



MERMAID STEEL

JAY HARTLOVE

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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CHIELLE'S HEART WAS POUNDING with a confusing rush of worry and anticipation as she floated up under Sten's landing. She gripped the edge of the platform and looked up the ramp. The gentle slap of waves under the wooden floats measured her tense breathing. She glanced back at the setting sun, and then up at the shack. Surely Jacio would have gone home by now. Sten would be alone. Her heart pounded even harder.

Courage. This has to be done. Courage.

She hopped up on the deck and made the long climb up the ramp. Maybe this will turn out well. Why did this ramp have to be so steep? Oh, right, low tide.

The half dozen steps from the wharf edge to the door never looked so far. Now or never, she thought as she walked. All or nothing. She knocked.

Sten opened the door and a rush of warm smoke-scented air spilled over her. He was silhouetted in the orange glow from the roaring hearth. She suddenly felt cold and outside.

"Chielle. What a happy surprise. Please come in. Isn't it kind of late for you to be out?"

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She stepped in and smiled at how much she liked being here. Her smile faded as she turned to face him. "There is something I need to talk to you about."

"Sounds serious. Shall we sit over here on the bench?" He invited her with a wave of his hand. "Can I get you something? Maybe some cocoa?"

"No, thank you. I will sit. Please stop being so nice. I've got a confession to make, and I just need you to hear me out."

He joined her on the wooden bench. "All right, I'm all ears."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "That first day that I rescued you from the net? I was not just casually swimming by. I had been watching you for a while."

"Good thing. I will never regret you being there."

"For days. I knew you were a blacksmith. I acted surprised to learn your trade. I had been waiting for a chance to talk with you — because you're a blacksmith."

"I understand."

"When you offered to teach me how to work metal, I thanked Rorra for my amazing luck." She looked away. "Then I abused your trust a second time."

"You taught your men how to make those spear points."

"Yes," she sighed. "I didn't know they were going to make weapons. I thought, I thought, I don't know what I thought. Of course they were going to make weapons."

She looked up and met his gaze. "I am so sorry. I lied to you, and I betrayed your trust."

He shrugged his eyebrows and pursed his lips. "The good news is, you're not a very good liar. I suspected all this pretty much from the beginning. My only regret is that you felt you needed to lie in the first place. It certainly makes sense. You probably grew up hearing it all the time. 'Never trust a human.'"

"That's true. I'm still ashamed, especially now that I've gotten to know you and found what a kind and thoughtful person you are." She caught herself before she started gushing.

"That says a lot for you. You feel guilty for acting the way you were taught."

Her heart pounded again, this time with a glimmer of hope. She lowered her head and looked up at him. "Can you forgive me?"

He turned to face her fully. "Yes, Chielle, I forgive you."

She sighed so big her shoulders dropped. "Thank you."

"Were you worried I'd say no and throw you out?"

"I didn't know what to think. The thought of losing you was tearing me apart." She caught her breath when she heard the words that had spilled out.

Sten smiled the most charming, bemused grin she had ever seen. "Losing me?"

Her heart just about jumped out of her chest. Now or never. All of nothing. Even with all of her courage gripped tightly, all she could manage was a quiet but sincere, "Yes."

She didn't see when he moved so close, but suddenly his face was right up to hers. He was breathing just as hard as she was. She was pretty sure the pounding vibration she was sensing was his heart matching hers. He leaned in and puckered up, so she did the same.

At first contact she found the mix of soft lips and muscular pressure fascinating, but this was swept away by a sudden flood of giddy joy that completely surprised her. She held his face in her hands and he wrapped his strong arms around her body, pulling her up against his chest. She let his love wash over her and she dove in.

When at last he broke the kiss, she rubbed her cheek against his in a stroking motion. She was very happy he had shaved again today.

He seemed confused.

"That's how we kiss." She pointed down the side of her face. "Remember the pressure nerves."

"Oh, right. You're really sensitive there."

"Very."

"Which is why you don't like beards."

She stroked his bare cheek with her webbed fingers. "Yep." She wrapped her arms up under his and around his back, pulled him tight, and buried her face in his neck. "You make me so happy."

She thought she felt him stiffen under her hug. Was she moving too fast? Then he squeezed her back.

She reveled in the connection, warmed by feeling his heart beating next to hers. She nuzzled his neck and was pleased his sweat tasted like sea water.

He stroked the back of her head with his hand, caressing the fringe edges of her gill flaps. Even though his hands were rough, it was the gentlest thing she could remember.

She loosened her hug and looked up into his eyes again. His breathing quickened right with hers and they fell into a mouth kissing, cheek rubbing, head clutching frenzy. He once pushed his lips too hard and opened her mouth, only to encounter her full row of pointed, razor sharp teeth. He pulled back in surprise.

She shrugged, puckered up her full lips, and gave him a reassuring smooch.

He launched back into kissing her and her excitement overwhelmed her. The smell of his body, the texture of his loose shirt, the taste of his breath, the hair on his head, his strong hands grasping her body, fumbling with her dorsal fin, it was all intoxicating.

She was so lost in the moment she did not notice her body was gyrating, her tail was lashing, and she started to rub her breasts against him. He looked down and she saw what she was doing.

“You’re getting pretty excited,” he commented with a chuckle.

“How embarrassing. I’m sorry. My instincts took over.” She wrapped her arms around her chest. “I’m just mortified.”

“Your instincts?”

“Courtship dance, underwater. Everything is always in motion in water. We don’t just embrace, we swim around each other, brushing our bodies together. You must think I have no self-control.”

“Hey, abandon to the moment isn’t a bad thing. I’m kind of flattered that you trust me with such an intimate ritual.”

“I really did not mean to do that.”

“Would you stop apologizing? You are who you are. I’m still learning all this. Believe me, I’ve got habits and instincts that I’ll be apologizing for as well.” He caressed her cheek and held it in his hand. “Besides, when I look into those astonishing eyes of yours, I’ll forgive you anything.”

“I promise not to take advantage of that. Your trust is so important to me.”

“You’ve got it.” He leaned in and touched his forehead to hers. “Hey, it’s way past sundown. How are you going to find your way home?”

"I'll use the moon and echoes." She was sad he had moved so quickly to her departure. He really did think she was moving too fast. She joked to cover her doubts. "You're not trying to get rid of me, are you?"

"No, of course not. I've got a lot to do tomorrow, so I need to get to sleep soon. I also didn't know if you could navigate in the dark, or if your family would worry about you. Or does your family know where you are?"

"They will worry if I'm out too late. No, I have not told them about you. I told my brother about you and the metal working, but frankly, I didn't know what else to say."

"Have I really been that vague? Chielle, you stir feelings in me that I have not felt in a long, long time. I don't know how safe it would be to go tell your family that you're seeing me romantically, but please do not doubt that I am very fond of you."

Fond. Now there's a word to ponder. "May I come see you again tomorrow?"

"Um, not tomorrow. I'm going to be tied up all day. The day after next would be great. Can you make it day after tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course."

He stood up and stepped to the hearth. "Can I get you anything before you go?"

"No, thank you." She got up and straightened her erda. "You're right, it's late, and I should be going."

He intercepted her at the door. He wrapped his big arms around her and drew her up close. "I'm really happy you came tonight." The way he smiled at her nearly dissolved her apprehensions. The warm kiss he gave her finally removed her doubt.

She grinned up at him. "Day after tomorrow."

"Good night, Chielle."

"Good night, Sten."

She turned at the wharf edge and smiled back at him in his glowing doorway. She waved and thanked Rorra he was such a patient man. She nearly ruined it. As she leapt off into the black sea, she thought she must slow down, take it easy, let things flow naturally. Rorra would want it that way. Sten was worth the wait.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Hartlove is the award-winning author of the urban fantasy “Goddess Rising” trilogy (*Goddess Chosen*, *Goddess Daughter*, and *Goddess Rising*) and the fantasy romance *Mermaid Steel*. He is also the playwright, director and producer of *The Mirror’s Revenge*, the musical sequel to the “Snow White” fable, which had its theatrical run in the San Francisco Bay Area in August 2018 to rave reviews.

His stories are filled with conspiracies and the supernatural, gods, dreams, angels, and hidden connections. His creative motto is “Dark Secrets Revealed”. He loves to take stories where the reader does not expect, with sympathetic villains, heroes with very dark pasts, and lots of plot twists. He was selected as one of the “50 Authors You Should Be Reading” by *The Authors Show*.

Jay is a former competitive costumer, having won Best in Show at both San Diego ComicCon and WorldCon. You can read more about Jay’s creative adventures, including much of the research he put into his books, at jaywrites.com.

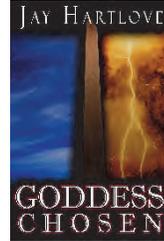
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