

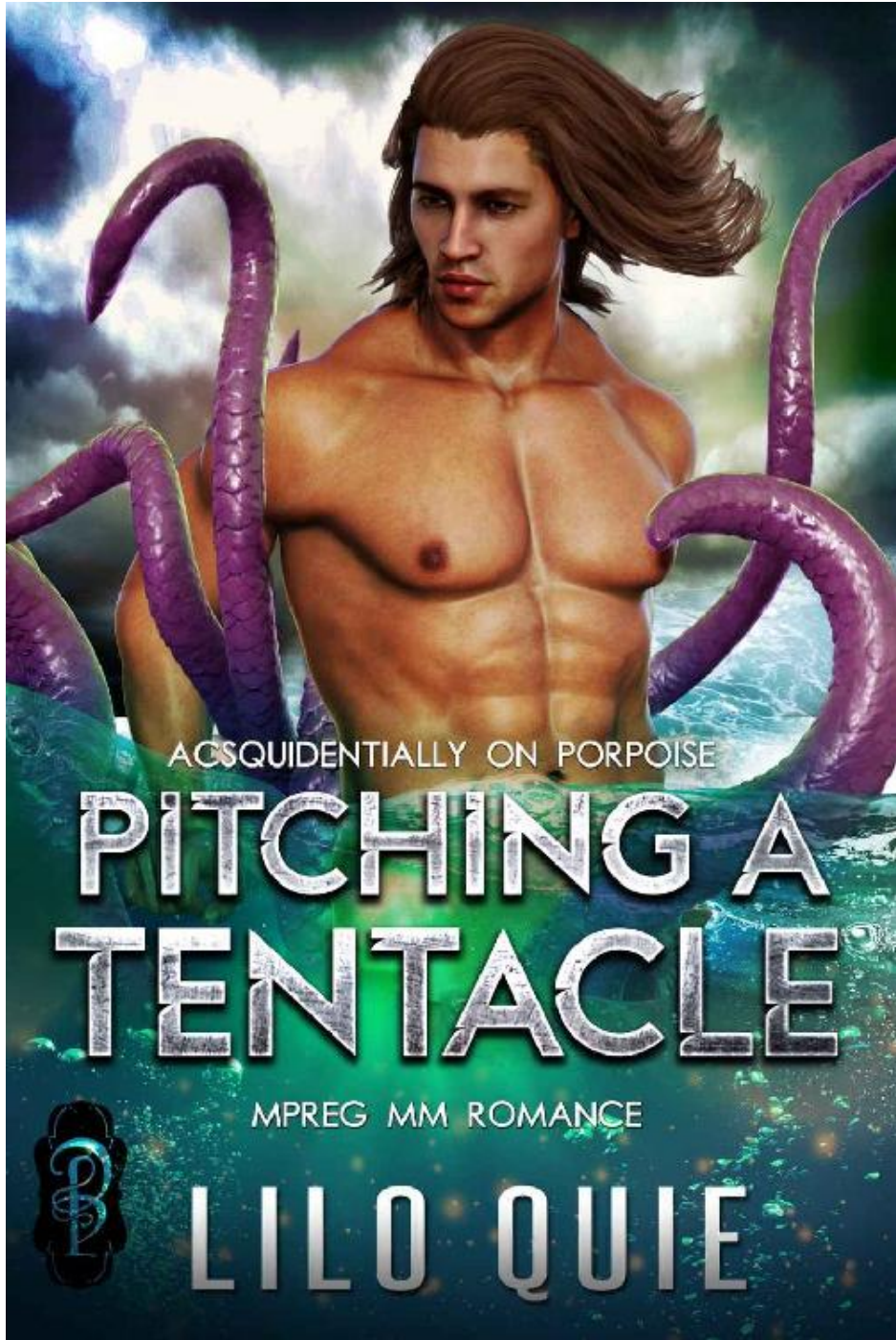
ACCIDENTALLY ON PORPOISE

PITCHING A TENTACLE

MPREG MM ROMANCE



LILLO QUIE



The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of a copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by fines and federal imprisonment.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

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

Pitching a Tentacle

Copyright © 2023 by Lilo Quie

Digital ISBN: 978-1-68361-906-2

Paperback: 978-1-68361-907-9

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work, in whole or in part, in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now

known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[About the Author](#)

[By Lilo Quie at Decadent Publishing](#)

Cane had always been a good cecaelia, kept his tentacles to himself, and left the omegas alone, but when the king's son professes his love for him, Cane can't commit. He waits for his fated mate, even if the king will punish him for rejecting his son.

Morgan has lived a quiet life in forced solitude learning the manners and quiet duties of an omega. Dolphins are polyamorous creatures, and Morgan dreams of being touched by multiple hands at once, but his family has other plans for him. When his arranged marriage to a wealthy beta goes sour and he's left marked and devalued, he flees his home and asks the council to remove him. It's there he learns it's not multiple men he craves, but the multiple arms of the hottest cecaelia he's ever seen.

Together they find love and family in the most unlikely of places. Even with the little lost merboy who needs a family, no matter how much he wants to believe he's part piranha. Together with their pet lobster Bluecifer, they'll be the family that none of them ever had.

Warning: contains shellfish.

I was in an argument with friends some time ago talking about tentacle-tailed mermen, which I found out were called cecaelia. This sparked a conversation about which tentacle being the ‘special tentacle.’

In this story? They’re *all* special.

Dedication

This one goes out to everyone in my FB reader group.
Thanks for cheering me on, peeps.

Pitching A Tentacle
Acsquidentally on Porpoise

by

Lilo Quie

Chapter One

Cane

Watery voices echoed around the castle chamber as the merfolk of the East Trench Shimmer gathered for the trial of one Hurricane Gale. Nervous whispers that carried far further than they should have spoke of guilt, of challenge. They questioned whether the standing accused alpha would challenge their king.

“I’ve never broken a rule before!” Cane raised his arms above his head. The crisp, cool water around him churned. “I couldn’t let them die!” The galley of people silenced to listen, squirming into their stadium seating. Cane dared not look back, for fear of catching his omega father’s eye and disappointing him.

“Sorry, Cane. You’re an alpha, and are held to a higher standard. We cannot overlook this. You almost let humans see your merform, and thus we have punishments for that.” Their elder, King Neap Tide, reigning alpha for these past forty years, bristled his impressive beard and held himself a little higher than Cane. Though height was truly irrelevant when one swam everywhere. Cane could dwarf any fish-tailed mer in size alone with the impressive curl of his many tentacles and some help from his orca father’s genes.

“I saved lives, and I wasn’t seen. I think it’s stupid. Why can’t we just—”

“Reveal ourselves to all the humans? Yes, let’s do that. How many medicinal teas will we end up being dissected into?”

What about you, Cane? Are you eager to have your mating tentacle lopped off and turned into a human's sexual stimulant?"

"I didn't reveal myself!" Cane's voice echoed in an authoritative boom, exuding alpha power that made King Tide bristle and tense.

With a drifting approach, the king went eye to eye with Cane, pressing a finger into the young man's earthen skin right against his sternum. "You will *not* use your dominance on us. You are *not* a king. You are a commoner. Do we understand? I might have been more lenient, but you are too dominant to be in our midst *unmated* for much longer, Cane. You cause disharmony in our shimmer."

"It's because I won't accept your son's proposal, isn't it?" Cane's upper lip twitched, and he braced himself, trying not to flare his tentacles in threat.

The king's jaw twitched at the statement. "You will hold your tongue."

"No, I will not! I look for my fated mate, and me turning down your son was not an act of defiance. He is a beautiful man, and a sweet one with so much love in his heart, but I would do him a great disservice if I mated him. Doing so would deprive both myself and him of finding our fated one." Cane calmed himself and pulled his tentacles in. When he let his temper rise, his unfurling tentacles put on a threatening display, offending the average beta, and challenging any alpha.

"You dishonored him!" The king's voice echoed around the stone walls, drifting upward through the vented ceilings.

Flitting fish disturbed the fingers of light, reaching outward, touching the scene below them.

Whispers grew in intensity, the gallery of mers, both tailed and tentacled, hushed and spread their own rumors.

“How? I have been a gentleman in all ways. I have not laid a tentacle on your son!”

“He is a prince, and he professed to you! Your rejection has dishonored him.”

And there was the crux of the matter. Cane stared at the king without a lick of emotion.

“I’ll take my punishment before the elders for vote. Your son will find his fated and will thank me one day for not touching him.” Cane bowed his head. “I understand it is the will of a father to protect and love his son. You are defending him and his pain that I have inadvertently caused, and for that, I am sorry.”

“Oh, Cane,” his omega father whimpered from somewhere behind him.

“You’re dismissed. We’ll convene with the elders and decide your punishment.” The king banged his scepter against the mosaic tiled floor and swam through an ornate doorway, following a group of fish-tailed mermen with silver streaked across their scales.

It’d been a running argument for years, ever since he was twenty, when the king had appointed Cane to be the first prince’s personal guard on occasional trips to the surface. Cane still had a job and ended up taking South everywhere with him. They were a few years apart, and while not

forbidden in their shimmer for the lower class to mingle with the upper because it would defeat the purpose of fate to disallow it. With that in mind, it was certainly frowned upon to sexually fraternize with ones that were not your mate. Cane wanted his mate to be his first, and while he had canoodled with the odd male, certainly not the prince, he'd never crossed the line. He kept it to his tame tentacles and mouth. After all, he did want to be able to please his mate when he found them.

“You didn't sleep with the prince, did you?” his omega father, Nori, asked, grabbing Cane's thick arm as he hovered in the water beside him.

“Of course not. My fated is out there. South was a good friend and I couldn't do that to him. I'm sorry I hurt his feelings, but better than depriving him of his true mate.”

“We both know this is a farce. Nobody really saw you? You're certain?”

“It was dark, and I waited until they were nearly unconscious before helping them. They saw some tentacles, that was all. And besides, that was months ago. I reported it back then.” Cane leaned into his omega father, their bare shoulders rubbing. “I won't ever have a child outside of my fated. It's not fair to the family.”

“It takes two to tango, sweetheart. We were young and in love. I never found my fated, but at least Izaiah could give me you first.”

Cane pulled his smaller omega father into his chest for a tight hug. “He did the best he could, I suppose.”

“He did. He took care of us. His heart was just elsewhere.”

“Nori!” Someone called from across the chamber, swimming up to join the father and son. Cane’s omega father looked up, head tilted curiously.

“Aunt Marina.” Cane tipped his head in acknowledgement and waved. She gave him a cold stare, tossing her hair back and sniffing obnoxiously.

“Nothing but trouble! Honestly! Would it have been such a hardship to be with a prince? You think your father wants to live in that sunken boat?”

“It’s not a sunken boat. We *built* it out of a sunken boat, Izaiah and I.” Nori held his hands up in weak protest.

“It’s a sunken boat, Nori. And look here, your deadbeat son is in trouble with the king! Fraternizing with humans with his tentacles out and not a mate to show for it.” Marina huffed and gestured at Cane with flailing tentacles.

“He saved lives. The sea gods say that all life is sacred. Their deaths would have been pointless. I’m proud of him,” Nori said, resting a sweet hand on Marina’s shoulder.

“But to turn down a *prince*, Nori?”

Cane rolled his eyes.

“All of you guys are crazy. No, I don’t want my papa to suffer. But I also don’t want to do what my dad did. Is that a problem? Since when does me respecting the rules make me the bad guy?” Cane pursed his lips, staring down at his aunt.

“My point, Cane, is that you’re a troublemaker and you should be focused on your family, and not on the silly notion of true love like it’s done your family much good.” She huffed and flitted her tentacles, pulsing her veil to slip out of the chamber, following the rest of the curious onlookers.

“Baby, you did the right thing.” Nori reached out, taking his son’s hand. “You wait for love, and I’ll be fine. And I’m damn proud of you. You have so much pride and honor. The prince will thank you one day. I promise.”

If only everyone else could be as proud.

Cane stared down at the floor and sighed, the pressure of the deep water soothing in its own way, squeezing him from all sides like a hug. The sea was his home, and while he did surface occasionally to work, his passion was welding. And he got good money for it, too. Enough money that he could buy his papa anything he wanted within reason, not that he’d take it. He’d never dare to suggest buying Nori a different house. He loved that house. But a vacation home? Travel? Cane wanted to see his papa find his fated mate at long last.

Cane floated over to a railing along the side of the room and wound his tentacles around it, sidling himself in as he stared from the windows. The light filtering in played strange patterns over the world and he lost himself, waiting for the elders’ deliberations. Nori grabbed one of Cane’s tentacles and squeezed it lightly.

“It’ll be alright, baby. The elders know what they’re doing. The king just wants to bully you into being with South.”

“I know that. You know that, but everyone thinks I’m this merwhore now.”

“Well, you’re big as an orca, mean as a shark and smart, oh-so smart. I see you thinking all the time, and you love. You love so much, and so hard. You’ll figure things out.” Nori nudged him and he folded his arms, a little surly, his defense against the world. He put on a strong face, but since he was a boy, he was the alpha of the house, and alphas were supposed to be tough.

“My baby clam. Hard on the outside, soft and tender on the inside, but once you’re open, there’s a pearl in there somewhere.”

“Papa, come on. It’ll be alright. They’ll put me on guard duty by myself at the far end of the trench for a week, and we’ll all forget it.”

Nori didn’t look like he bought that excuse for a minute, and the chamber door fluttered with movement as a tentacle-tailed elder swam out, calling him forward. Nori pushed his shoulder and stood back, hand to his heart anxiously.

“I’m afraid the king won’t have it. We tried for you, Cane. We really did.”

Cane nodded. “Thanks, Uncle Psi.”

The elder curled out a brown patterned tentacle and grabbed Cane’s wrist. “But the answer won’t change. They say banishment.”

Nori wailed, clutching his chest. He curled into himself and the water went cold around Cane.

“No...I didn’t do anything wrong. How could they just—”

Psi held his hand up, silencing Cane with an understanding nod. “It’s not entirely permanent. It’s a chance to mend fences. They want you to leave the shimmer, and they’re giving you a place to live and a job. And they have contingencies.”

Cane swallowed hard, jaw trembling as he waited for the verdict.

“You have six months to find your fated mate, and then you must return to South or stay gone.”

“You expect me to find my fated mate just like that?” Cane bristled. “I have to take care of my papa. I have things I need to do here.”

“And we’ve covered that. Half your salary will be going straight to him. We’ve some new alphas coming in soon from another shimmer, and we’ll see if Nori will lodge one for help around the home. That garden of his requires a lot of maintenance.”

Cane lowered his head with shame. “Can I visit?”

Psi shook his head, his longer locks twisting behind him.

“Can...can he visit me?” Cane held his breath and Psi nodded.

“Of course. We can’t stop him traveling. We can’t stop him leaving, either.”

Cane glanced over at his papa, eyes filled with sadness.

Nori swam over, hugging around Cane’s chest. “Wherever you go, baby, I’ll follow. I’ll sell the damn house if I have to.”

Psi held up a hand. "I'd wait on that if I were you." A sly grin crawled across his lips.

"I went to see Nehima a few weeks ago. I was worried about everything and we asked the gods for guidance." Psi rested a hand on Cane's shoulder and smiled. "He said the prince will find his fated soon, and to not fight change."

"The old sea witch says many things, but they don't tell fortunes for the lower class." Cane huffed.

"That's what you think. They want you topside at the docks first thing in the morning. I hope you like freshwater."

Cane didn't.

Chapter Two

Cane

“Welcome to camp Wannahatchee, where our goal is summer memories you won’t forget.” It was too damn early in the morning for a person to be so fucking perky. He’d not been this tired since the local soft drink plant had an extended ocean leak and the spring tide washed it away in one foul flush after they fixed it, taking delicious caffeine with it. She was a female, light-haired and bright-eyed. He’d sniffed out a few females before and they held little interest. Being born of omega, he was far more likely to be attracted to omegas himself. Especially as an alpha.

The middle of goddessdamn Wisconsin. Who. The. Fuck. Sends a merman into the middle of fucking Wisconsin? The council, that’s who. The king, too, fighting for the feelings of his young son so hell-bent on love he couldn’t see past his own nose. *Selfish.*

“What’s the name mean?” Cane asked, his accent must have sounded strange compared to the yawning northern American.

“Excuse me?” The bright-eyed tour guide, a tall woman with a thin-set boyish figure and blonde hair growing brown at the roots, asked. Her name tag said she was Kaycee, but she just didn’t look like a Kaycee. She had a *Jessica* vibe. If that made any sense.

“What’s Wannahatchee mean?” Cane stared at her, trying to keep his face impassive. Apparently it was such that it made

her recoil, stuttering.

“W-well I dunno. It just is. The name of the lake or something?” Her nervous twitch brought with it the scent of canid and, strangely, female alpha.

Cane sucked his teeth and sighed. This was going to take *forever*. How the *hell* was he supposed to find a mate in the middle of Wisconsin next to a goddess forsaken man-made lake in the smack damn middle of two shifter territories having a turf war? Coyotes and wolves weren't friends at the best of times, and whoever decided to build a summer camp full of human and shifter children mingled was an idiot or a genius. He'd been there thirty minutes and already been warned of the monster dogs that hunt the woods for bad children at night.

“Right. Well, don't let me stop the tour. Just point me in a direction and I'll go.” Cane shoved his hands into his pockets. Clothes felt *restrictive*. Also, his human *tentacle* never really fit comfortably in his pants. It liked to lean down one leg or the other or find a way to twist itself in his testicles. Everything just worked better with his merform.

“Speaking of names. You said your name was Cane? That's an interesting name. What's it mean?” She blinked up at him with a bright and vapid smile that didn't reach her eyes.

“If you're going to be disingenuous, I can give myself the tour from the pamphlet and find the head office to give me my assignments.” Cane smiled back. “But if you're just awkward, it's short for Hurricane.”

A look of relief watered over her and she sagged a little. “Look, man, I'm trying my best here. One of the girls in my bunk threw up on me this morning and I've had so many

crying kids this week, it's not even funny. Can you just cut me a second of slack?"

Cane stared at her for a lingering moment. "Sweet. Turn off the happy, peppy act and give me your true opinion and true self. You're not winning points with me that way."

She gasped, almost offended for a moment, her cheeks going pink. Her eyes flashed with terror.

"I'm gay." Cane held up a hand. She relaxed again.

"Oh, thank heavens, I'm not the only one." Kaycee wilted into a slackened heap. "Do you know how hard it is? By the by, don't tell *any* of the human kids here. They tell their parents and we have to answer a million questions. It's supposed to be one of those 'neutral' camps, but there's definitely some religious kids in here and...yeah."

"I'll bear that in mind." Cane nodded graciously and followed her through the camp. The pine-needle strewn ground crunched underfoot as she pointed to the different cabins, the main mess hall, and crafting places.

"Okay, and you're in cabin twelve...oof," she sighed.

"Why the oof?" Cane raised a brow.

"The criers and bullied kids. They made a whole wimp cabin. Not that I see them as wimps, it's just that they tend to group like personalities here to 'make better friends.'" Kaycee flapped her hand about, waving the topic off. "I hope you can handle it."

Cane laughed. "I can handle criers a lot better than I handle bullies." He'd put alpha power down on all of their

little asses and show them who the real boss was. Even a clueless human would have buckled under his gaze.

“That’s a relief. Okay, so here’s the office. They’re going to give you your keys and schedule then take you to trade off with Brent for the pup—kids.” She stumbled over the word and Cane leaned in slowly, sniffing.

“Excuse me!” She stepped back, her eyes, somewhere between blue and gray, widening.

“Not familiar enough with canines to tell the difference. Alpha...hmm...” Cane leered.

“Fox.” Her shoulders slumped.

“Mer.” His booming laugh broke the tense mood.

“I thought you smelled a little like ocean water. Glad my sniffer’s not off.”

“Go on in. I’ll introduce you to the others on staff later this evening. Once the kids are in bed, we hang for a bit and play Would You Rather.” Kaycee waved him off and checked her schedule before running off.

Chapter Three

Cane

Cane made it to his cabin and unloaded his belongings. He checked the time and texted his papa. Phones didn't really translate underwater noises the best, and merspeak was mostly telepathy anyway. But a good military-grade waterproof case specially designed for them made texting a breeze.

Made it to the camp. It's nice. There's a female alpha fox here, and she's sweet.

I thought you preferred male omegas? his father snapped back quickly.

I wasn't prospecting her. It's okay here. There's a lake to let my tentacles out. If I do things right, there won't be rumors about a monster in the lake by the end of all this.

Don't you even joke! You go out there and find your mate. I miss you so much already.

Cane sighed. *Miss you, too. You know I'm too much of a papa's boy to get too far. Love you.*

Love you, too, baby. Don't forget to check in with me when you can, okay?

Yes, sir. Every day. Cane closed his phone and drooped. He felt like he'd disappointed the only person in his life that mattered.

He absolutely had to find his fated mate, and soon.

He'd been told time and time again that he would know when he met his mate, that his heart would skip a beat, his skin would flush and the draw would be nearly impossible to resist. All the while, his eyes would fly open wide, like the sun bursting through the ripples of the surface, dappling them in the muted colors of the sea like gemstones. Cane smiled at the thought as a little boy came running into his cabin and dived under his bed. He squeaked as he did so and a distinctly *prey* smell came from him. *Omega.*

A few gruff boys bustled into the cabin. "Where's the little runt? My dad says they got butt cooters, like, inside them."

"Gross." Another pup gagged.

Alpha pups? No, they were predators but not alphas. Not all, at least. One of them was feline, the others some sort of mustelid. Both betas. *Of course, a beta wouldn't understand.*

"Boys, that's not nice. Why would you say such a mean thing?" Cane called out, using his sweetest voice. This camp was crawling with humans and there they were, openly talking about shifter anatomy out in public, *and* using it to harass a poor little boy.

"Who the fuck are you?" The third approached, the fattest of the bunch squinted up at Cane, his face screwed up tight, trying to look tough. *Little alpha?*

"My name is Cane. What's your name?" He smiled at the children, letting his lips stretch wide as the fat one's beady eyes took him in.

“Now, what were you saying when you came in here? Those were some strange words I’ve never heard before.” Cane tilted his head. Most shifters had never seen a mer before to recognize their scent, and they paled. “Man. That’s strange stuff and I should call the government... You know.” Cane walked across the room and slammed the door shut, letting the octopus take over his eyes for a moment before he swiveled his gaze toward the boys and let his alpha power flow.

“You talk about shifter stuff in public again, and I will not be nice. Do we understand one another?” Cane growled heavily.

One mustelid urinated, the front of his pants darkening as a puddle formed on the floor. He let another slam of his alpha power go toward the boys and they started crying. “What you’re doing is not cute, and it is not okay. I am alpha of this cabin. These little ones will be my pack. Are we clear?” A life of living at the bottom of the ocean gave him excellent control over his lungs, and he could deepen his voice in horrifying ways.

Aaaaand the fat one pissed himself, too. *Great.*

Cane slung the door open and pointed out the door. All three boys bolted and Cane closed the door to grab a mop from in the bathroom. He wet it in the sink and sighed haggardly as the little scampering boy came out.

“W-what’s an alpha?” The little boy’s shimmery coppery eyes and orangey-red hair stuck out like a sore thumb, but Cane couldn’t quite pin his species.

“Means, I’m top dog of the place.” Cane wasn’t about to give an uneducated omega an anatomy lesson he didn’t need.

“Ask your pater.”

“What’s a pater?” He blinked up sweetly and the sheer *cute* that the boy emanated made Cane’s heart constrict. The feral part of him wanted to hold the boy tight and protect him like a treasure.

“Your father.”

“Oh. I don’t have one.” He looked at the floor.

“Mother?”

He shook his head. “I live with Mrs. Beasley in the group home. I don’t get a momma and papa because I keep running away. I’m good at that.” He nodded proudly. The kid had a lot to run away from. Likely he was having changes and things going on with his body different than his peers. At eleven or so years old, he was watching his human companions grow hair he’d never get while becoming physically different than him.

“What’s your name?” Cane watched him carefully.

“Ripley.”

Cane smiled and knelt down, getting level with the boy. “Can you smell a lot of things other kids can’t?”

The boy nodded, his eyes wide. “What do I smell like to you?”

Ripley tilted his head, and gingerly approached, head bent low by instinct. He looked up from beneath his mop of carrot hair and frowned. “You smell like salt and water and safe.”

“Mhm.” Cane grinned, and the boy fidgeted nervously then nodded.

“You smell like... Big leader, dad, thing.” Ripley shook his head, confused as whatever his alter or senses told him conflicted with his man self.

“Good. That means I’ll protect you, okay? I don’t have a bad smell. Just be a sweet boy and if you have problems, come to me and I’ll make them pee themselves again.”

Ripley beamed, and Cane ruffled his head, delighting in his gap-toothed smile.

A knock came from the door, sharp and insistent.

“Mister Gale?” The door swung open, and Cane looked up from the boy.

“We have three young men out here who said you *threatened them with violence.*” An uppity beta female piped up at him with a sharp note to her voice. One of the boys stuck his tongue out at Cane and he raised a brow.

Ripley fell into instant tears. “No, he didn’t! They were chasing me and saying they were gonna—”

Cane dipped down and shushed. “You don’t have to repeat what they said.”

“Miss, these boys are going to tell you the truth, right now.” Cane stood up tall and stared the boys down, doing his best to give them an understanding, paternal look. From their wide-eyed expressions, they held onto the same fear as before.

“He said if we did what we did again, he’d not be nice.” The fat boy dug his toe in the dirt, shivering under the rolling alpha power. He’d given them a lick of fear earlier; since they’d brought the beta in, he laid on full alpha compulsion. The woman seemed oblivious to it.

“Now, tell the nice lady... I’m sorry, ma’am, I didn’t catch your name yet? I’m new here.” Cane extended his hand, and she wrinkled her nose before taking his ring finger with a pinch and shaking his hand by that.

“Patrice Duval. Senior coordinator.” She sniffed indignantly.

“Would you rather I call you Miss...Mrs? Duval or Patrice?”

“Mrs. Duval is fine. Thank you, Mister Gale. You’re very polite.”

“Now, boys, tell Mrs. Duval here what you were doing to poor Ripley and what I stopped you from doing.”

“Don’t say nothing, Eric.” The fat boy stomped the mustelid’s toe.

The third one, the whiniest of the bunch, started crying and fessed up. “We was chasing him around because Kip said that Ripley had a butt cooter and he wouldn’t show us so he was gonna make him show it.”

Cane wrinkled his lips in disgust and Ripley’s tears grew thicker. Out of some instinct, he scooted from his place on the floor and latched onto Cane’s leg protectively. Cane patted over Ripley’s head and sighed. “He’s just a boy, and what anyone’s got going on in their swimsuits is none of your businesses.”

Ripley clutched tighter, sniffing.

“I see. I think these young men and I need to have a long conversation with their parents. I apologize, Mister Gale, and I applaud you for handling it quietly and efficiently.”

“I’d have gone to get one of you sooner, but I was busy trying to console the victim. I deescalated the situation. I imagine those three are pretty upset they got caught doing something wrong, and they were trying to protect themselves.” Cane nodded to the boys with a face of understanding, but deep below, his alpha coiled.

“If this is a tough discussion for you, ma’am, I’d be happy to speak to these boys’ dads for you. Man to man, as it were. I don’t think a lady ought to have those kinds of discussions with a man if she is uncomfortable with it.” Cane smiled sweetly and her cheeks blushed. She obviously didn’t want to call their parents and probably wouldn’t, but Cane’s sweet talk and offer to do the awkward part of her job for her made her fan herself with delight.

“Can Ripley stick with me for the time being? I think we’re going to be good buddies and I want to make sure that he’s okay.” Cane smiled and Ripley buried his face in Cane’s pant leg. There, he wiped his tears then rubbed his cheek, not understanding what he was doing, all instinctive scent marking...the same scent marking a child might do to a parent.

Oh sea gods have mercy... I am not going to cry. Cane stared up at the ceiling and blinked a few times before settling himself with a wavering breath.

“Absolutely. Good looking out for him.”

Chapter Four

Cane

“Speaking alpha to alpha here, sir... Oh, you’re a beta? Wow, could have fooled me! But yeah. I don’t think little Kip needs to be here this summer. If he’s chasing omegas at this age and being loud about it in front of humans, maybe he needs a little time to adjust and talk.”

Apparently, Kip really was an alpha, a weak one, but one all the same. As a preteen, he was sniffing about and interested in omegas, and his father was a little miffed.

“My boy isn’t interested in sex. He’s twelve.”

“No, sir. Never said he was. I said he’s chasing omegas. He can’t help what his sniffer says, but he can help how he acts about it.”

“Seems like something you ought to be teaching him. Don’t see why I need to come get him. If you have the time to be calling me, you should be smacking some sense into that omega to stop scent spreading to get boys to chase him.”

Betas. Why the fuck does it always have to be fucking betas?

Cane took a deep breath. “I’m an alpha, sir. I prefer omegas to females, and have never once been controlled by pheromones, sir. Self-restraint is key.” Cane rolled his eyes when the idiot grumbled some beta fundamentalist bullshit about stronger betas being born from alpha male and beta female pairs.

Kip bunched up on the seat next to him and sniffled.

Oh, my gods...I can't send this kid home to this idiot.

“Sir, I assure you that he will not be engaging in that kind of activity here, especially if I have my say in it. What he does as a consenting adult is on him later on. Are you coming to get your kid or not?”

“No. Do your damn job.” The man hung up the phone and the chubby kid started crying again.

“You, kitty, what are you?” Cane pointed at the kid.

“Ocelot.”

“I’ll have someone set your dad straight. I guess you’re staying here, but you need to really think about what you did to Ripley. You made him feel way worse than your dad just made you feel. You can help what you just did. Ripley can’t help what he is.” Kip hung his head with shame.

“Go on back to your bunk and if you even make eye contact with Ripley again and he tells me, I will not hesitate to use the full font of my alpha. Are we very clear? This is not how a good alpha behaves.”

The boy nodded and darted out.

Cane rubbed his temples and called the other two in, and their parents agreed that they needed to be home and talked to. Severely.

Cane had to make a final phone call, but this one on his personal phone. For that, he slipped out of the office and went back to his bunk to hide behind the small building as his phone rang.

“Hurricane! How are you?” The bright tones of his high school best friend, Beach, greeted him.

“I’ve been better.”

“I heard. How’s camp *Wanna-peepee?*” Beach wasn’t one to leave a pun unattended or unsaid and Cane did his best to ignore it. He should have seen it coming.

“I’ve got some big concerns. You know there’s an omega in human foster care, here, who doesn’t know what he is, right?” Cane picked at his fingernails.

“No. I didn’t. What is he?”

“No clue. Never sniffed something like him before.” Cane took a deep breath.

“Try to sus out what he is. What’s his name?”

“Ripley Smith. Nine years old, and very orange. Ginger to the core.” Cane chuckled, and a keyboard tacked away on the other end.

“Ahh, yeah. Get us more info. We’ll see who we can ship him off to later.”

“Also, I just sent two beta boys home to their parents for talking about alpha-omega stuff out loud in public. I got a little ocelot alpha here who’s said some really disgusting things to our little omega and a beta fundamentalist dad that’s wanting us to teach omegas not to spread their pheromones.” Cane shuddered.

“Ugh. His name?”

“Kip Tenclaw. Age twelve.”

“Yep, got him here on the register. We’ll send the kitten services for his clowder out to talk to his parents. How are you holding up?” Beach hesitated.

“Decent. I’m worried about my papa and terrified that South won’t find his mate or I won’t.”

“I’m working on things on my end. Ride out the summer. Maybe your mate won’t be from the sea and this was predestined?” Beach paused. Cane had known him longer than he’d been working for the Shifter Allied Council. SAC. He paused, breath shifting. He had a habit of chewing his bottom lip when he thought. “Was he ugly?”

“The prince?”

“Yeah.”

“Pft. No. The boy was a temptation and a half just to swim around. His last mating season drove me damn nuts wanting to swim circles with him.” Cane sighed heavily. “He’s beautiful, and he has a beautiful soul. He deserves his fated.”

“Loving someone enough to know they need someone else is a big thing. But thanks for the call. I’ll have your issues handled. Looooove ya!” The call ended. Ten bucks said that Beach was looking South up on social media.

Chapter Five

Morgan

Morgan sat on the edge of his little creaking cot, staring at the tattoo circling his wrist. The cetacean symbols of a claimed omega. Meaningless. He slapped a leather bracelet over the tattoo and blinked tears away. “Fuck you, Degan!” he hissed under his breath and sighed, studying the edge of the tattoo barely visible where a fine line had been circled around his wrist, a mark of shame as a dishonored omega.

When he’d petitioned the shifter council to relocate him in an emergency because of his failed mating, he’d thought he’d go to another pod or a shimmer. He never thought he’d be sent to the fucking middle of nowhere, a thousand miles from saltwater, in the middle of hordes of unwashed crotch goblins beside a lake that smelled like algae. Granted, it did look like it had some tasty freshwater fish he hadn’t managed to find yet.

“Mister Morgan! Casper took my flip-flop!” The whine of a small child broke his reverie.

“Liam, did he take it, or did you throw it at him and he won’t give it back to you?” Morgan waited through lingering silence. Having hearing as good as he did had its advantages. The kids got away with very little around him.

“He stole it!” Liam pouted and stared at the floor.

“Did he really?”

“No.”

And there the truth of it was. The child's pouted lips and surly tone set the pace. Morgan took a moment of silence to gain patience. "Tell Casper to come here."

Liam ran off. "Oooo! Casper's in trooooubbleeee," he shouted outside and a solid *thwack* punctuated Liam's nasally voice.

"If I'm gonna get in trouble, I might as well hit you. Nyah!" Casper marched in, staring daggers at Morgan, who held his hand out for the flip-flop. Liam burst into tears outside, and Morgan couldn't muster a fuck to give. His last fuck had packed up shop, flipped the sign to closed, and gone off to the Bahamas.

"Don't tease the humans, Casper. Please." Morgan sighed heavily.

"S'not my fault he don't wipe all the way and stinks worse than a dumpster." Casper crossed his arms.

"Lord have mercy, child, you test my patience." Morgan took a centering breath, snatched the flip-flop from his hand, and stared the little tawny-skinned boy with dark-brown hair in his too-green eyes. "Turn around."

Casper whined.

"No no. I don't give in to kitten eyes. Turn. Around."

Casper turned and got a gentle flick to the back of his ear, not enough to hurt but to make noise. Usually, that was enough for shifters. Casper squealed in shock and ran out. Morgan would maintain his evil reputation, Liam would shut the fuck up for a few minutes, and Casper would stop pestering the

mundanes. “Fucking domestic short hairs. They think they’re so clever.”

Morgan stared at his phone for a few minutes. His parents hadn’t responded to his texts or calls in over a week, aside from a perfunctory acknowledgement. They were furious with him, as if the whole debacle was his fault! It wasn’t his fault. He really tried.

A fat tear hit the screen of his phone. It slid over the surface, trailing to the edge as a text message came in from Kaycee. *Oh, my gosh, did you see the new counselor for the crybaby cabin?*

Is he cute? Morgan might have been freshly dumped, but he wasn’t emotionally attached to his former fiancé. At twenty years his senior, the wealthy beta had been a good pick for him for his family’s business, and Morgan had agreed. He didn’t love the male, nor particularly like him much, but cetacean merfolk didn’t often mate. They married for convenience, but polygamy was the norm. In fact, Morgan’s mother and father had never even lived together, their relationship tied to him alone. Any dealings he had with his father always seemed transactional.

Morgan knew his place as an omega with a wealthier father. He’d be traded off as a trophy to a well-to-do beta or a ruling-class alpha. He was a pivotal piece to be the bearer of children, held in forced monogamy to a philandering husband. Secretly, he longed for the days he’d have done his duty so he could find a few lovers. He couldn’t imagine having just one. Being surrounded by alphas, taken by multiple at once, had been a fantasy of his for as long as his libido had been alive.

*Alpha with a capital A and he's so good with the kids.
He's already got a clinger.*

Morgan's lips twisted as a poorly angled photo showed an enormous alpha with skin the rich color of wet sand and brown hair bleached from the sun. "Oooh." He zoomed in and squinted. He needed to see this creature a little closer.

So, what is he? Morgan was okay with shifters aesthetically, but he was designed to make love in his merform, something he wouldn't want to engage in with a shifter.

Merfolk of some kind. He didn't specify and I don't know if it's rude to ask. You guys get classy about your species, right?

Morgan snorted. *A little. It's the 1950s down there when it comes to some species.*

That's like, really sad. :(

I'm not that way. Not anymore, at least. He'd been raised to believe cetaceans superior. He'd scoffed at the fishfolk and the eelmen, thinking them beneath him.

I wouldn't be friends with you if you were. Now get out here and check out his butt with me. The little crybaby ginger is all over him.

Morgan rubbed at his eyes and flattened his unruly dark fluff with a swipe of his hands. His hair was awful without the kiss of saltwater to tighten the coils. He tugged at it a little, trying to wield it into some sort of shape, but found it fruitless. "Eh, he's not *that* good-looking." Morgan dismissed his unruly hair and slipped out of the cabin, whistling for the kids to assemble for swim time.

The six kids in his cabin gathered around excitedly. There had been seven. He glanced about for the little chubby skunk beta. “Anyone seen Piper?”

Casper came running up and tugged Morgan’s shirt hem, eyes glimmering.

“Sup?” Morgan stared down.

“Piper got sent home. He was misbehavin’ bad. He’s in the office waiting for his dad to come get him.” Casper’s soft whisper made Morgan’s skin prickle.

“What did he do?” Morgan narrowed his eyes.

“He was chasin’ Ripley around again makin’ fun of him for bein’ omega.” The little beta kitten’s lip trembled.

“Oh no, he was with Kip again?” Morgan sighed heavily. “Wait, Ripley’s an omega?”

“I think? He smells like people and omega. Is he a latent?” Casper blinked up at Morgan with those big eyes. Latents were rare, human hybrids who didn’t know. Usually someone always caught them young, but Ripley was already school age.

“I dunno.” Casper shrugged. “He’s an itty-bitty omega. Can’t do nothin’ ’bout it when an alpha starts pushing everyone around.”

“We’ll see about that.” Morgan marched his way toward the lake, calling his boys in as other counselors followed through. All the staff there were shifters, spreading and feeding into the forest monster myths.

Morgan's anger flared when he caught sight of Kip sitting on the shore, pouting, arms crossed. He sniffed and snarled, trying to fight back tears.

"Kip Tenclaw!" Morgan put his hands on his hips.
"Where is Piper?"

"Got sent home with Doug." Kip folded his arms over his knees.

"Why? What did you do?" Morgan leaned in close. Little alphas always needed to learn there'd be an omega bigger than them someday.

A richly tanned arm broke Morgan's field of vision and rested on his shoulder. "He was very rude and made Ripley feel bad about his body and scared him. And he's going to be tagging along with me a little bit so he can learn how a real alpha acts."

There was a patois to the voice. A dusting of island French. Morgan glanced up and found the half-smiling form of the new counselor standing above him. "A-alpha," Morgan said by way of greeting.

"Please. It's Cane." Soft sea-glass eyes, ones far too pale for someone of his pallor. They drew him in with a warm smile, and the scent of the ocean, home. The flicker of it made Morgan's stomach lurch and heart ache, longing to kiss and lick the man before him just for the taste of sea salt surely still on his skin. And it was complex, not just salt but salt of another ocean.

"Morgan," he spoke breathily, hand trembling as he reached out to shake the alpha's hand.

“Let’s have a little chat?” Cane gestured with his chin and Morgan followed blindly. He’d follow the alpha anywhere if he said it with that rich voice, his square jawline set so perfectly. Morgan withdrew his hand as the alpha glanced away, pointedly avoiding any contact with the male.

“S-sure.” Morgan scampered to match Cane’s long stride, moving to the very edge of the soft polished-rock beach.

“So Kip and his little buddies were chasing Ripley around saying he had a *butt cooter* and demanding to see it.” Cane’s upper lip curled.

“Butt... Cooter...” Morgan hated the way that sounded, and hated it worse saying it. He felt dirty.

“Think the word is scrabble legal?” Cane raised a brow and Morgan caught himself choking.

“Sixty-nine points. Minimum.” Morgan grinned and Cane chuckled.

“Mm-hmm. I see. Anyway, you see that little shit over there bothering Rip again? The shifter council is getting involved.”

“Absolutely, Al—Cane.” Morgan found himself fidgeting flirtatiously, nervous in a whole new way. At twenty, he was woefully inexperienced. He’d been kept *virginal* for his future husband someday. And since he was dishonored... He couldn’t wait to have someone punch his v-card to kingdom come.

“Do you have any idea what Ripley is, by the by?”

Morgan shook his head. The kid had hidden from all the activities the few weeks he’d been there. “I’m sure the council

knows what he i—”

“Nobody’s called the council. They have no idea who he is or where he came from.” Cane tensed, his expression going sour as he stared down at Morgan before stepping aside.

“Anyway. I’m heading off. It was nice to meet you, Morgan.” Cane’s tone went formal, and he stalked off, his face poorly restraining anger and disappointment...

Morgan hadn’t realized that nobody knew the boy was here, or what he was. *I’m such an ass.* Every shifter had access to a council representative to convey things like this, exposures and more. And he’d assumed and upset the very attractive mer whom he was very much in lust with.

I can’t do anything right...

Chapter Six

Cane

Never in his life had Cane picked up on the scent of an omega so quickly. A mer, of course. Morgan hadn't been in the ocean in far too long, but the scent of it clung to his skin, from more northerly climates than he came from, and warm, so warm.

The heady scent of arousal perfused Morgan as they spoke, standing too close to one another. Close enough for Cane to run his fingers through those dark locks to savor the undertones in them. Almost equally, Morgan stared back, his eyes so dark he could barely tell pupil from iris. He could get lost in those eyes, and he wanted to.

Not many people felt comfortable calling their representatives, with Cane being an exception because he grew up with his. He could understand that nobody had called, likely thinking everyone knew already or had pushed it onto one another. It was easy for a kid to get lost like that. And Morgan seemed genuinely remorseful.

The omega lifted a slender wrist to tuck an unruly lock of hair behind his beautifully tilted ears, his thick lashes fluttering, eyes a little too shiny. Cane wanted to hug him and tell him it was alright, that they needed to work harder to keep an eye on Ripley, but he stopped, falling short.

The mer had been flirting, Cane was certain. The way he leaned into Cane, the way his eyelashes fluttered. The scent of arousal, as if he were subconsciously advertising interest.

Cane had been interested, too, unlike any other before. His heart leapt for a moment. But clear as day on his wrist, as the little leather band tilted, were the very fresh lines of a cetacean claiming tattoo.

“Anyway. I’m heading off. It was nice to meet you, Morgan.” Cane turned and stalked off, determined to find Ripley.

It didn’t take much time to find the boy sitting on one of the rickety docks, staring at the water with a strange and longing expression.

“Want to go for a swim with the others?” Cane waited for an answer, but Ripley shook his head.

“Can’t swim?”

“Don’t want to take my clothes off.” Ripley wore a pair of long shorts and a big T-shirt, hugging his knees in a vulnerable sort of way.

“I’m sorry Kip made you feel so bad. That’s not how a boy like him should act.”

“I’m not a girl!” Ripley clenched his knees tighter.

“Nope.” Cane stared out at the lake and scooted nearer to Ripley. “Why would you think I thought that?”

“I dunno. They think I have girl parts and I don’t!”

“Well. I think you’re having a confusing time. But if there’s anything, and I mean *anything*, you want to talk to me about, you know I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to, okay?” It was instinct for a shifter to stay hidden from

humans, in their blood to hide and fear. Ripley wouldn't understand it.

"I'm fine now, Mister Cane." Ripley wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I'm just tired and hungry."

"Alright, everyone, line up. Teeth brushed? Smile for me!" Cane walked up the line and squinted at their teeth. "Jeremy. Go try again."

The little blond stomped off, grumbling. Everyone else looked passable.

"Mister Cane, can we skip scary stories tonight?" Ripley asked, tugging at his hem.

"Of course. We don't have to read any stories if you want."

"Mister Steve, before you, said we had to."

"Well, Mister Steve was a butt." Cane pursed his lips as giggles spread about.

"How about this? I'll pull up a cartoon on my phone and we'll watch it before bed, hmm?" Cane grinned conspiratorially. They weren't allowed to watch TV while they were there, or to have their phones or media.

Thirty minutes later, Cane chuckled as sleepy kids piled on a few beds pushed together, Ripley leaning into his side, all half asleep. One by one, Cane lifted them and put them to bed with barely any protest. A quick flick of the switch and they were officially in lights-out territory. Cane plugged a small night-light into one of the cabin's few outlets and settled down

onto his bed to feign sleep until they were deep under. He'd been in his human legs for far too long and needed the cool touch of water, even if it was stale, murky, and unsalted.

He found himself thinking of the pretty mer he'd spoken to, the freshly bound one who was making eyes at him, and his stomach curled. He wondered how someone could disrespect their partner so easily, and almost missed Ripley climbing out of his bed, stealthily sneaking to the door on his tiptoes.

Interesting.

Cane rose once Ripley was out of earshot, following at a great enough distance, quietly stepping over sticks. The kid moved like a shifter in the night, like he could see the world around him.

He moved his way to the lake and followed the edge to a copse of trees, throwing his pajamas over a wild grapevine before jetting into the cold waters of the lake. Cane watched cautiously, waiting for long seconds as the boy sank beneath the surface and didn't rise. *Surely not.*

Cane slipped into the same copse, tossing his shirt next to Ripley's before kicking off his shoes. He made his way to the water, slipping in as he pulled his shorts free and shifted before tossing them onto a log poking out of the water. Ripley might have been okay with a little streaking, but he certainly wasn't. Even in merform, he kept his hectocotylus curled and tucked to be polite. Swimming around waving his mating tentacle about always felt rude. That, and his papa had taught him right.

But then again, any tentacle was a mating tentacle in the right circumstances.

Sprawling tentacles the color of dark eggplant wreathed about him. Taking in the color of the moonlight and brackish green water around him made his chromatophores cinch and pulse until his color more closely matched his surroundings.

The water below was a fantasyland of sorts, a sea of bare moonlight casting down on what had once been tall trees, the remains of a few old brick houses, their stone foundations unmolested after years beneath the flooded reservoir of the man-made lake. An old rusted truck, most of it gone the way of time, sat partially submerged in the mire. Amid it all, a beautiful tiger-striped tail of turquoise green and bright orange merchild with fins almost like a betta flared and flitted around the bottom, chasing lazy perch about. Glittering blue eyes flicked and red hair swam about his cherubic features, and Cane knew immediately what the boy was. A rainbow darter.

The freshwater fish native to the Americas had its mer counterpart, but they were long since defunct as a species. In the twenties, when the world was changing too fast, they'd been some of the first shifters to abandon their shifted forms, cutting the spirit of it from their bodies, relinquishing their spirits to be human. Cane couldn't imagine doing such a thing, but knowing what Ripley was, made giving him back to his people dangerous. They wouldn't hesitate to take his spirit.

Cane swam and darted about the bottom, flowing with the stirred silt in Ripley's wake, watching him flip about excitedly, smiling as his pale face turned up to the moonlight. He didn't want to startle the boy, but he wanted to be seen, so he lazily floated out of the silt and calmly spoke, pushing his spirit into the words. "Ripley?"

The boy froze and glanced around, bright blue eyes pinning when they swiveled to Cane, his face morphing in horror.

“So that’s what you are, little one. Such a precious mer.” Cane approached, his tentacles waving lazily behind him.

His eyes went big as saucers, and only a squeak came out of his lips with a bubble of held breath. He’d not learned to empty his lungs before diving yet. “Mister C-Cane?” His words were a little jumbled; his mastery of speaking underwater would come in time.

“Yes. Don’t be scared.” Cane held up his hands and approached like Ripley might run but gasped, the water rushing from his siphons, the tube-shaped organs behind his ears that breathed for him.

Ripley tensed and jetted forward, putting as much force as he could muster into ramming straight into Cane’s chest, arms stretched. “Oof!”

“I didn’t... I’m a... I couldn’t tell anyone I was a mermaid.”

“Merman. Merfolk, whichever you prefer.” Cane wrapped his arms around the boy and swam lazily as he buried his warm face into Cane’s chest, rubbing affectionately. “Shh. Do you know much about what we are, Ripley?” Cane wrapped a tentacle under the boy’s arms and swam off lazily, dragging him along as they drifted in the near-stagnant current.

“I...I didn’t know. I don’t know if there’s more like me, and I was scared. Every time I get into the water, my tail

comes out, and it's weird and I don't have boy parts and I feel gross." Ripley's face morphed into a mask of misery.

"Fish merfolk don't tend to have *boy parts* as it were. All those parts are on the inside." Cane drew them back toward the spot where they'd entered the lake, swimming lazy circles.

"I'm not a girl," Ripley reiterated, and Cane reached down to ruffle his hair.

"Course you're not. You're a kind of boy."

"A kind of boy? I'm a boy!" Ripley's cheeks reddened.

"Yes, but I'm a kind of boy, too. There're many kinds of boys for merfolk. There're alphas, betas, and omegas. I'm an alpha male. You're an omega male. The typical male is a beta." Cane wanted to keep it rather simple, but a jarring splash had him snatching Ripley and scurrying off, his chromatophores shifting to camouflage them.

"Easy, it's me. Well, I'll be. You don't see many rainbow darters around." Morgan came into view in a shaft of moonlight, his dusky skin all golden, richly Pacific.

A motherfucking dolphin. Cane should have known it from the beginning. The slick-skinned merfolk were elitist to the extreme, and Cane froze with Ripley in his arms.

"Oh my gosh! Mister Cane! Mister Morgan is a dolphin!" Ripley fought his way out of Cane's grasp and darted up, swimming eager circles around Morgan until the current spun him lazily.

"Hey, easy." Morgan laughed, lifting his hands up to avoid bumping the boy. Cane found himself staring at the male's form, streamlined and sleek, every inch of his skin

begging for touch, save for that mark on his wrist that named him as claimed.

“I didn’t know he was a dolphin, either.” Cane offered Morgan a polite but reserved smile. The omega had bedroom eyes and no right to stir the surrounding water so sweetly, almost begging to be claimed.

“Can Mister Morgan come swim with us, please?” Ripley flicked his tail and floundered a bit, still unsteady in his merform. Cane wondered how long he’d known he could shift.

“Sure. I would like for you and Morgan to have a heart-to-heart, maybe. He’s omega, like you.” Cane laughed, bubbles swirling his head as Ripley latched onto his arm and rode through the waters as they waded slowly.

“Aww, cutie. Do you not know about anything?” Morgan jetted forward and snatched the little mer, their forms more similar and swimming so streamlined.

“Kip thinks I’m a girl.” Ripley pouted.

“Alphas can be a little dumb when they see a cute omega. He wants to be friends and doesn’t know how to show it. He only knows how he thinks it should work. Sometimes, alphas can be a little cold or mean when they like an omega.” Morgan shot a cool and lingering gaze over his shoulder, making Cane falter back a few strides, the veil of his tentacles stilling.

“I think that’s a little unfair. Not every alpha that bullies an omega is showing interest. Sometimes they’re just an ass, or perhaps they’re being cold because they’re not interested.” Cane glanced pointedly at Morgan’s wrist, watching him go wide-eyed and bring his covered wrist to his chest.

“What’s wrong?” Ripley glanced between the two.

“I think after we’re done with our swim, Mister Cane and I need to have a little chat about assumptions and how to treat an omega, too.” Morgan twirled in the water, tail flicking obnoxiously at Cane as he swam between obstacles in the lake’s bottom.

“Mister Cane was real nice to me. He made Piper pee himself.” Ripley hugged onto Morgan’s arm and flitted his fins, as at home in fresh as Cane was in salt. He wondered how the boy would fare in saltwater. Wondered if the boy would want to come with him. Since all merfolk originally came from the sea, they all fared well in saltwater, but darters were their own problem. The boy needed to be protected beyond anything else, and Cane wanted to accept that duty.

“I see.” Morgan avoided Cane’s gaze and twirled with Ripley, promising him more late-night swims and an introduction to the world of secrets that came with being the wonderful creature he was.

When they reached the bank once more, they changed in a hurry, Morgan taking Ripley as they marched their way back toward the cabins.

“You guys have a runaway?” Kaycee whispered out as she came from behind a cabin, flashlight in her hand but not on.

“Kaycee is safe,” Morgan said, whispering over the little one’s shoulder.

“Ripley here needed to stretch his fins a little.” Cane picked the sleepy boy up, far too light for a boy his age. Frail. He wasn’t being fed right.

“Fins, eh? What do we got?” Kaycee approached and glanced over the little one.

“Mer, fish type.” Cane cut Morgan off and gave the male a stern look. The last thing they needed was word getting out to other darters. A child like this was given up for a reason, to protect him from losing his spirit, whether by fate or design.

“Aww, sweet little goldfish, I bet. Look at all that red.” Kaycee grinned, glancing between the three before offering a cheeky wink.

Ripley closed his eyes and yawned, nestling into Cane’s arms, comforted by an alpha in the most basic of ways, calm and knowing he was safe from all things terrible.

When Ripley curled into his blankets and nuzzled into his pillow, sighing so hard his body deflated a little, Cane slipped out and stared at the anxious omega leaning on a precarious pine, shedding needles too far in the dead of summer to be healthy. He drew Cane in with his dark eyes and equally ebony hair, throwing that glorious scent, skin a shade pinker than his own.

“You wanted to talk?” Cane approached, hands in his pockets, slouching a little so as not to loom. He preferred the water where everyone floated at face height, equally. Looking down grew tiresome.

Chapter Seven

Morgan

Cane sauntered out of the cabin, his shirt askew from hastily dressing, the scent of brackish lake water miring his natural salty alpha scent.

“I did. You’re acting cold to me, like I’ve insulted you. I get it that some cetaceans don’t treat your kind the best in some shimmers, but I’ve tried to be very welcoming.” Morgan stiffened, cheeks warming. “If not a little forward.”

“The *forward* part is my issue, omega. And I’m from a very liberal shimmer.” Cane snatched for Morgan’s hand and lifted his banded wrist, shaking it ever so gently, as a reminder.

Morgan snatched his arm away. “Why does it matter?”

“I don’t fraternize with mated omegas.” Cane crossed his arms, and Morgan’s rage flared. Before he could even register what he was doing, Morgan hauled back and slapped Cane across his face with a loud crack that echoed around the camp.

Cane halted, those sea-glass eyes full of hesitation, not anger. Not rage. Nothing Morgan was accustomed to. Schooling his face, he carefully rested his palm against the striking mark glowing across his cheek.

Morgan wrestled the leather band from his arm and held his wrist up. “Not mated. Never was.”

“That’s a mating mark, isn’t it?” Cane leveled his gaze at Morgan, slouching uncomfortably low so their eyes met. He wasn’t used to alphas being so accommodating.

“It would have been. My parents arranged a mating for me and he changed his mind. Said I wasn’t *chaste* and turned me down a week before my wedding. It’s crossed through, see?”

Cane studied the mark and frowned. “I’m not familiar with what the markings mean among cetaceans, just what they are.”

“So you were an asshole to me because you thought I was someone else’s property?” Morgan slapped Cane again but gasped when the larger male grabbed his wrists and stared him down.

“Maybe I liked the way you smelled, and I was mad at myself for sniffing at a mated male. Had nothing to do with property but respect for a mating’s sanctity.” Cane didn’t hold him tight, but relaxed his grip, thumbs roving slightly over his wrists, his tanned digit tracing Morgan’s marking.

“Don’t assume, then. Ask. Because I liked the way you smelled, too.” Morgan pushed closer to Cane, bringing their faces closer. Cane’s eyes dipped to Morgan’s lips, fixated. Closing the distance, Morgan pressed his lips in and whimpered as the male possessed his mouth in a hungry kiss.

Cane tasted like the sea, his tongue pulsing and warm, pushing deep, and *textured*. The slickness of it glided smoothly, curled unnaturally, and choked Morgan into pulling back with a sudden husky cough. Hazy eyes caught the tail end of his tongue like a dark-purple tendril, drawing back over full, warm lips.

“That’s new...” Morgan ran his thumb over his lower lip and swallowed.

“Never kissed a cecaelia before?” Cane smirked.

“Can’t say I’ve kissed more than a few men before, and definitely not a cecaelia.”

“So, what’s this about you not being chaste?” Cane raised a single perfect brow, the gesture oddly arousing.

“Arranged mating. When he proposed and I accepted, I got my marking, but I wanted to wait until the ceremony when what he owed my parents was exchanged, to have relations, as it were. This upset him very much, so he sent me home and called it all off. Made some claims that I wasn’t loyal to him.” Morgan cleared his throat and stared at the ground. “Utter bullshit, but my parents started searching for someone else that would take me with those claims, and the dating pool of men wanting to claim a rejected omega isn’t exactly rife with ideal specimens. I refused, my parents got angry, and I asked the council to move me someplace safe.”

“Why were they trying to sell you like that?” Cane reached his hand out and took Morgan’s, staring at the markings again. Morgan nodded.

“That line through it marks me as an adulterer.” Morgan’s lips twisted.

“Did you love him?” Cane stared, his pale eyes tracing the lines.

“Pft. No! Crusty old beta. He was a good choice for my father’s business and my mother’s estate. He would have given me a very comfortable life and, with the right precautions, we could have made children.” Morgan nervously tucked a lock of hair behind his ear, avoiding eye contact with Cane.

“Why didn’t he pick another beta? He couldn’t have satiated you. You’d have been miserable.” That sad expression softened Cane’s features, made worse by the red welt on his cheek.

“He needed an alpha heir. A beta and an omega have a greater chance at making an alpha or omega than two betas.” Morgan twisted his lips and shuddered. “What about you? Why are you here?”

“Helped some shipwrecked sailors get to land safely. My king’s son made a proposal to me, and I rejected him, so they sent me out here as punishment for the former.” Cane’s smile curled at the edges, proud of what he’d done.

“Was the guy ugly or something?” Morgan snorted. He couldn’t imagine Cane, the walking sex symbol that he was with his tapered hips and broad shoulders, being so cruel as to reject someone heartlessly. Then again, he’d brushed Morgan off without a second thought.

“My parents weren’t mated. My father found his fated mate when I was young. It broke our hearts when he left, and I’d never do that. I’m waiting for my true mate. And no, not ugly. He was lovely inside and out. I suppose his father held all his son’s bitterness.”

“Huh. Sounds like you’re a man-whore,” Morgan snorted, and Cane swept him up with a handsy hug. “Feels like it, at least.”

“Never once. But I’ve fooled around. You?”

“Nothing serious. I was a good boy waiting for my arranged mate. Playing my good little boy role.” Morgan

snorted.

“Wanna go swim in the lake a bit and feel each other up? Let me apologize for being an ass. If you’ve never kissed a cecaelia, I suppose you’ve never fooled around with one. We’re seven times more fun to fool around with.” Cane grinned and Morgan shivered with the absolute wickedness of it.

“I thought you were eight times?” Morgan followed the grinning male back toward the lake, spellbound by his smile and scent.

“The eighth tentacle is special.” Cane pulled the male along.

“How special? What does a guy have to do to get number eight?” Morgan twirled in Cane’s arms, his feet splashing in the shallow water at the rocky edge of the beach.

“My hectocotylus. It’s my cock. I don’t go around needlessly debasing virgins.” Cane snorted and tugged his shirt off, revealing the ample sun-kissed warmth of his skin. *Gods, that sea scent still lingers.* Morgan mirrored his actions, and they kicked their shorts off, diving in with a hurried splash, legs transforming with that beautiful shiver.

“Please don’t refer to your dick as a heck-to-cocktapus or whatever, if we’re getting freaky. I don’t really want t—” Morgan’s breath hitched as Cane ensnared him with seven wandering tentacles, and silenced him with his expert kiss.

Cane’s tongue moved in practiced ways that made Morgan’s entire being curl with want. Moving his hands over Cane’s body, tongues thrusting against one another, breath

would have been hard to come by on the surface, but down at the bottom of the lake, floating over the remains of a dilapidated barn, the goddess blessed them with other means to breathe.

Morgan wasn't *the best* at anatomy, at least of cecaelia, but he did know they kept their siphons behind their ears, and merfolk kept gills there. But for cetaceans? Lower down his back, Cane's hand wandered, searching out the opening, letting a finger stroke the sensitive orifice.

Morgan parted with a hiss as his vent grew tight, cock perking to life inside him. "H-hey. Nothing's h-happening there."

"Nothing? I have it on good authority that it's sensitive. I've never experienced it myself. Is the rumor true?" Cane nipped Morgan's lower lip and circled his fingers once more, being ever so gentle and careful not to obstruct his flow.

"Very sensitive. You were not led wrong. Never had anyone d-do this before." Morgan's vent met the cool water around him, the tip of his cock peeking free.

Morgan's thoughts went numb as his body surrendered, lips locking with Cane's once more. With a soft chuckle, Cane withdrew and mumbled over Morgan's ear. "Would you like me inside you? Here?" Thin tendrils, warm and insistent, traversed the slick skin of his tail.

Being a dolphin and omega, he had certain anatomical differences from the average merfolk. He bit his lip when his cock, emerging slowly, entwined with a wandering tentacle, curling together as a second pushed into the slit from which

his dick emerged. Tightly coiled heat welcomed his cock into the water around them. “Goddess, yes!” Morgan whimpered.

“And here?”

Another tentacle circled his vent, teasing the base of his cock, his opening, and down to his tight hole, teasing the rim. More tentacles circled him, and the world lit with filtered color, moonlight bathing them with rippling green cast beams. “Please. Yes!”

Morgan realized, working his hips and tail, that this was what he’d dreamed of in the heat of the moment. It wasn’t multiple males he craved, but one, a singular alpha with more prehensile appendages than Morgan could keep up with.

The first slow push of a tentacle was the most exhilarating, a tendril squirming into his vent beneath his cock. Where an alpha or beta male would have nothing there, Morgan harbored a mating channel meant to take his mate’s cock deep, locked in a slow swim of mating for long stretches of time.

He’d had fingers in his channel before, tongues, and on one memorable occasion, a cock in his tighter lower hole, but the prehensile feel of something so similar to a cetacean mer’s cock made his entire body hum and vibrate.

“Do you want rid of this?” Cane whispered into Morgan’s ear, wrapping a tendril around his marked wrist, tightening it with a slow coil.

Morgan could only nod and whimper, crying out as the tendril in his channel pushed deeper, another in his ass grinding in slowly. Two tentacles gripped and grappled with

Morgan's cock, pumping with vigor as the one on his wrist tightened.

"It may hurt a bit, but if I break enough blood vessels under the surface, it'll scatter the ink and you can absorb it. May take a while." Cane continued pumping Morgan's shaft, tentacles prodding his channel, finger teasing the perimeter of his spiracle. Too much pleasure coursed through him until the sting and suck of tightly wrapped tendrils worked his wrist. "The only place a male need mark his mate is in his heart."

"Oh! Oh fuck." Morgan's cock kicked and twitched, seizing up tightly with a shivering coil, locked in embrace with Cane's tentacles.

"Shh. Calm down." Cane chuckled and nuzzled into Morgan's neck as his eighth tentacle unfurled from beneath him. "This one doesn't go inside you."

Morgan openly stared, his heart fluttering as the blunted tendril, pale from lack of exposure, sought out from his veil, trading places with the tendrils gripping his cock. *His hectocotylus*. Morgan's entire body tensed up as their cocks entwined.

Cane knew what he was doing as he pumped his other tentacles so delicately, keeping Morgan on edge. His *hectocotylus* plumped, twitching with increasingly aggressive jerks until Morgan choked, keening out with a shrill noise that made Cane laugh until he grunted. Cane gasped, small bubbles cavitating around his mouth, eyes wide then clenched as his hips jerked and spasmed, the water around them clouding with thick spurts and pulses.

Easing their points of contact, Cane withdrew, drawing his hectocotylus to himself, the rest of his tentacles retreating. His arms didn't waver, though, holding Morgan through the aftershocks of orgasm. Cane had kept his word, his mating tentacle never penetrated him, but Morgan would have let him.

Floating in the mired water, eyes half lidded, Cane was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. Even more beautiful than the dark bruising prickling over his wrist as scattered ink settled around suctioned circles.

"Thank you." Morgan settled into Cane's arms as his cock withdrew, sliding back into his body.

"For what? I think we both needed a little something." Cane swam circles around Morgan as he released him, his throaty chuckle a bubble of delight.

"Now this is how you get an omega to show you their butt coo—" Cane said, grinning until Morgan slapped his hands over Cane's mouth.

"I swear to the goddess if you say that word, I will tell Kaycee your mating tentacle is small! We're besties and we tell each other *everything*." Morgan glared.

"Go ahead and tell her that. I don't care. You know differently, and that's what matters, hmm?" Cane darted forward and pecked a soft kiss to his nose before filling his veil with water and propelling himself off in a graceful flow. "See you at breakfast, cutie. If the tattoo doesn't look like it's healing up right, I'll do it again."

Hell of an apology...

Chapter Eight

Cane

The pinging alarm for rise and shine chimed across the camp. Seven little boys, four of which were quite obviously shifters, all weak betas, swarmed around him as they all made their ways to the showers. Ripley was the only one from a group home, he'd said, but Cane wanted to run a check, himself.

“Alright, everyone! No fooling about. We get in there, scrub our bottoms, and we get out!” Cane pulled a plastic whistle they'd given him the day before, from his shirt and tweeted it at the kids. A metal one hung in his shirt, but that one registered a pitch only shifters could hear, a different sort of alarm.

“Cane! Is it waffle day?” Jeremy, one of the two humans in his cabin, asked.

“Oh, I'm not sure.” Cane puzzled at his phone before shooing the kids into their stalls. Creaking handles and whining kids complaining about cold water lasted all of about six minutes before they were shivering and bouncing out, eager to find their way to the breakfast hall, where Cane was very happy to see the sexy little dolphin. *Morgan*.

With his kids dressed and ready, they marched back to the cabin to drop off towels to dry on the front porch. All of them had nice towels save for Ripley, who came with a rather worn towel. Ripley caught his eye and averted his gaze. “I use it a

lot. 'Cause I go swimming, ya know?" Ripley's whisper made Cane smile.

"Ah. I have a few towels with me. You can take one of mine. This one's seen better days." Cane ruffled Ripley's head, and they bounced off in search of food.

They smelled it before they saw it, the fetid scent of milk on the breeze inundated with fresh meats for the more carnivorous kids and cereals. One of his little beta boys, some sort of lagomorph, he was certain, came back from the cafeteria line with a big salad covered in chopped apples.

Definitely a bunny.

Ripley wasn't picky, as long as there was plenty of it, and Cane made sure that Kip was far away from the little ginger before going to hunt Morgan down.

"There you are!" Morgan piped up from behind Cane, making him spin on his heel. He raised a hand, his wrist missing the leather band from the day before. Purpled bruising replaced the tattoo, and within the confines of the scattered ink, sat little concentric rings in a neat tapering pattern. The pattern, all Cane, made something primal in him rise. "Ooh. Save that look for our swim tonight."

Cane shook his head to clear the possessive thought, and a pleasant smile stretched the corners of his mouth. For the first time since being sent from his shimmer, he forgot about everything. "You'd like another swim?"

"Of course. You didn't leave me much reason to avoid you." Morgan beamed and the wonderful smile he gave Cane made his heart flutter.

Out of the frying pan and batter dipped into the deep fryer. Cane prayed that Morgan wouldn't make him regret this. Even with South, he'd been smart enough to not instigate anything. They'd not even kissed, and Cane had been adamant that they find their mates. And there Cane was, coming so close to giving a male his hectocotylus. His mating tentacle ached to be plunged deep in Morgan's hot channel. The temptation had been there before, but never so *volatile* as it had been. With Morgan's cock wrapped around his mating tentacle, prehensile lengths entwined, Cane had burned with temptation. Even then, he felt the echoes as his human form's mating tentacle plumped.

"Come sit with Kaycee and me." Morgan snickered and drew Cane away. "Thank you, by the way." Morgan rubbed at his wrist again.

"I should be thanking you. It was amazing." Cane grinned, but Morgan's nose twisted.

"Not that! Feels weird thanking someone for hanky panky... No, I'm talking about this." He held up his bruised wrist reverently. "Once it heals, I can join another pod."

Cane didn't like that, the thought of Morgan going elsewhere. His more feral nature begged him to wrap Morgan up and keep him still, build him an enclosed nest of stone and hide him from the world. "Mine."

"Yours? Aren't you in a shoal?" Morgan blinked up at him.

"Oh! No. Shimmer. We're a diverse one. Our alpha king is a porpoise, harbor porpoise."

“Oh! I apologize. I didn’t mean to assume. But your shimmer would take me?”

Hearing Morgan’s interest made Cane’s heart flutter. “If they don’t, I’ll make them.”

“Speaking of, will you ever be going back to your shimmer? I can’t exactly go back to my pod.” Morgan walked with Cane toward the cafeteria line, waving gently toward the old bear working the line.

“We have an agreement. I have to go back in six months to take South as my own, unless I find my mate first.” Cane shrugged at the notion, and Morgan laid a hand on his shoulder.

“So you...not unless they’re your fated mate?” Morgan hesitated.

“Only if they’re my fated.” Cane nodded, and the expression on Morgan’s face made his heart buckle. “But you’ll find your fated, too. I’m certain of it.”

They gathered their food and Morgan stared down at his wrist, drawing his fingertips over the bruises with something complicated dancing in his eyes that Cane couldn’t make out. “Yeah. We’ll find them.”

Cane’s heart ached for a moment before he was distracted by the chef coming out with a sashimi salad of some variety. “I think so, too. This looks great! Thanks.” Cane offered the man a bright smile and wandered over to a table where Kaycee sat at the end, playing on her phone.

Without looking up, Kaycee muttered, “What base did you get to with Mister Feely?”

“Third,” Cane said, making her jolt and fumble her phone.

“Fate’s sake. Shit!” She sighed heavily. “Morning, Cane!”

“Uh-huh. Morning, Kaycee.” Cane sat a few seats down and paid attention to his food, glancing up in time to see Morgan settling in with Kaycee, her eyes brightening as she saw the marking. Cane made a point not to eavesdrop. Whatever they were discussing wasn’t his business.

“Get over here.” Morgan tugged his arm and Cane slid closer with his food, still intent on eating as he wrapped his tongue around a forkful of salad and fish.

“And he knows how to use it, too,” Morgan said, leaning into Kaycee’s side with a sweet giggle.

Cane stared at his food and pointedly ignored them when a polite tug to his shirt caught his attention.

“Mister Cane?” Kip whispered behind Cane.

Turning in his seat, Cane gazed down at the kid, his eyes bright and timid. “Sup, lil’bit?”

“My dad called me this morning and was really angry.” Kip kicked at the floor, lips twisted.

“You going home?” Cane crossed his arms.

“They said I have to ap—apla—pologize?” Kip struggled with the word. “And if you and Ripley forgive me, I can stay. But I’m still grounded when I get home.”

“Ahh. Well. It’s not if I forgive you. It’s if I trust you won’t do something like this again. And if I think you understand what you did.” Cane leaned over his knees, getting very quiet. “Because my kind do not forgive so easily.”

Kip swallowed hard, trembling in place. “I won’t do it again.”

“Tell me what you did wrong and why.”

“I was mean to Ripley because he is an omega.” Kip whispered the last part and Cane didn’t relent. Forgiveness would be harder to earn than that.

“That’s part of it. But I don’t think you understand what you did.”

“I almost gave away our secret...”

“Nope. That was a risk, but you attacked someone you are designed to respect. You made an omega, who should trust an alpha, learn to fear an alpha. What if he is so scared of alphas for the rest of his life and avoids meeting his mate?” Cane folded his hands and rested his elbows over his knees.

“I—I didn’t know.”

“And you talked about his privates. There aren’t as many omegas as betas and alphas combined. They’re sensitive about their bodies, and Ripley especially so because he doesn’t have shifter family. You made him feel disgusting. There’ll be days he’ll look in the mirror and see something gross instead of himself. Do you ever look in the mirror and see something gross?” Cane rested a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Kip sniffed and nodded.

“Because you’re an alpha and your parents treat you differently?” Cane squeezed his hand.

Kip nodded again, fighting tears.

“Alright, then.” Cane glanced around and raised his voice. “Come on, Kip. I need your help with something.” He glanced over and gave Morgan and Kaycee a wink before taking Kip back into the kitchen with him, where the other kids couldn’t see him. The swinging door had barely closed before Kip burst into tears, sniffing. Cane got him some paper towels, and they migrated into the back toward a pile of potato boxes that they sat on while he calmed down.

“Sucks when people see you cry, huh?”

“Alphas don’t cry!” Kip sniffed hard.

“Fuck yeah, we do. I cry sometimes.” Cane leaned back on his potato throne. “But imagine how many times you made Ripley cry and you let everyone see it. Embarrassing, right?”

Kip nodded.

“Yeah. Crying is normal. Holding it back is this stupid toxic thing. Now. Do you *really* understand what you did to Ripley?” Cane stared the little shifter down, his golden-brown eyes glittering with tears.

“I made him cry and get embarrassed and feel like he’s gross.” Kip hiccupped and sniffled.

“Someone hurt?” The cafeteria employee, a bear named Gibson, poked his head into the room.

“Kip here hurt an omega’s feelings and is getting a hard lesson on what it means to be an alpha.” Cane stared Kip down.

“Oof. I’ll bring you some ice so you can cool your face down, kiddo.” Gibson wandered off, returning in a few minutes with a damp towel wrapped around some ice. With

shaking hands, Kip took the cold towel and rubbed it on his face and dabbed at his eyes.

“Let’s let him calm down.” Cane patted Gibson’s shoulder, and they slipped out. A mild expression of panic crossed Kip’s face before Cane opened the door and called over his shoulder. “Once he’s done helping you cut those onions, send Kip back to my table, okay?” Cane winked and went back to his breakfast, taking a few hurried bites as Morgan stared at him as hungrily as he had the night before.

“What did you do to Kip?” Kaycee raised a brow.

“Gave him a minute to cry it out, something he never gave Ripley a chance to do.” Cane grinned at Kaycee.

Her brow rose higher. “Kip? Crying?”

“Yep.” Cane took another bite and glanced over when Kip came out, eyes still a little swollen. He didn’t say a word but tugged Cane’s shirt to walk them over to Ripley’s table where he sat with Cane’s other boys. “Ripley, can Kip talk to you for a second, or do you want him to go away?”

“No! You can’t tell me to go away!” Kip panicked, tugging on Cane’s shirt with a whine.

Cane crossed his arms. “Yes, he can. That’s what consent is. People get to decide who they are touched by and associate with. Now. Ripley, may Kip speak with you?”

Ripley turned around to straddle the bench and stared at Kip. His face hardened, the corner of his mouth twitching. A little vicious streak glinted in Ripley’s eyes but stifled.

“S’alright, as long as Cane is here.”

“I wanted to say I’m sorry. I was mean to you and said ugly things. I don’t think you look weird.” Kip’s lips twisted.

“Okay. I’m still mad and I don’t want to play with you.” Ripley nodded.

“And do you want Kip sent back home, Rip?” Cane gave the boy a warm smile, opening him up for choice.

“If you promise to keep him away, I don’t mind him staying.” Ripley nodded shortly and Kip brightened, standing up straighter.

“You can make him go cut more onions or something.” Ripley nodded and turned back to his food, grinning at one of the beta boys who leaned over the table to stare at Kip with wide eyes.

“Thank you, Ripley. I’ll make sure he keeps to himself. Alright, go to your table, Kip, and no more bullying or you’ll never find your mate.” Cane shooed him off and returned to Kaycee and Morgan’s side to grab his plate. A quick wink at Morgan made color flutter over his cheeks.

Cane sauntered away and the barest whisper perked his heightened hearing. “Goddess’s sake, I may have to go change my shorts if he keeps eying me like that.”

Chapter Nine

Morgan

“Alright, campers! Today we get to take a trip in the canoes. Isn’t that exciting?” Morgan clapped his hands and stared down all the nervous kids lined up with the overzealous boys waiting for an opportunity to sword fight with an oar.

“Mister Morgan! I gotta pee!” Casper danced in place, knees tilted in.

“Go pee. Anyone else?” Three or four sets of hands raised and Morgan swore under his breath. Children had bladders the size of peas. “Alright, we’ll wait. Go pee and *no dallying!*” The headache that pinched behind his eyes and rolled his stomach made his mood that much poorer, but the thought of meeting Cane again for another swim that night was thrilling.

Every night since he’d arrived, they’d gone out for a swim with Ripley, teaching the little mer how to control his shift better. Once he was sleepy and content, Cane carried him back and Morgan waited shoreside for his suntanned hottie. Despite their growing closeness, Morgan held his affection at a distance. It was transactional, something to sate them both as they found reminders of home in one another. Home and something so warm and familiar that Morgan never wanted to leave his arms.

Timothy, one of Morgan’s least favorite whiny children, a human with far too many allergies, sat in one of the canoes, rocking in the shallow waters. “Mister Morgan! I don’t feel so

—” Morgan turned in time to see *and* smell the child losing his lunch to the water.

Morgan wasn't usually a sympathetic sort of person when it came to puking, but his body made an exception and he leaned on a pier support and managed to keep most of his lunch down. “Ugh.”

If that wasn't bad enough, one of the kids that left for the bathroom returned and leaned forward, losing his lunch as well, while a few others gagged.

“Whoa!” Cane came marching through, dodging a doubled-over child. “Let's get everyone to the infirmary who has tummy aches!”

Timothy and two other kids trudged off with Morgan in tow. “Can you keep an eye on the rest of them?”

Morgan glanced at the kids playing about, and one of the children dipped an oar into someone's mess and proceeded to chase another boy around with it making him squeal.

“Yeah, no problem.” Cane leaned into Morgan's space and placed a soft kiss onto his temple, making a few of the children giggle and whine in disgust.

“Morgan!” Ripley trudged past everyone and grabbed for his hand. “I'm coming with you.”

They trotted their way down to the infirmary, dispensing pink stomach medicine to everyone as they settled down and got one of those neat little half cans of lemon soda. The infirmary had air-conditioning, and they relaxed in the gentle breeze.

“Morgan?” Ripley prodded him as he fiddled with his phone in the office next door while the kids got a thirty-minute nap, as per camp protocol.

“Hmm?” Morgan tapped at some candy Tetris game.

“When the summer is over, do I have to go back to the group home? Can I go live with other merfolks? Like me?” Ripley fidgeted.

“That’s the plan. Hasn’t Cane talked to you about it?” Morgan raised a brow and put his phone to the side.

“No.”

“I think he’s trying to adopt you or at least have you placed in his shimmer.” Morgan licked his thumb and rubbed at a smudge on Ripley’s cheek before tucking his hair neatly. Ripley leaned into the affection and grinned, his entire body shaking with excitement.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I think there’s some hurdles, but he’s got a council rep on it.” Morgan smiled. “Maybe I’ll come, too.”

“Are you and Cane going to get married?” Ripley squealed at a pitch that only some air-raid sirens and children could achieve.

“Hey, now! No. Cane and I are good friends—”

“Good friends who kiss.” Ripley gave Morgan the smuggest grin that he’d ever seen.

“You little snot! But no, just because we kissed doesn’t mean we’re getting married.” Morgan’s lips twisted as a pang

of sadness settled in his belly. “Cane is waiting for the right special person to come along.”

“How come you’re not the right person? You’re really special. I’ll tell Cane he has to marry you!” Ripley nodded with all the self-certainty an eleven-year-old could muster.

“Oh, sweet summer child.” Morgan cupped Ripley’s face and smiled down at him. “Cane and I are good friends and I don’t see that changing anytime soon. But the goddess chooses who gets to stay together forever, and the goddess hasn’t picked us. The goddess doesn’t pick dolphins, normally.”

Ripley frowned and stared down at his feet. “But what if I pray really hard to the goddess? I’ll tell her that’s all I want is for you two to get married.” There was so much conviction in his little blue eyes that Morgan could only laugh.

“Sure. Pray really hard and maybe she’ll listen. I’ll pray, too.” Morgan gave him a hug, squeezing him tight.

“That way, you both can adopt me.” Ripley squeezed back before pulling away. “Okay! I’m going to go see Cane and pray really, really hard!” He darted off and Morgan’s nausea subsided, replaced with such a paternal warmth that his cheeks flushed.

“In a perfect world, Ripley,” Morgan muttered to himself after the door closed, Ripley off like a bolt of ginger lightning.

Cane sauntered his way toward the lakeside, a complicated grin twisting his lips. He’d carried Ripley back to his cabin that evening, half asleep in his arms from a vigorous

swim. “Never heard anyone actually pray to the goddess before.” Cane snorted, drawing Morgan’s attention.

“Nor have I. We worship by swimming in moonlight and hunting the fish she gives us. We thank her with dolphin song. Prayers aren’t something I really understand.” Morgan traced his fingers through the rich silt at the shoreline, drawing a little heart in the algae-laden mud before sinking his palm into it to smush it away.

“We build stone circles. Cecaelia don’t often sing. But we do set out offerings of shiny shells we find for her.” Cane sat beside Morgan, letting their fingers entwine in the mud. “Like this.” Cane rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a half a shell laden with pearlescent nacre that gleamed the same color as his eyes, that dusky bluish green.

“Oh, that’s pretty...” Morgan reached for it and Cane cupped it in Morgan’s hands.

“We toss it into the water for her. And we hope that she brings us what we need.”

Morgan stared at the shell then let his gaze drift to Cane. *What we need...or what I want so much that I need?* They tossed the shell together as slight ripples caught the moonlight. It threw off a slight glow from concentric ripples flowing lazily.

Cane’s fingers circled Morgan’s wrist, tracing the dispersed ink of his distorted mating mark. The marks from Cane’s suction cups still showed brightly, despite the healing. “I should tidy this up a bit.”

Morgan withdrew his hand and smiled. “No. I think I like this. The goddess gave me what I needed, and I’d like to keep this, if you don’t mind. What did you ask the goddess just now?”

Cane stared at the water for a long moment, brows furrowed. “That South finds his mate, and that Ripley can come with me.” There were words left unsaid and maybe he wanted the same thing Morgan did. After all, Ripley couldn’t go with Cane unless he had a mate... Maybe Cane did want Morgan as more. Rather than question it or dwell on the unlikely, Morgan buried the thoughts and leaned into Cane for a lingering kiss that drew them out of their clothes, into the water and down.

Even if it wasn’t fated, the lovemaking was good. Too good.

As tentacles wandered Morgan’s body, drawing him into a squirm and shiver against Cane, he ached for more. Seven wasn’t enough. Fingers wandered, always going for his ears, down his neck, and nimble digits always trailed the edges of his spiracle so gently, never impeding his breath. Every moan and whimper dissolved into the water around them, and the urge to suckle his long, textured tongue grew.

Cane didn’t let him have it, but kissed low down his collarbone, his chest, circling each of Morgan’s nipples. Lower. Cane kept going, teasing inside his navel to find his vent, tracing the slit with tender licks. Every flick of his tongue drew Morgan’s vent a little more open, slick coating his insides. His cock, filling inside of him, pushed free, just the pointed tip curling back. As the slender length emerged, a

tendrils circled his length. Tiny suckers plucked and crawled along it, like minuscule mouths and delicate kisses traveling in waves.

“Cane...Cane!” Morgan’s heart fluttered as Cane’s tongue plunged into his slit, finding his channel as a slender tendril toyed with his tender pucker. Sweet pressure invaded him deeply in every hole before pulsing and undulating in a shivering rhythm. Morgan reached for Cane’s hair with a vicelike grip.

“More?” Cane mumbled around his tongue, grinding it into his slit with alacrity.

“More!” Morgan’s core clenched, knotting up tight as he lurched forward, hips jerking. A wavering cry broke free, shrill in the water until Morgan came unannounced. With a stifled scream, Morgan bit down on his lip when Cane withdrew his tongue, swallowing Morgan’s length to swallow every drop of cum he could get, his face a mask of bliss and pleasure.

“Feeling better?” Cane kissed Morgan’s receding cock.

“In some ways.” Morgan drew Cane up so they could kiss a little longer. Cane’s mating tentacle writhed free and curled around his flagging cock, drawing him back to full mast. He’d never put the tentacle inside Morgan, but like this, it was almost just as good.

“And others?”

“Fate doesn’t often come for a dolphin. So why does thinking about this being temporary make my heart hurt so

much?" Morgan withdrew from the kisses and nuzzled into Cane's neck as he stiffened.

A warm hand slipped along Morgan's back and cradled his head. Cane spun lazily in the water with him. "We don't have to keep on doing this if it'll hurt you."

Dolphins didn't crave a single person. His mother and father had never been monogamous. Nor had he known anyone that was. And Morgan himself had never wanted for a single person. Yet, he wanted Cane, wanted that mark of his, and wanted to have him forever. *You're my mate, and I'll be here until you figure that out.* Nothing would convince Morgan otherwise.

Chapter Ten

Cane

Morgan really was lovely in the sunlight, running about with the deepest brown highlights in his hair transitioning to the darker roots in a gentle fade. The saltwater wasn't as harsh in his beach-curling waves, and Cane longed to see him darting about the ocean, fishing and flailing. The great thing about dolphin merfolk was that the goddess had given them a terrible but great gift. To the naked eye, in a glimpse or photo, they appeared no more than a dolphin. Their human side wasn't visible to humans unless they were fully in their human form. Cane would be able to watch him leap in the water, roll with the waves, and sun himself endlessly on his private white-sand beach.

Combing his fingers through the pebbles on the rough beach, a particularly interestingly colored stone stood out from the rest. He plucked the rock into his fingers and twirled it, thinking the cool, stoney gray of it reminded him much of Morgan's dolphin's skin. He squeezed it in his hand, imagining pocketing the stone, but thought of the goddess and the blessings she bestowed. *Please let Morgan be mine, and if not, may he find his true mate soon.* Cane could live with walking away from Morgan if the male found his true mate. He would find another way to get Ripley.

Morgan darted from the pier and into the water, swimming wickedly fast to snatch up a kid who had gone under the water and flailed, strangely still. *Sydney.* The kid was diabetic and getting him to take his medicines and keep a

snack in him was difficult at the best of times. Morgan jogged out of the water, kid under one arm and patted his back until he spit up water. With nothing else to do, Cane ran to snatch up a juice box and his testing kit that he kept nearby.

Without looking up, Morgan snatched the test kit and helped Sydney prick his finger with minimal protest. “Okay, it’s not too low.” Morgan sighed in relief, pressed the juice box into Sydney’s hands, and made him sit on the sidelines.

“Good job.” Cane helped Morgan to stand and offered the male a gentle smile.

“How are the crybabies doing?” Morgan smirked and averted his gaze.

Cane shrugged and glanced about. “Not crying too much as of late.”

Ripley took off running like a bolt, Kip following close behind before he squealed and leaped into the water.

“Uh...” Morgan turned his head so fast his neck cracked and Cane whipped off after them, diving into the water to grab Kip.

“Hey!” Kip flailed and struggled as Ripley swam back around, pouting.

“Ripley? You okay? You need help out of the water?” Cane buckled down on his grip to keep Kip down.

“No! Cane! We were playing tag and Kip was it.” Ripley tugged on Cane’s arm to let the squirming gremlin of a child loose. Kip splashed and spluttered, pouting.

“You sure?” Cane glanced between the two warily and Ripley nodded fervently.

“Yeah! Can we bring Kip with us tonight, pleeeassee? He said he’d show me his kitty if I showed him my tail,” Ripley whispered before glancing around.

“Ahh. We’ll see what Morgan says. If you’ve been good and it’s really what Ripley wants. Okay?” Cane patted Kip’s head. “But I am sorry I nabbed you.”

“It’s okay. Can we go play now?” Kip shook his head, one eye winced closed to fling water about and sneezed, clearing his sinuses.

“Yeah. That’s fine.”

“I’ma get you, Ripley!” Kip growled a little and Ripley grinned, his teeth shifting in his mouth into a row of razor-sharp defensive teeth.

“Ah! Rip!” Cane pointed to his teeth and Ripley covered his mouth and whined. “Need help out?”

Ripley shook his head, and Kip paddled over to splash at him, distracting him. “C’mon Ripley! Tell your fishy later. That’s what I have to tell my ocelot.” The distraction seemed to work and Ripley splashed back, laughing as his teeth shifted back to normal.

Cane smiled and swam back to shore, giving a concerned Morgan a pleasant wave. “All’s good. Ripley asked if Kip can come with us tonight?”

“Hmm... Alright, but we can’t go diving with him. I think he could use some fur time anyway. I’ll get Kaycee to organize a run with him and a few others who are getting antsy. Little

alphas have a hard time with it.” Morgan gave Cane a quick hug, pulling away before Cane could grab him by his wrist and stare at the marking. Words sat on the tip of his tongue. A shudder of a breath broke his thought and their eyes met for a moment. “Please?”

In that word lay a thousand meanings, but not a one of them Cane could answer right away. Part of him knew he should work over the tattoo again, erasing his markings, but the primal urges within him said that the marking was his, a marking that would be understood by all cecaelia. Ripley’s shrill laughter broke their moment as he ran up, dripping wet and grinning while Kip stomped about the beach, getting water out of places, showing how much his feline self hated the water. He wrapped his arms around them, pushing Morgan and Cane together.

Ripley nuzzled into Cane’s hip, gripping tight as he could. “Can Kip come?”

“Yeah. We’ll get Kaycee to run his kitty after, okay?”
Morgan’s dark eyes softened so much.

“Thank you!” Ripley closed his eyes tight and whispered, “I asked the goddess if you could be my daddies.”

Without missing a heartbeat of time between Ripley’s heartfelt words, Morgan spoke. “Me, too. Love you, fry.”

Me, too. Cane swallowed hard and brought Morgan’s hand to his mouth for a soft kiss. “If the goddess wills...”

“She will! I’ll ask her every night until she says yes.”
Ripley bounced in place and ran off, tackling Kip back into the water.

“I really hope she says *yes*.” Cane lifted Morgan’s chin and smiled, staring at his pretty lips. Were they not surrounded by dozens of children, he’d kiss the male so deeply.

Morgan pulled away, cheeks pink with delight. “I’ll go see to my kids. It’s your turn for crafts.”

Cane whistled for his kids, and they came running. “Come on, rinse off and crafts time!”

“Aww, I don’t want to rinse.” Jeremy pouted and stomped.

“Look. I don’t want to rinse, either, but lake water gives you gross crotch rashes if you don’t rinse off and I don’t particularly want to be walking around scratching my no-no’s, okay?” Cane glared at a few of the boys, who nodded in agreement. Of all the males on the boys’ side of the camp, Cane’s were the least odoriferous, and he bore that mark with pride.

“Shower time!” Cane shooed them off to clean while he rinsed in a separate set of stalls for the adults, his mind swimming with hope. It’d be too convenient if Cane had found his mate on his first day. He needed to call his papa.

In a rush, he finished and gathered the kids, marching them back to the cabin for a quick change and a jaunt to the craft cabin where an old shifter woman showed them how to emboss leather. Cane had no interest in the craft, but he snuck around the side of the building and sent a text to his papa. Calls didn’t work so well, but he’d surface to speak.

Cane played around for a few minutes before his phone rang. He answered on the first ring. “Papa?”

“Hello, Fry! How are you?” Nori’s soothing voice made Cane smile, especially since he sounded happy for a change.

“I’m doing well. You?”

“Good. I went on a date.” Nori laughed.

“Did you get some number eight?” Cane laughed.

“Noooo. I don’t think I’m quite ready for that. I don’t think he’ll get another date, either, but he was sweet...well, sweet until after dinner.” Nori chuckled.

“Ooof. Pig?”

“Yep. I paid for my own dinner and he still thought he deserved to dip ol’ number eight. Anyways, kiddo, what’s up?” Nori sighed pleasantly.

“I think I’ve met someone.” Cane twisted his lips and waited for a response.

“*Someone* or your mate?” Nori’s voice was cautious.

“I don’t know. I think he’s very special though. I really want him to be.” Cane sighed heavily and waited.

“Honey, only you can know. I thought Izaiah was my mate for the longest time, but he never put his mark on me,” Nori said.

Cane frowned. “How does the mark work?”

“Mate mark? I suppose we didn’t talk much about that. It’s a permanent mark you leave on your mate, sticks around if he’s the one. It’s different for everyone.”

Cane gasped softly and sank down against the wall, heart hammering. “I think I fucked up.”

“Hmm? What did you do?”

Cane told Nori about the tattoo, the marking he'd held from his fiancé, and the mark he'd made over it, trying to disperse the ink. “I didn't mean to mark him... What if we're not fated mates? What if he never finds his true love because of me?”

“Honey, only you can know that. Do you love him? Because if I had everything to do all over again, I'd still pick your father. I loved him, still do. That love never goes away, so even if he's not your fated, you can be happy. But a mark is a mark.”

“Thanks, Papa.” Cane smiled, sighing with relief. “Guess this is time to tell you that if I claim Morgan... We're bringing home a fry. Little rainbow darter.”

Cane had to hold his phone away to stifle the scream of joy on the other end. “A grandbaby!”

“Yep, he's eleven, red-haired as a goldfish, freckles and all. Rainbow darter, so the council sure as hell ain't sending him back to his bio family.” Cane laughed, his heart fluttering.

“You bring him straight home to see his grandpa. Oh. And we need to work on getting you someplace to live...”

“Yeah, I was thinking. The lease on my cove house is coming up in a month or so. Can you have that ready for me when they move out?” Cane had bought the house years ago as a fixer upper and a place to hold his welding equipment and boat. He rented it out to another couple, a shifter mer pair that couldn't live underwater. They'd been building their own

place for some time, so Cane didn't feel too bad. It was almost ready.

“Oh sure. I'll go cle—”

“No, just hire someone. You've got access to my account.” Cane snorted.

“I don't mind.”

“Unless you're going to pay yourself twice what I pay that cleaning company, no thank you. You're my papa, not a servant.”

“You know what, asshat? I will take double. How's that? Then I'll go spoil my new grandson at the market.” Nori sniffed and Cane laughed.

“Okay. I think he should stay a little bit with you before we move in, and I don't want to rub things in South's face.”

“Mm-hmm. South has moved on, honey. He's been flitting about, flirting hard for some time. I've seen him out and about with at least two men this week alone.” Nori snorted with amusement and approval in his voice.

“That makes me happy to hear. Thank you.” Cane smiled. “But I have to go. You sure you're good?”

“One hundred percent. Come home soon. Love you, byeeee.”

Cane echoed his goodbye and hung up, wondering how to talk to Morgan about it. He'd say yes and be thrilled, of course, but Cane didn't want to take the magic away from him.

Time would have to tell.

Chapter Eleven

Morgan

Head resting on Cane's deliciously firm belly, Morgan stared up at the cloudy sky, taking in the aerial display. "I think that one looks like balloons."

"Not from my angle." Cane laughed, and Morgan made a curious noise. "Looks kinda like a sac."

Morgan tilted his head, frowned and glanced over Cane's shorts. With a quick tug to his elastic, Morgan peeked in and frowned. "Oh jeez, you're right."

"Hey! Peepers off my mating tentacle." Cane laughed, and Morgan glanced about. All the kids were having a movie day due to the probability of rain, but some of the counselors were coupling off and canoodling on shady hillocks and mossy patches in the woods.

"Mating tentacle?" Morgan choked on a laugh. "You've never noodled around with this tentacle, either, have you?"

"No! Wouldn't doing it human style kinda feel weird? Like... Thrusting hips and...seems awkward with two stiff legs, and it can't flex as much as my merform." Cane's upper lip curled.

"Wait... It can move when you're not in merform?" Morgan sat up and wrestled Cane's hands to gain access to his cock, which had plumped from the attention. As it drew to full hardness under Morgan's caressing hands, Morgan lay atop him and chuckled.

“Hey, not out in the open like this.” Cane gasped when Morgan ground his hips in, as equally aroused as the other.

“But you’ve never even touched me in my human skin,” Morgan whined, languishing in the sensation of cloth over their cocks separating them.

“I dunno, seems like something... I’ve never done it before.” Cane gasped as his cock bucked. Morgan chuckled but withdrew. He’d said before that his *human tentacle* was reserved for his mate, and he’d not yet decided that Morgan was his. Morgan had decided though.

“Okay. I can wait.” Morgan slid away but Cane bit his lip and rolled onto his side, sheltering space between their bodies.

“Alright, if you can wait, I’ll show you.” Cane tugged the waistband of his shorts down, letting his cock spring out between them. It seemed like an ordinary human cock, save for the fact that it had a degree of motion to it, curving upward with a gentle flex, an angle that would hit Morgan’s innermost spot.

“Whoa.” Morgan swallowed hard, his mouth watering to taste it. He bet that Cane’s cum and cock would taste much like his skin, like the ocean, salty and a little musky. Morgan was no innocent in some ways, but Cane was a temptation he couldn’t pass up. It was rare that Morgan produced slick in human form, enough that the sudden sensation of it wetting his crease made him tense and shiver.

“Oh, you like?” Cane pulled Morgan closer and tugged his pants back up, but allowed their clothed groins to rub gently.

“Mm-hmm.” Morgan gasped softly when Cane’s hand circled his waist, slipped down the back of his shorts, and hesitated at the crest of his buttocks.

“Want me to get you off? Put my finger there?” Cane slipped his fingers down a little lower and Morgan whimpered, lifting a leg to sit atop Cane’s hip, affording him better access.

“Mm-hmm.”

It wasn’t a good angle, but Cane had lasciviousness in mind when he sank a finger deep, trailing his slick with ease. He slid his digit back and forth, searching for where Morgan found his pleasure. With a gentle arch of his hips, he allowed Cane to graze his prostate with the wandering tip of his finger. The noise he made seemed to coax Cane into more, letting him add a second finger to wriggle and grind just at Morgan’s spot as they lay there, frothing.

“We still good?” Cane nuzzled into his neck and nipped, digging his fingers deeper to press into that spot so exquisitely.

“Y-yeah.” Morgan’s voice came out husky with lust, and a few moments later, he seized up, leg spasming. “Gonna...”

Cane flipped him onto his back, pulling his fingers free, and with an awkward gesture had his mouth over Morgan’s and their cocks brought together, suddenly unclothed. Cane pumped eagerly, relishing Morgan’s finish, rubbing his cum into their cocks until he, too, spilled with a trembling breath. A low swear muttered over his lips, tickling Morgan’s ear. Three tiny words followed the swear, ones that Morgan didn’t expect to hear. “I love you.”

“S’that mean we’re mates?” Morgan chuckled drunkenly and grinned at Cane’s bright eyes, shadowed with lust and apprehension.

“Means, I don’t care if we are. I love you. That’s all I need. All I want.” Cane leaned down and nuzzled happily with a soft sigh. “Come home with me after the summer ends. Please?” Cane’s voice held a rough edge, fearful, as if he thought there’d be a chance Morgan would say no.

“I’ll come with you. I promise. Does that mean I get number eight?” Morgan bit his lip.

“Once we’re at home in our bed. I will. I promise.” Cane nipped his ear and held Morgan tight. “And Papa demands grandbaby time with Ripley ASAP.”

“Are you sure? You’re not just saying this so you can keep Ripley?” The fear of that squirmed in his belly.

“No. I know many couples who would take him in if asked. Ones that would let me see him all the time. If you’re mine, I’ll treat you well. I may not be dolphin rich, but I do well enough. I invested soundly a few years ago in property before our town became a vacation hotspot. I’m an underwater welder and that’s decent pay. We’re good.” Cane tucked a lock of hair behind Morgan’s ear.

“I could get a job. I’m good with kids, and I can darn nets and make cute clothing.” Morgan found a soft finger pressing into his lips, one laden with their muddled cum.

“Shh. You’ll do what you want. If you want to work, do what you love. Don’t stress. An alpha is judged by how well cared for his partner is.” Cane stroked his head again.

“That’s an orca thing if I’ve ever heard one.” Morgan snorted.

“My alpha father is an orca.” Cane sat up and tilted his head at Morgan. “Didn’t I tell you?”

Morgan’s heart flopped into his stomach. Orcas didn’t interbreed, but the fact that Cane sat there...

“Wait, you’re telling me that if we have babies... We won’t have cecaelia?”

“No. They’ll be three-quarters cetacean, so they’ll express cetacean, and Orca is—”

“Dominant.” Morgan sat bolt upright, eyes wide. His stomach churned anxiously. “We could have orcas?”

“Yeah? If they’re alpha, it’s certain. Omega will have a 75 percent chance of being orca. Slim chance for dolphin, but there’s a one in a hundred chance we have a cecaelia. It’s not impossible.” Cane grinned at Morgan.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“My last name is literally Gale.”

“Oh my goddess.” Morgan fanned himself as heat seared his cheeks. The Gale family was a large family and influential in the cetacean community.

“What’s wrong?”

“Do you know how much of an honor it would be to have an orca child?” Morgan bit his lip. He’d be the talk of his pod if word got back he bore orcas. He’d be revered and his parents would be so angry they couldn’t get a dowry off him.

Then again, they'd be angry if they found out he'd stooped as *low* as to mate a cecaelia, Gale or not.

“Whoa. Shh. Dolphins are the only ones impressed by orcas. They're wealthy, yes, but it's not that big of a deal.” Cane laughed like it wasn't something huge.

“No! It is. My parents are going to shit themselves.” Morgan cackled with glee.

Cane snorted. “I don't think you'll have to worry what your parents think much anymore. You can do what you really want to do.”

“I really like making my own clothes, but my mother said it made us look poor. I only ever had two or three outfits at a time, so I made a lot to play in.”

“Only two or three?” Cane stared at him oddly.

“Omegas don't get much spent on them.” Morgan offered a polite smile.

Cane's upper lip curled. “That changes now. Anything you want, I'll try my best to get you. I'll lie to the goddess herself and declare you my mate if it's not so.”

But would it be a lie? Morgan couldn't help but wonder. He'd never felt this way before, but then again, he'd never been this close to someone. Time would tell, and Morgan would listen.

As the first few cool droplets of rain sprinkled down, Morgan and Cane laughed as they scrambled to stand.

“Get Ripley! I think he'll be okay in the rain, but you never know when kids are excited.” Cane pulled his shirt off

and wiped Morgan clean before jogging toward the lake. Morgan took off running and as a summer storm raged above, they played among the hydrilla and pondweed at the bottom of the lake. It felt like something a family would do. But Morgan's family had never done anything like that with him. Ripley would have all the blessed memories of it, Morgan promised himself.

Never in his life did Morgan have a partner that cared for his pleasure. Dolphin mers were voracious in their appetites and insatiable. Even still, Cane never let him go wanting, always taking a break for a swim for him, ready to dive to the bottom of the lake, bathe in the moonlight on the beach, cuddling one another. Cane was there for him, soothing him through what should have been the worst time of his life. It'd been a lovely six weeks.

Of recent, at times he'd felt dizzy and lethargic, wanting to go to bed without so much as a snuggle from Cane.

It was morning by the time he was certain of something deep in his heart as the nausea rolled in and the tender mammary slits aside his vent alluded to something that would assure he'd have Cane for longer.

Can I be pregnant? We've only done outercourse... But even Morgan knew that a tenacious sperm could hitch a ride into his channel from their frothing cocks.

He hustled into the nurse's office and picked up a test, the human ones surprisingly accurate for omegas.

Sitting in the infirmary's bathroom, he peed in the cup, dipped the stick, and watched as two pink lines confirmed his suspicion.

In a moment of panic, he called his half-sister.

"Trish?" Morgan perked up when the other end crackled. His sister spent little time in the ocean since her partner worked topside.

"Morgan? Where the fuck are you? Do you know how much trouble you're in?"

"Wyoming, some shifter summer camp called Wannahatchee. Council sent me out here after... You know." Morgan wrapped a hand around his belly and took a shuddering breath.

"Do you know how embarrassed we are? My partner is disgusted with me, thinks that if you were loose that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree and I must be, too! He's paternity testing our son!" Her shrill bark made Morgan crumple. They'd been thick as thieves when he was little.

"I didn't cheat. I've never slept..." He couldn't say that anymore. He'd gotten knocked up, confirming everyone's suspicions. "Degan wanted me to have sex before we were officially mated. I refused."

"Why couldn't you have just put out for your mate? You were already marked." She whined in exasperation.

"Because he would have done the same thing whether I had sex with him or not. I was protecting myself until Mother and Father got their payout." Morgan swallowed down a mouthful of bile. He didn't know why he thought she'd help.

“Well, it’s a fine mess you’ve gotten us into.” Trish huffed. “You should have told someone!”

“I did. I told Mother and Father. And when they didn’t believe me and had me marked, I told the council. Wanna know who listened? You didn’t see the men they brought in to see me like I was used leftovers. They touched me and squeezed me like a fucking farm animal.”

“Sometimes it’s not all about *you*, Morgan.”

“No, it’s never been about me. I didn’t get to go to private school. *You* did. I didn’t get new clothes every season. *You* did ___”

“You always wanted to wear those tacky rags around.” Trish clicked her tongue.

“Those were clothes I handmade. I loved them. I didn’t get an option. I didn’t get toys or phones or trips or vacations. I had to sit at home with Grandma while you and Mother went to spa trips.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t like that stuff.” Trish sighed heavily.

“Nobody ever asked me! I was told to wait for a mate that would take care of me. I was told I’d get my turn when I got a wealthy husband. And let me tell you, Degan highly misrepresented *that*. I don’t think he had the actual money to pay my dowry. He was hoping to use me to have an alpha child to take the family finances in his name.” Morgan choked on a shuddering breath.

“You never liked that stuff. You’re a boy. You don’t need that stuff.” Some of the conviction ebbed from her voice, laden with uncertainty.

“I loved that stuff. Remember when you got those sheet masks, and we painted our toenails? I *always* wanted to be treated the same. I wanted to be pretty, too.” Morgan whispered those last words and choked on tears.

“Sometimes, it’s not all about what you want, Morgan. It’s about the good of the family. Sometimes, people have to make sacrifices. I’ve made them, too.” Trish hesitated again, like she was thinking for the first time and hated it. “Goodbye, Morgan. I hope things work out for you.” The line went silent.

Morgan broke down into little sobs. He didn’t know why he thought Trish might have insight, having been mated off herself. The beta they’d mated her off to had given her a son, another beta to add to the cesspool of insecure men.

Then there was Cane, the sweet cecaelia. A life sheltered had deprived Morgan of the targeted hatred of Cane’s people. He’d been anecdotally told that the tentacle merfolk were bad, but he’d never met one until Cane, and hadn’t been repulsed. He didn’t smell bad or seem uncouth. He was like any other mer, but better in that he’d shown him kindness and affection.

The only question was, would Cane question the pregnancy? Would he think Morgan tricked him or was with someone else? He didn’t have the heart to find out right away.

Cane said he loved him. That it didn’t matter... They were already taking Ripley in, what was one more? In his heart, he knew Cane would make it work.

Chapter Twelve

Cane

Cane leaned against the cabin, eyes traversing the grounds as his kids took turns lobbing fist-sized bags of sand at a wooden board with holes in it. They called it cornhole, which sounded pretty disgusting to Cane, but it didn't involve anyone crying or giving kids weapons. That had to be worth something.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he glanced down at the screen.

“Beach!” Cane held the phone to his ear. “Tell me good news.”

“Well. The good news is that we're getting Ripley the fuck out of there.” Beach laughed nervously and Cane's heart sank.

“I hear bad news in your voice there,” Cane said.

A lingering pause and heavy breath into the receiver stretched into eternity.

“The council wants him to go to a larger shimmer, to a group home there. You're not mated, not related to the kid, and he's an omega. What the hell do you know about omegas other than sexing them up?” Beach snorted.

“I know plenty. Nori taught me well.” Cane half smiled. “And I don't sex up omegas. I'm an outercourse only kinda guy... Well, with the tentacle that counts. Everything else is fair game.”

“Any tentacle is a—”

“Mating tentacle in the heat of the moment.” Cane snorted then sighed. “So, if I have a mate, would that change anything?”

“Might. I’d certainly vouch for you.”

“Okay. Another good reason to make a decision quick. Tell them I have a mate.” Cane waited for a quick but surprised goodbye and sighed, suddenly wanting off the phone.

Casper, a little feline shifter, ran by, the rest of his group in tow with no Morgan in sight.

“Where’s Morgan?” Cane had missed the male this morning at breakfast, and the night before, he had skipped their nightly swim.

“I think his family showed up, but it’s not family day!” Casper kicked a rock and twisted his lips.

Cane’s stomach knotted. If they were here, it couldn’t be good.

“Where are they?”

“Mess hall!” Casper grabbed a cornhole bag and chucked it.

“Alright. Thanks.” Cane glanced around and whistled for one of the juniors to step in and keep an eye on the kids before jogging up to the mess hall.

He didn’t have to get that close before hearing the loud discussion.

“And your duty to this family—” a nasally female chirped out.

“We’re not a family. You and Father have made that abundantly clear,” Morgan’s sharp retort barked out.

“Well, then all the motivation for you to start your own! All we’re asking is that you spend some time with your new fiancé here. They’ll take you, even if you are disgraced,” a male voice rife with exasperation said.

Cane let himself into the building and caught sight of two glaring shifters next to an overweight male with narrow eyes and a good sixty years on Morgan. Which, for their kind, who could live a few hundred years if they were careful, was significant.

Cane raised his voice as he approached, hands in pockets. “New fiancé? Did I miss something, sweetheart?”

“What? Excuse me?” A rather severe woman with dark hair and eyes just as bleak stared daggers at Cane. “They allow cecaelia to speak out of line here?”

“Cane! I was just about to tell my parents about you.” Morgan’s eyes widened as he turned, depthless orbs full of pleading.

“Tell away.” Cane reached for Morgan and drew him in for a little one-armed spin and smile. “Since it seems I’m speaking out of turn, here.”

Morgan’s cheeks, red before, went redder with what Cane could only assume was part anger and shame. “Mother, Father, I’d like to introduce you to my mate. Hurricane Gale.”

Mate? Seems Morgan is on the same page.

“You can’t be serious! You’d side with this...this... Calamari!” His father gestured at Cane while the older gentleman behind him blanched. Morgan visibly flinched.

“Right out there with the hard C, then? Pleasure to meet you.” Cane took in all the things that Morgan had casually mentioned, all the things he saw, and some of the very interesting things he didn’t.

His parents were dressed nicely, but nothing was new. Very strange for a couple that held such wealth, supposedly. Even more strange when their son had never seen any of it, living vicariously aside them, never reaping the lavish vacations or parties. A child born of privilege without privilege.

A line of gray hairs shone along his mother’s scalp, her dye job not touched up for some time. No expensive cologne met Cane’s nose. *Interesting. They’re broke.*

“I speak my mind,” his father said shortly, and from the shocked expression across the older male’s face, his mind wasn’t much appreciated.

“Why are you so interested in marrying him off to some rich beta?” Cane cocked his head slightly and stared.

“That’s none of your business, cecaelia. And I’d appreciate it if you kept your filthy tentacles off my son.” The rather severe woman stiffened visibly.

“It’s quite alright. I was under the impression that young Morgan here was actively seeking an arrangement, Steven.” The older gentleman raised his hands before glaring at both Morgan’s parents. “You didn’t specify he was unwilling.”

“He agreed to do what we asked, Lyle.” Steven, Morgan’s father, glared at Cane, as if this were all his fault.

Morgan bowed his head. “Mother and Father made an arrangement with Degan Gray and he called our engagement off after I was marked. I refused to bed him before the ceremony.”

“He was of the open opinion that you were young and enjoying the freedoms of youth, and he didn’t feel comfortable taking you to his bed, being so promiscuous. It’s never been quite the problem for me. I’m quite the cad, myself. So I thought you might like to make a small arrangement with me.” The older gentleman, Lyle, gave a nod of acknowledgement. “But I see now that you’re a chaste and tame thing.”

“I had the council remove me from their care and they placed me here. The options they presented me with were undesirable and Degan took too much delight in my very public humiliation. I kept myself pure, as I was told.” Morgan gritted his teeth and glared at his parents before unfastening his leather band. “And I still am pure.” His voice wavered.

The marking, since their lovely first night, had dissipated, the bruising faded. The ink had spread until the original design was no longer visible, but concentric rings like shaded bubbles trailed around his wrist. Morgan stared at it with a misty expression. The tiny smile on his face made Cane’s heart flutter.

“You let a filthy calamari mark you?” his mom screeched through a horrid gasp.

Lyle froze and turned on his heel, eyes narrowing. “Meridian! I’m going to have to turn your offer down on the

grounds that your son was not willing, and I would have nothing but regret if I were to tie myself to a family with such outdated views. My omega father was a cecaelia. I'm sorry, but your son was right to run away."

Morgan froze as Cane slid his arm around the male's waist. "We'll talk, after," Cane said, a soft whisper over the edge of his lips.

"Keep your tentacles off my son!" Steven marched up to Cane and put a finger to his chest.

Politeness would dictate that Cane hover at eye level with the male, but height wise, Steven was a few inches short of being threatening. Immediately, Cane rose to his full height, losing his slouch. "A mer's form is what the goddess gives them of their parents and grandparents. The goddess does not hold one form better or worse. My alpha father was an orca."

It'd been a sore spot most of his life, his wealthy father meeting his mate in another orca, leaving him and his papa alone with little support. He'd never sent much in the way of finances, but word always came back of the opulence they lived in. When Izaiah called, he seemed like he regretted it. They spoke often though. Cane pulled Morgan in a little tighter.

"That's why he's so tall." Morgan grinned in delight, almost as if finding joy in his parents' disgust.

"He left my father when I was six. He found his true mate." Cane's heart wrenched a little. He had barely two months to go to find his true mate, less than that if he wanted to keep Ripley. The poor boy was smitten with Morgan and rarely left Cane's side.

Now or never.

“Yet you work at a summer camp?” Steven snorted dubiously. “How do you plan on caring for our son?”

“Well, I’m an underwater welder. I make very good money. I invest well. I live frugally. I can take care of Morgan just fine. My family also are close to the crown of my shimmer, so we have status.” Cane rubbed a soothing hand down Morgan’s warm back, digging his fingers in. The male’s pulse fluttered under Cane’s fingertips.

“Lyle. I am so sorry my parents dragged you into this, but what were they exchanging for me?” Morgan glanced at the older man, brows furrowed.

“The usual dowry, and his father is pressuring him for an alpha heir. So there’s that, too.” Lyle shook his head. “Come on, you two. The boy’s mated, plain as day. You’re grasping at straws.”

“That’s my inheritance! I cannot... We need the money, Lyle. We can’t just—” Steven glared at Morgan as if expecting him to buckle. Cane tightened his grip, and Morgan stood a little taller as if Cane gave him strength.

“Play nice, and those two may give you some orca grandbabies.” Lyle snorted. “But you two didn’t impress me at all. And you, Hurricane, was it?”

“Cane, sir.” He extended his hand, grasping the beta tight by the wrist for a solid shake.

“You’re a good man. My firm sometimes needs underwater welders, and it’s so hard to find a cetacean that is

willing to get their flippers dirty. What family did you come from? Gale, you said?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ah.” A dawning look of recognition registered over Lyle’s face. The Gale family was a larger family, well-connected and, from what Cane knew, seclusive. He’d never met any family on that side, but it wasn’t strange.

Lyle pushed a card into Cane’s hand. “If you need anything, work or the like. I pay handsomely. I can get you clients that pay even more handsomely.” Lyle clapped Cane’s shoulder. “For a finder’s fee, of course.” He shuffled out, shaking his head.

“You can’t be serious! Meridian, control your son.” Steven gestured wildly at Morgan, who pressed into Cane’s side.

“I’ve chosen my mate. He’s marked me and we’ll be sure to get started on getting you a nice heir. He’s got orca in him, so there’s always a strong chance at having orca babies.” Morgan grinned.

Steven stared daggers at Cane and Morgan before slamming a chair to the ground in anger and storming out, Meridian following without even a goodbye.

“Well, that was a shit show.” Cane sank down onto a seat and ran his fingers through Morgan’s loose curls.

“In many ways.” Morgan leaned over the table miserably and buried his face in his arms. “We really need to talk.”

Talking was the last thing Cane wanted to do. Everything in his body told him to protect his mate, that he was

vulnerable, precious, and claimed.

This. This has to be it. My mate.

Chapter Thirteen

Morgan

“We really need to talk.” When his parents and the prospective mate for him were out of earshot, Morgan broke down, tears cascading over his cheeks, hard, racking sobs shaking his chest.

Cane was all arms when Morgan needed it, so large, tight and warm, his skin gaining the lightest tinge of purple underneath the golden tan, as if he yearned to shift, to surround Morgan with his tendrils and hide him from the world.

“What’s on your mind?” Cane was thoughtful like that. He knew what was wrong, his parents, but he’d witnessed it.

“How do you know if someone is your mate?”

Cane hesitated. “I—I was always told that I’d know when I found them. Did you find someone?” Cane’s entire face morphed into pure misery.

Morgan pushed up onto his tiptoes and locked Cane into a deep and desperate kiss, his heart rattling in his chest as he worked up the courage to say it. “No. I mean, yes. I found you but...”

Cane hesitated, stepping back from him, head cocked. “What?”

Morgan pulled at the hair on his head. “Mate me. Claim me. Please.”

Taking Morgan's hand, Cane brought it to his lips, fingers delicately trailing the mark his tentacle had left. "It shouldn't have stuck around this long, you know?" Cane kissed the bubbles left in the claiming ink, the new design full of more love than the old ever was, even if done so flippantly.

"Maybe it's a sign?"

"Tell me why you want me to claim you so badly?" Cane sat down and pulled Morgan into his lap, letting the smaller male straddle him as they peppered one another with small kisses.

"Being stupid..." Morgan's voice caught.

"I don't think so. Something's bothering you." Cane nuzzled into the taut lines of Morgan's neck and nipped gently, breathing him in. Every muscle in his body went rigid as his nostrils flared. "I see. So that's what I'm scenting."

"I thought we weren't... I thought you kept *it* to yourself." Morgan shuddered.

Cane hesitated. "We've rubbed up against one another but — Well shit." His chest shook with light laughter. No anger, no derisiveness or shame. Only trust.

"What?"

"I've never had a dolphin. Your cock pulls into your channel. And we've been..." Cane hissed and clucked his tongue. "So, how would you like to handle this?" Cane trailed his hands to Morgan's hips and stared down between them for some sort of sign.

"I dunno. I want to keep them. We don't have to be mates, but you can help me raise them if you want or not." Morgan

flinched in preparation for an answer.

“I actually wanted to propose something similar at the end of summer, if you were still interested. My friend Beach works for the council.” Cane’s lips twisted. “We’ll take Ripley. We’ll move into my nice, big home. And you can still search for your true mate if you feel I’m not it.”

“That sounds nice, but I really think you are my mate.” Morgan rested his head in the crook of Cane’s neck, taking in his thick alpha scent.

“What are you two doing in here?” One of the counselors, an old bear, grumbled at them while shuffling his way toward the kitchen. “Better not be making babies at the dinner table.”

“Ship’s sailed on that one, Gibson.” Morgan groaned, halting him.

“No shit?” The bear glanced between the two. “Happy about it?”

Morgan flinched as he waited for Cane’s response. Morgan was terrified more than anything, grateful he’d never have to return to his parents, a ticket to be disgraced so badly that he’d never be wanted again. A baby would be freedom.

“Nervous as hell. I was not expecting this today, I tell you.” Cane laughed and wrapped his arms tighter around Morgan, but his grin lit up the room.

“Have you ever been mated, Gibson?” Morgan’s thoughts scattered.

“Yeah. Long time ago. We live apart now, but that’s how bears are. We get together around spring.”

“How did you know they were the one?” With a barely perceptible shiver, Cane squeezed Morgan a little tighter, waiting for the words.

“I’m not sure. It was like we were always drawn together. My inner bear was always so very content with her. But you two are expecting and not mated?” Gibson shuffled over and sniffed at them. “Nah. I think you two will be fine. The nose knows.”

Cane rubbed a hand up and down Morgan’s back. “Like father, like son. We’ll figure it out. I won’t leave our baby. And we can’t leave Ripley.” Gibson huffed and waved them on, grinning as he made his way to the kitchen.

“No, we can’t, can we?”

Cane scooped Morgan up by his ass cheeks, squeezing them tight. “Honestly, I think we need to take a break. My cabin or yours? If you’re already in the family way, we should finally go raw.”

“Seriously? We’re in a serious situation like this. My parents are furious. I’m damn near homeless. I’m pregnant, unmated and—” Cane silenced him with a kiss.

“In the arms and lap of someone who would never let you go. For as long as you wanted. We’ll figure it out. I told you I’d lie to the goddess herself if I had to, mate.” Cane smiled and stood. “But for now, I have a few phone calls to make. And feel free to stop wearing that bracelet. Let my marks show. Let me at least pretend I’ve claimed you properly.”

And like that, Cane parted from him with a soft kiss and a warm smile. “Go tell Ripley. We’ll be going home soon.”

Morgan had dreaded telling Cane. They'd been fooling around for months, and they'd discussed very little in the way of mateship, other than they wanted it. But something bothered Morgan. When they first met, Cane had almost been angry when he saw the mark, been insistent on covering it with his own... The goddess had given them their merforms so many generations ago, had made them what they were. Dolphins rarely mated for love. Few mers did. But when they did mate, finding their true love, it was a special and all-encompassing passion. A passion that Morgan could only pray he found with Cane. He believed he had.

The kids had gathered around with a junior camp counselor, lobbing cloth sacks of corn or pellets or something at a board with holes. Years prior, they used to do archery and fire little rifles.

“Hey, Mister Morgan!” Casper bounded up, eyes bright, hands full of the sacks.

“Sup? Seen Rip around?” Morgan craned his neck and Casper pointed toward his cabin.

“Seriously? Why isn't he out here playing with you guys?” Morgan sighed.

“He was crying again, and I took him back there and gave him lots of blankets because Papa says that's what omegas need when they're sad.” Casper nodded sagely.

“Good job. Thank you.” Morgan ruffled his hair and jogged off toward Cane's cabin, finding Ripley right where Casper had promised, huddled up amid a mountain of blankets with the scent of fear thick on him.

“Rip? What’s wrong?” Morgan shuffled over and sat on the edge of his bed with a half grin.

“I don’t know. I got lonely and scared and I thought your family was going to take you back home and I don’t want you to go.” Ripley shivered. “I want to go with you.”

“Oh, sweetheart. You can come with me when I leave.” Morgan didn’t dare pull Ripley out of his nest, but rather huddled in with him with a tight hug.

“I don’t want to! I want to go with Mister Cane! I— Maybe it’s this dumb fish thing. I don’t know.” Ripley tugged at his hair. He’d likely never been around merfolk before, never scented alpha and omega. He didn’t understand his own needs.

“Shh. Take a deep breath.” Morgan pulled Ripley into his lap and tightened the blankets around them, wrapping his arms firmly. “What do I smell like to you, little one?”

“You smell like a mommy...” Ripley nuzzled into Morgan’s chest and returned the lingering hug with a soft whimper. “And Cane smells like a daddy.”

“Do you want us to be your papa and daddy? We can all be together?” Morgan stroked over Ripley’s head, coaxing the unruly locks to lie flat.

He didn’t speak right away, only whimpered as he nodded fervently. “But they’re gonna send me back to the boarding school after summer. I cry too much and they get mad at me.” Ripley sniffled, wiping his nose on his sleeve. “Will you be here next summer?”

“Hah. Probably not. I mean permanently, to come live with other merfolk. Teach you how to be an omega.”

“You’re gonna get rid of me because I cry too much,” Ripley said, his voice full of stubbornness.

“Want to know a secret?”

Ripley nodded.

“How do I know you’re crying if you’re underwater all the time?” Morgan grinned and Ripley glanced up in shock. “But never hide it. Getting you to stop crying is stupid. We have to do things to make you forget to cry.”

“I don’t want to cry. It just happens. Casper was really nice to me and put me in with lots of blankets and said his papa said that’s how to help.”

Morgan chuckled. “Cane is on the phone right now making sure we get the paperwork. You’re coming home with us. You’re scared and anxious all the time because you can’t shift enough. You can’t let your fish part out, or burrow in the sand, or snuggle and nest like an omega needs to. And there’s a likelihood that your instincts want an alpha to protect you. Casper knows what you don’t.”

Instead of the joy Morgan expected, tears welled up again as Ripley whimpered, sobbing into the blankets.

“Shh! What’s wrong, Ripley? We don’t have to take you if you don’t want.” Morgan patted his back.

“I don’t want Kip to protect me!”

“Ew. No. Cane is an alpha. No Kip. He’s a shifter, not like you. You’re mer.” Morgan kissed his temple and squeezed him

tight.

“O-okay.” Ripley closed his eyes and sank into the protective hold of an omega, a *parent*. Morgan had spent a while at this camp, playing the part of raising kids, helping shifter kids integrate with humans. He thought of himself as the cool older brother, but with one on the way, and the fish fry in his arms, Morgan thought he could do this. And if he couldn't, Cane would be there.

Chapter Fourteen

Cane

“Caaaaane! How’s my favorite man doing? I was wanting to talk to you.” Beach’s welcoming voice over the phone took a little of Cane’s nerves off edge.

“Is it good news or bad news?” Cane hesitated but sighed in relief when Beach laughed.

“Nah, all good. We got some info back on Ripley when I was reporting your mate status. Turns out, he was surrendered by a young male, likely an omega. And the hair sample sent in tells us his alpha father was the darter. His omega was some sort of goldfish, which probably explains the red hair.”

“So, is someone going to come get him?” Cane swallowed, dreading the answer.

“Yeah. You two. He was fully surrendered, likely hoping to keep his tail out of the eye of the darters so he didn’t end up with his spirit cleaved.” An audible shudder wracked Beach’s voice. “I insisted he go with you and that Lake boy. Cute, isn’t he? I had a feeling he’d be your type, hmm?”

“Matchmaker, matchmaker. You’ve done well. How would you have known?” Cane snorted.

“When you were a kid, you never stopped taking in injured animals. You had a pet lobster that came when you called for fuck’s sake, man. How could you not fall for an injured bird?”

“Fell like a damn rock. But I have a question... They tell us that you’ll know when you find your mate. How do you know?” Cane leaned against a tree and stared out at the sparse kids running about.

“I always forget your alpha father wasn’t a cecaelia.” Beach laughed. “The alphas don’t get a sign. The omegas do. Our wild counterparts were made to basically lob ol’ number eight at the female and skedaddle so she could make babies on her own time and die protecting them.”

“Yeesh.” Cane sighed, question unanswered.

“Nah. The reason why you’re taught to keep that tentacle tucked is because that’s the mating tentacle. You not only breed your partner with it, but you mark them, too. Your brain doesn’t know, but his does.”

Cane thought back to his desire and urgency to destroy the ink in that tattoo, to use his tentacle to make that mark... “I haven’t told my papa yet. Hell, I’ve not told anyone yet. We just found out he’s expecting. I didn’t waste time, apparently.”

“What? Cane, I thought you kept it to yourself. I mean, you weren’t sure he was your mate.”

“I did! I had a moment of poor judgment. We frothed a little and I guess some got in there by accident.”

Beach choked on a laugh. “There’s a reason why we say, any tentacle is a mating tentacle in the heat of the moment, Cane. And in freshwater, no doubt, it’s not as inhospitable for conception... You’re an animal, sir. I’ll go ahead and register Ripley to you, then? Morgan as your mate?”

“Yeah. No big ceremony though. I’ll give him what he wants, but his family didn’t seem to approve of me at all.” Cane snorted.

“No doubt. His father has a little bit of status and it’s no secret he’s been hunting for a mate for him to bolster their family back up the scale. So you think he’s your mate now?”

“I don’t know. I marked him kinda. I used my tentacles to strip his claiming tattoo, and it left little marks in the ink.”

Beach snorted. “Figures. Have you texted Nori about him yet?”

Cane’s stomach twisted. “I haven’t.”

“Oof. Tell him to call you once he’s topside. Don’t leave it to the text.”

“On it. Thanks, Beach. Get the paperwork to me so we can head out in a few weeks.” Cane let loose a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

“Take it easy, man. Bye.” Beach hung up and Cane closed his eyes, thumb wandering the screen of his phone from memory to pull up his father’s texts. Calling underwater was near impossible, but they could text quite easily.

Call me when you’re topside. Good news.

Nori wasn’t tech savvy and within minutes, the message was marked as read.

Cane tucked his phone into his pocket and cringed when it vibrated. He glanced down and saw his dad’s number popping up.

“Papa! I didn’t mean for you to rush topside.” Cane swallowed nervously and ducked around the corner of a building to speak softly.

“Oh, I was already topside with your auntie. What’s the good news?” His omega father’s bubbly voice piqued with hope.

“Well. There’s three parts to the good news.” Cane cleared his throat.

“Oooh, okay. The most shocking one first!” Nori sucked his teeth.

Cane bit his lip and sighed. “Morgan is expecting. You’re going to be a grandpa to more than Ripley.”

A sharp intake of breath came in retort, and for a second, Cane thought Nori was silent. The line crackled and the shrill sound of a scream of joy found a register the phone could translate. *Ack!*

“I’m gonna be a grandpa!” Nori’s voice cracked and his aunt muttered something in the background about Cane being nothing but trouble. “Were you trying? When is he due?”

Cane cleared his throat. “Not on purpose. But we’re also bringing home Ripley for sure, council approved. The council said if I was mated, we could bring him home.”

“I am a grandpa already! Twice!” Nori gushed.

“I’m glad you’re happy.” Cane laughed.

“Ooooh. I almost forgot about that little omega boy. How does he and your new mate get along?”

“Ripley, his name is Ripley. He loves Morgan. We’re coming home.”

“Well, I would fuss at you to keep your damn tentacle to yourself, boy, but things are working out in your favor. Do you love him?”

“So much. We get along well. I think we need time. It’s all unexpected.” Cane cleared his throat, and the hesitation brought Nori’s mood down.

“Of course, dear. Do what you need. I’ll be here. Do I still need to be getting the house ready? The one on the shore?”

“Yeah. Lease is up. I don’t think they’re going to stay...” Cane hesitated. “If you could go check that out and do what we talked about...”

“Absolutely. Anything for my favorite son,” Nori bubbled excitedly.

“Your only son! That’s not hard to match up to.” His aunt Marina huffed in the background.

“Tell Aunt Marina that they’ve got a few lovely wineries out here and I’ll be bringing her some Moscato and give her permission to use the beach on my property.” Cane sighed and Nori muttered to his aunt, who silenced and sniped something about him being a *good boy*.

Jerk.

“Sooo, your Morgan. Dolphin you say?” Nori cooed with delight.

“Not one kind or the other, just dolphin. Lovely sandy skin and beautiful eyes. Very practical.” Cane smiled to

himself. “And an excellent conversationalist.”

“Mm-hmm. I really bet you’ve done a whole lotta *conversing*.” Nori chuckled and Cane could practically hear the air quotes.

“We go for some swims of an evening. Don’t make it weird.” Cane snorted and said his farewells, hanging up as he toyed with his phone and dialed.

It rang twice before a curt voice answered. “Cane?” His alpha father’s curious tones perked up. They’d not spoken much since he found his mate and left. It hurt too much for him to see Nori, and for Nori to see him.

“Just wanted to tell you that I found my mate. A dolphin. From a colony up north.” Cane cleared his throat.

“Ah. Good to hear. Wouldn’t be Morgan Lake, would it?” His father perked up and Cane swore internally. Of course. His father knew everything.

“Yes, sir.”

“Figured you’d be a sucker for him. His history doesn’t bother you?” Izaiah clicked his tongue.

“Fabrications, mostly. He’s lovely. Very lovely. Such a sweet male.” Cane smiled, his cheeks pulling tight.

Izaiah hesitated. “And racist?”

“Yeahhhh. His father whipped out the hard-C.” Cane snorted. “But Morgan’s never treated me different.”

“Those northern dolphins are a menace. But he’s okay with you?”

“He sought me out first.”

“Forbidden fruit.” Izaiah chuckled. “Thank you for calling and telling me, my little sea star. Any other news? You sound jittery.”

“I may or may not be my father’s son.” Cane chuckled.

“Hah! Okay, I need to tell Harold. And we should come visit.” Izaiah sighed, his voice tense as he mentioned his mate.

“Won’t he be jealous? I’ve never met him before, but it’d be nice.” Cane bit his lip. Harold had always been adamant he never meet Nori or Cane.

“We’re two alphas, Cane. We can’t have kids and he’s warming up to bringing you in. Grandbabies. And being what your blood is... There’s the certainty you have an orca if you found a cetacean.” Izaiah cleared his throat.

And there the crux of it was. Cane was an afterthought to his father after he found Harold. He wanted to say something, but for the sake of his family, he caved. “We’re adopting a little one as well. A little rainbow darter omega.”

Izaiah muttered on the other end, talking to his mate, likely. A soft *aww* interrupted.

“We’ll plan a visit soon. And I’d very much like to give you some money. Something to start your family off with.”

“A little late for that. I’ve built myself a little nest egg. I do well.” Cane bristled at the thought of not being able to care for his mate. Like Izaiah had abandoned Nori.

“I know that much, but your father wouldn’t take anything but the bare minimum from me. Not for your care, anything. Proudful. I see it in you. Let me try.”

Cane had been resentful, silenced often by his omega father, lamenting their lack of money. The hard winters and low tides. And all because Nori wouldn't take more than the minimum? "I didn't know that Papa was holding back."

"Gosh, no. I tried, often. I think he was too heartbroken. You're owed something. Even if it's just to pad you comfortably for the babe and the fry. Rub it in those Lake's nasty noses. You're a Gale! Cecaelia or no, you're my son and I want to. Don't take it as an insult." Izaiah may have had ulterior motives, preserving bloodlines, but anything to make Morgan feel more cared for, to wash away some of the bitterness.

"I'll accept. I'll text you my address and when I'm expected back. I'm not quite ready to join the shimmer since I turned Tide's son down. I wouldn't want to rub it in his face. We'll keep to my beach house." Cane picked at a thread on his clothes and smiled, praying that South would find his mate, and be happy Cane turned him down.

Business handled, they said their goodbyes and Cane went off in search of his mate.

He wasn't hard to find, huddled up with Ripley in a fantastic omega nest, hugging tight as he fought oft-shed tears.

"How are my boys doing?" Cane smiled, and Ripley slipped out of the covers before rushing to Cane for a hug.

"M'good. I was scared and Casper made me a nest and Morgan helped me feel better." Ripley sniffled.

Glancing about conspiratorially, Cane grinned. "Did he tell you that you're coming home with us? I have a beach

house. They're getting ready and you've grandparents eager to meet you."

"I don't want to make them mad by crying all the time." Ripley buried his face in Cane's stomach and nuzzled, wiping his nose. Cane's shirt would never recover.

"Nah. You're an omega. You have to cry. Alphas are stupid and hold back their tears, so omegas can cry for them. I think you'll be fine." Cane reached over Ripley's shoulder and rubbed until his trembling ebbed. "Start thinking about what you want to put in your bedroom."

"I want my own bed and I want lots of blankets. I want shoes that light up! I want... I want a door that locks." Ripley tensed up, as if expecting him to argue.

"We'll have all of that, and when I take you to your new grandpa's home, we can let you sleep in a bubble nest or make you a sand nest to burrow down into." Cane pulled down and snatched Ripley tight. "Sound like fun? And lots of omega friends your age. All different kinds of mers."

"With tails like me?" Ripley perked up and Cane shook his head.

"You're very special, Ripley. There's not many with tails like yours, but so many fish merfolk. You'll fit in and be loved so much. I think you'll have all the good alphas fighting to be the one to protect you." Cane chuckled.

"Only if I want, right? What if I don't want them?" Ripley's eyes watered as he peered up.

"Then tell them to shoo or go away. They need to learn to accept *no* as an answer young. It shouldn't be your job to teach

them. Please, just learn to tell them no.” Cane picked Ripley up and swung him a bit before plopping onto the bed next to Morgan, with Ripley laughing on his way down. “And if they don’t listen, I’ll snatch them bald-headed. I have the tentacles to do it, too!”

Ripley gasped and giggled.

“Guys?” Kaycee’s voice came from outside the cabin. She peeked in and tilted her head. “You okay in here? They said Rip was sad again.”

“I’m happy now, Miss Kaycee. Mister Cane is going to adopt me!” Ripley beamed.

“Oh. I didn’t realize Cane could adopt without a mate.” Kaycee glanced over toward Morgan as he sheepishly raised his hand, the leather band gone.

“Oh! Oh!” Kaycee squealed. “I thought you were hiding your claiming mark. I didn’t know that—”

“I was at first, but Cane tried to disperse the ink with tentacle hickeys and it left behind a cool pattern...and something else.” Morgan snorted and pursed his lips, cheeks pinkening.

Kaycee narrowed her eyes and sniffed a few times. “Oh, dear sweet sugar! Cane! You two already are making babies?”

“Babies?” Ripley glanced between Morgan and Cane.

“Only recently found out. A little bit of a shock.” Morgan chuckled. “I guess the goddess wants Ripley to have a sibling.”

“Morgan is gonna have a baby?” Ripley’s eyes went big. “When the baby comes, can I stay, please? I’ll be good.”

“Oh, Ripley. Of course you can stay. They’d never send you away. You’re too cute.” Kaycee strode up and squeezed his cheeks. “And if they don’t take you. I will.”

“But I want to live in the ocean!” Ripley trembled, squeaking, when Morgan grabbed him for a tight hug.

“You will! I promise. Cane told me he has a nice house by a trench made from a boat!” Morgan sighed and rested his cheek on Ripley’s head.

“Someone from child services will be by in the next two weeks to get us paperwork. I’ve ended up on a list as next of kin through their ways. Also, I—I don’t think it best we move to the trench right away. Things might still be rough for me, so Morgan and I will stick to the beach house. Ripley will stay the night with Grandpa the first night. We’ll get Rip’s bed ready. And the house is big enough for all of us and a plus one.” Cane beamed, and Morgan’s eyes went wide.

“What’s it look like?” Morgan sat up straight and Cane held his phone out, showing a dated rental listing for his house. “Four bedrooms, bonus room, living room, dining room. Huge deck and a pier with a covered boat dock for easy shifting and traveling.” Cane waved his hand dismissively.

Morgan squealed. “Wow. It’s so big and nice. Look, Rip!”

Ripley peered at the phone and gasped, watching them thumb through the photos.

“Which room is mine?” Ripley peered at the pictures.

“Well, Morgan and I will be taking the master, so you have three bedrooms to choose from.” Cane pulled his phone back as a text popped up. *Izaiah.*

I want a picture of my grandfry.

Cane snorted and shot a picture of Ripley back to his father.

He’s adorable! Is he part goldfish?

Yeah. Cane smiled as his father commented on how precious Ripley was.

See you in a month, Father. Do you want me to see if Papa will meet you?

I’ll message him. If he doesn’t respond, I’ll take a trip down there myself. It’s about time we find some peace.

I’ll leave that between the two of you. We were all hurt a bit. And I don’t blame anyone. I want to make that clear. But if you decide to be in our kids’ lives, don’t disappear later, okay?

I promise.

Cane stared at those two words and took a deep breath. Ripley didn’t need another person flaking on him. But it was a step in the right direction.

Chapter Fifteen

Morgan

The end of summer couldn't come soon enough, loading kids onto busses one by one. Ripley watched kids he'd known for months leaving but wore the biggest grin. Morgan's only qualm was wearing looser shirts to hide the small swell of his belly.

"I can call you Papa for reals once we get to Cane's house?" Ripley could hardly contain his delight at being allowed to go to the ocean, to see a city underwater, and swim with people like him without hiding.

"Nothing stopping that now, if you want." Morgan beamed.

"You got your bags packed?" Cane strolled up, patting Morgan on the shoulder. They were going to visit Nori for the first night, and once Ripley was comfortable, let him stay there for another night while the two had some much-needed skinship. The summer camp made it hard to get thirty minutes alone with one another. Morgan hadn't even had sex with his mate outside of their merforms yet, and his entire insides burned to feel Cane that way. Slick dewed at his backside so often at the mere thought of it.

"Packed and ready!" Morgan beamed. "They're sitting by the door of my cabin like you asked since you won't let me lift anything."

Cane gave Morgan a cheeky grin and leaned in for a soft kiss, hand on his hip that snuck to feel his belly with the

gentlest palm. “I really think we’re mates, Morgan.”

“I think so, too. I’ll love you until the sea goddess takes us. I’m certain of it.” Morgan stole another kiss while Ripley bounced up and down excitedly, eager to go. He’d never been on a plane before.

“I love you, too. And Ripley, and our little one.” Cane grinned against his lips, sighing wistfully as his phone buzzed, telling him their ride was ready, if the app emblem that flashed across the screen was to be believed. “Okay, you two go wait by the welcome center and I’ll grab our bags.”

Morgan took Ripley’s hand, and they strode off. As they approached the center, the idling car, a black SUV of some sort, flicked its lights to signal them to come over. The morning heat, as muggy and depressing as it was, drew Morgan to the car. A window rolled down as a suspicious driver stared them down. “Where’s the big’un?” The thick accent of some strange variety that was unfamiliar to Morgan gave him pause.

“Oh, he’s getting the bags.”

“Get in.” The driver unlocked the doors with a loud clack, and the inviting breeze of AC that wafted through the window drew him in. Ripley climbed over to buckle himself in, eyes bright and excited.

“Thanks. You can cut the air out here with a knife.” Morgan laughed as the doors clacked, locked, and the vehicle lurched forward. “Hey!”

“Move, and the air won’t be the only thing that’s cut.” It took Morgan a second to place the voice and the smell. *Degan.*

Morgan glanced into the rearview mirror to watch the male in the third row of seats grinning eerily as the driver moved forward.

“Why are you here?” Morgan made his words come free as calm as possible while Ripley whimpered, ready for tears.

“Because your parents already spent the damn dowry money and won’t refund it. So I’ll take you back, despite being of common stock.” Degan sniffed. Morgan lifted his gaze to the rearview mirror to catch Degan’s lip curling. “So the least you can do is give me a few calves and we’ll move on. Understand?”

“That’s not how it works, Degan. I wasn’t involved in those decisions.” The car continued to move, peeling out of the camp’s gates as they hit the road. Morgan slowly moved his hand into his pocket, reaching for his phone with hopes of alerting Cane.

Degan, wise to Morgan’s intent, snatched the phone the second Morgan’s finger hit the unlock button, pawing through the phone for a minute. “Make sure we nip this in the bud. GPS turned off, phone in airplane mode.” He casually cracked the back window and tossed the phone out of the still-moving vehicle.

“Degan, please. Ripley doesn’t need to be involved in this.” Morgan pulled the shivering child into his side.

“I know about the little runt. We can make a deal. You give me an alpha child and you and the runt can go. Act out, even once, run away, anything, and I will send his little ass to the coyotes or back to his people. Would you like that, little

one? You want to have your merform cut away from you so you never have to swim again?”

Ripley shuddered, and the tears rolled forth, his sobs quiet and shaking against Morgan’s side.

“Degan! He’s been adopted. We’ve already signed the paperwork.” Morgan glared up at the mirror, catching the beta’s eye. “He’s Cane’s child, first.”

“He can wait nine or ten months or so. You’ll have a fertile period due soon if I remember your cycles correctly.” Degan’s dark chuckle made Morgan’s stomach knot up. “What do you think, fry? Want me to give you a little brother?”

“But Morgan is already giving me a brother...” Ripley buried his face into Morgan’s side some more and Morgan laid a hand on the bare swell of his belly.

“Fuck! I suppose if it’s alpha and cetacean, we can pawn it off on your parents. If it’s that dirty calamari blood, we may have to dispose of it. Probably should abort the thing and throw you into estrus as soon as possible anyway,” Degan snarled.

Ripley sobbed with trembling whimpers.

“The baby is a Gale’s. The father is alpha, half orca. The babe has a strong chance of being an orca.” Morgan’s heart raced, beating hard in his chest. “Izaiah Gale’s the father’s father! My mate is a cecaelia, but he carries orca blood!”

“Izaiah Gale? Fuck. Perhaps the disgrace would buy the calf off me. That whole family would die of disgust if it got out he had a cecaelia son,” Degan snarled and sat back in his seat, idly twisting a gun in his hand, as if keeping a constant

reminder visible that he was the one in charge. “I don’t even like men! The only reason I even had interest in you is for alpha children, you know? Your kind disgust me.”

“The feeling’s mutual.” Morgan glared into the mirror, and Degan leaned forward to smack his gun against the side of his head.

Before Degan could withdraw, Ripley twisted in his seat, clawing for the beta’s arm, sinking sharp little teeth deep into ruddy skin, heedless of the gun or not.

A deafening crack made the driver scream and swerve about as Degan drew back, blood pouring from his arm, likewise Ripley’s mouth. Everything came out muffled, Morgan’s ears whining as he tried to reach Ripley and shield him from Degan’s anger. Ripley stared down at his lap, his shorts soaking with blood from a wound somewhere on Morgan’s outer thigh, matching a bloody hole in the upholstery in his seat.

The driver shouted something, car swerving as Morgan’s blood pressure bottomed out and he collapsed to the floor.

“Morgan!” Ripley’s shrill voice squealed out as the clattering continued. “Papa!”

Morgan woke as his stomach roiled, the telltale rumble of a vehicle beneath him. He hated cars. Their stillness and vibrations ruined his equilibrium, honed from years of tides.

His wrists and ankles were zip tied together, biting into his skin. “Wha—” Morgan groaned as Ripley’s big, scared eyes met his own, blood soaking into his shorts and up into his

shirt. A tightly tied cloth constricted his leg as blood seeped through the bandages. Thankfully, Ripley didn't seem to be crying. The expression on his face told Morgan he was far too angry to cry.

"We... Need to get to water. My leg." Morgan stirred and reached for Ripley, only for him to recoil, eyes darting toward the front of the vehicle, a different one than they were in before. A panel van of some sort, not the black SUV before.

"He's lucky I didn't kill him. But he'll learn his lesson soon." Degan laughed from the front seat.

"What are you going to do?" Morgan sat up and Ripley snarled.

"I'm going to go give him back to his *real* family. I don't tolerate insubordination from an omega." Degan accelerated and made Morgan slide backward along rough, ridged metal. Ripley floundered for footing, his upper lip twisting.

Morgan squirmed to sit back up, but Ripley held him by his arm, as stone-faced as any alpha tasked with protecting an omega. The rough way the van rocked made Morgan gag once more, reaching to hold his belly protectively.

Ripley crawled toward the front of the van. A six-or-so inch gap between a steel divider and floor rose to the headrest of the seat where it turned to mesh. He glanced over at Morgan and held his finger up as he crawled on his belly, reaching under the seat, his expression mischievous.

From within the electronics beneath the seat, Ripley pulled out a handful of wires with a little black box connected. Reaching down again, he pulled out a cell phone and stared at

it with a stern expression. He played with the menu and side buttons for a few minutes before the phone opened with a click.

Tapping on the phone, he held it to the black box and toyed with the Bluetooth, tongue poking from between his lips before he grinned and pushed the bundle of wires back beneath the seat. He spent another minute on the phone before tossing it back beneath the seat and scooting away from it.

“What did you just do?” Morgan mouthed the words.

Ripley shrugged, bottom lip sticking out in a pout. “Stuff. Daddy’ll find us.” He nodded with certainty.

Morgan stared at the scraped and scared child, his heart aching, and prayed that the boy was right. “I think so, too.”

Chapter Sixteen

Cane

A text message pinged Cane's phone as he trotted toward the welcome center, loaded with bags. He sat them down and glanced around, not seeing Morgan or Ripley anywhere. He reached into his pocket to grab his phone and saw a text from Morgan.

I left to go get a box of wine and think things over, but I don't think it's going to work out. I should never have spread my legs for a fucking squid.

Cane's heart twisted in his chest with complete sadness for all of five seconds before his blood went cold. Morgan wouldn't drink, not while carrying Cane's child. They were mated. He'd never leave Cane. And as for the spreading of legs? They'd never actually had sex outside of their merforms. He'd been hesitant to even have fully penetrative sex *in* their merforms, wanting a doctor to see to him first. His first scan was in less than two days with his shimmer's physician.

Cane swallowed hard and pulled his phone out, dialing Kaycee.

"Thought you three nerds left." She answered on the second ring.

"No time for sass. I need to see the cameras for the welcome center in the past twenty minutes. Now. Morgan and Ripley are missing." Cane's heart thundered in his chest as he paced, waiting for Kaycee to bring her master keys to let him into the offices.

“What’s going on?” Kaycee ushered Cane in and they crowded into the small security office while she opened the program to rifle through the cameras.

“Morgan sent me a text that he was going to go get plastered and think things over and he was gone...” Cane glanced toward Kaycee as she went pale, rummaging through the camera until they found a blue sedan idling outside waiting for them, their ride. A black SUV pulled in behind it before a scrawny male got out and approached the sedan. They spoke for a minute before the sedan left and the SUV waited until Morgan and Ripley hopped in. Without any warning, they were gone.

“Who the fuck was that?” Cane swallowed hard and Kaycee shook her head.

“I dunno, but I don’t think Morgan knew they weren’t your ride...” Kaycee shifted uncomfortably and Cane stormed out of the office, dialing the best person for the job. *Beach*.

“Situation,” Cane blurted the moment Beach answered.

“What we got?”

“Morgan and Ripley are gone. Someone pulled up and picked them up pretending to be our taxi.” Cane paced in the hallway.

“What? Are you certain?” Beach hesitated, waiting for more.

“Morgan sent me a text saying he was breaking up with me and going to go drown his sadness in a box of wine.” Cane scoffed.

“Oh, Cane...” Pity swept through Beach’s tone, then he gasped. “Wait, Morgan—he’s pregnant! He wouldn—”

“Exactly! We checked the cameras, and they got into the wrong car. Someone sent our taxi away.” Cane paced about. “So whoever took him didn’t know he was...”

“Let me ping his phone to see what I got. You call your papa and settle him down. May want to give Izaiah a text... He’s got connections.” Beach hung up and Cane texted Nori, explaining things as calmly as possible. He called not a few minutes later. The sheer worry in his tone made Cane regret saying anything, but he had to know things would be okay.

Next, he called Izaiah, his alpha father. His deep tones on the other end brought little comfort to Cane, but when he said his mate was taken, a dark sound crackled through the receiver. “Don’t do anything rash. I’ll get someone to put me in contact with the Lakes and throw my weight around.”

“I’ll wait as long as I can, Father.” Cane hung up and Kaycee patted his shoulders for comfort.

“What do we do next?” She waited and Cane stared at his phone until a text from Beach came in, saying Morgan’s phone was last pinged a few miles from the camp. Kaycee had a camp Jeep running and waiting by the time Cane had mapped the location and they were off, praying they’d find Morgan and Ripley alive.

When they got there, Cane saw the stretch of road, bare on each side with stretching fields. They both climbed out and Cane dialed, pacing the road as he prayed to hear it ring. Cane

heard nothing, but merfolk were better at hearing underwater than they were above. Kaycee though? She darted off down the road and hopped into an irrigation ditch, finding Morgan's phone in a heartbeat. The screen cracked but still functioning.

"Don't touch the screen. There may be prints." Cane ran up and inspected the phone, sniffing it lightly. "Beta. Male. Dolphin."

"Oh no." Kaycee's lip trembled. "You don't think it's his ex?"

"I don't *think*. I *know*. And he's not his ex. They were arranged. They were never together." Cane thought that an important distinction, but he jogged back to the Jeep to make a call to Beach.

"Find him?" Beach's wavering tone made Cane's gut clench.

"No. I found his phone and scented a male beta dolphin. Nothing else. No blood or anything." Cane took a deep breath and shuddered.

"Okay. Escalating this." Beach hung up.

"Verdict?" Kaycee started the Jeep, and they headed back toward camp. Sheltering in place was the best bet until they had a solid plan.

"Things are bad."

Back at the camp, Cane did his best to wear a hole in the floor from pacing. His papa called his alpha father, all checking in to make sure Cane, above all else, wasn't doing anything stupid. He wasn't sure he was doing anything *smart*, either. As the sun set lower in the sky and his rage and anger

were about to get the best of him, a single text message hit his phone. The text in it was garbled, but the link it sent was GPS coordinates from a shipping company's location tattler pointing them to a truck stop parking lot an hour and a half away.

Kaycee was moving in a heartbeat, loading them up. "Bitch doesn't know what's coming. Let me get the first few good shots in so you don't get in trouble. Foxes fight dirty."

Cane grunted noncommittally as they sped off into the twilight. An hour in, and the van was moving again according to the coordinates, and they were still twenty off. He bit his tongue and snarled, updating Kaycee's GPS to stay on their ass.

"I think they're heading north to the lakes. If they hit Superior, we're fucked... They'll be in Canada and we can't do shit." She gunned it, brow furrowed as Cane made a call to Beach, explaining.

"I'll call ahead to the Lake Superior merfolk. They're a little standoffish, but they don't do mate-thieving or kidnapping. They're real interested in family," Beach assured them.

Stopping for gas cost them eleven minutes. The near empty tank took a while to fill, but they'd have to stop eventually, too. And it seemed like Kaycee was right. They were nearing the lake at an alarming speed and had only managed to gain a few miles on them.

A text message came through from Beach. Apparently, they were locking the lake down. As a smidgeon of relief settled in his gut, Cane's phone rang. *Izaiah*. "Father?"

“The fucking Lakes couldn’t pay Degan back his dowry, so he’s taking Morgan back. They seemed unconcerned, but apparently, they’re in so much debt it’s not even funny. They’ll be doing time in jail. Degan didn’t know they were desperate for money and he was playing games to get Morgan’s dowry price dropped.” Cane’s father sighed in the background. Harold muttered something out of range, and Izaiah whispered back. “Harold says that Degan will be sanctioned. He’s a common bottleneck and has no authority.”

“I don’t think I can hold back when I find them, Father. I’m going to put Degan down.” Cane trembled in his seat. His mate was in danger. He could only wonder what Degan would do to their child.

As if reading his mind, Izaiah sighed heavily. “I can’t stop you, but the possibility of that child being orca is too high. There’s no way he’d harm a child with orca potential.”

Cane wasn’t the best with genetics, admittedly. He hadn’t intended to impregnate anyone. “You keep saying that, but why is it such a big deal?”

“No. Orcas have very few betas to the point where they think they’re just weak alpha, which is why we’re seen as purists. Alpha carries the pattern, and you carry the orca gene on your alpha chromosome. Orca is dominant over all other cetaceans. Omega and alpha pairings very rarely produce betas in general. It was rare you expressed cecaelia at all. But alpha would carry your orca genes,” Izaiah rattled off and Cane hesitated.

“What?”

“I guess Nori kept you pretty in the dark on this, but people think orcas are purists. We’re just dominant for our type and breed slow.”

“But... Your family never wanted to see me and you rarely came around.” Cane went quiet, too many things making him sad.

“Cane. Nori and I kept our distance because it was easier, and it hurt you so badly. I don’t have family to come see you. My alpha father passed away and my omega father moved on. He was contracted to give my alpha father a son. Nobody is ashamed of you. No matter what those dolphins say. Trailer trash supremacists.” Izaiah snorted. “I’m so sorry you thought that...”

“Thank you.” Cane took a deep and wavering breath before Kaycee called out that they were approaching the dock right to where their target van sat, door ajar. “Love you, Dad. We found the van. Bye!”

Fuck.

Kaycee glanced about, eyes narrowed. Cane hesitantly opened the door and found blood, lots of blood. None of it Ripley or Morgan’s. *The beta?* Degan...was bleeding?

“Over there!” Kaycee’s nose twitched, and they ran toward the dock, watching one boat unhitch, ready to float out into the marina.

Cane stripped as he ran, following the scent of his mate and dove into the chilly waters. The murky, polluted water filled his siphons and choked him through the brackish wastes. He had to overcome. He tented his veil, propelled himself and

streamlined, ready to rip the world to shreds when he silently slipped up against the boat, tendrils wrapping around the fiberglass shell, stabilizing him.

“And you’re sure that this little runt is one of the blessed omegas?” A rather pompous voice piqued Cane’s attention as he slinked higher up the boat’s hull.

“Yep. He’s a darter. Smell him.” What Cane could only assume was Degan, said.

Cane kept himself at the water’s edge, waiting until he could see his foe, the round-faced beady-eyed male that had laid prior claim to his mate and the aging bent form of a male that smelled *wrong*.

Morgan was nowhere to be seen, but Ripley sat in front of them, his wrists zip tied together. “Not a darter!” Ripley managed to growl around his gag and leaned to chew at his zip ties. With a sharp snap, Ripley launched himself at Degan and bit into his arm, teeth wickedly sharp. “M’a piranha!”

Cane snorted and unshifted, crawling aboard before snarling at the two males.

The old man wailed in shock. “E’ gods, man! Put some clothing on!”

“I’ll put clothes on when I have my mate and child back!” Cane reached for Ripley, who had his teeth out, sharp and bared, and pulled him back by his arm. The teeth were a bit jarring, but some merfolk did have defensive mechanisms. Cane, personally, had ink, though he rarely used it. Though, when Degan whipped around with a kitchen knife, Cane spat the viscous black liquid into his eyes with spot-on aim.

Degan screamed, clawing at his face as the knife clattered to the floor.

The old man raised his hands. "I was told he was a darter!"

"M'a piranha," Ripley growled again and Cane patted his head.

"Why did you want a darter?" Cane narrowed his gaze.

"He is a sacred omega. We have to take his merform as a sacrifice to the goddess!" he said, his blue eyes watery with nerves. "Or great disaster will befall us."

"Yeah, no. Ripley is my son. You will not sacrifice my son's spirit to the goddess for your own misguided feelings." Cane brushed Ripley's hair back and glanced around, his nerves trembling in want for his mate. "Where's Morgan?"

"In the fucking cabin. He won't stop screeching! The fry isn't even his." Degan spit and wiped at the black that refused to clear from his face with angry swipes. Blood trailed his arms from Ripley's repeated gnawing.

Cane stuck his head into the cabin and spied a very tied-up Morgan gagged and stowed in a pile of fishing nets, and the scent of blood made Cane panic.

Before he could greet his mate, Morgan's eyes went wide in fear, fighting his gag as Ripley screamed. The old man came around with a lobster cage and smashed it into the back of Cane's head.

Cane stumbled, blinking stars from his eyes before he turned, shifting as his tentacles drew him taller. Shifting helped heal. The orca in him was plain to see in mer form by

size alone. On land he was a monster though. A monster that reached for the quivering male with a swipe, knocking the cage from his hands and slamming him to the ground. His tentacles spread and anchored the male to the ground, drawing ropes and lines around to bind him tightly. “Never. I repeat. Ever. Threaten a cecaelia’s child or mate.” Cane’s tentacles wrapped and tugged a still-blind Degan into his share of ropes.

Ripley scurried into the cabin and when Cane turned, he had the ropes and gags mostly free.

“Piranha, huh?” Morgan hugged Ripley tight. “Those are just your fighting teeth, hun.” They laughed and squeezed tight before Cane knelt.

With a gentle hand, he cradled the side of Morgan’s head, tracing dried blood. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, nothing a little bedrest won’t fix.” Morgan rested a hand on his belly as if by instinct, closing his eyes to settle in the sensation. “Baby feels fine.”

“Good. That’s really good. I love you so much, you know that?” Cane held Morgan close for a lingering minute before standing and taking the wheel. He started the boat to guide them back to shore where they could wait for someone to collect the males.

“Morgan got shot,” Ripley whined, and Morgan tugged at his short leg to show the healing red streak of a graze. It would scar in time, but Cane would remember this moment for his mate’s strength.

Kaycee stood at the dock like a sailor’s wife waiting for her husband to come home, her face twisted in worry until

Ripley waved at her and called out. “Miss Kaycee! Daddy spit on the bad guy!”

Morgan gave Cane a wry glance, his upper lip curling. “You spit on him?”

“Inked.” Cane’s cheeks heated.

Morgan hefted himself up on unsteady legs and glared out at the tied-up and spluttering Degan. “Ew.”

Ripley nodded in agreement. “Really ew. I lived with this lady and her husband once and he chewed this stuff and spit everywhere and it was black and gross like that, too.”

Morgan gagged and covered his mouth before making his way to the side of the boat to feed the fish.

Cane docked the boat and Kaycee ran aboard and into the hub to hug them, stopping short at Cane, staring down at his tentacles. “Uhh... Which one is the *special* tentacle?”

Cane hadn’t emerged from the cockpit but needed to shift before he came out so as not to be seen.

“Back off, hussy. You don’t get to see that. The special tentacle is mine.” Morgan snorted.

“What special tentacle?” Ripley blinked up.

“It’s my octopus privates. It’s the tentacle I keep tucked.” Cane didn’t see any reason to lie to Ripley, as he would have to discover these things in polite society anyway when he joined the mers.

“Ew. Where’s my fish privates?” Ripley blinked up. “And why does Kaycee want to see your octopus privates?”

“I didn’t want to see his special tentacle! I was making sure I wasn’t touching it when I hugged him.” Kaycee sighed.

“All my tentacles are special.” Cane chuckled darkly and waved them at Kaycee, who scoffed. “And we’ll let Morgan talk about omega parts with you later. Okay?” He patted Ripley’s head while he seemed suddenly very concerned, as young boys were, about things of that nature.

“Oh ew. Gross.” Kaycee threw her hands up and went to pat Morgan’s back as he finished being sick. The two hugged for a lingering moment. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just don’t mention chewing tobacco again. I—” He fought a soft gag. “Don’t think I can handle it.”

Ripley tensed his shoulders and pouted, issuing a tiny apology before Cane patted his head again. “You were a very brave boy.”

“And smart. You got the GPS coordinates he sent, right?” Morgan turned and sat on the ground with Kaycee, glaring over at the two tied up men.

“That was Ripley?” Cane turned to the boy, and he beamed up at them.

“One of the foster homes I was at taught me how to mess with a tattler so he could pretend he was working when he wasn’t. And you made me memorize your numbers.” Ripley beamed. Cane decided right that moment that there was quite a lot to teach the fry, and a lot of un-teaching to do.

“How’s your head?” Morgan pushed up on his tiptoes and prodded at Cane’s head.

“I shifted quick enough to heal. It’ll bruise,” Cane said, wrapping his mate up in his tentacles and arms, nuzzling his neck.

“Alright, guys, get some pants on and call people.” Kaycee tossed Cane his pants, and he shifted, shimmying into them as Kaycee averted her gaze. The older male and Degan remained on the floor, earning a sneer from Cane.

“You don’t understand. We need the child. He is the only intact omega we’ve found in years!” the older gentleman pleaded with Cane.

“Why should I care? You’ve forsaken your merforms. He doesn’t want to give up his tail.” Cane stepped over the male to tighten a spluttering Degan’s ropes. “And *you* are lucky I didn’t kill you. It was well within my rights for you, dishonoring my mate and endangering my child like that.”

“He was mine, and I paid his dowry—” Degan angled his head to wipe the black of Cane’s ink on his shoulder.

“He was chaste for you and protected himself from you. He wanted his mate to be his first. And you couldn’t wait and wanted to see if you could get a bargain. Broke bitch.” Cane walked away and scooped Morgan up into his arms. Finding a place nearby to settle, the three of them nodded toward Kaycee, who stared down at their two captives.

Ripley turned from the crowd of adults and ran over to Degan, brow furrowed. “Asshole!” He swung his foot as hard as his little leg could carry him and nailed the beta right in his family jewels, much to his shout of displeasure. The little lights in Ripley’s shoes flickered as he did so.

Kaycee, Cane, and Morgan winced, hissing under their breath.

Cane scooped Morgan up and carried him back to the van from where they came. Kaycee stayed with the captives and snarled, eager to get her licks in. If he could have a few minutes alone with his family, he thought he'd be okay.

Chapter Seventeen

Morgan

It'd been a rough few days getting another flight out of town, even rougher when he finally spoke to his family, who pinned the blame for all their woes on him.

“Shouldn't have spent money you didn't have.” Morgan failed to see how their spending problems was his problem. And they'd had the audacity to contact Cane's alpha father and negotiate for an heir, like he could do that! Morgan told himself he'd sleep and fuck until he couldn't anymore to make up for it.

A rather severe woman with a sharp nose and eyes that same sea glass as Cane's pulled up with an equally lovely omega in tow. Morgan's thoughts left all of the negative and snapped to when the omega launched himself at Morgan with a squeezing hug. “Oh my goddess! You're so adorable!” Before Morgan could even return the hug, Ripley was laughing as the omega, Cane's papa, snatched him up for a twirling hug. “Oh, and my grandfry!”

“This is your auntie Marina, and I'm your grandpa Nori.” The omega helped Ripley into a seat and turned to shoo Morgan away from the bags. “Let Cane get them. I won't have you lifting a thing.” Nori, so excitable and full of Cane's spirit, ushered Morgan into the back seat next to Ripley and waited patiently for Cane to slip in.

“No hug for me?” Cane grinned and Marina huffed.

“Boy, you are trouble and a half!” Marina shook her head.

“You’re lucky I didn’t slap you. Poor Morgan over here’s been through so much and you couldn’t keep it in your pants!” Nori fumed as he glared daggers at Cane, who had adopted a wide, wolfish grin.

“I think Grandpa means your special tentacle,” Ripley whispered.

“Honey, he’s an alpha. He thinks all his tentacles are special.” Marina sniffed and Nori snorted.

Cane frowned and leaned down to Ripley. “I think it’s rude to be talking about my special tentacle, don’t you?”

Ripley nodded. “Don’t be mean to C—Daddy.” He stumbled over the word and earned a hug from Cane.

“Don’t force it. You call me whatever you want until you’re comfortable.” Cane peered out of the car windows and gave Morgan the sweetest wink, full of flirtatious energy.

“Same goes for all of us, sweetheart. I would love for you to call me grandpa, but if you’re not comfortab—” Nori fell short when Ripley, seated comfortably in the middle between Morgan and Cane, leaned forward and hugged his arm, nuzzling in.

“I always wanted a grandpa, and a daddy and a mo—papa.” Ripley gave a sheepish smile to Morgan, who laughed.

“That’s alright, fry.” Morgan smiled and stroked Ripley’s hair as he continued to latch onto Nori.

“Ooooh! Is that the ocean?” Ripley pulled away from Nori and leaned over Cane’s lap to stare out the window at the sprawling expanse of beach houses and white sand.

“Where’s your house?” Morgan found himself interested as they glanced about, taking in the warm sun, the gently swaying trees.

“A little ways out. He’s the luckiest son of a jellyfish I’ve ever met. Got that beach house because the bridge collapsed and sat on it three years before he petitioned the county to replace the bridge with his assistance and worked on rebuilding it the entire time. Bought half the neighborhood for pennies on the dollar.” Marina turned onto a rural road as gravel crunched under tire.

Ripley couldn’t move his face from the window, eyes locked on the ocean. He said he’d never been before, never seen or smelled the ocean. From the longing expression on his face, though, despite being a freshwater fish, his merfolk spirit craved it.

The SUV crossed the frame of a well-maintained bridge, the structure not even humming under their tires in the short distance from one side to the next. Saltwater muddled beneath them as they rounded a corner and approached a rather boxy white house with empty flower beds and deplorable landscaping. A lonely, crooked bush sat by the front steps, but Morgan adored it as they rolled into the driveway.

“Can I plant a garden and do some landscaping, please? I’ve always wanted a garden,” Morgan said as they rolled out and Ripley barreled into the yard and dove into the sparse grass to roll around, laughing.

“Whatever you want. Paint the house if you like, anything. I want this to be your home, too.” Cane’s adoring tone made Morgan’s heart flutter.

“It’s a cute house, and we all warned him not to get it, but he wouldn’t listen. Spent all his money buying these houses up like candy and it’s a whole mer neighborhood. There’s an HOA being put into place to keep unaffiliated humans out,” Nori gushed as he let them into the home.

Morgan didn’t know what he expected, but it wasn’t what was before them. It was dreadfully plain, with no personal touches. An old couch sat in the center of the living room facing the dark spot where a TV should have been; the outline of one still rested there.

“They left some furniture, and I had a few things brought over from the salvage store, but it’s just to tide you over until you need.” His aunt turned her nose up like doing this had hurt her reputation somehow, but Morgan gave her a squeezing hug all the same.

“Thank you!” He wanted to be disappointed in how dreary and bare everything was, but when Cane told Morgan they’d be going furniture shopping soon so he could pick out what he wanted, his heart soared.

“That fancy consignment store downtown. Mason owns it and he wants you to come get first pick. He’ll give you lowest price on everything.” Nori chuckled. “He’s still hoping for another date.”

“Unless you’d rather have brand new,” Cane said from the other room, drawing Morgan in as he spied the master bedroom. It was just a new mattress and box spring on the floor with a blanket and fitted sheets.

“And I realize getting out of bed may be getting to be tough, but we’ll go shopping in two or three days, okay?”

We're not even sleeping here tonight. I imagine you want to sleep in your merform after that awful camp." Nori doted on Morgan so excitedly as he wandered.

"Papa! Daddy!" Ripley shrieked from the other side of the house. "Can I have this one? I want this room!" Morgan walked around a set of well-guarded inset stairs and down another hall, past other bedrooms, and into a rather long and narrow bedroom. Couldn't have been more than ten feet wide, twenty-five feet long. It would have made a wonderful playroom.

"You sure you want this to be your bedroom, or you want it to be your playroom?" Nori said, speaking his mind.

"What's a playroom?" Ripley glanced up and Nori blinked and fanned himself, eyes watering. "Please don't cry. I'm sorry! I didn't mean to say something bad." Ripley's eyes went watery and Morgan swept over, shushing him.

"No! You didn't say anything. There's a bedroom where you sleep and keep your private things, and then you have a big room that you have or can share with your siblings to put all the toys and computers and TVs in so you can all play together and have fun. There's lots of windows in here for fun times, so I don't know if you want all that for a bedroom. I was just sad that you didn't know what a playroom was. It's just a kids' office."

Ripley calmed down with a snuffle. "But I like all the windows..."

"How's this? You can have this for your bedroom, Rip, but if you want to switch later, we can. Go pick out a backup bedroom. But! When it gets stormy, we have to lock this room

out and go to the storm shelter or another room, okay?” Cane patted Ripley’s head, and he cheered up before wandering around to find his backup.

Morgan sighed in relief, and Nori apologized.

“No, no, it’s good. It’s good. He needs to see adults crying a little. He’s sensitive and thinks that it’s bad and we’ll hate him for it.” Cane sighed, and Morgan went about inspecting the bonus room. It didn’t have a closet, but a wardrobe and dresser would fix that. Maybe a toy chest... Ripley would need to be shown those things or be allowed to pick what he wanted as he saw or thought of it.

Ripley came running back through, avoiding looking at the adults. “I picked a backup.”

Morgan walked about and found a pretty little room in the corner, not too small or too big, but one window that gazed out over the ocean perfectly. “Oh, this is pretty.”

“I think I like this room better. Can I have a hammock instead of a bed?” Ripley gave them pleading eyes.

“Flat hammock frame. So if you don’t like it, we can switch to a futon mattress to make it all snug and comfy?” Morgan’s proposal made Ripley beam. “And lots of pillows and blankets.”

Ripley danced in place and squeaked when Cane swept over and picked him up. “Let’s go see the best part.”

“The bathroom?” Ripley blinked up and Cane sat him back down.

“Around the corner if you need to use it. We’re going to go downstairs.” Cane shooed him off, and they waited before

Morgan decided he needed to go, too.

“Shrinking bladder?” Nori laughed, and Morgan darted off.

Once everyone was situated, they went down the hall and to the stairs, descending to the lower floor built into the cliffside, gazing upon a wall of thick-glassed sliding doors.

“Are those storm resistant?” Morgan eyed the wall warily.

“We don’t get too many harsh storms out this way, but if I need, I can roll the steel guards over them.” Cane pointed up to rolled steel built in above them, camouflaged from immediate view.

“Oh my gosh!” Ripley screamed as he fiddled with a lock on the door and wrestled with it to get outside onto the bleached-wood deck. “Ocean!”

Morgan, Marina, Nori, and Cane glanced between one another. Marina spoke first. “He’s really never seen the ocean before.” The words had a gravity to them.

“That changes now. Let’s get him dressed and we can go down. That’s our pier?” Morgan pointed down the long winding steps to the beach and over to the left where a small dock and hut lay.

Cane jogged back upstairs and to the car to grab their bags while Ripley made his way down the steps to roll in the sand, being wary of the water, but tempted, glancing back every few seconds.

“I found a seashell!” Ripley held up a broken fragment of a shell and grinned.

“Find a pretty one! We’ll give it to the goddess,” Morgan shouted back, and Ripley took the order to heart, digging and pawing through the sand in search of the perfect shell. “I owe her lots of shells because she gave me what I wanted!”

“What’s that, grandfry?” Nori descended the steps and leaned over the banister to watch.

“I prayed really hard every night and threw lots of shiny rocks into the lake so Papa and Daddy would take me home and be mates and love me.” Ripley dug in the sand a little more and held up a little shell, inspecting it. “Shiny!”

“There you go! That’s a good one.” Morgan joined Nori and offered him a sad smile.

“I see that sad look. It’s nothing to do with Ripley, is it?” Nori stared out at the child as he dug for more shells.

Morgan shrugged.

“Worried Cane isn’t your mate?” Nori turned his head and caught Morgan off guard.

“S-sorry.”

“No worries.” Nori reached over to take Morgan’s hand, staring down at the marking. “Rest assured. Instincts picked right. I see you two together and it’s harmony.”

“None of our parents were ever mated, so we don’t know what we’re looking for.” Morgan frowned.

“You’re happy, and that’s all that matters.” Nori patted him on the back.

“Cane’s a handful, but you look the type to be able to keep him straight.” Marina stared out at Ripley, a slight smile

on her lips.

“I got them!” Cane came rushing out, gripping a few bits of cloth in his hands.

“Ripley! I got you a present. Come here.” Morgan beamed as he took a shirt from Cane’s hands, his own, a pleasant off-white crop top made from a T-shirt that had been stripped and rewoven with little tassels and cowrie shells. Morgan shed his shirt and traded it for the other as Ripley danced up excitedly, putting his lavender-colored one on, bouncing to hear the shells clack.

“Where’s Daddy’s?” Ripley blinked up at Cane and Nori chuckled.

“Honey, alphas don’t wear shirts for the most parts. Omegas and women do.” Nori pulled his shirt off to reveal a rather plain and flowy thin-strapped shirt beneath.

“Gotta cover our nipnips?” Ripley raised his shirt up and Marina snorted.

“No. You can show off all the nipnip you want. Clothes are a fun thing.”

“Ladies go around with their boobies out?” Ripley covered his mouth in a soft gasp.

“Not any ladies I associate with, but if they did, meh? Being nekkid isn’t evil for us. The fairer of our sexes gets the benefit of accessorizing.” Marina guided them toward the little boathouse and inside. It smelled of old wood and salt and creaked gently underfoot as they filed in. Nori and Marina stripped first, diving into the open pool before them where a boat should have rested. Ripley followed, making sure his

little top was still in place before splashing about as his tail and fins righted him.

“Oh, your colors are so beautiful, look at that, Marina!” Nori slid into the water, tentacles blossoming out around him, Marina in tow.

“Can I ask a bad question?” Ripley twisted his lips and stared at Nori and Marina scrutinizingly.

“Ask away, little one.” Nori treaded water as Cane held Morgan’s hand, letting him step into the water carefully. Without clothes, his bump was a little more noticeable.

“How come you don’t have your special tentacle tucked in like Daddy does?” Ripley scrutinized Nori and Marina as they snorted, laughing.

“Honey. We are childbearers. We don’t have a hectocotylus. That’s something for alphas and beta males.” Nori pulled Ripley in for a hug and laughed.

Ripley, as if having something dawn on him for the first time, gasped. “Is that why I don’t have a wiener when I’m a fish?”

“Oh, you poor child. You do. It’s tucked in neatly inside until you need it.” Nori rolled his eyes and gave Morgan and Cane a pointed look.

“But it doesn’t come out when I pee!” Ripley crossed his arms.

“Rip. Remember those things I told you were adult stuff we’d need another omega fish mer to talk with you about?” Morgan cleared his throat and Ripley’s little cheeks went pink.

“Oh, he’s fine. He’s curious and doesn’t know all the things. You have one, it’s just hiding until you’re old enough to be mated. But it may be worth it to have Doc talk to you about that. Fish parts are different from cecaelia parts. Now come on. Morgan has to be at the doctor, and we have to take you shopping.” Nori pecked a kiss onto Ripley’s forehead and separated to dive down, waiting for them to follow.

Cane would barely let Morgan swim, keeping on his tail as they swam the scant few miles out to reach the bustling coastal city beneath the waves.

Chapter Eighteen

Cane

“It’s so salty!” Ripley laughed and licked the water around him, the gills on his neck fluttering inconsistently as he figured out how to breathe in the ocean.

“Yes, it is.” Cane swam lazily, keeping a hand on Morgan to ease his way. He’d heard omegas often complain of their backs while shifting and swimming while pregnant. It would be a long day, and letting him get too tired too soon would ruin the experience.

“And we’re sure it’s okay for me to be back here? South is fine?” Cane hadn’t made contact with the omega since he left.

“Still catting about. That friend of yours showed up last night and already South was all over him. The king has dropped everything and would like to issue you a small, private apology. I’m also sorry I didn’t believe you,” Marina said, grudgingly. “But you sure as hell didn’t waste any time giving Morgan number eight.”

Cane shushed her, but Ripley was several tails ahead of them, with Nori twirling in the currents. They’d hit the barrier soon enough, the magic that kept humans out and obscured sight.

“Alright, Fry! Hold your breath and swim fast!” Nori sped up. The barrier could be a little disorienting, but Ripley did it like a champ, disappearing through the wavering wall as everyone else followed. His jaw dropped in pure surprise, fins

halting in the water as the current took him for a little spin in place.

“There’s so many!” Ripley gazed out at the small city, mers of all types swimming about. Cecaelia jetted over buildings and fish-tailed mers swam the streets. The odd cetacean flitted by, or a royal porpoise. “Look! Papa! There’s mers with tails like you!” Ripley pointed at a porpoise and Morgan chuckled.

“Not quite, sweetheart. Different kind of cetacean.” The differences were minor, but some mers could be tetchy, and Morgan would have been more afraid of that.

“We’re liberal here. Nobody gets upset over misclassifying a tail.” Cane urged Morgan toward town, and Ripley lagged back, shrinking into Cane and Morgan’s space as his eyes stayed wide.

“What’s wrong, Rip?” Cane snagged him with a tentacle and he held on, letting Cane tow him along.

“What if I see a shark?” Ripley’s voice went reedy and soft.

“A shark mer or a shark-shark?” Morgan took Ripley’s hand and smiled.

“Either!” Ripley tensed up, tail stiffening as Cane tugged him along.

“Well, if you see a shark mer, say *hello* and be nice. If you see a real shark, they won’t bother you. The goddess doesn’t let them nibble on her babies. The sharks may swim up and nudge you to see if you’d mind getting some fishing line or a copepod off them. They’re harmless.” Morgan chuckled.

“Ohh, and the whales come up and ask you to nip whale lice off them sometimes.” Cane chuckled, remembering childhood days spent being chased by pilot whales desperate for some fin scratches and lice picking. He sincerely hoped Ripley would have those memories, but there were far less pilot whales these days.

“Whales can get lice?” Ripley’s eyes went big before he covered his head. “But they don’t have hair!”

“Different kind of little critter, like a tiny little lobster. Gotta pop em off and squish them quick so they don’t hurt the whales anymore.” Cane grinned while Ripley made a face that changed the moment they neared the city, enough to hear the watery chatter of other mers.

“Alright. Ripley, you come with us.” Nori waved for Ripley to come over to him and Marina. “We’re going to go shopping and meet people while they go sit at the doctor, okay?”

Ripley slid out of Cane’s grasp and whined. “You’re gonna make sure the baby’s okay, right?”

Morgan rested a hand on his belly and smiled. “Yep. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

With a quick movement, Ripley darted toward Morgan and hugged, pressing the side of his face into Morgan’s belly. “I want a little sister.”

“Why’s that?” Cane ruffled Ripley’s hair.

“Because I want to play dress up and help Papa make little girl clothes and cute stuff.” Ripley beamed and Morgan whined. The fry could be so cute at times.

“Alright. We’ll try our best.” Morgan laughed. “Try and be a girl for Ripley, okay, little one?” Morgan patted his belly and Ripley sighed, parting ways to go chase after Nori.

“We really hoping for a girl?” Morgan muttered as Ripley swam off, his green-and-orange tail flitting amid the pulse of Nori’s and Marina’s tentacles.

“I’m just hoping they’re healthy... But it’s very unlikely it’s a girl.” Cane glanced about nervously. “I think...”

“Girl genes would be on your chromosomes...so if it’s a girl, it’ll be cecaelia or dolphin.” Morgan hummed and shrugged. “Oh, well!”

“Do you care?”

Morgan twisted his lips. “Pft. No. We have Ripley and that’s enough, but if we have more, I don’t care what they are. Cecaelia, dolphin, orca, or darter, I’ll love them all the same.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me.” Cane swam around to grab Morgan by his waist and swam off toward the city center, where the buildings were more organized and built out than they were on the outskirts. The domed buildings had organic shapes that, from above, blended into the seafloor below. Sidewalks and streets were pointless in the area, so buildings had entrances at all levels, inviting people in.

The building they searched for had a domed roof and was built far more sturdily than many of the buildings around it. The tsunami or rough tide likelihood was almost nonexistent in the area, as evidenced by the hundred years of coral buildup on the planes outside the city edges, protected by their barrier.

They swam into an airlock on the side, as was common in many technological businesses in the cities. Most had a centered building or nearby island for communications and medical, as evidenced by the Tidewater Shimmer, as they called themselves.

Swimming into the lock, they pressed a button as water drained from the floor and air bubbled up, allowing them to safely shift as the pressure equalized. From a pack on his back, Cane pulled out some board shorts and they pushed in, drying off in an intermediary room before entering a rather damp and stuffy plaza full of offices.

Cane knew the way by heart, having been sent to the office dozens of times in his childhood years and into his adult years, always over a busted nose or a deep cut that needed tending. He wasn't clumsy as much as he was unobservant, and far too trusting with wildlife. Beyond that, he took the royal children to the doctors often when he wasn't topside negotiating business or out in the field. The amount of work an underwater welder of his specialty could get was sparse, but highly lucrative.

The empty walls echoed with their barefooted steps as they traversed a few halls and knocked on a door labeled *clinic* before being let in by a stooped but amiable older man with a beaming smile.

“Hurricane! My boy, how are yo—” He halted, eyes widening as he laid eyes upon Morgan and gasped. “You told me he was cetacean, but you didn't mention how beautiful he was. Come in, come in!” He ushered them in, and Cane gave a soft laugh that echoed about in the pressurized room.

“I’m surprised. Cane spends so much time doting on me and bragging on me.” Morgan laughed it off, but the doctor tsked and took his hand, leading him through a small waiting area into a back room. Morgan hopped onto an exam table and glanced around. Everything had a distinctly salty and damp smell, but the doors were all sealed and running dehumidifiers that made Cane’s skin prickle.

“Doctor Coral. It’s wonderful to see you. I didn’t have time to give many details, what with everything going on.” Cane laughed nervously and the doctor pulled out his stethoscope. With a gesture, he had Morgan lifting his shirt to listen intently.

“One baby.” The doctor moved the stethoscope about. “But you already knew that, I’m sure.” He glanced up at the clock, counting seconds before pulling away with a smile. “Good heart rate. Cetacean!”

Organizing a few wires and devices, the doctor turned a small monitor to face them as he lubricated the end of a handheld device and pressed it into Morgan’s belly even before he’d lain fully back, homing in on the child within ever so quickly as Morgan gasped.

“Lemme see if I can focus on the tail a bit.” A little one, no bigger than the palm of Cane’s hand, curled in Morgan’s belly, twitching. So small and innocent. The black-and-white image of it twitched in mild annoyance, squirming, as if the unwelcome pressure could be swatted away.

Doctor Coral adjusted the wand at different angles and grumbled as he got fleeting glimpses of a fin and measured it on the screen.

“Well, I can tell you now, they’re alpha or omega, since it appears we have an orca! It’d take an amniocentesis to tell the difference, but some mysteries are best left until the grand unveiling, hmm? Well, unless he moves into the perfect spot for me to see his dor—” He took a few pictures while Morgan sat there, eyes wide. Ripley would be sad, but the child they bore would be important to the orcas and would elevate Morgan in status to his family. Cane was just happy that he appeared healthy.

“Oh!” the doctor gasped and turned the wand and grinned. “We have a showoff here!”

Cane couldn’t tell what the doctor was looking at, but it must have been important. Morgan squinted and snorted. “Yes, we do.”

“I have no idea what I’m looking at.” Cane puzzled at a little curled, undeformed dorsal fin.

“Alpha. Dorsal fin is a giveaway.” Doctor Coral printed off the picture and handed it over to Morgan, who stared at it with slight disbelief.

“We’re having a little orca, an alpha!” Morgan squealed and bounced in his seat. “My parents can go suck a sea anemone!”

“As long as that doesn’t make Rip any less special.” Cane gave Morgan a wary glance, and his expression went from utter joy to a full halt.

“Absolutely not. Ripley is just as much our baby as this one.” Morgan huffed as Doctor Coral wiped the gel off his stomach.

“Speaking of. That little darter. That’s Ripley, right?”
Doctor Coral glanced over his shoulder.

“Yes. We went into the camp single and came back with two kids, apparently.” Cane laughed.

“I’d rather have the souvenir T-shirt or one of those lame little stamped leather bracelets.” Doctor Coral waved his hand about. “My days of wrangling fry are over with. But I want to see him for a checkup. If he’s not been in water enough, he may have some breathing issues or malnutrition.”

“You have time today?” Cane leaned against the wall and Doctor Coral nodded.

“Yep. I assume he’s with Nori?” The doctor pulled out a rather clunky cell phone, one of the waterproof models that most merfolk this side of the shore owned. When Cane nodded, Doctor Coral’s thumbs flew, flicking out a message. An almost-immediate ding responded. “He says they’re trying to coax him into eating some fish, but they’ll be here in ten.”

“Oooh yeah. We haven’t had much luck getting Ripley to eat raw fish.” Morgan frowned.

“He’ll figure out it tastes good and go ham for it.” Cane laughed and bragged on Ripley and Morgan for a few minutes before Cane’s family returned, Ripley rushing in at full speed, bare feet slapping the damp floor.

Cane opened his arms just in time to catch Ripley, who laughed and flailed, reaching toward Morgan. “Do I get a sister?”

“Not this time, I’m afraid.” Morgan tugged his shirt back down.

“Alpha,” Cane said, cheeks going hot at Morgan’s words. *Not this time.* There’d be a next.

“Aww, but I wanted to be the big brother.” Ripley sighed.

“You will be,” Morgan said.

“But if he’s an alpha, won’t he be the big one?” Ripley’s lower lip quivered.

“Not for a long time. You’ll be the big brother, and will need to protect him. I’m an omega, and I’m protecting you. I’ll protect our little one.” Morgan opened his arms and Ripley squirmed from Cane’s. Their fry didn’t need any more excuse to snuggle up to Morgan.

“Okay.” Ripley sighed and eyed Doctor Coral warily for a moment. “He’s gonna poke me with a needle, isn’t he?”

“Probably. Been vaccinated against viral fin rot? Gill flu? Been treated against ick?” The doctor folded his arms.

“I don’t think so. I got all the people vaccines.” Ripley tightened his grip around Morgan’s waist.

“Come on, Fry. Off your papa and onto the scale so we can get your height and weight. You’re what? Nine?”

“Eleven.” Ripley stuck his tongue out as he jumped onto the scale and stood straight.

Doctor Coral flicked the weight on the scale a few times and frowned before flicking his gaze toward the height. “Small for your age, Fry. Your fathers need to make sure you eat your kelp.”

“I took a big bite of salmon earlier,” Ripley announced, and Nori laughed.

“I think it’s the fish he’s lacking. He’s never had raw fish before.” Morgan folded his hands in his lap and Ripley pouted. He hated it raw.

“It’s difficult to cook things in these parts, Ripley. We eat things raw. And sweets can’t really survive in the water.” Doctor Coral chuckled, and Ripley sulked as he took temperature, pulse, and blood pressure. Ripley grumbled through all of it but got over it quickly.

“Do I at least get a sucker after this, like back home?” Ripley sighed when Doctor Coral brought out the syringes. He plucked a few vials from a small refrigerator and snorted at Ripley, glancing over his shoulder.

“I got some gummy bears over on my desk if you’re that insistent upon sweets.” Doctor Coral flicked the syringe and moseyed over before making quick work of it. “Now I’ll need you to shift on the table here and let me see your tail, okay?”

Ripley sighed, and Morgan slid off the table to let Ripley get comfortable while the doctor raised rails on the side and turned his back so Ripley could undress and shift.

Doctor Coral turned back and prodded at Ripley’s scales and flicked his fins, shining a little light on them.

“Your slime layer is pretty thin. Do you wash your tail with soap, mister?” The doctor glanced up at Ripley, who nodded.

“Okay, you’ve never been taught how to clean, and neither of your parents here are fish-tailed. Fortunately, I am.” Doctor Coral waved a finger.

Cane perked up. “I forgot! You’re an omega, right?”

Doctor Coral glared at him for a moment. “Yes.” Usually, the admission of one being an omega was followed by discrediting their status.

Cane waved his hands anxiously. “Um. Ripley doesn’t know anything about omega and none of us are particularly qualified for a fish-tailed boy.”

“Ahhh. Okay. Nori, you and Morgan come visit me in a few days and we’ll get the talk going. He’ll need two more shots I can’t overlap today and for fish’s sake, feed the poor fry.” Doctor Coral waved them off and Ripley shifted, shimmying back into his little shorts before plodding after them. “Oh, and have him scrub only with seaweed for a few weeks to build his coat back up,” the doctor shouted after them.

“Am I dirty?” Ripley asked as they crowded into the pressurizing chamber.

“No, sweetheart. You’ve been cleaning too much. We’ll go pick you up some algae treatment to coat your scales back up.” Marina swept in and squeezed Ripley’s shoulders, and he sagged with relief as they ditched their bottoms and shifted quickly.

Leaving the water lock was easier than entering it, as it almost propelled them back into the streets, Ripley doing a somersault in the water.

“Come on, Fry. I promised you shopping.” Nori swept around Ripley and they laughed, heading back toward the market from where they’d come.

“You okay if your daddy and papa head back home and relax for a little bit?” Nori steered Ripley lightly.

“Is Mor—Papa tired again?” Ripley glanced over his shoulder, sadness flickering in his eyes.

“They’ve gotten to spoil you for weeks. My turn, now.” Nori harrumphed.

“Auntie Marina is coming with us, too?” Ripley halted and floated in place.

“Yeah. And I know all the best places.” Marina grinned and Ripley brightened a little.

“I’ll be okay! I’ll see you in a little bit and I’ll be good, I promise. And I won’t cry.” Ripley beamed and Morgan swam up to fawn over him a minute.

“Nobody’s mad at you for crying. You’ve a lot of sad stuff and scary times. But you’re so very brave. You saved me, remember?” Morgan hugged Ripley tight.

“I hacked the tattler and hot-wired the van!” He beamed and Cane snorted.

“What else can you hot-wire?” Marina swam up.

“Pretty much anything that doesn’t got an alarm on it if I can get to the wires. My foster father showed me before he got sent to jail.” Ripley yelped when Nori pulled him back.

“Alright, Fry! Enough of the hooligannery. Let’s go spoil you while they get some snuggles in.” Nori tsked, and they swam off, leaving Cane to lead Morgan through the lazy streets, toward the ravine where the water grew a little chillier.

Cane hoped Morgan would enjoy colder waters like his homeland.

Chapter Nineteen

Morgan

Cresting over a sand dune, peppered with coral and jutting rocks, the first outlines of a sunken ship sat lonely amid a beautifully done kelp garden and pretty arrangements of stone and anemones.

“This is interesting,” Morgan said, taking in the display.

“It’s not much, but my fathers built it together as a starter home. When my alpha father left, I took up the mantle with Papa. We kept building and fixing it up. It became sort of his new hobby. It may look plain outside, but inside it’s better than any home out here, I promise.” Cane approached the topside and swam to the deck hole, opening the latch to swim inside.

As Cane had promised, the inside was as lovely as any mer’s home he’d ever seen. The walls were the welded steel of the ship’s hull, dotted with photos in ornate frames. And while some merfolk seemed to decorate their homes like undersea magpies or middle-aged women redoing their bathroom in some awful beach theme, they’d stayed tasteful. Things had evolved over time, as evidenced by different shades of metal, but the space seemed so much more open. What had once been a fishing vessel had been turned into a small paradise, every surface gleaming clean.

“No algae anywhere. Do you use snails?” Morgan stared closely as he swam about and followed Cane into one of the small rooms toward the keel.

“Nah. I saw how much effort it took Papa to clean it constantly, so I put a little copper and silver into the wall paneling, electroplated it. We also have some tang fish around that nibble up the odd green spot.” Cane made a clicking sound as he stopped from entering the room and peered around until a few fish swam in a small school from what must have been the kitchen area. Their bright yellow patterns and eager formation made Morgan laugh.

“I didn’t know they were trainable.” Morgan lifted his arms as they circled him curiously, as if hoping he’d have some algae on him.

“Not precisely.” Cane opened a cabinet and found a jar within full of a green sludge. He shook it a bit and let it leak into the water around them and the fish went straight for it.

“Ahh. They know who feeds them.” Morgan laughed, humming happily. “I can relate.”

“We have some salmon in the cooler if you want?” Cane turned toward the chiller and Morgan snorted.

“I was hoping number eight was on the menu.” Morgan flicked a brow and Cane swept him in, drawing them both toward the small room he’d headed toward before. The yellow fish didn’t follow, content to search for more kitchen algae.

When the door opened, a disgruntled blue lobster came scuttling out and snapped a few times at Cane before scuttling off to parts unknown.

“Woo, pests getting in?” Morgan stared and Cane shrugged.

“He’s mad I haven’t been home in a while. He wants his shell scrubbed. He’s old and had a hard shed last time, so it helps.” Cane smiled apologetically before sweeping Morgan into his bedroom.

Little cabinets lined the walls, portholes with doors to easily pull things out, but what caught Morgan’s eye was the comfortable little hammock tucked up in the corner of the room with gauzy netting strewn about, turning it into a little hidden alcove.

“Oh, Ripley will love this.” Morgan gasped as Cane pulled him in and nestled in, tentacles wrapping around key points in a securing manner, hiding away from the world as cephalopods were wont to do. Morgan found it endlessly endearing as Cane brought him in like a treasure, drawing their lips together for a soft kiss.

Morgan had been starved for touch the past week, wanting Cane more than he’d ever before. And he found it while surrounded by saltwater, curled in his many tendrils in a dark room where naught but the faint glow from the slit of a window above and the glint in Cane’s eyes could be seen.

“I love this so much.” Cane’s mouth found Morgan’s neck, his firm hands wandering his mate’s waist. “But I think our little fry is going to enjoy burrowing in the sand.”

“And our calf?” Morgan’s vision darkened, his lids growing heavy in the cool quiet of Cane’s private space.

“I don’t know what a calf would like. Do you?” Cane nipped along Morgan’s neck.

“I can only vouch for myself, and I didn’t spend much time in the ocean as a child. I loved hiding in the kelp and finding sponges to play with. My sister tried to get me to catch blowfish to get high, but I wasn’t interested in that. Seemed cruel. I liked being warm and free.” Morgan stretched out, shivering as tendrils engulfed him, suckered appendages sliding down his body in familiar ways, like thousands of tiny mouths, plucking soft kisses along his skin. Each tugging pull traversed his flesh in ways he’d only ever dreamed of.

“Sweet soul,” Cane breathed over Morgan’s ear as tentacles migrated around his back, over his belly, the trail of symmetrically ordered suckers trailing below his navel, inching closer to his slit that ached and twitched.

Cool water met the inner part of his vent, the tip of his cock throbbing to journey forth into the soothing saltwater. Rather than a tentacle greeting his cock, Cane’s firm hand traced the outside of the slit before dipping in. The pad of his middle finger teased Morgan’s cock into aching hardness but blocked it from emerging.

“C-Cane?” Morgan’s breath shuddered, his insides clenching. His cock stung with pleasure, the tip inching firmly against Cane’s palm. Two fingers spread his vent wide as the slick, warm tip of a tentacle traced his opening.

“I wonder if your cock can feel me from the inside.” Cane nipped Morgan’s ear and tugged, the water swirling there in delicious ways before the tip of a thicker, blunter tentacle pushed against his crowded opening. With his cock filling and restricted, crowding its sheath along his channel, Cane’s tentacle stretched and filled him.

“Y-yes!” Morgan’s voice came out breathier than intended, stuttering as Cane pushed deeper.

“You wanted number eight, right?” Cane squirmed the tendril deeper, pulsing it in strange rhythmic ways as it bottomed out.

Morgan’s insides twisted, clenching as pleasure rushed through him like water through a sea vent. Hot pleasure flushed through him until Cane moved his palm, circling his hand just in time. Morgan’s cock filled the circle of his palm so perfectly, plunging into the tightness.

That was all it took, the tight heat, short squeeze, and firm pressure. Morgan gasped out, body going rigid as another tentacle traced the circle of his lower hole, undulating there so gently. Cane’s fist tightened, and the writhe of his body drew his lips down Morgan’s shoulder, down his back, and to the opening of his spiracle for a gentle flick of his tongue.

Of all the skilled noises that their kind could make in water, merged with their telepathy, a scream didn’t translate. Morgan threw his head back, mouth open wide. The darkness of the room went black then white, as an orgasm trembled deep in his channel, radiating out. What broke free was a squeak so shrill it vibrated his core.

Morgan’s cock gripped onto Cane’s hand, the tip curling. Every inch of Morgan’s body hummed with pleasure, invaded in and around every lower orifice. Not wasting a moment, Cane claimed Morgan’s mouth. Cane’s tongue curled and lapped in ways no other merfolk could, owning Morgan with heart and soul. Overwhelmed with pleasure, Morgan surrendered to it, a mere buoy in the sea of bliss, cast adrift.

Like a distant echo, he barely took in Cane's heavy breaths, the way every muscle seized and trembled. The tumble of Cane's pleasure drew Morgan into a state of awareness where his subconscious allowed him to release.

Morgan's hips spasmed, stilled by the tight wrap of Cane's tendrils, and the pulsing of his mating tentacle grew more intense, grinding as if to drive his seed deep, fruitless, seeing as Morgan had already fallen prey to its virility.

Light exploded behind Morgan's eyes, and together, their final twitching shudders let loose a cloudy haze about them in the water, flowing toward the wall vents where the dirtied water drifted off much like Morgan's thoughts, hazy and listless.

Secure in Cane's hammock, Morgan curled gently to himself and closed his eyes. "I love you."

"Love you, too, cutie." Cane loosened his tentacles and Morgan yawned, enjoying the soothing saltwater around him.

Voices drew Morgan out of his haze of lust and he woke, tucked sweetly into Cane's netting. Ripley's joyful laughter and Cane's deep voice drew him out, tail flitting as he opened the door and swam toward the great room. Ripley's uncontrollable giggling made his stomach flutter, or maybe his baby moved. Morgan touched his bump curiously and found his calf rather active, perhaps responding to Ripley's contagious laughter.

"Stoop!" Ripley flailed about as the blue lobster from earlier crawled over him, tiny pincers plucking over his scales,

as if looking for something to nibble on.

“He’s not going to stop until he gets all the lake crud off you.” Cane folded his arms.

“I shut the door to the kitchen to keep the tang from going after him.” Nori giggled.

“I say let them have at it. Maybe it’ll help his slime coat.” Morgan covered his mouth for a little laugh, drawing everyone’s attention. Even the lobster stopped and turned its eyestalks his way.

It scuttled a few steps closer to Morgan, antennae twitching. Seeming to determine Morgan sufficiently Cane-scented, it went back to nibbling on Ripley.

“What’s his name?” Morgan swam over to Cane and tucked into his side.

“Bluecifer,” Marina said, eyeing the thing suspiciously. He halted his thorough cleaning of Ripley’s tail to return her gaze. Morgan fanned his tail a flick away, distancing himself from the ornery creature.

“Seems a fitting name. Did you name it, Cane?” Morgan smiled as Ripley went back to squirming.

“Izaiah did.” Nori stared at the crustacean before taking a wavering breath and giving a sad smile.

“I just called him Blue.” Cane shrugged and darted over to grab Nori for a hug and twirl. “But you had a fun day, right?”

“It was a wonderful day. You’re right.” Nori nodded. “Now let’s go get dinner ready. Come on, Morgan, Marina.

Cane and Ripley can clean Bluecifer up.”

Morgan gave Cane a wary look and received an encouraging nudge. “He doesn’t bite. Just be yourself.”

Nervous more than anything, Morgan flitted up to give Cane a swift peck and swam off with Nori and Marina to the small kitchen.

Cooking, as it were, didn’t happen underwater. They ate things raw, but preparation could take time to debone and fillet. Morgan was well used to doing the scaling when he stayed with his grandmother. “What can I help with?”

“I pretty much did everything this morning, but thank you for offering.” Nori smiled and Marina tugged Morgan’s arm to get him to rest in a netting chair along the wall, far better suited for cecaelia. Morgan didn’t mind though. Snuggling in reminded him of the comfortable moment he’d shared with Cane earlier, and the lovely nap afterward.

Nori pattered about with fish fillets, putting them into little baskets with a weighted lid to keep the contents from floating about. For a select few, he broke out some cookie cutters and began punching cute shapes into fish fillets and seaweed. “If this won’t make him eat, I don’t know what will.”

Morgan made a soft noise of delight at the idea, and Marina nodded approvingly. “Worked for Cane when he was a fry.”

“Picky eater?” Morgan chewed his lip with concern.

“Once he found out fish the food, and fish the friends, were the same thing, he stopped eating for a while. Poor baby.

Such a sweet soul, always taking in hurt creatures.” Nori smirked and Morgan’s cheeks flushed.

“He is so very sweet. He snatched me and Ripley up on day one.” Morgan traced his fingers along the clean netting, cheeks warming in thought.

“Impulsive as anything, but he’s a good kid. Now we got questions for you, new nephew.” Marina stiffened and turned in her seat toward Morgan as Nori continued plating things.

“Ask away.” Morgan opened his hands invitingly.

“You’re from a conservative pod. Did falling for Cane bother you at first?” Marina stared in wait.

“No. I’ll be honest. I’ve had a proclivity toward cecaelia without knowing it. I’ve not met many in my life, not really. I heard the bad words used, but I never saw the vileness they claimed. I never wanted to have that much hate in me. Cecaelia have treated me so much better than my own family. Beach got me to that camp and away from my arranged marriage. Cane was a bit of an ass to me at first, but otherwise he warmed up fast.” Morgan fidgeted.

“An ass?” Nori turned his head, brow knitted with concern.

“He saw my wrist tattoo and thought I was mated, so my flirting came off as rather scandalous.” Morgan cleared his throat nervously.

“Yeah, that’d do it. Cane’s many things, but a home-wrecker he is not.” One of Marina’s tentacles pushed forward and nudged Morgan’s shoulder.

Nori, packing up Ripley's fun-shaped food, smiled. "Let's go eat in the garden. I think Morgan gets the Papa seal of approval." Nori beamed, and they all filed out, rushing into the great room as Ripley sat scrubbing at the joints of Bluecifer, his little pinchers raised high to allow him better access.

"Come on, we're eating in the garden. I packed a little extra so Ripley can share with Bluecifer." Nori swept by, a sweet smile crossing his lips as Ripley gathered the lobster carefully into his arms and swam after.

And as it turned out, sharing with the lobster and the little fun shapes were just the key to Ripley very much enjoying his dinner.

Chapter Twenty

Cane

It'd been a rough day of shopping. Morgan, bundled in a hoodie to hide his growing belly, couldn't really make up his mind on the couch they wanted. Cane had opinions on both of them, but watching Morgan labor over the decision made his heart warm. The secondhand store had a wonderful selection, and Morgan was tied between a large L-shaped sectional and an overstuffed piece with a matching armchair.

"Do they make slipcovers for the sectional?" Cane eyed the store owner, Mason, who had followed them around dutifully.

"Yes, I believe there's a few that came with it when the former owner called us," he said, wandering into the back to rummage about, bringing out a neatly folded box of covers.

"Oooh, that settles it. Yes. Cleanable slipcovers! Babies and children are hell on furniture." Morgan giggled and Mason placed a neon-pink tag on the box and sectional marking them as sold. "Matching tables and ottoman, too?"

"If Morgan wants them." Cane glanced over and Morgan bounced with excitement.

Mason nodded and drew them through the gallery to see about bedroom furniture. They talked about Ripley's hammock bed and Mason brightened, showing them a beautiful bunk bed, high-rise with a hammock beneath. Morgan gasped, and they pink-tagged it before the picture had

even finished sending to Nori and Ripley. Within moments, an enthusiastic *yes* came in response.

“I think that’s all for now.” Morgan chewed his lip nervously, wearing a little dent into it.

“We do need baby furniture, eventually.” Cane rested his hands on Morgan’s slender shoulders, rubbing sweetly.

“We do.” Morgan hummed and followed Mason into the crowded back room of the place where he kept the less valuable pieces.

“Take your pick. I can’t give this stuff away half the time. I usually reserve it for shipments out to disaster areas and people in need.” Mason gestured at the clean and neatly stored changing tables, quality cribs. “No used mattresses, and anything that has serial numbers gets checked for recalls before I keep it.”

Morgan sighed with happiness and picked out a few pieces that came from a matched set. All in a sort of sterile generic white. “Can I paint them?” Morgan clapped his hands together and turned to face Cane with the biggest, most pleading eyes that Cane had ever seen. He would have thought Morgan was asking for half of Pottery Barn with how much yearning lay within those dark pools.

“If you want, or I’ll paint them for you, or Ripley can help if you like. Anything you want.” Cane drew Morgan into his side and hugged him tight.

“Are you sure it won’t look cheap and tacky?” Morgan’s eyes watered.

“And if it does? If it makes you happy, it’s worth it.” Cane rested his chin on the top of Morgan’s dark curls, inhaling his sweet, salty scent. His feral nature begged him to surround his mate in tentacles and treasure him, protect him from the world.

“Won’t you be ashamed?” Morgan tensed. Whatever his family had put him through had left an indelible mark on him.

“Why would I be? A house is a home. It’s where we express ourselves and hide from all the bad in the world. Our home is a reflection of us and our safe space. It’s not meant for other people to enjoy. So if you want your garden to have, hell, a thousand lawn gnomes, pink flamingos, the most awful paint job on this furniture you can think of, or even one of those singing fish on the wall... Go for it. My home will be perfect when my family is smiling.” Cane swatted Morgan’s rump gently and relished the flush of delight over his withdrawn features.

“Really? And can we go get paint and supplies after?” Morgan practically vibrated.

“Sure. Hardware store? I’ll lay a tarp down in the garage.” Cane snorted, and Mason walked from around the corner with a sly grin.

“Before you go taking him to the hardware store, let him look through my boxes in back. Someone dropped off a load of things and I take furniture only, but they were a flipper and there’s so much chalk paint.” Mason waved his hand dismissively.

Morgan brightened and rushed back to the boxes indicated, leafing through cans of relatively new paint in

colors that appeared to delight him. Paintbrushes, assorted hardware, sandpaper. “Cane! Do we have tools?”

“Yeah. I kept a locked case of my things in the garage. Should be everything you need in there. If not, I’ll buy new.” Cane chuckled and Morgan’s happiness made his feral nature preen with delight. He had provided for his mate and been deemed worthy! The world was whole and right.

“He has everything here I wanted!” Morgan positively glowed, and Mason got their address, promising to have all their stuff at the house within the next few hours when his delivery guy came back. Cane paid him what he thought was a far too reasonable amount, which may or may not have had something to do with his amorous intent with Nori. Cane filed that mental image away in his repressed memories bin. *Ew.*

But then again... Good for him. Nori needed happiness.

From what he remembered of his alpha father, the male was a freight train of love and joy. He swept about, always so happy and *in love*. Cane couldn’t understand how he could have left them. The mere thought of leaving Morgan made his heart wrench *painfully*. He placed a hand to his chest as they exited the store and fought back the sting of tears. A strange comfort came with that thought.

He is my mate. There are no other options. Izaiah walked away too easily.

As if to satisfy his fears, he pulled Morgan into a kiss that swept him off his feet. In the center of the parking lot, not a care in the world, Cane had no room for doubt. “Mine.”

“Love you, too,” Morgan hummed, lips brushing Cane’s.

Somewhere along the road, a truck's horn honked, and a human shouted, "Gay!" out his window before speeding off like a coward. Morgan, oblivious, turned his head to look around, like he'd be referring to anyone else, before pointing to himself with confusion.

"Not had much interactions with humans, huh?" Cane didn't let it stop him from carrying Morgan back the rest of the way to his truck.

"No, why?" Morgan blinked up at him sweetly.

"Never you mind. Stay that sweet and innocent, please." Cane helped him into the car, heart aching to take his mate to every store in town to buy him all that his heart desired.

Cane carried Morgan across the threshold of their home. Nori and Marina sat around, half napping from exhaustion. All the new furniture sat in place as far as Cane could tell from a cursory peek.

"Morgan's tools are in the garage with the baby furniture. Ripley wanted to break in his hammock. I don't think he slept entirely well last night, but Doc Coral thinks he needs a night or two a week of sea sleep to adjust his body." Nori's sad smile made Cane melt a little. Watching his father coo and fawn over the little omega made Cane hope for a future where his father could find his mate and give him a sibling.

"Thank you, guys. I would have happily done it by myself." Cane swept in to give his papa a hug and hummed. It was good to have him back, and a little sad at the same time that he'd come home only to be a taken man, ready to venture

on his own, away. He wondered if Nori was lonely without him. He had small hopes that Nori would have at least catted around a bit while Cane was gone.

“And missed out on an opportunity to get a little landleggy with your beau?” Marina wiggled her fingers at Cane.

“I don’t do that. Too dry and…” Cane shrugged.
“Awkward.”

“You’ve never given him dry number eight?” Marina sat up, eyes wide. “Ripley!”

Morgan pursed his lips and did his best to look anywhere but at Cane or his family.

Ripley stumbled from his room and trotted in, rubbing his eyes. “Hmm?”

Cane shushed Marina, but Nori waved him off. He got up, walking toward the boy. “Morgan and Cane are home and want to have a snack with you before we go back to the boathouse.”

“Yes! They didn’t know if we’d get to see you today.” Ripley pumped his fist.

“Having fun with Grandpa?” Cane swept in to pick Ripley up as Morgan took the excuse to leave.

“Lots of fun! Bluecifer and I played fetch! I got to pet a shark. They’re really nice. And there was a sea turtle that wanted me to get a hook off of its flipper.” Ripley didn’t stop talking the entire time Morgan sat with him while Cane raided the fridge for some juice and cookies.

“Been eating your fish and seaweed?” Cane peered over his shoulder.

“Yeah! Grandpa makes it taste better.” Ripley tied into the juice and cookies, bouncing in his seat. He swung his feet in synch, his body itching to be back in the water.

“I’m glad. You ready to spend the night there without us?” Morgan rested a hand on Ripley’s and earned a bright smile.

“Yeah! Bluecifer will sleep with me. I feel lots better when I get to sleep down there.” Ripley grinned, cheeks full of cookies.

Cane scooted in to sit at the table. “So, you liked the bed?”

“It’s amazing! I want a poster, too. The group home didn’t let me hang up posters. Kyle had a calendar that had a naked lady on it, but it was really old. I wanted a bluebird calendar, but they didn’t have any left for me,” Ripley rattled on.

“What kind of poster?” Cane’s heart swelled. It felt like having a real family for the first time since he was so little.

“I dunno. Maybe one with cats on it? Or a big picture of Bluecifer!” Ripley rattled off his options, but Morgan and Cane could only stare at one another, sharing secret smiles that made Cane proud to spoil the fry rotten.

“Whatever you want.” Morgan stretched and yawned, the hem of his shirt rising a fraction of an inch, the warm tone of his skin giving Cane a delightful little peek that made his insides stir and his human tentacle perk up.

“Ripley, come on, Fry. We have to get back home before the tide changes, or we’ll have a hard swim ahead of us.” Nori

strolled in and Ripley hesitated for a moment. Morgan faltered like he wanted to tell Ripley to stay, but Ripley cut him off with a tight hug.

“I’ll come back tomorrow and sleep in my bed more. I gotta get strong and good at swimming to help my little brother.” Ripley drooped down against Morgan’s chest and rubbed his face into the bump.

Morgan hiccupped shortly, eyes watering. “Rip...”

“Ah, there we go, hormonal waterworks.” Marina strolled through, stealing a cookie. “See kid? Told ya. Big emotions.” She took a bite and waved the chocolate chip disc about.

“I’m not hormonal!” Morgan sniffled and hugged Ripley too tight, making him squeak. The tiny noise turned into a sniffle then a whimper. In a blink, Ripley fell into shivering sobs.

“Why are we crying?” Ripley sniffled. “I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“No, it’s happy. You make me so happy, Fry. I never thought I’d have everything I wanted like this. You’ve made me the happiest papa in the whole ocean.”

Ripley snuggled into Morgan’s arms for a few breaths before pulling back. “Okay. Mo—Papa...” He caught himself before clutching to Morgan’s hoodie. “I love you and Daddy so much. I’ll do everything I’m told. I’ll eat all the gross seaweeds and I’ll help clean and I’ll walk the lobster and—”

Cane leaned in to pat Ripley’s back. “Ripley, Bluecifer doesn’t need walks. He comes and goes as he pleases. If he’s sticking with you, it means he likes you. And don’t force

yourself to eat something. I'm very proud that you're trying new things."

Ripley sniffed and nodded.

"And nobody will kick you out or send you back to the group home if you act out a bit. Have fun, make friends. Be loud. And when you come back up here tomorrow, we'll go do something fun."

"I wanna make some new clothes with Papa." Ripley gave Cane big pleading eyes.

"Absolutely." Morgan didn't hesitate. Cane had told him how lovely his clothes were and so had people from the shimmer. He'd gained new confidence in his clothes, and the prospect of status and decorum went out the window with half of his fears.

Ripley gave one last squeeze before Nori scooted off with him, Marina tailing after them. She paused in the doorway once Nori and Ripley were waving their goodbyes out of earshot. "Think about what I told you two."

"About what?" Cane puzzled before a dawning look turned Morgan's face into a sea of crimson.

"Give him some leggy lovin'," Marina said before waving herself out.

"We don't have to," Morgan whispered, but by the twitch of his shorts, Cane knew he was interested.

Cane had fooled around a little on land before, but was largely inexperienced and uncertain. Morgan wasn't though. He took Cane's hand and led them down the hall where, in no

time, everything would be a little more awkward or a lot more intimate between the two.

Chapter Twenty-One

Morgan

Guess I gotta take the lead. Morgan lifted his arms to pull the hoodie away. His uncovered flesh touching the cool sea air coming in through a cracked window made a soft groan of delight pass his lips. Cane swallowed hard, giving Morgan a rather flattering show of the sharp lines of his throat, bobbing nervously.

Cane surprised Morgan a little, starting the intimacy by pushing against his back. With a gentle gesture, Cane's hands wrapped around Morgan's chest then middle, circling his pectorals, belly then hips, fingers stumbling. "Everything is from behind like this." Cane's voice cracked with want as a finger traced the curvature of his buttock over the thin material.

"Mhm." Morgan gasped as Cane's fingers wandered, tracing his layers of cloth ever so slowly. He was far more familiar with Morgan's mer form, his smooth-skinned dolphin tail so much different than the plush cheeks of his rump. Dolphin omegas did tend to carry their weight on their hips, bottom, and thighs. While Morgan was a thin male, he did have a nice handful of cheek for Cane to grasp.

"But you only have the one channel like this." Cane's disappointment drew Morgan's mind from his selfish shiver.

"Yeah. And it gets so slick and fun. Have you ever jerked off in your human form?" Morgan chuckled and Cane shrugged.

“A few times. The balls are kinda weird.” Cane withdrew his hands and fiddled with his pants until they fell to the floor.

“Then you should know what feels good for you. Do that inside me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Cane nuzzled into the back of Morgan’s neck and groaned as his cock jerked bare and pressed into the low of Morgan’s back.

“You won’t. Just do what I tell you.” Morgan drew his shorts down with a single gesture and turned to help Cane from his shirt while he tempted him with pouted lips, open for a kiss.

Cane dipped to give him that brush of contact, brief at first then lingering, tongues tentatively pushing free like they’d be different like this. Cane’s motions, usually confident, were despicably and delightfully uncertain. Morgan sucked his tongue, relishing that extra length and agility. Kissing Cane made Morgan feel like his mouth had nerves it shouldn’t have. The echoes of it relayed to his cock that pulsed with life, blood rushing in hot and fast. “T-touch me.” Morgan drew Cane’s hand to his cock, relishing the firm touch.

“Be a little less gentle. Skin is less sensitive.” Morgan guided Cane’s fingers to draw tight and pumped, guiding him with firm pressure. A rumble of approval curled in Cane’s throat and hushed with a shudder when Morgan reciprocated the gesture. The familiar warmth and weight of Cane’s cock jerked in his hand, flexing impulsively.

Morgan relished in the touch for a few lingering moments, sinking back into a flurry of kisses. Cane, pliant and obedient to Morgan’s needs, moved one step at a time, shifting with

Morgan's gentle guidance, coaxing him to fall back onto the bed.

The blankets and sheets didn't match, nor did the blinds or the curtains the former tenants left, but Morgan didn't mind. Cane, sprawled over the blankets, uneasy wonder lost in his eyes, made it all pointless. Happiness was all that mattered.

"I'll do all the work. Lay back and keep looking at me like that." Morgan swung his leg up and onto the bed, smoothly sliding over Cane's legs.

"Don't stress yourself. Please." Cane's voice lacked conviction, eyes deep and dark. Hunger and a foreign sort of worship sparkled in his gaze.

Morgan thought he might feel self-conscious as his belly grew, but Cane couldn't keep his hands or tentacles off him. Nothing about his growing body was the least bit unattractive. And if Morgan was honest, he'd been raised to give someone children, had wanted to experience the miracle of growing with child. It came so naturally for him but in such an unexpected way. Knowing his mate had left his mark on him so vividly had given him life to treasure and carry, made Morgan's libido hum with desire.

"Shh. Lay back. Tell me if I do something you don't like." Morgan slid down the length of Cane's legs, kissing a trail toward his mate's human cock. It twitched against Morgan's lips the moment he met the slick tip, tongue flicking to take in a drop of precum.

"O-oh! I like that a lot." Cane shuddered, a ripple of tenseness going down his chest, making his abdominals move in a crawling sort of way, belying his more flexible sea-loving

nature. The attention to his cock urged him to shift, to breed. Morgan knew this because the urgency to shift shuddered through him, too. The goddess of the sea called her children home to procreate and love.

Drawing himself up, Morgan guided their cocks together, the grinding touch spit-slicked and fleeting. It felt good, but Morgan's backside twitched, cool air glancing off the wetness of him.

"Morgan," Cane hissed. His hips flexed and muscles rippled again. "Driving me crazy."

"Remind me to tell you about the pirate with the ship's wheel attached to the crotch of his pants, later." Morgan chuckled as he prowled forward, guiding Cane's cock over his balls to the tender spot behind, trailing the slick over Cane's pronounced head. It flexed like it wanted to drive deep.

"O-okay. N-need to prep you," Cane hissed when Morgan reached behind himself to toy with his ring, starting off with two fingers stinging as he sank in, quite easily opening up faster than he'd anticipated. Slick practically dripped from his tender hole. Sliding forward and down, Morgan pierced himself with Cane's cock, gently at first. He appreciated the sting, far different in this form than in the water.

Yes, it was clumsy, but that added to the newness and delight of the situation. Sliding down Cane's cock was its own pleasant sort of torture, nicking his spot on the way in. Morgan released a shuddering breath, a sigh that settled into the pit of his stomach. Of all the wonderful sensations he had with his tail, he lacked the one thing his human form had: a prostate. Morgan shuddered, part of him unwinding at the gentle graze

of it. Once his full weight rested on Cane's hips, Morgan moved.

Cane reached for his mate, clutching Morgan's hips with uncertainty. "Morgan." His breathy voice made Morgan shudder involuntarily. A drip of precum made a string that swung from the tip of his cock to right above Cane's navel. Its precarious sway ended as the weight of it came to rest on smooth skin.

"S-so beautiful." Cane shuddered, muscles roiling as he stared openly at Morgan.

Morgan leaned forward and braced his hands over Cane's chest, choking back a soft noise as his hips rolled, working Cane over his spot with purposeful determination.

On the edge of control and uncertainty, Morgan loved watching Cane lay there, eyes unfocused, drifting in and out of worshipping him with soft noises. Cane was so certain and ravenous in the water, but on land, Morgan was king. He rode like the wind, rolling his hips. A lifetime of adaptation to the surface had made Morgan more comfortable with his body. Cane walked with grace and confidence, but he lacked it in bed. "You should see yourself." A rumble of pleasure shivered through him.

Cane fought the shift, his cock pulsing, texture changing as it flexed, as if trying to become a tentacle. The whole sensation made Morgan's stomach flop with uncomfortable pleasure. A new position, a new sensation. It all culminated into an uncontrollable jerk of his hips that broke his pace.

Taking advantage of the hiccup, Cane thrust upward, riding the edge of a shift as his cock pulsed deep, too deep,

pressing into his spot while wheezing out the most glorious groan.

Cum, warm and silky, filled Morgan. Each kick of Cane's cock rumbled against Morgan's prostate, driving him to cry out in time for Cane to grasp his cock and stroke with a gentle but coaxing fist, riding out his orgasm. Morgan didn't have to wait long for his release, spilling over Cane's hand with a breathy shudder. Cane didn't stop there, rocking his hips, as his legs shifted, body curling and wrapping, risking drying out to plunge his cock, morphing into his hectocotylus.

The first orgasm had been striking and confusing, but the second came over him like a wave crashing on crumbling cliffs. Eyes wide, body shaking, Morgan shot into a curling mass of tentacles, down to one restraining his wrist, mimicking the marking he'd taken the first evening he'd known. "G-gonna dry out." Morgan's breath formed a whisper over his lips, lungs too strained to produce much noise.

"Instincts are mad for this. Please." Cane wrapped his tendrils, suckers inching and plucking over his entire body as the shift finished. Cane groaned, his tentacle pulsing, inching deeper in ways he didn't in his merform. A hard pulse and squirm sent Morgan over the edge and with a single, sharp, breath, sparks danced in his eyes, balls drawing up tight in that odd sort of way they did until exhaustion took him into warm tendrils, sticky from lack of water. As they lay there curled up, the tentacles over Morgan's belly gently rubbed, soothing the child within.

Morgan's father hadn't even moved in with his mother during her pregnancy. And as far as Morgan was aware, he

never really helped or parented. He was a periodic guest that doled out criticisms, checking on the crop of offspring.

“You’ll be a good daddy.” Morgan pulled a tentacle to his face and kissed it before snuggling in happily.

Morgan sat in a chair, staring at the disassembled furniture laid out over a tarp. A fan blew the fumes of paint out the open door as Cane took care of it for him, not wanting to harm the baby.

“I can’t help but wonder if maybe we shouldn’t get a home down there.” Cane chewed his lip and stood, back cracking from poor posture. Morgan’s sage-green-and-lavender theme came together nicely.

“I think it’s fine, Cane. I was raised on the surface, and I wasn’t close enough to the ocean to visit it daily. I think I’m fine with this, more than fine.” Morgan patted over his belly gently. He’d been getting bigger quickly, much to Doctor Coral’s delight.

“Yeah, but what if people talk?”

“People will always talk. Now hurry up and get that clear coat on before your father gets here with his mate.” Morgan crossed his arms and glanced about. He hesitated, lips twisting. “You seen our fry around?”

“I heard him and Kip running around on the beach earlier.” Cane stretched and tugged his gloves off, staring at the little speckles that dotted his clothes with disdain.

Morgan grunted, getting to his feet with a little stumble before Cane caught him, worry dancing in his eyes.

“Easy. You’re off-balance... How about we go for a swim?” Cane smiled hopefully, and Morgan wanted nothing more than to get the weight off his feet and hips for a minute.

“Can’t. We’re waiting for Izaiah and Harold.” Morgan stuck his tongue out. They froze as the crunch of gravel broke the soft sounds of the ocean. A sleek, black SUV with tinted windows rolled in, and Morgan’s heart flipped, skin going cold as he recalled Degan. He whimpered fearfully.

“They’re here. You okay?”

“Sorry... The car. Degan...” Morgan leaned into Cane to regain composure as two large males, as tall and broad as Cane, stepped from the vehicle.

Morgan immediately knew who his alpha father was of the two. They had a similar swagger, a set of the jaw and that same beach-sunned hair, a soft brown sunned almost, but not quite blond. Harold was his complement, a little more narrow at the hips, jaw slightly more narrow, and nose a bit patrician. He appeared the sort to be at home in a library, dressed in a starched blue button-up and dark chinos. Izaiah didn’t have the refinement that Harold did, dressed far younger than his actual age in a pair of skinny jeans and a hooded sweatshirt that flapped in the sea breeze. “My boy!” Izaiah approached, arms wide as Cane met him with a warm embrace.

Harold stood by, hands hooked in his pockets, expression reserved and nervous.

“Harold.” Morgan nodded and shuffled over to take his hand in greeting. “Does anyone want to come in for some tea? I made a jar of sun tea this morning. Should be good if the fry and his shifter friend haven’t gotten into it.”

“Is that the cat smell I keep catching hints of?” Izaiah’s nostrils flared and a tenseness in his shoulders Morgan hadn’t noticed before receded.

“And his beta father.” Morgan smiled sweetly. “They’re leaving in an hour or two. I’ve already changed the sheets to the guest bedroom and the windows are open, airing it out. I apologize if the scent bothers you.” Morgan offered a polite smile.

“Not at all. I’m a little nervous as of late with the Degan situation. Seems you’re the real talk of the dolphin community, eh?” Izaiah grinned wide and grabbed Cane, locking his head under a thick arm for a quick knuckle to his scalp.

“Izaiah!” Harold gave him a warning glare with ice in his dark eyes.

“Gah!” Cane wriggled out of Izaiah’s grasp and the two shoved at one another playfully until they bolted out the back door, as rowdy as a pod of cetaceans ever dreamed of.

“I do apologize.” Harold rubbed his temples, and Morgan offered him a seat in the kitchen.

Shrieks of delight mingled in with Izaiah and Cane’s playfulness.

Morgan glanced out the window to see Ripley slung over Izaiah’s shoulder and a shifted Kip digging himself a hole so deep in the sand that all Morgan could see was the tip of his too-fluffy tail. His beta father sat nearby with a very uncomfortable expression. Kip had a lot to learn, and his father needed to realize that maybe sniffing out omegas was a natural thing for a young alpha. He didn’t look happy about

everything the whole trip, but he was polite enough and Kip was ecstatic to see his friend.

Dave, Kip's father, turned and headed back inside, trailing up the steps to the back door, where he dusted off with a towel by the door and stomped the sand away.

"Hey, Dave. Want some tea?" Morgan busied himself grabbing glasses as Harold sat up, a little more relaxed with Cane out of the way.

"That would be nice. Thank you." Dave had avoided Morgan most of their visit. "And thank you for...you know. I don't know many alphas or omegas." He cleared his throat nervously.

"Completely alright. People make all this effort to educate everyone on anatomy and reproduction, but they skip the part where we're just people." Morgan laughed it off and gathered ice from the freezer to fill the glasses. He had ice cubes with little twists of lemon wedge in them that added a nice touch to the tea. He'd seen all the fancy videos online with the neat kinds of ice and couldn't resist.

"That's about the gist of it. They're out there playing like any other little boys. I do think Kip is a little taken though." Dave pursed his lips.

"Innocent as anything, just like I said, right?" Morgan raised a brow, smiling.

"Yeah. But you don't... You and Cane are happy?" Dave nodded in thanks when Morgan poured the glasses and handed him one. Harold took his politely as well.

“Happy as anyone, I guess. Hell, even if we weren’t alpha and omega, we’d be together. You’d know, wouldn’t you, Harold?” Morgan nudged his shoulder and the male’s cheeks flamed bright red.

“I suspect that is so. I do rather love Izaiah.” He cleared his throat and Dave’s eyes widened, as if he were both uncomfortable and unsure of what to do.

“Two alphas can... I mean, I suppose... It’s—” Dave fumbled his tea nervously.

“Oh, three or more alphas can. I’ve seen it. Cetaceans aren’t much for monogamy, but that’s our culture and society. I, personally, am monogamous. Harold and Izaiah are monogamous, I believe.” Morgan glanced over and Harold nodded in confirmation, but something lingered in his expression, uncertainty, shame, fear. Morgan would chat that out of him later.

“That just doesn’t seem like something the goddess would allow... I understand that you’re different, but that’s not how it’s supposed to work for us, shifters that is.” Dave stared at his tea, as if his words were more for it than Morgan and Harold.

Before Morgan could say a word, Harold turned in his chair, back ramrod straight and jaw set. He had a very alpha air about himself. It was nearly oppressive and Morgan would be very interested in seeing his merform, if not just to marvel at him. *Pregnancy hormones are no joke! Either I get some number eight tonight, or Cane’s gonna get my number one.*

“We do not worship your goddess but rather the sea herself. She makes us as we are, protects us, and comforts us

in her watery embrace. It is not ours to question our goddess or to ask us why we are the way we are. She has given us love and happiness, and we do not take for granted that which we are blessed with.” Harold averted his gaze, studying his tea as well. “Who are you to say what a goddess has created is bad?”

“Did the goddess create murderers and kidnappers?” Dave cut his gaze to Morgan.

“Kidnapping and murder are choices. We have free will. I can’t help that I’m drawn to alphas.” Morgan couldn’t quite muster anger for the man. “But I don’t have to make you accept me, either. I just know that Kip out there is going to be an adult someday. My parents will never hear from me again for how they treated me. Kip is your kid, and how you respond now may decide your relationship when he grows up.”

“And being gay is a choice, too.” The bitterness didn’t make it into Dave’s voice, only uncertainty.

Harold extended a hand to Dave and rested it politely on his wrist. A gentle sort of contact. “If I could love an omega or female, I would. It would have been so much easier and the ocean would have far less tears in it. I chose happiness, in the end. I cannot live in a sea where fate would choose for me and another to live together in misery. Did you feel like being with your mate was a choice you made against your happiness?”

“No!” Dave quieted once more, withdrawn with so many similarities to Kip in his uncertainty and posture.

“You worry about you and your mate. Trust me, we feel the same about ours. Can’t help it. Wouldn’t change a thing.” Morgan fixed himself a glass and sat down, resting a hand on

the curve of his belly. Harold flicked a sheepish gaze in his direction. Jealousy? That longing look gave Morgan pause.

“So it’s real likely that Kip will like omegas, isn’t it?” Dave’s anger had gone somewhere distant, but the question didn’t need an answer. He knew, and Morgan smiled.

“It’s a possibility. If he finds an omega, you’ll have grandkittens, you know?” Morgan’s platitude relaxed Dave marginally.

“That’s not really my concern. I worry he’ll be ostracized.” Dave took a long swig of his tea with a hum of appreciation.

“Well, you’ve picked up some bad habits from humans. I can tell you that much.” Harold’s upper lip curled and settled. “Because we’re nothing like that.”

Dave nodded and perked up when a wiry kitten with too-big paws came bounding into the house, tail fluffed.

“Hey, Kipper, you ready to go gather your things?” Dave’s tone went into a stiffly sweet tone, one no doubt encouraged by the therapy he’d been mandated to seek. One could not have a child like Kip without the appropriate parenting and mindset. And with focused oversight from locals, and the willingness of the council to remove children from homes that could damage them, it took concerted effort for a parent to continue inappropriate behavior. And even then, sometimes, if the child asked, they would be removed anyway.

Kip shifted, and Morgan threw him a dish towel with a quick gesture to cover himself. “I don’t wanna go home.”

“You have Ripley’s phone number and email. You can talk any time you’re allowed and you’re always welcome back.” Morgan smiled. “Now listen to your father and go get some pants on. I want to hear you’ve been getting good grades and acting out less. I don’t want Ripley hanging around with you if you’re going to be a bad influence. And our calf is on the way and I don’t want a bad influence around him, either.” Morgan gave a sheepish Kip his most practiced paternal glare, and he wilted.

“Yes, sir.” Kip pouted and ran off to gather his things.

“How do you make him listen like that?” Dave blinked up at Morgan.

“Easy. Threaten their pride, not their tails. Anyone can spank and scream, throw tantrums, and name call. I’m an omega, the weaker sex to an alpha. Kip’s little alpha brain wants to assert dominance, but he also knows he needs the favor of his lesser. A little part of his brain tells him he needs omegas to trust him. He needs the weak to rely on him. I threaten to take away things that would take away that power. In this case, he’s attached to Ripley. He sees me as important. Simple as that. He wants my approval and Ripley’s respect.” Morgan snorted.

A soft, breathy chuckle echoed with Morgan’s. Harold sat his tea down, a grin splitting his too-stiff face. “That is insidious, and highly effective. I like that. You’ll make a good parent to your calf. Orca children are spirited, strong-willed, mischievous, and defiant.” Harold glanced out of the glass doors, gaze resting on Izaiah, Cane, and Ripley. “And some, they never grow out of it.”

Morgan followed Harold's gaze and frowned. There was jealousy there in his gaze, and Morgan couldn't make it out. Whether it was for Cane or Ripley, or what lay beyond their beach, Nori.

"I cleaned up all my stuff. May I please go tell Ripley goodbye?" Kip stood in the doorway, shirt on backward.

Dave gave Morgan a quick glance.

"Thank you for asking. If your father says so, you may." Morgan nodded back toward Dave, who gave him a permitting gesture.

Kip tensed, one second from bolting, before Morgan gave him a steely glance.

"Thanks, Dad!" Kip smiled apologetically before bolting off.

"Reminds me of Izaiah when he was that age." Harold laughed, and Morgan hesitated as Dave waved his farewell and met Kip outside to head home.

"You knew him?" Morgan paused.

"Yeah. I'm a few years older and he chased my ankles around for years. Broke his little heart at one point." Harold frowned.

"That seems to have turned around." Morgan glanced out the window, wanting to give Harold some emotional space.

"I'm not so certain, anymore," Harold said, his voice a near-silent whisper that Morgan almost missed for the sound of the ocean breeze.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cane

Cane sat on his back porch, watching the bioluminescent algae streak in the foaming tide. Ripley had gone to bed, and Morgan sat in the nursery sewing yet another little outfit for their calf, irritated by even the slightest noise. He had infinite patience for Ripley, but Cane seemed to be the target of much ire. That particular night, it was his breathing, too loud. Likely, Morgan was nervous and tired of Cane's incessant hovering.

Izaiah had crashed on the couch an hour earlier, but Harold had gone out for his nightly swim, distracted and distant as he'd always been. Over their visit, he had made a valiant attempt to form some sort of relationship with Cane, and whether it was out of guilt or on behalf of the calf due in mere weeks, he didn't know.

A disturbance in the algae streaked toward the boathouse, too small to have been Harold, who had yet to return. Cane rose curiously. Nori had sworn off their home since Izaiah had come, but perhaps he'd changed his mind. Cane made it to the last step before the door to the boathouse opened and a slight omega stood there, one Cane knew relatively well. Even in the low light, he seemed pale, his expression one of heartbreak.

"South?" Cane didn't move toward him, but the omega did, running through the sand toward him with heavy footsteps until he crashed into Cane's chest, shaking with weak sobs.

"Hey... South. It's been a while." Cane glanced around almost guiltily, planning his next move carefully.

“I’m in trouble.” South shuddered, shoulders pinched.

“What kind of trouble?” Cane tensed as South sagged, shaking. “What did you do?”

“Nothing, I shouldn’t have come! I—” South’s face streaked with tears as he tried pulling away. Cane didn’t allow, just scooped him up and carried him along the stairs. “Put me down!”

“Nope. Let’s get something warm in you and talk like adults.” Cane marched into the house and bumped the screen door open with his foot.

“Hot cocoa or kelp tea?” Cane glanced over his shoulder and Morgan answered before South did.

He shuffled into the kitchen, hand resting on the surface of his belly. “Kelp tea, please. Oh, we have company?”

South sat up in his chair, bolt upright, pain wrenching his face.

“Morgan, this is King Tide’s son, South. He and I are old friends.” Cane rested his hand on South’s wrist and earned a whimper.

“I’m so sorry for... I—” South broke down into little sobs.

Cane drew Morgan closer and shushed South. “I’m glad you had me sent away, but I wish you’d have found your mate.”

“I did!” South shook with wet whimpers before folding his head over his arms.

Cane swapped places with Morgan, letting one omega calm the other with soft noises.

“Hot cocoa for him. Chocolate and sugar,” Morgan said, iron certainty held in his voice.

“Sorry for what I did. I’m so sorry.” South choked on his words, letting Morgan scoot closer to pat his shoulders and bring him a napkin while Cane bullied the kettle.

“Putting some of the minerals the doc sent in your tea. Want some cinnamon on your cocoa, South?” Cane had feared Morgan’s response to the jealous male, but Morgan was ever-so-secure in his feelings. He never doubted Cane. Morgan gave Cane a thumbs-up, but if South had said anything, he didn’t hear it. He busied himself with food.

“What’s wrong? One cetacean to another.”

“I met my mate, and I didn’t realize it and I’ve messed everything up. I didn’t know.” South’s chest shuddered.

“A mate is a mate, South. You need to reach out and apologize and—”

South interrupted Morgan with a shuddering cry. “I slept with someone else!”

Morgan paused. “Before or after you met them?”

“After. I had this fling, and it was great and he only wanted something casual and I—I wanted to find someone else and it felt horrible and then I realized and he was gone.” South hugged himself and hunched over, shivering through the admission until Cane slid the hot chocolate before him and the salty tea to Morgan.

“Who is your mate?” Cane knew half the city in one capacity or another and would happily slap an alpha around to his senses.

“Council representative... Wilder.” South crumpled. “He stopped coming for visits.”

“Beach Wilder?” Cane paused and pulled out his phone, irritation burning in the back of his mind.

“Yes. I—I didn’t know. I really liked you, Cane, and I thought—then him and I didn’t know it was... I thought I was being stupid and falling in love too easy.” South took his cup and blew on it, halting mid-sip when a groggy Ripley entered the room, worry in his pretty blue eyes.

“Daddy?” Ripley rubbed his eyes and stared at South for a long moment.

“Hey, Fry. Did we wake you up?” Cane scooted over to pat Ripley over the head.

“I smelled chocolate and wanted some.” Ripley crawled into a seat and waited patiently for a cup while South tamped his sobs down.

“Don’t worry. Papa and Daddy won’t get mad if you cry bunches. I cry a lot, too.” Ripley offered a sleepy smile, and Cane poured the leftover hot water over a packet of instant cocoa.

“Wh-who is this?” South hesitated, staring at Ripley.

“Ripley was one of our kids at camp from a group home. We decided to make him part of our family.” Morgan patted his shoulder and leaned back in his chair, sipping the hot tea.

“Ew, sea leaf water.” Ripley sipped his cocoa and a fleeting smile crossed South’s lips.

Cane stepped out of the room, a little bit of murder on his mind as he dialed Beach’s phone. He’d be on the surface this time of night.

On the third ring, Beach answered. “What?”

“That’s no way to answer your phone. What happened to a greeting? Hi? How are you?” Cane snorted.

“Fuck off. What do you need? I have a migraine like you wouldn’t believe, and with you, it’s always something.” Beach groaned.

“Migraine? The kind of migraine that might get better if you were to suddenly pay a certain prince a visit?” Cane gritted his teeth.

“What would you know about it?”

“Enough to know South is in my kitchen crying the sea onto my table.” Cane flicked at the paint on the railing of the steps.

“Doesn’t matter. I wanted— He’s playing the field.” Beach’s voice croaked.

“Get your ass down here,” Cane growled.

“I know cetaceans are poly—”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re being dumb. Is he really your mate?” Cane sighed.

“I thought so, but he’s still seeing other people and I don’t like that. I’m jealous and I hate it.” Beach snarled into the phone and his breath picked up. “I’ll be there in a few days. I

dunno if I want to see him just yet, but I'll get some sort of closure." Beach hung up and Cane sneered before dialing another number he didn't want to.

The phone rang a few times before a groggy voice answered. "Office of the King."

"Barnes? It's Cane, Gale."

"What's up?" His tone went serious. Even if Cane had been in trouble at some point, they all knew he meant well.

"South showed up at my house, pretty upset. Can I speak to King Tide? It's a little personal. My mate is sitting with him." Cane winced when Barnes gave him a terse grunt of disapproval.

"That's why my mate is handling it."

Barnes grumbled and put Cane on hold for a lingering moment before the handset clattered and Neap's grizzled voice came on the line. He must have been dozing off early. "Cane?"

"Hello, Your Majesty. I thought it best to tell you that South showed up at my home without a guard. I'm assuming nobody knew he left?" Cane stared out at the dancing lights in the sea as Neap made a noise of agreement.

"Been meaning to speak with you anyway. I wanted to apologize for earlier inconveniences." Embarrassment tinged his voice.

"That's neither here nor there, Your Majesty. Things worked out how they needed to. He's upset and my mate is consoling him." Cane waited for a response that took a little too long to come.

“I suppose he’s not over you?” The words came out hesitant and reserved.

“Oh, he’s over me a hundred times over. I think he met his one and didn’t realize it until they were gone.” Cane cleared his throat, and the king paused, a soft hitch in his breath.

“It was that council representative, wasn’t it?” King Tide’s voice went low. Protective, but filled with a new sort of wisdom he must have picked up since Cane.

“I believe so. He is a friend of mine, and I made sure he’s on his way back, but I don’t think either of them are ready to meet.” Cane turned to stare into the window of their home. Morgan, full and tired, leaned over to console South while Ripley sat in his lap, hugging him tight. The fry had a heart on him, bigger than any whale he’d ever met.

“It’s more than we deserve from you. I hope you know that.”

“He came to me because he knew I’d still care for him. I don’t view every omega’s friendship as an attempt at mating. I value him as a person. Would you like one of us to escort him home, or perhaps he could stay the night?” Cane awaited orders from his king.

“He’s safe where he is. I’ll send someone to collect him come morning, and they’ll be bringing you a gift for the calf, a peace offering.”

“Thank you. You are too kind.” Cane said his goodbyes and hung up before walking back inside, catching a still-weepy South muttering then quickly silencing.

“I miss something?” All three of them stiffened. Even Ripley.

“It’s private omega stuff, Daddy.” Ripley beamed, and Cane gave the fry a head pat then South.

“Alright, then. You go get yourself back to bed and let’s get Izaiah into the guest bedroom so we can let South take the couch.” Cane steered Ripley to his room while South gently protested.

“I called your father.” Cane turned and frowned at his once-friend. South shrank in his seat, eyes renewing with tears.

“Did you tell him?”

“I told him what he needed to know. You met your mate and didn’t realize it until he’d left. I also called Beach and expressed your need for him. He feels it, too. Whatever you two work out after this is on you, but your father said you could stay the night.” Cane stepped through the hall and into the living room. Izaiah sat up, waving Cane off.

“Warmed the couch for you, princeling. Go sleep.” He scratched himself and shuffled off toward the guest bedroom before grunting. “Seen Harold?”

“On a long swim.” Cane helped a still-weepy South to settle down and patted his head. The young male had a heavy heart, but it wasn’t Cane’s place to fix it. Beach would have to. But Cane would facilitate all he could; after all, Beach helped him find and keep Morgan. “You gonna be alright, South?” Cane settled down by the couch and patted his arm, rubbing gently to calm him. Morgan leaned in the doorway nearby,

watching with a sweet sort of unease, not for him but for South.

Cane couldn't imagine sleeping with someone else after meeting Morgan. Then again, Cane had marked Morgan so quickly it didn't matter. He wondered if he could forgive Morgan if he'd slept with someone else, and found his heart trembling in his chest, a flutter of visceral disgust. But despite everything, he knew he could forgive Morgan.

As if guessing what Cane was thinking, South barely whispered, "Do you think he could ever forgive me?"

Cane stared at the floor, the conservative tile in need of a sweep from the errant feet of children running in and out. "I put myself in Beach's position. If Morgan had been with someone else before we were claimed, after we met? I won't lie. It would hurt, but I think we'd forgive one another."

"Forgive one another? What... What would Beach have for me to forgive?"

"For not claiming you the second he sensed it. Should have known better. Get some rest, South. Tomorrow is a new day." Cane stood and South tugged his arm. "Hmm?"

"I'm so sorry." South blinked a tear away and Cane shrugged.

"It's in the past."

"You love your mate. Morgan's lovely. I wish I were more like him, you know?" South smiled, the expression faltering.

"I do. I love him more than the first cold shock when diving into water after a long summer's day. I love him more

than tilapia. I'd give up number eight for him, you know?"
Cane snorted and South shoved him away.

"Thanks, asshole," South grumbled and snuggled into the couch while Cane made sure to take Morgan to bed and touch every inch of his body to remind his omega how much he was loved. When the back door opened and closed, gentle footsteps echoed through the house before Izaiah and Harold's sleepy voices came together and silenced. A family whole once more.

Come morning, amid a flurry of Ripley racing about and Morgan loafing at the table while complaining that Cane wouldn't allow him to cook, South joined them. And it didn't take long for Cane to have fruit ready, summoning his father and stepfather in for fresh coffee. Morgan whined longingly but winced and squirmed as their babe protested within his belly. Their little one had time yet to go, but Morgan was a slight omega, a sleek and streamlined dolphin. Cetacean, yes, but they all worried how the birth would go.

Ripley gave up his rampage, waving around a stuffed dog that Nori had gotten him before plopping into his chair next to a nervous South.

"It's nice to have all these people here." Morgan beamed as Cane bustled over with a tea for him.

"Not for much longer, looks like." South shrank in his seat as two men strolled their way up the beach. Both of which Cane recognized.

"Papa?" Cane wiped his hands on a dishrag and jogged out to greet him. Nori usually called beforehand and had been

adamant about not seeing Izaiah.

One of the palace guards, a clownfish mer that he'd worked with a few times but couldn't recall his name, held a serious expression that wasn't mirrored on a nervous Nori.

"Cane!" Nori jogged up, cheeks flushed.

"What are you doing here?" Cane welcomed Nori into his arms, hoping to block the view of Izaiah and Harold. Nori didn't flinch too much, but he was tense.

"I—Harold came to see me last night. I think I'm ready to see Izaiah and it's stupid of me to hide. He's actually quite sweet." Nori avoided eye contact and Cane couldn't help but smile, walking Nori in as the guard waited patiently. He didn't say a word but stood still as South skirted out, wishing them a good day.

"He seems in a hurry." Nori eyed South, skirting away, an almost apologetic and ashamed expression affixed to his usually carefree features.

"He's having a hard time. Catting around didn't suit him and Beach caught his eye, apparently." Cane grinned, and Nori stifled a laugh.

"Oh, the fleeting heart of youth. He'll figure it out, or he won't. Life goes on." Nori grabbed Cane's hand, and they walked into the house.

Morgan's eyes widened and Ripley beamed when Nori came in, but Izaiah's reaction made Cane wonder. He halted, mid-bite on some fruit, nostrils flaring. It was like no time had passed, the warm stare of his soulful eyes focused in, still in love. All of it passed in a flicker, swallowed by pain.

“Nori...” Izaiah stood so fast his chair tumbled. “I— Nobody said you were c-coming.”

Nori offered a tense smile. “Harold came to see me last night. We had a nice chat, and I wanted to see you. You look good.”

Izaiah didn’t have to say it; it was written in his dilated eyes and flushed skin. “Yeah. I like it you...too you—” He tripped over his words and Harold slapped his back a few times.

“You look lovely as ever, Nori. I think he means.” Harold kept his eyes turned away, but the regret and jealousy that Cane expected didn’t come. The two needed to greet one another, if they were to all be in their grandchild’s life.

“I’m sure. It’s nice to see you’ve still got your fluke in your mouth, Ize.” Nori perched on his seat next to Ripley, and the chatter died down to focus on the fry and his happiness with the toy, a little sad he couldn’t have a real puppy. Bluecifer would have to do. Living a semi-aquatic lifestyle didn’t leave too much room for land-dwelling pets. It created a rift.

“Can I have a pet jellyfish?” Ripley perked up and Morgan snorted.

“Noooo, no sea wasps.” Morgan shook his head and waved Ripley off.

“But the sharks are nice...” Ripley pouted. “I thought the goddess didn’t let us get hurt.”

“Jellyfish aren’t part of the sea goddess’s blessings. They’re her curse after some king acted like Kip did.”

Morgan's words immediately quelled Ripley's curiosity and the matter dissolved.

"Okay." He went back to eating and Nori fawned over him a little too devotedly, perhaps trying to keep from staring at Izaiah, who had no compunction staring, nor Harold who, too, wore a concerned but interested expression.

"So, why was South here?" Nori broke the awkward silence, and Morgan shrugged.

"Met his mate and was feeling shitty about it. I'm sure it'll work itself out," Cane answered before Morgan could say anything, and Ripley busied himself with fruit.

Cane had the distinct feeling they were hiding something, but Cane had his whole family together for the first time, and his heart had far more wonderful things to focus on.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Morgan

“The goddess is a hussy!” Morgan groaned as he lay in bed that morning, squirming amid sweat-damp covers.

“You say something?” Cane pushed his head in from the hallway and stared at Morgan with rising concern. His brow had a defined crinkle in it that he’d worn for several days.

Ripley stirred in the covers and snuggled up against Morgan’s legs before stretching into a shivering yawn. “Is it breakfast time?” He rubbed his eyes and squinted at Morgan. “You smell funny.”

“Yep. I think the calf is deciding whether or not to come.” Morgan smiled and Cane paced from the bathroom.

All the signs had been there for a day and a half. Morgan’s appetite had fallen, his belly dropping, and the incessant urge to seek the water had him languishing in the boathouse at all hours of the day and night to soak amid the soothing waters. Without shifting, he’d not be able to bear their child with ease.

“Is that why it smells like pennies and meat?” Ripley stuck his tongue out and slid from the bed.

“Yeah. It’s the water babies swim around in.” Morgan smiled and shifted his hips uncomfortably.

“What? You’re leaking?” Cane rushed over and Morgan shoved him away. “We need to call people and get the doctor and—”

“Shush. It’s far too soon. Enjoy the family time. I’ve not broken yet, merely dripping.” Morgan squirmed again as the child within’s tail twitched and flicked. A rounded bump near the top of his belly rose and roamed as the infant stretched, his little head grinding into Morgan’s diaphragm.

Cane couldn’t force himself to settle, pacing as much as Morgan wanted to be. When Morgan’s feet touched the ground, his skin crawled, his body demanding to shift and soak in the ocean’s embrace.

“Maybe I wouldn’t oppose us hanging out in the boathouse.” Morgan flinched at Cane’s reaction, tensing hard. His wild instinct flashed in his eyes, demanding he protect his omega.

“Whatever happened to chucking number eight at someone and swimming off?” Morgan yelped when Cane plucked him from bed bridal-style.

“Get the doors, Rip. And we evolved.” Cane glared at Morgan, but Ripley graciously remained unquestioning.

“Morgan needing another soak?” Izaiah sat in the kitchen with Harold, hands laced over the table. Whatever conversation they’d interrupted ended immediately.

“I think this is my last soak, guys.” Morgan forced a smile. No, he smiled genuinely. He loved all the to-do, the fawning and redecorating. He’d never had this much attention in his life, and the gentle squeezing pains would subside into much less once he was in the sea.

“I’ll text Nori.” Izaiah stood abruptly, and Morgan couldn’t help but notice the flash of joy in Harold’s eyes at

that. The three were spending time together, and while they were still stiff and cordial, every visit became easier than the last. And from the discussions he'd had with Harold regarding their dying bedroom, Morgan had noticed a distinct change in patterns. The two were rekindling.

The thought died out in a jarring flash as Morgan's insides twisted and the eking wetness of before seemed to become more pronounced. "Okay, boathouse time! I already texted him earlier. Marina is getting Doctor Coral, and Ripley carried all the supplies out yesterday."

Cane sagged with relief.

"Papa said you'd get scared." Ripley tagged along behind as Cane made that long walk to the sea. Sand squeaked under his bare feet and Ripley diverted something cradled in his hands. He approached the churning water and threw something in before folding his hands as if in human prayer. Cane paused and Ripley returned, rubbing wetness from his eyes.

"Everything alright, Fry?" Morgan mustered the fortitude to pay attention to Ripley. "Asking the goddess to help me?"

"No. I already know she'll make sure you're ok." Ripley walked up to rest his head against Morgan's shoulder. "I wanted to tell her thank you because I'm getting a brother and a home and parents and family."

Morgan teared up and spared an arm to stroke over Ripley's silky locks, lightened from sun and salty water. He truly had some goldfish in him, but the rarity of his existence meant he was something special to be treasured. "Ripley?"

“Hmm?” His bright eyes shone with all the excitement that Morgan couldn’t show.

“Never, ever for a moment, think that you’re less than anyone. You are a beautiful child, and we’re lucky you let us be your parents.” Morgan relaxed in Cane’s arms.

Cane echoed Morgan’s comment before pushing forward to the boathouse and setting Morgan into a lounge chair they’d set up. A few camping chairs lay around, and Ripley sat one up and pulled to the side quietly.

Cane stepped to the ledge near the ladder, gently lowering Morgan to his shaking feet. With barely any effort, he had Morgan’s shorts free, letting him slide into the water to shift into his merform.

It stung like nothing else as the saltwater hit his open vent, already swollen and pliant. Perhaps he’d waited a little too long? It didn’t matter.

Morgan stared up at the bare ceiling, breathing through his nose as Cane followed suit and anchored his tentacles to the dock’s piers.

The lapping water echoed about the small building, flitting at the worn ends to the garage doors that would welcome a boat in. From the outside, it appeared like any other private pier with boat storage. The inside, though, had been made cozy, letting the boat’s arena function more like a private wading area, blocked from the world around them by floating walls on anchored pillars.

The water lapped against Morgan’s belly, dark in the humming light, highlighting the boxes and crates of Cane’s

tools that had been neatly stacked all to one side in preparation for this moment. A fish-tailed mer could birth completely underwater, as could the cecaelia, but the mammalian blood of whales and cetaceans meant that a babe's first breaths needed to be air before their spiracle would prime, allowing them to do as their natural counterparts could not by breathing the sea water.

"You hurting?" Cane's gentle cradle of his body let him relax as tension like a vice wrapped its way over his belly.

"Yeah." Morgan smiled through the sensation, thankful their goddess made their births easier than humans.

With a shivering breath, he hissed his way through the pain, floating amid the ebb and flow of the sea in the safest place in the world, Cane's tendrils and arms. As if sensing Morgan's thoughts, Cane wrapped his arms over Morgan's belly. It made it so Morgan merely had to hold his head up, because anything beyond that and the cinching contractions, Cane took care of, like he took care of everything else.

"Anything I can do? And feel free to squeeze a tentacle." Cane rested his chin in the crook of Morgan's neck, his warm breath bringing some heat to the cool winter's waters. Though, even in this area, winter remained less cold than it did brisk by morning, pleasant by day.

"Gimme number eight to hold on to." Morgan reached around in the water playfully, but squeaked when a tendril slid into his grasp, a little thicker and blunter than the rest.

Cane's soft voice barely whispered over his ear, "If it'll make you feel better, I'd let you."

Morgan squeezed moderately, almost tempted to do it until Ripley spoke. “That sounds gross.”

“What does?” Cane cleared his throat guiltily.

“Holding onto his private tentacle.” Ripley didn’t hear the second part, thankfully.

“Eh. Not as gross as things are going to get once I share water with the sea.” Morgan laughed a little and squeaked when dark figures shimmered in the water, bringing up Nori and Marina and a very silver-tailed omega merman, Doctor Coral.

Marina leaned in and slapped Cane’s arm with a scowl. “I saw that,” she mouthed, and Cane had the good sense to turn his head, sharing a blush with Morgan.

Nori either didn’t see or kept his mouth shut about it. He peeked outside and Izaiah’s voice greeted him then Harold’s. They spoke quietly while Marina settled in next to Ripley and patted his head. He seemed unfazed by everything and that suited Morgan well.

“Instinct has you by the siphons, hmm?” Doctor Coral swam closer toward the couple, and the skin of Cane’s tentacles went from a rich violet spotted with eggplant to a rather vibrant pink and yellow that melded into orange, flashing warning colors from his chromatophores.

“I come in peace, alpha. Calm.” Doctor Coral gestured for Morgan, and Cane grudgingly moved his tendrils away enough for him to see.

“Am I okay to touch your belly?” The doctor glanced from Morgan to Cane, relaxing at a soft nod. With gentle

hands, he slid forward and placed his palms over Morgan's belly. He concentrated and pressed into the flesh, riding through the way his muscles twisted and squeezed. "Mm-hmm." His flat tone suggested nothing and Morgan's anxiety shot up, stomach clenching involuntarily.

"Shhh. Nothing bad. You're not quite as far along as I was expecting, but that's fine. Mind if I feel your vent? It'll be a little intrusive." Doctor Coral held his hands up, wading in place while Cane's colors deepened into less threatening ones, the rich purples that Morgan loved.

Morgan nodded and closed his eyes while gentle hands and probing fingers navigated his channel. "Yeah. You've got a little time. The tail hasn't even broken through yet."

The doctor swam to the side and shifted, climbing the ladder as he tied a wrap around his waist in a fluid motion. Following him with a fierce gaze, Cane replaced his tendrils into their protective positions and left Morgan to luxuriate in the dull sensations echoing through him, one sharpening cramp after another.

Ripley had been educated in anatomy at Doctor Coral's hand, taking a very methodical approach to what he was. Ripley understood his body better and definitely understood what happened not ten feet away from him. His baby brother would enter the world tailfin first, the appendages firming up in the water for a little while before Morgan gained the strength to push the child free, a different experience than he might have one day if he chose to bear fry. They bore their little ones headfirst, but their shoulders were often far more flexible, more cartilaginous than cetaceans.

“How are you holding up, Rip?” The doctor sat beside him.

Ripley looked up, eyes bright and cheeks wind chapped from days on the beach. “Excited.”

“I bet you are. Are you scared? I told you there’d be a little blood, right?” Doctor Coral patted Ripley’s hair, the soft wisps laying in place for a moment before popping up.

“Yeah. And it’ll hurt, and Papa might cry. And if it scares me, I’ll go hang out with grandpas.” Ripley listed everything off like he’d been made to repeat it several times.

“Okay, and it’s okay if you want to cry, too.” Doctor Coral glanced over at Morgan, reaffirming his status.

Morgan closed his eyes to relax, taking in Cane’s heavy heartbeat, the crowding pressure of his tentacles, and the gentle rocking motion of the sea. Ordinarily a worry for a birthing cetacean. Being held by his lover, though, Morgan could lose himself to the gentle pushes and constricting pain.

The contractions were farther apart, enough so that Morgan could almost fall asleep between them. With each clench, it only got stronger until Morgan bit out an uncomfortable noise and thrashed his tail, letting something within him give. The scent of blood laced the water as pink streaks trailed off and away.

Morgan and Cane seemed to have the same idea, and they reached down, anticipating tailfins, but finding nothing quite yet.

Marina moved in to sit with Ripley, keeping him occupied as people popped in and out, waiting for news. All the while,

Doctor Coral watched and waited, doing absolutely nothing from what Morgan could tell and it, frankly, pissed him off. “Doc, are you going to help or hover, because I’m not really in the mood for this.” Morgan’s voice shivered as he spoke, the beginnings of another contraction creeping up on him as his vent twitched and burned from pressure somewhere deep within.

“It’s not like there’s anything much I can really do besides tell you to push because you’re about to have a tail.” Doctor Coral slid into the water, navigating the stained waters to peek closer to Morgan’s vent.

“Oh yeah, little orca tail.” Coral laughed and Morgan hissed as he gently manipulated his vent before pulling Morgan’s hand to the little tailfin.

Morgan’s heart seized as the contraction ebbed, tears burning his eyes. “It’s so small!” Morgan shuddered for a lingering moment as Cane joined him to feel the child’s tail. It hadn’t straightened yet, curled and soft. It’d take a little while for blood to flow into it, stiffening it enough to swim. The feeling of it made Morgan sob with joy.

“Want to go get Grandpas?” Marina nudged Ripley, and he stared at them for a lingering moment before nodding and scampering off.

Morgan hissed through another contraction, tail thrashing as voices neared the door. He regretted telling people they could stay around, suddenly insecure when his frustration came to a pinnacle and he shouted, tail jerking against Cane’s hold. His mate accommodated the motions, letting Morgan do what he needed to. “Want him out. Want him out!” Morgan

gritted his teeth and bore down. He thought he'd have more time and looked forward to that special moment when a bearer got to feel their child's tail for the first time, waiting to welcome them.

“Impatient one, isn't he?” Doctor Coral rested a calming hand on Morgan's belly and from the immediate and jarring sensation, had grabbed the child's tail, holding it steady.

“N-not talking!” Morgan cried out, gnashed his teeth, and hissed as he pushed again, his vent spreading, burning even.

“Whoa, long tail.” Izaiah made a yelp as Nori's chastising voice cut him off.

“Shush!” Nori frowned, and Harold had adopted a remarkably similar attitude to curb the wayward alpha.

“Haaa! Fuck!” Morgan thrashed as his body bore down, belly pushing into the open pelvis of his hips. The coiled shape of his child, round not moments ago, had stretched out and his belly distended, defined over the remainder of the child. Morgan's motions set the child's motions into play, making him jerk and tail swat reflexively. “Out! Please!” Morgan pushed, bearing down as every muscle in his body shuddered, burning more intensely by the second. Each push gave him more room to breathe, pulling the baby out from his diaphragm.

“So close!” The doctor darted back as Morgan arched his back, thrashed his tail, and screamed, white-hot pain searing through him until the entire world went silent and the pain ebbed.

A dull echo of voices whispering—no, not whispering—muffled, drew him from the overwhelming relief. A veil separated him from the rest of the world, his mind fuzzy until wandering tendrils and Doctor Coral’s arms drew a thrashing and gasping little orca-tailed merchild onto his chest.

“He’s beautiful.” Cane’s arms swept in, holding Morgan and his chest for a long moment, his breath shivering.

“Dad’s crying...” Ripley’s voice came from too close and Morgan reached his hand toward the ginger-haired blur until his damp flesh touched Ripley’s, fingers brushing until they held hands.

“Did you two ever decide on a name?” Doctor Coral went about assisting Morgan in severing the cord and ridding the placenta. They let the tissue drift off into the ocean, the gift of life given back to the goddess.

“I get to pick the name.” Ripley leaned in excitedly until Nori approached and helped him down into the water, following suit with everyone else.

The little one’s soft gasps for air subsided into a gentle breath and broke into sobs as he flailed, uncertain of where to breathe from. Morgan turned him onto his front, patting his back just below his tiny, spluttering spiracle and dipped him into the water.

Instead of flailing or screaming, the child calmed, at home in the sea, as if back in the womb.

Lost in the wonder of his child, Morgan descended, cradled in Cane’s tendrils.

Morgan winced and filled his lungs with water as their journey to Cane's birth home began. There, the child would need a few days to adjust before they could shift, and Morgan wanted nothing more than to rest and recover.

The currents rippled by as Morgan lazily swept his tail through the water, light streaks of blood still marking the water, but lessening with every motion. Despite the pain, Morgan needed to move to heal, as his wild counterpart needed.

As they approached the house, Doctor Coral examined the child and Morgan before declaring them healthy and pulling free a heavily waterproofed tablet from his bag to record the details of the birth. "And his name?"

He was a healthy twenty-nine inches long, hair a mess of dark waves, and eyes watery and pale like ice. Morgan didn't want to let go, but when the child went to someone else's arms, he barely protested.

"Ronan Gale." Ripley beamed.

Harold and Izaiah sat on the netting seats, and as if they didn't realize, Izaiah and Nori held hands. The distance and pain that had been there months before had become something else. The goddess healed all wounds of the heart in time. But Morgan wondered how it would play out and prayed that Harold would not be hurt.

"That's beautiful." Harold grinned, and if he noticed the two holding hands, he said nothing.

Morgan found himself being swept into Cane's room, into his netting bed, where a sleeping basket had been mounted

nearby for their little one, where he would float asleep easily. It wasn't the time for that though.

At the sides of Morgan's vent were mammary slits that swelled, feeding channeled glands beneath his skin that drew toward his nipples. In human form, his glands would have his chest swollen and sore, but as he pressed on his chest, the water around clouded. The scent of milk in the water made little Ronan squirm and seek the source, latching even as Cane drew away and turned out the light. Underwater, there'd be no risk of falling asleep with little Ronan and rolling over atop him. Cuddled in Cane's sleeping net, child finding sustenance, all was right with the world.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cane

A few nights under the sea had done wonders for them all amid the incoming and outgoing flow of people excited to see the child. Notably absent, though, was South, who was still figuring things out with Beach. As his childhood friend, Cane expected him to visit, and he did, fleetingly. Ronan seemed to weigh heavily on him, bright eyes following Beach's pale features.

He swam out like his tentacles were on fire, and Morgan had chuckled about it for hours.

"He's not you, Cane. He'll come around, or we'll knock some sense into him." Morgan shook his head and Cane withheld a surge of anger for his friend, instead choosing to hope he came to his senses and forgave his mate.

Ripley started school with the other fry, letting Morgan swim him out in the morning three days a week. Since the babe had arrived, Cane and Nori had taken over the role. He was slow to make friends, but they came around eventually. Nobody had seen a fish like him, but he fell into a group of little omegas that tended to scurry about together in lieu of the more adventurous stunts of alphas and betas. But he flourished, and that's all Cane could ask for.

Izaiah and Harold went back to their home farther north, a historically orca-dominated pod led by another of the Gale family, a king in his own right. They made sure that Cane

knew he and his mate were welcome, and that little Ronan needed to come be acknowledged by the family.

The morning after they left, Cane received a call from the older beta dolphin that had asked for his information. Despite meeting under rude circumstances, he had good news. A project had come up among a dolphin pod in Izaiah's area and it was as good of an excuse as anything. So, they drove up the coast, his little family napping in the back seat as the road purred beneath his tires.

The waters there were much colder, making Ripley shiver until they reached the heated palace underwater. Morgan kept his head bowed, humbled, and they swam amid rather plain architecture and murals through the ages of different people and their interpretations of the orca kind.

Cane had never met any of his father's family, as the closer ones had passed on and the more distant ones were... orcas. They were never as emotional as Izaiah, who seemed to be an outlier but rather stiff and reserved as Harold ever was.

Ronan couldn't swim on his own quite yet, but he wriggled as they flowed through the water, eyes wide and curious until they reached a small gathering room filled with cetaceans of all kinds, all delighted to see the new babe. Ronan Gale, the first alpha calf born since Cane.

One excited orca and dolphin after another swam about with a cooing Ronan, marveling at his pattern and little pinched tail. He had power in his tail and wiggled eagerly, already wanting to swim, though it'd be months before he could do more than amble in a direction.

When the king of their pod arrived, he took no head seat or demanded attention. Several people nodded with respect, but he stared at Cane with a distant, twisted expression.

“Hurricane?”

Cane glanced up and tensed when the king approached. Harold and Izaiah flanked him, eager to protect him like their own. Harold, especially. He felt guilt for having kept them apart and had apologized often in the months they’d known one another.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Cane offered a nod, and the king snorted.

“Please, kings are so antiquated. I understand your shimmer does things differently, but here, I’m just Donovan. May I hold our newest addition?” He outstretched tanned brown arms and took the little one to his chest. Something like hope flashed in King Donovan’s eyes. “We’re so very stubborn when it comes to mating that children are few. I hope you’ll consider moving closer or bringing Ronan more often. He’ll need his people and our histories. He’s important.” The king traced thick fingers through the babe’s hair, a mountain of a male closer to Cane in size than most merfolk. The whales always were larger.

“We’ll do the best we can,” Cane said, watching the king cradle their newborn.

The king grunted noncommittally. “If it looks like you’re not giving him a proper education, we’ll send someone out your way to teach him.”

“Yes, sir.” Cane nodded and Morgan flustered when the king addressed him with a nod and smile.

“I hear your parents were sentenced here recently. Shame how they treated you. They reached out asking for assistance with the dowry on you.” The king’s dark chuckle made Cane bristle.

“My most sincere apologies, Yo—sir.” Morgan caught himself and floated himself a little lower to show respect. Cane lifted him by his elbow to be equal height to the king.

“There we go. Your mate gets it. But no worries, I sent a hundred dollars to their prison commissary, and Izaiah assures me that he’s seen to you and the little one getting their part of the family fortune?”

“Yes. Thank you, s—Donovan.” Cane held his chin up.

The king shrugged. “Every Gale gets enough to start them off right. I think yours was a little late getting there, Hurricane, but you made it in the end. You do the Gale name proud.”

It was all Cane could have ever dreamed of. He’d longed for his alpha father’s side of the family in some ways and grown bitter in others. And while it didn’t heal the pain of rejection, something warm nestled in his belly. Pride. Hope. Joy. Morgan had given him not one son but two, making sure they got to keep Ripley. Morgan had brought them all back together.

Cane watched as the king gently opened his arms and guided Ronan into a little jerky swim back to Morgan’s arms. “I made a point to send that photo you sent us of your family to your pod, Morgan. They’re running it in their weekly newsletter. Apparently it’s a big deal when a dolphin mates into an orca family? Strange.” Donovan waved his hand in a

kingly way, the air of aristocracy a thinly veiled shot at all that had viewed Morgan as less. He puffed with pride.

“Thank you so much, sir.” Morgan bowed his head, and the king smiled.

“No problem whatsoever. Now, you and your little ones go off and get some salmon. They caught it fresh this morning, and it’s good for the milk. Little Ronan will grow faster than most cetaceans can keep up with, feeding-wise. Cane and I should go off and talk a bit. Izaiah tells me he’s an underwater welder, and there’s a project I’ve needed seen to for quite some time.” The king guided Cane by his elbow and they swam off together like equals. And Cane, for the first time in a very long time, unburdened his heart of all the pain and fear of rejection for him, his mate, and children. In the grand scheme of things, it was as close to a happily ever after as any cecaelia could ask for.

About the Author

Lilo Quie spends her day moving between her home lab and recording studios working as a voice actress and consumer goods formulation chemist. Her foray into writing began as a curiosity, much like the eclectic mass of hobbies and inventions in her garage, just to see if she could, and there she found her new passion.

WWW.Liloquie.net

By Lilo Quie at Decadent Publishing

The Inner Demons Series

Delivered to His Demon

Treasured by His Demon

Forgotten by His Demon

Fallen for His Demon

Not Meant for His Demon

Taken by His Demon

Forsaken Few: The Omegas of Club Despair

Pierce Him Gently

Nick Him Tenderly

Lance Him Sweetly

Mark Him Softly

Forsaken Few: Finding Home

A Mother's Creed

Carver of Hearts

Empty Nests

Deep in Dette

Settling His Dette

Dette Management

Dette to Society

High Interest Dette

Red Sky.

At Nite

Acquidually on Porpoise

Pitching a Tentacle