From Under the Sea

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From Under the Sea

by FallLover

Summary

Decades ago, General Seth - known as the God of War amongst the merfolk - was taken prisoner by his friend, Sea King Osiris. With some help, Seth tricks Osiris into killing himself and breaks free of Osiris' prison, but flees into the arms of a stranger on the surface. Will Seth escape captivity for good?

Notes

This was originally published on Archive of Our Own for MerMay 2023.

The fanfic title is based on the song from "The Little Mermaid" (1989).

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seth couldn't believe the plan worked. He pushed himself up from the blue tile floor of the room where Sea King Osiris typically kept Seth prisoner for 40 years. As prisons went, it wasn't the worst it could be, with wide open spaces, cushions everywhere for Osiris to use Seth at his own leisure, a large, comfortable bed that stank of Osiris, large, one-way thick windows where fish and merfolk occasionally swam past to remind Seth of where he couldn't go, and a ceiling that could be spelled to look like the water surface at night or daytime. The room was far beneath Osiris' main palace, and Seth's typical pastime when he wasn't doing what exercises he could, brushing his hair, or reading in order to do *something* with himself, was to watch fish swim by and resist the urge to try, again, to smash the thick and spelled glass to break.

On rare occasions, Osiris would take Seth out of the room on a leash made of adamant, attached to a collar which could contain even the most powerful of merfolk, like Seth once had been before Osiris locked him away. Seth still had scars from the times he'd been in the collar, but he knew if he misbehaved, he'd be returned to his prison, and face worse punishment than being treated publicly as a pet. So he sat at Osiris' feet and listened to court proceedings. And sometimes Osiris fed him sea grapes or shrimp. Seth had grown past being embarrassed this way. It had been too many years, and his early attempts at escape had all been failures.

Rather than seething about his captivity, he focused on gaining information to help him escape in the future. In particular, he focused on the courtiers who spoke of Isis' growing forces. Isis, the former consort of Osiris, who had left under mysterious circumstances. Rumor was that she'd wanted to share the throne, and Osiris had refused. Uglier rumors were that she wanted to rule alongside a new lover from abroad. Seth didn't know the real answer, and it hardly mattered, since she'd been gone as long as he'd been imprisoned. She certainly hadn't contacted him before or after his imprisonment, or at least not in a way that had reached him.

It was one of rare court sessions Seth attended that a servant brought Seth a tray of food, and Seth – as he glanced briefly at the servant's mostly covered face – saw something gleaming gold in their eyes. A look of mischief. But they quickly left. Seth casually checked the food over while Osiris leaned back on his seaweed green throne and listened to farming reports. And when Seth noted something off about the pastry on the tray, he secreted it on his person, in the expensive, flowy, *and opaque* garments Osiris insisted on clothing him in to make him *prettier* while keeping the "best" parts of him hidden from others (Osiris was jealous like that, which was why Seth always wore a dark mask to cover his upper face whenever they were in public), and finished off the rest of the meal.

After Osiris fell asleep in their bed that night, Seth pulled himself off of Osiris, letting Osiris' seed drip out of his ass as he walked to the bathroom. He was used to *that,* too, and Osiris would enjoy seeing the mess anyway. Osiris saw it as proof of his own affection. Or his claim. Osiris thought similarly of the collar scars on Seth's pale neck, and sometimes Osiris would pull Seth's long red hair aside to kiss them, during which Seth struggling not to grit his teeth and *snarl.* He was supposed to be *grateful* Osiris didn't leave it on all the time, largely because once it nearly strangled him to death when Osiris was a bit too ecstatic in bed and overloaded the spells on it. Then it only came out for *special* occasions, when they left Seth's prison together.

Seth dug through the dinner roll in the bathroom, and discovered, hidden inside, a tiny vial of blue liquid, and a small rolled up piece of parchment in military script Seth had developed for his officers in his youth, back when Osiris let him lead the army. This was a message from Sekhmet, his former sort of ally, whom he hadn't heard from since before his captivity. Apparently she had some ideas of her own.

Seth scanned the paper, and then swallowed it. He gazed at the vial in awe, and planned. He couldn't act immediately, of course. He had to wait until Osiris woke up. Seth later swallowed the vial's contents before Osiris had seen, walked out to where Osiris was sitting, and said he was going to kill himself.

Osiris watched Seth fall in alarm, and saw Seth's pale body begin to take on signs of rotting. Osiris had wailed and vainly attempted to heal him, but his magics were useless. In desperation, he'd said, "I'll be there with you, my love." And then he'd taken some poison he'd squirrelled away, and fallen at Seth's side, his arms wrapped around Seth's torso.

Seth pushed himself up a short while later, a bit disoriented from the faux death state created by the vial's contents, but otherwise hale. The purple and blue marks on his skin – purely aesthetic to fool the overwrought – were fading. He was conscious while Osiris wailed, and was glad the potion kept him from laughing. The sight of Osiris laying on the floor at Seth's feet, dead and already rotting away, as merfolk bodies did on death, was at once everything Seth had dreamed of for years… and also empty.

Seth and Osiris had been raised together, and Seth had become leader of Osiris' military at a young age. They'd even been friends, until one night when Osiris had drugged Seth, and Seth had woken up a prisoner, and Seth's trust had been shattered forever.

Now, Seth didn't mind the stench of rotting flesh for the few moments he took to bask in the reality of it. He told himself that Osiris' green skin and long, dark hair looked *better* as it dissolved. It was all evidence that Osiris was dead at last, despite being the most powerful member of their race. In the past, Osiris was too strong to kill, and used his spells and poisons to keep Seth weak. No more, though.

Now Seth got to work. He didn't bother grabbing any of the useless drapes Osiris gave him for clothes, and refused to touch any of the doctored food or drinks. He'd hunt with his bare hands if he had to, particularly since there wasn't anything here he could use as a weapon. He *did* grab the collar and put it in a pack for his back, to destroy later, along with the empty vial, which was the only evidence of what he'd done. Then he worked his way out of the room, easily passing the numerous previously locked doors. The spells keyed to Osiris were

gone now that he was dead, and here, with all of them open at Seth's touch, was more proof of that fact.

Oddly, there were no guards around. As Seth went up through the levels of the underwater palace, he heard shouting in the distance. Seth's magical skills were rusty, but he was able to slowly and carefully dissolve his body into sand when he heard approaching footsteps. Everyone who passed him was too preoccupied to notice more sand on the usually pristine palace floors, and it had been decades since anyone had seen him do it anyway, so they weren't even thinking to look for it. The guards were harried and angry. Courtiers ran. It was chaos.

Seth knew they couldn't know Osiris was dead yet. The smell wouldn't reach this far yet, and Osiris' magic was important, but this had to be something else. Someone would have gone to check on Osiris if the missing spells were the issue, and they hadn't yet, because Seth would have passed them.

"They've broken through the front gates!" someone shouted.

Seth blinked and realized the palace was under attack. He assumed it was Isis, since few others would dare. His instincts warred with him to go help. He'd been a soldier in Osiris' military for 62 years, defending their kingdom from attackers, and had badly missed that life during his captivity. People would get hurt, no matter what Isis' plans were. She'd been a fair and generous leader in her time, but it had been decades. People changed.

…But he'd been trapped here for decades, too, and only one person had helped him. He owed these people nothing.

So he ran from wherever he sensed soldiers.

He managed to sneak out one of the exits while guards were busy elsewhere, and the first moment he managed to jump into the ocean proper and transform into his true form, he nearly cried in relief. His long bright red tail – unusual for merfolk – moved quickly behind him, as if he'd never stopped swimming. Osiris hadn't let him shapeshift at all in captivity, and it felt like stretching muscles desperate for it. He could have swum for days, but knew he wasn't free yet.

He sped away, heading towards open waters, somewhere far from whatever was happening.

But the potion he took – the one in the vial – despite not *actually* killing him, made him weak, and he was rusty at moving unseen in open water. He ran into a patrol of enemy soldiers, and by their armor colors – bright green, gold, and blue – he knew they belonged to Isis. Isis' soldiers. The warriors blinked in surprise at him, until their leader said, "It's Osiris' pet general! Don't let him get away!"

Seth had heard worse over the years, so he didn't bristle. He could have stayed to fight them, but he was in no shape to do so. He fled in the opposite direction.

Isis' soldiers were good, though. His back prickled from their spell arrows.

In desperation, he went for more open waters, hoping to surprise them. They'd have expected him to dive downward, and could corner him in some nook, and killed or captured him that way. He refused to do that. He *wouldn't* die here and he *wouldn't* be captured again!

A hand caught his, startling him, and he heard laughter, "This is one you owe me now."

He lost consciousness.

When he next woke, he was laying on a beach, with hot sand heating his pained back, and sunlight blinding him. He'd been on land a few times in his youth, but that had been ages ago. Still, he knew to try and turn his head and shut his eyes against the light. It hurt a lot, and his head felt heavy.

As his vision adjusted, he saw, above him, a dark-skinned, handsome male face with bright blue eyes and short, dark hair looked down at him in concern.

Seth glared, ready to fight anyone who demanded it. "I'm Seth, the God of War…" An old moniker people gave him based on his success in combat. It usually spooked people, at least, before people began calling him Osiris' *pet*, anyway. "If you dare… I'll kill you." A surge of pain swept over him and he shut his eyes again.

"I'm Horus, son of Isis," an unfamiliar voice said nearby. "It's good to meet you."

And with that, Seth fell again into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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When Seth woke up, his back was resting on smooth tile. He could see sun-filled water around him. His bright red tail was still there, floating. He blinked and looked up, realizing he was in very *shallow* water. He flexed his hands – in this form, his fingers had sharp black claws.

He recalled getting greeted by someone unfamiliar, someone named… Horus?

Isis' son!

Seth looked around, alarmed. The area seemed reasonably large, but it was also an enclosure of some kind. There was no access to the ocean.

Memories of Osiris imprisoning made Seth automatically reached for his neck, but the collar wasn't there. His pack was still on his back, too. And he didn't feel any spells keeping him weak. His magic was right there for him to grab and use and turn this whole place to sand if he wanted. Plus, he was still transformed. Osiris never left him that way, since Osiris found Seth's true form too frustrating to control.

If Horus had imprisoned him like this, he was an idiot.

Seth breathed in deeply. The water was clean and not unpleasant, though he ached for the open sea. He wasn't sure it was safe, though, if Isis' soldiers were on the hunt for him. *But surely Horus would have reported me?* Seth had been exhausted and strung out, but thinking about it, those soldiers had been more *surprised* to see him than anything else. It might be that Isis just warned them about Seth, and didn't tell them to specifically look for him.

But Seth didn't know. And at any rate, he wasn't getting anywhere sitting in this pool. He pushed himself up and broke the surface.

As long wet hair fell back against his neck and his eyes adjusted to the sunshine, he looked around at his surroundings. What he saw looked like the interior of a large building surrounding an open yard of some kind, allowing him to look up at blue sky, a few clouds, and sun. There were a few chairs and umbrellas for shade. The walls were low, and seemingly made of wood. There were windows to the inside.

"Ah, you're awake!"

Seth turned to see Horus lounging on a long chair nearby. He wore an open, short-sleeved blue shirt, which revealed his dark, muscular torso. He also wore black shorts. His feet were bare. He pulled the dark glasses of his face and stood up to walk over to the pool edge, before crouching down.

“How are you feeling?”

Seth studied this stranger now that he was awake. Tall, young, perhaps? It was hard to say with merfolk, who could live for centuries and often stayed youthful for a substantial portion of it, particularly if you were powerful enough to change how you looked with magic. Isis was the most powerful sea witch the merfolk had ever seen, it was said. Her son might have powers just like her.

“I’m fine,” Seth said, quietly. “How did I get here?” He remembered laying down on sand, and then nothing.

Horus winced. “Sekhmet brought you to the shore where I was walking, and left you there, saying I needed to look after you. Then she left.”

Seth grimaced. Why would she bring him here, though? Did she trust Horus? She’d helped him get away from Osiris, so…?

“The island is isolated, but I wasn’t sure the waters were safe, so I carried you inside to the pool to rest. It’s saltwater, so it should be good for you.”

Seth felt a hint of embarrassment over the idea of Horus… *carrying* him. Seth didn’t even know him! But he didn’t feel anything wrong. If Horus had… made *use* of Seth’s unconsciousness, as Osiris often did, Seth couldn’t tell.

Horus smiled. “Would you like something to eat? This place is pretty well stocked. I’ve got human food and food merfolk like. You can take your pick. I can bring it to you here, or you could sit somewhere.”

Seth frowned. “Something I’d like? Do you just have live fish waiting to bring to me to hunt?”

Horus blinked. “If you wanted, yes. Mother equipped this place with everything to suit my needs.”

“…Is Isis here?” That was a terrifying idea. He wasn’t even sure what he’d say to her if she was.

“No,” Horus said, his expression clouding over. “She’s attacking Osiris’ palace.”

Seth felt a bit of glee over that, and a tinge of regret over abandoning his people when they probably needed him. But there was also curiosity. “Ah. Why aren’t you with her?”

Horus sighed and sat down. He dropped his bare legs in the water. He wasn’t close enough to Seth to reach him, nor did he try to get closer. His arms rested on the ground beyond the pool edge, and he relaxed. “I haven’t decided yet, what I want to do. My coming of age is in a few weeks.”

Seth considered that. Merfolk came of age at age 28. They typically took on their profession, and learned more difficult magic if they were gifted with it. “How old are you?”

“I’m 27.”

“Ah.” Seth frowned. “But you should be with the other merfolk. There are ceremonies and…” Unless Isis had to hide him from Osiris. Perhaps the stories of Isis’ lover were true…

“Mother raised me among humans,” Horus said. “Well… somewhat, anyway. I’ve been learning from other merfolk for the last two years, what it’s like to be one of them. It was to keep me safe from Osiris.”

“He’d use you to get at Isis,” Seth said.

Horus smiled. “Yes. But he’d also try to claim me as his son. And Mother refuses to allow him to.”

Seth nearly fell under the water surface. “You’re… Osiris’ son?!”

Horus shook his head ruefully. “I’m Mother’s son. Osiris happened to be involved in my conception.”

Seth winced. “I know I just… I was his prisoner. So, you’ll have to accept I don’t exactly trust people connected to him.” Even if Isis was invading his palace. Or had invaded.

“You’re Seth.” Horus said. “Mother spoke of you, sometimes. And I heard stories.”

What kind of stories? Seth wanted to ask. Though he honestly wasn’t sure he really wanted to know, given his imprisonment and the reaction of those soldiers.

“How did you escape?”

Seth’s fingers twitched in the water. “I killed him.”

Horus’ eyes widened.

“Is that going to change this arrangement?” He wasn’t afraid of whatever Horus attacked him with if so. Seth was prepared to fight. He could get out and fight on land if he had to, though it wasn’t his preferred space.

Horus watched him for a moment, then shook his head. “Not particularly. I never met him, and Mother hates him. It’ll probably make her plans easier, honestly.”

Seth blinked. “You’re not going to imprison me, too?”

Horus tilted his head at Seth. His bright blue eyes were oddly alluring, his expression open and calm. “Why would I?”

“I told you I killed someone. I’m a general.” *Or I was, anyway.*

“I’ve killed assassins before,” Horus replied with a shrug. “Osiris sent them after Mother and anyone close to her. He got an inkling some years ago that she had a lover or something, and

wanted them killed. Little did he know, the person she was protecting was me. Not all of them were killed or redirected by Mother and her forces. I had to deal with a few."

Seth reevaluated this strange young man. So the musculature wasn't just for show, or carrying unconscious merfolk.

"And I don't think Sekhmet would bring you here if she thought you'd kill me." Horus frowned. "Well… maybe, I suppose. It seems a lot of effort for that, though."

Seth snorted. Yes, it did.

"You're free to wander the grounds," Horus said as he pulled his legs out of the water and stood up. "Though I'd stay indoors if you're not in this area. For safety. Mother has wards around the place, but it's best to be wary." He smiled. "I'm going to get something to eat. Offer's still open to bring you something. Or you could eat with me."

Seth's stomach grumbled, and he was grateful Horus couldn't hear it, unless the man had super hearing of some kind. Seth didn't want to risk the food being poisoned, so he moved to the pool edge and said, "All right, I'll go with you." It was better to keep the man in his line of sight, anyway. He shifted his tail back to legs and hoisted himself up out of the water.

"Oh, um…" Horus walked to his chair and grabbed a towel, only to turn back as Seth used his sand to form dark pants on his lower body. Horus blinked at him. "Um… do you want other clothes?"

Seth raised an eyebrow, making a pointed glance at Horus' bare chest poking between the middle of the open shirt. Seth admitted to himself that it wasn't a bad chest, but more to the point: it wasn't like Horus was being modest about his body, either.

Horus looked down, then chuckled. "Ah, I guess you're right. Whatever makes you comfortable. I have a substantial wardrobe you can use if you wish, and one of the air spirits here can make something for you, too." Horus dropped the towel and gestured for Seth to follow him into the house.

"Air spirits?" Seth asked, still wary as they went inside. He hadn't been in many homes on land, and had mostly just explored a few human shops. He had the sense this house was dry and orderly. The dark carpet beneath his feet was comfortable. There was a lot of wall art of birds and plants Seth didn't recognize, though he'd never been much of a land expert in that sense, either.

Humans coexisted with the merfolk, after centuries of wars, some of which Seth had even participated in. Now they largely kept to themselves, with some trade in between. Osiris hadn't cared for them all that much, which Seth felt was stupid. Although Osiris could easily encourage storms for human ships, the humans could poison their people, too. It was dangerous to ignore a potential enemy. Seth's visits on land had mostly been to better understand the humans, since he'd certainly never been chosen as an envoy of his people. He'd only met a few humans outside of battle, who were at turns curious and wary of him. He'd met one of their ambassadors: a friendly woman named Ashley, who'd been cordial to

Seth in all their meetings, though they weren't close. He only saw her once in the distance since his imprisonment. He wasn't even sure what had happened to her.

Horus and Seth arrived in a large kitchen, where Horus showed Seth the fridge and the pantry.

"You can also just ask the spirits to make something for you. They're servants Mother assigned to me. They look after all my needs."

"How did a sea witch get control of air spirits?" Seth asked, looking around with sudden sharpness. Where were they hiding? Would he even be able to see them?

"She pays them," Horus said, pulling out a covered bowl. "I made some curry earlier. It's got cow in it, if you're interested in that. Or obviously you can make anything you want. Nothing in here is toxic to merfolk."

Seth waited for Horus to step away from the fridge before surveying it. He didn't know that he trusted premade meals, but some of the fruit might be okay. He grabbed a bowl of grapes and stepped back. The food was roughly similar in some ways to what they had underwater. He washed the grapes in the sink, for extra caution. If they were poisoned, Seth's own magic should keep him safe. Osiris had only caught him off-guard because Seth hadn't been expecting his ruler and friend to poison him.

Horus went to microwave his food while Seth picked up his clean grapes and inspected the kitchen. There was a tall table with stools, and a long marble counter for preparing food. He still couldn't see any of the servants.

"You're welcome to sit anywhere," Horus said. "Or stand if you wish."

Seth chose a stool far from Horus. He watched the other man as Seth ate his grapes. Seth was hungrier than he realized and quickly went through the whole bowl.

"I can get you some water or something," Horus said as he came over with a bowl of curry and a cup of some beverage.

"No," Seth said. "I'll get it."

The meal was largely uneventful. They sat in silence, with Seth drinking his plain water as he watched Horus eat his own meal. Seth asked the time, and found it was near lunch. He hadn't slept long, only a few hours. He wondered what was happening around Osiris' palace. If they had found Osiris' body yet. How that played into Isis' hands.

Seth was still glad Osiris was dead. He'd do it again, if he had to. He realized the hand holding his cup was shaking, and he let go of it to put his hand under the table.

"I can show you to a bedroom if you'd like," Horus said as he cleaned up what he used – and the empty grape bowl. Seth kept his cup of water. "There's a few guestrooms here, though they're hardly ever used. Or you can go back to the pool if you'd like."

Seth thought about sleeping in his true form again, after so long of not doing so. His hair floating in the water, the quiet movement of floating… The thought was tempting, but…

“Do the guest rooms lock?” Seth asked. Certainly if they locked from the inside, they could be locked from the *outside*, but Seth knew he could break any walls around here if he had to. He wasn’t sure of Horus’ abilities, but he didn’t think the man could break walls easily. And if he could, Seth would deal with that if he got to it.

“Yes,” Horus said. “You can lock it on the inside. Though I won’t…” Horus shook his head. “I’ll show you one?”

Seth found himself alone in a guestroom, having dismissed Horus for the day. There was a window with blackout curtains near a large wall. Currently the curtains were open, and out of it he could see a beach and blue water as far as the eye could see.

Horus said this was an island. Isis really must be hiding him. But how had Sekhmet known about Horus? Perhaps she’d helped Isis hide him?

Sekhmet was an old sometimes ally of Seth’s. She’d spied for him on various campaigns, and often talked strategy with him. But she could be unreliable at times, often disappearing who knew where for some time. He’d been surprised she’d been there for him when he needed her, since she hadn’t been around for some time.

I need to find her, he thought, sitting down on the comfortable bed. The place smelled faintly of flowers, though he couldn’t identify them. But the seaweed stench of Osiris was absent. And the sheets looked clean, perhaps even fresh. But he didn’t want to sleep before he’d taken a proper shower. He got up to explore the facilities, and discovered what looked like a very functional washroom.

Bathing for merfolk could be strange at times. Their homes often functioned with dry and wet areas, with the latter filled with water. Osiris had trapped Seth in the air part of the palace for some time, save for Seth’s visits to the throne room, which was filled with water. Seth had taken showers to stay clean and feel something like he had when he lived fully immersed. The few times Osiris cleaned him, he loathed.

It didn’t take much figuring out to see what did what, and soon he was standing under a warm spray, letting the water cover him. He wasn’t sure about the different bottles in the shower for him, so he just used his hands to scrub. Shapeshifting had gotten rid of Osiris’ seed, but he still scraped at his ass, as if to get anything left out. He had the odd realization that despite the fact this place seemed isolated and away from Osiris’ palace, the dead king himself, and anyone else, Seth still felt like he was imprisoned by Osiris’ memory.

He ended up sitting on the floor, curled in on himself, letting the water soak over him. Osiris was dead, he knew that. Seth wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t true.

If his cheeks were wet with more than the shower water, no one knew otherwise.

Eventually, he got up, turned the water off, and dried off with a fluffy blue towel, before heading to the bed. He paused when he noticed clothing resting neatly on the sheets. He glanced around, angry. Had Horus entered somehow while he was in the shower? Seth checked and the door was still locked. But perhaps Horus had the master key.

Are the pajamas suitable? A soft voice asked in his ear, making him jump. When he saw nothing where he looked, he realized it was the air spirits. They must have brought him the nightclothes. He walked over to the clothes in question, and discovered the material was soft and warm, and black.

"…Yes, they're fine," Seth said as he pulled them on. He considered hiding away where the spirits couldn't see him, but that would lead to more paranoia. He'd had to be naked or mostly naked around Osiris and members of the court for decades. He'd manage.

There was a pleased feeling in his mind, and then he had the odd sense he was truly alone.

He stared out the sunny window, with its view of an ocean he couldn't explore just yet, and a door he locked against a seemingly generous stranger he didn't know he trusted, in a house run partially by invisible spirits.

Yes, he was "alone". And "free".

He laughed.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seth's grumbling stomach woke him late in the evening, and he snuck back down to the kitchen to make himself some *actual* food. The house at night was dark and quiet, and he didn't pass anyone else. He supposed they really were alone here, and Horus wasn't seemingly stalking his movements.

The kitchen was quiet and dark, and Seth flicked the lights on to find it empty and ready to use. He managed to find enough basic ingredients to put together a pasta with meat sauce, and shortly enough was devouring it all. Grapes weren't exactly *filling* food.

It was strange, to think this was one of the first meals he'd been able to make for himself in decades. Osiris always brought him food, or had servants leave it for him. And before that, he'd had his own servants prepare meals. Gone were the days where he hung out with his sister, Nephthys, learning recipes, or lived in barracks and made what he could when he occasionally got decent ingredients. He'd learned from older veterans who knew a thing or two from here and there, and got to be a half-decent cook. Or at least he didn't end up killing anyone or himself with his meals. But his focus on bettering himself in combat and climbing the ladder to the highest rank he could took precedence, and servants preparing his food allowed him to focus on strategies against their enemies.

Perhaps if he'd been more aware of things, Osiris wouldn't have trapped him.

Seth swallowed and lowered his fork. He couldn't fall back into that line of thinking. It was useless. Osiris was dead. Seth was on an isolated island with the apparently hidden son of Isis and Osiris, unsure of where his future lay. He could try to join with Isis, perhaps, and offer to work for her. He had no interest in taking up the reins of Osiris' throne himself. But Isis might have use for a strategist and powerful warrior. Assuming she didn't kill him on sight for his association with Osiris.

He could try disappearing on land somewhere. Figure out a life there. He had some old contacts he could check out, see if any of them were still active, despite the years… He could disappear pretty easily, where perhaps even Isis couldn't reach him.

But the idea of being away from the ocean was daunting. And reaching out to other, distant kingdoms posed its own dangers. He thought of Nephthys, from whom he'd become estranged 20 years before his imprisonment. Was she even still alive? Would she take him in if he found her? Or should he leave her alone, at least in part to protect her from whatever storm someone else might bring down on Nephthys' head in an attempt to get at Seth?

For all Seth called himself the God of War, as others had named him, which made him seem big and power and impressive, the world felt far larger than he had ever imagined it, and him

just a tiny part of it. He'd worked so hard to get to the place in the world he was in when Osiris brought him down from it. And even dead, Osiris' damage left ruins behind it.

I'm glad he's dead, Seth thought, glaring into his empty bowl.

Seth was relaxing in the indoor pool again when Horus came to visit. It was late morning, and after his late dinner, he'd slept for a bit, and then gotten up early and made and eaten a small breakfast. He felt more pleasantly full than he had in ages, and was starting to – ever so slightly – relax. Now he lounged against the corner of the pool and gazed ahead, thinking over his options. He still hadn't made up his mind.

Horus wore a similar outfit today to what he'd worn the previous day, with red shorts instead, and an open white shirt. He nodded at Seth and asked, "Good morning. How did you sleep?"

Seth shrugged. His long red tail flicked idly at the water. "Well. Thank you for letting me stay here." He *was* eating the man's food and taking up one of his rooms, after all. A bit of thanks was deserved.

Horus smiled brightly at him. "Don't mention it. It's an honor, really." Horus sat down on the pool edge again, letting his feet fall in the water.

Seth watched him thoughtfully for a bit, then asked, "Can you… shift?" He'd never heard of a case where a mer couldn't shift into their true form, but he'd also never met a mer in their humanoid form *first*, who'd been raised among humans. He wasn't sure how that affected someone's abilities. There were merfolk who didn't shift to their humanoid form until they were preteens, but you wouldn't be able to do that if you were raised on land.

Horus blinked at him, then nodded, "Of course! I'm just used to staying like this around the house."

"Oh."

Horus stared at Seth for a bit, then said, "Did you *want* me to shift?"

"What?"

"Well, the pool isn't that large and I figured you'd want your space. With both of us in there, it'll be kind of tight. I don't want you to feel crowded."

Seth thought about that. Horus had a point. He'd have to leave to give Horus proper space in here. Then he frowned. "But it's your house…" Horus had the right to decide who was where.

"Well… yes. But you're my guest."

Seth's fingers twitched in the water.

"…If you're fine with me shifting while you're in the pool, I can. Or we can move out to the shore?"

“I’m fine with you shifting here,” Seth said. The idea of close proximity was daunting, but he was *comfortable* in the warm water, and in good position to attack if the need arose. Plus, he was curious to see what Horus looked like with a tail. Seth had seen Isis in her true form, with her bluish-green scales and traces of gold. She looked beautiful, and she was threatening when she needed to be. Osiris was large and bright, dazzlingly green, with a powerful tail that could beat enemies to bits, and fins laced with red, blue, and white. “Go ahead.”

Horus studied him some more, as if trying to figure out Seth’s ulterior motives, and then shrugged off his shirt onto the ground and hopped into the water.

Seth would have averted his eyes slightly under other circumstances – it wasn’t rude to see other merfolk transform, but it was usually considered rude to *stare* – but he still wasn’t sure how much he trusted Horus. It was likely he was more powerful in his true form, and—

Seth’s thoughts trailed away when he saw Horus settle back against the wall with his large, brilliant blue tail – nearly the size of his father’s – with traces of red, and white in the scales, and large, golden fins. His chest looked even broader like this, and his eyes had sharp black markings around them, making him look a little older and more intimidating. His fingers ended in sharp blue claws. He looked as deadly and beautiful as Isis, and as powerful as Osiris.

Seth knew the man was attractive, but like this, it was worse, somehow. It didn’t help when, despite Horus’ efforts, their end fins accidentally bumped each other, which felt like a shockwave. Tail touching was a particularly intimate act for merfolk, and typically only occurred either in combat, with family, or with a partner.

Seth laughed nervously. This was a stupid idea and he knew it from the get-go. Well. “There really isn’t a lot of room, huh?”

Horus smiled. “I can get out, if you prefer?”

“No, it’s fine.” Seth settled back, keeping his tail under *control*. It was awkward, but Seth wasn’t going to force the man out of his *own* swimming pool.

For a while, they just stayed like that, and Seth did eventually close his eyes to take in the sunshine. It felt nice. Though he missed the gentle cool depths of the ocean, too.

“Would you like something particular for lunch?” Horus asked.

Seth murmured softly, “Don’t you have anything better to do than entertain a stranger?”

Horus chuckled. “Not really. I’m taking a break in my studies to make up my mind, and I study better at night or the early morning, anyway, not the day.”

“What’s the struggle with deciding?” Seth asked, genuinely curious. He’d never even considered staying on land for his coming of age.

“Mmm… Part of it is not being using the living as a mer, I suppose. I have friends among the humans, and I’d probably see them less if I chose to live among the merfolk, among whom I

only know a few."

"That's understandable."

"I also might be more drawn into Mother's power games. She has a place for me ready in her dynasty. And I don't know that I want to be there."

Seth recalled being chosen by Osiris to lead his troops. It had been an honor at the time, but now it was buried under the betrayals, the decades of imprisonment. Even without Osiris' betrayal, it had been a heavy responsibility. "I can understand that. Have you told her?"

Horus laughed. "No. She just knows I'm hesitant. She's always had a mind bent towards being in control and having power. She can't understand giving it up for *less* with no future of *more."*

"There's… power in comfort," Seth remarked, finding Horus' description quite sad. "You have a world you enjoy living in. That doesn't seem so terrible to me. Power isn't everything." It certainly wasn't everything when it came to people like Osiris. Seth would have said no in the topsy turvy world where he'd been able to see what would happen to him.

He'd known Osiris as a prince, once. He was calmer, gentler. Still charismatic, handsome, and powerful, even then. Seth thought that ascending to the throne only made him more impressive, despite his sometimes questionable policies when it came to humans in particular. But he still didn't know if Osiris had always been the way he was during Seth's imprisonment, or if having the throne just made him feel like there weren't any obstacles left for his goals. He couldn't imagine Osiris staying comfortable in the role of a prince forever. He was so defined by *needing more*. Needing *everything*. But perhaps. Perhaps.

Horus smiled softly at Seth, making Seth's cheeks warm. "I wish she could see that."

"You could tell her."

Horus grimaced. "I wish I had the courage for it."

Seth sighed and didn't reply to that. To be fair, he couldn't imagine talking to Isis, either. "If you're to have a place in her dynasty, though, that'd give you power of your own. You could make your own decisions, then, at least to some extent."

"That *is* true. I *do* support Mother and her ideas, but I refuse to be a puppet." Horus studied Seth. "Is that why you were imprisoned? Because Osiris didn't like you refusing to be a puppet?"

Seth snorted. "Osiris imprisoned me because he's an obsessive monster led by his cock. Or he *was*, anyway." Seth smirked, even as he oddly felt something ache in his chest. "When I was his general, we used to talk almost like equals. He respected my decisions and didn't attempt to force me into specific strategic choices." Seth grimaced. "I suppose the obvious lesson is that those in power will respect you until they decide they don't have to anymore, because that decision is always theirs, not yours."

Horus bowed his head. “I’m sorry.”

Seth shrugged. “A lesson for the future, then. Become stronger than your mother, and you won’t have to worry.”

Horus laughed. “I’m not sure *that’s* possible.”

“You never know. Not all of Isis’ magic is innate. She studied for years. Osiris may have won the lottery in terms of power, but so did I. And he largely kept me bound through trickery, not power.” Osiris pushed hard to keep Seth weak, either through the collar, drugs, magic… whatever it took. They both knew that despite Osiris’ knowledge and abilities, Seth *could* break free if he wasn’t kept weak. Seth was the better warrior, the better strategist, and his powers were particularly in line with escape.

“Were you friends before he imprisoned you?”

Seth was surprised at the question, but gave it serious thought all the same. It was better than being trapped in his self-hating fury about his own inability to escape Osiris’ imprisonment prior to Sekhmet’s aid. “Once. Maybe. I’m not sure. Perhaps I had our whole relationship wrong.” Seth snorted. “He used to tell me how much he thought about me, almost from the first time he met me, when he was still a prince. But he waited. And when he discovered courting would be a failure, he decided to go with what he ended up with: drugging and imprisonment. But he lies so much, who can say with him?” Had Seth imagined the kinder young man he’d known when they were both young? Had he been fooled by his own hopes of promotion and glory?

“You thought of him as a friend, though.”

Seth blinked. “I did. Once.” That version of Osiris had been buried under the one he came to know over the years. “But I don’t know if… I don’t think the person I knew ever existed outside my imagination.”

“That must have been hard. Realizing that. Losing someone you cared for, or at least trusted.”

Seth swallowed and his hand went to the scars on his neck. At first he’d been groggy from the drugs, then confused, then *furious*. He’d raged through his new prison. Osiris had leaked knockout gas into it to put Seth out, and that was just the start of things. Osiris took away everything Seth hadn’t realized he’d been used to as a *person*. And there was too much fury and pain to even fully recall how much Osiris showing his true colors had hurt.

“…It’s been too many years,” Seth said instead. He put his hand down. “Besides, I don’t think Isis would go to that level. Maybe. I’m not sure. We were never close.”

Horus smiled. “Mother has always been kind to me. Rigorous with my studies, perhaps, but kind. She can be harsh to her enemies, though.”

Seth wondered what would have happened if he hadn’t killed Osiris. If Osiris had lived to face Isis in battle. Who would have won? And if Isis *had* won, what would she have done with Seth afterward? Killed him, for being involved with Osiris? Kept him as another pet?

He needed to destroy the collar. Adamant wasn't impossible to find, but he was too paranoid that, used once, it would be used on him again, somehow. But you needed powerful magic for it, and there were few people like that. Isis, perhaps. But he was worried she'd turn it against him if he showed her. And what favor would she ask for in return?

"I'm getting hungry," Horus said. "Shall we eat something?"

Seth nodded, glad for the distraction. He began to push himself out of the water, but with the smaller amount of space and his own distraction, he miscalculated and bumped his tail against Horus'. That startled him and made him overcompensate in his further movements. And when Horus moved to stop him from falling, they became tangled together, with Horus holding Seth close to his chest under the water.

Seth simply stared up at Horus' bright and worried face for a moment, the water somehow making him almost *glow*. Seth's heart raced, and he recalled Osiris, holding him close, keeping him trapped—

But then Seth shoved away and Horus was letting him go. Seth sat against the far wall of the pool again, breathing quickly, ready to attack with his claws if he had to. But Horus didn't follow him. They just sat staring at each other.

"I'm sorry," Horus said. "I didn't mean to—"

Seth tried to focus. Osiris wasn't here. He was dead. Horus hadn't trapped him in the pool. Seth had invited him there. Horus stayed where he was, and had only tried to help. Even now he stayed still, rather than moving further away. Seth might have attacked him otherwise.

Seth pushed his head out of the water. There was no one around, still. It was just the two of them, and wherever the air spirits were. He pushed out of the water, transforming into his human shape, and hugged himself. He almost went to his room, but that would mean he was running away, wouldn't it? Is that what he did, now?

It was always the question with Osiris. Seth was powerful and smart in his own way, but Osiris had outwitted him. True, Osiris had stabbed him in the back by abusing Seth's trust, but Seth should have been more on guard. And Osiris had lorded that over him at times, noting Seth's weakness. *Perhaps if you were stronger, this would have been more difficult.*

Seth had hated him. But inside, he'd wondered, was Osiris right? Was it a weakness in Seth that allowed Osiris to do this? Was he too trusting? Clearly, judging by his interactions with Horus, he was.

"Seth?" Horus asked, pulling Seth out of where he was, mentally.

Seth looked back at him.

Horus was still in the pool, but he had his arms resting on the pool edge, and a worried expression on his face. "Is there something you need? I can help or the air spirits can…?"

Seth yanked himself back to reality. Osiris was wrong and dead. Seth was on the island. Sekhmet had helped him escape and brought him here. It would be pointless to just bring him here to another Osiris. Seth trusted her enough for *that*. He was second-guessing himself all over again, like he had in the years of his imprisonment, and it was pointless, because Osiris was wrong, and had been proven so by the rotting corpse in Seth's former cell.

"…I think I just need to eat something," Seth said. "I'll make lunch."

Horus nodded. Even like this, with water dripping from his hair and his features worried, his beauty was obvious and alluring.

Osiris had been beautiful and alluring, too.

Seth turned away and went to the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 4: Slipping

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things were calmer for about two weeks after that. Seth kept his distance from Horus, though they were cordial with each other when they crossed paths. Seth made his own food and adjusted again to being self-sufficient. The air spirits were always there, ready to take his orders just as easily as they took Horus'. He slowly grew less weirded out when he went wandering only to return to a freshly made bed and a shining bathroom.

Sometimes Seth lounged in the pool for the relaxation of being transformed. Sometimes he just spent the day sleeping. While wandering the house, he found a large library that was clearly magicked to look smaller from the outside, and he began spending his days in there, reading different books. Osiris had brought him a few over the years, but never enough. He'd missed it.

He also found a practice yard, and, with Horus' encouragement, used some of the practice swords on the dummies.

"Mother insisted I have the best training," Horus said, when Seth asked about it. "If I wanted to join the military one day, or just protect myself in a fight, given I don't have any magic to speak of…"

"You don't have magic?" Seth asked, lowering the khopesh he'd been considering for another round of drills. It was nearly afternoon, and he'd barely worked up a sweat. He wore a t-shirt and light pants that allowed him freedom of movement.

Horus still walked around in an open shirt and simple shorts, seemingly completely unaware of how it emphasized his musculature, particularly his strong legs and ass. Seth decided to ignore it as much as possible, which wasn't much, all told.

"I don't," Horus said with a sad smile. "Mother thinks it might come to me with the coming of age ceremony… but I don't know." He gestured around. "It's one reason the air spirits are here and this place is so isolated. For aid and protection. They bring me all the supplies I need. I can't do it with magic, and hunting is dangerous."

"So you're trapped here, too?" Seth asked, surprised. No wonder he'd never left…

"Not quite. I can always leave if I want. But it's safe here, particularly during Mother's assault on Osiris' palace."

Seth nodded. "Have you heard anything? About the attack?" He assumed that with Osiris dead, Isis would be successful. But he was worried she would come to collect her son, particularly if she heard Seth was here…

Horus nodded. “It’s why I came to find you, actually. Mother sent word she’s successfully taken the palace. They’ve dealt with the last holdouts of Osiris’ forces. They’re still in the middle of doing safety sweeps and setting things up for the new administration, but once she’s got that handled, she wants to set up my coming of age ceremony as part of the opening festivities of her reign.”

“That’s… A lot.”

Horus shrugged. “She wants me firmly placed as her heir.”

“So she’s taking the decision from you.”

“She’s letting me know that the clock is ticking,” Horus said with a slightly grim expression. “I need to decide, and soon. If I decide to not stay, she’ll respect that.”

“She’ll replace you?”

Horus nodded. “If need be. But I’ll still be her son.”

“Ah.”

Horus studied Seth for a moment before saying, “They found Osiris’ corpse.”

Seth pursed his lips.

“She could tell he took poison. But that’s all.”

“Yes,” Seth said. “He did.”

“…Did you give it to him?”

Seth snorted.

“You said you killed him.”

Seth sighed. “In a way I did.”

“What do you mean?”

“He took it himself. Voluntarily.”

“Why?”

Seth grimaced. “I pretended to be dead. He wanted to be with me. So he killed himself to follow after me.”

Horus simply stared at him. “What?”

Seth laughed. “He’d talked about it before, you know. Binding our souls in death somehow. I knew he couldn’t do it, but he’d try.” Seth shrugged. “Whatever it was would require me to die first, at best. So I didn’t.” Seth grinned. “But he took the bait anyway.”

"…That's impressive."

Seth shrugged. "I didn't do it alone. Sekhmet helped. She knew how obsessive he was. Because she just… knows most everything, apparently."

Horus' expression grew thoughtful. "Mother always said Osiris left Sekhmet alone because she knew too much for him to pin down. She was always one step ahead of him. And he was lucky she didn't care to rule." Horus shook his head. "I guess he pushed too far."

Seth looked to the big window on one side of the room, gazing out at the calm waters beyond, as if he could see Sekhmet there. She hadn't contacted him even once, and he had no way to reach out to her, as usual. It was frustrating. "I'm still not sure why she helped me. We used to be allies after a fashion, but… It's just strange. It's not like I can offer her anything."

"Perhaps she disliked the way Osiris was causing the kingdom to stagnate. Many disagreed with his isolationist policies, and his focus on indulgences."

"Hmm… it'll be interesting to see if *Isis* partakes in indulgences, I guess."

"You think Mother will fall to the same ends?"

"I think the throne messes with your priorities," Seth said. "It's a lot of power for one person to have."

Horus nodded. "Yes, that's true…"

Seth set the khopesh aside and said, "What are you best skilled at, then? We could spar."

"What?"

Seth grinned. "You have to be the best, right? I was a general for years before I was taken prisoner by Osiris. Maybe you'll learn a thing or two. Or you'll teach me something new."

Horus smiled. "Okay. That sounds good. But I'm best at hand-to-hand. Though I always appreciate more practice there."

Seth stretched a bit as he walked over to a practice mat. "All right. Let's go!"

What followed was an oddly enjoyable session of practice. Fighting out of the water was different than in it, but Seth had learned how to do both. Horus was larger and more muscular than him, but that had always been the weakness of Seth's enemies: they saw his slightly smaller size and figured he was a pushover. But bulk often got in your way, and it was proven as Seth moved around Horus' hits and knocked him down over and over. He picked the younger man up and explained what he did wrong, each time. Horus would nod, and attempt to correct. And he was a good student.

But in the end, Horus ended up on his back on the floor, with Seth's left calf over his throat.

Seth grinned. "Give up?"

Horus scoffed. “Yes.” His eyes were bright and he was breathing quickly. There was sweat on his skin that made it glisten. Seth remembered what the feel of Horus' skin in his hands felt like, how hard his muscles were. The strength there. It called to something in him. Something Seth didn't want to think about.

Seth snorted and sat back on the ground. He was breathing quickly, and realized they’d been at it for a while. He was sweating, too.

“You’re amazing,” Horus said as he sat up with a grin. “I’d love to see you underwater, too!”

Seth smiled. “Maybe someday.”

Horus nodded and stood up. He offered a hand to Seth. “Want to get something to eat?” I’m starving.”

Seth stared at the offered hand, then took it. Horus pulled him up, and they were standing close together. For a moment, it was like the world went quiet.

Horus stared down at him in surprise. His right hand drifted forward slightly, nearly touching Seth's left. But he pulled it back.

Seth felt too aware of Horus, of himself. Of heated thoughts and things getting out of hand. Of how they could easily pull each other close and lose themselves that way. When he'd been in the military, it had been relatively common for people to work out their feelings that way, and Seth wasn't above it, though such occasions were rarer as he went up the ranks. Now he knew that if he wanted...

Osiris felt so distant in that moment, but right there, too. A part of Seth was afraid, and another part just wanted someone to cling to. Someone who wasn't Osiris or a nightmare, or his own anxious thoughts.

Seth's cheeks warmed and he looked away. “Yeah, let’s get something to eat.”

“Have you thought about what you’ll do?” Horus asked over dinner that night. They had moved to the dining room Horus recommended, and Seth had accepted the offer to dine together after the nice practice session earlier. It was a large, pretty room, with lightly scented flowers and a large window overlooking the water, as many rooms in the house did. The sky was clear and the moon was high and bright. The room lights were gentle, and the place had a sense of ease to it. Dinner had been good, too.

Seth was relaxing in a comfortable chair with a fruity non-alcoholic drink of some kind that the air spirits had introduced him to. Seth was giving out more trust, slowly. He still made his own meals, but he was willing to try things.

Horus had a cup of hot chocolate, and was warming his hands on it. “I mean you can stay here, of course, you’re more than welcome, and I enjoy your company. But my mother will want answers from me, and if I decide to join her court, I’m not sure this place will be available for you to use…”

Seth winced and said, “I know.”

Horus set his cup on the table. “I have connections with humans, of course, but I don’t get the impression you want to live on land.”

“I don’t,” Seth replied. “And I was going to follow up some connections of my own. But thank you.”

Horus nodded. “I could always speak to Mother on your behalf. You’re no ally to Osiris. I’m sure she wouldn’t see the harm in leaving you alone. She might even be interested in recruiting you. If you were interested, of course.”

Seth considered his glass. “I *have* thought about it. I’m just not sure. I encountered some of her soldiers during my escape and it didn’t go well.”

“What happened?”

“They shot me with arrows.”

Horus’ eyes widened. “That’s how you were injured when you got here?”

Seth blinked. “Yes…?” He’d almost forgotten about it, honestly. He’d been so overwhelmed by everything he hadn’t even thought much about it.

“I saw the wounds on your back when Sekhmet left you on the shore on your stomach. But since I don’t have healing magic, I put you in the pool and went to fetch a first aid kit. But when I returned, you were already healed.”

“…I *do* heal quickly. The injuries were minor.” Though usually it took longer than that. Perhaps the injuries were smaller than he thought?

“If you can remember who the soldiers were, I can report that to Mother as well. If they were acting out of line, they can be disciplined.”

“*If* they were acting out of line,” Seth emphasized. “*If.* It’s possible they weren’t. That they were under Isis’ orders to capture or kill me.”

Horus grimaced and nodded. “It’s why I think I *should* contact Mother. I don’t think she’d show up on my doorstep with an army if she learned you were here. But it’s something we won’t know about until we try it.”

Seth sighed. “She doesn’t know where I am right now. I could get away… find somewhere else to go.”

“She’ll scry for you soon if she hasn’t already. Can you evade that?”

Seth grimaced. Isis was the most powerful sea witch anyone knew. If anyone could find him… He was probably just lucky she was busy setting up a new government. It gave him time, but not much. He’d been using some of it to look for ways to destroy adamant, because the collar was still sitting in his room. But he’d only found mentions of, “Use magic to do it.”

And with Horus apparently magicless, Seth was out of luck, given his own magic, even at full strength, didn't go that way.

Horus bowed his head. "I know this is hard. But reaching out first could be a good idea. If nothing else, it'll give you a head start." He raised his head to meet Seth's gaze. "And I swear, you are under my protection while you are under this roof. If she wants to harm you, she, or anyone under her orders, will have to go through *me* first."

Seth blinked. "You'd… go against your mother for me?"

"You're my guest. And Sekhmet trusted me with your care." Horus smiled. "Plus, I like you."

Seth snorted.

"You're distant at times, but that's hardly surprising given where you came from, and that you barely know me. But you're interesting and insightful, and I'd like to spar with you again, if you can, to learn more from you. You're probably the person I've known longest among the merfolk. And that means a great deal."

"It's hardly a flattering view of our people." He was a soldier, not an ambassador or artist or philosopher or something. He knew how to disable and kill. How to evade detection. He could manage groups of people and logistics. He was popular with his soldiers – back when he'd had them – but there was still a distance there. What few friends he made over the years he hadn't spoken to during his imprisonment. And only Sekhmet seemed to reach out to him. Perhaps others had tried, but he'd never learned of it, nor seen any of them at court during his visits there at Osiris' side. A part of him knew it would be suicide for anyone to try – Sekhmet clearly didn't care, or believed in their success – but another, unkinder part, felt they'd written him off. And it made him more cynical in turn. He was polite to Horus, and even attempted friendliness, but the spar earlier had been the closest they'd been since the time in the pool, and Seth had been insistent on keeping that barrier between them.

In short, knowing Seth, with all his baggage, was hardly a great experience of what merfolk could be like. There were wiser, kind people out there, than him.

Horus smiled. "I wouldn't say that."

Seth snorted before he met Horus' gaze and felt there was something *else* in them that made Seth's cheeks heat.

He had to stomp that down before it got worse.

"You know Osiris wanted me for my body, as well," Seth said, which made Horus's eyes widen. "If that's the only reason you're protecting me, you'll not be getting payment in kind." Seth would kill him if it came to it. Seth found he didn't particularly want to, but if he *had* to…

Horus winced. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean…" He held up a hand. "Yes, to be honest, I *do* find you physically attractive. And I have to admit I've thought about that day in the pool for a time… But that's not why I enjoy your company. It's not the sole reason, anyway, or the main

one. I don’t expect you to pay me back at all, and certainly not in that way. You are a guest here. One I’m honored to aid.”

“…Good.”

“You don’t believe me.”

Seth sighed. “Horus, whether or not Osiris is your father… He kept be as his bed slave for 40 years. You know that. What do you expect?”

Horus bowed his head. “I know that. And I don’t… expect anything.”

Seth nodded.

“I just… remember that moment in the pool. Where our tails touched.”

Seth’s cheeks warmed.

“I’ve never felt anything like that. It was… electric, almost.”

Seth could lie. He could wave it off. But it felt cruel to someone who had offered him so much for nothing in return. So Seth sighed and said, “It sometimes happens when merfolk… when we touch like that. It can mean something… sometimes. But it could also mean nothing. It’s unusual for us to touch that way, so part of it is lack of familiarity…”

“What can it mean sometimes?” Horus asked.

“That we…” Seth sighed. “It’s just… I’ve never experienced it before. I only know that *sometimes* it happens…”

Horus was watching him with a fierce expression.

“…That we’re compatible,” Seth said. “Or something. Not soulmates, that’s a myth, but that… It’s tied up in old magic and the like. And it might not even be that.”

Horus nodded. “If you’ve never experienced it, how do you know what it is?”

Seth sighed. “It happened to my parents. And two of my friends. They all described similar things. And it’s something you’re taught when you’re young. It’s pretty common for people looking for partners to try it, to see if there’s a spark, so to speak. But even for couples who end up staying together, it sometimes never happens.”

“I see.”

“But it also doesn’t have to mean anything,” Seth said. “Even for couples it happens to, they don’t always stay together.”

“…You don’t want it to mean anything.”

Seth swallowed. “Horus, you’re a good man, from what I know. But I’m not… I don’t know that I’m ready for something… For anything. I don’t know that I ever will be again.”

“I’m not asking for anything.”

Seth shut his eyes. “I’m glad to hear that. And I’m sorry I can’t… be more for you. You deserve more than that.” He opened his eyes again and met Horus’ blue gaze, wondering what a future with him would be like, but shying away from it. Horus would go on to do great things, whatever he did.

At best Seth had a life of isolation ahead of him. Perhaps running. Perhaps a swift death if he wasn’t careful.

“I want you to have more than that,” Seth said. “There’s a whole world of people out there for you, and you *can* have more than… than me and my baggage.”

“I feel like you’re too dismissive of yourself.”

“I’m realistic,” Seth said. “I know about the things that let me become a general. My brains and skills. But there are other things, too. I still have nightmares, flashbacks, I’m difficult to be around… I don’t know that I’ll trust being near someone like that again.” Even though he was relatively okay with the sparring, if it had lasted much longer… But that road meant something more. Something he wasn’t sure he was ready for.

He *was* afraid. And he felt he had the right to hang onto his fear, after everything.

“…I understand.”

Seth was quiet, then. He didn’t know what else to say. Horus clearly knew he was trying for too much. That was good. It meant Seth wouldn’t have to try so hard to push him away.

“Are you all right with me speaking to my mother, to let her know you’re here?”

Seth sighed. “Yes.” He would be prepared somehow. He could always shift into sand and escape into the waves. He’d be gone before even Isis could catch him.

“I’ll send a message to Mother,” Horus said. “I’ll ask her to visit so we can talk.” He breathed in deeply, then said, “I’ve made my decision about what I want to do for my coming of age.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 5: Defense

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seth tried not to pace the nice-looking front room he and Horus were waiting in for Isis to arrive. The chairs were comfortable and pale blue, and there were paintings of birds on the walls. The large window nearby had pale white curtains pulled back and showed the sunny beach, and the water in the distance.

“She wouldn’t agree to it out in the ocean without sending guards *first*,” Horus said, as if he hadn’t said it a dozen times.

“I know,” Seth said. He tried not to be snippy about it, but he was. He was frustrated and anxious. He was weaker in his humanoid form and they all knew it. He could still transform into sand, but it was harder to move around, and certainly harder to use the sand as a weapon. And he wasn’t going to sit in the pool and wait for Isis to find him. But if guards arrived *first*, they had no idea how the guards would react. Word could spread of who was here, and Seth… wasn’t sure how well that would go down. At least if Isis came herself, they could confront the problem head-on (hopefully).

Seth still lightly tugged at his thin brown slacks. The white shirt he’d picked wasn’t uncomfortable, but he wished he was in the *water*.

“If you’re nervous, you could always take a break and—”

Seth glared at him, and Horus pursed his lips. Seth settled back in his chair.

After a time, Horus stood up and went to the front door.

Seth stood, as well, and dusted off his shirt, as if it had somehow gotten dirty in the time he’d done nothing with it.

Horus glanced at him, and Seth settled his expression into a neutral one. Horus then opened the dark wooden door. “Mother, welcome.”

“Horus!” Isis was much shorter than her son, and had dark skin and long, dark hair with gold and jewelry scattered throughout it. She wore a gorgeous trailing black dress that cut her figure well, and translucent veils around her arms, as well as a number of jeweled armlets and rings. She stepped forward to embrace Horus, and he hugged her back. “Are you doing well?”

“Yes, Mother,” Horus said, holding her tightly for a moment before letting her go. He was smiling warmly. Then he put out his left arm to Seth. “This is Seth.”

Isis turned her gaze fully to Seth, and he didn’t stiffen. “Yes. We’ve met.”

It was many years ago, now, and they'd never been close. Isis had her own circle of friends and allies and never really involved herself with soldiers. And Seth wasn't high society enough to frequent those circles himself. Seth bowed his head to her. "Isis."

"It's *your majesty*, now," Isis said with a smirk.

Seth's cheeks heated. "Your Majesty."

Isis scoffed, but was clearly pleased. "We truly live in strange times. The greatest war hero of our people, and we don't even know if you plan to return to my queendom, do we?" Her smile was bright, and her eyes were dangerous. Seth knew she could order his death with a word. He saw the soldiers waiting outside the door. Isis may not have sent them ahead under the agreement to meet here, but she came prepared, at least in part because she could still be attacked while traveling.

Osiris had died in his own home, after all, and he hadn't waged war against the government, or attacked the palace.

"We don't," Seth acknowledged.

"Would you like something to drink, Mother? There's food, as well," Horus offered.

Isis walked over to the couches and sat, watching Horus and Seth thoughtfully. "I'll take some tea. I suppose we might be chatting awhile."

The air spirits fetched it for her, and Horus and Seth settled on chairs nearby.

Horus sat forward. "I have made my decision for my coming of age."

Isis smiled. "Good. What have you decided?"

"I will join your court and live amongst the merfolk."

Isis' expression was bright. "Horus, that's wonderful!"

"On the condition that Seth is allowed freedom to travel where he pleases, so long as it is within your control to allow it."

Seth froze.

Isis' smile twitched. "Excuse me?"

Seth looked at Horus, who was watching Isis and ignoring him. "That is my condition."

Isis looked at Seth, who couldn't keep the surprise off his own face. "Did you plan this?"

"No… Your Majesty," Seth replied. Horus hadn't told *him* that. "I'm just a guest here."

"And what has that involved, specifically?" Isis ignored the hot tea on the table nearby to watch Seth with a sharp expression. "I remember what you did for Osiris."

Seth's left hand twitched, but he kept himself from attacking her.

"Mother!" Horus said, sharply. "I'll remind you that Seth is my *guest!"* Horus turned to Seth. "I'm sorry about that."

"Horus—" Isis began.

"Apologize to him, Mother."

Isis glared, and then looked at Seth. "I apologize, Seth. I overstepped."

Seth simply stared back at her for a moment, before saying, "It's fine, Your Majesty."

"Osiris kept Seth prisoner," Horus said. "Seth is not my prisoner, nor do I expect payment from him, as he is a *guest.* But I have little enough I need in life, Mother. I merely wish to do as a leader should and support those who need it."

Seth felt his cheeks warm again. He knew part of this was pity, and he hated accepting it, but what else was he to do? He had nowhere to go other than to flee to the humans on land and live there forever, apart from the sea. He *was* someone in need of the kindness of others, and living here, in Horus' home, after taking Sekhmet's help to get rid of Osiris and free himself from imprisonment… He was constantly reminded of how much he needed the help of others. He wasn't strong enough on his own.

"That is admirable, Horus," Isis said, her expression rigid. "A noble first decision for someone of your rank." She looked at Seth. "I hope you appreciate what Horus is doing for you."

"I do, Your Majesty." *Even if I still don't really understand why he's doing it, since it would be so much easier for him not to.*

"Very well," Isis said, looking at Horus. "This condition is accepted, so long as Seth never takes up arms against my throne." She looked at Seth. "I know you could easily lead an army against me. Or attack me on your own. I will not allow this, if you are to reside in my queendom."

"I accept those terms, Your Majesty," Seth said. "I would be honored to help support your armed forces, as well, if you'll have me." It would be something like what he used to do. He could find his own people, too, if any of them remained, and see how they fared. Perhaps some of them had survived Osiris' purges in the wake of Seth's imprisonment.

Isis frowned. "You would serve as one of my generals?"

"If you wish."

"It would be quite a boon to have you on our side… Though my soldiers would be wary."

Seth watched her thinking it over. She picked up her cup of tea and sipped it, while watching Seth thoughtfully. Eventually she lowered the cup and said, "Very well. I will discuss this with my generals, and see what their thoughts on the matter are."

Seth bowed his head. “I’ll want to speak to them as well, if I can, Your Majesty.”

“Of course.” Isis turned to Horus, “Horus, we’re going to have to discuss your new role and duties, as well.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“You’ll move to the palace, with me.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Isis looked at Seth. “Your old quarters have been left untouched since Osiris took you captive. Depending on what my generals decide, you may return to them.”

Seth felt his throat tighten at the thought. He hadn’t even thought about his old rooms in the palace. They were large, as suited his rank, and comfortable. The most home he’d had for much of his life. It felt like a whole other world. He’d be living in the palace again, near where Osiris had tormented him for decades. Could he bear that?

…He could leave for work. Perhaps he could even find somewhere else to reside. He would collect his things and make a new place for himself. But at least this way, he might have some of the old control over his life again, while he figured the rest out. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Isis included her head and looked to Horus. “Now we’ll discuss the island.”

“Staring at them isn’t going to make them go away,” Horus said as he and Seth swam through the water. Seth was busy occasionally glaring at the guards following them. Isis had brought quite a bit of protection, and Seth imagined things must be bad to warrant it. Unless she was showing off, or thought she needed them to keep *Seth* under control, which would make him almost respect her. “Plus, it means more freedom, in a way.”

Seth sighed. He knew *that*. With the guards there, he and Horus were free to leave the island, and swim where they pleased, at least *after* accompanying Isis to the palace. The water around them was open and comfortable, and Seth could properly stretch his fins.

It was nice.

He *also* noticed the look Isis sent them from up ahead as she swam onward, her bright, large tail weaving majestically through the waters. She carried her sea witch’s staff, covered in multicolored coral.

After their chat, Isis had insisted they head to the palace to finalize Horus’ ascension, as it were, and make it official as soon as possible. Anything Horus wanted from the house on the island, servants would bring. Horus had insisted Seth come along, which clearly annoyed Isis, but she shrugged, and noted that he would be expected to consult with the military anyway.

So here they were, swimming back to where Seth had escaped from, and Seth tried not to let the chills get to him. Osiris was dead. Isis said as much, herself. And Osiris wasn't coming back. The guards around them were for their *protection*. Not an ambush.

Horus stayed close to Seth, but not *too* close, giving Seth a bit of room. It was difficult not to gravitate to him, with everything happening. Seth was wary of the soldiers, and still wary of Isis, for all she'd been quite giving in this arrangement. Horus was the only relatively familiar part of this, and a friend.

But that way lay madness, too. And Seth imagined Isis wouldn't be very comfortable with him getting more obviously close with Horus. *That* was amusing in its own right. He found what she said earlier insulting, of course, but Seth didn't know whether to be furious or amused that Isis might consider him as someone who would actually try to sleep his way to power, at least with Horus in particular. Anyone who saw his life under Osiris and assumed that would be incredibly stupid. Besides, it was *definitely* not who Seth was. And if he *did* pursue Horus, it wouldn't be for that reason.

His cheeks heated. *If* he did? It wouldn't happen at *all.*

"You're sure you're okay leaving so soon?" Seth asked, quietly, to distract himself. He'd asked earlier, but they'd moved so quickly…

Horus shrugged, the movement highlighting his thick shoulders, which Seth forced himself not to stare at. "It was a home. I admit I care for it. But I've moved before. And I like the idea that you'll have more freedom sooner, and we can chat as equals."

Seth felt his cheeks heat. "You'll be a noble. I'm just a soldiers, at the end of the day."

"But you're more powerful here, physically and with magic. A title can't grant me that."

Seth supposed that was true.

"Besides, I trust the air spirits to take care of it all. And anyone Mother sends. Most of what's there is stuff she sent me. I doubt she'd forget any of it. Or abandon it."

"It's rash, to go so quickly."

"I'm seizing power," Horus said, grinning. "Someone wise taught me about that, once."

In spite of himself, Seth smiled, and looked away.

Seth blamed his distraction for why he wasn't ready for the attack.

They were passing an old, rotting, human shipwreck mostly inhabited by various fish. Soldiers sometimes used such wrecks as target practice. Children sometimes dared each other to explore them, which could lead to accidents and angry parents. They were a common enough sight that elders simply mapped them and told people to be wary. But that didn't stop the daring and the stupid.

They were also an excellent hiding place for ambushes, such as the armored and armed group who leapt out over Isis' group.

Isis pulled up a translucent blue bubble shield made of magic around them, which blocked much and kept enemies away, but didn't block some of the magic arrows and assorted missiles from taking down a few of the guards in the first wave.

Horus pulled Seth out of the path of a spear that fell where he'd been floating. Seth dissolved into sand to escape the grip, studied the area, and quickly launched himself past Isis' shield at their attackers. He was furious at being caught unawares, frustrated about the mess Horus was throwing himself into, and tore through two surprised enemies before they even realized what hit them. He used his sand to wrench up boards from the ship and toss them at more enemies, dissolved himself when they shot at him, and reformed to smash his tail into the head of an armored merman who was desperately looking for him. The hit knocked the man into the side of the ship, stunning him.

Seth lost himself in the fight, falling into old, familiar movements, particularly as more enemies appeared from within the ship. He grabbed a lost spear at one point and began cutting down enemies with it, hitting his targets every time. Screams filled the air, and there was a mix of people scrambling to shoot at him and also to flee from him, particularly since no one could get close to him, at least until it was too late for *them*.

In the end, he moved back to the circle of Isis' guards, looking out for more enemies. But there was only the carnage he'd left behind, with a few merfolk floating, unconscious, dead, or too injured to get away, in the area. Blood drifted in the water.

Seth gripped the stolen spear in his hand, ready to use it again. His blood sang at him to keep going. But he calmed himself, knowing he needed to be focused and ready.

"If anyone is still alive and able, come out now and surrender!" Isis called out. "Or we'll show no mercy!" She still had the shield up over herself, Horus, and a few guards who stood ready beside her. Most of her forces were still there, albeit with injuries of their own. Their weapons were bloody.

There was no reply, and Seth wondered if they'd killed the only leaders the group had, or if they were too cowardly to come forward. But as he looked around, he spotted movement beneath Isis' shield, near the bodies of some of the fallen, partially in the shadow of the wreck. Someone was making a spell!

Seth aimed and threw his spear at whoever it was. His aim was true. They went down. The spell died.

But his focus meant he didn't see the person behind him aiming for his back.

He felt whatever it was hit him straight on, before he could dissolve into sand. The pain was sharp, whatever it was, but he was already turning and going after them. The woman who'd fired at him barely screamed before he killed her. She'd been hiding on the top deck of the ship, among more bodies of the fallen.

A burst of pain went through Seth and he collapsed on the deck, back in his true form. *I really need to get better at guarding my back…*

“Seth!” Horus yelled.

Seth tried to get up, but it felt… rather hard. His tail struggled to move. He saw Horus swimming towards him, and Isis following him, and then darkness covered his vision.

When Seth came to, he was laying on his left side, and staring at what he realized was Horus’ neck. Seth blinked, and then froze when he realized Horus was pressed up close to him, chest to chest, and their tails were entangled. Horus’ left arm was wrapped around Seth’s chest, keeping him close. Horus’ eyes were shut, and he was asleep. He felt warm. The electricity of their tails touching was getting to him, as well, making it difficult to focus. But he needed to figure out what was going on, so he pulled his gaze away to look around.

They were still on the shipwreck, but somehow had seemingly cleaned away some of the corpses. Seth and Horus floated slightly above the deck itself.

“You’re awake,” Isis said from nearby.

Seth looked up over Horus to see Isis sitting on a broken mast, watching him. Her dress looked something like an octopus’ tentacles, which made her more intimidating. He also realized it probably wasn’t a good idea that he was, well… the way he was with Horus.

“What happened?” Seth asked, unsure how to extricate himself without hitting Horus somehow.

“You nearly died,” Isis said, watching him calmly. “The blow that hit you was a curse, meant to poison you quickly to your death.”

Seth shuddered at that.

“Thankfully, Horus got to you in time, and helped slow the curse.”

“…What?”

Isis shrugged. “Neither of us knew what he did. But your tail wrapped around his, and the curse’s progress slowed. It gave me time to deal with it.”

Seth blinked, and recalled his injury when he’d arrived at the island. He’d healed so quickly… “But Horus doesn’t have magic.” There was a coming of age ceremony when Horus hit 28. They would know *then* if Horus had any. It couldn’t be their connection, could it? He’d never heard of special healing powers coming from that…

Isis studied Seth thoughtfully, and Seth realized he’d forgotten to call her *Your Majesty.* But instead of reprimanding him she said, “He is a mysterious child. He will make an interesting prince.”

Seth had no response to that.

Isis lowered her eyes to Horus. “My son was worried sick about you. He went to your side immediately when you fell.”

Seth’s cheeks darkened.

Isis studied him for a bit. “What is your interest in my son? Because clearly there is more going on than you say.”

Seth’s cheeks heated. “I… He’s a good man. I didn’t intend… This isn’t what I meant. I don’t wish to be with anyone.”

“So you say. But your actions seem to show otherwise.” She looked pointedly at Seth and Horus’ intertwined tails.

Seth swallowed nervously. “I don’t remember grabbing him. It was…” He grimaced. “I don’t know.” Had he subconsciously reached for safety? Which in this case, meant Horus?

Isis met his gaze. “I cannot say I support this relationship, whatever it is.”

Join the club, Seth thought.

“But since my son is not averse to it, I will not stand in the way.” She sighed. “He will have time for other relationships, after all.”

Seth had no idea what to say to that. He knew at least some of Horus’ feelings on the matter, but knew it wasn’t worth debating while Horus was sleeping and they were still out in the open, potentially in danger. But he knew his limits. “I won’t get in his way,” Seth said. “I don’t want to hurt him. I owe him much.”

Isis nodded. “Given my son’s advocacy for you, and the way he reacted when you were injured… I don’t see any of that being an issue.”

Seth simply stared back at her. Given her previous demeanor, he expected more of a fight.

Isis sighed and leaned back. “You did a good job defending us. I can see at least some of where your loyalties lie.” She studied him again. “Do not hurt my son.”

“I won’t,” Seth said. He didn’t intend to. Ever.

Horus’ left arm tightened around him, and for a moment, Seth recalled a different arm there, pulling him close, keeping him caged. But Horus’ tail twitched slightly, sending more pleasant electricity through Seth, and he felt contained and… oddly safe. His back still hurt a bit, but he could tell he was healing.

“I will admit,” Isis continued, “Selfishly, if this is what convinced him to take up his birthright, I’m not averse to it.” She met Seth’s gaze coldly. “I want my son nearby where I can protect him. When he can become a powerful man.”

“He’s a pawn,” Seth said, quietly.

Isis raised an eyebrow at him. “You disapprove?”

“Does it matter? I’m a pawn for you, too. He’s your son. I’m just a soldier. Your Majesty.”

Isis studied him for a bit longer, then shrugged. “I suppose it doesn’t.” She flicked her tail to raise herself up off the mast. “Rest. Recover. We’ll head out soon enough. We all have responsibilities waiting for us at the palace.”

Seth watched her go. He was still held tightly, and realized he had best resign himself to this for the time being. They’d talk about it when Horus awoke.

He settled against Horus, listening to the sound of the younger man breathing. He watched Horus’ sleepy expression and thought, *I’ll keep protecting you, too. Even from Isis, if I have to.*

He shut his eyes to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 6: Shoulders

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Horus woke up, he blinked at Seth, who just stared back at him briefly before saying, “Would you please untangle your tail from mine?”

Horus blinked some more, and then his eyes widened and he said, “Sorry!” Before letting go and pulling away.

Seth let him loose, too, feeling that pleasant electricity vanish without the contact. Isis was gone, so it was just the two of them over the shipwreck. Isis’ guards were away with her, as well, giving them some privacy. But Seth knew they were patrolling the area.

“Are you okay?” Horus asked, staying close but not *too* close. “You were badly hurt…”

“I’m fine,” Seth replied, and it was true. Physically, he felt as hale as he’d been before the attack. “Thank you for… your concern.” He didn’t know how else to thank Horus. For helping him to heal? For… something? “Did your mother tell you about the um… the healing thing?”

Horus’ eyebrows rose. “What healing thing?”

“I healed faster when you got to me.”

“…Really?”

“I think it happened on your island, too, when I first arrived.”

“Is that your magic?”

“No, I don’t have that kind of skill.”

“Oh.”

“…You didn’t do anything?” Seth asked.

“No.” Horus smiled sadly. “I don’t have healing magic. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

“Then I have no idea what’s going on.” Seth frowned. “That’s not normal.”

Horus thought for a moment, then asked, “It’s not because of the um… connection between us, is it?”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing happening before.”

“Ah.”

“But it might be something about your latent abilities, given you’re near your coming of age. I don’t know.” Seth shook his head. “This isn’t my area of expertise.”

Horus nodded. “Of course. I’ll speak to Mother more about it. Maybe we’ll figure it out.”

Isis didn’t have a clue either, so far as Seth could tell, but he nodded anyway.

Horus met Seth’s gaze for a bit before adding, “Should we talk about… your tail?”

Seth’s cheeks heated. “It was an accident. I didn’t realize I was doing it.”

Horus’ gaze grew neutral. “Oh.”

“I don’t mean…” Seth sighed. “Horus, I acknowledge there’s a connection between us. Perhaps I don’t plan to embrace it fully in at least a romantic sense at this point, but all of this has made me aware that… you could use more people on your side.”

Horus blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t have bodyguards yet, and you will in time… but you’ll also need your own protection, generally. Someone at court in your corner.” Seth grimaced. “I don’t mean to just install myself there, but… my conversation with Isis makes me believe you might want help sooner rather than later.”

“And you plan to fulfill that role?”

“…As a token of my gratitude, yes. I have the credentials for it from my military service. If nothing else, I can protect you, physically.”

“Ah.”

Seth heard the sadness in his voice and sighed. “And because… I like spending time with you. And want to ensure your safety.”

Horus smiled at that. “Then I accept your offer. Though I hope it won’t interfere with your plans with the military.”

“I’ll figure it out. …I’m sorry I grabbed you.”

“I didn’t mind,” Horus replied.

Seth blinked at him. “You’re sure?”

“Really. I didn’t mind.”

“Even though I’ve said, repeatedly now, that I’m not just… jumping into a relationship with you? Being a sort of protector or advisor for you isn’t the same as… whatever my anatomy seems to want.”

“I will acknowledge that is… frustrating. But I’ll deal with it.” Horus smiled. “If you need someone or… something to grab onto, I’ll happily be there for you in future.”

Seth snorted. “Don’t hold your breath.”

Horus laughed. Seth pretended it wasn’t cute.

But as Seth studied him, Seth was afraid, too. He knew he was falling easily for Horus. Horus just… made it easy. The man didn’t seem to have a bad bone in his body. But he was going to be a prince. Isis’ heir. He’d have just as much power over Seth as Osiris had. Power that could easily be abused in accordance with Horus’ whims.

Suddenly returning to the palace didn’t sound so appealing.

He wouldn’t do that, Seth thought as he swam off in search of Isis and her guards, with Horus at his back. *He’s not like that.* But Seth had thought the same thing about Osiris, hadn’t he?

Seth snorted. *Is this how I spend the rest of my life? Afraid of anything being Osiris’ shadow?* Osiris’ mark forever on his life, deciding who he was with and what choices he could have?

Seth looked out on the open ocean, with its endless blue. He could go and hide somewhere else. Without Isis hunting him down, there were lots of options. But hiding in a hole somewhere, apart from everyone, wasn’t what he wanted, either.

Still better than jumping the first warm body after Osiris, Seth thought.

He sighed.

Their party left the shipwreck shortly after that and headed to the palace. Their group was more on alert now, but there were no more ambushes. Horus still swam near Seth, but they didn’t strike up any conversation. Seth could still feel where Horus had held him, and where he’d held Horus in turn. He knew their current arrangement was unofficial, but he tried to act more like a guard and keep watch. But it was hard, with Horus so close, and Seth’s body wanting to draw nearer.

They arrived at Isis’ palace soon enough, and it looked little different than when Seth had left. The structure was tall and beautiful, with curving walls that resembled sea plants and coral, made from stone that rippled through rainbow colors in different lighting. It was like a large, intimidating coral reef, with entryways and windows for visitors and residents to swim into and out of. There were more guard patrols wearing different armor, now, but the panic was gone. Merfolk of all kinds and ages saluted or bowed to Isis as she passed, and gave Horus and Seth curious looks. One mer clearly from a killer whale family was surrounded by a small crowd of smaller merfolk, who eyed Seth thoughtfully from a distance. When Seth met their gaze, the large mer grinned at him, and Seth wasn’t sure if it was friendly or not, but he nodded back.

Seth was used to odd looks from his time as Osiris’ *pet,* so he did his best to ignore most of the onlookers. He tried to focus on making sure no one got too near Horus. He wasn’t an

official bodyguard or anything, but he looked after the man to some degree. But between the local guards and Isis' protection, no one tried anything.

There was no particular grand ceremony to mark their entrance, other than a sort of guard arrangement as they entered the palace. Seth was followed along, staying at Horus' side. He also didn't like to think too hard about how he was *returning* to Osiris' palace, after so long attempting to escape it.

It's not his palace anymore, Seth thought. *It's Isis'*. He could feel the adamant collar in the bag he'd brought with him. Almost like Seth had brought a piece of *Osiris* back. Seth didn't even know what he'd do now. He couldn't ask Isis for help: she might use it against him. And Horus couldn't undo it, and might tell his mother. If Horus *did* inherit some special power during or after his coming of age, maybe it would even *induce* him to use it.

Seth felt more and more that coming here was a mistake.

Inside the palace, when Isis prepared to usher Horus to his new chambers, Horus explained matters to his mother. Isis gave Seth an annoyed look, but acquiesced, and said that Seth would be appointed quarters near Horus. She also arranged for new bodyguards for Horus.

Seth knew he should try to find time to visit his old rooms here, to see what state they were in. But being back in the main throne room was making him different to hold onto his focus. The place was largely empty, but for Isis and her guards, but he remembered sitting by Osiris' throne, collared, awaiting Osiris' pleasure.

Seth followed Horus to his palatial rooms, and stood aside while a whole crowd of servants arrived to arrange new clothes for their prince. Seth kept his eyes on them all, ready for someone to make a move. But no one did. They had fabrics, jewelry, and special products to shine his tail and prepare his hair.

Seth settled down on a chair out of the way where he could oversee it all, and didn't bother stifling a grin at Horus being overwhelmed by it but still attempting politeness. When he turned to Seth for help, Seth shrugged. There was to be a small ceremony and a meal later, and Horus had to be ready for it.

While Horus argued over jewelry with the servants, Seth glanced out the large window in the main room. Like most windows, it was spelled to keep people out, not in, and Seth could have escaped through it if he wished. But for now he simply observed the view of the inner palace grounds, with its maze of courtyards, reefs, kelp forests, and balconies. Guards and courtiers swam along, and occasionally multicolored fish of different sizes. Nothing truly large – those animals knew to stay away from the palace – but enough that he could watch the fish swim around peacefully.

Horus' chambers were larger than Seth's were, as befitted nobility, and he had a large bed and multiple closets, as well as a large vanity with a cleanly polished mirror.

Seth glared at the servants who approached him to try and prepare him for the meal, and they backed off, but he noticed a pair of long golden earrings in one of their hands, and took those

with a brief thanks. When another servant offered a pearl comb to work through Seth's hair, Seth took the comb himself and brushed out his hair.

The servants left him alone after that.

The other servants eventually finished their work and departed the room, having prettied up Horus suitably. The younger mer was now wearing a thick golden necklace, a golden circlet with a blue gem in the center, golden armbands, and golden glitter on his tail. There was heavy blue and black make-up around his eyes, making him look more regal and intimidating. His scales shone, and his skin seemed a bit shinier than it had beforehand. He also wore a thin, translucent veil that wrapped around his arms and floated around him as he moved around. His ears were pierced with blue gems.

Horus swam to his bed to rest on it with a sigh.

Seth put down the comb and swam over, floating just off the bed edge to watch Horus. "This is just a taste of things to come. Servants are the nice ones. Courtiers are something else." He'd known enough of them in his time even before his captivity.

"Don't remind me," Horus said. He looked up at Seth and smiled. "I'm glad you're here. And not trying to put something on me."

Seth laughed. "Give them a day. I'm sure they'll insist on the tattoos next time."

Horus grimaced.

Without thinking, Seth reached down to rub out the angry lines on Horus' forehead. His hand froze, and Horus stared up at him in surprise.

Seth pulled his hand back, and he settled on the bedside. "You look good. I'm… sorry it's uncomfortable."

"…I'll adjust to it. Thank you for staying."

Seth smiled. "It's my job now."

"Do you think I look good?" Horus asked, quietly.

Seth looked at Horus, who looked strangely nervous in his finery. "You look like a handsome princeling. You'll steal hearts like this." He studied Horus' shiny skin, and said, "What did they put on you? Some sort of oil?"

Horus grinned. "It's a kind of shimmer, I think? A light spell, I'm told, part of my armlets. You can touch it if you'd like."

Seth reached out a cautious hand to Horus' shoulder, and set his fingers down. It felt no different than regular skin. His hand moved softly along Horus' upper chest, before stopping on his right breast.

What am I doing? Seth thought. Beneath him, Horus didn't say anything. He didn't try to move away, though he could. Osiris never let Seth explore like this. Everything was on *his* schedule. His wants. Seth squeezed the soft flesh beneath his palm.

Horus grunted quietly.

Seth let go with, "Sorry, I…"

Horus lightly grabbed his wrist and said, "No, it… No. Please." He pulled Seth's hand back to his breast, laying it there. "I like when you touch me."

Seth's heart was racing as he looked down at Horus, who met his expression with a look of clear want and… and… Seth leaned down to kiss him, wanting to taste what he was like. Wanting to know if his body was just a fool, desperate to recreate what it was used to.

The kiss was hot and wet, and Horus cupped Seth's right cheek to keep him in place.

When they broke the kiss, Seth moved his tail onto the bed to curly around Horus again, and leaned his head against the other mer's. He shut his eyes.

Horus wrapped around him, hugging Seth's back tightly.

"I think I hate being back here," Seth said, quietly.

"…Oh."

Seth sighed. Somehow it was easier to think with Horus right there, next to him. "It's not… I don't know what other options I had. This will give me freedom to some degree. And it's my first day back. I'll figure it out."

"I'll gladly help you," Horus said. "Just ask. Anything."

Seth wanted to laugh. "I promised I'd protect *you*, you know. When I woke up to discover you were shielding me." He squeezed Horus tighter, his tail wrapped around Horus' hips.

Horus placed a kiss on Seth's brow. It was gentle and sweet.

Seth sighed. "I don't know what's coming for us. But I know that… my path is bound with yours. And worried as I am about what I'll do with that, I'm willing to give you a chance." He breathed in again and added, "I'm willing to give… something with you a chance. Obviously, anyway."

Horus smiled. "I look forward to getting to know you. And selfishly, I was hoping you'd agree to come with me here because I wanted to be near you."

"So you *do* have flaws," Seth said.

Horus snorted. "Oh, I have many. Did you think I didn't?"

Seth pushed himself up on Horus' chest to look down at him. His tail fell back to tangle more with Horus' again, sending sparks of electricity through them both. He was destroying some of the servants' work, and found he didn't care all that much. Horus was beneath him, waiting, wanting him. Seth's future, perhaps, in this place.

"I wasn't quite convinced," Seth said. The pouch with its adamant collar, which Seth hid in one of the empty wardrobes, said otherwise. But he thought he might bring it up. Someday soon. There was power in what Seth was doing here. In how Horus let him have power. Horus was young, and Seth had no designs on controlling him like a puppet. But even here, Horus was letting Seth dictate their pace, what they did.

It felt like more than Seth had been allowed in most of his life. It felt like maybe Seth could make something of himself here, different to the god of war, who killed whoever opposed Osiris. Different to the Seth who cowered and ran. Or he could start something, anyway. And Horus would be there to catch him, if Seth fell.

He ducked down to suck Horus' collarbone, making the other mer tremble beneath him. Horus squeezed Seth's hips. When Seth finally looked up, Horus had his head raised to meet Seth's eyes, his eyes cloudy with lust. "But why don't you enlighten me, my prince?"

Horus smiled.

Chapter End Notes

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