

CHAPTER ONE

AURELIA



The human had no idea how much danger he was in, wading out into the tide on the evening of the Beguiling Ceremony. Aurelia told herself the reason she kept leaving the kingdom to watch him was because she was protecting him, even though in her heart she knew that if this were true, she would stay away. If she was honest with herself, she would admit that the reason she was here was to indulge in the dark fantasies she had dared not speak of to anyone, not even to Atlana, her favorite and most trusted sister. Night after night, her fins propelled her to this same spot off the shoreline. She knew the human would be bathing here. She had been quietly watching him over the passage of almost a dozen moons. He was a beautiful dark-haired man with skin kissed by the sun, which made him look like a golden god with strange, powerful limbs. Each evening at sunset, he walked from the sandstone castle behind the dune to the beach, stripping off his clothes and submerging himself in the cold water. Something about him, whether it was his confidence or his physique, told her he was the prince.

The human was unaware of her presence, and she watched him in awe from her spot behind a massive rock beyond where the waves broke. Aurelia gazed at him, her head just far enough out of the water so she could take him in with reverent eyes, her long red hair floating on the surface, around her shoulders. A familiar longing washed over her as the man's strange limbs flailed in the surf. Even the best of human swimmers looked unsteady to those who were born in the water, but Aurelia loved to watch his odd, undulating movements. The sight of his naked form diving under the water and thrusting back up again sent her heart thundering in her chest. A pleasant, tugging sensation pulled at the tender flesh below her navel, a tingling cavern of need that pulsed from within its protective circle of scales. She slid a finger underneath the two front fins that hid her sex, feeling the silky wetness that pooled there, a well of need. A dull ache to be stroked and petted and filled by the man on the shore bubbled inside her body. She longed to swim closer, to see what color his eyes might be, but did not dare reveal herself. Instead, she stayed concealed behind the rock, involuntarily letting out a soft, silvery cry at the thought of his warm hands on her, caressing her. She relished the way the human's chiseled, naked body gleamed each time he popped out from under a wave. Without his clothes, a siren's capture would be even quicker than it usually was, but Aurelia pushed the thought away. The idea of possessing him that way did not excite her as it should have. It never had.

The human stopped his swim with a sudden jerk, bursting up out of the water. He stood silently for a few seconds, looking out past the rock where Aurelia had concealed herself. Aurelia ducked below the water.

"Hello?" he called out, his voice low and smooth. It seemed

to glide through her like a manta ray through warm water. She wanted to call out to him, but if her voice lured him to her, it could be dangerous for him. While Aurelia had no intention of harming him, it was best that they kept this safe distance between them, the way her lust was beginning to overtake her. She closed her eyes. Her thoughts were a tangle of images of the human, his hands, his lips, his cock, and visions about being taken by him in taboo ways. A soft sound escaped her at the riotous fantasies that flooded her mind.

The human stood up out of the water again, streams of it dripping from his young, angular face and down his body.

“Who’s there?” he called out. The small gills behind Aurelia’s ears fluttered rapidly, and her heart pounded in her ears.

One more look. Only one more look at him.

She rose again to the surface, peering out from behind the rock, drinking in the sight of him.

“Where are you?” he said, and his voice was tinged with something like fear and longing melded together. It made her want to dive over this rock and glide through the water to him. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and slide her tongue into his mouth. But if she did that, she would risk pulling him under, and he would succumb to the siren’s magic that would imprison him in the kingdom below. The image of him being yanked below the surface, helpless and subject to the desires of a mistress, left a piercing sensation in her chest. No, she would not have him, not like that.

“I’m here,” she whispered back to him. “I’m here, and I want you.”

For a minute she wondered if the man had heard her. He craned his neck, as if searching for the source of her voice, but then gave a slight shrug and dove under the waves a final time before surfacing. As he turned back toward the shore, Aurelia

marveled at the muscles in his back and the broadness of his shoulders. His buttocks were bare and shapely, several shades lighter than the rest of him. He shook his head, sending water droplets flying off him. He pulled something white over one arm after the other, leaving the front open and his bare, tanned chest exposed. *Shirt*, Aurelia thought. That was the word for it. She could see the light dusting of hair that started on his chest and trailed lightly down his torso. She imagined what it might feel like to run her fingertips over that trail, following it down to the sizable width of his cock, and shivered. The human continued to dress himself, and she remembered that the strange adornment he pulled over his legs was called ... trousers? Atlana, who tended to indulge Aurelia's interest in the practices of humans more than her other sisters, had told Aurelia about the trousers.

"The trousers keep their cocks from hanging out," she had explained.

"But why?" Aurelia had asked, for she did not understand why it was necessary for a human to conceal his cock in the first place. The only human men she had ever seen until she had discovered the man on the shore were the ones kept by the elite sirens in Thalassia, the kingdom of the sea.

"It's part of their culture," Atlana had explained patiently. "It is not proper for them to show those parts of themselves to other humans, unless they are a mated pair."

Aurelia wondered if this was the reason the man on the shore bathed alone. She delighted in the prospect that, if what Atlana had told her was true, that meant she had seen him in a state of vulnerability he kept hidden from other humans.

When the man finished dressing, he turned his back to her and started back toward the castle. Aurelia's heart cracked, though she was comforted to know he would be safe inside the palace walls when the Beguiling Ceremony began. When he

finally disappeared over the dune, Aurelia flung herself out of the water and into a graceful dive that sent her crashing through the surface and down into the depths of the sea. She knew if he had looked back at her just once, she would have drowned the world for him.

CHAPTER TWO

SILAS



Silas's feet kicked up sand as he walked the shoreline, lost in his thoughts, each step loosening the tightness coiled in his chest. The closer he came to the edge of the sea, the farther he retreated from his stifling royal life. Being in the water was only thing that brought him comfort in the days since his father's sudden passing nearly a year ago. His father had been only forty-nine when the strange sickness took hold of him.

Silas rubbed a hand roughly over his face, trying to banish thoughts of his father's frail final days from his mind. When the funeral ended, Silas's mother, Queen Keltira, had given him what felt like a few days to mourn his father before placing the weight of a kingdom he was not ready to bear upon his shoulders. She agreed they would delay his coronation for another year, but even that was not enough time. King Ulrich should have lived for at least another twenty, even thirty, years. Even though Silas was first in line to the throne, and he knew it was his duty to prepare for it, he was exhausted by his mother's pushing. Every minute of his day was mapped out for him,

from what he would eat for each course of every meal, to endless council meetings, to the awkward outings with the beautiful, eligible, exceedingly dull ladies of the court. These tight-laced women his mother paraded in front of him were all well-mannered, lovely, and unreadable. Silas did his best to be enthusiastic about them. He smiled through garden strolls with stilted small talk and rehearsed laughter. He endured the fluttering touch of gloved hands on his arm from ladies who were well bred and perfect but seemed to have no interests or personality.

There were, of course, exceptions to this observation. Lady Katherine Castor had been a kindhearted woman with a mass of dark curls, bright-blue eyes, and a gap between her front teeth. She was funny and intelligent, if a little overenthusiastic about naming every different bird species they saw, interrupting her own sentence to shout out things like, "Look! A European bee-eater!" But their last outing had ended with a stiff, tight-lipped kiss that the poor lady had accidentally planted on his nose instead of his lips. She had been so embarrassed by the incident that she turned on her heel and ran out of the garden before he could tell her it was all right, that he had been charmed by the tiny moment of imperfection. He had not seen or heard from her since.

Silas reached the edge of the tide, looking around to make sure he was alone before stripping off his clothes and folding them, leaving them in a pile in the sand. No one ever came down here in the warm months, as disappearances ramped up during this time of year. But Silas was not afraid. He waded into the sea, allowing the waves to crash over him. He submerged himself, the taste and smell of the cool salt water enveloping him in a rapturous embrace. When he came up for air, he was exhilarated. The sea was the only thing that didn't ask him to lie about what he wanted, and

what he wanted was an entirely different life than the one he had.

Silas's feet sank into the sand where he was standing as a wave pushed him backward before pulling him in again. He submerged himself, allowing the sea to swathe him in a delicious baptism, and there it was again. That strange, silvery voice calling out to him as it had before. It was as if the sea was teasing him, beckoning him. He still remembered the first time he had heard it, the ethereal sound that was at once comforting, erotic, and spine-chilling. He called out a curious "Hello?" There was no answer. He shook his head and dove under another wave.

That night, alone in his bed, he recreated that otherworldly sound in his mind as he abused himself to the point of a sweaty, shameful release. He thought about the moment he had turned away from the water, the glint of shimmering scales and salt-slick skin that caught his eye and then disappeared beneath the waves. Silas turned in his bed, unable to erase the voice from his mind. He finally fell into a fitful sleep, plagued with strange, erotic dreams of a woman he did not know who tormented and beckoned him from the sea.