

The Mer Chronicles Book Two



BEYOND LEGEND

HEATHER McLAREN

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"What happened?"

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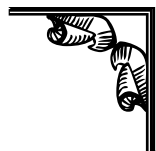
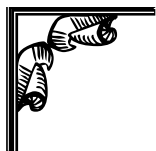
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Also by Heather McLaren

Mythos



BEYOND LEGEND

*Book 2
of
The Mer Chronicles*



HEATHER
McLAREN



ZUMAYA EMBRACES

AUSTIN TX

2019

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

BEYOND LEGEND

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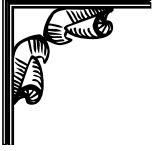
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*For Charlie Jane, Kimber
Liliana,
Bryce Alexander, and Dakota Nicole.*

*Angel Cheyenne
August 2, 1998*



I. Outbreak

The underwater sun had dimmed to a hazy cyan, casting a lavender glow around the massive cavern and lighting up the mountain range that cradled Atlantis. Mers swam between one- and two-story marble homes and down the city's ancient streets, long since devoured by the ocean floor. Fish, with their own sense of boundaries, wove in and out of open doors and windows.

Near the outskirts of the city, Faryn relaxed in front of her house as her husband chased a school of blue-and-green parrotfish with an empty net. David's white breechcloth barely covered his buttocks and his caramel-colored thigh muscles rippled with every kick. Dark hair fanned out around his shoulders; strays caught on the rough stubble covering his jawline.

He might have acquired Faryn's ability to breathe underwater, but his hunting skills were still less than impressive. She laughed when a fleeing fish smacked him in the face with its tail.

David shook off the fish slap and scooped the perpetrator into his net. When he noticed her watching, he raised it over his head and grinned.

His telepathic thoughts radiated pride.

— *I caught one.*

— *Good job.* Faryn stifled another laugh when the fish wriggled out a hole. — *But I think you lost it.*

— *What the...?* He lifted the net and took off after the escapee. The fish bounced off the side of a neighbor's house, smacked him in the face again, and swam away. All the while, David stayed one stroke behind.

— *I'll get it this time,* he cried. — *Any minute now.*

— *I believe in you, baby,* Faryn called after him as he raced past, grasping for the fish's flukes.

If it doesn't kill you first, she thought with a silent chuckle and a grin.

The amusing chase held her attention a few more minutes; then, she began sifting through her own net, counting the shrimp and crabs she had collected.

Not bad for a night's work.

Faryn tied the top closed, set it aside, and lay back. Relishing the feel of the soft white sand against her skin, she folded her arms behind her head and closed her eyes.

With the sea demons finally gone, her underwater world was at peace for the first time in eleven thousand years, and she was doing her best to enjoy every moment of it—an easy feat, considering she was spending the rest of her life with the man of her dreams.

When a sharp pinch on the fluke ended her serenity, Faryn sat up and pried a crab from her lavender tail, dodging its snapping pincers. She untied the top of the net.

— *Don't blame me for your demise*, she said, dropping it in with the others. — *You would have gotten away had you not been so obnoxious.*

— *Talking to your food again?* David drifted to the sea floor next to her, pulled his tanned legs up to his chest, and wrapped his arms around his knees. — *This is our dinner, right? I would hate to eat your friends.*

Faryn set the mesh snare aside and gave him a playful shove.

— *Ha, ha. You think you're funny, don't you?*

David grinned. — *Yes, I do.* He looked over her harvest, his good mood wavering. — *Hopefully, I'll get to be as good a hunter as you. Right now, if it were up to me to keep us fed, we'd starve.*

— *Don't be so hard on yourself.* Faryn lay back down and got comfortable. — *Just give it time. You'll get the hang of it.*

He rolled to his side and began making small circles with his forefinger around her navel.

— *You really think so?*

— *Sure. I bet, by this time next year, you'll out-hunt me.*

— *Well, I don't know about that, but thanks for trying to give my ego a boost.*

— *You're welcome.*

— *And speaking of food...* David pulled her net closer. — *It's almost dinner time. Are you hungry?*

— *No, I caught those for you and Cindel. I ate a couple of hours ago.* Faryn giggled when he leaned down and asked her belly the same question. — *Honey, I'm only four months along. Our child can't hear you.*

— *According to the Discovery Channel, he's been listening to us for at least a week now. Besides, it's never too soon to get him used to his daddy's voice.*

— *And how do you know it's a boy?*

— *Call it a hunch.* David's deep-brown eyes reflected his undying love with a simple gaze that could have melted the coldest of hearts. — *I can't wait to meet our baby,* he said. — *I hope he has your beautiful smile.*

Faryn looked away, not wanting him to see her brewing doubts. What would he say if he knew she was not as confident in the pregnancy as she led him to believe? Would he be disappointed in her having cold fins?

— *What's wrong?* When she didn't answer, David gently turned her face back to him. — *Come on, talk to me.*

Here goes nothing!

— *I've tried to imagine what our child will be like.* Her eyes flicked from his face back to the sand. — *But the only examples we have for comparison were cast out of Atlantis centuries ago.*

— *Honey, Breeza had special abilities that could apply to our son.*

— *I know,* Faryn said. — *She could hear others' secret thoughts and walk on the shore after dark. I'm just surprised the High Council isn't worried about jealousy from the other mers. That was Breeza's downfall.* She looked down at the sand, envisioning an angry mob attacking their home.

— *You worry too much.* David cuddled up to her, his thoughts smooth and sweet. — *That was many years ago. Both our species have come a long way since then. They've allowed us to get married, and not only are they welcoming our baby, they're revering him as a blessing that could help keep the treaty between humans and mers alive.*

Although Faryn was relieved he didn't hold her uncertainty against her, she couldn't shake her concern.

— *I hope you're right,* she said. — *I've waited a lifetime for you both, and it would kill me to lose either of you now.*

David tightened the embrace. — *You're not going to lose us. We'll always be here for you.*

The story of the mer Ophelia and her forbidden human lover flashed through Faryn's mind. The pain of losing the man she loved and having her only child ripped from her arms had to have been torturous.

Faryn shivered at the thought and closed her eyes, forcing her psyche to a better place, a place where she and David held their baby for the first time. She could imagine them exploring the island of Seneca together, playing with the wildlife. And seeing how mers retained their human qualities in freshwater, one of the many lakes on Seneca would be the perfect place to share with their child the joy of swimming with legs. It was freeing—

David shot up, tearing Faryn from her daydream.

— *Honey, I think there's something wrong with those kids.*

Faryn knew Ash and Willa; they lived nearby. They were swimming home, listlessly, hunting nets barely clasped in limp hands. Worse, their tails turned black as she watched, dead scales floating away from their pale bodies.

Suddenly, Willa closed her eyes and sank to the sea floor, her nets drifting away, the captive fish and crustaceans scattering. When David and Faryn reached the child, her limp body was bobbing along the sand, and Ash was on the verge of losing consciousness.

While David tended to Willa, Faryn threw her arms around the boy and moved his dirty-blond hair out of his face to get a better look at his eyes. They were bloodshot and swollen. His lips were darkening, and a furry white coating covered his tongue.

—*Ash, what happened? Can you hear me?*

—*Faryn, I...I don't feel well. It hurts.*

—*What hurts, honey?*

—*I hurt...hurt all over.*

David gently shook Willa in an attempt to wake her. She was unresponsive.

—*We need to get them to the temple now,*" he said, cradling her to his chest. —*The High Council will know what to do.*

As they bolted across town, passing countless homes and tattered way-markers, Ash slipped deeper into delirium, his thoughts bordering on hysteria.

—*Momma, the beautiful mer...She calls to me. She tells me to do things. Bad things.*

—*Hold on. We're going to get you some help.* Faryn glanced over at Willa. The youngster's face was colorless, and thick clumps of her hair, left in their wake, floated like strands of blond seaweed.

—*Faryn, I can't feel her breathing,*" David said. —*Can you see her gills?*

Willa's gills, framed by her delicate ribs and pink seashells, moved in steady rhythm. But they were moving too slowly, her breaths shallow.

—*She's breathing, but just barely.*" Faryn welcomed sweet relief when she saw their neighbor swimming toward them. —*Briley, thank the Spirit you're here. These children need immediate medical attention. Can you alert the guards we're on our way?*

Briley touched Willa's cheek as they swam.

—*What happened?*

We're not sure. Faryn hugged Ash closer when she felt him slipping from her grasp. —*We found them like this.*

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—*I'll meet you there,* she said and darted ahead, dodging the mers gathering to watch them swim the last leg of their journey.

The concerned bystanders had their own theories, ranging from parasites to various pollutants from the human world.

— *Looks like the Rage*, an older mermaid suggested.

Another chimed in, — *Spirit help us if that's what this is*.

Faryn looked down at Ash, suddenly afraid of the child she had been so quick to help.

Anything but the Rage!

The temple appeared, a glorious safe haven, its cloudy blue-and-white larimar façade shimmering in the dim light. There were guards stationed at every column supporting the massive structure, and two stone warriors out front held their spears high and proud.

Briley and two guards patrolling the front steps immediately swam to meet them. The smaller merman scooped up Willa and started for the door. His comrade took Ash from Faryn.

— *Your friend told us you found the children. Please come with us,*” he said. — *We need eyewitnesses.*

Knowing the medical wing was in a separate building around back, Faryn asked, — *Aren't you going the wrong way?*

— *There's no way the High Council will keep these children in the same area as other patients* was all he said before the door shut behind him.

— *Faryn, please let me know how they are*, Briley said. — *I'm on my way to Shelter Cove to get my sister, but we should be home before it gets too dark. Drop by when you finish up here.*

— *I will, I promise. And thank you for your help.*

Leaving the gathering crowd behind, Faryn and David hurried inside. The Great Hall, although beautiful, with high vaulted ceilings and majestic columns, looked glum under the grim circumstances. The sheer white fabric cascading down the walls and the well-preserved purple-and-green flags floating high overhead seemed surreal and ghostlike.

— *Faryn, David, I'm so glad to see you*. Councilor Salene swam over and hugged them. It was shocking to see what the Battle of Seneca had done to her. Her long hair, four months earlier streaked with gray, was now almost completely white, and the wrinkles around her eyes were deeper.

— *What's happening to Ash and Willa? Are they going to be all right?*

— *The doctor is with them now*, Salene assured Faryn. — *But it doesn't look good. Their sickness resembles a disease our ancestors barely survived four centuries ago.*

Faryn wanted to scream. If she thought the sound of her own psychotic break would block out the devastating news, she would have done just that. Instead, she chose the saner route, doing her best to stay calm.

— *Not the Rage*, she said, hoping there was another epidemic Atlantis had conquered.

Please, please, please...

— *I'm afraid so.* Despite Salene's trembling hands, it was obvious she was trying to keep her emotions under control. — *What more can you tell me about the children?*

Faryn suddenly felt lightheaded, speaking on autopilot.

— *Their names are Ash and Willa Jessamine. They live with their mother across town on Mystic Way, number twenty-two,* she said. — *My little sister babysits them sometimes.*

— *What were they doing when you found them?*

— *They were carrying nets of fish.* Faryn's nausea continued to build, threatening to erupt. She felt as if she were drowning in a freshwater pond, trapped beneath the surface, and this damned sickness was a pair of giant hands holding her under.

Salene could not hide her panic.

— *Where are the fish now?*

— *They're loose,* David said. — *Why? Is there a problem?*

Salene turned away and called to the nearest sentry, — *Ryle, please pay Ms. Jessamine a visit and let her know what is happening with her children. And after you've done that, gather more guards and warn our citizens against hunting within the city limits. The fish may be contaminated. No, on second thought, clear the streets,* she said. — *I don't want anyone out right now.* When he hesitated, Salene grew impatient. — *Ryle, what are you waiting for? We haven't got much time.*

Ryle nodded his understanding.

— *Of course, Madame Councilor.* He swam from the room, churning up the water in his haste.

When Salene turned back to them, Faryn could see the wheels in her head spinning.

— *Did the children exhibit any other odd behavior?*

— *Ash said something I thought was only gibberish at the time; I can't believe I didn't see the signs right away,* Faryn said, battling her inner child, who would have much rather sat down and bawled her eyes out than face this. — *He said a beautiful merwoman was ordering him to do bad things."*

Salene let out a frustrated sigh. — *I was afraid of that.*

— *What kind of sickness is this?"* David put a protective hand to Faryn's slight belly. — *This Rage—is it contagious?*

— *Four hundred years ago, infected mers claimed to hear voices,* Salene said. — *They became violent, murdering indiscriminately. Their victims included friends, neighbors—even family.*

Eating contaminated fish was one way to catch the disease. but open wounds spread the sickness just as quickly. So, when an infected mer attacked another, if they didn't kill them, their victim would come down with symptoms a short time later. Usually within minutes.

— And as we've never welcomed humans into our underwater cities, I have no idea how this illness would affect you, David. A bite could kill you straight-away or do nothing at all.

She clasped her hands in front of her. — But what makes Rage victims even more dangerous is that, whether it be animal mimicry, the capacity to cancel others' powers, or to move things with their minds, the sickness doesn't dampen their ability to use these weapons against others. She paused, uncertainty etched into her features. — And worst of all, we have reason to believe Cadence created this epidemic to rid the world of us once and for all.

Faryn could have gone a lifetime without hearing the name of the entity whose infamous tyranny had kept her up at night as a younger mer, too terrified to sleep.

— Are you sure it was Cadence?

— Yes, and if this is the Rage, we have a very big problem.

— But we conquered it once before, Faryn reminded Salene. — All we have to do is isolate it again. She fidgeted with her coral-and-moonstone necklace. — Right?

Please, say "right"!

— There's something I need to tell you, Salene confessed, — concerning information past council members never told the general public. She glanced around as if checking for eavesdroppers. — The Spirit sent us a cure for the Rage—the Tablet of Truth—but it vanished before we could decipher it. We believe it opens a locked room on the east side of this building.

They followed her around a statue of a man in white robes and up to the vault containing the crystal fueling Atlantis's sun. Faryn thought she might have to use the molded marble as a handrail to keep from falling over, but, to her astonishment, she remained upright without its aid.

— Faryn, as you know, Thaden's father Aerith served on council with Servio before his death five years ago, Salene said. — Only days before the hunting accident, he came to us with an old family rumor that Cadence had conspired with an Atlantean to steal the tablet. Supposedly, Cadence hid it in an enchanted cave somewhere on Seneca."

Faryn could not believe a fellow Atlantean could be so traitorous to their own kind. The notion was abominable.

— Did he tell you who it was?

— He said he didn't know, Salene said. — We just assumed he was protecting someone, or that the identity of this individual had been lost over the generations.

— *And the tablet?*

— *We never found it, Salene told David. — We've sent warriors on countless missions to Seneca, but they've never come up with a shred of proof the cave even exists. Her downhearted gaze drifted away as she recalled the tragedy. — Thousands perished during the first Rage before we finally isolated it. How many more must die in the name of Cadence on our instruction? As if realizing she had just revealed an age-old secret, Salene clamped her hand over her mouth. — Please forget I said anything. That's a part of our history you're not supposed to know.*

Faryn wasn't about to let it go.

— *On your instruction? I don't understand.*

— *I can't—*

— *Salene, you have to tell us. Our baby's life could depend on it, David said. — How did past council members stop the Rage?*

Salene's face was dark with pain.

— *Fine...fine. What I am about to tell you I say in the strictest confidence, she said. — I'm not proud of how our ancestors ended the sickness the first time—none of the High Council is. She looked down a moment. When she raised her eyes, her shame was evident. — Symptoms of the Rage appear within minutes of infection, but the illness takes days to kill. It spiraled out of control so quickly...council decided the only way to end it was to euthanize the victims, she blurted out. They captured the infected, weighed the nets down with large stones, and threw them over the drop-off.*

Faryn shook her head. — *That can't be true. It can't be.*" She choked back a sob as she imagined the horror. — *How could the High Council do something so heinous?*

— *They didn't see they had any other choice. But I can promise you it will never happen again, Salene said with conviction. — We'll figure something out to stop the sickness without spilling innocent blood.*

Faryn tried to imagine the suffering the infected had endured at the hands of those sworn to protect them. She could almost hear their frightened cries and pain-filled screams as they plummeted into the utter darkness—the freezing pitch-black of the abyss where the pressure crushed them.

— *What can we do to help?* David asked.

Salene was quiet for the longest time before she spoke. Again, her attention seemed to drift away.

— *It's beautiful, isn't it? I still admire it after fifteen years in office," she said, watching the sun-crystal spin within its glass case. — Fifteen years... Salene tore her gaze away from the pink gem, her face strong with determination. — Faryn, you've helped us in our darkest hour. You slipped into Pandora and retrieved this very crystal from the sea demons, and you fought*

in the Battle of Seneca, losing loved ones and your innocence, she said. — And David, you helped us even when we wanted nothing to do with you. There are few with your kind heart and great courage.

— Thank you, but—

— The council can handle this problem, Salene cut him off. — You've sacrificed so much already, and I cannot let you put your child in harm's way for any reason. Go home and lock your doors. Bolt your windows and don't let anyone in.

— There has to be something we can do to—

— Faryn, you don't understand, Salene said. — Even Cadence fears the infected.

— What does he have to be afraid of? David gave Faryn an inquiring glance. — Isn't he immortal?

— For the most part, Salene explained. — But like the Spirit, he's vulnerable to his own creation.

— And if he manufactured the Rage, the infected could kill him. David finished.

— Ash, stop! Guards, catch him! Servio shouted from somewhere just out of sight.

Ash raced into the Great Hall from a side corridor, eyes wild and bleeding. Two guards tackled him, but he easily shook them off. Another morphed into a moray eel, attacking him from behind, but the infected boy clawed and scratched his way free.

Salene raised one hand in front of her and used her telekinetic ability to knock the boy against a wall. He bounced off and glared at her, rendering her helpless with his talent, then darted away, slammed into David, knocking him several feet, and swam from the temple.

— Go after him! Servio shouted as he and the guards stormed the Great Hall. — Not you. He stopped the closest merman and pointed to his injured comrade. — Isolate him. And once you've done that, go to Pavire and alert their High Council of our situation. We may need sanctuary if the sickness spreads. Without another word, he rushed back down the corridor toward the newly created isolation wing.

— That child has the power to cancel any ability—the most powerful of gifts—and he has the Rage! Salene grabbed Faryn's hands. — Please, forget my earlier advice, she begged. — With him roaming the city, the situation is too perilous for you to go home now. Stay here in the temple with us until the danger passes.

— We can't. Faryn pulled away from her. — I have to find my sister.

— But if they don't catch him... Salene followed David and Faryn as they shot outside. — Please, come back! she cried. — Faryn, David, don't go!

Faryn ignored her and focused on the surrounding neighborhood.

— *It looks like a ghost town, she said. — The only time I've seen it this empty so early in the evening was when we found a sea demon in the city.*

Every now and then, a face appeared at a window, but it didn't take them long to slam the shutters closed. Faryn imagined them whispering about the poor couple still outside.

When a familiar mer rounded the corner, she stopped.

— *Shilo, you need to go home and lock your doors. There's danger in the city.*

— *He doesn't recognize you, David said when the mer continued to stare at them, looking dumbfounded.*

— *Of course he does...* As her dead friend Harmony's father drew closer, though, the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. — *Oh, no! David, he's infected!*

The merman screeched and shot toward them, clawing at the water as if fending off attackers. His eyes were bleeding, and his snow-white tail was turning an ashy black. As she and David fled around a corner, Faryn tried to hold their pursuer back; but her ability hadn't reached maturity and barely slowed him down.

Shilo swam between the houses, cutting them off. He slammed into David, and they hit the sea floor, stirring up sand and grass. He ripped a handful of David's hair from the scalp and clawed at his face and chest. David's blood streamed around them, turning the water a sickening scarlet. He screamed when the diseased mer sank teeth into his shoulder.

Faryn envisioned the ocean bed rising...rising...rising. The wall of gritty powder blocked out the scuffle completely just before she hurled it at them as hard as she could.

Scarcely visible in the swirling cloud, David reared back and kicked Shilo and, thanks to his increased strength, flung the mer backward to land in the sand twenty feet away. He didn't move.

Faryn reached for David's hand, but he refused to take it.

— *Leave me here, he said. — I could be a danger to you and Cindel.*

She looked past him through the settling sand to the diseased mer still bobbing along the ocean bed.

— *I'm not leaving you here. You heard Salene. The Rage may have no effect on you.*

— *But we don't know that, and I could still be a carrier.*

Shilo groaned and began moving around.

— *Please, David. If you start getting sick, we'll worry about it then," she begged. — But if you stay here and run into more of the diseased, you're dead. How could I ever explain that to our child?*

— *If you're sure*, he agreed reluctantly. — *Come on. Let's get out of here.*

As they fled, Faryn's mind began playing tricks on her. She could see their house, but no matter how fast they swam, it didn't feel like they got any closer.

— *Cindel!* she shouted when they finally made it to their front yard.
— *Cindel, open the door!*

The house remained quiet, the shutters and door locked up tight.

— *Cindel, help us!* David shouted. — *Open the door!*

Faryn's heart pumped madly. She couldn't catch her breath. As soon as they got to the door, she pounded on it, yelling as loudly as she could, — *Cindel, open the door!*

She felt a stirring of the water behind her and grunted in shocked pain as someone yanked on her hair. She heard David shouting through a thick haze of horror, but he seemed so far away....



2. Great Escape

— *Get off her!*

David had flattened Faryn against the door in an attempt to shield her, but Shilo's iron grip only got tighter. Sharp pain shot down her neck and into her back when he yanked on her hair again.

— *Let go! Cindel!*

The front door sprang open. Startled, Shilo uttered a grunt and his grip loosened. Faryn and David dived through the doorway into a room lit by glowing scarlet chunks of rock, then slammed and bolted the door.

Cindel's eyes were wide, her lips quivering.

— *What's happening out there? Why are we hiding? Why did Shilo attack you?*

— *Listen to me.* Faryn held her younger sister's frightened face in both hands. — *Shilo is sick. We have to stay inside so we don't catch his illness. Everything is going to be fine.*

She drew Cindel close and gave David a warning look.

— *Promise?*

— *I promise.*

Please, let me keep that promise.

Cindel, though, had the rare ability to hear even secret thoughts unless they were blocked. She stiffened, then tightened their embrace.

— *I know you will if you can.* She caught sight of David and gasped.

— *What happened to you?*

— *I was attacked,* he said, looking defeated.

— *You were?* Cindel started backing away from him. — *How long ago?*

Faryn hurried over to examine his wounds.

— *How do you feel?* she asked, looking into his eyes.

—*I feel fine, but what are those weird red lights everywhere?*

She ignored the latter half of his question, overcome with relief.

—*Maybe Salene was right. The Rage may not affect humans. You don't feel sick at all?*

David grazed his fingers over his injuries, wincing.

—*No, I think I'm okay.*

Faryn relaxed a bit, although she continued to watch him.

—*So, what's with all these red lights?* he asked again.

Cindel, looking not completely convinced, swam over to the one sitting next to the couch.

—*They're stalactites. Papa got them on one of his expeditions with the treasure seekers.*

—*I didn't know stalactites glowed.*

—*They don't, for humans, Faryn explained. — But when Cadence created the sea demons, the Spirit knew we would need some source of light if we were away from home when they attacked. We can find these in almost every cave around the islands.*

—*And how do you light them?*

—*By touching them.* Cindel demonstrated by turning the stalactite off and then on by tapping it. She appeared pleased with her accomplishment. —*Despite our advanced eyesight compared to humans, the nearer to the surface we are, on the darkest night, and without the stars to guide us, we're as blind as any of you. So, it's good to have a source of light when we need it.*

—*Faryn, David, are you home? Let us in!*

Faryn turned to unlock the door, but David stopped her.

—*No! Luna could be infected.*

Cindel paled. —*David's right. You can't let her in.*

—*Faryn, please!* Briley cried through the locked door.

—*I'm not leaving them out there.* She brushed past David and swung the door open, looking around for Shilo as an orange-and-black-striped fish and a tuna hurried inside. Luna and Briley morphed back into mers and collapsed in an exhausted heap.

Luna's red-and-black fins quivered.

—*They're everywhere,* she cried with gasping gills. —*They chased us from Shelter Cove. We tried to make it home, but they cut us off.*

—*And I can't find my sister.* Briley clutched her spear, her bright-pink tail twitching with nervous spasms. —*Charlotte was right behind us when we started for here, but just now, when I looked back, she was gone. We have to go search for her.*

—*Did she know you were coming here?* Faryn asked.

—*Yes, but what if she's trapped somewhere?* Briley was crying and sounded on the verge of an emotional breakdown.

— *You can't think the worst. Being able to move things with her mind is the most useful ability she could have,* Faryn said to try and calm her friend.

— *Where did you last see her?*

Someone banged on the door.

— *Briley, Faryn, are you in there?*

— *Charlotte!* Briley flung the door open, and a young blonde rushed inside.

— *There are dozens of crazy mers out there,* Charlotte cried. — *I never thought I was going to see you again.*

— *Did they bite you?* Briley asked, checking for wounds.

Charlotte brushed her hands away.

— *No. I was so scared out-swimming them wasn't difficult. I didn't even have to use my talent.*

— *What is happening to everyone?* Luna asked. — *Why are they attacking one another?*

— *It's the same sickness Willa and Ash have,* Briley said, keeping her gaze on Faryn. — *They're contagious, aren't they. Does the High Council know what it is?*

— *They think it's the Rage.*

Even as the word tumbled out, Faryn still had a hard time believing they were battling the terrible plague again, and that she and her friends had a front-row seat to the destruction.

Luna drifted to the sofa, horrified eyes locked on Faryn.

— *Are they sure?*

— *Yes.*

Briley stared hard at David.

— *Wounds spread the disease—that's one of the few lessons I remember from five years of school.* Suspicion rang in her tone as she pushed Charlotte behind her. — *How did you get hurt? Did you get into a fight with one of those things?* She turned her spear on him. — *Get out of here, David. Get out of this house now.*

— *My husband isn't going anywhere,* Faryn shot back, swimming between them. — *If he was infected, he would be showing signs by now. Salene believes he's probably going to be immune because he's human.*

— *Faryn, get out of my way. We can't take any chances.* Briley jabbed the spear at her when she refused to move.

David swam in front of Faryn, his glare warning Briley.

— *Get that thing out of her face.*

— *Briley, think about what you're doing,* Charlotte protested, trying to prevent disaster. — *If you throw him out, and he's not sick, you're murdering him.*

— *Please, Briley, Cindel cried. — Listen to your sister.*

Briley ignored them.

— *Faryn, I know he's your husband, but if you choose to fight for his life, you could lose your own. Think of your unborn child.*

— *I am thinking of my child. This is her father you're threatening for no good reason.*

Luna grabbed the shaft of Briley's spear.

— *Briley, we can't turn on one another now. Sticking together may be the only way we get out of this alive.*

Briley refused to take her eyes off David.

— *But what if he's infected?*

— *And what if he isn't? Could you live with yourself knowing you murdered a friend? Especially when there's a chance he isn't even sick? Charlotte touched her sister's forearm, inching closer. — Do you really think you could look into his eyes—a man who has fought beside us and sacrificed so much—and run him through with that spear?*

— *She's right, Luna said. — We need to give him time. Isn't that something you would want?*

Briley's expression softened, but she didn't lower her weapon.

— *I like you, David, but I'll do whatever it takes to keep my sister safe, she warned him. — I'll spare you now, but if you show any symptoms of this sickness don't think for a moment I won't kill you.*

Faryn thought, *You'll have to get through me first! I dare you!*

But David said, — *You'd better. I won't be a danger to people I care about.*

— *All right, everyone settle down, Luna interrupted. — So far, it looks like the Rage only infects mers. What else do we know about the disease?*

— *Well, as Briley so eloquently pointed out, Faryn said, shooting Briley a dirty look, — we know that bites and scratches are infectious.*

— *And contaminated food, Charlotte added.*

— *Salene told us Cadence is behind it, David blurted. — And that they ended the first plague by killing all those who were infected.*

Cindel's hands flew to her mouth.

— *We never learned that in school.*

— *They told our ancestors it was of unknown origin, Charlotte chimed in.*

— *The Ocean Guardian? Briley said, voice full of disbelief. — How could the High Council keep that from us all these years? We deserved to know where the sickness came from.*

— *They lied. I guess they feared a mass panic. Faryn paused a moment. — Anyway, unless we want to kill innocents to rid the city of the disease again, which I'm sure we're all against, our only option is to go in search of a Tablet of Truth hidden somewhere on Seneca. Salene said it could lead to information on a cure.*

Angry voices from outside ended their discussion. Deranged mers surrounded the house, screeching and howling with pain and madness. They pounded on the shutters and door.

Cindel covered her ears and drifted to the floor.

— *Make it stop!* she cried. — *Go away! Go away!*

Faryn rubbed her shoulders to comfort her.

— *David, get my father's weapons. They're in the hall closet.*

Briley followed him to retrieve the spears and daggers, still eyeing him suspiciously, and Charlotte and Luna swam over to help soothe Cindel.

The screams and howls outside continued. Shutters splintered as the diseased mers fought to get in, but they didn't break.

— *They want to kill us,* Cindel sobbed. — *I can hear their secret thoughts. They're too sick to speak, but that's what they're thinking. They can't control themselves.* She stopped crying and stiffened, staring ahead as if in a trance. — *A woman is encouraging them.*

Faryn listened for the voice, but she couldn't hear anything over the enraged mers.

— *What does she sound like? Have you ever heard her before?*

— *No, but she tells them we're evil. She's lying to them.*

Faryn cupped her sister's chin and looked into her lavender eyes.

— *Cindel, don't listen. Focus on me. I will not let them hurt you.*

Cindel turned away, but Faryn gave her chin a light shake, grabbing her attention again.

— *You know what I'm thinking—things no one else can hear. Am I telling you the truth when I say I won't let anyone hurt you?*

— *Yes.* Cindel collapsed against her. — *I'm just so scared.*

Faryn rocked her sister gently, wishing there were something more she could do to comfort the innocent soul she had promised their father she would protect.

— *Momma and Daddy are looking down on us right now,* she said, — *protecting us.* By the time Briley and David swam back into the living room, she assured them, — *She'll be all right.*

— *We'll all be fine,* Charlotte agreed, smoothing Cindel's hair. — *We're safe in here.* But no matter how brave she acted, Faryn could sense her lingering fear.

Luna bent down and grasped Cindel's hands.

— *You are the most courageous mer I've ever met,* she said. — *I remember what you did for us during the Battle of Seneca.* She waited for a sign the child was still coherent enough to understand what she was saying, and when Cindel finally nodded, she continued. — *You fought a sea de-*

mon fifty times your size and won. Don't let diseased mers take that tremendous accomplishment away from you.

The screaming and the pounding fists stopped suddenly, and minutes dragged on as they waited for the uproar to start again.

— *They're gone*, Cindel said, hope returning to her face. — *I can't hear their thoughts anymore.*

— *Thank goodness*, Charlotte mumbled.

— *Wait a minute*. Briley focused on David, her face a contorted mask of confusion. — *How can you see us right now? Our fear camouflages us from humans.*

— *The bond he shares with Faryn must have given him that ability*, Luna said. — *I can't believe I didn't notice.*

David stared from one mer to the next.

— *I've been able to see you through your fear camouflage since the Battle of Seneca. I just assumed you knew.*

Faryn wrapped her arm around him.

— *This proves how deep your love for our species is, how in tune with us you really are.*

— *I think it's romantic*. Light brown under normal circumstances, Charlotte's now bright-purple eyes reflected tender emotions. That color was a trait unique to the selkies, which had long made her a topic of rumor in the underwater cities. It was a subject her father avoided discussing.

A blaring siren sent Faryn rushing to the nearest window. She cracked the shutters to see mers leaving their houses armed with spears and nets. The others clustered around her when she told them what was going on.

— *Do you think it's safe to go out?* Eyes on the departing mob, Briley adjusted her pearl-and-moonstone hair comb with a nervous hand.

— *I'm sure it is*, Faryn said. — *I doubt the High Council would sound the all-clear if it weren't.*

— *Well, we aren't going anywhere without these*. David lifted his dagger. — *Grab weapons, ladies, and remember to stay together.*

They emerged from the house in a flurry of multi-colored fins and silver blades. Faryn took Cindel's hand, and noticed her sister had stopped trembling, but the stunned fear never left her eyes.

They swam high over the city and up the wall of the cave toward the crystal archway that marked the entrance to Atlantis. The High Council floated in the mouth of the passageway separating them from the currents they traveled to get to the surface, waiting for the citizens to assemble. With David right behind her, Faryn shoved through the chattering masses, keeping a firm grip on Cindel. Briley and Luna swam just ahead of them. But where was Charlotte?

— *Charlotte!* Faryn heard Briley call. — *Charlotte, where are you?* She searched for her wandering sister in a panic. — *No, not again.*

Charlotte emerged from the crowd, oblivious to having been thought among the missing.

— *I hope we can get out of here before the sick find out we're leaving.*

— *Your sister is looking for you,* Faryn told her, pushing her toward Briley.

As soon as Briley caught sight of Charlotte, she grabbed her hand and tugged her close.

— *Stop doing that,* she scolded her. — *You can't go swimming off every time I turn my back.*

Charlotte's eyes morphed from black to red, and she frowned, but she didn't respond.

Councilor Servio raised his hand for silence.

— *Citizens of Atlantis...Please, citizens—*

— *Quiet down!* Councilor Thaden roared, and an infant's crying dominated the sudden hushed silence.

— *Please follow us to the surface in a civilized manner,* Servio continued. — *We can figure out what to do next once we're out of immediate danger.*

To Faryn's surprise, everyone began filing from the cavern in a calm and orderly fashion.

— *We're almost there,* Faryn told a shaking Cindel as they swam. — *Just a little farther now."*

But Cindel wasn't paying attention to her. She was staring down into the city, eyes like saucers.

— *They're coming!* she screamed. — *They're coming!*

Faryn whirled to see a horde of plague-ridden mers racing toward them. As if in a foaming whirlpool, her mind began to spin faster and faster.

— *Come on!* She grasped David's and Cindel's hands, and they fought through the crowd. Several mers shapeshifted into octopuses, squids, and turtles to make it easier for them to wriggle and squeeze to safety. Those without this ability used a different one to fling people this way and that with their minds in their panic to escape.

As the Atlanteans swam over the top of one another, sapphire blood began to drift around them. Faryn yanked Cindel out of the way when a young mermaid next to her accidentally skewered a merman in the chest with her spear. The girl never noticed in her panic as he turned to sand.

— *Throw down your weapons!* Salene shouted. — *You're killing one another!*

Faryn dropped her dagger as the swarm of mers swallowed David. She lunged toward the spot where he had vanished, panicked.

— *David, where are you?* She searched for him, but all she could see were the terrified faces of the Atlanteans. Someone elbowed her in the back of the head, and she put her hands up to block a second blow. In the commotion, she lost both hold and sight of Cindel.

She turned in circles, screaming, —*Cindel, where are you? Cindel! David!* She heard the pain-filled shrieks of those dying at the hands of Enraged mers, and she witnessed several brave souls battling their attackers, perhaps hoping to give the rest time to escape.

Like a living shroud, the crowd surrounded her; and before she knew it, she was at the bottom of a crush of mers. The light vanished; her world grew smaller. It became hard to breathe, and there were too many to move with her mind. Her gills gasped for oxygen.

— *Cindel! David, help me!* She was on the verge of passing out. She couldn't move or even think clearly.

As the swarming bodies devoured the last pinpoint of light, a hand hauled her from her suffocating tomb.

— *I've got you,*" David told her, his other arm wrapped around Cindel's waist. — *Hang on to me.*

— *We're almost to the corridor, Cindel,* Faryn said when her head had cleared and she could see where they were. — *Hold on just a little longer.*

Cindel nodded, clinging tightly to David's other hand.

As soon as they made it past the crystal archway, Luna rejoined them.

— *I saw you go down,* she told Faryn, — *but the guards wouldn't let me come back for you. Are you all right?*

— *We're fine,* Faryn said, trying to calm her racing pulse. — *But the sooner we get out of here, the better I'll feel. Where are Charlotte and Briley?*

— *I haven't seen them since everyone went crazy, but I hope they're up there somewhere. They were ahead of me,* Luna said, scouring the crowd. — *Wait...there they are.*

She pointed. Faryn glimpsed Charlotte's face and began to relax a bit.

— *All right, that's all of them,* the nearest guard said. — *It's a good thing we stole this gate from Pandora after the last battle.* He slammed it down and locked it. — *I knew we would have use for it someday.*

— *I did, too,* the other said. — *But I didn't think it would be this soon.* He began herding Faryn and her friends away from the entrance, and once again, they were separated by the crowd.

— *Wait for us!* A couple raced for the entrance with dozens of diseased mers hot on their fins. As they got closer, and Faryn saw what the woman was carrying, her heart dropped.

— *You have to let them out!* She recognized the guard named Ryle and turned to him for help. — *They have an infant!*

— *If I open the gate, I risk spreading the sickness to the surface.*

Faryn watched in horror as an Enraged tackled the father and dragged him away. The merman's tortured screams mixed with the shrill cries of his attacker. Others swarmed him, tearing him limb from limb.

— *Please, save my baby!* The mermaid rushed up to the gate, grasping a bar with her free hand. — *Please! I'm begging you!*

Two Enraged grabbed her and began hauling her away. Her baby wailed when one of them tried ripping it from her arms.

Faryn snatched the keys from Ryle and smacked him with her tail, knocking him farther into the corridor. She heard David shouting her name as he tried to push past the guards, but she ignored him. Unlocking the barricade, she rushed back into the cavern, dodged the infected, and tugged the mermaid toward the open gate.

An Enraged grabbed the mother's flukes, dragging her back.

— *Take my baby!* she cried. — *Please!* She cried out in pain when the closest attacker bit her the first time, sounding more wounded animal than Atlantean.

— *Faryn!* Ryle shouted. — *Hurry!*

Faryn grabbed the infant from the desperate mother's arms and flew toward the gate. She ducked beneath the crystal archway, and the barrier slammed down just before the mob of diseased mers smashed into it. They stuck their arms through the bars, screeching and clawing.

Ryle plucked the dark-haired baby from Faryn's arms and hurried away. Two other sentries rushed her back to David and Cindel.

David threw his arms around her.

— *I thought I'd lost you. Please, don't ever do anything like that again.*

She wanted to tell him he didn't understand. How could she protect her own child while allowing another to die in such a horrible way.

Cindel, traumatized, said nothing. She clung to David, watching those around them with a wary eye.

The guards steered them onward, shouting for order. The quartz-encrusted walls and ceiling sparkled as if covered with undersea stars, but Faryn could no longer appreciate their beauty.

When they made it to the currents, Luna called, "I'll meet up with you at the surface." Seconds later, the fast-moving stream rushed her away. Charlotte and Briley waved before hurrying ahead.

Faryn looked over at the current heading back into the city and wondered if they would ever use it again. Would they eventually return to Atlantis, or would they have to find sanctuary elsewhere? Pavire was the largest underwater civilization, but it wasn't big enough to house everyone long-term. Where else could they go? Cronin had disappeared long ago, and Pandora's sun was dead. Znai was now a deep-sea mer habitat;

and despite the rumors their rivals had moved on, they still avoided the city.

When their turn came, Faryn dived into the current and, with David and Cindel, soared over deep trenches and brilliant bioluminescent algae-covered valleys. She clung to them, dreading what fate had in store.



Faryn and Cindel followed David out of the current and up the two-hundred-foot shaft beneath the sea floor. The algae-covered walls glowed sapphire, radiating a faint glow to guide them to the surface.

— *I wonder what the High Council will do, Cindel whispered. — I hope they have a plan.*

Faryn's heart felt like it was breaking. Cindel looked to her for guidance and protection, and she was failing her.

What do I say? What would our parents do?

— *It's all right, Cindel reassured her. — I really didn't expect an answer. Besides, I think Mother and Father would have felt lost right now, too.*

David did his best to remain calm, but Faryn could tell his confidence was in danger.

— *I'm sure the High Council has a plan, he said. — Your ancestors beat the Rage once. They'll figure out a more humane way to do it again.*

The trio cleared the sea floor by way of a breach in the Bimini Road to find Luna waiting for them.

— *How crazy is this? She gestured toward the terrified crowd. — Someone pinch me.*

The last guard emerged from the current, and seconds later, one of the stone blocks making up the underwater road slid back into place, cutting off contact with Atlantis.

From out of the dark ocean, a familiar shape soared toward them. The spotted dolphin swam up to Faryn and nuzzled her side.

— *Not now, Lola.*

Lola nudged her again, and Faryn gave in, petting her to keep her entertained.

— *All right, girl. I missed you, too.*

— *I would be happy to give you some attention, Cindel said in a child-like voice.*

Lola clicked contentment and nodded when the child wrapped arms around her.

— *Everyone, I need your attention. Salene waved both arms over her head. — We need to speak to you, please. Once everyone quieted down, she continued, her face ashen. — As you know, we came under attack. But this*

assault was of the worst kind, because it came from within our own city. We now realize we face an epidemic of the Rage a second time.

— What can we do to help? someone near the front yelled.

Lola voiced her opinion with a series of excited clicks.

— While Servio and Thaden take a handful of our best warriors to the island of Grand Bahama to ask the humans for their assistance, I will accompany you to Pavire.

— We want to help! another shouted. *— We have a right to protect ourselves!*

— You can't make us hide like cowards! someone complained.

— You will stay in Pavire until it is safe to go home! Thaden's thundering outburst made Faryn jump. *— What would happen if we all got sick?* He glared at them. *— We would be a memory. Is that what you want? Please do as you're asked and follow Salene to safety.*

The crowd thinned out, muttering.

— This is unbelievable, a merman exclaimed. *— I've lived in Atlantis my entire life, and yet I have no say in what happens to it?*

— It's outrageous, his elderly comrade agreed.

Faryn glanced back at the brave souls traveling to Grand Bahama moments before they faded into the deep blue. Although she, too, hated the idea of being a refugee in Pavire, she and David followed the Atlanteans to their sister city without question. Perhaps their future lay just beyond the island of Andros.



3. Sister City

Two hours had passed since the mers left Atlantis. A thick layer of limestone covered the sea floor making up the shallower water of the Great Bahama Bank, and moonbeams lit up the underwater world as if it were the middle of the day. In the distance, small holes carved in the rock changed color from turquoise to deep blue.

Faryn tugged David toward a small strip of coral edging the island of Andros. Sea grass brushed his legs like thousands of tickling fingers, and tiny animal eyes stared out at him from the submerged foliage. Despite their reason for visiting Pavire, he was excited to see another underwater city.

He wondered what he would find beyond the gates of this new hidden world. Would it resemble Atlantis, or appear alien, with only the face its inhabitants were mers tying the two civilizations together?

What a shame this trip couldn't have happened under better circumstances.

— *Tell me about it*, Cindel answered his unspoken thought. — *I only have good memories of Pavire, and I would like to keep it that way. The last time I was here, I could barely keep up with the adults.*

With every flip of her flukes, David could see her excitement growing.

— *And Tristan and I were barely up to our parents' waists.*” Luna’s smile faded at thought of her brother, dead in the great battle against the sea demons, and she grew quiet.

David’s heart went out to her. No matter the bad blood between him and her brother Tristan, the young merman had died gallantly in the place of someone he’d loved—someone David loved. Thanks to Tristan, David

had his beloved Faryn, a gift the sea demons could have stolen had it not been for his rival-turned-friend.

Briley and Charlotte swam just ahead of them, chatting about visiting their parents for the first time since they'd moved to Atlantis four months before. Despite the grim situation, Charlotte's face lit up when she spoke of her mother.

— *I haven't seen her in so long*, she said. Then, they disappeared into the crowd.

As the Atlanteans rounded the south end of Andros, a vast multitude of creatures ranging from turtles to eels congregated around the coral heads, while the occasional shark stalked sand dollars and crustaceans. Through the mass of mer bodies, David could see the drop overlooking the trench known as the Tongue of the Ocean looming in the distance.

A hammerhead darted past; David froze, afraid to move. Why would it come so close to a species they usually avoid?

Before he could warn Faryn they had unwanted company, a scarlet light shot up from the side of the underwater cliff; the shark snatched it up and dragged it over the ledge. The strange glow appeared to have had arms and legs.

— *What was that?* David asked.

— *A deep-sea mer*, Faryn said, pity for the creature in her sorrowful expression. — *They're distant relations. We've never gotten along despite the fact we share the same dismal past.*

— *They're also a shark delicacy*, Luna added. — *Sharks crave them so much they don't even notice we're around. And the Spirit didn't give them the scent to repel sharks, because they were the worst offenders.*

— *What made them worse?*

— *When our ancestors turned from the Spirit*, Cindel said, — *he transformed us into mers, but there were those whose sins were unforgivable.*

— *That doesn't mean they're still like that*, Luna interjected. — *We can't hold their past against them any more than we can be held accountable for those who turned from the Spirit in the beginning.*

David dodged a clump of tangling grass.

— *But what did they do that was so bad?*

— *You name it, they did it*, Cindel said. — *Murder, thievery, rape—*

— *We're nearly there*, Salene's announcement interrupted their discussion. — *We know the deep-sea mers frequent this area, but if we leave them alone, they'll do the same for us. Before we enter Pavire, are there any questions?*

— *How long do we have to stay here?* someone asked.

— *Until the danger passes*. Salene glanced at the drop and back. — *The Pavireans will welcome us with open arms, as they have always done, so*

there is no reason for you to worry. With that, she spun on her tail and swam for the cliff.

— *No reason to worry?* someone near David muttered as they followed her. — *We have every reason to worry.*

The cliffside, covered with coral and crustaceans, dropped four hundred feet before the darkness took over, concealing what lay beyond. David swam over the edge, staring into the abyss. He could see many bright lights in the pitch-black, zooming around in green, yellow, and red streaks. Despite their speed, he swore he could still make out legs.

— *Faryn, don't the deep-sea mers have tails?*

— *No. Their legs are covered in scales, and flippers replaced their feet.*

— *They don't have hair, either,* Cindel said. — *And they never leave the sea. They can't come this close to the surface except at night because they're allergic to the sun.* She scrunched her face up. — *I think they're ugly.*

— *They're not that ugly. Besides, they can also travel to the bottom of the sea no matter how deep it is, and that's something I've always envied.* Luna bumped into the mer in front of her and mumbled a clumsy *I'm sorry* when he shot her a dirty look. — *Anyway, we may not get along with the deep-sea mers, but they don't go out of their way to harass us unless provoked...and the other way around.*

— *We're getting close,* Faryn whispered.

David could feel her budding excitement. He kept an eye out for the entrance to the deepwater city, hoping it wasn't too much farther. He may have adjusted to life in the ocean, nearer the surface at least, but secrets concealed by abysmal darkness still terrified him.

He spotted Salene pressing her hands against something he couldn't make out through the crowd. He bobbed around to get a better look.

— *What is she doing?*

— *The emblem of Pavire is a lock that lets us into the city,* Luna said, eyes on the councilwoman. — *Humans only see it as a carving in the stone. That's how the city remains hidden.*

David watched in amazement as a crack of emerald-green light appeared in the rocky ledge. The crack grew larger until it was the length of an average human man, then expanded, creating a doorway. Salene led the way inside, and a few minutes later, he entered the unknown.

Quartz and bioluminescent algae brightened the wall and ceiling; the passage was much larger than it had looked from outside, but it was still cramped with all the mers. It reminded him of the tunnel into Atlantis.

They swam a long way before rounding a corner. The corridor wound over several steep hills and around numerous sharp turns before snaking beneath an archway laced with emeralds and rubies into a cavern twice

as large as Atlantis. One- and two-story marble homes shimmered under the dim orange-and-yellow Paviren sun. Instead of mountains surrounding the city, mighty riverbeds, once overflowing with fresh water, criss-crossed the outskirts. In the center of it all, a colossal temple, constructed from the same cloudy blue-and-white stone found throughout the city of Atlantis, cast its shadow over nearby buildings.

He saw a ghost town, devoid of life.

David stared down at the magnificent spectacle, nervous in the face of the city's deserted state.

— *Where is everyone?*” he asked as he followed the group into the cavern. — *I thought Pavire was the social hub of your underwater civilization.*

— *It is.* Faryn grasped Cindel's hand, her eyes also on the city. — *This doesn't make sense, unless...*

— *Unless what?* David did not like the sound of her hesitation. — *Do you think the Rage has beaten us here?*

— *We cannot be alarmed by the state of Pavire,* he heard Salene announce over the crowd's sudden buzzing. — *They could be taking extra precautions to ensure their citizens' safety. We will go to the temple as we planned.*

She swam on.

David studied one empty home after another, expecting to at least see people were watching them from the windows. They weren't.

— *I don't like this,* he muttered.

— *Me, neither.* Cindel suddenly went quiet, as though listening to a conversation.

Faryn stopped. — *What is it?*

— *I can't...be sure. Their thoughts...are...all mixed up with ours.* She gestured toward the other Atlanteans. — *But I sense fear. The Pavirans are definitely hiding...from something.”*

— *Why did you stop?* Luna called back to them. — *We need to stay with Salene.*

— *Have you seen Briley and Charlotte since we got here?* Faryn asked her. — *This doesn't feel right, and I'd like to know where they are if we have to make a quick getaway.*

— *The last time I saw Briley and Charlotte, they were working toward the front. Do you want me to find them?*

— *No. We don't even know if anything is wrong yet.* However, Faryn knew her thought tone wasn't as confident as she'd wanted it to be.

— *The High Council is coming to meet us,* someone up ahead shouted. — *But one is missing.”*

David maneuvered so he could see the three Pavirans coming from the temple. The mermaid leading them rushed up to Salene and hugged her.

— *You must hurry, she called out. — All of you. We feel we have it isolated, but I must warn you Pavire is infected with the Rage.*

The buzz of conversation erupted again among the new arrivals. Salene put her hand to her chest.

— *Where is Greer? Doesn't he usually come to meet newcomers?*

— *Greer was assaulted at daybreak as he traveled to the south side of the city to visit his daughter, a male council member said.*

The third councilor's pinched features had a trace of arrogance.

— *The attack on him was the first, he added, pursing his lips.*

When Salene turned back to her refugees, she could not hide the tremor in her telepathic voice.

— *Those of you who do not know anyone from Pavire, please follow councilors Leander, Corvina, and Draegan to the temple. If you have family or friends in the city, you are free to find them...although you do so at your own risk.*

A number of the Atlanteans fanned out to find shelter. David spotted Briley and Charlotte the same moment Faryn did, and they swam to join them.

— *Our parents live close by, Briley said. — I have to make sure they're all right. She and Charlotte started away.*

— *Do you want us to come with you? Faryn shouted after them.*

— *No, Briley called back. — We'll be fine.*

A middle-aged mermaid swam past and up to the council members. A younger mer in her early twenties followed close behind.

— *Obviously, we cannot house everyone, the older one said. — But we are willing to do our part for whom we can.*

— *That's Thaden's sister and niece, Cindel explained to David. — Why Thaden didn't just stay here with them is beyond me.*

— *But if he'd stayed here, we never would have had the pleasure of knowing him. Luna made a fake smile. — And he's so popular in Atlantis.*

— *Thank you, Salene said, then announced, — Tienne and her daughter Haven have offered to take in fifteen souls, but I'm afraid we must decide quickly who will go with them. An attack could happen any moment.*

— *Why don't we leave? someone demanded.*

— *We need to let Servio and Thaden know Pavire is infected, another one shouted.*

— *And go where? Salene responded. — If the sickness has already spread here, that means it's at the surface as well. Here, we at least have sanctuary. Pavire is our only option right now.*

— *I can take families...women and children, Tienne said.*

Salene turned to David.

— *I'd like you to go with them—they may need defending. Faryn and Cindel can go as well. Luna, you come with us to the temple.*

It took a few minutes for the other choices to be made, including the orphaned baby Faryn had rescued, and they accompanied Tienne and Haven home. The rest flocked to the temple with the High Council.

As they passed through town, David surveyed the rest of their party. Although he recalled having seen some of them on the streets of Atlantis at one point or another, he didn't know any of them. He gripped Faryn's arm as they rounded the corner.

— *What do we really know about Tienne and Haven?* he asked. — *I've never seen them in Atlantis. You would think they'd visit Thaden every now and then, right?*

— *Salene trusts them, and I think we can—*

— *They make me nervous, just like Thaden always does,* Cindel interrupted.

— *No matter how much I dislike Thaden—and that's a great deal—we can't hold it against his family because he's a tyrant.*

The houses got bigger the farther along the sand-covered street they swam. Many were twice the size of those they had already passed. Coral encrusted the limestone fountains that adorned the yards.

Tienne led them to the biggest they had seen yet and opened the door. She and Haven floated off to the side for them to pass by. Up close, Tienne was a very attractive woman in her forties. Her blue eyes sparkled with generosity, and her smile welcomed them. Haven's blond hair framed angelic features, and her small upturned nose made her seem approachable.

Once everyone was inside, Tienne shut the door and locked it. She gestured toward the room beyond.

— *Please, make yourselves at home,* she said.

Instead of scarlet stalactites, statues provided light of a brilliant blue, and they were everywhere, lighting the interior as brightly as an extraterrestrial sun. The main room was the largest David had ever seen in an underwater dwelling. The ceilings were high, and everywhere he looked, evidence of the family's standing in the community was obvious. Crystal knickknacks and jewel-encrusted vases were in abundance, and an enormous fireplace dominated the far end of the room. The wrought iron couches and chairs looked brand-new.

— *It's beautiful, isn't it?* Tienne gestured around as if showing her home off on HGTV. — *Thank goodness for the magical water in our cities, or the furniture would have rotted long ago. Don't worry,* she said when she noticed David glancing at the fireplace. — *I've boarded it off. We're safe here.*

He gave her a polite nod, grateful for the safe haven but a little put off by her pride.

— *Thank you for taking us in.*

Superficial snob!

— *You're very welcome, my dear. Because my brother governs Atlantis, I feel very close to the city's citizens...and since one of Atlantis's finest chose you as her mate, she added, — who would I be if I turned you out just because you're human?* She flitted away to mingle with the others. Despite her courtesy, David sensed a hint of disdain just beneath the surface.

Evidently, so did Faryn.

— *Ignore her, she told him in hushed tones. — Not everyone is used to the idea of humans among us yet.*

— *I heard that secret opinion, David. But I think she looks more like an unshelled clam, Cindel said, suppressing a laugh. — Believe me, you're not alone. I don't like them, either, though for different reasons.*

— *You've been complaining ever since they offered us a place to stay, Faryn said with a frown. — Why don't you like them?*

Cindel snorted. — *I don't like Thaden, either, remember? It's the entire family. I can't read their unspoken thoughts. I can hear everyone else, but them? Nothing.*

— *That is odd, David agreed. Not that he knew all that much about Cindel's handicap or the gifts that accompanied it.*

Cindel nodded. — *What if they're witches?"*

Faryn laughed. — *Cindel, there are no such thing as witches. They're only stories meant to scare us.*

— *Well, there's something wrong with them, she muttered.*

Then her pout dissolved, and she grew still. She swam over to the nearest window, swept the filmy white curtains aside, and pressed her ear to the wooden shutters. David joined her, already knowing the answer to what he was about to ask.

— *What do you hear?*

Cindel's gills trembled. — *Them. They're coming for us.*

He listened, but he couldn't hear anything over the nonstop chattering around him.

— *How close do they sound?*

A loud screech answered his question. The room fell silent. No one moved. Another shrill cry sounded, and then another. Just as in Atlantis, they were trapped inside a house with only wood and glass separating them from certain death.

David guided Cindel to the middle of the room, where everyone else had gathered, but he didn't take his eyes off the shutters.

— *Are you sure they can't get in here?* he asked Tienne as he moved closer to the fireplace.

She swam up next to him. — *They haven't yet.*

Haven left the company of another young mermaid and joined them.

— *That doesn't mean they won't, Mother. There was only one mer involved in the last attack. Who knows how many are out there now? But don't worry, she told her now-terrified guests. — We have a plan if something goes wrong.*

Thank God! David thought.

— *What's the plan?*

— *There just so happens to be an alternate route out of the city in my bedroom,* Haven said.

He didn't hide his surprise. — *I didn't know these cities had alternate entrances. Does Atlantis have one, too?*

— *They all do, even if the High Council doesn't want the general public knowing about them.*

— *Haven, shut up,* Tienne warned her. — *I've told you about speaking out loud everything that pops into your—*

— *Wait a minute,* Faryn said, moving to stand by David. — *If you have an escape route in your house, why are you still here?*

Haven gestured to Tienne with a grimace.

— *Ask her.*

Tienne glared at her daughter.

— *It isn't in our nature to leave others behind until absolutely necessary. Haven, you know that. There's a lot one can do for others in an infected city.*

A cracking sound echoed through the house, and the screeching outside got louder.

— *They're breaking the boards in the chimney,* Haven cried. — *Mother, you said they couldn't get in.*

— *I said they hadn't yet,* Tienne reminded her. — *All right, everyone—to the back of the house. Hurry up. Let's go.*

— *David, I need to make sure Luna is safe. She's my best friend.*

He took her by the shoulders. — *Right now, we need to get to safety. Luna will be okay. She's tough.*

— *But I can't leave her—*

— *I'm sorry, but we don't have a choice.*

David urged Faryn ahead of him as they filed from the living room through a spacious, nearly empty kitchen to a back bedroom, passing three stalactites on the way. Tienne began digging in the sand near the foot of a clamshell-and-sea grass bed.

— *Haven, where's the rope? I can't find it.*

Haven swam next to her mother and sifted through the white powder, coming up empty until her third try.

— *Here it is.* She yanked on it, and a trapdoor rose to reveal a large hole in the floor.

— *Get a light,* Tienne instructed her.

Haven grabbed a chunk of blue rock off the dresser and led everyone underground.

— *Hurry!*, she shouted when a few held back.

David wasn't enthusiastic about following strangers into a dark hole when he didn't know where it went, but it had to be better than what was breaking in. After several others had gone ahead, he pushed Faryn and Cindel in front of him, keeping a firm hold on his mate's hand.

By now, it sounded as if the Enraged were right on top of them. Tienne rushed into the tunnel carrying another light, clinging to the rope that worked the trapdoor. She gave a tug, and the trapdoor flew back into place.

The passage was barely six feet wide; crabs and other bottom dwellers scooted along the sand to escape the light. The walls seemed to close in on them. David had to remind himself, more than once, it was just his overactive imagination and fear of closed spaces that made him feel like he was trapped.

— *How long is this tunnel?* Cindel wondered.

— *That depends,* Haven said. — *Where do you want to go?*

Nervous laughter filled the corridor.

Suddenly, the cover of the tunnel flew off, and Salene, with bleeding eyes and pale skin, screeched and dived toward them.

— *Swim!* Haven screamed.

Swim they did, followed by the moans of the Enraged who had followed Salene. They plowed into one another and bounced off the walls in their manic state. Their plague-induced lack of coordination may have been the only thing that would save the refugees.

When David thought they might never make it back to the surface, a faint light spilled into the tunnel just ahead.

— *We're almost there!* Haven cried. — *Swim! Swim!*

They fought sea grass as they raced out into the open. David did not recognize anything. The current was significantly stronger than on the way to the city, and the coral reef had all but disappeared, leaving flat, sandy terrain in its place. He swam headlong into someone and reared back, ready to fight.

— *It's us, David.*

His mind cleared enough for him to recognize Briley and Charlotte, and he took a ragged breath.

— *We have to get out of here, the Enraged are right behind us.* He scanned for anything he recognized as they shot away from the tunnel. — *Which side of the city is this?*

— *Watch where you swim,* Faryn warned

— *Why? What's wrong?* He looked back as three Enraged popped out of the tunnel.

— *These blue holes are dangerous.* Briley scanned the seabed, apparently on alert for a threat he did not understand. He looked down to see turquoise water abruptly become deep blue.

The pits in the limestone were numerous, immense, and dotted the sea floor like holes in Swiss cheese.

— *What's so dangerous about them? We passed some on the way here.* When Faryn didn't answer right away, he pressed the issue. — *Why do we need to be afraid of the blue holes?*

— *The lusca,* Cindel answered for her. — *It uses the passages under-floor to hunt. Thankfully, it can't swim far. The water is too shallow.*

Should I ask? Hell, yes! David decided quickly.

— *What's a lusca?*

— *A demon with a huge appetite,* a blonde towing a two-year-old said as she passed them. — *Swim fast, swim far.* She fled without looking back.

Suddenly, David felt something tugging on his feet. He yanked them free and lunged forward.

— *What was that?*

Cindel squealed, and Faryn grabbed her arm and pressed on.

— *It's right below us! Look out!* she shouted to those behind them. — *The lusca is awake!*

A gigantic nightmare creature emerged from one dark hole in a horrifying mass of tentacles and teeth. Its head was like a great white shark's, but its many flopping appendages reminded David of an octopus. The lusca was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen, and it was coming for them fast. Each time it inhaled, it sucked them toward it until it breathed out again.

The creature's powerful jaws seized a straggler, tearing into her flesh with terrible ferocity. She screamed once and turned to sand. The lusca began chasing them.

— *It's coming!* Faryn screamed. — *Don't look back!*

David kept her in sight. Brain stuck in survival mode, he fought to escape the suction of the lusca's powerful breathing. His limbs ached, and the adrenaline driving him had his heart pounding.

The shallows of the Great Bahama Bank stretched out in front of them like a wrinkled blanket, promising shelter. David struggled on, faithful to

Faryn's warning to never look back. His mind was a flood of emotions, his pounding heart seemingly at the point of bursting.

— *It's gone.*

Cindel's words stopped David in his tracks. He looked back to see a calm ocean; there was no trace the lusca had ever been there. He wrapped his arms around Faryn and held her close, relieved they were alive.

— *Luna...*

— *She's in the temple, honey,* he said to try to comfort her. — *That's the safest place she could be.*

Faryn tightened her grip on him. — *I hope you're right.*

Briley swam up with Charlotte in tow. — *What are we going to do now? My parents are missing, and the Enraged have made it to the surface.*

Tienne and Haven joined them, too.

— *Do we have a plan yet?* Tienne asked, out of breath.

— *We're going to Seneca,* Faryn decided. — *We need to tell the High Council Pavire is also infected.*

Haven gave her a puzzled look.

— *The Atlantean scout told us your High Council went to Grand Bahama.*

— *They did,* David said. — *But Seneca will be their next stop. I'm sure of it.*

He realized with horror they were the only ones to have survived. The mers he had never had a chance to know were dead.

But he still had his family. As they set off for the island of Seneca, he silently thanked the Spirit for its bountiful blessings.



Paviren Councilor Corvina caught up with Leander as he swam to the hall to address the refugees.

— *We've secured the doors, but their numbers...*

— *They're our people, Corvina. And as council members, we have a duty to them,* Leander said softly, trying to keep the doubt from his voice.

— *Yes, you're right.* Corvina set her face, trusting him as she always had. This was the second attack against the temple, Salene was missing, and no one knew the fate of those beyond the walls. It was terrifying to think that things could still get worst.

— *Perhaps a sortie, to look for survi—uninfected,* she suggested.

— *In a moment.* Leander stopped before the gathered mers. — *Citizens, guests—your attention, please.*

The Atlanteans and Pavirens in the Great Hall continued talking.

Corvina tried again, louder. — *I need to tell you—*

An alarm cut her off, silencing everyone. Leander took his hand from the lever in the floor, and the siren's wail dwindled.

— *Well, that did the job.* Corvina gave him a trembling nod and focused on the crowd. — *We have the Rage isolated to three back rooms, as you already know, she said. — But there is a great chance the sick could invade us again, and therefore, we need to be diligent in preparing ourselves for a third attack.*

— *What can we do?* Luna shouted from the front. — *We have nowhere to go!*

— *I say we fight!* another shouted. — *We outnumber them!*

Corvina nodded. — *I know you want to fight, she said. — And I understand why. But if we find the cure, those we kill would have died in vain. The Enraged are still your friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.*

— *Everyone deserves a chance to live,* Leander agreed. — *Including those afflicted by this ravenous infection.*

Draegan entered, wrapped in his usual air of superiority.

— *We will split up into smaller groups,* he said. — *We're sitting ducks if we remain in the Great Hall any longer. Do you agree?* he belatedly asked his colleagues.

Leander nodded.

— *I do,* Corvina agreed as well, although she knew there wasn't anywhere they could hide that would provide complete protection. She moved away and called for the attention of the people around her. — *Please find your families and form three groups. We will filter these groups further when we get to where we're going.*

As mers rushed to find loved ones, she rejoined Leander and Draegan.

— *I hope we're doing the right thing by not fighting,* she said. — *One wrong decision, and Pavire may not survive long enough to see another sunrise.*



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