Jewels of the Sea

by
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Part One

X'an deftly plucked the little octopus from its hiding place. With a swift movement, he partially crushed its head with a rock. The creature spasmed a few times, then died. X'an swam with his catch to a large flat rock that was mostly concealed by gently waving fronds of seaweed and ferns.

He settled himself on the rock, tail curled beside him. With a sharp claw, he plucked an eyeball from the octopus and chewed on it thoughtfully.

He felt odd. The pod was in its usual yearly frenzy, and things wouldn't settle down until one of the males finally caught and mated with the matriarch. And B'fi wasn't making the chase easy.

He didn't see what all the fuss was about, personally. B'fi was nice and all, but why such a commotion just because she was in season? X'an shook his head, confused. He
nibbled on a tentacle, grinning as a small school of bright silver fish zipped by him. They were safe for the moment; the octopus was enough to slake his hunger.

Sensing movement in the weeds behind him, X'an jerked around. His eyes scanned the covering of plants, trying to pick out what had alerted him.

There. A flash of red. X'an tensed. With a flick of his powerful tail, he launched himself off of the rock, streaming with the fluid grace of a predator through the weeds. This section of the ocean floor was practically a jungle, overgrown with a lush abundance of plantlife. Colorful anemones waved gently at his passing, and he slipped through an opening in the coral.

He pulled up short, fins fluttering to hold him in place. "Hello?"

The smaller male, obviously not one of X'an's pod, bared his teeth, chittering threateningly. His tail moved stiffly, sending him back a few lengths.

X'an's eyes widened at the long, thin scratches that wound their way across the stranger's chest. They crossed over his gills, and disappeared into the bright red of his tail. "Are you...are you all right?"
The merman glared at him, shaking his head to send a cloud of his black hair covering his body. "Go 'way," he rasped out.

"I'm not going to hurt you," X'an said softly, drifting closer to the skittish male. He halted when the spines along the merman's flanks lifted in warning. Then he looked closer. Several of the spines appeared to be damaged, shorter than normal and not tapering to their usual dangerous points. Like they had been broken. "What happened?"

The red and black male gave a high pitched, keening cry that made X'an wince and back away a bit. This only steadied his resolve, though. Determinedly, he began to move in again. This time, he noticed how the other merman's eyes followed the movements of his hand. He looked, realizing that he still held the octopus. Tentatively, he held it out. "Are you hungry? I don't mind sharing."

The male twitched, his mouth dropping open a bit to taste the water. With halting, jerky movements, he drew closer to X'an, drawn by the promise of food. X'an tore off a tentacle and held it out, watching in bemusement as the smaller male snatched it and began to gnaw at it desperately, gulping it down in only a few bites. "More?"
A hesitant nod met this query, and X'an held out another tentacle. "What's your name?" he asked as he watched the second tentacle disappear as quickly as the first.

Cool blue eyes studied him carefully as the last bite was swallowed. "S'ke," he answered after a long moment, then held out a somewhat shaky hand. X'an grinned. He handed over the rest of the octopus, then drifted to the seabed. "I'm X'an," he said. "Why don't I find us something more to eat? And then I want to hear all about where you come from and why you're here."

Still eating hurriedly, S'ke watched the blue-green male swim away, already stalking the unlucky lobster that had scuttled by.

X'an eagerly hunted another treat for the newcomer. He felt rather bad for the strange male; it was obvious he had been on the losing end of some sort of fight. Those scratches weren't from any shark, though. X'an just hoped that it hadn't been one of the other males from his pod, in a rage over being bested for the matriarch's attentions, that had done the damage to the almost fragile-looking red.

X'an gave a tiny flick of his powerful tail and sped from his hiding place, snatching the lobster and easily digging his claws through the creature's head, killing it. With a
triumphant little clacking of his pointed teeth, he bore his prize back to the other merman.

S'ke twitched nervously as the currents warned him of the approaching merman. He moved slowly back into the scant protection of the waving sea ferns. Again he raised his spines, knowing that they wouldn't be much of a deterrent considering the condition they were in.

He relaxed only fractionally when the seemingly friendly blue merman came into view, holding out his freshly caught meal.

X'an approached the rattled S'ke slowly, holding out his peace offering. "You can have it," he said reassuringly, "I don't mind."

S'ke's gaze flickered back and forth between X'an and the delicacy he was offering. His fins waved a bit, propelling him the slightest bit forward just enough to grab the lobster before it could be snatched away.

X'an watched in amusement as the lobster was quickly and efficiently devoured. It was a matter of seconds before the lobster was gone, nothing but bits of broken shell left floating desolately to the seabed.
S'ke peered up at his benefactor. "Thank you," he whispered, still somewhat leery of this uncharacteristic generosity.

With a shrug, X'an replied, "You looked like you could use it more than me. What happened to you?"

S'ke scowled, not looking at X'an. He settled on an open patch of seabed, digging his tail into the sand and burrowing a bit. He rolled, wincing a little as the sand ground against his open wounds but relishing the way it scoured his scales clean. He stilled, reaching for a handful of sand and rubbing at the patches he'd missed.

Feeling no animosity over being so casually dismissed, X'an propelled himself towards S'ke. He paused as eyes the color of the lid over Drytop fixed him with an intent gaze. "I can help if you," he volunteered. "I don't think you be able to reach everywhere, not with those wounds." Amazed, he watched as those unusual eyes sparked with bits of color like that of the shimmering little brightfish that darted about in the shallows.

S'ke cocked his head, considering. Finally, he gave a somewhat reluctant nod. He knew it would be difficult to groom properly until he was fully healed. Still, he would be ready should X'an try to cause him any harm.
Slowly, X'an came to a rest beside S'ke, wary of the still-hackled spines. He picked up a handful of rough sand and began to carefully burnish the dull patches of scale along the back of S'ke's tail. He smiled in delight as a deep, almost iridescent red was immediately uncovered.

Endless moments passed as the two worked to groom S'ke, the red eventually becoming more at ease with X'an's attentions. It didn't last for long, though.

"X'an!"

X'an jerked slightly at the imperious call, and he quickly lifted up and swirled around. "A'yo," he said with a sigh. He turned to reassure S'ke, only to find the other merman had vanished, leaving only a trail of lazily waving ferns in his wake. With another sigh, he turned back and swam back to his pod.

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"You shouldn't go off by yourself like that," A'yo remonstrated the sub-male. "One of the elders might catch you and mistake you for a rival. You're not strong enough to fight any of them. And you know how R'li gets
when he thinks someone is challenging his reigning claim on B'fi."

X'an rolled his eyes. "I wasn't anywhere near the courtship grounds," he responded in annoyance. "I'm not interested in all of that. Besides," he shrugged, "R'li is the dominant. I'm just a sub, not even an elder yet. He knows I'm not a threat."

"I still don't want you going out alone. It's...odd. You should stay with the rest of the pod."

X'an frowned. "I don't want to," he muttered petulantly.

A'yo glared. "You have to stop acting so strange," she informed him crossly. "You should try to fit in better. You don't want to end up a loner with no pod to call home, do you?"

X'an shrugged and taunted a small hermit crab, sending the creature huddling inside its shell.

With a sigh, A'yo gave up the argument. "Come on, the others are going to play tag-the-shark, why don't you come," she cajoled.

X'an shook his head. "I'd rather stay here," he said. "I might go talk with G'lis for a while."
"Fine. Be like that." With a pout, A'yo spun and swam away, flicking her tail dismissively at X'an.

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S'ke huddled in the small cave he'd found, prodding at the broken tips of his spines. He should probably be safe here for a while, and there was a small growth of edible anemones nearby that should sate him for a while. He might even manage to catch a few of the sluggish eels he'd seen moving listlessly through the grasses outside the cave.

He'd be fine as long as the others didn't find him.

Part Two

X'an hovered on the outskirts of the open, inviting grotto. He clicked his teeth together, then made a whistling sound of query.
In response, a young merman came into view. "Yes?" X'an grinned. "Hi, W'es. Are you well?"

W'es grinned back. "Well enough. Come to escape A'yo again?" He found it inordinately funny the lengths X'an would go to in order to avoid the mermaid; almost as funny as what A'yo would do to try and keep X'an by her side.

"A little," X'an admitted, 'but I also came to speak with G'lis."

"Ah," W'es nodded. "The Keeper is hunting down a meal at the moment, do you want to wait? In the meantime, perhaps I can help." At X'an's affirmative response, W'es led him to a large, smooth rock where they both settled down.

After a moment of easy silence, X'an ventured a question. "W'es, what do you think of Outsiders?"

W'es cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"Well, People from outside of the pod. Do you think they're...dangerous?"

W'es thought for a moment before responding. "I only have a fraction of the knowledge the Keeper has," he
finally said, "but...I think they can be dangerous. Not always, by any means, but there is usually a very good reason that they have no pod of their own."

"Oh."

Seeing X'an's somewhat downcast expression, W'es hastened to elaborate. "Of course, an Outsider could just be a loner that doesn't prefer to be in a pod. D'os is heading in that direction, I think."

"Or the Outsider could be a rogue." G'lis drifted towards the two sub-males and reclined on the seabed next to them.

X'an knew about loners, but he'd never heard of a rogue. "What's that?" he asked the elder.

"A rogue is insane. He - or she - is driven out of the pod because of the danger they represent to the rest. A rogue is violent and vicious. That is why a pod should always be wary of Outsiders until they have proven themselves."

"But how can you know?" X'an pressed. "I mean, what if you meet an Outsider, how can you tell if he's a rogue or not?"
G'lis leaned back, burrowing a bit into the sand. "Have I ever told you of L'in?" he asked casually as he tickled the belly of a passing ray.

W'es and X'an both leaned forward eagerly, anticipating one of G'lis tales.

With a smile, G'lis began. "In times before, it happened that a young male left his pod to explore the regions beyond. L'in was no longer a sub-male, but had not enough experience yet to be considered an elder. And L'in yearned, more than anything, for knowledge of what was outside the pod. L'in would have done well to learn from his Keeper, but he was an impatient one who did not take well to instruction. He was one of those who must learn by doing, not by hearing.

"Now it happened that L'in soon chanced upon a group of males who greeted him with a strange enthusiasm. After a bit of talking, L'in came to believe that these were others like him who were seeking their own paths in the regions beyond. Not being well-versed in the ways of Outsiders, L'in joined their group eagerly, thinking that together they would be able to explore and learn all the more than he could alone.

"All was well for a time, although L'in's new companions occasionally acted in a manner that struck L'in as odd and
not quite right. But when he voiced his thoughts, his companions were quick to reassure him that such behavior was natural for Outsiders. And so, over the space of time, these Outsiders drew L'in closer to them, binding him to them through word and deed.

"Thus, time passed, and the group ranged far and wide, occasionally drawing in others. And then it happened that the Outsiders came upon a pod in the midst of it's mating cycle. The matriarch had been courted and won, and it was time for the younger females of the pod to choose their mates. The Outsiders were driven to a frenzy by this, for they had been wandering for a while and had not had a chance to court any females.

"The leader of the group determined that there were many females in the pod, surely one would not be missed for a bit. And so it was that he convinced the others to set upon a solitary female and take her from the pod to an isolated place.

"Now, L'in was greatly distressed by this decision, and hung back while the others were distracted with trying to rouse the uninterested female. He had no desire to participate, but was unsure of what to do. These were his friends, and he could not challenge them. He thought perhaps he should try and bring others from the pod to
help, but did not know how they would react to him. And so he did nothing.

"As it happened, the abduction of the female had not gone unnoticed. It was but a short space of time until several elders of the pod arrived and set to work freeing the female. The group fought viciously, but the elders were soon joined by others, and the group was subdued."

"Even L'in?" X'an asked breathlessly.

G'lis nodded. "Even L'in. And so the group was brought before the matriarch to hear judgment. The female they had taken was there also, for it turned out that she was the eldest daughter of the matriarch and would one day guide the pod in her stead. The matriarch, greatly incensed by what had been attempted upon her child, judged them harshly. She pronounced that their spines were to be broken and their claws dulled, leaving them nearly defenseless. Then they were to be taken into the midst of the feeding grounds of the sharks, and left there. And so it was."

X'an waited a moment for G'lis to continue. When the Keeper said nothing more, he blurted, "What happened then?"
G'lis frowned a little. "Well, they were killed of course. Without spines or claws, they had little defense against hungry sharks."

"So that's it? L'in is dead? That's a stupid way to end a story!"

G'lis fixed the merman with a stern look. "It is the way it happened. One cannot change that which has already passed."

"I don't get it," X'an complained, looking to W'es for support. "What are we supposed to learn from that?"

"What do you think, W'es?" G'lis asked his protégé.

W'es furrowed his brow in thought. "That...we should always be wary of Outsiders."

"And?"

"Ummm. That we should...not let the words of others sway us to do things which are not right?"

G'lis inclined his head. "It is enough. Think on it more, both of you, and tell me later what else you have learned." With that, he lifted himself up and drifted lazily to his cave nearby.
X'an pouted. "I hate it when he does that," he complained half-heartedly.

W'es just smiled. "Just think, I have to go through it every day!"

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S'ke stalked the elusive eel. The creature was deceptively quick, and had manage to evade him for some time. S'ke was so intent on his hunt that he did not notice how far he had strayed from his cave.

Finally, he caught the eel, and ripped savagely into it, taking out his frustration over the long hunt on his twitching prey. The meal was devoured quickly, and S'ke finally took a moment to look around.

Without warning, a tawny mermaid emerged from a patch of grasses and halted directly in front of him. She hovered in place, spines lifting gracefully in the current as her fins waved. She blinked, then made an odd twitching motion with her tail.

The motion drew S'ke's glance down, where he was disconcerted to find the female's genitals pouting open
in arousal. He cringed back a little, flinching from the heady scent of pheromones released into the water.

The mermaid examined him for a moment longer, then apparently dismissed him. Twirling in place, she darted off again.

That was certainly different. S'ke decided it was time for him to return to his cave...if he could manage to find it again. He had just turned to go, when several more figures barreled out of the grasses. There were four of them, all male, and all very irritated. The largest one, a dark brown mer with strangely short hair, tasted the water and glared at S'ke.

"Who are you?" he hissed angrily. "Would you make challenge for B'fi?" He loomed closer, intimidating the smaller merman.

S'ke shook his head frantically and scooted back. He chittered nervously as the large male continued to advance, spines raised. The others followed suit, and soon had S'ke trapped between them.

S'ke was utterly petrified. All four of the mermen were quite obviously readying themselves to attack, and he had only his claws and a few unbroken spines to defend himself with.
"R'li," came a soft, crooning voice. As one, the males all turned. There was the tawny female again, and she swayed invitingly. With a mischievous grin, she flicked her powerful tail and darted away.

R'li hesitated for a moment. "Leave, Outsider," he snarled at S'ke. "This courting is not for you!" With a final growl, he spun around and resumed the chase for the matriarch, leading the others in a fast pursuit.

S'ke was shaking as he hurried back to his cave. He didn't know why R'li had been so threatened by him. He had no desire to vie for B'fi's affections. Quite honestly, he'd been rather put off by the scent she had exuded. He certainly had no intention of challenging the larger male for her.

With a deep sigh, S'ke curled up on a bed of seaweed. Next time, he'd make sure to stay close to his cave. He wanted to see no more of R'li.

Part Three

A'nil hovered on the outskirts of the mating grounds, hidden by an outcropping of rock that blended well with his mottled gray-blue coloring.
It was always the same; the heady excitement, the desperate seeking, the frantic chase, and finally the capture of the willing prey.

Mating season. The time when the pod males were more concerned with courting the matriarch than with mundane daily life. When the defenses of the pod were down, and the inexperienced beta female was in charge of keeping control. When the alpha female herself was an easy conquest for a strong merman willing to challenge for her.

It was the perfect time. It was the perfect pod. And the matriarch was a lovely thing, her lithe golden form weaving sinuously through reefs and seaweed as she teased and taunted those hapless males still in the competition for her affections. It would hardly be a sacrifice for him to carry on with his plan.

He would not make the same mistake twice.

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"A'nil?"
A'nil slipped through the shadowed weeds towards the voice. "P'en, I told you to stay near the cave," he reprimanded. "Where is your sibling?"

The pale yellow merman shrugged as he pushed his hair away from his face. "D'ruc is back in the cave. I only came out to find us something to eat. What did you see?"

A'nil gave a low growl. "Do not question your elders, youngling. And do not disobey my orders!" He glared at his offspring until the male cringed back and lowered himself submissively to the seabed. A'nil grunted in satisfaction and turned to snatch a passing fish. His sharp teeth bit cleanly through the large, wriggling body as he swam back to the cave they'd found, followed closely by P'en.

"P'en, did you find - A'nil." D'ruc's glittering almost-black eyes - so like his sire's and sibling's - opened wide upon seeing A'nil's glowering expression.

Swiftly, A'nil darted forward, his empty hand reaching out to squeeze D'ruc's throat. His claws pricked warningly through the tender flesh as he snarled, "The two of you will do as I tell you, or you will learn again just who is the alpha male here!"
D'ruc struggled only briefly before going limp and tilting his head back, baring his throat completely to A'nil.

Satisfied that he had proven dominant once more, A'nil released his offspring and took another bite out of the fish he held. Once he'd consumed enough to sate him for the moment, he released the remains, watching in amusement as the two younger males immediately descended upon the half-eaten fish and growled like squabbling younglings over the scraps. Soon enough, there was nothing left of the hapless fish but bones, which were quickly discarded.

D'ruc tentatively swam closer to his sire. "A'nil? What did you find?" he asked hesitantly as he settled himself on a perch that placed him somewhat lower than the older male. His sibling swam over and nestled in next to him, and they gazed up at their sire curiously.

Feeling more benevolent now that he had eaten and that his offspring had shown that they knew their place, A'nil reached out and stroked gently through their clouds of hair, the light and dark browns mixing together between his fingers. "It will work this time," he informed them confidently. "The matriarch is in heat, and there are but a few males remaining in competition for her. The chase will end soon, and then I will have my chance."
"You will challenge for her?" D'ruc asked, his bright orange tailfin waving in growing excitement.

A'nil nodded. "I will win easily. Only one male looks to be any competition. He will likely be the one I will have to challenge." He bared his teeth. "I will best him easily. He is barely scarred; I doubt he has engaged in any serious fights before." His dark eyes narrowed. "I will be alpha male of this pod! And then...it will be ours."

D'ruc chittered with excitement, his teeth clicking together happily. P'en, however, frowned slightly. "What if he comes? He could ruin everything for us."

"The other?" D'ruc asked scornfully. "We shall best him as we did before. He is but a pitiful little youngling." He looked to his sire for confirmation.

A'nil snorted. "The other is too much like his mother," he stated with disgust. "She was weak, not fit to survive. She was easy prey for the sharks. You," he gazed at his offspring almost fondly, "you two take after me with your strength and ambition. It is why we shall survive. Why we shall rule." He shook his head. "S'ke has none of my strength. The sharks will soon feed on him as well."

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B'fi giggled as she eluded her hunters once more. Heat burned through her veins, and she knew it was nearly time for the chase to draw to a close. Excitement bubbled through her, providing a burst of energy that she used to propel herself along the seabed.

They were near. A wicked thought crossed her mind, and she halted. Waiting.

It wasn't long before the three remaining mermen shot into view. B'fi watched in amusement as they halted before her, swaying slightly with the current.

Her fins spread like fans, beckoning them closer even as her spines lifted almost imperceptibly, warning them to keep their distance. She began to move, twisting and swirling in a seductive dance that kept the males captivated. She swam closer, flashing her inviting genitals at them. They surged forward at the cloud of pheromones that swirled around them, but halted as her spines lifted fully.

Once assured that they would remain in place, B'fi lowered her spines again and continued her dance. It was not quite the final mating dance that she would engage in with the dominant male, but it was close enough to drive the males out of their minds with desire. They
swayed in time to her movements, hypnotized by her tantalizing dance.

Taking advantage of their state, B'fi suddenly ceased her dance and darted swiftly away. She knew from experience that it would take the males a few moments to recover from her display and follow.

B'fi laughed merrily. She loved Courting!

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X'an made his way rapidly across the seabed. He hoped to find S'ke again, but wasn't sure where exactly to look. He'd already checked the small coral reef where they'd first met, but there was no sign of the elusive merman.

Briefly, X'an wondered if he should just stop looking. He had understood the warning implicit in the story G'ilis had told. He knew that he should be wary of Outsiders, perhaps more so than usual in this case considering the wretched condition S'ke had been in. However, it was this very condition that spurred X'an on in his search.

X'an wracked his brain trying to think where S'ke could be. He knew it would likely be somewhere the injured merman could use as both a hiding place as well as a
feeding ground. He would certainly want to be able to easily elude others, which was going to make X'an's task even harder.

After a bit more fruitless searching, X'an remembered a small cave that he'd stumbled across in his wanderings around the outskirts of the pod's borders. It was a secluded place, not easily found by those who weren't looking. X'an himself had passed it by many times before finally stumbling across the entrance. It would make a perfect place for the skittish S'ke to take refuge.

X'an quickly made his way to the spot he remembered, slipping under a small opening in the rocks that hid the entrance to the cave. He came to a halt just inside the cave, eyes softening at the sight.

S'ke lay curled on his side, gills fluttering gently as he slept. His hair swirled gently about him, caressing the pale skin of his upper body and resting lightly on his shimmering scales. He was beautiful.

X'an frowned as that thought crossed his mind. He couldn't understand why he would think of S'ke as beautiful, but there was not denying that it was so. He felt something swirl in his belly, a strange feeling that reminded him of how the other sub-males in the pod described their reactions to females that were in season.
X'an had never understood that, had only looked upon those females with a vague curiosity. He had never figured out what all the fuss was about.

But S'ke... For some odd reason, X'an wanted to curl up with S'ke and hold him close, to twine tightly with the other merman and gently touch that inviting flesh.

He didn't quite understand the way he was feeling. Maybe it was because the other male was injured and X'an felt the need to protect and comfort him. Whatever it was, X'an knew he would not be able to stay away from S'ke, even if he was an Outsider.

S'ke stirred. As he awoke, something alerted him to another's presence, and in a flurry of movement he scooted back along the far wall. He looked around, panicked.

"It's me," X'an called softly, lowering himself to the floor of the cave so as to be less intimidating. "You remember me, right?"

After a moment, S'ke relaxed a little. "X'an," he said, nodding.

X'an smiled and clacked his teeth together. Moving slowly, he drifted towards the other merman. "Are you
hungry?" he asked. "I can catch something for us to eat if you like."

S'ke shook his head. "I had an eel earlier." He finally settled back down, scratching idly at a healing cut along his flank. He twisted a bit, then reached for a handful of sand and began to burnish his scales.

"Can I help?"

After a moment of thought, S'ke nodded.

Fighting down an inexplicable burst of excitement, X'an swam over and settled himself behind S'ke. "Here, let me." He took hold of S'ke's hair and gently dragged his fingers through the tangled strands. S'ke grew very still, but when X'an did nothing more than comb though his hair he relaxed.

The two continued in silence. Once he was done with S'ke's hair, X'an got a handful of sand and joined S'ke in scouring the merman's body clean. Too soon for X'an, they were done. Feeling a bit mischievous, X'an giggled. "My turn."

S'ke blinked as the other merman moved around to lay next to him and began to scrub at his own scales. Tentatively, watching warily for any sign of retaliation, he reached out and began to help X'an. He soon realized
that X'an was enjoying his assistance, and he became more at ease with the closeness. Scooting a little closer, he rubbed at a particularly dull patch on X'an's tail.

"So, have you been doing ok?" X'an asked casually. "I mean, no one's made any trouble, right?" He eyed S'ke's broken spines and half-healed wounds in what he hoped was an unobtrusive manner.

S'ke noticed the questioning looks, but still refused to speak about how he had been injured. Instead, he offered a more recent incident. "I was out earlier. I think - I think it was near the mating grounds."

"Oh." X'an turned to look at S'ke fully. "What happened?"

"There was a female," S'ke said quietly, "all golden like the sand on Drytop when the bright light is fading." He smiled a bit sadly. "Have you been Above?"

X'an shook his head, eyes wide. "You have?" he said in awe.

"My mother used to take me when I was a youngling. There was a little place of Drytop. The sand there sparkled under the bright light, and everything was warm and soft. And when the bright light was gone, sometimes
there would be a little light above, and it made everything glow like...like brightfish."

"Like your eyes," X'an whispered, then lowered his eyes as a flood of embarrassment washed over him.

"M-my eyes?" S'ke looked at him quizzically.

X'an glanced up and nodded. "There are flecks in your eyes the same color as brightfish."

"Oh." S'ke flushed a faint pink.

There was silence for a moment before X'an asked, "Do you still go there? Above?"

"Not since my mother- there were sharks, and..." he shrugged and turned away to hide his sadness.

"I'm sorry," X'an whispered. He nuzzled against S'ke's arm, projecting sympathy and comfort. When it was obvious that S'ke would not speak again without prompting, X'an said, "It was B'fi."

S'ke finally turned to look at X'an again. "B'fi?"

"The female you saw. She's our matriarch, she's in heat now. What happened when you saw her?"
"She just looked at me for a bit, then swam away. Then the others came."

X'an sat up, concern filling him. "Others?" he asked in apprehension.

"The males," S'ke clarified. "There were four of them. One, he was bigger than the others. He..."

"R'li? You didn't challenge him, did you?" X'an's concern was growing. "He's been alpha the last few seasons, he doesn't like being challenged."

"No!" S'ke blurted out. "I wouldn't! I would never - why would I challenge him? He's huge!"

X'an shrugged. "B'fi is in season," he explained. "Lots of males go funny. So," he continued, "they just left you alone?"

S'ke's eyes darkened in memory. "Not at first. They circled around me. I think they were going to-to-to-" he paused and shuddered. "But she came back, and they all went after her again."

X'an sighed in relief. "That's good. You wouldn't have stood a chance against R'li, much less the others. Not in your condition."
With a scowl, S'ke pushed X'an away from him. "I'm not weak!" he stated firmly, arms crossed over his chest.

"I don't think that!" X'an protested. "It's just...well, look at you! You're injured, and your spines won't be fully regrown for a while. I just - I don't want you to get hurt."

Slowly, the scowl left S'ke's face and a look of curiosity took its place. "Why not?"

X'an blinked in consternation. "Well...because I like you! You're...you're my friend!"

A shy, pleased look came over S'ke, and he drifted closer to X'an. "I...I like you too," he admitted softly.

With a pleased chitter, X'an burrowed close to S'ke, fingers weaving through his hair as he nibbled affectionately at his neck.

S'ke laughed quietly. "No one's done that since my mother," he said as he sighed and allowed X'an to pull him closer.

X'an laughed as well. "I groom unexpectedly as well," he joked, "but you already knew that!"

"X'an!"
The two stiffened and broke apart at the call. They held still, each wanting to avoid detection for their own reasons. It was not to be, though. A head poked through the opening in the cave, swiftly followed by the rest of the merman.

"Hey, X'an. Who's your friend?" the intruder asked with mild curiosity.

X'an moved to block most of S'ke from view. "D'os. How did you find me?"

Not at all perturbed at not having received an answer to his question, D'os merely said, "I've known about this cave for a while. It's a good place to hide."

Peering out from behind X'an, S'ke studied the newcomer. He didn't appear to be any kind of threat. He was smaller than S'ke, although he didn't appear to be much younger. He had unusual coloring, though, blue hair and scales but with a red stripe that ran through the center of his hair and was mirrored down his tail. Perhaps most striking were his eyes, a green that put the brightest ferns to shame. Oddly enough, S'ke didn't feel at all threatened by this merman.

X'an seemed to sense this, and slowly relaxed. "What did you need, D'os?"
"W'lo and T'ar asked me to find you. Something about helping with the younglings." He nodded at S'ke. "Nice meeting you." With that, he slipped back out of the cave, leaving the other two alone.

X'an heaved a sigh. "I have to go," he told S'ke forlornly. "If I don't, D'wa will get on my case for not helping. She's beta, and if I'm in trouble with her, I'll be in trouble with B'fi after the Courting."

"I understand," S'ke said. "You...you'll come back?"

"Sharks couldn't keep me away!" X'an promised boldly. He leaned forward and nuzzled S'ke again. "Later," he said softly.

S'ke watched him go, wondering at the wrenching inside him as the male swan from the cave. He supposed he should eat something to calm the squirming feeling in his stomach.

Part Four
S'ke scratched idly at one of the healing marks across his chest. He was glad the wounds no longer pained him, but they tended to itch horribly. X'an was always gentle when grooming near them, and he would rub with just the right amount or pressure to soothe the healing skin and scales.

S'ke blinked at that thought, but shrugged and let it pass. He was not used to anyone other than his mother touching him much, and she'd been gone for a while now. X'an was much more affectionate than other mers he'd met, but for some reason it didn't bother him to be close to the other male. In fact, just the thought of him made S'ke feel all shivery. He wasn't quite sure why, but he liked the feeling.

He wondered if X'an would be back soon. An idea had been formulating in his mind, and he hoped the merman would agree to it. S'ke was looking forward to spending more time with X'an.

As if summoned by S'ke's thoughts, X'an head appeared in the cave opening. "S'ke! You're still here!" X'an happily propelled himself forward and briefly nuzzled S'ke's neck.

S'ke ducked his head, flushing a bit. "Where else would I be?" he asked softly.
"I though you might have gotten spooked by D'os and found somewhere else to stay." He idly ran his fingers through S'ke's hair, picking out a few knots that he found there.

S'ke leaned into X'an's touch, sighing in contentment. "No," he murmured, "he didn't frighten me. He's...not like the others, is he?"

"D'os?" X'an cocked his head in thought. "He's always been different. W'es, he's training to be our next Keeper, he thinks D'os will be a loner. He like to go places; you know, outside the pod. He's told me about some of the things he's seen." His eyes shone in remembrance. "Did you know there are giant fish that swim Above, and there are things on them that look kind of like us, but have two tentacles that they move around on instead of proper tails?" A look of sadness briefly passed over his face. "I don't think he'll stay with us much longer. I'll miss him."

S'ke curled his tail over X'an's, rubbing softly. They were silent for a while, content to simply hold each other and think.

After a bit, S'ke worked up his courage and put forth his idea to X'an. "X'an? I've been...that is, I was wondering...I mean..."
X'an grinned. "What?"

"Would you like to come with me to see Drytop?" he finally blurted out in a rush.

X'an's eyes widened. "Drytop?" The thought filled him with excitement. He'd never been Above before, never seen some of the things that D'os and S'ke had spoken of. He was so tempted, but...what if B'fi or D'wa found out? He could get into a lot of trouble. D'os could get away with it because he was almost an adult, and he was a bit odd anyway. But him?

Before X'an even said a word S'ke could see the refusal written on his face. His own face clouded over, and he pulled away from the other merman.

When S'ke retreated, X'an focused on his forlorn expression, and something wrenched inside of him. He couldn't bear to see S'ke like that. "I-I'd like to go," he said quickly, determinedly putting out of his mind the trouble he would be in should the excursion be discovered.

S'ke turned back in astonishment. "You would?" he practically squeaked out.

X'an beamed. "Yep. When do you want to go?"
S'ke blinked. He had hoped that X'an would agree, but now that he had S'ke found his mind strangely blank.

"S'ke?" X'an swam closer and waggled his fingers in front of S'ke. "Are you ok?"

"Hmm?" S'ke shook his head, sending his hair swirling in a cloud around him. He focused on X'an. "What?"

X'an smiled and stroked a bit of hair that floated past. "I asked when you wanted to go."

"Oh. Um, now?"

X'an darted to the cave entrance. "Well," he said, looking back over his shoulder, "what are you waiting for?"

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X'an was nervous as S'ke led him further from the pod's borders. He's never ventured this far away from home before. He edged closer to S'ke, crowding the merman. "Sorry," he whispered as he nudged S'ke a bit sharply.

S'ke smiled. "That's alright," he responded. He reached out a hand and tugged X'an closer. "Here, stay by me."
They swam for a short time, X'an staying close to S'ke, but looking around him with eager eyes. It really wasn't much different from what he was used to staying with the pod, but...it was new. He'd never seen any of this before and-

X'an stopped dead, fins waving gently to keep him in place. "S'ke? What's...that?"

S'ke swam closer, pulling X'an with him. "It's one of the fish from Above," he replied. "They usually live near Drytop, but sometimes they die out here and fall to the bottom. But look." He swam up and touched the skeleton of the giant Drytop fish. "They don't have any flesh. But there are caves inside."

X'an reached out a trembling hand and hesitantly touched the skeleton. "You've...seen one before?"

S'ke nodded. "C'or...she was my mother," he paused and glanced away briefly before continuing. "She showed one to me, and took me inside."

"Inside? What was there?"

"So many strange things. Rock that were made into shapes. More pieces of the skeleton stuff. Shiny things. Some had sparkling rocks, others had pearls. And there
were lots of bright round pebbles. Mother let me take some to play with."

"Can...can we go inside and see?"

S'ke nodded, and he and X'an slowly swam around the skeleton until they found a large hole in its side. S'ke peeked his head in first. "It's a bit dark, but not too bad. Be careful of the skeleton, though. If it's been dead for a while pieces might break off."

"I'll watch out," X'an promised.

Silently, they swam through the many caves inside the skeleton until they came to a large one. X'an stared in wonder at all the fascinating objects inside.

S'ke had been right. So many shining things. A flash of color caught his eyes, and he turned to see a scrap of something red waving in the current. He picked it up cautiously, but the flimsy thing tore apart at his touch.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

X'an nodded. He continued to explore the cave. Quite unexpectedly, he came upon something that made him jerk back in shock. His spines raised, and his teeth chittered menacingly.
"X'an? What is it?" S'ke swam up beside X'an to see what had alarmed him.

X'an quieted and stared in awe as S'ke hovered beside him...and beside the strange merman in front of him. "S'ke," he whispered, "there's two of you!"

"There's two of you, too," S'ke whispered back

Both males drifted forward, reaching out to touch their doubles. They frowned when their fingers met only a hard surface.

"Is that really me? How does it do that?" X'an asked. "How does it make more of us?"

"I...I don't know." S'ke pushed his face closer, looking at his double in fascination. After a bit of study, he pulled back. "You're prettier," he said decisively, then bashfully shook his hair out to cover his face.

X'an giggled. "You must be looking at the wrong one, then. You're definitely prettier."

S'ke just shook his head and, after one last glance at his double, swam back to the object he had been examining before.
"I wonder what it's for." X'an poked the hard surface, staring at where his finger seemingly touched that of his double.

"Don't know. But look." S'ke settled beside what looked like a square rock of the same stuff as the skeleton. With a quick movement, he lifted the top half of it up, revealing an interior filled with the round shining pebbles S'ke had spoken of.

"Wow," X'an whispered, attention distracted from his other self. He made himself comfortable next to S'ke and they began to poke through the pebbles, spilling handfuls of them across the floor of the cave as they searched for other shining things in the hollow rock.

Underneath all the pebbles were sparkling rocks linked together in long strands. Green rocks, blue rocks, red rocks, clear rocks, and rocks that reminded him of the delicate amber fish eggs he would sometime find. Black and white pearls were found made into strands as well, and little shining circles with tiny chips of the colorful rocks were discovered too. There were even circles the color of brightfish to which were attached white rocks that glinted with bits of orange and red.

"They're so pretty!" X'an exclaimed in delight. He reached for a strand of the red rocks and looped it over
S'ke's head. They settled on the merman's chest, a perfect match for his tail. X'an chose another strand that matched S'ke's eyes, and added a strand of the black pearls as well. "There. You look lovely."

S'ke grinned and ducked his head bashfully. He sifted through the strands of rocks and picked out one made of blue and green for X'an. He added one of the amber ones, with a bashful, "They match your eyes." He picked up one of the small circles, fiddling with it as he avoided X'an's gaze.

X'an smiled radiantly and picked up one of the larger circles, noticing that the ends did not quite meet. He studied it for a moment, then tried to fit his hand through. It slipped easily on, settling on his wrist. X'an squeezed it a little, and the ends pushed closer together, tightening the circle on his wrist. He smiled triumphantly.

"Here, it matches." S'ke held out the smaller circle he'd been playing with; it was set with a stone similar to those on the circle now adorning X'an's wrist.

X'an looked at the tiny circle, then at himself. Finally, he held out a hand. "I think it will fit on a finger."

S'ke nodded and pushed the circle onto X'an's smallest finger. It was too big, so he pulled it off and tried the
finger next to it. This one fit it perfectly, and X'an held his hand up, nodding in satisfaction. "Wait, you need one too." He rummaged through the pile of stones and finally found a similar set of circles, one each for S'ke's wrist and finger. But instead of a white stone with bits of color in it, these were set with black stones that seemed to have the same bits of color shimmering in their depths.

X'an gently slipped the larger circle onto S'ke's wrist and tightened it, then pushed the other circle onto his finger. "There. We match now."

A noise outside the cave startled them, and they darted to the other side of the cave, watching the entrance warily.

A familiar form drifted inside. "Never thought I'd see you here," D'os said calmly, studying X'an carefully. "Aren't you a bit far from the pod?"

"Um..." X'an darted a glance at S'ke, then looked back at D'os.

"We were going to see Drytop," S'ke explained.

D'os nodded. He glanced down, noting their adornments with a slight grin. "You'd better not let B'fi or the others see those when you go back," he told X'an. "They'll wonder where you got them."
"You won't tell, will you?" X'an blurted out.

D'os sighed and shook his head. "Just be careful. It can be dangerous Above." He nodded at S'ke. "Watch out for him."

S'ke nodded back. He wouldn't let any harm come to his friend.

D'os turned to leave, but paused to add, "If they ask, I'll tell them you needed to get away from the girls for a bit. W'lo will understand."

They watched him go, X'an heaving a sigh of relief that his little adventure would not be mentioned to the pod.

S'ke squeezed the hand he held, then looked down in surprise. He hadn't even realized that they had been clinging to each other, and from the look on X'an's face, neither had he. It was nice though, and S'ke squeezed again. "Come on," he said, "Let's go see Drytop."

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X'an eyed the glimmering surface above him with no small amount of trepidation. S'ke nudged him and gave
him an encouraging nod. Steeling himself, X'an took a deep breath and propelled himself up.

The bright light dazzled him momentarily, and when he could see again, little spots danced before his eyes. S'ke's head broke the surface beside him, and X'an flitted closer. "It's so...empty."

S'ke smiled. "Not quite." He pointed behind X'an, and the other merman twisted around.

"Wow."

Brilliant green and glistening white, just like S'ke had described. Waves crashed upon the shore, Drytop merging with the underwater realm.

"Come on." S'ke swam towards the shore, and after a moment's hesitation, X'an followed.

They soon reached the shallows, and S'ke used his arms to drag himself up onto the sand until he was completely out of the water. "X'an, come on! It's so warm and soft!"

With another deep breath, X'an followed suit. He awkwardly pulled himself towards S'ke, panting with the effort. It hadn't looked this difficult when S'ke had done it! "S'ke!" he gasped out, "It's not working! It's squeezing me!" He lowered himself to the sand, tail slapping
against the wet beach as waves curled up around his waist.

S'ke immediately dragged himself back to X'an. "Shh. I'm sorry, I forgot. It was like this the first time I tried it, too. There's no water to hold you up, so the emptiness makes you heavy. Just rest a bit, you'll feel better soon." He scooted up next to X'an and lifted his head onto his stomach. They lay there, S'ke running his fingers soothingly through X'an's wet locks of hair while the other merman struggled to get used to the sensation of being continually pressed into the ground.

After a while, X'an realized that S'ke was right. It was easier to breathe after a few moments, and the emptiness seemed to stop pushing so hard. He made a rumbling sound of contentment as he closed his eyes and concentrated on the sensations of warm sand under him, bright light heating from above, cool waves lapping up around them, and S'ke's nimble fingers petting through his hair.

"Better now?" S'ke asked after a bit.

"I...I think so," X'an replied. He lifted his head and looked up at S'ke. "Thanks."
S'ke smiled. "Hey, want to see something really neat?" At X'an's nod he shifted and began to drag himself further up the beach. X'an followed at a slower pace, but he was able to do so without much of a struggle. He paused when he saw where S'ke had led them. "It's sea grass!"

S'ke laughed. "But it's on Drytop. Here, come feel."

X'an lay himself next to S'ke and ran his hand over the cool grasses that covered this part of Drytop. A little further away, he noticed what looked like an odd kind of sea fern sprouting, and beyond that, long stalks grew from the Drytop, and sprouting from the top were what looked like more odd ferns.

It was so bizarre. Similar to the underwater realm, but at the same time, so alien. The ferns were even swaying as if being caressed by a current of the emptiness.

"Do you like it?"

"I'm not sure. It's...different."

"Good different, or bad different?"

"Good. Everything just looks so strange. Not like in the real world. How can those ferns grow so high with the emptiness pushing them down?"
S'ke shrugged. "Drytop is a funny place. I'm not sure how or why most things work here. But I like it. It's a nice place to visit." He grinned.

"It's definitely nice with you here." X'an snuggled closer and began to play with S'ke's hair. He blinked as the stones on the circles he wore seemed to catch the bright light and sparkle it back madly. "S'ke," he breathed, "look at the colors!" He held his hand out for inspection.

They both examined the stone, curious as to how the colors had gotten mixed inside and seemed to jump out at them under the bright light. Even the dark stones on S'ke's circles seemed to dance with colors. As a matter of fact, everything seemed brighter on Drytop. Their scales gleamed in the light, and their hair... X'an had never seen his hair dried out, but it too seemed to shimmer in the light. And S'ke... S'ke looked beautiful. X'an reached out and reverently placed a hand over S'ke's heart. "I'm glad you brought me to see this," he told him. "It's wonderful. It's so lovely."

S'ke swallowed and laid his hand over X'an's. "Not as lovely as you are," he whispered, blushing.

Not exactly sure what he was doing, X'an leaned closer and nuzzled S'ke's cheek. His tongue darted out, and he licked at the salty smoothness of S'ke's skin.
S'ke gasped and turned his head, and his lips pressed against X'an's.

Both males held themselves still, unsure of this. Neither knew quite what was happening. Then, X'an flicked his tongue out again and tasted S'ke's lips.

S'ke's tongue darted out to taste as well, and the two explorers met. They held still for a long moment, then S'ke opened his mouth a bit more and pressed closer.

X'an shuddered as S'ke's tongue joined his in his mouth. This was the oddest thing; he'd never seen this sort of thing before, but it felt...nice. It made a ball of heat curl up and out from his middle. Even his fingers were tingling, and he raised trembling hands to rest against S'ke's back.

S'ke wasn't quite sure what to do with his tongue now that it was inside of X'an's mouth, but then X'an sucked on it, and he moaned. The squirming feeling in his stomach returned in a rush, and when he felt X'an's arms circle around him, he lifted his own to embrace X'an in turn.

X'an was finding that he rather enjoyed S'ke's tongue. He'd never thought of sucking on a tongue before, but S'ke's was so slick and wriggly, and X'an quickly decided
that he wanted to suck on S'ke's tongue as often as possible. But as much as he was enjoying it, he thought he shouldn't hog all the fun. So he stopped sucking and, when S'ke's tongue retreated, his own followed it and pushed tentatively into S'ke's mouth.

S'ke too quickly found that he enjoyed sucking on X'an's tongue. In fact, he was enjoying it rather a lot, and the squirming in his stomach spread out and down. Something inside him seemed to blossom and open, and he jerked forward, then back. Somewhat shocked, he reluctantly pulled away from X'an's tongue, then looked down.

X'an's gaze followed his, and they both stared in surprise at S'ke's genitals, which had emerged from the slit that normally concealed them - except during times of mating.

"That's...that's never happened before," S'ke said weakly.

"Wow." X'an reached out, then hesitated. "Can I-?"

Before S'ke could answer, a flash of light lit up the sky, which had darkened unnoticed by the two merman. The light was quickly followed by a loud crashing noise that made both males flinch. The light breeze had picked up and was now whipping their hair around.
"What's happening?" X'an called to S'ke in mounting fright.

"Water! I've seen it once before!"

And he was right. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than drops of water began to fall down on them, soaking them once more. X'an spat when he realized that the water was wrong; it had no flavor, no salt. It was bland and empty as the rest of Above.

"We should go back to the sea."

As quickly as they could, the mermen made their way through the falling water and back to the refuge of the welcoming ocean.

Part Five

D'wa herded the errant youngling back into the group, watching closely until the precocious merchild was once more engaged with his peers in a game of crab-stalking. With a sigh of relief that yet another minor disaster had been averted, she swam back to the other sub-females who were helping watch over the younglings.

L'il chittered softly in amusement. "Wearing, aren't they?"
D'wa huffed and tossed her head in exasperation. "Did I ever have that kind of energy?"

"You hardly much older yourself, you know," L'il pointed out. "Surely you can keep up with them?"

"Besides," H'ar added, "at least you have some ranking that they'll respect. You should see the little hellions when it's just the rest of us watching!"

Normally, the adults of the pod kept their young close. Children generally remained with their mothers until they matured a little more, and even sires took an active part in watching and caring for their offspring.

During a Courtship, however, adults turned their attentions to other matters. Those males not vying for the attentions of the matriarch were occupied with wooing one or more of the other females in the pod. The females greatly enjoyed this extra attention, and kept the males distracted as long as possible. And since D'wa was beta, it was left to her to marshal together other sub-adults in the pod to help care for the younglings.

D'wa was thankful she only had to deal with this for a short time. The younglings were cute, granted, but they were exhausting! D'wa knew that B'fi liked to string her suitors along until the last possible moment, but she
hoped it wouldn't be too much longer now. She couldn't wait for her sibling's Courtship to finish. Things would return to normal once the matriarch had mated.

"J'yc! Come back here this instant! You know you're not supposed to play with any turtles larger than yourself!" T'ar launched herself after the youngling and pried her fingers off of the patient turtle's shell. Once his impromptu passenger had been dislodged, the turtle paddled quickly away. J'yc was ushered back to the others with a firm reprimand to behave, and T'ar settled back down next to H'ar.

A'yo surveyed the younglings in a calculating manner. With a firm nod, she announced, "I shall be having one of my own in a few cycles, I imagine."

D'wa flicked her tail in interest. "Making plans already?"

A'yo swept her hair back from her face. "It's never too early to start thinking about that sort of thing."

L'il's spines rattled gently. "I'd rather like to be courted by R'li; he's so...big!"

"Well, make sure you wait until B'fi has her chance with him! You know he always bests the others for her."
"Like I said, he's big. I'm sure there will be plenty left for me once the matriarch is through with him!"

The other females chittered gleefully. "Well, who would you want to be courted by?" L'il asked them.

"X'an," A'yo responded promptly. "He has the loveliest scales. And when he looks at me it makes me shivery all over. He still has some growing up to do, but I'm sure I can manage to turn him into a suitable mate."

T'ar ducked her head and snatched a passing crab to nibble on in order to hide her amusement.

"I wouldn't mind being courted by G'ilis," W'lo offered. "I know the Keeper doesn't participate in the courtings often, but he's just so...intense."

"I rather like W'es myself," T'ar said. "Although I wouldn't mind D'os, either. But I doubt he'll still be around by then."

D'wa nodded. "B'fi thinks he'll be leaving the pod soon. She a little upset about it, but she won't stop him if that's truly what he wants. He never really seems happy when he's here, you know."

"I heard him say once that something bigger was calling to him," H'ar told the others, "but he didn't say what."
She thought for a moment, then added, "I think I'd like E'ta. He's a bit wild, but he's got wonderful hands."

"Well, I'm not going to worry much about my courting. Besides, being beta, I might just end up with R'li, too!" Her eyes glinted with humor as she gently tagged L'il with her fin.

L'il huffed with mock annoyance. "I can't take the competition!" Her head turned sharply. "L'ar, leave that ray alone!"

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It was over.

R'li snarled triumphantly as his last competitor conceded defeat, dropping back and away, one hand clutched over the wound on his shoulder. B'fi would be his once more. Nothing stood between them now.

R'li hastily tore through the vegetation separating him from the tantalizing female. He came to a halt before her, watching her display in fascination.

B'fi could feel her blood burning inside of her. The chase had lasted long, the competition between males had
been fierce. She had enjoyed the taunting and teasing she'd put them through, but now it was finished. Now it was time to mate with the victor. It came as no surprise to her that R'li had once again bested the other males. He was, by far, the strongest, fastest and most cunning male in the pod. A fitting mate worthy of the matriarch.

And so she danced. Writhing, swaying, displaying fins and spines, fingers outlining her aroused genitals. Her pale hair swirled around her, and her eyes glittered gold to match her scales. She shone; at this moment, she was the most lovely creature in the sea, and she knew it.

Utterly captivated, R'li drifted closer. His own genitals responded to B'fi's arousal and invitation, emerging from their protective slit as he made ready to claim his prize.

A tremendous force hurtled into him from the side, and R'li instinctively bared his teeth and raised his spines. He struggled against the clawing grip, finally managing to free himself and spin around.

B'fi watched, somewhat perplexed. She had never seen this male before, but it was clear that he was challenging R'li for position as her mate. She tamped down her arousal a bit, allowing spines to settle back into place as she drifted to the seabed, content to watch.
Confused, barely able to think through his arousal, R'li attacked the impudent creature that thought to keep him from his rightfully won prize. He didn't know who the other male was; he didn't care. He would emerge victorious. He always did.

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A'nil watched as the Courting neared its end. The lone male remaining was large; he was fast; he was strong.

But A'nil had the advantage. He was not worn by an extended courtship. He was stronger and faster; he had more experience. And he had a burning lust. Not for the matriarch who was even now beginning her mating dance, although she was a captivating creature and he would have no difficulties mating with her. No, his lust was for something greater. Something that would soon be his.

But first, he had to take care of his rival. And he had to do it now.

A'nil shot from his hiding place and slammed into the other male, spines extended and claws digging into the unprotected flesh of the male's side.
From the corner of his eye he could see the young matriarch settle down to observe the challenge, but he dismissed her to concentrate fully on his opponent. The other merman was even now struggling though a haze of lust to launch an attack of his own.

A'nil had planned the encounter this way. He knew that once the mating dance had started, his opponent would be dazed with arousal and unable to fully respond to his challenge, at least right away. It was the moment of greatest weakness for a male, to be attacked when his defenses were down and he was burning with desire for that which he'd struggled to win.

A'nil took advantage of the other male's sluggish responses, knowing that it wouldn't last long. And it didn't. The two were soon engaged in a fierce battle, claws slashing, spines tearing at each other. Teeth biting and ripping.

For endless moments the two struggled against each other, blood tainting the water around them a faint pink. Scales flashed as they twined about each other, snarling in fury.

A'nil dug his claws into the merman's belly and slashed. His opponent faltered.
X'an darted through the weeds, leading S'ke back to his cave. He had greatly enjoyed their adventure Above, but he couldn't wait to get back to familiar ground. Maybe he and S'ke could do some more of that tongue sucking thing; that had been exciting.

He wondered briefly if any of the elders in the pod had tried anything like that with their tongues. He'd never seen it, but that didn't mean it didn't happen. Maybe during courting or something... But that didn't make sense. S'ke was male, and males didn't court each other.

Did they?

A hand ran teasingly up his side as S'ke surged ahead of him and into the entrance to the cave. Racing after, X'an nearly barreled right into the other merman's abruptly stillered body. He peered around S'ke.

"D'os. What happened? You look...strange."

D'os studied the two of them, eyes flickering over their new adornments. "Better take those off before you go back to the pod."
"I was going to," X'an assured him. He tugged S'ke with him as he sank down on a rock beside D'os. "What's wrong?"

"The Courtship is finished."

X'an huffed in relief. "That's great! Now things will get back to normal. R'li took longer than normal this time, B'fi must have been feeling energetic."

D'os shook his head. "R'li didn't win her."

X'an blinked. He blinked again. "Um...huh?"

"An Outsider challenged R'li for her. He was...vicious."

"Challenged?" X'an paled. "But, R'li is ok, right? He wasn't...killed?"

"He was hurt badly, but the Outsider left him alive. X'an, the Outsider has mated with B'fi. He's the new alpha male."

"I don't...how could R'li not win her? He always wins her!" His tail jerked in agitation.

S'ke had an awful feeling about this. His stomach sinking, he asked timidly, "Who won? Who is the Outsider?"
With a somber look in his eyes, D'os replied, "He called himself A'nil."

**Part Six**

D'wa glowered at the Outsider.

She didn't know what was the matter with her. The Outsider - **A'nil** had bested R'li fairly. He had legitimately won the right to mate with B'fi and become the alpha male of the pod.

And he made her skin crawl.

She glanced around at the other mers who had left off their own mating games to observe B'fi's new mate. There was a great deal of confusion, but nothing in the way of anger or distress. Such happenings were a way of life in pods. It would take a little time for everyone to get used to the change, but things would settle down fairly quickly.
D'wa turned back to find A'nil staring at her intently. She forced herself not to cringe under his bold, piercing gaze. She was beta, second only to the matriarch herself, and no male would intimidate her!

Still, she relaxed and shivered faintly when B'fi caught the Outsider's attention again and those cold eyes finally left her.

Perhaps she should speak to G'lis.

~*~*~*~*~

X'an and D'os watched, astounded, as S'ke keened sharply and backed himself against the wall of his cave, arms wrapped tightly over his chest as shudders wracked his body.

With a cry of distress, X'an flitted over and patted his hair frantically. "S'ke? What's wrong? Why are you upset?"

S'ke made no reply, only buried his head against X'an's chest and clutched at him frantically.

D'os slowly moved closer. "You know A'nil...don't you?"
After a moment, S'ke nodded. "He...he..." he gestured to the pale scars on his torso and lifted his damaged spines. "They did this to me," he said softly.

"'They'?" X'an asked. "Who's 'they'?"

~*~*~*~*~

A'nil finally managed to slip away from the hordes of curious mers...and his new mate.

He sneered at the thought. The mating itself had been pleasurable enough; there was no doubt that B'fi was a lovely creature, and the preceding fight had certainly stirred his blood. But she was not...suitable. Not for his plans.

He slipped quietly into the cave, startling its current occupants.

"A'nil!" D'ruc and P'en darted swiftly towards him. Upon seeing their sire's satisfied smile, P'en commented, "Everything is going according to plan, then?"

A'nil's eyes glinted. "The matriarch is a delicious morsel," he said lasciviously, and he ran his tongue over his sharp teeth. "It's almost a shame that I'll have to kill her. Still,
not much of a loss. The beta female is a sweet, tender thing. I will easily take her once she is matriarch. She will be much more easily controlled; she is but a youngling and will need...'guidance' when she takes her sibling's place."

D'ruc clicked his teeth in amusement. Impatiently, he asked, "Does that mean we can leave the cave now? I'm bore-"

With a snarl, A'nil cuffed the merman. "You will do as I tell you!" he hissed. "They can not know of you yet, our advantage would be lost." He settled back, ignoring the sulky look on his offspring's face. He beckoned the two closer. "Worry not, younglings. Our time is coming, and when the pod is mine, you will have your rightful place as betas." With an indulgent smile, he added, "I will even let you have your pick of the young females. I saw several delightful ones that would be suitable for you."

D'ruc and P'en grinned eagerly at each other.

~*~*~*~

S'ke tried to hang back as the trio moved into the pod's
borders, but X'an refused to loosen his grasp on the other merman's hand.

X'an looked back and gave the timid male an encouraging smile as he tugged lightly. "It'll be fine," he assured him. "G'lis is very nice, and he'll know what to do about this. He knows everything."

S'ke gave a tremulous smile in return and reluctantly allowed X'an to lead him through the bed of sea ferns and closer to their goal.

D'os glanced back at the two. He wondered about S'ke. He has a feeling that the merman had not told the complete truth about A'nil. Oh, he did not doubt that A'nil and his offspring had attacked S'ke, but there was something in the way that he had spoken that made D'os think he was hiding something.

He only hoped it was nothing that would wind up hurting them all.

~*~*~*~*~

G'lis listened to W'es and D'wa speak with growing concern. This A'nil sounded very suspicious. He did not like how the Outsider had arrived at the Courtship in
time to challenge and defeat R'li when he was at his most vulnerable. He had questioned D'wa most thoroughly, and had been assured that the tale had been told exactly as B'fi had related it to her. The young beta had also spoken to him of her more **personal** concerns about the Outsider.

While he admired B'fi, and considered her to be one of the better matriarchs he had known, he knew that, in some ways, she could be quite naive. And being Courted did not bring out her better qualities; it was during this time that she tended to be the least level-headed. D'wa, however, he had found to be very observant and shrewd, with an uncanny ability to see beyond what most others did. When her time came, G'lis knew she would be one of the greatest matriarchs ever to reign in the ocean.

And because he trusted her judgment of this A'nii, the pit of worry gnawing in his stomach grew larger.

A minute shift in the current alerted him, and he turned, spines lifting as preparing to meet a threat. Unconsciously, he moved between the young mers and whatever was approaching.

He relaxed when Do's appeared, followed closely by X'an and- His spines lifted again at the Outsider that emerged. Another one?
The three halted at G'lis' threatening stance. Warily, D'os approached. "G'lis," he said calmly, "This is X'an's friend S'ke. I think you should hear what he has to say."

G'lis studied the way that X'an had shielded the Outsider - S'ke - from him, hovering protectively in front of the smaller male and holding one hand tight in his own. After a moment, he let his spines settle, and he drifted down to recline on the seabed. As he watched, X'an too relaxed and led S'ke to a spot nearby, allowing the mer to settle before laying beside him and wrapping an arm around his waist, nuzzling his hair and speaking softly to him.

He blinked. This was an unexpected development, to say the least. Perhaps he was mistaken?

He felt the other young mers approach and settle next to him as well, W'es taking his place just beside G'lis.

W'es, too, was watching the pair. X'an was now combing his fingers through S'ke's dark hair, gently brushing across the back of his neck. S'ke visibly calmed and cuddled back against the other male. After a moment more, W'es leaned close to G'lis and murmured, "Unusual. Do you suppose...?"

"It seems likely," G'lis replied. "I had not considered such a pairing for X'an. It does not occur often."
W'es snorted softly. "With A'yo's approach towards him, perhaps it isn't as surprising as you would think."

G'lis held back a chuckle and cuffed his student lightly. "Behave," and then in a louder voice, "X'an, speak to me of your friend. He is an Outsider."

Startled out of his soothing movements, X'an looked up at G'lis, noticing for the first time that all eyes were on him. He flushed faintly, but refused to let go of S'ke. "I found S'ke a while ago," he explained. "He was hurt." He went on to speak of how they had grown closer and, with only the briefest hesitation and a guilty look on his face, told of their brief adventure Above. After telling how it had been discovered that S'ke knew A'nil, and that the other Outsider had not arrived in the area alone, he quieted.

G'lis nodded as he considered this. Then he spoke to S'ke. "Young one, you have been hurt. Not only in body, but in spirit. What is it about this A'nil and his offspring that you have not spoken of?" At S'ke's wild look, he added, "You have nothing to fear from us. But we can only help you if you tell us all you know of your attackers."

S'ke glanced at X'an, who nodded in encouragement. He had grown to trust X'an, and did not believe that the
other male would ask him to do anything that would lead him to harm. So, after a moment to compose himself, he made his confessions.

"A'nil, he-he's my...my sire."

X'an jerked almost imperceptibly, then clutched S'ke even tighter.

In an unsteady voice, S'ke related his story.

"C'or, my mother, was always thought to be rather odd. Our matriarch had always thought that she would be a loner, so they were all surprised when she and A'nil mated and I was born the next season. A'nil usually mated with one of the other females, D'la. She was D'ruc's and P'en's mother. That was the only time my mother ever mated. I didn't mind not having siblings, it was nice when it was just my mother and myself.

"A few seasons ago, my mother...there were sharks, and-
" He broke off for a moment, letting X'an's hands soothe him. Finally, he continued. "After that, I was alone. I never really knew much of our pod. Mostly, my m-mother took me out exploring on our own. I was almost like an Outsider to my own pod. I think maybe that's why..."

"No one knew at the time, but A'nil was...mad. He and D'ruc and P'en had been planning. They were going to kill the matriarch and her beta and take control of the pod." He shuddered. "No one suspected. No male had ever done such a thing. And A'nil was an elder, a trusted member of the pod. It was unthinkable.

"There was a fight, but the matriarch and her alpha were a strong match, and A'nil's plan failed. The pod banded together and forced them out. They-they didn't think I could be trusted either, because he was my sire as well. I...I was forced out as well."

X'an snarled softly, then bent and licked tenderly along S'ke's neck.

"I wandered for a while. It wasn't really that different from before. At least I knew how to fend for myself, thanks to my mother. I was managing fairly well." He took a deep breath. "Just before I met X'an, they found me.

"Apparently, A'nil was convinced that his plan had failed because someone had warned the matriarch of his intentions. When they found me and realized that I had left the pod as well, they decided that I was the one who had betrayed them. I was lucky to escape alive. I hid. I hid until my hunger was so great that I had to hunt or chance
dying from starvation." He smiled faintly and turned his head to look at X'an. "And then I met you."

D'wa had listened to the story with burgeoning horror. "We have to warn her! A'nil will kill her!"

G'lis rose. "We can not do this alone," he stated. "I am the only adult here, and am not a fighter. I could not best A'nil, even R'li could not on his own. We will need help from the others." He frowned. "It my not be easy to convince them. This sort of behavior is unprecedented."

D'wa drew himself up and flared her spines ferociously. "They will listen to me!" she snarled.

G'lis nodded. "Gather them, D'wa. Gather all that you can in the mating grounds. We will search for A'nil and the others and alert you when we have found them."

D'wa nodded and darted swiftly away.

G'lis turned to D'os. "You and I shall search for these Outsiders. W'es, remain here with X'an and S'ke."

X'an rose. "But-"

"X'an, your friend is still injured. Without his spines fully healed, it will be difficult for him to defend himself. I do not want him left alone, and W'es will be able to assist
should anything happen. D'os is more familiar with the areas around the pod boundaries than any of us and will be of most use in this hunt. I will send him to retrieve you once we have found them."

With a sigh, X'an nodded and settled back down.

"And X'an?" G'lis waited until he had the young mer's full attention. "When this is done, I believe you and I should have a talk about your choice of a mate."

X'an watched him go. "My...mate?"

**Part Seven**

A'nil swam into the cave where his offspring were waiting. "It's time," he hissed coldly.

D'ruc and P'en jerked upright and began chittering excitedly.

"Silence." He waited until they had quieted. "She is alone now," he told them. "The other adults are occupied with their own courtings, now that the matriarch is won and they've all had a chance to gawk at the Outsider." His eyes narrowed. "You remember what you are to do?"
P'en nodded. "Once you've lured her further away from the pod and distracted her, we come up from behind and attack."

"Yes. When you have her off-balance, I will deliver the killing blow. Once she is dead, the two of you will drag her body outside the boundaries to where the sharks feed. Return to the cave after that is done. When the pod realizes their matriarch is gone and we have all," he sneered, "mourned suitably, I will take the beta female as mine. With the new matriarch firmly in hand, it will not be long before I have the entire pod under my control. Then, you will join me and take your rightful places as betas of the pod."

"And we will have our choice of the other females?" D'ruc asked eagerly. "You promised."

A'nil sighed. "Yes, D'ruc. You may have your pick." He spun around and headed for the entrance for the cave. "Follow me."

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"They'll kill her," S'ke whispered, shivering. "They'll kill anyone who tries to stop them."
W'es shook his head. "You came to us in time. G'lis and the others will find them and stop them. B'fi will be fine, I promise."

X'an held on tighter to S'ke, rubbing his arms and twining their tails together. "It'll be ok," he murmured soothingly. "You don't know our Keeper. He's very protective of us all, especially B'fi. He won't let anything happen to her, even if he has to take on A'nil by himself."

S'ke's eyes widened in fear. "He can't! He said himself that he wasn't a fighter! A'nil will-

"A'nil will do nothing. He made a mistake choosing this pod to bring his madness upon. He will be dealt with." As he spoke, W'es seemed to radiate power and authority, and X'an began to see why this one had been chosen to someday take the Keeper's place.

The effect of his words was immediate; S'ke subsided, leaning back against X'an. X'an smiled and rubbed his cheek against S'ke's hair, murmuring soft words of comfort to him.

A noise in the grasses alerted the trio, and they tensed in anticipation. W'es lifted off the seabed and stretched himself to his full length, visibly bracing himself for a confrontation.
"W'es? G'lis? Have you seen—oh!" A'ya drew up abruptly, frowning in confusion. "W'es? What's going on? Are you alright? I was looking for X'an, he-X'an! There you are!"

X'an sighed and waved a hand at A'ya, still keeping a tight grip on S'ke with the other.

A'ya's eyes grew wide in surprise. "X'an, that's an Outsider! What are you doing with an Outsider? Don't you know—"

"A'ya." W'es spoke quietly, but something in his voice made A'ya's mouth snap shut, and she turned to him questioningly. "A'ya, S'ke is not the one you need to worry about. It is A'nil that is the problem here. He is planning to attack the matriarch, he and two of his offspring. They intend to kill her."

A'ya gasped in shock. "Oh no!"

"G'lis has gone to her aid, he has D'os with him. D'wa is gathering the elders to lead a counter-attack. A'ya, I need you to alert the other sub-females keeping watch over the younglings. Bring them all here; this will be the safest place for everyone. We are depending on you to make sure that none of the young ones are left in harm's way. Gather any sub-males that you can find as well."
A'ya nodded briskly, her entire demeanor reflecting her determination. She no longer appeared to be simply another giggling sub-female, but an adult ready and willing to defend her pod by any means necessary.

W'es smiled gently. "Thank you."

Without even another glance at X'an, A'ya darted off on her appointed mission.

W'es settled himself down close to the other mers. "Now, we just wait to hear from G'lis."

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"You can't be serious!"

D'wa glared at C'es. "Do I sound like I'm joking?" she snarled, her fury obvious.

"Such a thing has never been done," G'ra scoffed. "No male would dare."

"This male would. He is an Outsider, whether he won B'fi fairly or not. And he is mad. He has brought his madness into our pod, and now our matriarch is in danger. I will not let him succeed!"
The elders subsided, muttering softly to each other. They still had their doubts, but D'wa, while a sub-female, was beta. They would obey her. And if what she said was true...the Outsiders would be dealt with.

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D'os pushed himself, swimming as quickly as he was able. There was little time to spare.

He barreled into the mating grounds, nearly colliding with E'ta, who had appeared suddenly in front of him. The elder mer clutched at his shoulders, holding him in place. They were quickly surrounded by the rest of the adults.

D'wa broke through the crowd. "D'os! What news do you bring?"

"G'lis has found B'fi," he gasped out. "A'nil and two others were just arriving. He sent me for you while he remained to defend the matriarch." His eyes grew worried. "I fear for them."

"Where?"
"On the outskirts, near where the sharks feed." His message delivered, he darted away to inform W'es.

D'wa bared her teeth and flared her spines. "Come," she hissed menacingly to the elders. "We fight."

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A'nil grinned savagely. Things weren't going exactly according to plan. But, while the Keeper's aid was unexpected, he was confident that D'ruc and P'en could handle him. As for the matriarch...

B'fi snarled as a clawed hand tore across her tail, shredding one of her fins. Eyes narrowing, she darted in and struck, her spines piercing deeply into A'nil's arm. Before she could move away, though, his other arm wrapped around her torso and yanked her close. A'nil's tail twined around her own, immobilizing her in a deadly parody of a mating embrace.

"It's over," A'nil whispered as he held B'fi's wrists together behind her back with his good arm. He lifted the other, sneering at the puncture wounds as blood slowly clouded the water around them. His prey struggled, and he tightened his grasp. His eyes flashed madly, and he
brought his claws up to B'fi's belly. As he dug them in, he looked into her eyes. He wanted to see her look of defiance change to defeat when he ripped her open.

Something slammed into him from the side, and he lost his hold on B'fi. Snarling with fury, he rounded on whomever had dared to interfere.

He was given no chance to retaliate. The pod fell upon him viciously; several males grabbed his tail, slashing at his fins. Others grabbed his arms, and A'nil bellowed as he felt his spines snap off. Thrashing against his captors, he watched helplessly as D'ruc and P'en were overwhelmed as well. Hope surged as he saw D'ruc evade capture, but he hissed when the young mer didn't even spare him a glance before fleeing frantically. He raged. His plan couldn't have failed! It wasn't possible!

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"G'lis! Are you injured!"

G'lis waved E'ta off. "I am fine," he managed, although he winced a bit as E'ta's hand prodded a bruised area. He managed a weak grin. "I may not be a fighter, but those
two were positively pathetic!" His eyes grew worried. "How is B'fi?"

"I...will survive." B'fi appeared, flanked by D'wa and G'ra. One hand covered her belly, where blood still seeped out. G'lis moved forward quickly to attend to her wounds.

"One of them escaped," D'wa told E'ta. "Go with G'ra; find him. Bring him back. They will be judged together."

E'ta and G'ra nodded and swam away quickly, intent on tracking down the mer who had gotten away.

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W'lo had organized the other sub-females into a loose circle around the younglings. The sub-males hovered outside of them. No one would harm these younglings while they were guarding.

X'an stayed with S'ke, aware that the other mer was being watched with suspicion, although no outright hostility. To them, S'ke was just another Outsider. He tried not to take offense; he was aware of how on edge everyone was. D'os had arrived just a short time before with the news that the elders had been alerted and were
on their way to assist B'fi and G'lis in their fight. Now they just awaited the outcome.

Focused on W'es, who was conferring with D'os and W'lo, X'an did not notice anything amiss until S'ke stiffened beside him.

He glanced over to ask what was wrong, but his voice caught in his throat. A strange mer was staring at S'ke with an expression of fury.

"D'ruc," S'ke whispered.

At the name, X'an growled. He pushed himself in front of S'ke. "Back off!" he snarled.

D'ruc's eyes darted around, now noticing the other mers that were turning their attention towards him. They moved quickly, and he hissed in frustration as he realized that he was surrounded. His eyes narrowed, and he fixed his dark gaze on S'ke once more.

"You," he spat out. "This is your fault!" He rushed forward, intent on his vengeance.

With a roar, X'an attacked. No one would hurt S'ke, not while he lived!
S'ke was astounded at the speed and aggression which X'an displayed. He would have never imagined that the other mer was capable of this. He watched, eyes wide, as X'an evaded a wicked blow that, if it had connected, would have slashed over his genital slit. X'an retaliated with a swipe to D'ruc's face that laid open his cheek.

Then, D'ruc managed to whirl around and catch X'an across the chest with his spines. At the sight, S'ke growled and lunged forward. He would not allow this!

X'an grinned as S'ke caught D'ruc around the tail and bit down into his side. D'ruc yelped and twisted, trying to shake the mer off. Then, clawed hands were grabbing his arms and tearing into his hair, yanking him away from his opponents.

S'ke immediately swam to X'an, covering the wounds on his chest with a gentle hand. "You're hurt," he whispered, voice heavy with misery.

X'an covered the hand with one of his own. "It's only a scratch," he assured the other mer.

Still uncertain, S'ke moved their hands away and leaned in. He licked at the wounds gently, satisfied when he realized that they were indeed shallow, and had already stopped bleeding.
X'an gasped at the light tough. "S'ke," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. He buried his hands in S'ke's hair and pulled the other mer's face to his. He pressed forward, touching their lips together.

S'ke moaned, opening his mouth and allowing the slick invader entrance. He nibbled gently, then suckled. Again, he felt that strange squirming in his belly begin, and warmth suffused him. Neither of them noticed the curious looks they were receiving from the other mers.

G'ra and E'ta arrived then, halting abruptly as they saw that the one they were pursuing had already been captured. Both blinked at the image of the two submales holding each other close, mouths firmly connected.

"Well," G'ra said, chuckling. "It looks like things are under control here."

E'ta grinned, eyes sparkling as he watched S'ke and X'an continue to embrace. "It's almost a shame to intrude."

G'ra rolled his eyes and swatted E'ta softly. Still chuckling, he swam to where the young mers held the Outsider captive. "We must bring him to B'fi for judgment. Can you handle him?" The mers all nodded confidently. "Then let us go."
Part Eight

B'fi frowned. She had just heard the tale that S'ke had told of A'nil, and what he and his offspring had attempted to do in their former pod. Such behavior from any mer was completely unheard of, and these Outsiders had attempted to bring that madness to her pod! She beckoned G'lis closer and consulted with him briefly. Finally, he nodded his support, then backed away.

Turning her head to where the males of her pod were holding the other Outsiders captive, B'fi glared fiercely. She flicked her tail, moving closer, growling softly as the wound on her belly pulled. D'wa immediately swam up beside her, silently supporting the matriarch. Briefly, B'fi brushed against her in appreciation. Then she faced her attackers, spines hackled.

"Your actions here have only proven your madness," she snapped. "No rational mer would ever have attempted to do such thing. You are a danger to every mer in the sea!"
A'nil growled and tried to lunge forward, but his spines were broken and useless, and his injuries had weakened him. He was no match for the mer who guarded him.

B'fi hissed. "Your former pod Banished you for you madness," she continued, "and still you did not learn. You are a sickness. And I will not allow such sickness to remain within my pod!" Her spines lowered, and a look of sadness passed briefly over her face. "And neither can I allow your sickness to spread to other pods."

She looked to G'ra. "You and the others elder take them. Break what spines remain intact, and leave them for the sharks." Sighing, she turned away as the Outsiders protested and struggled against their captors.

D'wa rested a hand on her shoulder. "It had to be done," she said softly, knowing her sister hated having to mete out such punishment.

"I know." B'fi rested a hand over her belly, careful of her wound. "But I fear for the child I carry now. To have such madness in the sire, in his offspring...what will become of this one?"

D'wa nibbled at her neck in reassurance. "You forget, X'an's friend is also an offspring of A'nil. And he carries no madness." She glanced over at the pair, who had
continued to hold onto each other throughout the proceedings.

B’fi nodded. She had wondered at the closeness displayed between the two when she had questioned S'ke. X'an seemed extremely protective of this Outsider. Perhaps...she had heard of such pairings in other pods, but never seen one for herself. Perhaps this S'ke would not remain an Outsider. She would watch and see.

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X'an looked on in worry as judgment was pronounced upon A'nil and the others. Would S'ke share their fate as had happened in his former pod? Would he again suffer because of the madness of his sire and siblings? He turned to G'lis. "Not...I mean, what about S'ke?" X'an reached back and clutched S'ke's hand. "Will he...?"

G'lis cocked his head. "X'an, did you think more on the story of L'in as I had instructed?"

"Huh?" X'an frowned. "Isn't this more important that a story?" G'lis did not respond, but merely smiled faintly and waited. X'an huffed out a frustrated sigh. "Fine. Um...L'in and his friends were left to the sharks after they
tried to take the pod's beta female. "He scowled harder. "But S'ke wasn't like that!" he protested. "He tried to help! He warned us about...oh."

"Oh?"

X'an calmed visibly and thought hard. "L'in didn't even try to help because he thought it wouldn't do any good." He grinned. "So does that mean S'ke isn't going to get in trouble?"

"Lin's guilt was as great as that of his friends because, when he knew their actions to be wrong, he made no move to stop them. By witnessing their actions and doing nothing to help the young female, he was as responsible for what happened as those who carried out the abduction itself." G'lis swam forward and gently caressed S'ke's face. "You conquered your fear and came to speak with me; you did what you could to aid the pod. And when X'an was under attack, you came to his aid despite your own injuries. Your actions set you apart from the others. You hold no responsibility for what has happened here."

X'an let out a shout of joy as he grabbed S'ke in a tight embrace. S'ke, pink with embarrassment, wrapped his arms around X'an and hid his face against his neck.
X'an hummed contentedly. "Does that mean S'ke can stay here?" he asked after a moment. "He won't have to leave the pod, will he?"

"He may stay."

X'an turned swiftly in shock to find B'fi and D'wa had come up behind him. After a moment, he realized what she had said, and grinned. "T-Thank you!"

B'fi looked at him intently, head cocked, then turned to S'ke. She smiled. "Such an odd pairing," she said softly, before turning and allowing D'wa to help her to her resting place.

X'an blinked. "Um..." He shook his head. "G'lis? What did she mean by that?"

G'lis chuckled.

"G'lis?"

~*~*~*~*~

A'yo frowned as she watched X'an swim off with G'lis, twining himself about that other Outsider. S'ke. What was it about him that made X'an look at him the way he did? It was so very...strange.
Perhaps she would speak to the other females about this.

~*~*~*~*~

X'an blinked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, X'an."

"But...I mean...that's really possible?"

"Yes, X'an." G'lis chuckled as he watched the young mers blush and glance at each other from the corners of their eyes, even as their hands and tails gently twined together. "Why don't the two of you just...explore," he suggested. "I'm sure you'll see for yourselves."

Their blushes deepened, but the two smiled and darted off, still holding hands.

E'ta glided up next to G'lis and watched the two sub-adults swim away. "Not bad for an Outsider, hmm?"

G'lis smiled. "I do believe he'll be good for X'an. I had concerns about him following in young D'os' steps and becoming a loner, but I get the feeling that he'll be settling down nicely now."
"You could be right," E'ta agreed. He glanced at G'lis out of the corner of his eye. "I had noticed that you were not involved in any courtings this cycle."

The smile on G'lis' face twitched. "I had noticed the same of you," he replied casually.

Edging a bit closer, E'ta shrugged. "None of the females interested me. I had...other things on my mind."

"Did you now?" G'lis murmured. He shook his hair back and stretched. "W'es will be helping B'fi and D'wa for a while," he said abruptly. With a twitch of his tail, he headed back to his grotto.

Eyes glittering, E'ta followed.

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H'ar combed her fingers through her hair, tugging at each snarl. "I'm glad that B'fi will recover. From what I could see, her injuries looked severe."

D'wa nodded. "Yes, they were, but she's strong. She won't be back to full strength for a while yet, but in the meantime, she'll be keeping me pretty busy. She's worried that I won't be prepared to lead the pod should
something happen to her. After this business with A'nil, well, she wants to make sure the pod will remain strong."

"You'll be a good matriarch. You have as much strength as B'fi," T'ar told her confidently.

"I hope so. But not yet. I'm just not ready for that kind of responsibility."

"You will be. When the time comes."

D'wa shrugged, flushing slightly. Glancing over at A'yo, she grinned and deliberately changed the subject. "So, X'an and S'ke are getting along well I gather."

A'yo frowned. "It's rather odd, don't you think? After all, they are both males. I thought only dolphins did that sort of thing."

L'il snickered. "Dolphins will do any sort of thing." The others erupted into giggles as well.

Calming down a bit, T'ar managed to speak. "Well, G'lis says that it happens in many pods, and really isn't that uncommon. Besides, isn't that surprising, is it? X'an never did go strange like the other males do during courting. And no offense A'yo, but he always acted so odd around females. Like we were some sort of...of squid, and he
couldn't quite figure out why we had started talking to him."

"That's true," W'lo agreed. "I mean, I only ever saw him act even halfway normal around you, D'wa."

"That's probably because she's the beta, not just a regular female," H'ar said.

A'yo sighed heavily. "I admit though, it is a bit disappointing. I had hopes for X'an. Still, I suppose it's for the best. Can you really picturing him siring offspring?"

"Oh dear. One of him is bad enough." T'ar blushed. "I didn't mean it like that. I meant-" She covered her face and groaned as the others began to laugh.

"Besides, with the injuries R'li received from A'nil, he probably won't be able to win the matriarch again. The other males will have too much of an advantage over him. I think he'd make a suitable match for me, though." A'yo shook her hair out decisively.

D'wa grinned. "Be careful. B'fi may want to keep him anyway. He is rather handsome after all."

"Hmm. We'll see." A'yo plucked up a passing crab and crunched into it as she plotted the nuances of her first courting.
X'an playfully chased S'ke through the entrance to their cave. The two pulled up short when they found D'os already occupying it.

"Don't mind me," D'os told them. "I figured you'd be back here soon, and I just wanted to make sure I saw you before I left."

"You're leaving?" S'ke frowned. D'os was really the only other mer from X'an's pod that he'd interacted with, and he rather liked him.

"Yeah. It's time."

X'an was saddened by this announcement, but he'd always suspected it would happen. "I'll miss you," he said softly, and S'ke nodded his agreement.

"I know. Me too. But it's a big ocean out there. I need to see more of it. Something out there is calling to me."

"What?"
D'os grinned and shrugged. "Not sure. But I'll know it when I find it." He slid past them and out the cave entrance.

S'ke and X'an watched him go. "Do you think he'll find whatever he's looking for?" S'ke asked.

"You know, somehow, I think he will." He snagged S'ke by the waist and pulled him close, nuzzling at his neck.

S'ke sighed and nudged X'an's head up, pressing their lips together and nibbling his way inside to press his tongue against his mate's. After a moment, he pulled back. "Shall we try some of those things G'lis spoke of?" he asked in a playful voice.

X'an moaned and pressed himself closer, feeling the squirming sensation in his stomach build and spread. "Oh yes," he gasped out as he twined his tail around S'ke's.

The two drifted gently in their cave, hidden from the world as they gently explored these new sensations with each other.

The End