



THE FAIRY TOMES OF CERULEAN COVE

MARINA

A Fantasy Romance Story

ANN SEPINO

MARINA

The Fairy Tomes of Cerulean Cove, Book I

by Ann Sepino

LICENSE

This is an authorised free edition from

www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author and Obooko.

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2022 Ann Sepino

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be re-sold or redistributed to other people. In addition, this book may not be republished or uploaded for full or partial access without permission from the author. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your favorite book retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Original image used to make the final book cover courtesy of [Paul Winter](#).

This is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and events are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, places, and events is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER I

The sight in front of her was one of the most intimidating things Marina had ever seen.

She was floating before the open remains of a large clamshell, one perched atop a stone pillar in the middle of an underwater cavern. Around her, luminescent algae glowed and faded like the stars of the night sky. Cold currents swept in and out of the crevices in the walls, bringing with them the haunting sounds of the watery deep.

She would have swum out of the cavern already if not for her desire to talk to the sorceress.

Said sorceress lounged in the clamshell, eel-like tail curled tightly. The algae's faint light illuminated her dark hair and knowing gaze. "I've seen that look in your eyes before, child."

"So, you know why I'm here?" Marina asked, her voice quavering. The sorceress' calm demeanor didn't lessen the trepidation she felt.

Her anxiety must have shown, because the woman began to smile. There was a curve to the sorceress' lips that did not bring Marina any comfort. If she were more timid, the teal and blue scales on her tail would have already lost their color from fear.

"I'm not the most accomplished sorceress across the deep, blue sea for nothing," the woman replied. Her tail uncurled, allowing a bottle of glowing blue liquid to float from her grasp and towards Marina.

“Here.”

Marina took it in her shaking hands.

“Is this the potion?” she asked, eyeing the liquid inside. Whatever it was, it didn’t look palatable at all.

“Yes,” the sorceress answered. “A spell to mask the mermaid’s magic essence lying dormant in your blood. One sip, and you will have what you desire. On one condition.”

The other merfolk had cautioned her about the sorcerers and their conditions. In truth, Marina had nearly decided not to come here because of those warnings. Only the fact that nothing was left of her old home pushed her to stick to her decision.

“What is it?” Marina asked.

The woman before her tilted her head. That smile stayed just as controlled as before. “After stepping foot upon the human world, you will have to wed the first unmarried man you meet. If he does not marry you or he discards you later on, your life will belong to me forever.”

Marina gulped. She already knew about that stipulation from the stories being passed around. The task felt more daunting coming from the sorceress herself.

“I understand.”

The woman raised one eyebrow. “Are you not frightened?”

“If it means that I can have what I’ve always wanted, I will do anything,” Marina said, her determination overshadowing any misgivings she

felt.

A volcanic quake had destroyed her coral home and buried her parents and siblings in mere seconds. The ashes it scattered killed off what was left of the reef. Her shoal had been forced to disband and seek refuge in other mer kingdoms.

As one of the unlucky few who didn't get accepted into a new home, Marina had no choice but to go where only the most desperate merfolk went.

Luckily for her, the sorceress had no objections to the idea.

"Very well then," the woman said, ready to gamble with another life. "May fate be with you."

She could not stand the sorceress' excited gaze any longer. Marina twisted around and swam out of the cave as quickly as she could. Her shimmering blue tail and translucent fins propelled her through the water, leaving bubbles in her wake.

Marina changed direction at one point and headed towards the surface. She broke through the waves and sucked in some desperately needed air to calm her pounding heart. The gills on her neck closed, allowing her lungs to work alone as she looked around for a good place to ground herself.

She eventually found a sandy beach sheltered by a curve of imposing bluffs. The place was familiar to her only because she had seen it once while hunting for fish. Now, Marina had no brothers or sisters to hunt for.

"Well, here goes nothing." Marina dragged herself

onto the sand until she was sure that the changing tide would not reach her. Then, once she'd tidied the mess that was her tangled brown hair with her free hand, she opened the bottle and lifted it to her lips.

The last thing she remembered before passing out was a disgusting taste that resembled mer blood.

When Marina finally woke, it was to the sight of something more pleasant than the sorceress.

She first noticed the strong human scent that surrounded her. Next, she became aware of someone's warm arm supporting her back and shoulder. And when she opened her eyes, she saw the face of a man.

"Hey," the man said, his mouth turned down and his dark eyebrows wrinkling. He had the greenest irises Marina had ever seen, even among the merfolk. "Are you all right?"

Marina tried to turn her head so she could see the rest of him, but a dull pain behind her neck made her scalp throb. The potion must have been more powerful than she thought.

"My head..."

Thankfully, the man was kind enough to hold her gently through the ordeal. He adjusted his arm so that she could rest her weight on it. "Steady now."

"Thank you," she said after regaining her strength and adjusting her bearings.

Carefully, Marina raised her hand to the back of her head as if to feel for any wounds. In truth, she wanted to see if her gills were gone. The smooth skin

under her fingertips proved that the potion had worked.

The man didn't notice what she was doing. He seemed more concerned by the fact that a stranger like her was on the beach. "What the heck are you doing all the way out here? And so early in the morning?"

Her heart raced. If there was one thing she wasn't very good at, it was lying. But one look at the fishing net that the man had discarded close by, and Marina knew that she couldn't tell this man the truth.

Out of all kinds of humans, it was fishermen who disliked merfolk the most. They competed for fish, after all, and rogue merfolk were notorious for seducing fisherfolk from their spouses. It's the reason why only the married among her kind were allowed on land.

There had been more than one unwed mermaid or merman who returned to sea because humans had driven them away after discovering the truth.

"I... got lost..." she said.

The man snorted. "Got knocked out is more like it. Are you alone?"

"Yes," Marina replied.

"You don't look too good. Are you... in a bad way?" The man's eyes darted down before coming back to her face. He blushed. "Did somebody hurt you?"

"No."

The man pressed his lips together and stayed silent. Marina could see not just his discomfort but

also his disbelief. After all, there were only so many reasons for an unconscious, naked woman to appear out of nowhere.

Eventually, he sighed and helped her sit up.

“Here.” He let go of her so he could remove his coat and drape it over her shoulders. “What happened, then? Why are you, um, underdressed like this?”

If he didn’t look so troubled by her presence, Marina would have taken the time to appreciate his coat’s scent. She found the mix of pine and salty breeze wafting from the fabric rather pleasant. It made her feel safe, even though she should be cautious with the human who’d found her.

“I didn't bring clothes with me when I... escaped...” Marina said, not really sure how else she could explain her predicament. She didn’t want to return to the sea and present the sorceress with her life before the sun had set on her first day as a human.

The man gnawed at his lower lip, and Marina hoped that he’d take pity on her despite her poorly worded answers.

“I get it,” he said, much to Marina’s relief. “I won't ask anything else if you don't feel like talking, but at least let me take care of you.”

“I'd appreciate it, Mister...”

“The name's Caspian.” His arm returned to where it had been before he gave her his coat. “What's yours?”

“Marina,” she said as he helped her to her feet. She

looked down, and for a moment, Marina marveled over the sight of her ten new toes digging into the white sand.

“Well, Marina,” the man—Caspian—said, “let's see if you can walk without tipping over.”

Marina struggled over her first few steps, but Caspian was quick to support her whenever she nearly fell. He held her to his side, only briefly loosening his arm when he had to retrieve his fishing net. The rest of the time, he helped her past the occasional boulder that dotted the beach.

“Where are we walking to?” Marina asked after noticing that they were going only one way.

Caspian pointed to a sloping path of pebbles that connected the edge of the beach to the grassier terrain above. The rest of the path steadily rose towards a rocky mound topped by a copse of trees. A stone cottage was tucked neatly among the foliage, blending seamlessly with the natural environment surrounding it.

“That cottage on the bluff is mine,” he said. “We'll set you up there so you can rest.”

Even though she was grateful for the assistance, she didn't want to impose too much. She only needed to get used to walking, and then she would be on her way. She had to find a groom as quickly as possible or her life would be forfeit.

“Won't your wife be curious about me when I show up?” Marina asked, toying with the possibility of asking him to bring some supplies to her instead.

Caspian looked her way and grinned. “Lucky for you, I don't have a wife.”

Marina's stomach nearly dropped.

The man who'd found her was unmarried. And a fisherman. And she was bound to her promise to the sorceress, whether she liked it or not.

No wonder the woman had been more than happy to help her transform. There was a good chance that the first human she met would be one that did not take kindly to mermaids. The sorceress had been counting on her to literally turn tail before she could even begin her new life.

Well, the woman would be sorely disappointed.

Marina had come this far, and she would not give up now. She could be happy with Caspian as long as she remained careful. The man was built well and was quite nice to look at, and he seemed kind.

Even if he turned her away and she returned to the sea in disgrace, at least she could say that she'd tried.

“I'll be your wife,” she said.

It would be hard, but the idea of wandering the sea alone was a lot harder to bear.

Caspian nearly stumbled when he heard her words. He almost took her down with him. “I beg your pardon?”

Marina clung to his side and looked him straight in the eye. She could see the blush return to his cheeks with a vengeance. She could feel her own face warming as she held his gaze.

“Marry me.”

CHAPTER II

Of all the things Caspian expected to find on the shore, it wasn't a naked woman with a heart-shaped face and long, beautiful brown hair.

He'd almost run away screaming at first, thinking that he'd found a dead body. Thankfully, he'd noticed her steady breathing as soon as he came closer to look her over. As much as he could without disgracing either himself or the woman, of course.

In that short amount of time, he'd glimpsed just how pearly her skin was. How gently her figure curved and dipped in all the right places. He'd noticed her shapely legs and small feet.

Although he would have liked to see more, Caspian was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of things. His mother and sister would have given him a beating, and his father would have thrown him into the sea. Luckily, the coat that he'd decided to wear against the morning chill had been long enough to cover her.

Now, the woman was dressed in his late mother's old clothes—and going through her breakfast more enthusiastically than he had expected. Her wide blue eyes and the happy little chirrups coming from her bow lips were close to driving him insane.

“Good, yeah?” he asked, hoping that some small-talk would distract him from his startling fascination with the woman.

Said woman swallowed the food left in her mouth before smiling at him. “It tastes heavenly!”

If there was anything he could boast about, it was the artisan techniques that his late parents had handed down to him. His father had been a master at reading the sea, and his mother had had a knack for preparing and preserving fish of all kinds. They’d been good at what they did despite their identities as ‘humble fisherfolk.’

“I caught it fresh from the water over there, then cured it with enough salt to last a year,” he explained.

The woman nodded before picking up her fork and resuming her feast. “I didn't know it would taste this delicious.”

“You look like you've never had fish before.” Caspian ran through the landlocked villages that he knew of. If the woman wasn’t used to eating fish, then she might have come from the forested regions like Regalia Ridge or Viridian Vale.

However, the woman shook her head.

“It's the only thing I've had since I was a child,” she said, “but I've never had it cooked. Like this, I mean.”

Ever since regaining consciousness, the woman had given nothing but confusing answers. There was no question that she was hiding something from him. She didn’t want him to know where she’d come from or what had happened to her, and this was reason enough to let her be on her way.

However, Caspian didn't have it in his heart to leave her to her own devices. A young woman like her, seemingly unaware of the dangers of the world, would have no chance against the swindlers and ruffians that passed through Cerulean Cove. Not to mention the fairies and other beings that occasionally visit human territories.

"I see," he said, dismissing her secretive behavior for now. He didn't want to upset her if it meant making her recall any horrible things she'd had to go through to get here.

The woman finished her food just as Caspian pulled a chair out from the other side of the table and sat down. "Thank you for serving me breakfast."

"About what you said earlier." Caspian laced his fingers together and set them on the table. He didn't want to talk about this in his little kitchen, with its modestly stocked cupboards and dull wood floors, but no other place in the four-room cottage seemed any better.

The parlor's furniture was still covered in sheets because he hadn't entertained anybody there in a long time. The spare and main bedrooms were out of the question. And it wasn't like he could drag her out of the house after the hearth had just warmed her up.

"Yes?"

"You were only joking, right?" he insisted, knowing full well that nobody in their right mind would wish to marry him out of nowhere. Even his

former lover that had known him for years had declined his proposal.

The last he'd heard of Recca, she was engaged to some well-off knight from the Northern Village.

He really should have listened to his sister and found someone who could accept his humble background. Instead, he just had to lie to himself and believe that his former lover would change her mind. In the end, Recca had told him that he'd never be enough.

"I was serious," the woman said, much to his surprise. "I truly wish that you'd marry me."

His sister had been forever telling him not to worry about her and to just settle down. Find someone who would at least be willing to work alongside him if he truly wasn't interested in romance anymore. Of course, this was easier said than done.

"But why?" Caspian couldn't help but scratch his head. "I mean, I'm flattered, but you barely know me."

Before he could move away, the woman had leaned over the table and covered his clasped hands with her fingers. They looked so smooth and dainty compared to his sun-tanned, knobbier ones. "You covered me up, gave me food, and didn't take advantage of me. I think kindness is a wonderful quality in a husband."

It seemed like Caspian's cheeks weren't done blushing for the day, and it was only mid-morning!

The woman looked so earnest with her praise that he couldn't find the willpower to tell her she was wrong. He didn't know what part of him would make for a so-called wonderful husband.

And still, she wanted to marry him.

"Either I'm dreaming," he murmured, "or I just became the luckiest bastard on this side of Cerulean Cove."

The woman tilted her head. "Is that where we are?"

"Yeah," Caspian said. The nervous, almost pleasant feeling he got from hearing the woman's voice faded as his eyes narrowed. "You didn't know?"

The woman shook her head again. She shrank back into her seat, and Caspian almost regretted saying anything. "I was in such a big hurry to get away that any place would've been fine."

Caspian didn't like that statement at all. Firstly, it meant that the woman was indeed running away from something. Whether that something was dangerous or not, only time and a healthy dose of trust will tell.

Second, it only proved that the woman had no idea how dangerous the surrounding forests could be. Many of the villages were safe because the oracles who guarded them employed knights and sentries to patrol their lands. The paths that the caravans took to get from one region to another were a different story.

"And somehow you ended up here," Caspian said,

not bothering to hide his relief.

There were worse places for someone to pass out. Cerulean Cove may have been small, with only three villages and nothing of significant importance to export, but it had its own charms if one bothered to look. Even his sister wished to return home as soon as she'd earned enough money to better their lives here.

The woman tilted her head the other way, and that small motion pulled Caspian out of his thoughts. "You said something about being lucky."

"It's just that I was thinking about finding someone to mind the house," he answered honestly. "Fishing takes up a lot of time. And as far as I'm concerned, it's better to have someone watching this place in the early morning and late afternoon. The problem is, there aren't a lot of folks in town who want to live all the way out here."

"Well, I do," the woman said, surprising him yet again. She was ridiculously set on marrying him. "I like it here because it's close to the sea."

Strangely enough, Caspian was warming to the idea too.

The woman—Marina, he remembered—was quite beautiful. Besides that, she appeared to have an energetic spirit. Caspian was sure that Verna would appreciate a warm, friendly, and enthusiastic sister-in-law.

What was more, marrying her meant that he could help her escape from whatever had driven her to

come here in the first place. She could eat and sleep somewhere safe. She could start her life anew, a luxury that many people down on their luck find hard to come by.

“You'll have to clean the house and do the laundry while I'm away,” he said.

Talk of housework didn't phase her. She even looked excited at the prospect of tackling those chores. “I don't mind.”

“And it would have to be a marriage in name only,” Caspian added for good measure. “Like I said, we barely know each other.”

Unbeknownst to his sister, Caspian actually did want a romantic relationship again. However, he didn't want to start it on the wrong foot the way he had with Reca. He was intensely attracted to Marina, but attraction and desire alone didn't make for a lasting relationship.

Simply put, he wanted more than just infatuation this time around. He wanted what his mother and father had. With someone like Marina, if possible.

To this end, he would remain a gentleman even if he died trying.

Either Marina thought the same or she simply had no objections to this clause. “Of course.”

Just like that, she'd sealed their fates. Now Caspian just had to stop by the village temple and ask the local oracle for her blessing. And, of course, hope that this convenient marriage of theirs didn't blow up in their faces.

CHAPTER III

Even though she knew much of the human world already—mostly from her parents, who used to surface and trade above-sea—Marina still realized that there was more she could learn. She'd picked up a few things since living with Caspian. And she enjoyed each new experience.

For instance, Marina didn't know that human clothes could be so cozy. She'd seen women in peasant blouses and billowy skirts from afar, but she hadn't known how they would feel on her scale-free skin until now. She liked the softness and warmth of the cotton and linen fabrics.

She also liked the soaps she used to wash them. Unlike the slime that merfolk harvested from fish, the stuff that Caspian used for cleansing smelled strongly of many different things, some of them pleasantly unfamiliar. She liked the one that smelled of flowers best, and she *loved* the bubbles it made.

Now, though, her favorite thing would have to be the village temple.

She liked the arched windows of blue stained glass built into the white, square-shaped building. They went well with the blue tile roof and black double doors out front. The tint of their panes was faint enough that Marina could still see the black, wrought-iron fence that surrounded the entire property.

The inside was charming too.

The stone floors had been scrubbed and polished clean, and fresh garlands hung from the beams beneath the foyer's ceiling. The round altar in the middle of the shrine room had been draped in lace and heaped with all sorts of flower bouquets. A tall candle stood at the center of the arrangement, adding to the gentle light that came from the wall sconces.

She would have liked to watch the way its creamy wax melted and rolled down towards its catchment bowl—if she weren't marrying Caspian at the moment.

“With these bands, your hearts are bound. And with a kiss, your souls are sealed.”

Marina returned her attention to Lady Rosa, the village oracle Caspian had told her about. They'd only met today, but she already had a good feeling about the woman. Maybe it's because Lady Rosa exuded authority in the same way as the sorceress, but without being intimidating.

She next shifted her gaze to Caspian.

The man squeezed her hand the moment their eyes met. “Marina?”

He'd explained the ceremony to her ‘just in case it was different from the ones where she came from.’ She remembered that at this point, they were supposed to kiss. Marina's cheeks flushed, but she soldiered on.

“It's all right,” she said, returning his gesture.

Before she knew it, Caspian had leaned towards her until their lips came together. His one arm snaked behind her back to bring her closer, and she complied. It was a soft kiss, and rather brief, but it was more than enough to make Marina realize that she liked it.

Even more than her clothes and soap and the temple, maybe.

“Congratulations, both of you.”

Marina was still too tongue-tied after Caspian’s kiss to say anything. Luckily, the man hadn’t lost his senses the way she had. “Thank you, my lady.”

The oracle nodded. “And it was a pleasure to meet your lovely bride.”

“You’re too kind.” Marina said, pleased that Caspian hadn’t thought to release her yet. She rather enjoyed having him close to her side.

“Will you be moving into town now that you’re married?”

“No,” Caspian said. “We’re staying by the sea.”

“You have a point.” Lady Rosa looked Marina’s way and winked at her. “All that privacy will be good for your marriage.”

This time, both she and Caspian blushed. They’d been living together since her arrival at Cerulean Cove, but they hadn’t really talked about it out loud. It was a little embarrassing to hear someone else actually bring it up in their conversation.

“That’s not what I meant, my lady,” Caspian hurriedly explained. “Marina loves it there.”

“It's true,” Marina confirmed. “I've always been fond of the sea. I can't imagine living anywhere else.”

Thankfully, the oracle latched on to the topic and dropped the one before. “Did you live close to the water before coming here?”

“In a way,” she replied, not wanting to go into too many details. There weren't very many humans who could easily decipher her true origins, but oracles were among the few who could.

Marina had the sorceress' potion to thank for her disguise. As long as she didn't use any of her merfolk magic, Lady Rosa would remain oblivious. And as long as Caspian didn't sever their marriage, she'd retain her human form.

Caspian must have noticed her discomfort because he spoke up before Lady Rosa could ask for more details. “I have to go into town to restock on food. Our supplies are running low.”

“Do you need any vegetables?” the oracle asked. “Because if you do, you can harvest some from the temple garden.”

“You don't mind, my lady?” Caspian asked. “The temple belongs to you.”

“Consider it your wedding present,” Lady Rosa replied. “I'll let my apprentice know. She can help pick out the ones you can harvest.”

Caspian's happy face made Marina's heart skip a beat. She'd seen him smile before, and it always made her feel things she couldn't explain. Simply put, she enjoyed seeing his eyes sparkle with joy.

Only then did Caspian let go of her, and only so that he could shake the oracle's hand. "Thank you, my lady."

"Shall we?" Marina said after Lady Rosa left them to fetch her apprentice. The oracle told them that they could meet up at the garden gates.

"It's too hot outside, and you're not that used to the sun," Caspian said as he took her hand. "Why don't you stay here where it's more comfortable?"

"But I want to help," she replied.

"I know, but I don't want you fainting out there from exhaustion." Caspian looked deeply into her eyes. The green of his irises seemed to turn gold in the light of the candle. "You've barely recovered from the last time."

"I swear I won't," Marina murmured, mesmerized by the man. Nobody, with the exception of her late parents, had cared this much for her well-being.

It didn't help that Caspian had dressed up for the occasion. The coat he usually wore had been replaced by a tailored jacket, and he'd worn one of his newer pants. He'd also let her borrow his late mother's fancier clothes, 'so she could be even prettier than she already was on their special day.'

Remembering his kind words made Marina blush. If he was this charming with her now, she could only guess how he would treat someone he truly loved. She knew how lucky she was to have found such a thoughtful human.

"Let's make a deal, then," Caspian said. "You stay

here for the moment, but when we get to town, you can help keep track of which items we'll be buying from the stores.”

He was being so kind to her that Marina finally agreed.

“All right,” she said.

Relief washed over Caspian’s face.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. Their matching silver bands winked in the candlelight, cementing the fact that they were married. “Wait here, yeah?”

Marina nodded. She hung back when Caspian dropped her hand and excused himself from the shrine room. She felt a sense of contentment as she watched him stride to the front door.

Surprise replaced that contentment when Caspian paused and spun around. He made his way back towards her, cradled her cheeks, and kissed her more deeply than the first time. His hands were still gentle on her, but there was no mistaking the desire that dictated this second kiss.

It was over before Marina could even convince herself it was happening. She barely caught the blush staining Caspian’s cheeks before he dismissed himself again. She stood slack-jawed and speechless in the middle of the shrine room, not really sure what to make of the incident.

A chuckle echoed against the walls and broke the spell that seemed to have trapped her.

Marina turned around just as a pretty woman with

golden hair entered from a side door. The stranger wore the same vestments as Lady Rosa, except hers didn't have as much of the elaborate embroidery as the other one had. She assumed that this woman was the oracle's apprentice.

The stranger smiled at Marina with the same welcoming aura that Rosa had shown. "Caspian seems like a new man now that he has someone of his own."

"My lady?" Marina asked as the woman came to her side.

"He's not the richest person here, and he's not very chatty with the village women. Not many prominent acquaintances as well, I'm told," the woman said. "I'm glad that it didn't hamper you from marrying him, though."

Marina's brow furrowed. It seemed that she had many more things to learn about the human world. She didn't understand what riches or acquaintances had to do with marrying someone, but it must be important.

For now, she would wait until Caspian returned with their vegetables.

Marina had the rest of her life to figure out how her new world worked. Caspian had told her that this was their special day, and she didn't want to be the one who spoiled it. She wished to enjoy the rest of their trip to the Western Village, which she had been wanting to explore since the morning.

Because maybe, *just maybe*, Caspian would kiss

her while they were there.

CHAPTER IV

Caspian felt like he was walking on air. His steps were light, and his lips had curled into an easygoing smile. He wanted to believe that it was because of the day's fair weather, complete with a sunlit sky, fluffy clouds, and a warm breeze blowing through Cerulean Cove's Western Village.

The truth is, he felt happy because he was holding his wife's hand.

They were walking on a cobblestone road leading towards the village square. It took them past cottages big and small, as well as flowering gardens and cheerful people going about their own business. The men and women he knew waved at him—then tailed him with their eyes after realizing that, this time, he hadn't come into the village alone.

Not that he minded. After all, Marina was beautiful, even in her hand-me-down clothes. Even the blindest fool would take a second glance at her if she walked by.

They passed a group of children playing with wooden swords. One was pretending to be some sort of rogue creature, whereas the other played at being a knight. Marina's chuckle upon hearing their banter made him smile wider.

"You look happy," he said, moving just a bit closer to her to make room for a man pushing his weighty wheelbarrow.

“I am,” Marina replied. She had just as big a smile on her face. “I’ve never been to this village before. I didn’t know it would look so beautiful or have so many people.”

“Didn’t you have any villages that looked like this?” Caspian inclined his head. Yet another clue as to where she might have come from, but he was still no closer to figuring out her former home’s exact location.

Marina’s eyes darted to the side, as if trying to recall what the other villages she’d seen were like. Or perhaps she was trying to think about how she could answer him. “There were, but... I always thought that the villages here would be quieter.”

“At least that means you’ll be used to the crowds in the shops,” he said, dropping the subject.

Although he was curious, he didn’t want to ruin their afternoon by needling her for more information. This was their special day, even if it had been done out of convenience. Caspian only hoped that they would reach a point where Marina could trust him, preferably before their hair had turned gray.

Marina swung her wicker basket at her side as they turned a corner. “Where are we heading?”

“To the seamstress, for one,” Caspian replied. He readjusted the straps of his canvas pack so that the vegetables already inside wouldn’t tumble out. “You need new clothes.”

His wife looked at her frayed skirt and faded peasant blouse. Her hand-me-downs were

serviceable for now, but they were already so old that they wouldn't last until the end of the season. "You're probably right."

Caspian nodded. Thankfully, he'd saved up a bit of money just before Marina tumbled into his life. It meant that his new net and sail would have to wait a little longer, but at least his wife wouldn't freeze to death in the colder season.

"We'll go to the mercantile after that," he continued. "Then, the roadside market for fruits and other vegetables. We'll stop by the butcher last."

"What's a butcher?"

Caspian stopped short. If he hadn't been holding Marina's hand, she would have continued walking without him. Since he was, she also paused in the middle of the road, thankfully nowhere near the path of another couple going the opposite way.

"It's the man who sells meat like beef and chicken," he explained, a little confused by her question.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You eat beef and chicken, right?"

"Have you never had beef or chicken before?" Surely, even in the most remote villages, people raised cattle or bred poultry for food. Then again, there were families who couldn't afford to buy these meats or cruelly refused to feed them to their children.

"No." Her smile shrank. "Is that strange?"

"Not if you're from somewhere else, I guess," he said, not voicing the other possibilities. He hated to

think that his wife might have never eaten a good meal before now. “When we get home, I’ll cook you some stew so you can try it out.”

Marina’s mood lightened. “I’m sure I’ll love it.”

Buying extra ingredients would cost him some of the coins he had been saving for a new salting jar, but Caspian didn’t mind. Marina had been a big help in minding the house and volunteering to do other tasks such as mending his nets and rinsing his catch. He was sure that their efficiency would help him earn the same amount in no time.

He gave her hand a little squeeze, and they resumed their walk.

It wasn’t long before they reached the seamstress, who was ‘more than happy to fit and measure such a beautiful, young customer like Marina.’ By the time they were through, Marina had walked out in a new, ready-made outfit that the shop’s owner had added some slight alterations to. She’d also carried a bundle of other clothes, as well as garments to wear beneath them.

Their stop at the mercantile had taken less time, seeing as they were only there for salt, sugar, thread, and a few other things they needed around the house. Shopping at the market, on the other hand, seemed to take an eternity. There were so many people hovering over the stalls and haggling for better prices just like them.

By the time they finished, the fluffy clouds in the sky had given way to scary-looking mounds of gray.

The wind had picked up, almost whispering through the trees. The sun was nowhere in sight.

“It looks like rain,” Caspian said as he held his palm up to check.

His other hand was still holding on to Marina. Caspian had been too nervous to lose her in the market’s crowd that he reached for her as soon as they entered the fray. He hadn’t let go since, even though they had already stepped out of the village and started making their way to the seaside bluffs.

“Really?” Marina stared at the skies. “Does it get dangerous here?”

Caspian didn’t miss the worry in her voice. He’d heard stories about distant villages that would flood during heavy storms. In fact, the caravans sometimes brought those areas’ former residents along as a way to help them find new homes.

“Were rains dangerous where you came from?” he asked.

Marina pressed her lips together. She didn’t take her eyes off of the darkening horizon. “A little.”

“Don’t worry.” Caspian squeezed her hand like before. He waited for her to look his way before smiling at her. “We’ll hurry home as quickly as we can.”

Thankfully, his reassurance eased her tense features.

They did their best to pick up their pace despite the heavy things they were carrying. Caspian was glad that they’d bought a new pair of shoes for

Marina. Otherwise, the pebbles they were hurrying over would have cut her feet.

Unfortunately, the skies opened up and dumped a torrent of rain on them before they could make it the whole way back. They had just started at the foot of the incline when the first droplets hit his nose. By the time they were at his front door, they were both soaked through.

“That was stronger than I thought,” Marina mused as she left her wicker basket by the door and helped him remove his pack. “Not as dangerous as I expected, thankfully.”

“You’re all wet, though,” Caspian noted, taking care not to stare too much at the way all that water had plastered her shirt onto her skin. He also did his best to hide his blush under the guise of wiping his face dry. “Would you like a warm bath?”

Marina’s eyes sparkled. “With hot water?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, moving his gaze to the little alcove in the corner of their parlor. “I’ll set up the tub and heat some water over the stove. Then you can take a soak behind the screen while I cook up some stew.”

The one thing Caspian learned after days of living together was that Marina was obsessed with long, relaxing soaks. It had been awkward at first, knowing that a beautiful woman was lounging just feet behind the old privacy screen while he went around the house. The threat of being haunted by his parents was what had kept him from stepping out of

line and acting on his more... mature urges.

“Yes, please.” Marina said. She even removed the pin from her hair and combed through her brown tresses in preparation. “That sounds like a lovely way to spend the afternoon together.”

That was the moment when their situation truly sank in.

With just one word—*together*—Caspian realized that they were married. She was his wife, and *he* was her *husband*. After years of waiting and hoping, he finally had someone to share his life with.

What’s more, the person sharing was cheery, vibrant, and interested in whatever he had to offer her. If she was this happy around him now, he could only wonder how ecstatic she’d always be with someone whom she genuinely loved. He could only hope that his fond affection for her would be enough.

“Why are you so charming?” he asked, letting that fondness slip out.

Marina stopped combing her hair. She lifted her eyes to meet his, and that exposed the rosy color blooming on her cheeks. “I...”

Her words trailed off when Caspian kissed her.

He didn’t know what compelled him to do it. Perhaps the sight of her blushing face framed by tendrils of damp hair was too tempting to resist. Perhaps the fact that they were bound together for the rest of eternity had played with his head.

One thing was certain, though. Kissing her soft, shy lips was the most amazing thing he’d done in his

life. The feel of Marina melting against him, breathing him in, and curling her fingers into his shirt filled him with so much euphoria he could burst.

Even his most intimate past encounters with Reka couldn't compare.

It took everything he had in him to finally pry himself away from her.

"I'm sorry," Caspian said, even though part of him wasn't. That same part screamed at him to take things even further. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Surprisingly, Marina licked her lips and kept her hands on his heart.

"I don't mind," she said, her voice so breathless that he almost dared to kiss her again. "You're a lovely kisser."

If he were a lesser man, he would have thrown his principles away and flung their agreement to the stormy winds. Caspian knew that he couldn't act on any passionate fantasies now. For one thing, his wife had started to shiver from the cold.

The temperature was only going to drop further because of the rain, and he'd be damned if the weather and his inability to care for her made Marina sick.

"I'll draw that bath now," he said, escaping to the kitchen to prepare her hot water.

Caspian decided to heat only one kettle's worth, just enough for Marina to use. He was perfectly fine

with using water straight from the pump for his own bath. After all, every inch of him already burned from that one kiss.

CHAPTER V

Her eyes scanned the choppy waters as the blustery winds ruffled her new gingham skirt. The dark red fabric billowed around her legs. Against the sandy shore, it looked like a flag or a beacon used to guide the way for nearby ships.

That's exactly why Marina had chosen to wear it.

Caspian had set out to fish early that morning, and he hadn't been back since. Now it was almost noon, and his little boat still hadn't made an appearance on the shore. The gray clouds that were rolling in from the sea didn't ease Marina's mind.

Two other fishermen who had set sail later had already returned. The few others who lived south of the cove hadn't even bothered rowing out. She walked from one end of the beach to the other, hoping that nothing had happened to him.

A long time passed before she spotted his boat's sail cresting over the waves. Marina dashed to the small pier south of their bluff, the place where Caspian usually moored. She waved her hands and hoped he could return as quickly as he could manage.

"You're back! Thank the fates, you're back!" she said as the man finally hopped onto the dock and secured his boat. She didn't even glance at the half-empty net he'd hauled up before tackling him.

"Marina? What are you doing here?" Caspian

barely flinched when her arms came around his neck. His voice held a hint of alarm. "A storm's rolling in!"

"That's why I was waiting for you," she explained. Now that Caspian was here, the anxiety coiled in her chest started to dissipate.

Caspian wrapped one arm around her as he reached for the net he'd dropped onto the wooden planks. He then led her back to the beach. "Were you worried that I'd have a hard time getting home?"

"I don't like the water when it storms," Marina said. She clung to him even though she knew that the sea couldn't reach him anymore and rip him away from her. "You might get hurt out there."

The man snorted. One of his brows rose as he smirked. "I'm a good swimmer, you know."

For the first time since meeting him, Marina felt her ire rise. She didn't like the proud, confident look on his face. She'd been living in that watery world until only a few weeks ago, and she knew what struggling with its natural power was really like.

"The sea doesn't care how good of a swimmer you are. If it wants you to sink to the bottom, it'll do everything it can to get you there," Marina said. "You're a fisherman, right? You're supposed to know that."

Beside her, Caspian tensed. His smirk wavered when she pulled herself away from him. "I do know that. That's why I'm very careful when I fish in weather like this."

Marina shook her head.

“You should just stay home.”

The man reacted to that suggestion with a sudden stop and a tight jaw. He turned to face her. “You don’t get it, Marina. I *have* to go out.”

Marina couldn’t believe his hardheaded reply. She’d seen the drowned bodies of fishermen sinking to the bottom of the sea even as a child. And when she was older, she even helped tow them back to the surface and shuffle them onto shore so that other humans could give them a proper burial.

The thought of Caspian’s lifeless form slowly drifting down into the deepest, darkest trenches filled her with a horror she couldn’t even describe.

“Why go out at all?” she asked, needing him to see reason.

It was clearly the wrong thing to ask, because Caspian imploded. He spun swiftly and marched towards her. “Because I need money! Does that answer your question?!”

Marina was so startled that she backed away. In her hurry, she nearly tripped on a conch shell partly buried in the sand. Caspian only stopped his advance when he saw her teetering on her feet.

They stared at each other, Marina with surprise, Caspian with a mix of shock and frustration. The wind whipped at the man’s hair. The green of his eyes had dulled in the midst of their bickering, filling her with a sense of despair.

“Excuse me,” Marina said before leaving him behind.

She hurried over the path that led back to their home. In her haste, she sprayed sand from under her feet, its sound interspersed with the sniffing she made. Never in her life did she think that a human would make her cry.

Marina slammed the front door as soon as she entered the cottage, then sought refuge in the little kitchen that still smelled of butter and flour. She could barely look at the bread basket she'd made earlier that morning, the special treat she'd prepared for when Caspian finally came back. They were supposed to share it in front of the fireplace while the man talked more about the village folks he knew.

It wasn't long before Caspian appeared at the threshold, chest heaving and eyes as wide as saucers. The net he'd been carrying a while ago was nowhere to be seen. Even the buckets he usually moved his catch into weren't in his hands.

"Marina, I'm sorry." He came into the room and stood in front of her. His fingers brushed away the few tears she hadn't managed to wipe off. "I didn't mean to yell."

"I didn't like it," she said.

"Nobody would," he replied. "I'm so sorry."

The shame and remorse in his tone made Marina's heart ache. It wasn't in her nature to hold a grudge against anyone. She didn't even think ill of the merfolk that had rejected her request to join them, much less the one human that had actually accepted her.

Marina knew that this man she'd married was hardworking, good, and kind. Caspian would never lay a hand on her in anger. Even if he figured out that she was originally a mermaid, she didn't believe that he would harm her afterward.

Still, it didn't make the sting of his reprimand feel any less painful.

"You hate me," she said, her voice breaking.

Caspian was quick to deny that thought. He pulled her into his arms before she could say anything else. "No, I don't. I got annoyed, but that doesn't mean I hate you. It's not the same."

"I was worried," Marina admitted as she breathed the scent of salt and sun on Caspian's coat. It helped remind her that he was still alive and breathing. "I kept thinking about what would happen if you didn't come home. I don't want to lose anybody else."

Her arms tightened around him as she remembered that day of loss.

If her older sister hadn't shoved her to the very back of their reef, where the seagrass was so tangled up with mud that it blocked the heat, fumes, and debris from the volcanic quake, Marina would have passed on with her family. Losing them and their home had been the worst day of her life. The only comfort she had was the thought that they had all been together during those last moments.

She didn't want Caspian to struggle by himself out there. If fate was kind enough, she would grow old with him until he could no longer set out to fish.

They would live in his cottage on the bluff, where they'd be safe and warm.

"You won't lose me," he reassured her. "We're in this together, right? With these bands, our hearts are bound. With a kiss, our souls are sealed."

"Caspian..." Marina looked up at him, relieved that he wasn't going anywhere.

His throat bobbed as he returned her gaze. "Do you really like my kisses?"

"Yes."

And just like that, Caspian gifted her with another kiss.

This one was long and slow and gentle. It was an apology and a promise to stick together. It made Marina weak at the knees, prompting her to lean most of her weight on Caspian.

The man used that moment to slip his hand beneath Marina's long locks and run his fingers over the small of her back. He moved his other one to the curve of her hip, just above where her skirt flared close to her bottom. In return, Marina carded her fingers through his hair and traced the blades of his shoulders.

Caspian dipped his head so his lips could reach her neck. "Marina..."

The first claps of thunder made Marina jump.

"What was that?" she asked, pulled out of their languorous kisses by the noise. That's when she noticed the heavy downpour outside their kitchen window.

Thankfully, she hadn't clipped Caspian's chin in that second of surprise. She did, however, distract him for the moment. "Thunder."

"That was thunder?" she asked. "Why was it so loud?"

A flash of lightning followed by a second, louder boom startled her again. Caspian moved his hands once more, but this time with the intent of easing her worries instead of seducing her. "It always is."

Marina sensed the change. She turned back to him, more concerned by his quiet sigh than the look and sound of a thunderstorm on human land. She couldn't do anything about the latter, anyway.

"What's wrong?"

The man pressed his lips together. Then, as soon as she'd stopped flinching at the loud sounds of thunder, he released her. "I can't believe I lost control again."

Marina felt empty after Caspian let go of her. Lately, it was how she reacted whenever he parted from any hugging or hand-holding they did. She chewed on her bottom lip, finally admitting that things were moving well beyond the conditions they'd agreed on.

"Caspian?"

The man had been retreating to the entryway, but he paused and looked over his shoulder when she spoke.

"I'm sorry for touching you," he said. "I didn't mean to get carried away."

Her cheeks flamed at the idea of what would have happened if they hadn't stopped. Now that she could acknowledge how much she actually cared for her husband, getting carried away didn't seem like such a bad thing. She didn't know if what she felt was deep enough to call love, but if the shoe fits...

"If—If we got to know each other better," she stuttered, "it would be all right if it happened. Right?"

Caspian's eyes widened. He turned away before she could confirm if the red in his cheeks had been the start of a blush. "M-maybe."

CHAPTER VI

The turning of the seasons had always been a part of Caspian's life. He liked it when the leaves changed color and the sun climbed the sky much later in the day. He enjoyed the crisper air that swept in from the sea and chased away the muggy heat.

The problem was that the cold waters didn't encourage many fish to swim near the shore in the mornings. It didn't help that pods or schools of bigger sea creatures would be passing by and taking their cut of the catch. Caspian didn't even want to think about the merfolk who had already trimmed those numbers down.

All this meant that Caspian would catch little to nothing if he went out early. He could always fish just before noon, but if he did, he would have to decrease the time he spent on actually selling the fish.

Marina could do that in his place, but Caspian tossed the idea out as soon as it entered his head. Considering how dainty her body was, she would have a hard time lugging a cart loaded with buckets of fish around town. Letting her head into the village alone might also expose her to whatever had brought her to Cerulean Cove in the first place.

Caspian sank into the lumpy couch and sighed. He'd been hoping to bring Verna home by next season, but it looked like his sister would have to

wait again. He'd made progress saving up for her shop, but he hadn't done it fast enough.

His sigh must have drawn Marina out, because she peeked into the parlor.

"You look worried," she said. "Is something wrong?"

It seemed like that's all Marina asked him about lately. Not that he could blame her. He was the one who moped around the house as soon as he returned for lunch and dinner.

"I have to change things up." His gaze drifted to the locked cupboard in the corner where he kept their coins. "I won't save enough money for us from fishing alone."

Marina stepped fully into the room and sat beside him. Her presence helped settle his nerves a little. "What do you mean?"

"It's getting colder, and it's going to be a lot harder to catch fish out at sea," Caspian explained. Without conscious thought, he reached for his wife's hand and held it. "Fewer fish means fewer coins to take home. We're not going to starve or anything, but we might have to make do with what we have until next year."

Marina had actually come into his life at a good time. If she hadn't been around, he would still be scrambling to gather firewood, can fruits, preserve fish, repair the house, and do all sorts of chores to prepare for winter. But with her help, all those tasks were done by noon, which left him plenty of time to

worry about his plans before heading out to sea.

“I don't mind,” Marina replied, leaning against his shoulder. He really did like the floral scent wafting from her hair. “I'm not really used to having a lot of things.”

“Thank the fates for that. But it doesn't mean I won't try hard to get the best of those things for us,” he said.

“And what does that mean?”

“Imagine, Marina, how much nicer it would be to live in a big house.” Caspian laced their fingers together as he told her about what he envisioned for their little family. “Or not to have to mend clothes anymore. To have plates and cups made of glass instead of clay or wood. And furniture upholstered with the softest down feathers instead of lumpy bits of wool and cotton.”

Marina hummed. “That does sound nice.”

“And my sister,” he continued. “She won't have to work as an apprentice anymore. She can open her own little tea house in town.”

“Um, Caspian...”

Caspian paused. His wife had squeezed his fingers tight enough to pull him out of his imaginings. The gesture made him wonder if he'd said anything that might have made her uneasy.

“What is it?” he asked.

Marina worried her lower lip as she looked at him. “You never told me you had a sister.”

Caspian blinked.

“Oh.”

He knew that he looked like an idiot at the moment, and he was. In his mad rush to get himself a wife and carry on with his plans, he'd somehow forgotten to tell said wife that he did, indeed, have a younger sister. Caspian would have slapped himself if Marina wasn't holding his hand.

And hold his hand she did, even if the conversation was starting to set her on edge. The little furrow between her eyebrows revealed the distress his surprise had given her. “Should I be worried that she might have no idea I exist?”

“No! Not at all!” Caspian quickly denied this. “Verna has always hoped that I would marry someone like you.”

The more he spent time with Marina, the more Caspian proved his first hunch about her. His wife had an innocent charm that would bring out Verna's protective instincts in an instant. If there was anything his little sister enjoyed growing up, it was mothering their friends and acquaintances.

His confident response set Marina at ease. “Really?”

“If she met you in person, I think she'd approve,” Caspian said. Then, an idea entered his mind. “In fact, I'm going to write to her today. Tell her that I landed the prettiest woman in Cerulean Cove.”

Caspian had never felt more satisfied after seeing the blush that bloomed on his wife's cheeks.

“Is it all right if I write to her too, then?” she asked.

“I’ve been practicing my letters. I think it would be nice if she got to know me from my own words as well as yours.”

That was another thing he’d only just discovered about Marina. She knew how to read just like any other person, but she’d never written anything before. When he’d asked, she’d said something about a shortage of parchment in a place where writing wasn’t a necessary skill.

The existence of such a village had been puzzling him for days now. That being said, Caspian was relieved that Marina didn’t live there anymore. The growing sheaf of scrap parchment she’d plundered to practice her penmanship on proved just how much she enjoyed writing.

“I think she’d appreciate that,” Caspian said. Verna loved exchanging letters as well, so having a new correspondent in Marina would delight her.

Caspian removed himself from the couch and headed for the writing desk on the other side of the room. He had to get a head start on those letters before leaving for the afternoon. This time around, he wanted Marina to use fresh paper instead of the crumpled ones they were saving for the fireplace and stove.

As he rummaged through the biggest of the desk’s drawers, though, a hand gently landed on his arm.

Caspian turned to the side, only to see Marina’s thoughtful expression. She was back to gnawing that plump lower lip of hers. “Caspian?”

“Yeah?” He tried his best not to be distracted by her mouth, but he was failing. He’d enjoyed their few kisses so much that he’d been waiting for another chance at doing it again.

Marina’s face, however, hinted that such a chance wouldn’t come today. “Do you really need the money?”

Another heavy huff escaped Caspian’s chest. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been so vocal about his frustrations within earshot of Marina. He didn’t want to worry her or make her think that marrying him had been a poor decision on her part.

Truth be told, the idea of Marina regretting their marriage didn’t sit well with Caspian. He’d come to adore her over their time together, if he had to admit it. He sincerely wanted that feeling to grow.

Judging from what she’d suggested some time ago, she also thought there could be more to their marriage than just two people helping each other out.

The only way to do that was to be completely honest with her, even if it made them both worry. After all, his parents did say that marriage comes with ups and downs. If his mother and father could weather through those ‘downs,’ surely he and Marina could do the same.

“My family has had to make do with so little for so long.” He straightened up and cupped her cheek. “I want to have more, given a chance.”

Caspian didn’t tell her about Recca’s role in making

him rethink his worth. He didn't want Marina to pity him more than she already did. Besides, his little sister's existence was enough shock for the day.

Marina nodded.

"I understand." She smiled and went on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "I believe you can do it, Caspian."

"Thank you for putting your faith in me," he replied after shaking off his surprise.

By that time, though, Marina was already leaving the parlor. There was a new spring in her step and a determined set to her shoulders which told Caspian that something was on his wife's mind. He didn't know what it was, but he was thankful that it had wiped away her distress.

Now, if he could only do the same for himself.

CHAPTER VII

Even though Marina had decided on what she must do, the very idea of doing it made her fidget. Still, she tried her hardest to hide what was on her mind from Caspian. She didn't want him to suspect that her heart was likely beating twice as fast this morning.

"Do you have everything?" Marina asked as she helped Caspian load up whatever he needed to take to the open market.

"Mhm," the man replied as he secured his wares in the cart. "Fresh fish in the buckets, dried ones in the baskets, and change in my pockets."

His easygoing smile almost made Marina feel guilty. She supposed she could tell him about her plan, but she was sure that he wouldn't hear any of it. She needed proof that she could do it first, and maybe then he'd agree.

"Good luck."

"Don't worry, Marina," Caspian said. "By the time I'm home, all these will be long gone."

"All right." She had faith that he could do it. Caspian was one of the hardest-working people she had ever met, both on land and underwater.

Caspian came to her and kissed her cheek without fuss. She would've blushed if her mind wasn't focused on her little secret. "I'll bring home a nice, fat chicken for dinner. You'll see."

Marina wished him luck a second time before watching him go.

She rushed back into the cottage not long after Caspian's cart faded in the distance.

Her husband usually spent a good part of the late morning and early afternoon going around the village to sell fish. This meant that she had a few hours to execute her plan before he came back for dinner. She hoped to return to the cottage by then.

Marina found a piece of scrap parchment which she used to scribble her message on. She relayed how long she might take and what time she might come back, taking care to emphasize that she knew what she was doing. Surely her note would reassure Caspian that she was safe.

The ink from her quill hadn't dried yet, but she was already out the door before she could change her mind. Marina descended to the beach, down to the dock where Caspian had moored his fishing boat. After making sure that no one was on the shore or atop the overlooking bluffs, she loosened the ropes securing the boat and hopped in.

It wasn't long before she was paddling away from the shore as quickly as she could.

Thankfully, the seas were calm and the sky showed no signs of a coming storm. It would make her journey to the Mystical Reefs easier. Her sister had shown her the area before, and together, they'd marveled over the many sea creatures that had made their home there.

Marina rowed along the coast until she felt the first ripples of magic. She steered Caspian's little boat towards what would have looked like a cramped, empty cave to most humans. In truth, though, an invisible barrier protected the bigger chamber beyond.

Marina's merfolk origins allowed her to slip past the magical barrier and reach the half-submerged reef structure.

The cove looked just as it did many years ago. Its marble-like walls reflected the bright blue light coming from the water, and its high ceiling featured a dizzying variety of stalactites. Just beneath the crystal clear surface grew colorful corals that housed fish, anemones, urchins, seahorses, crabs, and all kinds of mollusks.

A giant clam grabbed Marina's attention.

As soon as she realized that she could get to it easily enough, Marina stripped down to her underthings and waded into the water. She didn't cast her magical essence on the reef until she was submerged to the neck. Roughly half an hour passed before it affected the clam, causing it to open its shell and show her what she had come here for.

Marina carefully collected the pearl before retreating back to the boat and wringing seawater out of her hair. Merfolk thought little of the shiny trinkets because they were plentiful under the sea, but she remembered that humans valued them greatly. She secured it in a linen pouch, then

prepared herself for several more rounds of doing the same thing.

She collected five more pearls before deciding to quit. After all, she only had so much essence to spare before the loss weakened her. With her remaining strength, Marina set off for their cottage—

Only to be accosted by her panic-stricken husband as soon as she walked through the door.

“Where have you been?!” Caspian asked. He held her by the shoulders, as if afraid that she might leave again as soon as he let go. “Do you have any idea how worried I was when I found your note?!”

“But I said I'd be back at this hour,” Marina replied, a little confused. Maybe she wasn't as good at writing as she thought she was, and she'd messed up the note. “I wrote it down.”

“You didn't say where you were going!”

Marina winced. She had purposefully left out that little fact. Not that she could keep it a secret for long, because her skin and hair reeked of the salty sea. Caspian only needed to calmly look at her to deduce where she had gone.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I was in too much of a hurry.”

“And what was so important that you completely forgot to tell me where you were going?”

That was the opening Marina needed. She pulled the linen pouch out of her skirt pocket and undid the strings that kept it closed. Then, she held its mouth open wide enough that Caspian could peek at what

was inside.

“These.”

Marina watched as Caspian’s eyes bugged out. She felt his fingers loosen their hold on her shoulders. They slowly tightened again as the seconds ticked by and his mind began to process what his eyes were seeing.

“Marina?” he finally asked, his voice much softer than before. “Where in the four corners of Cerulean Cove did you find these pearls?”

His furrowed brow and subtle frown almost convinced Marina to reveal her secret.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t tell you.”

Caspian’s frown deepened. “They’re not stolen, are they?”

“No! I would never steal from anyone,” Marina replied. “I know you wouldn’t want me doing that either. I could never shame you like that, not when you’ve been so nice to me.”

“Thank goodness for that. And thank you for thinking of me.” However, he didn’t release her just yet. “How did you get them?”

Marina hesitated. She could guess how Caspian would react, but she couldn’t avoid answering him. He’d been worried for her the whole time she was away, so it was only fair that she told him at least part of why she had been gone.

“We used to search for them where I lived. Out on the sea,” she whispered.

“You what?!”

“Please don't be angry.” She winced. The last thing Marina wanted was for Caspian to yell at her again, even though it was out of worry this time. “I knew what I was doing. It's something I've done my whole life.”

Caspian seemed to have remembered his earlier promise. He shook his head and took a deep breath. “I can't believe you would go out there on your own.”

“You said you needed the money,” Marina replied, head bowed. Her shoulders sagged, and not just from Caspian's firm yet painless grip. “I figured searching for pearls while you were out selling fish would help.”

“Or you could tell me where to look for the pearls so I could get them myself.” Caspian's hold drifted down to her hands. “I don't want you to put yourself in danger.”

“I can't.” Maybe someday, she would find the courage to reveal her true self to the man. At the moment, she was afraid to lose him before she could even confess her feelings. “Please trust me to do this alone.”

“Marina.”

“Please,” she begged. She lifted her eyes again, hoping that he hadn't run out of patience for her. “Think of your sister. I can help her dreams come true, but only if you trust me.”

For a long moment, they did nothing but stare at each other. They waged a silent battle of wills by the door. The pouch of pearls hung from their clasped

hands, forgotten in the wake of their determination to win.

Finally, Caspian wrapped his arms around her. And although he grumbled his displeasure, he took care not to crush her or curse aloud. Marina knew that she'd won when his head slumped onto her shoulder and his hand combed through her still damp hair.

“Just be careful,” he murmured against her skin. “And promise me that you’ll always, *always* come home.”

Tears pricked Marina’s eyes as she stroked his back. She closed them and prayed that he would still trust her like this when the time to spill her secrets came. Emotion clogged her throat, making it hard to speak.

It felt good to have a home. It felt good to stand in Caspian’s embrace. She never wanted these feelings to end.

CHAPTER VIII

Of all the skills his wife could possibly possess, he didn't think harvesting pearls would be one of them. Even the traveling merchants Caspian knew rarely had them because they were so hard to come by. But here was Marina, who came home every afternoon with four or five pearls for him to sell to the caravans.

He now knew that Marina wasn't who he thought she was. It was possible that he'd completely missed the mark when it came to her origins. But his wife remained tight-lipped about it no matter how many times he asked, so he hardly tried anymore.

"Marina!" Caspian waved his hand when he saw Marina returning from the beach. "Over here!"

Marina's face lit up as she waved back. "Caspian!"

He parked his cart on the side of the dirt road before hurrying towards her. Caspian caught her by the waist and spun her around as soon as they came close enough. His heart warmed when he heard her laugh.

"Someone got lucky again," he said as he put her down.

"Really?"

"We sold all our stock, Marina!" Caspian cupped her cheeks, framing her smile between his fingers. His voice was rising to unimaginable heights out of excitement, but he couldn't care less. "That's two

weeks in a row! We have enough money to bring Verna back and set up her establishment in town. We can even start another business.”

Marina’s reply was much more subdued. She grasped his wrists and looked up at him with her familiar wide eyes. “What kind?”

“The pearls, Marina,” Caspian explained. “We can sell them to rich folks, maybe even accept commissions if we find someone who can craft jewelry. We’ll be swarmed with patrons from near and far.”

The thought had come to him while he was going around the market.

Mister Bailey had built a few stalls and apartments that he rented out to anyone who needed the space. He’d always wanted to acquire one for his sister’s future shop. Maybe they could have a second for Marina and himself.

However, his wife didn’t seem to be as interested in the idea as he was. “I thought we were only saving for what we already wanted.”

“It doesn't hurt to want a little more, right?” Caspian released her face, only to reach for her hands. “What do you think about a cottage abroad? Or a brand new wagon with more space?”

Marina tilted her head. “Won't a big wagon be harder to pull over the bluff?”

“I'm sure I'll manage. I know every dip and turn of this bluff, after all. Or we can buy a donkey to pull it for us, if you want.”

His wife pressed her lips together. “Mm.”

“Marina?” Caspian let go of her hands. It had been a long time since she replied to him with this kind of pensive silence. “Hey. What's wrong?”

He wouldn't force any new changes on her if she didn't want them. He didn't want her to take on a role that she didn't like, not when she was already comfortable drying fish and retrieving pearls. She only had to say the word, and he'd set his ideas aside for another time.

A wagon or a little jewelry shop could wait.

“Nothing.” Marina shook her head. “Just tired, is all.”

Caspian did think that her face was a little pale this afternoon. Her complexion was so fair, though, that he hardly noticed the change. But now, he could see some of her blue veins beneath her wrists and cheeks.

“Do you want to rest?” he asked.

Marina's smile returned. It wasn't as big as before, but it was a start. “For a little while.”

“Let's go over there.” He took her hand and started leading her towards a fallen log close to the road. They both sat down, and he put one arm around her to make sure she didn't tilt too far back and fall over.

She leaned against his arm and sighed. They stayed silent for a long while, just looking at the sun as it started to set over the calm, watery horizon.

“Caspian,” Marina murmured, “I... I...”

Caspian waited for her to finish, but she didn't.

The corner of his lips rose at the thought of Marina falling asleep at his side. She must have worked herself to the bone, finishing her chores on time and going out to find more pearls for the day.

He considered carrying her home on his back and leaving her in her bed to rest. The village sentries regularly patrolled close to the bluff, so their cart would be safe from thieves and such. He could simply return for it after making sure his wife was safely and comfortably tucked into her bed.

Caspian turned to Marina, ready to move her—only to stop short at what he saw.

Marina was hardly breathing, and her skin had lost what little of the pink tinge it had. There were blue circles underneath her closed eyes. Her lips had turned violet, and her hair...

He didn't even know that brown hair could turn gray so quickly.

"Marina! Marina, wake up! Marina!" Caspian struggled to his knees and held his wife by her shoulders. Her head lolled to the side, and Caspian knew he had to do something. "No, no, no. This isn't right."

He did move her to his back. But instead of heading towards their cottage, he hefted her the whole way to the nearby village. Caspian had never been more thankful for years of carrying heavy packs back and forth along this road.

He had one destination on his mind, and he was determined to reach it before it was too late. He was

sure that the village's only apothecary would know what to do. The woman had cured many people before with her medicine, even those that were on the brink of death.

The sight of the brick building and its hanging, wrought-iron sign didn't bring Caspian the comfort he thought it would. He realized that he could only rest easy after Marina was in the infirmary and being taken care of. To that end, he marched to the door and pushed his way inside, making sure nothing hit Marina's head.

A bubbly woman with short red hair glanced up from the marbled countertop. She flashed a pretty smile his way. "Welcome to Western Village Curatives. How can we help... Caspian?"

"It's my wife, Sienna," he answered. He moved closer to the counter so the woman could get a better look. "She's too cold."

He'd felt the change as he was walking to the village. Marina's body had been losing its warmth little by little. He hoped that either Sienna or her sister could figure out why and stop it.

"To the back, please." Sienna hurried to a door on the other end of the medicine shop and held it open for him. She called into the room as Caspian passed by. "Orelia! Caspian's wife is sick!"

A taller, more willowy woman with Sienna's hair color came down the narrow steps at one corner. She took one look at Caspian before gesturing to one of two cots that had been laid out for possible patients.

No matter how much Caspian didn't want to let go of Marina, he had no choice but to give her over to the apothecary's care.

Orelia started examining every inch of Marina the moment he laid her down. He stood to the side and wrung his hands, hoping that the apothecary could cure her. "Oh dear..."

"What is it?" he asked, moving closer to the cot as soon as Orelia began clicking her tongue.

Orelia looked up at him, her brows furrowed. She bit the inside of her cheeks, making her narrow face look almost gaunt. "We'll need to make Blue Elixir, and lots of it."

"What in the world would I need it for?" Caspian's forehead wrinkled. Nobody he knew needed Blue Elixir to get better because it wasn't even... even intended for... humans...

"Your wife is—or was—a mermaid, Caspian. One who's losing her life force very quickly." The apothecary's voice seemed to come from afar. Caspian could barely hear her due to the thoughts buzzing in his head. "That's why I need to make Blue Elixir to heal her."

At that moment, everything made sense. Marina's ethereal, almost otherworldly appearance. Her elusive answers and her ability to collect pearls like magic. Her wonder at even doing the most mundane tasks that her kind wouldn't be able to do underwater.

He'd married a mermaid.

No. That's not quite right.

To be more precise, he'd *fallen in love* with a mermaid. One that was going to die if he didn't do anything about her situation. The thought of losing her before they could clear the air, before he could tell her he loved her, chilled him to the bone.

"Will twenty gold coins suffice?" he asked, reaching into his pockets and pulling out all the small linen pouch he'd filled over the week. Caspian was glad that he hadn't left their money in the cart.

Orelia held her hand out, but Sienna clamped her wrist before it could reach the pouch. The woman stared pointedly at her sister. "Orelia?"

Caspian pushed the bag of jingling coins into Orelia's hand anyway.

"Please! You have to save her!" He turned his gaze to Sienna. Caspian didn't care that tears were likely to fall from his eyes at any moment. "I can't lose my wife!"

Sienna's pinched expression wavered. "Orelia, you know it's not nearly enough."

"Please!" Caspian insisted. If he had to kneel, he'd go down on his knees without question. "It's all I have!"

Thankfully, Orelia wasn't the kind of person to turn anyone down. The apothecary gently pried her sister's hand away before pocketing the linen pouch he'd handed over. "I accept."

Caspian could have fainted then and there. The relief that washed over him made his knees so weak

that he had to lean on the cot's headboard for support. Not only did it keep him on his feet, but it also made him feel more connected to his sick wife.

"Orelia?!" Sienna scolded. "You—"

The apothecary held out her hand. Her piercing eyes silenced her sister before they softened upon glancing at Marina. "We have to help her, Sienna."

Caspian knew that this was no small decision. According to one traveling merchant, Blue Elixir contained some of the most expensive ingredients for any concoction. The miracle medicine was made exclusively for severely ill beings with merfolk blood, something that rarely occurred in Cerulean Cove.

"Thank you." He knew that he'd just lost all the money for their new wagon, their summer cottage, and every extra luxury he wanted, but Marina was worth more than all of these. She was his life.

CHAPTER IX

Marina woke up to a different ceiling and an unfamiliar face.

At first, she thought she was dreaming. But when the woman at her bedside dabbed a damp towel at her temple, she felt its moisture. This let Marina know that something had happened.

The last thing Marina remembered was feeling terribly tired and sleepy while watching the sunset with Caspian. She'd tried to hide it from him, but she succumbed in the end. Now she wondered what had transpired since.

"Who are you?" Her voice came out scratchier than usual. "Where's Caspian?"

The red-haired woman paused her ministrations and smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Marina. My name's Orelia, and this is my infirmary."

"You're a healer?" Marina couldn't stop her wavering tone even if she tried. If Orelia managed to heal her, then she must have discovered what she really was.

"Of sorts. Most people refer to me as the village apothecary," Orelia replied. She set aside the towel she'd been holding, then stood up to shake out her crumpled skirt. "Caspian brought you here when he realized you weren't feeling well. Should I tell him you're awake?"

"Yes, please."

Marina scanned the room as soon as Orelia closed the door behind her. The infirmary's sickroom was bigger than her bedroom at the cottage, but it didn't have the same ambience. It didn't have her husband's colorful quilts and nick-knacks, and it didn't smell of pine and the sea.

Even her clothes were different now. Her white peasant blouse and fawn-colored skirt had been replaced by a pale lemon nightdress decorated to the hem with ruffles. She preferred the plain white variety that she'd bought after marrying Caspian.

Marina knew that she had to face him sooner or later. He deserved to know the full story now that Orelia had probably told him part of it. Plus, she would feel safer in this strange new place if he were with her.

The door opened, and Caspian walked in like she hoped he would. His eyes lit up as soon as he saw her. "Thank goodness you're awake."

"Caspian..." Marina couldn't believe the tender expression on his face. She had fully expected him to not even look her straight in the eye after technically lying to him.

He continued to contradict her assumption by rushing to her side and sitting as close as possible without disturbing her. "How do you feel? Do you need anything? I'm not sure what mermaids do to get better, but I'll try my best to work it out."

"You know." She expected him to, of course, but she hadn't counted on him bringing the subject up so

soon. Then again, Caspian had a habit of being blunt.

Her husband nodded. He reached for her hand and held it tight. “Orelia told me after examining you.”

She gulped. Marina would have liked to tell him herself, but maybe this was for the best. It might have taken her years before she could even suggest the idea that she wasn’t human.

The only con to this was that she now had to explain her actions. “You don't mind that I'm... I was a mermaid?”

“Marina, you can be any otherworldly creature on this continent so long as you're alive and unhurt.” Caspian started stroking the back of her hand with his thumb. “The truth is, I’m relieved that you’re not actually a mistreated runaway who’s being followed around by someone dangerous.”

Marina’s jaw dropped. No wonder he hadn’t pushed her to talk about her past or forced her to go anywhere on her own. She didn’t realize until then that he could perceive her situation that way.

Her husband had been protecting her from reliving some past experience that never even happened. He’d been keeping her away from a danger that wasn’t even real. If she didn’t already know his true character, this revelation would have won her over.

“You're not mad that I didn't tell you?” she asked.

Caspian sighed, but he didn’t let go of her. He bent

forward so that he could lean his weight on his elbows. “I’m flabbergasted, but we can have that talk another time. Right now, I want you to get better.”

Even though it was late afternoon and pretty deep into the season, there was just enough sunlight passing through the glass window to illuminate Caspian’s features. The bags under his eyes and the shadow that he usually shaved in the morning proved just how much her sickness had affected him. He must have missed quite a few fishing trips just to stay close to her in case anything happened.

“Thank you.”

Caspian returned her smile before cupping her cheek with his other hand. His eyes searched hers. “How did you end up like this anyway?”

“It was the pearls,” Marina admitted. She might as well start revealing the truth now that she’d regained a bit of her strength. “I went to sea and found some giant clams, then used my magic essence so they’d grow the pearls faster. It almost drained my life force.”

Her husband frowned. The rest of him, though, retained the calm, protective aura she’d come to associate with him. “You promised me you wouldn’t put your life in danger.”

“I know how much you hate being looked down on, so I wanted to help.” Marina went on a tangent about how the oracle’s apprentice had revealed part of his dilemma to her while he’d been preparing to harvest those vegetables from the shrine. She

explained that the apprentice's words about needing wealth and prominence had stuck. "I don't want you to keep thinking that you're unworthy or unlovable to anyone."

"If it means you have to put your life at stake, then you can forget that," Caspian said after listening to her words. "I don't care what anyone thinks about *me* anymore. I care about *you*."

"Even if I'm a mermaid in a human body?"

"You're not just a mermaid to me, Marina." He moved closer to her until their noses nearly touched. Marina had never seen him look more serious than he did now. "You're my wife, and I love you. It almost took me losing you to realize that."

She couldn't believe her ears. She wasn't expecting his softly spoken words to affect her so deeply, but they did. Marina nearly teared up from the sudden surge of joy she felt.

"Caspian, I... I love you too."

Their lips met gently, and Marina knew right then that everything would be fine. They loved each other, and their long, lingering kiss was just one of many ways they could show the other how they felt. The bands that adorned their entwined hands would stay in place until the end of their days.

Caspian broke away from her first, but only after a few more kisses that made her toes curl. "You have no idea how good it feels to hear you say that, Marina. If only I could take you away sooner."

Marina's cheeks warmed as a new thought entered

her head.

Things had changed. They weren't in this marriage out of convenience anymore. Their vows had taken on a new meaning.

"Does this mean that I get to share your room when we get home?" The scenario didn't sound bad to her at all. In fact, she looked forward to sleeping in his arms every night, where she felt safest and most loved.

"It's our room, but only if you want." The rosy color that must have dotted her cheeks bloomed on Caspian's face as well. She couldn't ignore his reaction, not when they had admitted their feelings for each other just now. "Actually, we were going to have to share it anyway. My sister will be coming home someday, and she'll probably take over our spare bed once that happens."

"If it means I can stay with you, I don't mind." She was definitely going to get better as quickly as she could. Marina didn't want to spend one more moment away from him.

"As for finding pearls, though..." Caspian said. "No more, all right? We'll find some other way to help Verna and make our dreams come true."

Marina blinked. At that moment, she recalled her trek from the beach, just before Caspian spotted her from the road. Something had been on her mind that time, but the man had spoken about his success in the village before she could say what it was.

"You know..." Marina tried to sit up but only

squirmed her way further down the cot. Thankfully, Caspian figured out what she was doing and helped her adjust her position. “I actually wanted to tell you something before I blacked out.”

Caspian righted the pillows behind her before helping her lean back. He gave her one more kiss on the cheek for good measure. “What did you want to say?”

Marina squeezed his hand. Any more kisses, and Caspian would have successfully distracted her from their conversation. She was barely fighting the urge to throw her arms around him and kiss him back.

“I wanted to say that I’d thought of something other than pearls to collect.”

CHAPTER X

A starry twilight sky and rolling waves capped with foam greeted Caspian as he made his way back to the bluff. The thin layer of snow covering the dirt road squelched under his shoes. He was glad to finally be going home so he could get out of the cold.

He stomped his shoes on the cottage's stone steps, then he opened the door and deposited his empty baskets beside it.

Hurried footsteps rushed from the next room over. A heart-shaped face with the most beautiful smile Caspian had ever seen peeked through the doorway. "Welcome back!"

"There you are." Caspian walked over to his wife and embraced her. "It feels good to be home."

Marina wrapped her arms around him, then drew back to point to their parlor alcove with her thumb. "I drew the bath for you. I figured you'd be tired after a day of hard work."

A warm bath sounded heavenly on a chilly day like this. He needed it after going back and forth from the cottage to sell first the dried fish, then the winnowing baskets and wreaths Marina had made. Luckily, a traveling merchant had taken one look at the baskets and offered to sell them through the caravans.

The great thing about Marina's having been a mermaid with long hair was that she'd honed the

skill of braiding and weaving other materials.

Marina's new idea wasn't as lucrative as her previous one, but he preferred it more than the other. She didn't need to use her essence to gather pine needles. There were so many of those things littering the nearby bluffs that Marina would have to stay overnight if she wanted to gather them all.

Thankfully, his wife had no plans to work for that long. She would always be around when he came home, often working on the last weaves of a basket or preparing dinner. And sometimes, like tonight, she'd be laying out towels for a bath.

"Join me?" Caspian asked as he shed his coat and threw it over the nearby couch.

Marina beamed as she unlaced the knot securing her skirt and kicked her shoes from under her feet. "Can you wash my hair?"

It wasn't long before they were soaking themselves in the tub, surrounded by tendrils of steam from the warm water. Marina sat on his lap, sighing blissfully as he combed his fingers through her soapy hair. She leaned into his touch, and he rinsed her off before putting his arms around her.

"How did your day go?"

His wife looked over her shoulder and smiled. That alone told Caspian that her day had gone well, which pleased him. "The sun was out, so the laundry dried quickly. And the winds weren't as brisk as usual, so I managed to gather plenty of pine cones and needles from the next bluff. I boiled the needles

the way those instructions in your sister's book said to.”

“Excellent.” He helped rinse the rest of her as she turned around. “Please make sure to keep your word and stay far away from the edge. I don’t want you diving into the water.”

“You do remember that I used to live in the sea, right?” she said as she returned the favor. “I may no longer be a mermaid, but that doesn't mean I can't swim anymore.”

Caspian raised one brow. Marina had told him about her past in the days following her recovery. She’d been wary of revealing too much at first, but he’d assured her that nothing was going to change between them no matter what.

In his younger years, he might have shunned her because of her origins. But he was a grown man now, with enough sense to understand that Marina was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Caspian couldn’t imagine himself or anyone else turning her away.

“You can't breathe underwater now, though.” He helped her out of the tub and put a towel over her shoulders.

“I swear to always be careful.” She smirked at him before tapping his nose. “Half a mile at least, like I promised.”

He rolled his eyes. As long as she still followed his request, he could tolerate her jabs about his overprotective behavior. “Any word from my sister?”

“Oh, yes.” Marina handed the towel back to him as soon as she’d finished using it. “She’s coming over as soon as she can.”

Her flowery scent tickled Caspian’s nose. She was much more suited to the fragrance than he would ever be, and he liked that. So much so that he drew her into his arms as soon as he finished toweling himself dry.

“Are you excited to meet her?”

“Yes.” She pressed closer to him. “She was very kind in her letter.”

His body came alive as soon as it felt her softness. The heat of their water seemed to have seeped into his veins. Caspian lightly ran his fingers over Marina’s spine, making her shiver.

“You really are beautiful.”

It was Marina who rolled her eyes this time around. But no matter how hard she tried to hide her delight with the gesture, her blushing cheeks still gave her away. “You say that all the time.”

“Because it’s true.” Caspian nipped at her shoulder, enjoying the tiny, barely audible gasp she made. “I’m so lucky that you married me.”

His wife giggled. “I think it’s the other way around.”

“We can argue here all night about which one of us is luckier,” Caspian said, “or we could do something else.”

He waggled his brows, making Marina giggle even more.

The woman shook her head, then led him away from the cooling tub. The light from their fireplace cast Marina's soft flesh and playful smile in a tantalizing orange tone. "What do you have in mind?"

"Kissing," Caspian said as he followed her to the bedroom.

"Just kissing?"

"Maybe more." He shut the door behind him, then gathered her into his arms. He peppered her lips and neck with kisses until she moaned. "Can we?"

He didn't have to ask her twice. They tumbled into bed, nearly knocking off all of their pillows in their haste. Their legs would have tangled in the folded quilt if Marina hadn't brushed it aside in time.

Their bedroom wasn't any bigger than the spare one Marina used to occupy, but he liked it that way. It was cozy enough, and it had a wide window with wooden shutters and glass panels that let the light in on sunny days. He'd moved their bed directly beneath it because Marina loved waking to the sunshine every morning.

Marina clutched his hair as he explored her body with his lips and tongue. "Caspian..."

"So soft and sweet," Caspian murmured. This wasn't the first time they'd made love, but it always felt like that.

He loved hearing the sounds she made whenever they came together. Loved teasing and tasting her until she cried out his name. He loved every touch

she returned, every kiss she pressed against his skin.

Marina hummed beneath him. Her lashes, weighed down by pleasure, opened when he returned to her neck. "I missed you."

"I missed you too." Caspian smiled.

It didn't matter how long or how short he was gone for the day. It didn't matter if they were making love or busy doing other chores around the house. He simply wanted to be with her for as long as possible if she welcomed it.

He was lucky that she welcomed it all the time.

He reached for a ribbon by the headboard and pulled on it to draw the curtains it was tied to. Moonlight poured from the window, landing on Marina's pale body and making it glow. Caspian's hands returned to her as soon as he saw the sight.

Marina arched her back when he traced a line from her neck down to her navel. Every sigh she made was music to his ears. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see you." He settled between her legs, then clasped their hands together. "I want to see the beautiful expressions on your face. The way every inch of your skin flushes with pleasure."

His words alone made that flush appear on her body. She looked so beautiful with those rosy cheeks and wide eyes that he just had to kiss her again. Their lips barely parted as Caspian loved her the way she liked best.

"Caspian!"

His passion only rose every time Marina uttered

his name. She would make these short sounds of pleasure whenever he moved, so he always did his best to draw them out. She was always so responsive and so pliant in his arms that he himself found it hard to hold back.

Every time he pressed into her, she clenched around him so tightly that he nearly lost his breath. She closed around him harder and harder, until she bowed and fell back against the sheets, ready to receive the last of his thrusts. He found his release not long after she did, calling out for her as passionately as she had.

Afterwards, Caspian tucked Marina against his side. His wife laid her head over his beating heart. He combed through the locks of hair on her head, never getting tired of how smooth and feathery they always felt in his fingers.

At some point, he would have to get up and start a fire. He didn't want Marina to catch a chill and have to go back to the infirmary again. He wanted her to be hale and healthy, especially now that they might have conceived their first child.

"Hey," Caspian whispered after his breath evened out. He waited for Marina to look at him before speaking again. "Do you ever miss your old home?"

Marina's eyes twinkled in the moonlight. She laid her hand over his heart, and he placed his palm atop it to keep it there. Her lips curved in a slow, satisfied way that put all his doubts to rest.

"You were always my home too, Caspian," she said.

“I lived in the sea, but I think a big part of my heart was always here.”

END

THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for taking the time to acquire and read this book! If you enjoyed this story, please make sure to leave a review on your favorite ebook website when you can. Make sure to subscribe to [Ann's Newsletter](#) so you can receive updates, previews, giveaways, and discount codes for new titles. Your subscription comes with a FREE READ: a superhero-themed romance called *Nemesis*.
Happy reading!

ANN SEPINO

Fairy-tale fantasies for the heart.

Ann Sepino is an independent Filipino author who loves all things Fantasy Romance. She enjoys creating the perfect happily ever after for her knights-in-distress and damsels-in-shining-armor. Her inspiration comes from the fairy tales and folklore of her childhood, as well as her interest and experience with local culture. One of her best titles, *Tribeless*, was influenced by these very elements.

To view more of Ann's books or stop by and say hello, feel free to visit her at:

annsepino.mystrikingly.com

facebook.com/asepinobook

WANT MORE?

This is Ann's book list as of December 2022.
You can visit her [Smashwords](#) and [Books2Read](#)
pages to grab these titles.

Fairy Tale Romances

Tilula, Current Affair, Knightly Serenade

Tropical Romances

Daemon Bound, Sans War, Tribeless

Holiday Romances

Merry Winters, Yule Kingdom

Eternal Romances Series

After Eternity, Choosing Eternity

Fairy Tomes, Cerulean Cove Series

Marina, Orelia

Flutterfae Brides Series

Florette, Crimsonella

Jinn Shifters Series

Catwished, Leopardized

Other Titles

Nihilist