the powerful rush of climax.

“Better,” he murmured, leaving her core to nip the insides of her thighs. Dazed and gasping for breath, Aria lolled her head in the direction of his voice to see his full silhouette at the foot of the bed. She listened to the sound of metal scrape as he unfastened his pants and shed the item before climbing over her. “Do you have any idea of how lovely you sound?”

“Crying out your name while you ruin me?” She found the strands of hair that seemed to habitually fall over his forehead and brushed them aside. He leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead with a soft chuckle.

“Mm-hmm.” He brushed the tip of his nose against hers at the same time he slid his cock through her crease. “A true siren, my darling.” He splayed a hand over her hip



and slid it to her bottom. “Lure me into the sea. I come willingly.”

Aria held her breath as he fit the wide head of his cock against her entrance. “I will never lead you astray, my prince. As long as you say you’ll stay with me.”

“Aria, you own my heart. I will always be yours.”

Her chest cinched and her mind whirled as he slowly claimed her with one, slow motion. He hiked her leg around his waist, her body accommodating him, welcoming him, claiming him in return.

Complete. One single entity entwined together.

Aria slipped her hand to the back of his neck and brought him down, finding his mouth and kissing him with every emotion from the bottom of her heart. He responded in kind, matching each desperate sweep of her tongue with his own, engaging in a dance far more intricate and permanent than any before.

This. Caspian. So right.

Perfect.

Each thrust of his cock pushed her back to that blissful precipice. Each moan and groan that curled between their hungry mouths. She raked a hand over his back, the sinew and muscle under her fingers taut and smooth. His body moved with grace, skill, a perfect pace that drove her higher and higher.

She broke their kisses, tipping her head back on a moan. Caspian wasted no time laying a path of kisses along her neck.

“Tell me I’m yours, Caspian,” she breathed. “That I belong to you and no one else.”

One of his hands found hers and folded their fingers together next to her head. “If there is anything I’m certain about, it’s that you belong to me.” He punctuated his claim with a thrust of his hips. “If you wish to be claimed, princess, I claim you. Here. Now.” Another thrust of his hips, hitting every sensitive spot she could imagine. “As the gods above hear my words.”

Lightning struck, shattering the darkness for a split second.

A bolt of merciless pleasure tore up from her core, splitting her in two, three, a million pieces.

She dug her nails into his back, the rippling bliss blinding her to anything but sensation. A sensation of melting into another, into Caspian. Molding together, a stronger creation of the sea, brimming with passion and promise and hope.

“Aria.”

The rasp of his voice quickly evolved into a roar.

Heat pulsed inside her, filled her with fire. Over and over.

Until Caspian’s thrusts ceased.

He dropped to his forearms, the mattress indenting on either side of her head. His labored breaths spread against her mouth before he claimed her lips in a tender, slow kiss. They remained locked together, kissing in the sweetest afterglow.

The village may burn outside, the storm cast the world beneath its curse, but here, in their little corner of peace, nothing could touch them.

“I never want this to end,” Aria whispered after Caspian lowered his body to the

mattress beside her. “I was the damn fool ten years ago. I should have listened to you, and listened to what my heart tried so often to tell me.”

“Princess, this will never end. You asked me to claim you. I did and the gods heard. As for the fool, I should never have left the sea. I should have fought harder for you.” He held her close, stroking her shoulder. “But my time here was not wasted either. And my patience not in vain—”

A volatile banging on the door jerked them apart. Caspian jumped to his feet and silently crossed the room to the bedroom door. Aria crept up behind him and peered between Caspian and the jamb. The flicker of lantern light reflected off the glass panes in the main room. The banging on the front door didn’t stop.

“Caspian! Open up by order of King Jethro!”

Caspian closed the bedroom door and gathered Aria in his arms. “Ready to return to the sea?”

“I can’t. The bracelet.”

He caught her chin, kissed her with precision, and chuckled. “Oh, princess. You underestimate me.”

### Chapter Eleven

Returning to the sea with no option of returning to this particular area of land may have been bittersweet if it weren't for the goddess swimming beside him, holding onto one of Stacia's arms. Together, they pulled her along, hoping to return her to Timarra for the proper burial rites.

They had barely escaped to the tunnel when the guards broke down the door. The king's men stormed Caspian's house, yelling out for him to surrender, but he and Aria had already made it through the spelled trap door and to freedom.

As soon as they dove into the water, the bracelet burned bright gold. The transformation happened immediately after.

He hated the pain that twisted Aria's face as her body contorted and reshaped, new bones and muscle growing, others absorbing until they disappeared. It was over before he could cast any spell to ease her pain, and left her dazed and swimming in a few tight circles.

Now, nothing remained of the terrible transformation. Her extraordinary, iridescent tail with flowing fins twinkled despite the lack of light at this depth. Her hair, still stunningly red, floated around her face whenever they slowed to contemplate their plan. The pale ridges along her cheeks and forehead, enhanced by matching iridescent scales, the short gills along her neck, everything captured his heart as much as Aria's human form.

The farther out to sea they swam, the calmer the undercurrents became. Caspian

made out a break in the clouds above the water's surface, an indication that the storm did not affect these parts. Or an indication the storm had already passed.

Night drove them on as they approached Timarra. Caspian stopped, drawing Aria around to face him. Her wide irises and slitted pupils questioned him. He lifted a hand, holding up a single finger in a signal for her to wait, and scanned the immediate area.

"She'll have a barrier up around Timarra, like I placed around Alamari. She'll know we're coming."

Aria glanced in the direction of her home. "Is there anything we can do? Any magic we can cast to counter it?"

"I need to get a feel for the magic, the spell, to counter it. If I cast carelessly, it'll alert her. She will know I came of my own accord because the bracelet allowed you to transform."

"I didn't transform last night at the docks."

"Because we weren't returning to Timarra. We returned to my home." He paused, his attention dropping to the bracelet. He caught the essence of the spell wound through the gold, but thought little of the mechanisms beyond how they prevented Aria from changing until she'd convinced him to return to Timarra. "Wait."

Adjusting his hold on Stacia's wrist, he lifted Aria's hand and scrutinized the bracelet, sending tiny threads of magic into the object in hopes of understanding it better. Complex, yes, but nothing deceptive.

Nothing obvious, at least.

Then how would the cursed bracelet know the difference between when Aria was returning to Timarra and when she was just in the water? If the spell detected his compliance, his willingness to return, she should have transformed last night. He'd already made up his mind to face Dima.

Unless...

"She already knows we're here," he grouched, glancing around again. "She must have placed a barrier around Alamari, but I kept close to the shore when I brought you to my house, and used an unknown pathway in the cliffside a little ways down from the tunnel to get you out of the water."

"You used a burst of air to carry us further away from the cliff when we dove from the tunnel."

"Which must have placed us within the warded area, hence your change." Caspian flapped his tail in frustration. "Damn it. Okay, let's get Stacia somewhere safe. We'll retrieve her once we're done with Dima."

Aria nodded. Caspian led them deeper, searching for a secure cavern or structure. He found a small cave occupied by an octopus, drew the eight-legged creature out, and carefully placed Stacia's body inside, using a large rock at the entrance to keep predators away. He captured Aria's hand in his, folding their fingers together.

"She'll be okay," he assured her.

"I know." She frowned and swam into his chest, hugging him. He embraced her in return. "I don't like any of this, Caspian. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"We'll make it through this. Together, princess." He kissed the top of her head. "What do you say? Should we keep our hostess waiting?"

Aria moved away, keeping their hands entangled. “That would be utterly rude.”

He smiled. “I agree.”

With a quick glance around, noting the solemn sea and the lack of life besides the bottom dwellers, they rolled their tails and propelled forward.

No reason for a stealthy entrance.

Not when Dima would be waiting for them at the kingdom’s edge.

\* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

Timarra lay in ruins, a staggering sight to behold.

Caspian masked his shock, his sadness. So many memories of a beautiful kingdom shimmering with colorful gems and alive with underwater plants and coral and fish.

All dreary and desolate.

It would have been unrecognizable if not for the untouched circular archway, the monumental landmark that led the way into the once-rich kingdom of Timarra.

Caspian tugged on Aria's hand, keeping her close to his side. He observed the ruined kingdom, his senses reaching out for resistance to his magic. He received none.

"Dima!" he barked, throwing his voice on a sound wave through the destruction. Only the plink of falling rocks answered his call.

Aria hugged his arm as they crept deeper through the waters, swimming over patches and mounds of dead sea life and structures that once used to dress this place in beauty. It brought back memories of Astauria, the glory of his kingdom and how quickly it could be taken away.

Caspian caught the slithering tendril of kelp reaching up between the cracks of rocks for Aria's tail. He spun them away, protecting her from the enchanted plants.

"Where is she?" Aria whispered.

"Watching us, I have no doubt."



“Great.”

Caspian would have laughed if his scales and skin didn't sting under the acute watch of his enemy. “Dima, you wanted me to return. Here I am!”

“Forgotten Prince, it's been some time.”

Caspian spun around, but he wasn't fast enough.

A shark bulletted from somewhere below, plowing into his gut and driving him back until his body slammed into the jagged rocks spread over the ocean floor. Somehow, he kept his grip on Aria. She shrieked, her voice painful and high, the scream of a siren. Tremors racketed through the ground and the water pulsed.

Until the sound of her voice cut off abruptly.

Kelp sprang up from the rocks again, this time snaking around Aria at a speed he could barely register. When he tried to slice through the sprouts...

Nothing happened.

He focused on the shark that kept him pinned to the rocks as Aria's hand tore out of his and the kelp bound her to Dima's wishes.

He tried to thrust out a wave to get the creature off him.

Nothing.

A sickening weight settled in the pit of his stomach.

“You have no power here, except for the power I need.” The demon finally came into

sight, her sleek form curling through the water with ease. Her dark eyes glinted with malice, her dark scales like an ominous shadow coiling around her body. “I drained you along your journey here.” She laughed, her pointed teeth as lethal as her black claws. Claws she clicked together as she said in mock apology, “I know your power. I’ve seen what you can do. I wasn’t taking chances. I’m sure you can understand.”

“I’m here, Dima. There’s no need to keep Aria and her family any longer. I’m here, so release them.”

Dima coiled around Aria, coming up behind her. She patted Aria’s hair, her smile caustic. “You have yet to fulfill your end of the bargain, prince. You value honesty? Equality? Well, release me from this curse your father placed on me and I’ll release your beloved Aria and her family.”

Caspian grunted, laying a punch into the shark’s snout. “Tell your pet to release me.”

“But how am I to be assured you won’t try to attack me?” Dima tapped one of her claws on her chin as she pretended to give it some thought. “Ah, I’ve an idea.”

The shark dug its snout hard into his abdomen.

A shockwave shot through him.

Numbness followed.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

When he tried to fend off the shark, his arms wouldn't obey his command.

When he tried to shout at Dima, his lips didn't part and no sound formed.

"I think that's a compromise. Now, prince. I want to make one thing extremely clear to you, and to your princess here. I give the orders. I'm in control. One way or another, you will reverse the curse." She snapped her fingers, sending tiny bubbles upward. Anger filled his chest, but he couldn't release it. Couldn't fight. "Sit over here."

She pointed to a mound of rocks and coral. The shark wiggled backwards, releasing him.

His first instinct was to conjure up power and magic, but his body did not listen. Instead, he moved against his will to perch on the ledge as Dima demanded.

Like one of her pets.

Aria struggled against the bindings, her mouth opening in a soundless scream as she fought. Her battle filled him with pride while he shouted and roared inside. His powers, elemental threads, coiled and curled and knotted deep in his gut and throughout his chest.

Dima circled him, raking her claws through his hair. "I think the little princess there knows what's in store for her." She laughed. "I gave her a preview while she slept."

Trapped inside his own body, Caspian's thoughts froze in horror.

Aria thrashed violently as Dima swam toward her, the kelp repositioning her body horizontally.

She woke from a nightmare, and he never asked about it.

And he delivered her right back into that nightmare.

Dear gods, help me.

### Chapter Twelve

Anightmare come to life. A manipulation that would end in more bloodshed.

Aria stopped fighting the kelp. It was no use. The harder she fought, the tighter the bindings held her. There were more tonight than when Dima arrived in Timarra and leveled her home to the ground. Aria had to come up with some other way to escape and help Caspian. As in her nightmare, his eyes blazed with fury and hatred, but his body perched calm and relaxed on the ledge.

Dima floated above her, tapping her claws in front of Aria's face. "How did you like my sneak peek into the events of this evening? I wish you had seen more. You'd know exactly what my plan for you is."

Aria started to respond, but her voice remained lost. Dima tipped her head, cupping her ear.

"What was that? I'm afraid I can't hear you."

Aria scowled. Dima grinned and shrugged.

"Oh, well. Guess it wasn't anything important. Let's get started, shall we? However, instead of starting with your arm, I think cutting your tongue out might be more fitting, followed by your voice box."

Dima lowered herself to Aria's side and tugged down her lower lip until she winced. The demon snickered and looked at Caspian.

“If, at any point, you wish to stop this, all you have to do is reverse the curse. The only words you can speak to me are, ‘I will release you.’ In case you wish to have some part of your beloved princess left to cherish.”

Aria clenched her teeth, but the demon snapped her fingers. Aria’s mouth opened against her command. Dima pinched the end of her tongue with two claws, piercing the muscle and delivering a bolt of pain. The sea witch pulled on Aria’s tongue until it became taut and agonizingly stretched.

Aria tried to scream when she felt the razor sharp edge of Dima’s nail against the back of her tongue. She tried to order her mouth closed, but it remained open. She tried to twist her head away, but the demon quickly stilled her fight.

“The more you move, the more it hurts. But who am I to steal the joy of pain from my captives?”

“I will release you.”

Caspian’s monotone voice stopped the demon in her tracks. Dima released Aria’s tongue and swam over to Caspian. His eyes followed her, the storm in them remained hidden behind a mask of surrender. Aria shook her head wildly, trying to get his attention. Panic swelled within her chest, a pressure that spread up to her head.

“You’ve always known how to take the fun out of things, Caspian. It was only her tongue, unless that’s a valuable commodity to you, prince.” She pouted, a terrible look for her, but it quickly turned into her usual malicious smile. She waved her hand in front of Caspian’s face one time. Caspian moved his lips, only choppy words escaping. “You’ll have to repeat the reversal a few times until it becomes clear. Let me warn you, should you try to trick me, my pets are waiting for a treat. Oh, speaking of treat, did you receive my gift? The lavender-haired gift?”

Aria seethed at the mention of her sister. Caspian's eyes cut to her as Dima twirled around in delight at her own cleverness.

Aria caught the fierce swell of his emotion, the boiling power restrained in his eyes. She nodded once, when Dima wasn't looking. She understood what Caspian was trying to relay.

The choppy words escaped Caspian's mouth in rhythm. They grew clearer with each repeat.

"Your sister, princess, was a rebel. She had a problem listening to directions. I warned them all to remain in the cage and not try to escape. What did that one do?" Dima shook her head. "She escaped! The nerve! I had to send my pets to fetch her before she got too far, and when they returned with her, ohh, I made sure the others understood the consequences."

By the time Dima was through recounting Stacia's murder, Aria was heaving breaths filled with anguish and rage. An unusual prickle coasted down her arms. She built on that prickle, the heaviness behind her sternum, the expanding well of emotionally triggered power.

She may not know how to use it, but anything to stop Dima and free Caspian would be good right now.

"You sirens have a terrible scream. It can do almost as much damage as mine. I tried to reassure your mother that she still had three children left, but it didn't seem to help much. I even allowed her the opportunity to hold your sister one more time before I left her for the sailors. She tried to curse me, like Caspian's father, but I don't make the same mistake twice. I shut her up, but it didn't prevent her from conjuring that storm."

Emotions.

She pulled on the reservoir of emotions, those she'd stifled since she discovered Stacia's demise. She picked at the seam she'd sewn into place when Caspian calmed her and they had to escape the warehouse. The prickling sensation intensified.

A faint ripple coursed through the water.

Dima stiffened, tilting her head. She twisted, her joyous demeanor turning solemn in a blink.

Another ripple cut through the water.

Aria focused on her grief. Her pain. Her desire for revenge.

A tremor shook the ground.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

Dima coiled around herself, her dark eyes sharp and focused. Aria stole a glance at Caspian, who had stopped speaking. His eyes pulsed with power. Power she felt resonate inside her bones.

It fed her the spark she needed.

The sky over the ocean cleared.

A thick bolt of white struck down, cutting through the water, and striking the shark swimming closest to Caspian.

Dima shrieked, spun, and launched herself to Aria's side. She raised one hand, baring her claws, and threw a lethal glance at Caspian. "I warned you!"

Aria's eyes widened.

Dima's hand dropped.

The tips of her claws pierced Aria's skin. She threw her head back and screamed in silence, the burn spreading everywhere along her body.

A fierce current slammed into them, throwing Dima back. Aria rocked in the kelp bindings, shuddering from the pain. She glanced at her chest where beads of blood ribboned around five superficial punctures.

Another powerful current rushed them, missing Aria and crashing into Dima. This time, the water caught her, trapping her within its sphere.

Aria watched in awe as another bolt of lightning struck down, stabbing through the water.

And piercing through the sphere, through Dima.

The demon shrieked, her deadly scream muffled by the watery prison. Smoke rose from her skin and between her scales. The bolt sizzled, persisting until the demon's skin charred to black and her body disintegrated into a pile of ash.

The sphere reabsorbed into the sea, and the ashes dissolved in the water.

The lightning winked out.

The kelp holding Aria prisoner shriveled and disappeared within the rocks.

“Caspian!”

Aria rushed to Caspian, who remained perched on the ledge. He followed her with his gaze, but didn't move. She sat in his lap, curling her tail around his waist, smoothing the swirling hair that floated around his head. She caressed his face, worry seizing her.

“Caspian, what do I do? How do I help?”

He puckered his lips.

She didn't hesitate to kiss him, and kiss him hard. She threw her arms around his neck, begging silently for him to return to her. For him to wrap his arms around her waist, pull her close...

She leaned back and looked down at his arms, embracing her and holding her tight.

When she lifted her gaze to his face, he wore a wicked smile and offered her a wink.

“You worried for me, princess?”

She smacked his arm. His eyes went wide before she laughed. She couldn’t help but share in the laughter as the tension and fear finally began to leave her body.

“You weren’t stuck, were you?”

He shook his head. “The spell ceased the moment she did.” He traced a finger over her chest and the healing punctures in her skin between the scales covering her breasts. “I think it’s best if we never find out how powerful I might become if my emotions get involved. I think I was on the brink of destroying the entire ocean to save you.”

“As long as you’re with me, I don’t mind living a life on two legs. In fact”—she pressed her forehead to his—“I think I prefer two legs when it comes to certain activities. “

“Ahh, I have to agree. Far more pleasurable than what we might have in this form.”

Aria pressed another kiss to his mouth and leaned back. “We need to find my family. I have to make sure they’re okay. And then we need to give Stacia a proper burial.”

Caspian nodded. “Let’s end this, once and for all.”

### Chapter Thirteen

“We will rebuild, and we’ll rebuild stronger.”

Aria hugged her mother after sharing tearful embraces with her surviving sisters.

Almost a month had passed since the horrors Dima brought to them. A proper burial was given to Stacia, filled with ocean blooms and a whirlpool capsule that transported her into the Afterlife. Time was spent sifting through debris and what was left of Timarra. They grieved those who did not escape the sea demon’s wrath and sent their spirits to follow Stacia. Scattered merfolk returned and worked together to begin cleaning up the destruction.

Now, it was time for her to leave.

To start her life with Caspian and rebuild Astauria.

Her mother finally released her, blinking away a shimmer that left the rainbow swirl in eyes that were brighter than normal. Sunlight filtered through the waves to spread beams of shimmering light over Timarra, and a promise of healing and strength to come.

“You take care of my daughter, Caspian.” Queen Taelyss held out her arms for Caspian and folded him into a maternal hug. “I couldn’t be filled with more joy than to know you are the one to become her husband. I know you two will do great things together.”

“You can rest assured she will always be safe with me. Loved and cherished and adored,” Caspian said, backing away and gathering Aria under his arm. The multihued blues of his tail glittered like a lagoon within the ocean, deflecting sunlight to the ocean’s floor. “We’ll return to help in your realm’s revival, Queen Taelyss. You have my word.”

“And you have my word, King Caspian, that our hands are yours in your revival as well. It fills me with great joy knowing you and Aria will rebuild Astauria. You both will breathe new life into that magical place.”

Aria’s mother dove back through the water, putting distance between them as she called out, “No longer forgotten, you shall thrive. Today marks the beginning to the greatness you both shall achieve!”

Aria squeezed Caspian’s hand, heaviness settling on her shoulders. She was leaving the only home she’d ever known. Tipping her head up, she took in Caspian’s handsome face, the sharp edges and ridges of his merman form as alluring and enticing as his human form. He filled her heart with the purest joy, the deepest love, and the greatest gift.

A gift of happiness forever.

“It’s time to go, my darling queen.”

“Princess,” she corrected.

Caspian chuckled. “Very well. If princess suits you, then I’ll call you princess. Don’t try to convince others you’re not a queen, though.”

Gliding through the ocean depths, hand-in-hand, they left the nightmare of Alamari, the pain of Timarra, and both dear and cursed memories behind.

Before they left, Caspian confirmed that Alamari burned to the ground, taking malicious souls with the fires, including the king and his wife. Their children survived. Aria hoped they would grow into better people, rulers with hearts and morals and pure spirits.

He managed to track Brack down, using a bit of magic to reassure himself his friend had settled in safely with his daughter's family. He'd even caught the eye of a local woman.

Love flourished all around, and Aria couldn't be happier.

They left the coast and paused where the ocean floor plunged downward into a deep nothing. Caspian brought Aria's hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. He wiggled the fingers of his free hand in a strange pattern, murmuring words she could not hear.

The water below began to churn and stir. The world around her pushed and pulled her body, urging her closer to the swirling whirlpool.

"Portal," Caspian explained. "It'll deliver us to Astauria. And our new beginning."

"Don't let go of my hand, you hear?" Aria grasped his hand more tightly between both of hers, holding on for dear life. Caspian grinned and led her forward, the natural draw from the hole pulling them in.

Aria closed her eyes. Her body twirled and spun like she was circling a drain. Caspian tugged her close, his strong arms wrapping tightly around her as they fell together into the unknown.

The sensation ceased almost as quickly as it started.

When she opened her eyes, she was no longer on the brink of the deep ocean, but floating in the midst of crystalline blue waters so clear she had to flap her tail to make sure she was still in the water. The sandy floor sparkled like a dazzling sheet of quartz and diamonds, birthing some of the most brilliant colors of coral and seaflowers she'd ever seen.

A paradise.

“Welcome, my princess, to Astauria.”

Caspian spread his arms, his smile growing. The sea stretched on forever. Occasional piles of white stone and jade were the only evidence of the once-magnificent kingdom they would rebuild. Behind her, the shimmering carpet gradually ascended, drawing her upward to breach the surface. Caspian followed and pointed to the sandy beach of a small island.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:16 am*

“We will bring humans back here, help them flourish anew. Some of the descendants of the old Astaurian villages escaped to other realms, but we will find them and offer them a home here once again.”

“This is...unbelievable,” Aria breathed. “It is pure magic. More than any rumor or legend painted it to be. The power is all around us, from the sea to the land to the sky.” She tipped her head up and soaked in the bright sun. “We’ll do your parents right. We’ll do everyone, everything, right as we move forward. You and me. Together. We can do amazing things.”

Caspian twisted her to face him, holding her waist as his fins caressed her tail. “Willdo, my darling. There is nothing we won’t conquer to make this world the best place to thrive.”

He dipped his head and pressed a soft kiss to her lips that instantly shocked her body into a heated storm. “But first, why don’t we shed the scales for a bit? Lay on the sand, soak in this brilliant sun?” He traced a finger between her breasts. “And let me take care of you the way you love?”

Aria draped her arms around his neck, curling her fingers in his damp hair. “I think I like the way that sounds, my king.”

“I hope you never feel otherwise.”

She teased his bottom lip with a playful nibble. He groaned.

“As long as I have you and you’re by my side, it will never change.” She scraped her



nails along his scalp and earned a pleasure-induced growl from Caspian. “And I’m yours forever, remember?”

He snickered, wrapping her hair around his hand and tugging until he had her head exactly where he wanted it: The perfect angle to claim her with his riveting kiss. “Forever will never be long enough to love you.”

“Love forever, and for an eternity beyond.”

His lips brushed over hers again. “We have a beach waiting for us.”

THE END