



# Aqua (Elemental Men #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** "I might be hallucinating or have a brain tumor."

How else am I supposed to explain the super-hot blue-haired man in a flamingo-printed swimsuit who appeared beside me while I was scuba diving? He could be a merman, but that doesn't make me sound sane.

Or I might need to reexamine what sanity means and prepare for my life to turn upside down.

**Total Pages (Source):** 10

## CHAPTER ONE

### AQUA

There's nothing better than being underwater. My brothers disagree, but they're wrong. When I'm not in water, it feels like something's missing... and the few times I've been to the desert, I could barely breathe.

Not that I really need to breathe. Well, I do, but... not. I'm in a human body right now, but I'm still not really human, which means breathing is kind of optional. Though if I went without it for long enough, maybe it would become non-optional? It's hard to know without trying, and I don't care enough to try.

George might know—or Flame. They like to do brainy thought stuff sometimes.

I'm not even going to suggest it to Zephyr, though. He gets squirrely at the idea of no air. He won't even come swimming with me—says the water doesn't have enough air in it and he feels like he's drowning even when he's just ankle-deep. So dramatic. There's plenty of air in water. I'm still breathing, aren't I?

Wait... am I?

I smile at the fish that's wandered over to kiss my shoulder, and an air bubble escapes my mouth. I guess I must be breathing or at least absorbing the oxygen my human body needs in some way. Being the essence of water means it pretty much does whatever I need it to.

Because water is awesome .

It's only in the water that my thoughts are truly clear. Only in the water that I feel whole.

I've lost track of how long I've been down here, but the subtle change of the tide tells me it's been a long time. The thought of leaving the water and going back to the house is blech, but Perry worries if I'm gone for too long. He's always been like that, in every incarnation. It doesn't matter that he remembers all his past lives now and knows I can't come to harm in water; he still frets when any of us are gone for too long. He's like a crab or a sea snail—a soft inside protected by a hard shell. It's only been six months since Aether found him and they rejoined us, but we all fell into our old habits immediately. We know what our job is, and we're determined to get it done. To win. We don't want to lose another species. Even if this one does seem determined to destroy itself and this wonderful gift of a planet.

I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive humanity for what they've done to my precious water. The poison is everywhere, and always I hear the whisper of sorrow in raindrops and currents. The pain of?—

A new whisper drifts to me on the tide, and I tilt my head to listen. A man... in trouble?

No... not in trouble yet . But the water says he will be.

My only response is surprise. Since when does the water care about humans drowning? The tide is eternal and will continue until the Earth ends. Species come and go; some live within the water, others don't. The ebb and flow of the waves pays them no mind.

But the current whispers to me again, more urgently. This man is different. This man

is special .

I'm curious enough to investigate. It's time for me to head to shore, anyway. It's Perry's turn to cook, which means takeout, and if I'm not there in time for the discussion about what to order, I won't be able to insist on soup. We'll probably end up getting barbecue again, like George always wants. There's so little water in chargrilled meat that it makes me want to weep. Everyone knows soup is the best ; George is just too stubborn to admit it. Stubborn like a rock, as Perry says.

I'm not stubborn. I go with the flow—like water. I take the path of least resistance, but somehow, I always get my way in the end.

Mostly.

Giving myself over to the urging of the current, I drift in the direction of the troubled man. Troublesome man? Neither of those seems right, but does it matter? He's a man. Trouble is somehow involved. How it's said isn't important.

I find the man in the area the humans call La Jolla Canyon. He's scuba diving, and based on the various pouches and containers and bags he has attached to him, I'm guessing he's a scientist and not just out here for kicks. Either that or he's a poacher looking for rare and endangered species to steal, but it's hardly likely the water would warn me about the danger to him in that situation.

For a moment, I just watch him. I'm too far for his human eyes to see me—most of my observations are from the water itself. He's incredibly absorbed in his task, which right now is taking pictures with an underwater camera of the fish in the area. I don't sense any predators nearby that might pose a risk to him, and he seems to know what he's doing, but the ocean insists that he's in danger and urges me closer.

That's when I see it. A tiny, teensy bubble rising from his air cylinder.

I'm pretty sure that's not supposed to happen. Air bubbles mean air is escaping, which would mean the man has less air than he planned... but those breathy-thingies tell people that, right? Like, there's a dial or a whatsit that shows them how much air is left?

Studying the man again and how absorbed he is in what he's doing, I don't think he's going to check the dial whatsit in time.

Around me, the water swirls anxiously. It wants me to save the man. To warn him he's running out of air and get him to the surface.

Meh. Why not? I have nothing else to do, and he's not hurting anything.

Okay... pretend to be human. What would a human do in this situation?

Swim! A human couldn't use the natural movement of the water to propel themselves—they'd need to swim. I can swim! I'll just swim over to him and pretend to be another human enjoying the water.

Moving my arms and legs like I've seen other people do, I quickly realize that swimming isn't a very efficient way of traveling through water. No matter how much I flap and kick, I'm barely moving at all! At this rate, the man's gonna drown before I even get halfway to him.

Giving up on that idea, I fall back on my usual methods. He probably won't notice that I'm not swimming—humans are really good at ignoring things they can't explain. Flame tried to tell me the theory behind it once, but I got bored because he never mentioned anything about water. I think I was also high at the time... sometimes that's the only way I can handle not being in the water. The others say I'm too needy.

I'm right beside the man before he even sees me, and the way he flails tells me I've surprised him. Oops. I reach out to grab his arm before he can get too far, then smile wide to show him I'm a friend. I can't really see his face behind the goggles and breathing apparatus, but the way he tenses under my hand seems to imply that he's not reassured.

Too bad. The ocean's warnings are getting more and more urgent, so I gesture toward the air tanks on his back, then mime a bubble rising from them.

He tugs away from me. I guess he didn't understand. Fuck. How am I going to do this? The easiest way would be to grab him and head for the surface—the water would help me even if he struggled. But I've watched enough divers to know humans can't do that. They need to ascend slowly to keep their brains from exploding... or something. George explained it to me, but I tuned out after the first bit. The relevant part was that fast pressure changes are bad for humans.

Which means I'm going to need his cooperation.

Grabbing his arm again, I look for the dial thingy. It's gotta be—there! I point at it, nodding urgently, and after another few seconds of resistance, he reaches for it. What he sees makes him flail again, and again, I steady him. Making sure I have his attention, I point up, then nod encouragingly.

It takes a lot longer than the ocean wants for us to reach the surface, and I can sense its impatience, but the man is insistent on stopping at regular intervals, even though I can feel the tension in his arm. I guess that makes sense—exploding brains are serious things. Finally, though, our heads break the surface, and he pulls out the mouthpiece and takes a huge gulp of air.

“Oh my god,” he gasps. “Oh my god.”

I wait patiently for him to finish his prayers. I don't really understand human religions—they keep changing, for one thing, so even if I tried, I don't think I could keep up. But I can be respectful of his customs.

He seems to be done, though, because the next thing he says is, “My boat... shit, where's my boat? I can't think. Rein it in, River. Don't panic.”

“I'm not River, this is the ocean, and I'm not panicking,” I tell him helpfully. Then, when the water whispers the information to me, I point north. “Your boat's that way. It's not far. Let me help you.” The water's relatively calm today, but humans are delicate, and it's not flat. With the tide coming in, the size of the swells will increase a little.

“I know you're not River,” he says wildly. “I'm River.” He blinks at me. “You have no gear. Are you a merman? Oh my god, are you a hallucination? I still had oxygen! I can't have... But I did come up too fast. Is this the first sign of the bends?”

The... bends? And he thinks he's a river?

“I've been told I'm very bendy,” I offer. I still can't see his face properly, but he seems nice, and the water likes him, so we could have sex if he wants to. Even if he does think he's a river instead of a human.

“He was there before I started ascending,” he mutters, and since he seems to be talking to himself and not me, I get on with the task of taking him to his boat. The ocean helpfully gets us moving in that direction.

He doesn't seem to notice.

“...could be oxygen deprivation, but the gauge said I still had air, even if it was low. But clearly the equipment is faulty, since I was supposed to have another hour's

worth, and... wait, what time is it? Did the regulator fail, or the dive computer?"

"There was air escaping from your tank." It seems like information he might like to know. "Here's your boat."

He stares at it, then turns to look at me. "How did we get here? I... I really am hallucinating, aren't I? Maybe I'm actually drowning right now, and this is just my brain's attempt to make it painless."

"You're not drowning. I saved you," I remind him. "I think you should get in the boat."

Nodding slowly, he reaches toward the ladder at the back. It's not a big boat, but it's bigger than a lot of the ones divers come out in. "I'm not sure if it's safe for me to drive," he says as he climbs out of the water. "My dive computer should have told me I was low on air, so I can't trust any of those readouts, and I know I came to the surface faster than I should have. What if there's a nitrogen bubble in my blood right now, just waiting to cause an embolism?"

I didn't understand most of that, but I know what nitrogen is. "I have a friend who can check that for you!" Grabbing the ladder, I clamber out of the water and into the boat. "Come with me—I'll take you to him now."

### CHAPTER TWO

#### RIVER

I stare at the blue-haired stranger grinning happily at me from the other side of my boat and wonder if he's real or a hallucination. Probably a hallucination. There's no way a real person could have been at that depth in the water with no oxygen and no dive suit. Plus, he seems a little... weird. It's extremely likely that I'm suffering from the effects of oxygen deprivation. Brain damage isn't a good thing for a scientist, so I guess that's my career down the tubes.

Damn it. All those years of study and grind were finally starting to pay off, and bam. It's over. Because of faulty dive equipment.

"Are we going?" my hallucination asks. "I can drive the boat if you want. Our place isn't far—just a bit north." He points in a northeasterly direction, toward the coast but farther north than the Krills pier I left from. I think. It's equally likely that I've completely lost my sense of direction and he's pointing farther out into the Pacific Ocean. I've never had brain damage before—or even disorientation from a dive. I'm always so careful to do things properly.

What the fuck went wrong this time?

"Sure," I agree. "You drive." If he's a hallucination, that means we won't actually go anywhere, and eventually my colleagues will notice I didn't bring the boat back or check in and come looking for me. All these boats have GPS locators on them—we joke it's so none of us poor underpaid researchers can try to hock one for rent money.

In reality, it's so that if any of us go missing on a dive, S he's me. Kind of. The fun version. Even his name is a sort of variation of mine—we're both water. But I've got nothing better to do while I wait for either help or my hallucination to end, so why not talk to myself? I might have some interesting insights.

“That would be great. A colleague of mine did some similar research into epidemics among sea stars and the impact that had on kelp, but while some species of sea star are somewhat migratory?—”

“Nah, they travel a little bit but not that much,” he interrupts. “They're not migratory in the same sense as other species... not on purpose, anyway.”

“Exactly,” I agree with... myself. “They might move to deeper or shallower water depending on the season, but they don't generally travel from one continent to another like sharks and whales and some species of fish do. She and I talked about it, and while she's still focused on sea stars and what we can do locally, we agreed that it would be interesting to see if similar patterns are evident in other species, and how much of it is caused or influenced by seasonal migration.” I pull a face. “To be able to take the research to the next level, I'd need to travel along some of those migratory routes, but I can't get the budget for that until I establish the feasibility of the study. Which is what I'm working on now.”

“I can definitely help with that. Like, I can find out the information you need and then they'll have to give you the money to go there! Or I can just take you there.” He purses his lips. “It would take a while, though. This boat doesn't go fast, and I don't think you'd be able to cross the ocean without it.”

Is this what an acid trip would have been like? There have been times I regretted not doing anything wild when I was younger, but honestly, if it would have been as confusing as this, I don't think I missed anything.

“Ah... no. I don’t think I could cross the ocean without a boat. And I don’t think this boat would be able to handle that kind of trip, anyway.” It would be like paragliding in a tornado. Not that I’ve ever paraglided—who the fuck wants to be surrounded by nothing but air? The ocean is way more interesting. I smile out over it—

What the fuck?

Is that... is that land? But we’re not moving. Aqua literally hasn’t started the engine. And I can’t be driving it, because I’m not at the tiller. “Where are we?” I ask as we get even closer and I make out a marina. It’s definitely not the Krills pier.... It’s hard to tell, but it looks like it might be one of those expensive private marinas that service the wealthy beachfront towns north of San Diego.

“Nearly home,” Aqua promises. “We can leave the boat with Jeff. He’ll look after it. And then it’s a super short walk to the house, where Zephyr can check you for a nitrogen bubble.” His brow knits with sudden anxiety. “Can you walk to the house? If you can’t, I’ll ask Jeff to let me use his phone, and I can call the house and get someone to come and pick us up. I think Perry’s home today.”

There are so many things to unpack there. Jeff? Perry? Zephyr? And he mentioned someone called George before too.

“This boat belongs to Krills,” I say warily. “I’m not really supposed to leave it places.”

“Jeff will take good care of it,” he assures me solemnly. “He’s used to looking after important boats.”

I’m still mentally debating whether I should try to wrest control of the tiller from a hallucination who never even started the engine, so the boat’s not really moving, so we’re not actually going to arrive at a marina for this mysterious Jeff to look after it,

when we arrive at the fucking marina.

My brain tumor has major skills.

As we gently drift into an empty berth and a tall, sun-weathered, gray-haired man in cargo shorts and a navy polo shirt with a company logo on it comes toward us, I stand and reach out to touch Aqua. How far will my brain take this?

Warm, solid muscle meets my hand, and he turns to look at me with a sweet, inquisitive smile.

I snatch my hand back. “Uh... sorry.” This is one hell of a hallucination. That felt like a real arm. Belonging to a real man. With a fucking banging body. It’s been a while since I’ve been with a man, but the stereotype about bisexual marine biologists is absolutely true when it comes to me, and hey, fucking my own hallucination means no messy morning after or awkward sexual health conversations, right?

I can’t believe that’s something I actually thought. Whether this is a nitrogen bubble or a tumor, it’s... wild.

The man’s smiling at us as he gets close, and I wonder if he’s a hallucination too. Am I really still sitting in my boat on the far side of the marine reserve? Or worse... am I floating in the ocean, oblivious to the dangers around me and the fact that my air will only last so long?

“Hey, Aqua,” the man—Jeff, presumably—says. “I’d ask if you bought a new boat, but this one clearly belongs to Krills.”

“Hi, Jeff! It’s River’s boat—this is River, by the way—but we just need to talk to Zeph before he takes it back. Could you watch it for us? It’s really important.”

“No problem,” Jeff assures us, then smiles at me. “Hi, River. I’m Jeff Fennix, and I’ve been the manager here for fifteen years. I promise the boat and your equipment will be fine.”

“River Peters,” I introduce, more because I don’t know what to say than anything else. I’m still not supposed to leave the boat, no matter how long he’s been working here. But... the marina is secure. I can see the locked gate from here, plus all the cameras. And I kind of want to see where my brain is taking me.

“Dr. River Peters?” Jeff’s face changes from polite to genuinely interested. “I have a friend at Krills, Elaine Cho, who says your current work has the potential to be groundbreaking for marine conservation.”

Oh. Well... that’s nice. If this is a tumor, it’s doing its best to be friendly. “Thanks. Elaine’s no slouch either. Her last paper was incredible.” That’s the complete truth.

“If you have time for a chat when you get back, that would be great. Otherwise, maybe Aqua can bring you around another time.”

“Sure!” Aqua agrees, and I smile.

“Yeah, of course.”

### CHAPTER THREE

#### AQUA

River assured me that he'd be fine to walk the short distance to the house, but I keep a close eye on him anyway. It's not a hardship—he's very nice to look at, with his messy black curls and pretty brown eyes in a tanned face. He seems to be worried about something, and while I might not know what it is, I know I like him and that his work is important. No wonder the ocean wanted me to save him—he's one of the people on our side as we struggle to prevent humanity from wiping themselves out and taking the planet with them.

Nobody wants Perry to have to decide to let humans annihilate themselves. It might save Earth in the long run, but it's devastating for him every time. And us. We haven't spent the last few hundred thousand years rescuing humanity only to have to say goodbye after all. Even if some of them do deserve it.

Not River, though. River's special. He's helping to make the oceans safer and stronger and healthier for its inhabitants, and that will have carry-on effects for a lot of land stuff too. So if River's worried about something, I'm worried about it too, whether that's a nitrogen bubble or his boat or me being a merman.

I grin. A merman. How ridiculous. Everyone knows they have a tail instead of legs.

“Here we are,” I say, pointing to the house. We've been walking on the beach side of the road, so I check carefully for traffic before ushering River across. “If Zephyr's not home, someone will know where he is, and we can get him back here quickly.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience anyone,” River protests, though it sounds like he’s trying not to laugh. “It’s probably a tumor instead of a nitrogen bubble anyway.”

That makes me frown. A tumor? Those are bad for humans. “I don’t know if Zeph would be able to tell, but Aether will,” I assure him. “Don’t worry. We’ll make sure you’re okay. Then I’ll come with you to take your boat back and you can have dinner with us while we talk about your research.”

He sighs wistfully. “That sounds perfect. Like a dream... or hallucination.”

I’m not sure what he’s talking about, but he seems to like my plan, and that’s what matters. I lead him up onto the front deck, and while he turns around to admire the view of the ocean, I fling open the front door. “Zeph! Zephyr, I need you!”

The sound of voices stops, and a second later, George and Perry come out of the living room.

“What’s wrong?” Perry looks me up and down. “Did you get caught in a fishing net again?”

I scowl. “Those things are gross , dude. And those men shouldn’t have been fishing in the reserve anyway—it’s a protected area. I didn’t ‘get caught.’ I ‘caught it.’”

George scoffs. “Whatever, you came home wrapped in a fishing net and we had to cut you loose. But I don’t see one this time. So what’s up?”

“River might have a nitrogen bubble and needs Zephyr to check,” I explain.

They exchange glances. “There might be nitrogen in the river?” Perry asks. “What river? Did you smoke this morning before you went out?”

Why would I do that? Weed is to take the edge off being on land. I don't need it when I'll be in the water. "Of course not. River is..." I look around. River's not in the house with me, so I turn and go back onto the deck, where he's still admiring the view. "Hey, come and meet the guys." I take his hand and draw him inside. "This is River," I announce.

Perry's jaw drops, and George makes a weird face. He might be trying not to laugh. Or he could be constipated again. I keep telling him he needs more water in his diet to flush his system.

"Please tell me he didn't steal a diver," Perry mutters, then raises his voice and smiles. "Hi... River, is it? I'm Perry. How did you meet Aqua?"

George makes a sound like he's choking.

"I'm honestly not sure," River says. "I was diving, and then he was there and my air was low. I might be hallucinating or have a brain tumor."

George's laugh explodes out of him, racking his body so hard, he bends over and braces his hands on his knees. Perry, on the other hand, nods sympathetically.

"Oh, man, I get that. Trust me, it will not get less fucked-up from here."

They're ignoring the important stuff. "Where's Zephyr?" I demand. "We need him to check River for the nitrogen bubble."

"He's on the roof," Perry says, since George is still wheezing with laughter. "Aether's with him—hold on." He pulls out his phone and sends a text, and a few seconds later, gets one back. "They're coming down." Putting his phone into his pocket, he studies River. "So... I'm guessing something went wrong on the dive?"

River shrugs. “I think my equipment failed. I should have had another hour of air, at least, and if there was less, my dive computer should have alerted me. I thought everything was fine, and then suddenly A-Aqua”—his face does this weird twitching thing when he says my name—“was beside me making all these strange gestures. He finally got me to look at my gauge, and when I saw how little air was left, I... panicked.”

“Came to the surface too fast?” George asks, sobering. “Any aches or pains?”

River shakes his head. “No.”

“Dizziness, nausea?”

“Nothing like that. It’s just...” He looks sideways at me. “Uh...”

Understanding flashes across George’s and Perry’s faces, but I don’t get it.

“It’s just that a guy in a flamingo swimsuit with no dive gear appeared beside you at depths no human should be able to breathe at, helped you to the surface, and has been...” Perry pauses. “Let’s say ‘unique’ ever since.”

I preen. I am unique.

River nods in relief. “Something like that. Plus the boat thing.”

“What boat thing?” I say, bewildered. “The boat was good!” I turn to George. “Driving a boat is so much easier than driving a car. You should have taught me that way. It would have been faster and had less yelling.”

George looks like he wants to say something, but Zeph and Aether come down the hallway before he can.

“Hey!” Aether sweeps Perry into his arms and kisses him. They do that a lot, but we all get it. It’s not like they get to spend a lot of time together—and usually things aren’t good when they do. They’re fated mates, the opposite sides of existence, and Perry only gets born when the world’s in serious trouble. “I missed you.”

Perry pats his chest. “Missed you too, babe. Even if you were only on the roof, and only for an hour.”

“Um, excuse me, sorry, but... is he about to get struck by lightning?” The horror in River’s voice has me turning sharply. He’s staring at Zeph with stark fear. “You need to get on the ground,” he orders, then spins to stare out the door. “Wait... clear sky. And... we’re inside?” Screwing his eyes shut, he whispers, “This brain tumor is not being fun anymore. Why is his hair floating ?”

“Is he okay?” Aether asks with concern. “Also, who is he?”

“We’re not sure exactly. His name is River. Aqua brought him home for Zeph to check if he has decompression sickness,” George explains, and Zephyr smiles.

“I’m happy to help.”

A little eddy of air swirls around us, kissing my skin and making River’s eyes pop open in shock, and then Zeph says, “No problems at all. Oxygen and nitrogen levels are well within normal ranges for humans. No nitrogen bubbles anywhere.”

To my surprise, River doesn’t seem relieved. If anything, he looks... skeptical.

Oh! He’s worried about the tumor! “Aether, can you check and see if he has a tumor? He thought that might be a problem, too.”

“I’ll bet he did,” Perry mutters to George. “I think you need to get the vodka.”

“Why?” George mutters back. “We’re not keeping him.”

“No tumors,” Aether announces happily. “You’re very healthy, and you have a beautiful soul. No wonder Aqua likes you!”

River stares at Aether blankly, then looks at Perry. “If my tumor hallucination tells me I don’t have a tumor, doesn’t that mean he should disappear?”

“I’ll get the vodka,” George announces.

“Not for me, thank you,” River says politely. “I have to return my boat... and go to a hospital.”

What? No! “But you’re fine,” I remind him. “Zephyr and Aether said so. We can take your boat back, and then you’re having dinner with us, remember? We have to talk about your research.” I turn back to my friends. “River’s doing super important work on migratory epidemics and their impact on the ocean environment.”

“Ohhhhh,” George says. “Marine biologist? That makes so much sense. Sure, you should stay for dinner. We’re all keen conservationists, and we’d love to hear more.”

“That’s very kind of you,” River says, but his voice is flat and he doesn’t seem to be here. All the River-ness is missing.

It makes me sad.

“But I can’t stay. I need to return my boat and go to the ER.”

I open my mouth to explain again that he doesn’t need a hospital, but Perry interrupts.

“That’s a solid plan. You shouldn’t go alone, though, so I’ll come with you. I used to

work for a law firm, so I'm really good at cutting through bureaucratic bullshit and red tape. No need to be sitting around the ER all night." Perry stands on tiptoe to kiss Aether's cheek, then strides determinedly forward and takes River's arm. "So, your boat's with Jeff, right? Where are we taking it?"

"Ah... Krills pier. But you don't need to come wi?—"

"Easy as pie. I'm licensed to drive any boat that can be operated by a sole person, so you can get your stuff sorted while I take us back, and then we'll be on our way before you know it." Perry already has River out the door and halfway across the deck, and I start after them.

George catches hold of me. "Oh, no, you don't. Let Perry handle this. He'll bring your friend back when he's calmer."

"He's not calm?" Oh no! "What happened? Did I do something?"

"Yes, but not on purpose. Aether, call Flame and get him to pick up dinner, will you? I need to talk to Aqua."

"Soup?" I ask pitifully, half my mind on the perfect man currently being taken away from me.

George rolls his eyes. "Fine. Soup. But make mine something with meat in it."

"Soup is so wet," Zephyr says in his dreamy way. "We should get?—"

"No," we all chorus. Zeph's choices always leave us hungry... and gassy.

"What do we need to talk about?" I ask George as he steers me into the living room and sits with me on the couch. "I should be with River. He needs me."

“Maybe he does,” George concedes, “but right now he’s a little freaked out by... everything. It can be scary for humans when they think they might have brain damage.”

I nod. “They need their brains.”

“Right. And they’re not used to seeing people who can breathe underwater, so you startled him a little and made him wonder if his brain might not be working right.”

“Ohhhhhh.” I get it now. “That’s why he asked if I was a merman.”

George stares at me. “Probably. Uh... when you were driving the boat?—”

“It’s super easy, George! I just asked the water to bring us to Jeff, and it did! So much better than a car.”

“Yeah.” He swallows, nodding. “That’s what I thought. Can... Can you see how that might have been confusing for a human who doesn’t have the ability to communicate with water?”

I blink at him. Confusing? “Not really.”

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### RIVER

“If everything that’s happening is a hallucination caused by a brain tumor or oxygen deprivation, the doctor telling me that it wasn’t was also a hallucination,” I mention to Perry as I drive us back to his house in my Prius. I can’t deny, he’s been good company for the past couple of hours, and he definitely was helpful in getting me seen fast at the hospital.

“If the hallucination is that good, you’ll probably die peacefully before you have to worry about it,” he replies placidly. “Just enjoy it in the meantime.”

I blink, taking my eyes off the road long enough to shoot him an incredulous stare. “That’s not how I live my life. I’m a scientist. I need evidence and forward momentum.”

“Right now, you need dinner and a stiff drink,” he counters. “I already texted the others and told them to make up the bed in the guest room so you won’t have to drive home later. It’s been a traumatic day, and tomorrow you have to deal with all that red tape at work over your equipment failing. Worry about all this then.” He mutters something else that I don’t catch.

“What was that?”

“Nothing you’re ready to hear, believe me. So... Aqua, huh?”

I feel my cheeks getting hot at the insinuation in his tone. “What about him?”

“C’mon. I might be eternally bonded with Aether, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate how hot the other guys are. And Aqua’s the sweetest person you’ll ever meet.”

I hesitate, because yeah , I noticed how freaking hot and sweet Aqua is. Smart too, since he seemed to grasp my research right away... though again, if I’m hallucinating, that was just me talking to me, and I’d be pretty upset if I didn’t understand my research.

“He is sweet,” I agree finally. “And... yeah, he’s... uh... really nice to look at. The hair surprised me. Did he... I mean, it looked like his body hair was dyed too?” That’s been bugging me since I first noticed it on our walk from the marina to his house. His happy trail and sparse arm and leg hair are blue too.

“Mmm,” Perry says vaguely. “Something like that. Blue for water. He loves the ocean... any water, really.”

“I got that impression. Is... Maybe it was part of the hallucination, but was he breathing underwater?” That’s not a question I ever thought I would ask, and I add quickly, “I mean, does he have access to some kind of revolutionary new...” I trail off. Nope. There’s no gear that would be invisible to the eye and allow a human to breathe and wear only board shorts at that depth in the Pacific Ocean. Nothing. Nada. It’s impossible.

As if he didn’t hear me, Perry says, “So what did you really think of him, though? Because I get the impression that he likes you. He’s definitely interested in your research, and I know he’ll want to get involved. I wouldn’t want him to get attached to you if you’re not into him. I can talk to him about it, if you want? So he knows to stay professional.” He pauses. “Well, as professional as Aqua gets.”

My first instinct is to thank him and agree. I don't need my personal life distracting me from work right now, and the last thing I would want is to hurt someone as kind and generous as Aqua.

The words stick in my throat.

"I don't know," I finally manage. "I... He's... Can I just check, I can tell he's intelligent, but he also seems..." There's no way to finish that sentence.

"Like an airhead?" Perry supplies, then snorts. "Hah! Aqua, an airhead. I'll have to tell George that one."

I don't get it.

"I like to think of him as our sweet himbo," he explains. "He is smart, though, especially when it comes to the ocean and rivers, rain, lakes... anything to do with water, he's an expert in. No jokes. But he likes to flow through life like... water. Ocean currents. Rivers to the sea. I don't fucking know. He goes with the flow."

I'm still digesting that when he adds, "And he gets anxious when he's out of the water, so he's stoned a lot on land. But never when he's in the water."

Ohhhhhh. Okay, this makes so much sense now. Living in SoCal all my life, and especially spending every spare minute hanging around the ocean, I'm no stranger to the hippie stoner surfer crowd. People tend to think of them as bums, but a lot are super intelligent and successful people whose brains work so fast, they need a way to turn them off. The beach and weed give them that outlet.

Aqua's probably got six doctorates or something and a brain that works like a computer, which explains why Perry said he's an expert on water.

I'm still not sure about the whole underwater breathing thing, though.

"He's not a merman, is he?"

Perry's incredulous look is matched by a scoff. "Mermen have tails ."

Um. True?

"Although," he continues thoughtfully, "I read this smut series once where, if they rinsed their tails in fresh water after getting out of the ocean, they turned into legs. The tails, that is. Not the whole merman." He makes a humming sound. "The only thing that would have made that series better is if it had been gay."

For a few seconds, I concentrate on my driving, then I can't hold it in any longer. "So is that a yes or no on the whole merman thing?" Jesus, if my colleagues could hear me now.

"No. I mean, no, Aqua is definitely not a merman."

I nod. "Okay. Yeah. Now that you mention it, I do remember he had legs... and didn't rinse anything with fresh water." I side-eye him. "You're not recording this conversation, are you?"

"What? No. Why would I be?" He sounds surprised, which is a good sign.

"Just checking. If UCSD ever heard about this, they might revoke my doctorate."

He's still laughing when I turn into his driveway. It's a nice laugh, and as weird as this whole afternoon has been, I'm kind of glad to have met Aqua and Perry. It wouldn't hurt me to expand my circle beyond the people I work with.

That's why I turn off the engine and get out of the car, even though common sense and my type A personality are telling me to go home and get some rest because tomorrow's gonna be a big day.

The spring day's edging into twilight, and the lights are on in the house, giving it an inviting glow. When Perry leads me inside—the door must never get locked, because he just opens it and strolls right in—the sound of male voices talking is welcoming. I guess they all live here together? It's a big house, so there would be room, and the location is prime. Maybe they all share the rent?

We go down the hall into a big, homey room with a giant, scarred wooden table on one side and what might just be a state-of-the-art chef's kitchen on the other. There's a massive island with seating for six, an endless expanse of countertop, a double sink, double ovens, an eight-burner stove, and a dizzying array of cupboards, one of which looks big enough to hide a fridge. I also spy an open doorway through which there are more counters and cupboards... a butler's pantry, maybe? The kind I've only ever seen on TV and in waiting room magazines.

Even if they all share the rent, they have to be individually loaded to afford this place.

Aqua looks up from where he's sitting at the island and beams at us. "Hi! You're back. How are you feeling? Did the doctor reassure you?"

I smile back because it would be impossible not to. "Yes. Thank you." I don't mention my theory that if this is a hallucination, the doctor was part of it. Perry's right; it's time to lean in and enjoy it. "Something smells good."

"Soup!" I swear Aqua's face couldn't get any brighter. "Do you like soup? There are four kinds."

"And garlic rolls or crackers," a redhead I didn't meet before adds. "Or if you don't

like any of that, we can find you something else.” He smiles politely at me. “I’m Flame, by the way.”

Of course he is. Did he dye his hair to match the name, or pick the name to suit his hair color? Despite the vivid color, it looks like it could be natural—there are so many shades blended in.

Kind of like Aqua’s. But nobody has blue hair naturally.

“River,” I introduce myself. “It’s good to meet you. Uh... thanks for inviting me to eat with you. And letting me borrow Perry.” I skim my gaze around the whole group to make it clear that’s aimed at all of them. Did I notice Aether’s green hair before? I think I might have been too freaked out in general. It’s really green.

George coughs lightly. “Just so you know, I’ll probably make a joke at some stage about River and Aqua. It’s too good to pass up.”

“Like you can talk, Pebble,” Perry says as he strolls over to Aether and climbs into his lap.

Pebble? George is glaring at him, so I don’t think I want to ask. “I can take a joke,” I say instead. “Especially about my name. My mom was in mourning for River Phoenix when I was born, so...” I shrug like it’s a normal thing for someone’s parent to mourn a man they never met so much that they name their child after him.

“I like your name,” Aqua says earnestly. “It suits you. You’re a water person.”

Uhh... “Thanks?” I think. Does he mean he thinks I’m wishy-washy? I can be assertive—I’ve had to be, in my field. Grants aren’t exactly growing on trees... or reefs, as the case may be.

“From Aqua, that’s the highest of compliments,” Flame assures me. “Move to the table, guys. Dinner’s ready. Zeph, can you—” He breaks off, shooting me a look, then coughs and continues, “—uh, help me carry the food? George, you too.”

I don’t have time to wonder if that was weird before Aqua bounds over to me. At some point he exchanged his board shorts for cargo shorts, but he’s still bare-chested, and I can’t say I’m sad about it. “Hi,” he breathes, grinning. “Sit by me so we can talk about your research. I’ve had some ideas about how I can help.”

Dinner is fun. More normal than I expected, given how unique the guys are, but then I guess sitting around a kitchen table eating can’t get too freaky. They all take an enthusiastic role in the discussion about my research, even Zephyr, who seems a little vague most of the time. George wasn’t kidding earlier when he said they were all conservationists. Aqua is definitely the most knowledgeable about marine life and ocean conditions, but they all weigh in on the impact of ocean health on the planet itself, and George knows a lot about the topography of the ocean floor and seabeds. Long after the soup is gone, we’re still gathered around the table, and more than once I wish I had my laptop to take notes—though I guess that wouldn’t be very sociable of me.

Finally, Aether smiles at me. He hasn’t said as much as the others, even though I get the impression that he’s usually a chatty guy. Instead, he’s been studying me and Aqua like he’s trying to figure out a puzzle.

“This has never happened before,” he says. “I think it’s a good sign.”

The table falls silent. Flame and George exchange glances.

“Babe,” Perry says cautiously. “What do you mean, exactly?”

Aether stands. “Let’s go into the living room. We have a story to tell River. Flame,

bring the vodka.”

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### AQUA

I stay close to River as we all follow Aether to the living room. Perry's at his side, hissing something I can't hear, but Aether doesn't seem fazed at all by his soul mate's urgency. Nothing much fazes Aether. I admire that about him. Even if I have no clue what's going on right now.

The last time we "told a story" in the living room, it was when he brought Perry home and we had to fill him in on who he really is so his memories of his past lives would be triggered. The time before that was exactly the same thing, but it was in another incarnation. The only time we ever gather together to tell this story is when Perry comes back to us—though this is the first time his name's been Perry. It's the first time my name's been Aqua, too. The best thing about living a lot of lives is getting to choose my name every time.

River leans close as we go through the door into the living room. "I don't understand what's happening," he murmurs. "Aether wants to tell a story?"

I shrug. "Guess so. You like us, right? And you're committed to saving the environment?" Better check on that first. If he's just being polite and plans to never see us again—or worse, go work for an oil company—then I can save Perry from the ulcer he's developing right now.

What would a marine biologist do at an oil company, though? I guess they have those nasty offshore drilling platforms. They probably need someone who knows stuff

about the ocean... I think.

The ocean does not like those drilling platforms. Almost as much as rivers hate mines. Actual rivers, I mean, not my River. Though maybe he doesn't like them either.

"What's your opinion of mining?" I ask as I fold up and sit on the floor, and he stares down at me blankly.

"What?"

"Ignore him," Flame calls. "Come and sit by me and George." He pats the middle cushion on the sofa, and River eyes it cautiously before going over to sit there. I immediately scoot closer so I'm almost touching his legs.

"Are you sure about this?" George asks Aether, who's sitting in one of the armchairs. Perry, shaking his head and muttering, is perched on the arm.

"It's never happened before," Aether says. His smile is wide. "It's a wonderful thing."

River looks around at us all, then half-raises his hand. "Um... what is?"

Aether looks ready to burst with excitement. "You belong with us."

River... does not seem excited by this. "Sorry?"

"Why don't I tell this?" Flame suggests. "It might sound less like a cult that way."

Perry snorts. "Good luck."

I frown. Huh? “We’re not a cult,” I point out. “Why would River think we’re a cult?” Looking up at him, I promise, “We’re not a cult.”

“I didn’t think you were,” he assures me. “Before, anyway. Can someone just tell me what’s going on?”

“You’re a scientist,” Flame begins. “Some of this is going to sound super weird, but just stick with me until...” He trails off and looks over at George. “Until what? Perry always remembered. We just had to keep talking until then.”

George shrugs. “I have no fucking clue.”

“I think I might just go home,” River says, starting to get up. “Thanks for dinner and ever?—”

“Sit,” Aether orders, using his in-charge voice. I straighten. He doesn’t use that voice often.

River sits.

“Zeph,” Aether continues, “Close the door, would you?”

It’s a request we make a lot when we’re feeling lazy, but it’s only when I see the alarm on Perry’s face that I remember we’re not supposed to do it in front of humans.

“Zeph, no,” Flame starts, but it’s too late. A breeze wafts across the room and delicately closes the living room door.

River stares at it. “Is there a draft in here?”

George snickers. “You could say that. Look, this is going to sound weird. You know

what the elements are? Not the periodic table of elements, but like the four elements of nature.”

“Earth, wind, fire, and water? Um... sure. Doesn’t everyone?” River’s barely paying attention, still looking around the room for the source of the breeze. His gaze skims over Zephyr, then snaps back. “Zephyr.”

Zephyr smiles distantly. “Hi.”

“Zephyr,” he says again. “That means... breeze.”

“Hmm.” Zephyr’s gaze unfocuses. That happens a lot—the air is always whispering to him. I’m probably the same underwater, but none of the others can really come there to see it. Except Aether, and he hasn’t had time since he joined us.

I glance over at him. “You should come into the water with me one day soon.”

“I should,” he agrees. “I’ve missed it.”

“Oh my god... Flame, give me the vodka,” Perry huffs.

Flame’s eyes are on River, who seems to be trying to solve a tricky mathematical problem, if his expression is anything to go by. “No... I think we’re gonna need it in a minute.”

“Okay,” River says, on cue. “Okay... I get it. The names, the hair colors. You’re all hinting that you’re the four elements... though Aether doesn’t mean earth, and I don’t know who George and Perry are supposed to be. But whatever mystical stuff you’re trying to sell, I’m not your guy. The only thing that interests me is my research.” He holds up his hands when George opens his mouth. “I don’t care what you’re into. Literally zero care factor. The trick with the door was cute, but seriously, it’s wasted

on me. How about we agree that you'll do your thing, but there's no need to keep it up when I'm around. Okay?"

Flame sighs. "So close," he mutters.

"I'm earth," George tells River. "Aether is the fifth element—life itself. Perry's human... kind of. We'll leave that for another time. We're not actually selling anything, anyway, so it's fine that you're not interested. But if you're going to hang around, you'll probably see some stuff, since we're not good at maintaining company manners for very long."

"I'll see some stuff, huh?" River's smiling, but it's a little condescending, and I don't think I like it. "What kind of stuff?"

That almost sounds like a dare. I don't think I like this story time. It was more fun when we were talking about the ocean. I lie down on my back and stare at the ceiling, remembering the feeling of the water surrounding me. Almost without thinking, I lift my hands and let them drift in the imaginary currents.

"That kind of stuff," Flame says. "In fact, the whole Aqua thing. It didn't surprise you that he can breathe underwater?"

"Not to mention diving without gear to keep him warm," Perry adds. "He'd go in nude if we let him."

"The water feels better that way," I murmur, only partly listening.

"Maybe he's... Cutting-edge technology is being developed all the time," River protests. "My latest dive computer does things my last one could only dream of."

"Wouldn't someone like you, who's so involved in the diving community, have heard

about tech like that coming onto the market?” George counters. “What would it even be , anyway? You touched Aqua, right? He wasn’t wearing a transparent dive suit. There was no mask, no air tanks. What kind of tech would do that?”

I frown and sit up. River’s anxiety is palpable, and it’s making it hard to hold on to the feeling of the ocean. I scoot over to lean against his legs. Hopefully he’ll sense the water through me, and that will help him to calm down.

“Maybe it’s something top secret,” River snaps, but he doesn’t sound like he believes it. “Maybe... maybe you’re all government agents or something.”

There’s a pause, and I lean my head against his knee. His hand comes to rest there, his fingers toying with my hair, and I sigh happily.

“Just making sure I understand,” Perry says slowly, “you think it’s more likely that we’re all government agents with access to the kind of top-secret technology that only appears in sci-fi movies than that what we’ve told you is true?”

“Ugh. Not really. I think it’s more likely that I’m slowly dying of oxygen deprivation in the middle of the La Jolla ravine and this is some kind of hallucination or dream.”

“You’re not,” I murmur. “There aren’t any people in the ravine right now.”

“How would you— Never mind. Water. Oceans talk to you and all that.”

My poor River seems overwhelmed, so I pat his foot. “It’s going to be okay. We’ve never told anyone this except Perry, and he already knew, kinda. But there’s gotta be a reason you get to know. Aether says it’s wonderful, and I believe him.”

“Good point, Aqua,” Flame says. “Aether, wanna share with the rest of us? Why, exactly, are we overloading poor River’s science brain?”

“It’s so exciting,” Aether says. “This has never happened before.”

I smile happily. If Aether says it’s exciting, it must be true! “That’s so cool, bro!”

“What is?” George demands. “What has never happened before?”

Aether frowns. “A lot of things, George. We can’t know what they are, because they’ve never happened.”

The growl that rips from George’s throat almost drowns out River’s sigh. “Yeah, I think I’m gonna head home. Philosophy makes my head hurt.”

I clutch his legs. “Staaaaay. Aether’s gonna explain. And you shouldn’t drive if your head hurts—you’re human and you might die.”

“Oh my god,” Perry mutters. “Why? Why can’t I just have a normal life?”

We ignore him. He does this sometimes—Perry’s always been dramatic, in all his lives. It makes him happy. He’s all drama, and Aether’s all chill. They’re perfect together.

“Aether,” Flame says calmly, “what’s so exciting that’s happening right now with River that’s never happened before?”

Aether grins wide. “Oh! We’re getting help. We don’t have to fight all by ourselves this time—River’s going to join our team.”

“I am?” River asks weakly. “Really? Is this... mandatory?”

“Not mandatory, exactly,” Aether says thoughtfully. “But I think you don’t really have much choice.”

Perry throws up his hands in exasperation. “Babe, that’s literally what mandatory means.” He looks over at River. “I swear, this isn’t a cult, and you can absolutely go at any time. But I’d really appreciate it, just so I don’t need to listen to Aether whining later, if you’d let us tell you the rest of it.”

River’s fingers tighten slightly in my hair. “I guess.”

“Let’s start with the short version,” Flame suggests. “Then you can ask some questions and we’ll fill in the details. We’re elementals, and we only incarnate as the dominant species of the time when our element is out of balance. Our job is to work with the element to restore it to the level the world needs at that time to allow the majority of species to remain alive.” He pauses, and I tip my head back to look at River’s face.

It’s pale, but he swallows. “Okay.”

Flame smiles approvingly. “When more than one of us incarnates at the same time, it means things are going pretty badly, and when all four of us are here, well... that’s really not good. But things have to be close to disaster for Aether to incarnate.”

River whimpers, then says, “Humans have done a lot of damage to the planet.” His voice is shaky.

“That’s why we’re here,” I assure him. “We’re working as hard as we can to fix it and educate humans, and Aether’s helping too. Him being here means things are bad, but it also gives the rest of us a power boost.”

“So... when you said you were conservationists, you weren’t kidding.” He laughs, but it’s lacking humor. “What—What happens if you can’t fix it?”

I wince. This part isn’t going to make him happy and calm.

“That’s where I come in,” Perry says resignedly. “Unlike the others, I’m not an elemental. I’m born in the dominant species at the time, I live a normal life, and if Aether’s not incarnated, I die in the normal way.”

River lets go of my hair and sits up straight. “What happens when Aether does incarnate?”

Perry takes a deep breath. “We’re fated mates—two halves of the same soul. He’s the essence of life, and he incarnates when life is seriously endangered. But he’s still an elemental, and he can’t fully understand the needs and ways of mortal species.

“I’m born mortal and live a mortal life. I have the knowledge of my past lives, understand the capabilities of these guys... and I know what my species can bear. What we can live through. If we can change. I’m the one who decides when it’s time to stop trying.

“If we can’t fix it, I’m the one who’ll say it’s time for humans to become extinct.”

### CHAPTER SIX

#### RIVER

I lie awake, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling in the dim light filtering through the sheer curtains. The window is open, and the soothing sound of the ocean is carried in by the breeze, but I can't sleep. And it's not because this isn't my bed. The guest room here at the beach house is extremely comfortable.

I can't sleep because it's only been a few hours since I learned that the world might be ending in my lifetime. Or, as it was explained to me, the world itself might not end, but the decision to let my species get wiped out would be made... sometime in the next seventy years or so. Before Perry dies a natural death, he'll make the call—either things will be improved enough for humans to continue, or the elements will stop fighting the tide of environmental disaster and let nature take its course. It might take a few hundred or thousand more years for extinction to occur. But the decision will be made during my lifetime.

Which, I'm not going to lie, made me want to curl up in a ball and sob while tearing my hair out. Incidentally, that was when Flame passed me the vodka bottle.

I only allowed myself two slugs, though (even if they were pretty hefty). I'm a scientist. I'm ruled by logic. And I needed a clear head to ask the right questions and get the information that mattered. By the time my brain was swimming with answers—some of which made no logical sense—it was late, and the guys insisted I stay the night.

Which brings me to now, and the decision I need to make. Although... is it really a decision at all? I'm a marine biologist. I'm an environmentalist. I'm passionate about saving the ocean. It seems like joining the fight to save the world is a no-brainer—especially when it would mean doing more of the same stuff I already do, just on a bigger scale. The guys have money, resources, and freaky supernatural abilities that could help me get attention for the issues the ocean is facing. Help me shift the worldview so more people join our fight. It's already a proven fact that younger generations are invested in saving the planet—they just don't have the influence needed to stop the carnage... yet . If we can hold back disaster for another ten years, more people who care will be in positions of authority.

Timing is critical.

Of course, there's also the possibility that this really is my brain trying to make my slow death by asphyxiation as painless as possible. But hey... if that's the case, why not go with it? I'm going to die anyway. Why not die while dreaming that a group of superheroes want me to help them save the world? There are worse ways to go.

Sighing, I sit up and toss back the sheet. If there's one thing I've learned tonight, whether this is a hallucination or real, it's that life is short. Tomorrow, I need to go to work and find out what the fuck happened with my equipment. I need to continue my research, and most likely begin looking at the best ways I can support the guys. I need to figure out how I'm going to find time to drive back and forth between this amazing beach house and my tiny apartment forty minutes away as often as possible while working crazy hours on my research.

So if I'm going to lie awake anyway, I'm going to put that time to good use.

On quiet feet, I slip out of the guest room and pad down the hallway. Aqua gave me a two-minute tour of the house before, helpfully pointing out where the bathroom was and whose bedroom was whose. I use that knowledge now, stopping outside his door

and tapping lightly.

He mustn't have been sleeping, because I don't have a chance to wonder if I should knock again before the door opens. In the dimness, he smiles at me—his wide, happy smile, the one that makes me feel like everything in the world is going to be okay.

“Hi. Do you need to talk?”

How is anyone this sweet? “Yeah, that too.”

Standing back, he gestures for me to enter, and it's only as the shadows shift over his moving body that I realize he's naked.

I mean... I was planning to steer things in that direction, but being preempted like this throws me off my game. Still, I walk in and make myself at home on the edge of the bed. There's an armchair I could have sat in, but that would be like taking a step backward.

Though, what the fuck is with this house? Who has bedrooms big enough to fit a king-sized bed and a dresser and a freaking armchair and not look cramped? My room at home barely fits a full-sized bed. Clearly being an incarnated element has perks.

Aqua sits beside me, leaving a respectful six inches between us, but hasn't bothered to put on pants, which makes me smile.

“If you have important questions, I can wake one of the others,” he volunteers. “But if you just need to talk things over, I'm really good at listening.”

“I know you are,” I assure him. “Do you mind if I lean against you? I kind of want to be touching—” His arm and shoulder are pressed to mine before I can finish the

sentence. I give a little sigh and let my weight rest against him—just a little. “Thanks. That helps me feel more grounded. There’s a lot to think about.”

“I know.” His tone is pure sympathy. “This is new to me too. We’ve never told a human about us before—just Perry. Usually he remembers his past lives at some point while we’re talking, and bam! We don’t need to explain more, and he doesn’t need to think about what to do. We just all get drunk to farewell his old life and then get on with our job.”

Heh. That doesn’t sound all that bad.

“I don’t think I want to get drunk, but I do want to do something to farewell my old life. Even though I won’t be leaving it as fully behind me as Perry does, I bet.” Not when my research and job are so closely related to what I’m needed for.

“I can help you think of a way,” he promises earnestly. “We can go diving, if you like? I know you’re still delicate like a human, but I know all the best places to show you, and sea animals love me.”

Aww. “Keep that for another time.” Because yeah, it sounds like a fucking dream come true. “I was thinking... wondering... Do you find me attractive?”

His eyes get wide. “I think you’re the most beautiful human I’ve ever seen,” he says with guileless earnestness that makes me feel like a god.

“Thank you. I think you’re beautiful too—on the inside as well as the outside. Would you be interested in having sex with me?” I’m messing this up so badly. With as awkward as I’m being, anyone would think I’ve been living alone on a deserted island my whole life. “You don’t have to. I just mean?”

“Yes. I would. Please. Can we? I like sex, and I know I’ll like it best of all with you.”

Instant. Boner.

“I think I’ll like it best of all with you, too,” I reply honestly, then stand and strip off my clothes.

Aqua stands too, and when I’m finally free of the constraining fabric, he takes my hand. “Can I kiss you?”

Oh my god, my heart can’t take this. I never thought I’d meet such an amazing man out in the middle of the ocean, but I did. “I’d like that.”

Our lips meet, hesitantly at first, and then, when we realize that the taste of each other is manna from heaven, more fervently. Somehow, we’re not standing anymore, the mattress firm against my back, the sheets soft as silk, and Aqua’s kisses are the most perfect drug that could ever hope to exist.

“I want to taste you,” he whispers, pulling away from my mouth. I chase after him, but as he slides down my body, pausing occasionally to dot kisses over my skin, his words sink in, and I let him go.

The first touch of his tongue isn’t on my cock, as I expected, but on my balls, and when he blows cool air over the wet, super-sensitive skin, my eyes roll back and I lose track of reality. I’ve always liked sex, but somehow, with Aqua everything is magnified—stronger, more intense. All I can do is try to breathe and let the sensations roll me under.

Mouth on my skin.

Lips wrapped around my cock.

Tongue teasing, teasing, teasing...

Fingers ghosting over my balls, sliding along my crack. I draw my knees up to give him better access, and the tip of his index finger slowly circles my hole.

“Aqua,” I gasp. “Oh, god?—”

I don’t get the chance to warn him before I come, but he doesn’t seem to care, his throat working as he swallows greedily. When he finally pulls off me and lifts his head, I’m a sweaty, limp noodle floating on an ocean of endorphins.

He grins. “You taste delicious. How long do you need to recover?”

As though a switch is flipped, I’m suddenly filled with energy. This is going to be the best night of my life.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### AQUA

Even though it's late morning and I'm not in the water yet, I'm smiling. How can I not be? This is the first time ever that we've gotten help—that's gotta be a sign that we're going to win this battle. And the help is River . He's so perfectly awesome. Amazing. Stupendous, even. He loves water and water loves him. He cares about marine life and is working to make things safer and better. He's dedicated to preserving the planet and is joining our fight.

He's the sexiest man I've ever met, and I've never had a night with any being as good as ours was.

I wanted to go with him to work this morning, but he said he'd be spending most of the day on paperwork and that I was better off in the ocean. He said he'd be back tonight so we could hang out and talk about how to handle his research. I can't wait to see him again. I think I'll take him for a late-night swim—there's something special about the ocean in the dark, and it's not like he'll be in any danger if I'm with him.

But before any of that can happen, before I can go spend all the hours he's gone in the water, I need to talk to Aether.

Unfortunately, he and Perry have decided to spend this morning in bed. They do that sometimes, and Perry gets super cranky if you interrupt. So I'm waiting.

“For fuck’s sake, Aqua, do you have to splash water everywhere?” George snipes, coming into the kitchen, where I’ve filled the sink and am playing with my wind-up toy dolphins. They’re not as good as real dolphins, but it would be cruel to put a real dolphin in the sink. Besides, it wouldn’t fit.

“Yes,” I tell him. “Water is perfect, and it belongs everywhere. I’ll clean it up when I’m finished.” I’m not even making that much of a mess; George is just a big grump lately. “Why are you here, anyway? Don’t you have some rocks to yell at?”

I’m not all that sure what George does, really. Except when it affects my water or my water affects his dirt. We had to work together a few months ago because it rained too much and there were some cliffs that collapsed somewhere. Before that, a stupid rockslide dammed one of my beautiful rivers. Stuff like that is supposed to happen sometimes—balance—but it’s happening too often lately, and that’s bad.

“I don’t yell at rocks. Why are you splashing in the sink instead of floating in the world’s biggest ocean?”

“I need to talk to Aether.” I wind up one of the dolphins and drop it in the water, where it performs perfectly, breaching three times before it runs out of pep. I swirl my hands through the water, enjoying the sensation of it eddying against my skin.

“What about?” George leans on the island, watching me with an expression of fascinated horror. I flick water at him just to hear him yell.

When he’s finished sputtering and drying his face—he doesn’t hate water the way Flame does, but it’s not his favorite thing, either—I say, “I need to talk to him about River.”

Just like that, all his anger dissipates, and he makes a humming sound. “River. Yeah. What the actual fuck is going on with that?”

“The actual fucks were amazing, thank you. I’m going to keep River. But we’ve never had people to keep before.”

George sighs. “That’s because you can’t keep people against their will, you airhead.”

I gasp. Airhead? Me? I’m water , not air!

Before I can splash him again, Aether and Perry walk in. “What the hell? Aqua, the ocean is across the street. Why are you playing in the sink?” Perry demands. His mouth is all swollen and he has glowy eyes. Aether’s hair is all messed up, but his wide, satisfied grin tells me he really doesn’t care.

“I was waiting for you,” I whine. Why are people being mean to me on this gorgeous, glorious, perfect day? “Aether needs to tell me more about River.”

Midstep, Perry swivels on his heel to face Aether. “Yeah. That. You distracted me last night before I could ask my questions. What the hell, Aether? Since when do we get help from the species we’re trying to save?”

Aether shrugs and slides onto a stool at the island, reaching out to dangle his fingers into the sinkful of water. “It’s never happened before.”

“Dude, you’ve said that about a million times,” I point out.

“And it doesn’t answer the question,” George adds. “Flame gave himself a headache trying to work it out this morning.”

“Where is Flame?” I ask, looking around nervously. He really doesn’t like when I splash water everywhere. That’s why he talked the others into buying this house right across the street from the ocean, when we were also looking at one a few miles away that was cheaper. He wanted me to not make wet messes inside. I kind of get it, but...

phooey to that.

“He’s keeping an eye on a brushfire,” George says. “His fireman is there.”

“The sexy one who should be on a calendar and thinks Flame is an arsonist?” Perry asks, getting juice out of the fridge.

“Yep.”

Aether makes a sound of interest, and we all look at him.

“What?” Perry asks. “Also, you still haven’t said what’s happening with River. Aside from him fucking Aqua through the mattress last night.”

I smile, remembering. “That was so good.”

“Trust me, we all know,” George says dryly. “Stop distracting us. Aether, talk.”

“About River fucking Aqua? I’d rather talk about me and Perry. Last night he did that thing with his tongue?—”

“They don’t need to hear that,” Perry interrupts. “Tell us what’s going on with River. Why do we suddenly have extra help?”

Aether shrugs. “I don’t know. I just know we do. He’s here to help Aqua... and to be with Aqua.”

My hands, which were wiggling through the water, flail, making an awesome splash. George immediately complains, but I’m too busy staring at Aether to pay any attention to him. “He’s mine ? I get to keep him?”

“We don’t keep other people,” Perry says, but there’s an uncertain note in his voice.

“River is meant to be with Aqua. I don’t know the details, but I know that. He and Aqua are matched, and they’re going to work together and be together.” He punctuates the best sentence I’ve ever heard with a firm nod.

“I don’t get it.” George is staring at Aether, water still dripping off him. “Why is this happening now?”

Aether spreads his hands. “It’s the will of the world. Who am I to question it?”

Perry groans. “Babe, you’re the essence of all freaking life. Your literal job is to question this shit. Aqua,” he turns on me sharply, “do not tell River that he’s yours or that you’re keeping him. Let him set the pace in your relationship.”

I nod happily. “Okay. Aether says I get to keep him, so he’s going to want to stay anyway.” I sigh. “I get my very own person to love. The perfect person. The water loves him! It told me to save him. This is the best day ever.”

Perry presses his hand over his eyes. “Oh sweet baby Jesus.”

“How come Aqua gets a person?” George demands. “I want a person too!”

“Don’t you spend enough time yelling at the rest of us? Why do you need someone new to be a huge grump to?” Perry demands, and I tsk.

“That’s not very nice. George might be...” I trail off, trying to think of a way to say this that won’t make George yell at me. “He might get loud sometimes, but he’s loveable sometimes too.”

“I hate you,” George tells me, finally snatching up a dish towel and mopping the

water from my big splash off his face. “Aether, is that why you made that weird noise when we were talking about Flame’s fireman? Is Flame getting a person too?”

“Oh. I don’t know. I was just wondering if Flame does count as an arsonist. Because he’s had to start fires on purpose before, when the balance required it, but he’s also spent a lot of time trying to control fires and put them out, which is the opposite of an arsonist. Can you be something and not be something at the same time?”

George stares at him, then turns to me. “Where’s the weed?”

“I’ll get it,” Perry volunteers. “I’ve only been awake for an hour and already I?—”

A very bouncy tune starts to play from the windowsill, cutting him off. It takes me a few seconds of humming along to realize it’s my phone ringing. “That’s me! Maybe it’s my River!” I yank my hands out of the water and race for the sill, sending droplets flying everywhere. River and I exchanged phone numbers this morning. I don’t use my phone much, but it seemed important to him, so I charged it and everything.

I slide my fingers over the screen until the ringing stops. “Hello? River?”

“Aqua.” His voice booms out, which I don’t think is supposed to happen. I look at the screen. There are a bunch of symbols there, but I’m not sure what they all mean. Maybe this is the normal volume and humans hold their phones to their ears because they have bad hearing? “I think I need help.”

“River, this is Perry. You’re on speaker,” Perry says, coming around the island and giving me an exasperated look.

“Oh. Hi. Uh, that’s fine—this isn’t private. Not from you guys, anyway.”

“What’s wrong, my River?” I ask anxiously. “I can help you. Do you need a tidal wave?”

“No!” The shout echoes from four voices.

“No tidal wave,” Aether insists.

“I’ll second that,” River says. “Listen, Aqua, I need you to tell me exactly what happened yesterday. How did you know I was running out of air?”

“The ocean told me,” I reply promptly. “That’s never happened before. Oceans are big, and water is eternal. It doesn’t really care when one person dies. But it really wanted me to save you. So I found you and saved you.” I beam at the phone. Best thing I’ve ever done.

“Oh... Oh-kay. Um... did the ocean say how it knew I was in trouble?”

I frown. “No. But let me check...” I reach out to the beautiful water, pushing down the immediate longing to be in it. Streams of knowledge flow through me, and I say, “It felt the weight of the air tanks when you got in and knew how long you’d be able to stay down, and then felt the air bubbles escaping and knew you’d have less time. It really likes you—it looks forward to when you visit, so it’s noticed these things.” I’m smiling again, because the water does like River—adores him. It recognizes him as part of me, but I don’t think I should say that.

There’s a little silence, then, “So this is the weirdest question I’ve ever asked, but does the ocean know how my equipment got faulty? Not just the air tank but the dive computer too?”

More knowledge rushes into me. “Not exactly. Only that they already were when you first got into the water.” Something new. “The ocean says someone dived six tides

ago with your equipment, though. Do you share equipment sometimes? The water seems to think that shouldn't have happened."

"It shouldn't," River says grimly. "We don't share equipment. I don't suppose the ocean knows that person's name?"

I shake my head, then realize he can't see me. "Sorry. The ocean doesn't know names. It doesn't like them, though. Am I helping? What's wrong, my River?"

"I'm going to try to get out of here early," he says. "Perry, you still there?"

"Yeah. What's going on?" Perry's brow has that little crease in it that means he's worried.

"I don't know for sure, but I think someone tampered with my equipment. I want to get my research and gear out of here—can you bring the car and help me?"

Tampered with his... My eyes widen. "Someone tried to drown you?"

Outside, the crash of waves increases and thunder booms, dark clouds gathering. George and Aether are by my sides a second later.

"Rein it in," George orders, even as Aether puts a hand on my shoulder and peace floods into me.

The fury of the ocean eases, and the sky clears.

"I don't know for sure," River's saying. "But I don't want to take chances. I've told my boss that I'm setting up a field lab, and he signed off. We're cramped for space here anyway."

“I’m on my way,” Perry assures him. “Don’t worry—we’ve got this covered.”

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### RIVER

I'm not sure when my day turned to shit, exactly, but I'm hip-deep in it now. Waking up was amazing—Aqua, the most comfortable bed in the world, Aqua, the sound of the ocean, Aqua, the morning breeze drifting through the window. Oh, and did I mention Aqua?

I had a very stimulating early morning workout, followed by pouty kisses when I told him he couldn't come to work with me. If I'd been planning to be in the field today, I would have been tempted to let him come, but he'd hate hanging around while I filled out incident reports and wrote up my findings from yesterday.

Even the traffic on the longer-than-usual drive to work didn't bother me. Sure, my world got turned upside down yesterday, but I now not only have a deeper purpose to my life's work, I also have the memories of the best sex I've ever had with the sweetest man I've ever met—and the promise of more. More sex, and more time with him.

Who could be upset with that to look forward to?

That's why it barely dinged my good mood when I got to my desk and saw the email from my boss, asking me to see him urgently. I figured it was about the equipment failure yesterday. That he wanted to check on me and remind me to complete the incident report.

I was mostly right. The first thing he said when I knocked on the doorframe to his office was “You’re okay? When I didn’t hear from you last night, I assumed you were, but the ER cleared you?”

“Completely okay,” I assured him. “No symptoms to worry about at all—other than the anxiety caused by the whole thing.” We both chuckled and then he waved me in.

“Come and sit. There’s something I need to discuss with you.”

Anybody who’s ever been called into their boss’s office and heard that sentence can tell you that 90 percent of the time, good things don’t follow. It seems I’m not an exception to that rule.

I sat down and said, “I was planning to complete the incident report first thing and send it through this morning.”

“Yes, thank you. We’ll need that. But after you left yesterday, I pulled the dive log—in preparation for appending it to the report—and I noticed that you checked out a boat on Tuesday afternoon, but you didn’t complete the equipment check log after.”

I stared at him. “What?” I didn’t check a boat out on Tuesday.

“Normally this wouldn’t even have been noticed—I know everyone occasionally forgets to fill in the log, even though you’re meticulous about checking your gear—but with yesterday’s incident, it poses a problem. Our insurance company checks every incident report because they take them into account when calculating our premium. The missed entry followed by what could have been a fatal equipment failure is something they would have refused to pay out due to negligence.”

My brain was still stuck on the whole boat-on-Tuesday thing. “What?” I repeated.

“River, please hear me—I am completely on your side. But I have no choice but to investigate this fully.”

His words began to sink in. “Uh... of course. Yes. What does that mean?”  
Suspension? Worse?

“I need you to submit the incident report as a matter of urgency, which you’ve already said you’ll do. I also need you to provide a letter from a doctor that says you’ve had no adverse effects from the equipment failure.”

I nodded. I knew he’d need that and already got the doctor at the ER to do it for me—it must be a request they get a lot, because they had a proforma template and everything. “No problem.”

He winced. “Unfortunately, you won’t be able to dive for the duration of the investigation.”

Fuck. “How long do you think it will take?” If I can’t dive while I’m on the clock, I can’t use the Institute’s boats—and I don’t earn enough to continually hire a boat, plus all the specialist equipment I’d need. My dive gear is technically mine—I get a yearly stipend for it from the Institute because I can’t do my job without it, but it belongs to me—but it’s not really usable right now, even if it wasn’t going to be at the center of this investigation. So that means I’ll be land-locked until—

“It could be a week, or it could be a month,” he said, and my heart sank. A month ? I have enough busywork to fill a week, maybe, but after that, my research will be at a standstill if I can’t dive. It would cost me thousands of dollars out of pocket—not to mention fill my weekends and early mornings—to do the research I need as a private citizen.

I mustered an unenthusiastic smile. “I guess I’ll just have to hope for a week, then.

I'll probably need that time to have my gear repaired or replaced, anyway." An expense I really didn't need.

He didn't smile back. "Unfortunately, there's more."

More?

"Because this is something that may impact our insurance, the outcome of the investigation isn't in my hands. It will be up to the director—and possibly the board—to make the final decision. I'm obligated to tell you that the result could be the termination of your employment if the director or the board believes that the insurance company may deem you a risk."

My. Breath. Stopped.

"Fire me? Because my equipment malfunctioned?" No. What? No.

"Because you didn't log an equipment check, and that equipment subsequently malfunctioned," he corrected, and I shook my head.

"I didn't dive Tuesday. I didn't take a boat out. I was in the lab all day!"

His brows rose. "The dive log shows that you took a boat out—and the security log shows your locker was accessed shortly before, and then again several hours later, which implies you took your gear with you."

For a wild minute, I wondered if the doctor missed something. Could I have dived Tuesday?

No. No, there was no way. I was in the lab all day. But that meant...

“Bill, I was in the lab. I absolutely did not take a boat or my gear out on Tuesday,” I insisted. “Could you check IT records? They’ll show me logging results and notes all afternoon. Heck, the security camera footage will prove I was here!”

Doubt flashed across Bill’s face. “I can pull the notes and test results,” he said slowly. “If you really did enter them on Tuesday, I’ll be able to use that to request security footage—it would fall under the investigation. But I don’t like the implications here, River. If you were in the labs, that means someone stole your swipe card, took your gear, signed out a boat in your name—again using your swipe card—and...” He trailed off, but I didn’t need him to finish the sentence.

Did that person return my gear and fail to do a safety check? Or did they deliberately screw with it?

I fumbled for the lanyard around my neck. “My swipe card is always on me when I’m in the building,” I promised. “I don’t take it off, because I don’t want to lose it. The only time it comes off is when it’s locked in the valuables safe on one of the boats or when I’m at home.” I used to take it off in my car, but too many times I’d leave it there overnight, and there was a spate of car break-ins in my neighborhood last year. Replacing a security swipe means a lot of paperwork, and nobody wants to deal with that.

Bill’s frown was worried. “Let’s look at that log.”

Two minutes later, the frown was growing deeper as he scrolled—presumably through all the notes I’d entered on Tuesday. I didn’t have the guts to go look over his shoulder. “I don’t like this,” he murmured. “This means there’s a duplicate of your security card.” He sat back and sighed. “Okay. I’m inclined to believe you because I know you, and I recognize your style of work in these notes. But I need to follow procedure here so there can be no question of what happened.”

I nodded. “Okay. What’s that?” And fuck. Fuck . Did someone try to hurt me? Kill me?

“I contact IT and get the second card cancelled immediately, and ream them out for allowing it to be issued. Both I and the head of IT will lodge reports about that. I contact security, put in a formal request for the footage of the lab and the locker room, and attach the report about the second card. Their system shouldn’t allow one person to be in different secure parts of the building at the same time.” He took a deep breath. “The footage request needs to go through several levels of clearance, so it will be a day or two until I get it. In the meantime, I’ll go down to the pier and talk to the staff there. Someone has to have noticed who took boats out on Tuesday. And I need to speak to the director so he knows all of this is happening.”

That made me breathe a little easier. I definitely wasn’t the one who took a boat and gear out on Tuesday, and there was evidence to prove it. “So it will be at least a few days before you can conclusively prove it wasn’t me.”

“Yes. I need the incident report from you as soon as possible, and also a written statement summarizing everything you’ve told me.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Once I get the footage, the director will make the call about what to do from there. A lot will depend on what it shows.”

What it’s going to show is someone else taking my gear out and then returning it damaged, putting me in a very unsafe situation. “Has my gear been sent for repair already?”

He shook his head. “No—that didn’t occur to me. It’s in your locker.” His eyes widened, and he began tapping his keyboard, presumably bringing up the access logs for the locker room. “Shit! I mean,” he faltered. “I’m sorry.”

I wanted to wave it off, but Bill didn’t swear at work—ever. “Someone accessed my

locker?” No. No no no.

“According to this, you did. Last night, about an hour after I walked you and your friend to your car. Let’s go have a look.”

Five minutes later, we stared into my empty locker. I swallowed hard. “Um... so I’m going to do that incident report, and then, since I can’t dive anyway, I’d like your permission to set up a field lab offsite. I’ve got friends who live by the beach, and I think I’m going to stay with them for a few days. In a house that has lots of people living there.”

Bill nodded, his face pale. “Permission granted. Though I need you to submit?—”

“An official request. I know. I’ll do that right after the incident report.”

“I’ll be looking for it.” He glanced back into the locker. “Maybe call a friend to help you pack up all your samples and things. So you don’t have to walk out to the parking lot alone.”

Which brings me to now, standing beside the receptionist in the lobby and resisting the urge to bite my nails while I wait for Aqua and Perry.

“Why are you being weird?” she asks.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“I dunno. My roommate’s best friend works in a dive bar. I’ve heard some fucked-up— Whoa, who is that ?”

Spotting them at the same time she does, I exhale in relief. “My friends.”

“ Just friends? Or, like... are any of them available?”

For the first time since Bill called me into his office, I smile. “The one with green hair and the short one are together. And the one with blue hair is mine.”

### CHAPTER NINE

#### AQUA

It doesn't take too long to get River's makeshift lab set up in the room off the garage. It's under the house, so it stays cool there all the time, and between me and Zephyr, we can make sure all his samples are maintained at the correct temperature and moisture point until the special fridge Perry ordered arrives. Flame says the room was originally fitted out as a gym for the last owner of the house, but none of us need a gym, so it's just been empty since we moved in.

Why would we need a gym? Exercising indoors when we prefer to be outdoors as much as possible? That's not smart. What is smart is keeping the room clean so now it can be River's lab! Here. At the house. Where I can keep him close and safe from the person who tried to kill him.

Rain starts to fall outside, and George sighs. "Aqua, stop. You're messing with the weather, and we have enough issues to deal with."

Looking up from his laptop, River says, "What?" and looks out the window. "Oh my god, Aqua, are you doing that?"

I smile sheepishly and concentrate on being calm. My River is here, safe, and I can protect him. "Sometimes when I'm not calm, water does things."

He gets up from his chair and comes over to give me a hug. "Be calm. Please. Because if you're not calm, I have to be calm—balance, remember? And I really

want to be the one having a nervous breakdown right now.”

The rain stops as I wrap my arms around him. “Okay. I’ll be calm so you can be upset.” I can do that for my beautiful River.

“Are we done in here for now?” George asks. “We should go upstairs so you can tell us exactly what happened.”

I’m itching to get into the water, but I understand why it’s important that the others hear this story, so we troop upstairs. While they’re all getting comfortable at the kitchen table, I fill a bowl with water, and once I slide into the seat next to River, I put my fingers in it.

“Are you okay?” he asks me.

“Sure! After this, we can go to the beach, right? I’ll take you surfing.” That will be so much fun!

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that,” he says, surprising me. “I think I’ve seen you surfing a few times, but it always looked like you didn’t have a board....”

I shrug and wriggle my fingers, letting the water ripple. “Why would I need a board? It would just get between me and the water.”

He tilts his head, and an incredulous smile quirks his mouth. It’s the first one I’ve seen since we went to pick him up at the lab. “So the waves are just... carrying you?”

“Yep!” I nod. He gets it.

“He’s the essence of water, remember?” Perry says. “It basically is him.”

“That’s so cool.” River leans against me.

“Yeah, whatever. Come on, tell us a story before Zeph loses interest,” George insists.

I look over at Zephyr, who has his usual distant stare firmly in place. I’m pretty sure he’s not listening at all.

“I hate to agree with George, but I need to go check on that brushfire again soon,” Flame says.

“I thought it was under control?” Perry blinks innocently at him.

“It is, but these situations change fast.”

“Plus your firefighter will go off-shift once they put it out, and you haven’t gone as far as actually stalking him at home yet,” Aether says blithely. “You should, though.”

Flame ignores him, but I can’t help wondering what Aether means. I’m still thinking about it while River tells his story, but I can’t work it out. Does Aether want Flame to stalk the fireman? Why? I thought stalking was bad.

“It really does sound like someone wanted to kill you,” Flame says at last. “They weren’t expecting you to be able to come back and dispute the whole Tuesday thing.”

“Exactly,” George agrees. “They figured you’d be missing, presumed dead, or that your dead body would be found. There’d be an investigation, they’d find that you didn’t do the whole log thing you mentioned, and assume that you were at fault for not maintaining your equipment. Since you’d be dead, there would be nothing more to do.”

Perry shakes his head. “Yeah, but why steal his stuff last night?”

“Maybe they didn’t want anyone looking too closely at it,” Aether suggests. “River survived when he wasn’t supposed to, so they wanted to get rid of the evidence.”

“I guess. It just seems shortsighted.”

“They probably panicked,” River says dolefully. “I don’t really care—the thing I want to know is, who wants me dead? And why?”

We all look at each other.

“It has to be someone you work with, right?” I ask. “Somebody who could walk into that building and sign out a boat at the pier?” They don’t let just anybody do that. It’s so rude—all those people who could be out on the water, but they can’t because other people hoard the boats. What good’s a boat if it’s parked at the marina?

River shrugs. “Yeah. Unless someone with super awesome skills hates me and has worked out a way around that.”

“Unlikely,” George says. “Let’s keep it simple. I’m not in the mood for complicated.”

I roll my eyes. “Complicated is awesome , bro. First it’s all, whoa, what the fuck? Then you spend some time with it, erode the edges a little, and it all starts to make sense. By the end, it’s simple, and everyone knows simple is beautiful.”

River gazes up at me with stars in his eyes. “That’s such a great way to think of it. You’re amazing.”

My chest puffs up with pride.

“Don’t use the word ‘erode’ when you’re talking to me,” George snaps, but I’m in too good a mood to care. River thinks I’m amazing!

“I’m keeping you,” I tell him. “Aether said so.”

Perry groans and buries his face in his hands, but River’s expression turns thoughtful.

“I’m not going to make any declarations,” he starts slowly, “since it’s only twenty-four hours since we met. But I kinda think I want to be kept by you.” He gives his head a little shake. “Let’s just see how things go, but it feels right.” He leans up to kiss me, and I pull my hands out of the bowl to cup his face.

“Aqua!” Flame sputters. “Do you have to fucking splash ?”

“I like the splashes,” River murmurs against my mouth, and I decide that I’m going to splash as often as I can from now on.

“This is sweet and all that,” Perry says, “but let’s get back to the point. River, who do you work with who wants to kill you?”

Reluctantly, River pulls away and wipes at the water I’ve left on his cheeks. A few drops have trickled down his neck, and he leaves them be. I grin at the sight of my water on him.

“I don’t know,” River’s saying. “I thought I got along well with all my colleagues.”

George huffs. “Someone disagrees. Did you accidentally eat anyone’s food in the break-room fridge?”

“No.” River rolls his eyes. “Do you really think someone would want to kill me over that?”

“Humans are weird. What about work? Did you get assigned a project someone else wanted?”

“It doesn’t work like that. We’re responsible for finding our own research projects and then convincing the Institute to give us funding for them—or applying for external grants. My research is a spin-off of something someone else is working on, but I spoke to her in detail before I even put together my first plan, and she was excited for me. She didn’t want to take this angle, but she thought it would be beneficial to her if I explored it. We exchange notes all the time, and one of her most recent breakthroughs was because of something I found.”

“So it’s not likely to be her, then,” Perry muses. “Not unless she’s a really good actress.”

“It’s not her,” River insists. “She brought me champagne as a thank-you when she had the breakthrough.”

“If we’re keeping it simple, it’s not her,” Flame agrees. “Anyone else? Someone jealous of your progress or your funding or your parking spot?”

River screws up his face. “I don’t think so? Not overtly, anyway. There’s some people I don’t know super well, but we always say hey and nod in the hallways. Nobody’s ever complained about m?—”

“There’s someone sneaking around outside,” Zephyr says dreamily.

“What?” Perry stares at him. “Are you sure?”

“The air says so.”

George swears. “Yeah, they’re there—I can feel them now. Goddamn paving—I told you we should get rid of it.”

“They’re sweaty,” Zephyr continues, then wrinkles his nose. “They smell stressed.”

“What are they doing?” River asks, alarmed. “Oh my god, my lab!”

“It’s fine,” Aether soothes. “She’s just peeking in the window, but she can’t see anything... I think. We should go down and talk to her. She doesn’t like River much.”

River gasps. “You can tell that?”

Aether shrugs, standing, and Perry adds, “He can sense strong emotions from people. Come on.”

I give my bowl of water a longing glance, then get up and follow River and the others outside. Once we make it to the deck, we all hear the gasp and see a woman running toward the road.

“Zeph, would you?” George asks, sounding bored. “My way is too disruptive.”

The woman freezes midstride.

“What the fuck?” River whispers, and I lean over to murmur in his ear. Mostly because I like being that close to him.

“Zephyr’s using the air to hold her in place. Do you know her?”

He stares at her back. “Maybe? I can’t tell from here.”

“Let’s go, then,” Flame orders, and we hustle down the steps and across the driveway. Across the road, the ocean calls to me, and I send a wave of reassurance that I’ll be there soon—with River. That makes it happy.

When we reach her, River walks around to see her face and frowns. “I know you...

Kelly from IT, right?”

“Well, that would explain how she got a copy of your security pass,” George says. Kelly doesn’t move or speak. “Zeph, let her go.”

The shriek that pierces my eardrums makes me wish Zeph would freeze her again. I wince, then step forward to block her path when she tries to run away.

“Could you not?” I ask, as politely as I can manage. “Why are you here?” My eyes narrow. “Did you hurt my River?”

“What the fuck, River?” she yells. “Who are these people and what did they do to me?”

“Why are you here?” River asks, his voice hard, and she blanches.

“I-I... I was looking for you. They’re saying at work that someone tried to kill you!” She clasps her hands to her chest. “I had to make sure you were okay!”

Aww, that’s so nice of?—

“We’ve spoken maybe three times in five years,” River retorts. “It’s not like we’re friends. Why would you go to the trouble of coming out here instead of calling, if you were that concerned?”

“And how did you know where to come?” Flame adds.

Mouth agape, she looks around at us all. “What is this, a hair modelling convention?”

Perry snorts, and even my River coughs a little. It’s not the first time we’ve heard things like that when we’re together, but it’s not our fault our hair is the color it is.

“Look, stop dodging the point or we’ll let you get up close and personal with River’s research—out there.” George points at the ocean, and Kelly’s eyes widen as his meaning sinks in.

I want to protest on behalf of my beloved water, but I don’t think the ocean would care if Kelly drowned.

As if someone flipped a switch, the stress drops from her face and she hisses at River, “You were supposed to die, damn it!”

RIVER

“You tried to kill me,” I realize, then, “ You tried to kill me? Why?” If I’d been guessing for a thousand years, I never would have picked a random person from IT who I’ve only spoken to a few times.

She ignores the question, her face all angry like I’ve done something wrong. “Why didn’t you die? You were supposed to die!”

Oh-kay. I’m now even happier that I decided to come here, where there are five men with superpowers and Perry, who looks harmless but would definitely shiv anyone who came at him in a fight, instead of going home.

George tsks sympathetically. “He just had to go and live, didn’t he? After all the trouble you went to.”

“Right?” Her eyes practically bug out, and her face is red. “It’s not fucking easy to get around all that security, you know! And signing a boat out—I work in IT! I’m not supposed to be at the pier. I had to make up some shit about calibrating the on-board equipment, and it only worked because the kid who’s there on Tuesdays is dumber than a bag of rocks.”

I stiffen. The kid who’s there on Tuesday—Gerry—might not be a genius, but he’s cheerful and kind and knows everything there is to know about looking after a boat. She’s got no right to be a bitch to him, even if he’s not here, and I open my mouth to tell her that, but Flame shoots me a warning look.

Fine. I'll let George con her into a confession like she's a TV supervillain.

"That must have been so hard for you," George commiserates. I haven't known him long, but this seems so out of character for him. "And so terrifying when he turned up at the office, no harm done."

Kelly scoffs. "Terrifying? More like frustrating! All that work for nothing—I'd have to start over!"

Oh. My. God.

But she's not done. "And as if that wasn't going to be hard enough to manage on top of my regular workload, with the client breathing down my neck already, then I realized he'd be able to deny taking his gear out!"

George scrunches up his face. "Is that why you took it?"

She sighs and admits, "I panicked. I figured if the dive equipment was gone, they'd see it as proof he was trying to hide something. I even went down to the pier again to see if I could change the name in the logbook, but when I got there, the supervisor was on the phone to Bill Kendy, confirming that River signed the boat out and saying he'd send a copy of the log."

"That's so annoying. Why does bureaucracy only work efficiently when you don't want it to?" George sounds a little like he's trying not to laugh at this point, but Kelly doesn't seem to notice.

"I know . When I need a fucking new keyboard, it takes three forms and sign-off from two supervisors, then there's a six-week wait. But nooooo, the one time I needed people at the pier to not pick up the damn phone, they're all over it." She sighs. "That was a dumb plan anyway—like I said, I panicked. I need to stay focused on my goal."

“Killing River?” George confirms.

She shrugs. “That seemed like the easiest way, but honestly, it’s just turned into a hassle now.”

I am so confused, and judging by the faces around me, so is everyone else.

Except Zephyr. I don’t think he’s even listening.

“Okay,” Perry says, “so what’s the goal, exactly?”

Kelly blinks at him like she’d forgotten we’re all here, then turns to me. “You gotta stop your research. Or change it.”

That’s not what I expected to hear. “Come again?”

She waves her hands. “Stop researching... whatever it is. Do something different.”

“Why, exactly?”

Rolling her eyes, she huffs, “So I don’t have to kill you, of course.”

“Yeah, of course.” I look at George. He’s clearly better at this than me.

“Who wants River’s research stopped?” he asks, and a light bulb goes on in my head. Duh. She mentioned a “client” during her ramble.

“Like I’m going to tell you.” Her snort is impressive. “You’ll cut out the middleman, and then I’ll lose my final payment. That’s the big one.”

Aqua leans close and whispers, “I don’t understand.”

I don't bother to whisper, speaking loudly and clearly when I explain, "Kelly's taken money from someone to stop me from completing my current research, and I'd say it's probably a lot of money, since she was willing to go as far as murder." I tilt my head and study her. "Who could that someone be? Another research facility or academic? But I haven't heard of anyone else doing similar research, and anyway, academia doesn't have a lot of money to throw around."

She smirks.

"Your research is about diseases being spread to different kelp and reef flora by migrating sea animals," Aqua reminds me. "Some of the fish in this area migrate from across the ocean—like the Bluefin Tuna. If you can prove that kelp parasites and infections are carried from there to here, or vice versa, wouldn't that be important? Not just to us and the kelp, I mean. To people too."

"It could have an impact on international relations," Flame muses, and then his eyes narrow. "Or, if the problem was found to be caused by something in particular... say, a company that was dumping in the ocean..."

Aqua gasps, offended. "I would have noticed that!"

"I would have noticed that," Kelly mocks, then scoffs. "Please. Who do you think you are?" She looks at Flame. "I literally have no idea about River's research or anything. All I know is that someone—I'm not saying who—wants to pay me big bucks to make him stop. So that's what I'm gonna do."

"No," George disagrees. "What you're going to do is pack a bag and run for it before the police arrive to arrest you."

She falters. "What do you mean? They can't arrest me; there's no proof I did anything."

Oh, no. She can't be that stupid. "Kelly," I say patiently, "have you never noticed the number of security cameras at the Institute?"

"They're dummies," she asserts confidently. "Everyone knows that. It's why we have those stupid swipe cards to monitor everywhere we go in the building. Like anyone really cares what's in the labs."

I shake my head slowly, and horror dawns on her face.

"They're not dummies?"

"They're not. They're very real. Bill has already requested the footage from Tuesday that will prove I was in the lab and show you taking my gear—twice."

She begins to shake. "No. No no no no no."

"You're definitely going to lose your job," I continue, "and George is right. The Institute will call the police. They have to, if they want the insurance company to be happy. I don't know what the charges would be?"

"I do!" Perry volunteers, all chipper. "I used to work for lawyers. Let's see... there was a lot of planning involved, right? Security cards and boat logs and the rest. So... falsifying information, for sure. Damaging private property, since you butchered River's equipment. Now, said butchering was supposed to kill him, which makes it attempted murder. You could argue that you thought he'd check his equipment before diving and that you only meant to prevent him from diving, which might dial it down to some kind of assault charge... I'm not sure. Stealing the gear after, though—that's evidence tampering. And I guess there's a possibility of insurance fraud? It really depends on what angle the investigation takes."

By now, Kelly's shaking so hard, I'm surprised she can stand. "No. No! I'm supposed to get my money and go on with my life. Nobody said anything about police. I'm just

a tool—don't they arrest the people in charge?"

"Either way, you'll lose your job," Flame points out calmly. "Do you really want to risk the rest? Tell us who hired you and run for it. Never do anything like this again, and we won't tell anyone you were even here."

For a second, she says nothing, just stares wildly at us all. Then her shoulders slump and she whispers, "I only ever spoke to one guy. He didn't say who he worked for, but I took a photo of his face when he wasn't paying attention and reverse image searched it. He's a VP at Scullitech."

I have no idea who that is, but I'm going to find out. "Go," I tell her. "And seriously, don't ever do this again. It's not worth it. You've already been screwed out of a job, and you know the Institute will blacklist you." I feel a little bad for her. Maybe I should offer her money or?—

"Why couldn't you have just died?" she asks.

Uh-huh. "You drive safe, now."

We watch until she's crossed the road to a beat-up Honda parked illegally on the beach side, and after she's driven off, I turn to Aqua. "It might not be dumping. Not the illegal kind, anyway. Or it could be a slow leak or something that this VP wants to cover up because it proves he made a mistake. But we'll find out." I glance around at the others. "Does anyone know what Scullitech does?"

Perry waves his phone. "According to Google, they're the leading manufacturer of oars and other rowing stuff. They're an American company, headquartered in LA, but their main plant is in Mexico—right on the Pacific coast."

"Checks out so far," George says. "Later, we'll pinpoint the factory on a map and Aqua can have a look-see at the water in the area. It might be something really minor

that they just don't want anyone noticing."

"Or it could be that they've damaged the kelp in that area, and my research would not only bring that to light but prove that they're responsible for damaged marine ecosystems between here and Japan." I shrug. "Aqua and I will work it out."

Aqua beams. "Together."

"Together." I nod and smile back at him. This may have been the most fucked-up thirty-six hours of my life, but I can't deny that the most comfortable, the most right I've ever felt is here, with Aqua. I'm a scientist. I don't believe in fate. But if I did, I might even say we're fated to be together.

"Let's go surfing!"

Twenty minutes later, as we skim hand-in-hand across the water, a wave carrying us toward shore, I'm grinning so widely I think my face might split. Later, I plan to suck my new boyfriend off in the shower, but right now, nothing could be better than this.

Off to the left, I see a shadow that I'm pretty sure is a shark—a big one. But Aqua assured me it's just curious and would never hurt me... and if it tried, the ocean would protect me. I'm not even sure what that means, but hey—the ocean saved my life once already, and it brought Aqua to me. Plus, I've always loved the water.

I guess it makes sense that Aqua loves me back.

Thanks for reading Aqua !