

SWEET SEASIDE

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“Jason, I’m not mad, just disappointed,” the king said to his nephew, “As heir to the throne, I expect you to automatically understand how things work.”

“That’s impossible, Uncle.” Prince Jason slouched and put one hand in the pocket of his jacket, where he kept his mother’s wedding band.

“We’re royals, we’re born with the innate ability to fully take in situations and make our own decisions about what to do from birth. I simply can’t fathom why you don’t use these noble skills.”

The prince crossed his arms. “You think I’m an imposter? That someone switched the real prince with me after I was born? I knew you didn’t love me.”

The king looked offended. “Jason, I’m hurt!”

“Whatever.” The prince turned on his heel and walked briskly out of the room.

Jason was the only eligible heir to the throne. Almost every royal in this cold, seaside kingdom had died of some type of disease. The situation had become so dire that a separate hospital wing of the castle had been reserved just for royals to protect the staff. Only six people of the royal lineage remained. Jason, prince and heir, about to turn twenty years old. Jason’s uncle Frederick, the younger royal brother, was king, and afflicted with frequent bouts of illness that had caused his health to deteriorate over the past decade, and most people were convinced that he wouldn’t last another decade. He was barely able to get out of bed in the morning these days. Jason’s father, Alexander, the elder brother, was unfit to rule due to brain damage. Jason’s three princess cousins were all under the age of twelve, way too young to rule. That was it. Only them.

Their miserable and dying dynasty had been allegedly cursed generations ago by a vengeful wizard whom they refused to be a patron kingdom to because he was a silver-tongued criminal who failed to fool them with his antics. Nobody wanted to marry into the seaside kingdom’s royal family anymore because they

feared the perpetual bad luck spreading to them.

The wizard's curse went like this:

*"As punishment for the royal family's scorn and for their spite,
My strongest spell, like a serpent, will sharply bite.
Fever will burn like fire, but the flames of life will be snuffed out,
And as if this were not enough, these plagues will spread
throughout.*

*Until the stubborn cowardice of these arrogant kin,
Change their ways which spawn such poison within,
All who are wed upon the soil to the blood of the Seaside,
Will find that they are condemned to death's dark tide."*

The wizard had never been seen again since he'd cast the spell, but the following generations had suffered greatly without any hope that the curse could be broken. Jason knew from a young age that his days were numbered.

Jason didn't want to rule. He wanted to be an architect. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to marry someone and bring them bad luck. The monarchy could go right to whale shit in his opinion. He just didn't want to lose his remaining relatives, even though they didn't get along with each other.

Jason exited the castle and made his way down the rocky slope to his favorite secret cove where nobody could bother him. He was sulking, but he knew the fresh sea air would calm him down a little. Staring at the sand below him, he headed toward his favorite rock so he could sit and gaze sullenly at the waves on this gray, misty morning. Jason waded into the lapping water. He looked up from his feet, saw the rock, and nearly jumped out of his clothes.

A merman was sprawled out on the rock. His eyes were closed, his forehead was sweating profusely, and he was barely breathing. His emerald-green tail had scales missing and his shredded fins lilted weakly in the wind. His skin was covered in bruises and bleeding cuts that stained the rock he lay on. His long dark hair was a disheveled mess with pieces of seaweed stuck in it. Based on his human half's appearance, Jason guessed he was about his age.

Jason was absolutely baffled. He'd heard of merfolk in fairy tales but had never seen or heard of them truly existing. How did this one end up on these shores? And what had he been through?

Jason climbed up on the rock and gently poked the merman's arm. The merman's eyes slowly opened. Their eyes met. Fear flashed across the merman's face. He choked out something frantically in a foreign language and tried to get up, but he was too weak to move. He let out a moan of pain.

"It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you!" Jason tried to assure him, putting a gentle hand on the stranger's shoulder. The merman stopped struggling.

Jason pointed to the water. The merman shook his head violently. Jason pondered this. They couldn't communicate apart from body language. The merman clearly needed medical attention and, for some reason, didn't want to return to the ocean, his main life source.

"Well," Jason said to himself, "I can't leave him to die."

Jason pointed to the merman, then to himself, then to the castle. The merman seemed to understand. Jason carefully lifted him up into his arms and carried him toward the castle. The merman clung to him, shivering, terrified of the unknown but relieved to be away from the rock. Jason could feel the pounding of the merman's heart, just as loud and frightened as his own heartbeat.

"Uncle!" He yelled as he entered the castle with the merman in his arms, "I found an injured fish boy on the beach!"

An hour later, the royals congregated in the hospital wing of the castle. The merman was stretched out on a bed of seaweed in the biggest glass tank they could find on short notice, which was more like a glass coffin than anything else, minus the lid, of course. There was no room to swim. A doctor stitched up his torn fins. Jason stood by the tank with his arms crossed. He felt responsible for the merman's protection and didn't want anybody besides the doctors to touch him. The merman looked calmer after seeing that the humans posed no threat to him, but he clearly sensed the negative energy in the room.

King Frederick stood opposite Jason, nervously wringing his hands. His three daughters, huddled around him, gazed in wonder at the merman in the glass tank. Jason's dad, Prince Alexander, wrapped in thick furs, stared blankly at the floor. Since the near-fatal fever had boiled his brain, he mostly talked in one-word sentences, if at all. He suffered extreme memory loss, barely

recognized those around him, and always needed someone with him to guide him through his daily needs. He walked with a limp, suffered frequent nightmares, and was prone to seizures. He hadn't smiled since the frightful fever had broken.

King Frederick took a breath, trying to keep his voice steady. "You found him, Jason?"

"Yes, Uncle."

The king's eye twitched. "You can't communicate? You don't know where he's from?"

"No, Uncle."

"You haven't been secretly talking to merfolk for years? I mean, it's okay if you have, I'm just trying to understand the situation."

"No, Uncle, he's the only merperson I've ever seen in real life."

"You don't know what caused his lacerations?"

"Ask the doctor, Uncle."

"Dr. Pamela, what do you think caused his lacerations?"

Dr. Pamela looked up from her work, annoyed at the distraction, "Probably got caught up in that violent storm last night, got smashed against rocks or other sharp debris. Fins are quite delicate and sensitive. However, this slash here on the chest is clean and deep, likely a knife wound. Hard to be sure, though."

"That makes sense," Jason responded. "He made it clear that he didn't want to return to the water. Maybe he was trying to escape something else entirely."

Frederick sighed. "Jason, what do you expect me to do about this?"

"Help me. You know, help me to help him?"

"How do you expect me to help you to help him?"

"Get some excavations under way! We need a bigger pool so this poor merman can swim after he recovers. I'll design the interior and you can find people to dig the hole."

"We have enough problems without having to worry about a fish boy of unknown origins! Repairing damages from the storm in the homes farther down the coast! Trying to figure out how to break this curse! Planning your coronation as King of the Seaside!"

"Water," Jason's father mumbled softly.

Frederick sighed. "Yes, brother, I know that."

"Daddy, please don't send the fish boy away!" Luna, the youngest princess, begged.

"Exactly," Jason agreed, "We can't just force him back into the sea if he doesn't feel safe. Surely, we can spare just a little more kindness. All we do in our spare time is sit in silence waiting for the next disease-related death. Each funeral becomes less expensive because less people attend, and nobody associates with us because we're cursed. Well, except for trade, because the goods we sell aren't cursed, but anyway, the people just do their own thing and don't bother us at all. Our crime rate is non-existent because we pay everyone a living wage. They're also not cursed, so they're thriving as long as they have leadership. There's literally nothing happening in this kingdom these days. We can set aside time for one marooned merman. Girls, you agree, right? You want the fish boy to stay?"

"Yes, please, please, please!"

The king gritted his teeth. "Fine. We'll work together to get the pool put together. He can stay until he's fully healed, but then he must go home, like it or not. This is no place for a merman who has nothing to do with us. He's better off in the ocean away from complicated human matters in general. He's been through enough and we don't want to cause him any trouble with our issues."

"Fine," Jason scowled, "I know I'm not your ideal heir, Uncle, but I'm trying to help someone."

"Jason! Firstly, we can barely help ourselves, and secondly..."

"Good talk, thank you!" Jason turned to leave, but the merman splashed frantically in the tank.

"Whoa, easy!" Dr. Pamela exclaimed. The merman looked at Jason with a pleading expression.

Dr. Pamela frowned. "Prince Jason, it looks like he's only comfortable if you're in here with him. The rest of you, get out. Prince, stay. Doctor's orders."

"Yes, Dr. Pamela," said the king, "Brother, come, let's get you something to drink."

"Sad," Alexander murmured glumly.

The king guided his brother out. The girls followed, whispering to each other excitedly. Dr. Pamela sewed the last stitch. "I better do some research on merfolk to get a better idea

of what he needs are and what kind of conditions he came from. Since most information is rooted in legend due to extremely limited contact between merfolk and humans, this might take a while. Keep him company, please.”

She left, leaving Jason alone with the merman. They regarded each other.

“I wish I could understand you,” Jason told him, “I bet you have some interesting things to say.”

The merman spoke in his own language. His tone made it sound like he was reflecting on his situation and trying to reach out. Jason hoped so. He didn’t really have any friends.

“I’d love to know your name,” Jason remarked. He pointed to himself. “Jason.”

“Jason?” the merman echoed. He said a word in his language, pointing at himself. His name, Jason guessed, but the word was formed in a way his mouth wasn’t familiar with.

Jason tilted his head, confused. The merman understood. He scanned the room and pointed to a map on the wall. Jason walked to the map and gingerly touched it. The merman motioned for him to go outward, past the castle, past the beach, and finally, past the shallows. Jason did so and stopped. The merman nodded and repeated the word.

“Reef,” said Jason, “We call this type of place a reef.”

The merman nodded. “Reef,” he repeated, pointing to himself again. His voice was low and sweet, conjuring the mental image of strong river reeds.

“So that’s your name in my language. Cool.” Jason gestured at the map again, in the same place. “Is that your home?”

Reef seemed to understand because he nodded again and made a face of discomfort.

Jason sat down beside him. “I’m sorry things aren’t right in your home, Reef. It must’ve been terrible, what you endured, and to be washed up in a strange place with no one...”

Reef sighed and stared forlornly at his tail. He could barely sit up, so his head was propped up just above the waterline. He curled up his tail and rubbed his fins.

“I’m not happy in my life, either. It really is a shame that you had to wash up on shores this dismal. Things really aren’t good over here.”

Reef was looking at him again, listening intently. He seemed to notice Jason's sorrowful tone. He had a light in his eyes, intelligent and kind. It was nice to have a companion.

"My family is small. So much death. Mom died when I was little. Dad got so sick that it damaged his brain. He doesn't recognize me now. My cousins don't get to have fun and just be kids."

Reef said something sympathetic sounding. He tried to reach up with one of his arms, but he winced and stopped moving it. It was thickly bandaged and fractured, with an infected wound.

Jason continued. "My uncle is Dad's main caregiver. He's stressed because he's a full-time father, uncle, brother, caregiver, and king. He puts so much pressure on me because I'm the heir and I constantly disappoint him because I'm unmotivated. We don't see eye to eye on enough things to get along with each other."

Reef asked a question. He pointed to a painting on the wall. A family portrait showing Jason as a depressed teenager. Jason went over to it and pointed to his image. "Prince. I'm the prince of this land." He pointed to the map for good measure.

"Prince Jason," Reef responded.

Jason felt more comfortable discussing his problems. Reef was such a good listener. "We're all unhappy. Nobody likes us because we're bad luck. I know it's not my fault. I can't control it. I also don't know what to do about it. I feel bad, like I've let my family and kingdom down just for existing."

Reef spoke. His tone was quite validating. He slowly, deliberately blinked his eyes at Jason, his face just as sad, as if communicating empathy.

"Thank you for listening," Jason said to Reef, giving him a strained half smile. Reef copied the gesture and nodded, speaking in his merfolk language.

Dr. Pamela returned. "Prince, your cousins need you. I'll take care of him, don't worry."

Jason didn't want to stop talking to Reef, but he wasn't one to argue with a doctor. "Okay, Dr. Pamela, thank you. I'll come see you again soon, Reef, okay?" He patted Reef on the shoulder reassuringly, then waved to him. Reef looked disappointed but understood. He waved back, and Jason left the room.

Within a week, a pool had been filled in the courtyard. Now Reef was strong enough to swim around while the rest of his body healed. Jason carried him to the pool himself and dropped him in with a big splash. Reef seemed happier with more space. During the time leading up to that change of venue, Jason had spent as much time as possible talking with Reef, whose company he found comforting. They gradually began to learn more of one another's languages, speaking in small sentences to one another. It happened quickly as both were quite enthusiastic. Jason found himself feeling calmer and more upbeat around Reef.

Reef seemed happier around him too. He'd grown accustomed to his new surroundings and was more willing to let people besides Jason and Dr. Pamela come near him, starting with the three little princesses who absolutely adored him. They would come by the pool and swim with him, splashing and playing. They would play tag and Reef would always catch them, being the fastest and strongest swimmer, but they didn't mind. The castle just seemed to enter a mildly enjoyable routine where people would pass through the courtyard and happily greet Jason and the friendly merman.

One day during this time, something extra special happened. Dr. Pamela guided Alexander out to the courtyard for fresh air and had a servant bring a chair for him to sit on near Reef's pool. She then went off to check on her medical supply inventory.

Jason looked sadly at his dad, who started blankly off into space. "Dad?"

No response. Jason didn't expect one.

Reef studied the king's brother intently. "Talk to him," Reef said to Jason.

"He doesn't," Jason said.

"Again, talk to him," Reef encouraged him.

Jason tried again, taking his father's hand. "Dad, I have something to tell you. Reef is my friend. The first and best friend I've ever had. I just thought you'd like to know that."

"Friend?" Alexander asked, looking up at his son.

"Yes," Jason responded, gesturing at Reef, "He's a good friend."

Reef smiled, then did something surprising. He lifted his tail from the water and smacked it down, causing a huge splash. Water sprayed all over Jason and his dad, startling them both.

Jason laughed for the first time in years. The feeling, the raw sensation of it was thrilling and euphoric. He glanced at his dad's shocked face and smiled lovingly at him. Alexander started laughing too. He smiled for the first time in years. He seemed more awake, more alive, more joyful than Jason had ever seen him, even before the near-fatal fever had stolen his sanity. It was the most amazing feeling Jason had ever experienced, laughing hysterically with his new friend and his father.

After several minutes of this, something like clarity seemed to shine across his father's weary, lined face. His father started crying.

Reef looked mortified. "My fault?" He asked in an apologetic tone, pointing to his tail fins.

"No, no, you're fine, Reef!" Jason spoke quickly, kneeling beside his father, who looked him dead in the eye.

"S-s-son?" He stuttered, more tears rolling down his face, still heavily scarred from old lesions.

Jason gasped. "Yes, Dad, it's me, your son! It's Jason."

Alexander stretched out his arms, still crying. "Jason. Jason."

Jason threw his arms around his father and held him tightly. "I missed you so much, Dad," he sobbed in his dad's furs.

After their hug, Alexander pointed at Reef. "Friend?"

"Yes, come meet him." Jason brought his father closer to the edge of the pool. Reef swam over and held his hand out to the frail man. He reciprocated. The two stayed like that for a moment, touching palms like that.

Reef smiled at Alexander and pointed at Jason. "I like him," he told Jason's dad.

Jason blushed. He liked Reef too. Quite a lot.

Reef pointed to Alexander with his other hand. "Kind man," he said, "Very kind man. He knows you, Jason. He loves you."

"Thank you, Reef," Jason wrapped one arm around his dad and held out his other palm to Reef. Reef touched his other palm to Jason's palm.

Jason smiled at his dad. "I love you, Dad."

His dad smiled back at him. “Happy,” he answered.

After that heartwarming experience between the three, Jason insisted that his dad hang out with him and Reef whenever he could. It was the closest he’d felt to him since the illness had spiraled out of control. Soon, Jason was just spending more quality time with his dad in general. He no longer saw his dad’s memory problems as a barrier between them. He took his dad on walks and even encouraged him to dip his feet into Reef’s pool and wade around in the shallow portion of it. His father’s physical health also seemed to improve. He was faster, more vital, more mobile. When King Frederick noticed his brother’s improvement, he just had to know how this miracle had come about.

“Brother, what’s gotten into you? Are you healing? After all this time?” He gazed in wonder at his brother, who took both his hands and squeezed them.

“Brother, I’m happy,” he spoke softly.

The king was shocked. “Jason?” He called.

“Yes, Uncle?” Jason was in the pool swimming with Reef.

“Do you know what’s going on with your father? I haven’t seen him anywhere close to this since before his fever. I want to know what you’re doing because it’s working.”

“It was Reef!” Jason answered enthusiastically, “He made Dad laugh.”

The merman shook his head and put his arm around Jason. “Both of us!”

Frederick was spellbound. “And is Reef the reason why my daughters are so cheerful lately?”

“Well, yeah!” Jason answered.

“Jason, we need to talk!”

In the king’s study, Frederick told Jason something he needed to focus on.

“As you know, young man, your twentieth birthday is coming up, and so is your coronation.”

Jason scowled. “I know, Uncle, and you know exactly how I feel about that.”

“I do, but I’m not going to be around forever. Us royals don’t live that long, you know, and I really want you to focus and prepare yourself for taking care of this kingdom.”

“You want Reef to go back into the ocean, don’t you?” Jason said in an accusatory tone. “You think he’s a distraction from my royal duties.”

“I just want you to remember the serious stuff going on. The kingdom needs your full attention.”

“I actually focus better when Reef’s around, Uncle,” Jason responded.

“Then why haven’t you turned in any of the reports that I asked you to go through?”

“Because I already did them, sorted them, and sent them out all by myself.”

“What? Without telling me?”

“I’m an adult, Uncle, I can be independent.”

“If you’re so confident, then why don’t you want to be king?”

“I just don’t, okay! I can’t be king, Uncle!”

“Why can’t you be king?”

“I’m going to help Dr. Pamela.” Jason stormed out of the study.

The prince was riddled with intense anxiety and drowning in guilt. Too many things were weighing on his brain. The upcoming kingship, his father’s health, his uncle’s health, the fate of the kingdom if they ended up with no leaders to protect them... Jason’s pace quickened until he was running through the halls toward the hospital wing. When he got there, Dr. Pamela was reading medical books.

“Dr. Pamela?”

The doctor looked up. “Yes?”

“Can I do anything to help you? I need to do something, anything!”

Dr. Pamela looked taken aback by his desperate tone. Usually, Jason was calm when he came to help her out.

“Oh! Um, you could go into that cabinet over there and count the rolls of bandages for me.”

“I’m on it!”

As Jason’s hands flew throughout the cabinet, counting roll after roll of bandages, trying to calm the negative voices in his head, he heard the running of six little feet.

“Cousin Jason?”

He turned to see his three cousins framed in the doorway. The oldest one, eleven-year-old Marie, was the one who had spoken.

“What is it, Marie?”

“We saw you running down the hall a minute ago. You looked upset. What happened?”

“Nothing!”

Marie put her hands on her hips. “Did you have a fight with Daddy?”

“We didn’t fight, Marie, we had a grown-up discussion. When you become queen, which is probably going to happen sooner than you think, you’ll understand what I mean.”

Marie went pale. “Queen? No, you better stay alive, Jason! What are we going to do without you? What did you talk about with our Daddy? Are you sick?”

Her words tugged on Jason’s heartstrings. His voice softened. “No, I’m not sick, Marie.”

“He will be, though, if he marries Reef,” commented the middle daughter, nine-year-old Eliza, “Is that what you talked about?”

Jason’s heart skipped a beat. “No, we didn’t talk about that, we talked about the coronation.”

Eliza frowned. “Okay, but what happens after the coronation? You do know that you can’t marry Reef, right? With the curse and all.”

Marie gaped at Eliza. “Eliza! How could you say that to him?”

“It’s true,” Eliza insisted, “Jason, I hate to say this, but Reef’s the best thing that’s happened to us in a while and if you marry him, then you’ll kill him, and you know it.”

Jason dropped the bandages he’d been holding. He knew that Eliza was right, but, for some reason, he had hoped that maybe for once in his life...

The youngest princess, seven-year-old Luna, burst into tears and tugged on Marie’s hand.

“No! No! I don’t want the fish boy to die! No! Please!”

Dr. Pamela looked appalled. “Princess Eliza! You’ve made your sister cry!”

Eliza scowled. “Jason, listen to me! It’s not just about Reef, it’s about you too! You could get sick and die too, just like your

mama! And *our* mama! We don't want to lose the closest person we have to a brother! Please don't give the curse anymore chances to destroy our family. You *can't* get married, and if you do, you'll be putting us in danger, and that's selfish!"

Marie looked like she wanted to strangle Eliza. "Why are you doing this? It's not his fault that we're cursed! It's not Reef's fault that we're cursed! Refusing to marry doesn't even break the curse, it just delays it! What about our Mama, Eliza? Are saying she shouldn't have married Daddy just because she was unlucky? Are you saying they were wrong for falling in love? Do you hate our Daddy for loving our Mama?"

Eliza gasped, shocked at the accusation. "No, that's not what I meant at all!"

Marie, sobbing, grabbed the still wailing Luna and ran out of the room, crying for their father. Eliza ran after them, apologizing profusely.

Jason's heart was splitting apart in his chest. "We have thirty rolls of bandages, Dr. Pamela."

He ran from the hospital wing, crying, with Dr. Pamela yelling after him, "Prince Jason, wait! Do you need to talk?"

Jason ran right to the courtyard, where Reef was waiting for him. Reef looked horrified to see Jason so upset.

Jason jumped into the pool and frantically paddled toward Reef, tears rolling down his face and clouding his vision. He felt Reef grab his hand and pull him into a comforting embrace. Jason wrapped his arms around the merman and held him tight, afraid of what would happen if he let go but at the same time feeling like it was wrong for him to be there.

"Jason." Reef spoke softly, tenderly stroking Jason's hair. He wanted to know what was wrong with the kind prince and would do anything to see him smile again. Reef saw something special in Jason, and he wished he knew exactly how to express how Jason made him feel.

Jason sniffled and gently rubbed Reef's back, not sure who he was trying to comfort more, Reef or himself.

"It's all my fault!" He sobbed.

"No," Reef whispered into his ear, "Not your fault."

He pulled Jason even closer than before, as if hoping to keep him anchored to reality. Jason's heart sang whenever Reef showed

him such compassion, whenever he felt Reef's touch, or gazed into his eyes.

That didn't stop Eliza's words from pounding into his skull and filling him with fear, though.

Jason, eyes brimming with more tears, buried his face in Reef's shoulder. "Oh, Reef, I just don't want to lose you!"

King Frederick was at a loss. His daughters and brother had been generally happier lately, but he still couldn't see eye to eye with Jason. This upset him because he loved his nephew, had faith in him, and depended on him because his energy for ruling was diminishing. He just couldn't get through to him and didn't know why.

Then a thought occurred to him. Everyone in the castle had benefited from Reef living in the courtyard. His daughters were enjoying childhood now. His brother was healing, at least a little bit. And Jason seemed to benefit most of all. He was smiling, laughing, and more focused. He was talented at his royal duties. The only absence was motivation to be king or even approach the topic of doing so. If Reef helped Jason bond with his dad, then maybe he could help Frederick bond with Jason.

"If Reef helps me bond with Jason, he can stay forever," Frederick decided.

Later that evening, the king waited until everyone else was asleep. Then he went out to the courtyard and saw that Reef was still awake. He was lying on his stomach in the shallows of the pool, chin on his palm, holding himself up by his elbows and gazing dreamily at the stars.

"Jason," the merman murmured softly to himself, "Sweet, beautiful Jason."

"Reef?" Frederick called.

Reef snapped to attention. "Sir?"

"Reef, I need to talk to you about Jason."

Reef looked concerned. "Jason? Is he alright?"

"Yes, he's fine, but I'm not. Jason will be king, but he doesn't want to. When I mention the kingship, he gets upset, says something snarky, and leaves. Am I too tough on him?"

Reef was silent, comprehending that information. Reef was a quick learner, but still not fluent in the humans' language. Frederick hoped he got the gist of it, if not every word.

"Scared of being king." Reef declared.

"But why? He does so well."

Reef shook his head. "Worried about the kingdom, about sickness. Jason says this to me."

"About dying young, leaving the kingdom without an heir? Spreading disease all over the kingdom and beyond?"

Reef didn't understand every word of those questions, but he nodded anyway. "Scared of death. Scared he can't help."

"That he'll fail the kingdom?"

"Yes."

"That he'll fail me? That he's not good enough?"

"He is good enough. For me," Reef said insistently, "Worth dying for."

Frederick raised his eyebrows. Reef knew about the curse, then. Jason must've told him.

"But he doesn't think he's good enough?"

"No."

"Do you think I made him feel inadequate?" The king asked guiltily. "I never meant to do that. I'm just as scared as he is. We all need him. Really badly."

Reef nodded. "Yes, he saved me. And you are scared. You care about Jason."

"I really think he has potential as king. I believe in him more than anyone, apart from you."

Reef nodded. "Good king, good man, good Jason."

Frederick smiled. "Our good Jason."

Reef blushed under the moonlight. "Yes. Our good Jason."

"So how can I tell him that I believe in him? That we're in this together? That I'm just trying to help him? I want him to feel good enough. Confident."

Reef pointed up toward the tower where Jason's bedroom was. "Talk to him."

"He doesn't listen."

"Talk to him. He needs you."

"He needs you, too. Maybe you should talk to him instead."

Reef shook his head. He smiled at Frederick and gestured to the tower again.

Frederick sighed. "Thank you, Reef."

He turned to leave but paused. "Reef, why don't you want to go home?"

Reef looked uncomfortable. "Jason is home to me now."

"But what about the ocean?"

Reef pointed to the scar that Dr. Pamela had thought was a knife wound. "Family did this."

The King gasped. Who would hurt such a kind, compassionate soul like Reef? "Reef...I...I had no idea. Oh, I'm so sorry that happened to you!"

Reef nodded sadly. "They hate me. Find me. Scare me. Hurt me. Human family loves me."

It made sense to Frederick now. Reef was afraid of the ocean because it reminded him of his horror-filled home life. No wonder he wanted to stay here. Jason was the first one to ever show him any kind of love. Well, he had to stay now. This merman had changed the royal family forever and for the better. Everyone had more hope now because of his optimism and deep faith in them. Sending him back just wasn't right.

"You can stay, Reef. You're safe here. Please, stay here with Jason. I know you love Jason."

Reef sighed dreamily and nodded. "I do."

The king smiled in agreement. "He's a good one. I'll talk to him again."

Jason was in his room reading when his uncle knocked at the door.

"Jason? May I talk to you please? I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize?" Jason was surprised. He opened the door. "For what?"

"If I've sounded like I've been putting pressure on you, I'm sorry," Frederick explained. "I'm just as scared and uncertain about the future as you are, so I want you to be prepared for anything."

Jason blinked.

"You're the best chance we have at a brighter future, Jason. I believe in your skills, your talents, your potential, and I just want you to know that you are doing very well and you're the only one I can see saving the kingdom from collapsing one day."

“Really?” Jason exhaled. “Well, um, I just...I don’t know how to fix every problem. Not yet anyway, and I’m afraid of failing the kingdom somehow. Failing the family. I’ve been shutting you out because all I can hear is my anxiety about the kingship telling me I’m not worthy and avoiding the topic is my way of telling you before the coronation and before you can tell me after my half-baked plans fall through.” He paused and pondered his own words. “I’m sorry too, Uncle. I should’ve reached out about my exact inner struggles more. It would’ve made all our kingship lessons much less stressful.”

“It’s alright, my boy, no need to apologize!” The king put his arm around his nephew.

Jason smiled. “Back at you.” After a moment, he added. “How do you know I’ll be a good king?”

“You’re kind. You’re caring. You stand by your noble decisions.” Frederick answered. “I can tell by the way you rescued that equally kind merman from a hostile environment and how kind you’ve been to my daughters. They look up to you, Jason. They’ve told me themselves. You’ve helped Dr. Pamela, written those reports efficiently and taken initiative. And the way you’ve supported your father and worked so hard to get him well. It all touches my heart.”

“Reef did a lot of that, though.”

“He did, yes, and so did you. You had someone as kind and giving as you to do it all with. Reef is good for you, Jason. He brings out the best in you. The best that’s been there all along.”

Jason was utterly taken aback. Why hadn’t they opened up to each other like this years ago?

“And I know you want to be an architect, too.”

“I do, Uncle.”

“Being a king and an architect simultaneously is perfectly viable. You can design a stronger kingdom with better infrastructure and sanitation to curb disease. You can design underground and underwater passages that allow merfolk to come and go as they please. Reef can’t possibly live in that cramped pool forever.”

Jason hugged his uncle. “Thank you, Uncle! Wow, an amphibious waterfall sounds amazing.”

“We’re in this together, my boy. You, me, your dad, your cousins, Dr. Pamela, and Reef.”

“So he can stay?” Jason perked up, eyes aglow, realizing the meaning of his uncle’s statement about architecture. “As part of the family? Forever?”

“Of course! That’s what he wants, and I want that too. Everyone is happier with him around, especially you. And I know he loves you, Jason. You can see it in his eyes.”

Jason blushed.

“Do you love him, Jason?”

The moonlight shining through the window made Jason’s eyes sparkle. “I do.”

“That’s wonderful! Why don’t you go ahead and tell him?”

Jason looked conflicted. “But what about the curse? I don’t want him to die.”

Frederick spoke steadily. “I understand, my boy. I don’t know what this old curse will do, but I do know that my wife knew the risks, and so did your mother. They both knew the risks, but they married me and your father anyway because they didn’t see the curse as a reason to give up on true love. I believe Reef follows the same logic.”

Jason looked out the window at the stars, took a deep breath, and sighed. “Okay.” He stood up, shoulders straight with determination. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his mother’s wedding band. He looked at it, suddenly able to imagine himself using it for its intended purpose. He hugged his uncle again and exited his room.

Frederick walked to the window and gazed at the stars, feeling happier than he’d been in years. He felt at peace, complete, with genuine hope that things could get better someday.

As Jason made his way down the stairs, he passed Dr. Pamela.

She winked at him. “Are you going where I think you’re going, Prince Jason?”

Jason laughed. “Of course.”

Dr. Pamela looked pleased with herself. “I was just looking for you. I found a bunch of dusty old books full of speculative tales on merpeople, you know, because so little is known for sure about them, and they all seem to agree on one important thing.”

Jason tilted his head to one side. "And what is that?"
 "That they bring good luck."

Jason gasped. "You mean...Reef could...could he?"

Dr. Pamela nodded. "It got me thinking about the exact wording of that wizard's spell:

*Until the stubborn cowardice of these arrogant kin,
 Change their ways which spawn such poison within,
 All who are wed upon the soil to the blood of the Seaside,
 Will find that they are condemned to death's dark tide.*

It means making changes to how we live our lives and figuring out how to take care of each other more effectively. Plus, if you're marrying Reef, who is from the ocean, and you do that in the water instead of on the land of this seaside, then the curse should break as soon as you exchange vows."

Jason had never been so delightfully shocked in his life. "Reef can break the curse?"

Dr. Pamela laughed good-naturedly. "I think the accurate statement is that you and Reef can break the curse together."

Jason, with butterflyfish in his stomach, walked down to the courtyard. Reef was still awake, swimming around.

"Reef?"

Reef looked delighted to see him. And a little flustered.

"Jason?"

"Reef, I want to tell you something."

Reef swam closer to the shallows, where Jason now sat. "Say it."

Jason took a deep breath. "Reef, I love you."

Reef inhaled sharply, his eyes wide with elation.

"And I love you, Jason."

Jason felt as if the sun was rising from the center of his heart. He held out his arms to Reef. Reef scooped him up, arms strong and warm. Jason took in a gulp of air and Reef dove to the bottom of the pool with him. There was just enough moon and starlight filtering through the water for them to see each other. Reef wrapped his flexible tail around Jason's legs. Jason and Reef wrapped their arms around each other and shared their first kiss. Both felt at peace. Both were happy. Both felt complete. Both were right where they needed to be, and that was home, and home was where the other one was. And with newfound hope for a better future, they both knew it would be this way forever.