

Isaac's Diary

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Prologue

From an early age, I was taught that fairy tales were true. Monsters exist in our world. They live in the depths of our ocean. They kill people. They drown and eat us. They hunt us for fun, like animals. My country has had to live with them for centuries. Our shores, though beautiful and enticing, are dangerous because of those monsters. Each child is forbidden to go near the water alone. People fear walking the beaches by themselves. Tourists are warned and taught to be afraid. Many governors and leaders promised to rid us of those monsters. They sent out campaigns, spending lots of money to exterminate the threat. Year after year, more of those monsters get caught. But for each one killed, they murder hundreds of us. They don't speak our language, so we can't make peace with them. There's only one way we can protect ourselves: make them extinct.

Chapter one: No fear.

I was always a rowdy child. Listening to the rules was never my strong suit. I was a troublemaker, and I was drawn to the ocean. Its strength, vastness, and extraordinary grace charmed me, called me, allured me. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to work on the water. The dangers of the depths never scared me. I loved the ocean. I loved the beings it produced. Fish and animals that lived in those waters. The corals and plants that hid under the dark blue. It always allowed us to feed off itself. It helped us survive. Our distant relatives came out of the water to live on the earth. We evolved to be where we are now, surviving first in the comfort of the oceans. How could we ever fear something that gave us life? I was set on becoming a fisherman. I wasn't smart enough to be a marine biologist, and my family didn't have money to pay for a university. So, with only a school education under my belt, the only way I could get to the ocean was fishing. Monsters or not, I was going to explore the waters.

On the last day of school, when I got my diploma, I rushed to apply for scholarships. I knew it was hopeless, but I still did. Poor grades, no applicable

experience, only a fire in me that pushed me further towards my goal. I applied and applied, often waiting months only to hear another rejection. It seemed the world had made up its mind and refused me at every corner or path I could find. My family held me in their embrace after each letter, consoling me while secretly rejoicing in my failure. My father was a mechanic, my mother a cashier in a local store. My grandmother on my mother's side used to work as a tailor but, in recent years, couldn't continue anymore because of her tremors and poor vision. My grandfather died long ago, when my mother was still a small child. He used to be a sailor. My grandma always said that my love for water must have come from him. However, he died on one of his trips. My family often reminds me that the monsters dragged him to the depths, where he would never be found. They fear I'll meet the same fate if I proceed with my goals. I never wanted to believe them, yet it stuck with me.

When you hear stories of scary monsters that enjoy murdering people at sea all your life, even if you try to resist it, you internalise them. With years passing and my end of school coming closer, I found myself more and more fearful of the water. At 16, I started going to the beach regularly. At

first, I couldn't walk over to the water, even in the company of my friends. They laughed at me. Rebels shouldn't be scared of superstition. Then I fought against those feelings. I began walking on the edge of the waterline, dipping my legs deeper and deeper with every visit. Soon I remembered how I loved swimming. By 18, I had no more fear. I walked the beaches alone. Swam when and where I wanted. To the absolute horror of my family, I kept coming back to the ocean for more. Then one night, when I was swimming along the shore and enjoying the clear starry sky, I heard it.

In the moonlight over the calm waves of the ocean, I heard a screeching sound. An inhuman scream that reminded me of the gritting of metal. A shriek like I had never imagined before. It came from the horizon. I looked over. The water seemed calm, except... Somewhere in the distance I saw movement. With a speed greater than a motorboat, something was closing in on me. It disturbed the ocean, creating a line on the surface, like airplanes in the sky. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Another screech brought me to my senses. I turned around, rushing to the shore. I could hear something closing in. I swam faster than I ever had. Powered by adrenaline and pure horror, I kept swimming. But I was too far away. In a moment, I

felt something grab my leg. Like a hand wrapping around my ankle and pulling me down. I barely managed to take in a little air before my whole body was silently swallowed by the ocean. In salty water, I couldn't open my eyes, yet I felt pressure rising as I was dragged to the bottom. Darkness. I thought I would die there, not even able to see the beauty I longed for. However, that something released my leg. I was scared to move. Then someone wrapped their arms around my chest, holding me carefully. I felt a gentle flow on my face. Whoever was holding me, swam me to the surface. Slowly, as if knowing that a rapid ascent might hurt me. I started swimming upwards, helping that someone get me to the air. It was then I realised it wasn't human. My legs accidentally struck something. It was moving back and forth, pushing the creature and me. A tail. It was covered in scales and tiny spikes. I felt a little cut on my foot after I touched it. Finally, fresh air hit my face. I breathed in hungrily. The hands that held me before released me. I looked down to catch a glimpse of what it was, seeing a silhouette disappearing into the darkness. It had a torso, two arms, and a long tail. I couldn't look at it for long, as it hid in the depths of the night ocean. I swam back to the shore. Already on land, I

examined my foot. It had a small cut that bled slightly, but it wasn't serious. I sat on the sand for a while, staring into the distant horizon and wondering what had happened to me. I was attacked, yet then saved, seemingly by the same creature. Why did it let me go? If they kill people for enjoyment, why was I spared? I soon headed home. I never told anyone about that encounter. I knew what they would say. The ones who doubted would never believe me, yet those who believed would make me fear it.

I spent two more years working in retail and attempting to find loopholes for getting into university until one morning I received my last rejection. There were no other choices but to move on and set out to find a job in the desired industry. Fishing and sailing companies required a couple of months of training, but to even get to that you had to go through an interview. While I was researching my options, something caught my eye: they all seemed to prefer candidates with certain training. I looked it up. It wasn't that expensive and needed nothing more than enthusiasm. I signed up as soon as I could. When spring came, I dropped everything to get to that training. I was about to learn "how to survive mermaids".

Chapter two: Mermaids.

I believe it was around the beginning of May when the first day of training commenced. With excitement, I went to the location, unsure of what I would learn. The first lesson took place in a rented classroom. It had an old chalkboard, chairs with desks, and a clock on the wall. Before the teacher arrived, I got familiar with my classmates. Antonio and Diego were the only ones older than me. They were around 25 years old. The other three guys and I - Fabio, Carlos, and Hugo - were in our 20s. Two more, Elias and Felix, were 19 and 18. Just eight of us. All young men, ready to learn about a mythical creature some doubted even existed. We got to talking. All of us were here for a similar reason: to get ahead of others and get a better job on the open water. I envied Felix the most because he got into the university I wanted to go to and would start his studies there in the autumn. He wanted to become a marine engineer. Oh, how I clenched my teeth when he told me about it with enthusiasm and wonder in his eyes. Others weren't as fond of his story as I was. It seemed Felix was the only one here who didn't require the training to do better in life. From just a short conversation, I could tell he

was a smart guy. Elias was here to get a certificate and become a diver. Fabio, Carlos, and Hugo all wanted to pursue ship work in various ways. Antonio wanted to be an aquatic veterinarian but had to drop out of university due to poor grades. Now he, like me and Diego, planned for a profession in fishing or sailing. The guys overall were friendly. We were all similarly confused and excited for the course. Then the teacher walked in. He was a muscular, handsome-looking man in his 30s. He had short black hair, styled carefully to one side, and brown eyes, sizing us all up one by one. He wore a suit jacket over a plain white T-shirt, cargo shorts, and sneakers. The man walked over to the teacher's desk, put a suitcase on it, and stood still as we took our places. His serious gaze made all of us cower and shiver. He didn't need an introduction. We all knew or had heard about him. His name was Ramon – our town's famous expert on ocean monsters. He observed us silently for another moment, then looked right at me, pointed, and said:

"You, there. What's your name?"

"Isaac, sir," I replied confidently.

"What brings you here, Isaac?"

I told him. He pointed at Antonio next. Then Felix. And so on. We introduced ourselves, told him what he wanted to know. Now it was his turn. Ramon told us about his first encounter with a mermaid: how he was swimming in the evening, something grabbed him, and started to drown him. He was scared and didn't know what to do. Then he saw a pattern in the creature's movement and started mimicking it. Instead of drowning him, the monster brought him to the surface, allowing him to breathe, then dragged him underwater again. They did this dance for a while. As Ramon said, it made his head spin. The pressure of deep water on his lungs made his body burn. He had had enough of being toyed with. He grabbed the creature by the head and beat it up right there underwater. Not even the sharp claws and teeth of the beast could help it escape.

"It was lucky I was running out of air, otherwise I would've killed it. I released it and swam to the shore. The monster was scared of me, I could tell. And by the end of this course, you'll also know how to defeat those creatures!" he announced proudly.

We all clapped. The way he told this story captivated us. We listened and ate up his every word. The first lesson was all about what to

expect during the course: lectures and theory, followed by practice and a final exam, after which we would receive our certificates. The exam was planned for mid-June, when the monster attacks are most common. Ramon assured us that if anything went wrong, he'd be there to help. We believed him.

After the lesson, we all went home, thrilled and eager to continue tomorrow. In the evening, right before sleep, I kept thinking of his story. It reminded me of my own encounter with the monster. The way it dragged me down, only to then bring me back to the surface. Maybe I was spared because I didn't fight? I let it pull me to the bottom without resistance. I was paralysed with fear, allowing it to do with me as it pleased. It could have been what saved me. However, Ramon's story wasn't that much different, and he still had to fight for his life. I felt confused. I went to bed thinking I'd figure it out when I learned more about the mermaids.

The next lesson taught us about the creatures. There was so much information. A local artist helped Ramon create several images of the monster. They had males and females. Both had sick-looking greyish skin, slim figures, and long, skinny arms with sharp, long claws at the ends of

their fingers. Their eyes, bigger than humans', had long lashes and different coloration. Their faces resembled humans' but were skinny and morphed. Their mouths were filled with one row of very sharp fangs, capable of ripping human flesh apart. Their torsos were similar to people's, both genders accordingly. Their tails were longer than the rest of their body, with different shapes depending on their genetics. Some had tails that resembled ones from fairytales, others more like eels. Their tails determined their swimming patterns, which we would learn in our practical lessons. Ramon also showed us audio of their 'killing screams', as he called them. A screeching sound so high-pitched it made us squirm. I recognised it. It was a little different from what I heard but close enough for me to be sure. The mermaids could make a variety of sounds, all in this shrieking way that were barely distinguishable from each other to our untrained ears. Ramon claimed it was the monsters' only language. With it, they communicated like whales. We couldn't decipher it, though he and others had tried. Each mermaid had their own voice, yet their swimming patterns were very similar to each other. Males were the ones who attacked the most, while the females were the most successful hunters. Our exam would be

surviving a male, since an encounter with a female would be too dangerous even for Ramon himself.

In the next half a month, we learned all we could about their way of living: how they killed for fun, how they played with their prey, and how deadly they were. The variety of ways these creatures could murder people was shocking. From teeth and claws to drowning and decompression sickness, hitting against the rocks or corals, ripping people to shreds by pulling their limbs in different directions, sensory overload, and so much more. It seemed these monsters were truly sadistic in their ways. Females were known to also consume the flesh of people they killed, taking great pleasure in it. All the monstrosities Ramon told us, showed us on video, audio, or painted images - we gobbled it up like the finest feast. Felix couldn't keep up. The horrors of this knowledge freaked him out, and he dropped out before we even got to the practical lessons. We were sad to see him go but glad he could make it without putting himself through it all. As the youngest guy left our humble group, we continued.

Chapter three: Practise makes perfect.

When the basic knowledge has been learned and checked through various tests, it was time for physical exercises. We started with breathing. Mermaids are known to drown their victims, so we had to learn to hold our breath even under the harshest conditions. Ramon taught us in a public pool. I felt like a fool sitting underwater and holding my breath while other visitors swam past me in other lanes. Yet it was essential. I was one of the best in the class. Since I enjoyed swimming, long periods of holding my breath or fast traversing from one side of the pool to the other were no problem. What I really struggled to do was take a punch.

Ramon's methods of teaching weren't nice. He was brutal and believed in education through perseverance. He held other guys purposefully underwater almost until they lost consciousness. Pushed us all to our limits even when we were feeling weak or under the weather. I found out about our next step after breath-holding on my own skin when, while I was peacefully sitting on the bottom of the pool, Ramon picked me up by

the hair, still keeping my head underwater, and kneed me in the stomach. The hard hit made me spit out all the air I was holding and crumble under the pressing force of his hand. I tried to get up to reach the surface, but our tough teacher held my head by the hair, pressing me down. In a moment, my vision started fading to darkness. My limbs went soft under the man's force. Then he pulled me up to breathe. I hung in his grip by my hair, hungrily gasping for oxygen. He held me like a dead fish as he spoke:

"This is what we are going to learn next. Holding our breath even when a hard rock hits us in the chest. When you face a mermaid, they will throw you against corals, the bottom of the ocean, or just their tail. You must be ready for it."

It took me longer than others to learn that lesson. I remember coming home with bruises on my stomach, chest, and back. Hiding them from my family because I didn't want to abandon the training. It hurt so badly, especially at night. Sometimes it felt like I couldn't breathe even in my own bed. I dreamt of drowning. Of being pulled and held under the water. I would wake up sweaty and gasping for air because I would hold my breath in my sleep. It was terrifying. At that moment I feared not just mermaids but also Ramon. His hits

were serious. He never held back. He would put us against one another, making us punch each other underwater as we held our breath under pressure. It made our group more hostile. The winners were praised immensely, while losers were shamed into more training. You could guess which part of the group I was in. Being beaten and thrown, partially drowned every lesson – I thought I couldn't hold on any longer. Yet I stayed. I'd come back again and again, taking every punch and kick like my life depended on it. And it did. I thought that without this piece of paper that I would receive by the end of this suffering, I wouldn't make it to the true job I desired. To work at sea, I was ready to withstand it all.

After punching came swimming patterns. Now that we could hold our breath for long and under pressure, we began learning movements that mermaids use to disorient their victims. Ramon taught it well. He would grab us by our chests, holding tightly so we couldn't take in a lot of air, then drag us underwater, pressing us tightly to his body, and start swimming in a very specific way, imitating the movement of a tail. I always felt uncomfortable during those lessons. Not because of lack of air or long exercises, but because the teacher was pressing against my back.

His nose and chin sometimes rubbing on my face as he swam in a gentle wavy style. Getting in rhythm with him felt sensual.

Hugo dropped out about then. Ramon convinced us to laugh at him. I resisted. As the other guys continued eating up every word the teacher said, I started to disobey. I talked to Hugo in the locker room about why he was leaving. He said he felt Ramon getting hard as they swam together. It made him uncomfortable. I believed him. I couldn't look at Ramon the same way after that. The way he treated us and turned our friendly group into fight-hungry rivals made me feel disgusted. I became even more of a black sheep.

After swimming patterns came the part I enjoyed the least. We were learning how to hurt those creatures: where to hit, how to hit, how to kill them. Ramon gave us all knives that we could choose to use during the exam to damage or straight-out kill the monster. I wanted to refuse even to touch the weapon, but I couldn't. Antonio, Diego, Fabio, Carlos, and Elias following our teacher's example, pressured me into taking it. It was a hunting knife with a sharp end and a spiked spine. Its handle was woven with rope for better grip under water. At the end of the handle were my initials. I felt conflicted. On one hand, I was

still part of this group, one of them, and it made me proud. On the other, I felt sickened by being among them. The way those guys changed on a dime in a month scared me. They were hungry for the monsters' blood. Every training Ramon fed us statements like:

"It's the mermaid. It hit you against a coral reef. Now it drags you down to the bottom of the ocean to not let you breathe! What will you do? Come on, kill it! Kill it!"

It worked well even on me. I became more rigid, feistier, angrier. I was hot-headed and agitated. After every lesson I would come home furious with the world, trying to suppress it so as not to hurt my family. I was always ready for a fight. Monster or not, it didn't matter. I finally noticed it when I lashed out at my mother for making mashed potatoes instead of rice. At first, I couldn't even comprehend why I yelled at her, why I was so angry. Then, when the next lesson another blow hit my jaw, I understood. I saw red, because I was taught to do so. Ramon was turning us into himself. Moulding us into something we weren't before under a pretence of education. It made me dislike him more.

Despite it all, I kept coming back. I kept persevering against everything that teacher of ours threw at me. All the punches and laughs, I took them. A month and a half passed. Mid-June was here. It was time for the final exam.

Chapter four: The exam.

It was a calm evening. The sky was orange and pink, covered in splashes of cloud, as we walked out to the beach in our swimsuits. The sun was closing in on the horizon. The ocean was still. No wind, no big waves. Everyone but Ramon and me had their knives. We were determined to get through this last part to claim our certificates. While we walked, our teacher told us:

"Today you'll meet a real mermaid. Don't worry, I'll be right here on the shore, observing. In case anything goes wrong, I'll save you. Remember our lessons, especially our last ones. Try to hurt that beast as much as you can, and then get out. If you kill it, you all pass automatically."

"No, no killing!" the guys riled up. "I want to hurt it too!"

"Chill out, boys," Ramon said. "It won't give up easily, remember."

There was nothing I could say that would make them change their minds. I didn't want the creature to get hurt. Even if it had murdered people before, I was against it. I was scared for the mermaid I had yet to meet. I saw these guys turn into violent and ruthless men, gripping their knives in

their fists like they were born with them. I stood back, hoping they would forget about me. They were so eager to get into the water, so ready to hurt someone. The rage and thrill in their eyes made me fear for my own life. I now hoped never to get into the water. I hoped they would skip my turn and I wouldn't even have to see that creature. However, it would only happen if they killed it. I wasn't ready for that either.

Suddenly, we heard a familiar screech. It was coming from the horizon. We all stared as the peaceful ocean got ripples on its surface. Something was approaching us fast. I remembered that evening. That time an unknown thing pulled me underwater. It was a similar scream, a similar line on the water. And then we all saw it.

Like a dolphin, it jumped out and above the surface. A creature with a lengthy body, skinny figure, and slim arms. A long, fairytale-style tail. It shimmered in the air under sunlight. Its scales reflecting light like silver. We couldn't distinguish its face or claws, but we saw something we would never forget.

The guys yelled in excitement, gripping their knives even tighter. All except Elias. The youngest of us crumpled. I could see his limbs soften. His

fingers released the weapon, letting it drop into the sand. I watched his eyes water as he kept staring at the setting sun. I sneaked next to him.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"What are we even doing here?" Elias whispered back. "To kill it... why? It's so majestic, so... otherworldly."

I put my hand on his shoulder, joining him in the moment of realisation. Others jumped and cheered, arguing over who would go first. Elias and I stood there silently. Then I felt a disappointed gaze on me. I turned to see Ramon. He stared at us, squinting, as if considering how he should dispose of us. I stared back. I felt scared and powerless. My eyes were empty. I think he caught that in my gaze, because the next thing I knew, he turned to one of the others and commanded:

"Diego, you're first!"

The guy gripped his knife, saluted our teacher, and ran into the ocean. We saw him swimming closer and closer to the mermaid that circled the water before us. We observed his confident strokes as he moved farther and farther away from us. Suddenly, his head disappeared. We could only see disturbance on the surface. Some kind of struggle was happening. Then Diego rose above the surface,

taking a quick breath. He went back down just as quickly. We could hear the screeching of the mermaid as it made its sonic way out of the water, only slightly muffled by it. After a couple of minutes, Diego finally crawled to the shore. His body was covered in bruises and claw marks. He held his knife in his teeth while struggling to swim to safety. When he dropped at our feet in the shallow water, Ramon asked:

"So? Did you get it?"

"I tried... but no," Diego replied, struggling to breathe. "It threw me against the rocks and hit me with its tail and claws, just like you said it would."

Now the others weren't as sure of themselves. They kept looking at the monster in the depths, and at their friend. Horror started to set in.

"Now is not the time to hesitate!" our teacher announced. "We must get that thing before it hurts someone else. Antonio, come on, you're next!"

The man shivered on hearing his name. Yet he went in. With every step deeper, he tried to look more confident to impress our leader. Changing from walk to swim, he made his way towards the beast. Then he disappeared. One moment he was swimming, and the next he was gone. We could

see the water. And only that. Then the ocean spat out Antonio, like he was a disgusting piece of food. Something threw him above the surface, sending him to the shore like a pebble skipping off the water. He landed slightly away from us, crawling to our feet. Defeated and without his weapon, he struggled past us to the sand. He was beaten up, probably from meeting the rocks with his face like our friend before.

It was Carlos's turn. Ramon sent him in, and the guy ran there with the ferocity of a barbarian. With his knife, he jumped into the ocean, heading for the creature. The mermaid welcomed him by dragging him to the bottom. More struggle. More waves. More unnecessary violence. Carlos came up to the surface several times, gasping for brief moments of air. After a couple of minutes, we could see him swimming towards us. His brow was cut open, covering his right eye with blood. His body was covered in cuts, bruises, and bite marks. He managed to hold on to his knife but was exhausted after the encounter. He dropped in the shallow water, unable to utter a word.

I saw Fabio shaking. His hands were trembling violently, and his knees were giving way beneath him. Elias looked the same. His eyes were teary.

I knew both of them didn't want to go through with it as much as I did.

"Isaac, your turn!" a cunning voice proclaimed.

My eyes widened. I had forgotten I wasn't here as an observer. I had to face that creature if I wanted that stupid piece of paper. I didn't argue. I didn't say a word. Calmly, I walked into the ocean. Slowly, I felt water wrapping its waves around my body. I inhaled the fresh ocean breeze. I took a moment to feel the rays of the sunset on my face. Suddenly, I didn't feel any fear anymore. All the damage that monster did to the others - how they shivered in exhaustion and pain - faded. I felt at peace. The gentle caress of the true mother of all humanity embraced me with the sweet lullaby of quiet waves. As I walked deeper and deeper, everything else disappeared and went away like a distant thought. My feet pushed my body off the sandy ground and into the swim. With slow strokes, I swam towards the sun. I forgot about the mermaid completely. Then I felt something like a current under me, hugging my body and pushing it. I gazed slightly down. Underwater, right under me, was that creature. He swam at my pace, staying right beneath me. It seemed he observed me as I tried to make out his shape. It wasn't pulling me underwater. It

wasn't even attempting to get me. I swam a little more, then took a deep breath in and dived towards it. I couldn't keep my eyes open because of the salty water, so I swam blind. I didn't know where the mermaid went. I simply swam down. Down and down to the bottom. Nothing touched me, nothing approached. I was left alone. Yet I could feel some kind of presence, as if someone observed my actions. Suddenly, my hand touched the sand. I couldn't believe it at first. I reached the bottom, where others were pulled against their will, by myself. I turned, standing on the sand with my legs. I wanted so badly to open my eyes, but I couldn't. Then I felt the water around me get disturbed. Something swam around me slowly, pulling the flow after itself. Then I felt fingers touching my shoulder gently. I stood still. They slid over my shoulder, landing a palm after. Then I felt the tips of long claws on my arm. It was the mermaid. But he wasn't trying to hurt me – rather, examine, explore, investigate. I thought it was time to move up, as I could feel my lungs slightly burn. I looked up, ready to start my ascent. However, the creature carefully placed its arms around my chest, taking me into a tender embrace, and started pulling me upwards. As it carried me up to the surface, I recognised its

swimming pattern. It was gradual and deliberate, letting me relax into its tempo. I started following it. Mirroring his moves like I was taught. I felt the pressure of the water alleviate as I slid through in tandem with the mermaid. We reached the surface gently. It reminded me of my first encounter again. It was the same care I felt now. Back then, I was concerned because I didn't know what was going on. However, now, I thought I understood. As I caught my breath, the creature waited patiently. I looked down at it. I saw its big eyes staring at me. I felt no fear, no worry. Nothing but serenity. I took another breath and went back to him. The same arms wrapped around my chest, and I could feel myself being carried away. The mermaid swam slowly. It held me fondly. I felt so light and at ease like never before. Then my face rose above the water. I took a slow exhale and breath in, holding it, ready to go back under. The ocean waves swallowed and accepted me with grace. I moved my body along with the mermaid. It was like we became one delicate mechanism.

Suddenly, my enjoyment turned into something more. The creature's palms slid across my chest, tenderly touching my nipples. As one of his hands pressed on one nipple, the other kept wandering

around my chest and stomach. I finally understood it all. It was a mating ritual, or something like that. I don't know if it was the moves of his tail, his gentle hands, or the feeling of safety he radiated that hinted at the right conclusion, but I could never have imagined how that experience would end.

As one of his hands glided closer and closer to my waist, I moved my hands slightly behind him and found his hips. As my fingertips touched his skin, I heard a quiet screech. It wasn't as piercing as before. It was softer, almost like a slight moan. I touched his silky back with my hands, absolutely forgetting that I was underwater and needed to breathe. However, he brought me to the surface himself, as if knowing something I completely missed. I took another breath. Back under the safety of the ocean, I kept exploring his body with my fingers, while one of his hands reached to my partially aroused privates through the cloth of my swimsuit. He grabbed it carefully, rubbing it, pleasing me. When I was training to hold my breath, I never thought I would be holding in moans. Then I felt his tender lips on my cheek and chin. He was kissing me, touching me so gently, so attentively. I wanted to kiss him as well. I rotated in his arms, coming face to face with him.

I wanted to see him, but I couldn't. With one hand, I found his cheek and then lips. With the other, I kept exploring his chest. His nipples were especially sensitive. As I touched him and he touched me, we kissed. I loved the ocean, and now the ocean was loving me back. We swam faster now, hastily, as if we were about to reach some goal.

I understood where we were headed only when I attempted to take a breath, forgetting we were underwater. Yet as I inhaled and air filled my lungs, I finally noticed sand under my hands and knees. I looked up. We were in a cradle of cliffs that embraced a small beach, shielding it from everything else. It was a closed-off part of the beach where people rarely hang around. Then I looked down. Big blue eyes with white stripes on their irises were staring at me. They were almost hypnotising. His short dark brown hair, still wet and covered in sand, looked a little out of place in comparison to his pale, greyish skin. Gills on his neck were opening and closing as he breathed fast. I don't know what made me continue kissing him. The mouth filled with fangs didn't discourage me. His lips, soft despite drying quickly in the summer air, tasted slightly salty. I felt his hand reaching to my swimsuit, untying the strings

carefully, reaching in as the second hand pulled them down. I leaned a bit back to see what was going on. In the mermaid's tail, I saw an opening. I had never seen it in Ramon's images before. Inside, it seemed pink. The mermaid guided my movements. He took my aroused organ and put it to the edge of the opening, as if inviting me to continue. Slowly, I went in. It was warm and wet inside. Like the vagina of a woman during sex. I moved gently. I wanted to show him the same care he showed me. I saw the mermaid react to my actions. He exhaled abruptly as I went in. And as I moved in and out, he moaned. The same quiet shriek, sounding as a sign of pleasure. It felt so wrong and so right at the same time. It was a male, and it was a mermaid. I never asked him his name. I didn't know him at all. I was pushed into the water under the impression I might die, and now I was actively having sex with a male mermaid. But I couldn't care less. Though my mind was in disarray, my actions were precise and deliberate. I kissed him, touched him, fucked him. Delicately, slowly, fondly. Then he reached to my hips, pushing them, providing me with a new, faster tempo. It felt so good. His moans, the way he arched his back. I couldn't hold it any longer. Suddenly, I felt his opening tighten. The mermaid

exhaled another moan, louder. He squeezed my arms tightly. I kept moving. I was so close as well. Only seconds later, I felt a wave of released pressure. I came inside that mermaid, and I was so glad I did.

I hung over him, holding myself up on my arms. I was still inside him. We both breathed heavily, staring at each other with hazy eyes. I pulled out. The opening closed after me, hiding itself as if it was never there. I sat on his tail, staring at him. Finally, I noticed that the scales of said tail had spikes. Yet it wasn't sharp at all. It was as if they softened at the mermaid's command, allowing me to participate in the action safely. When I caught my breath and reason came back to my brain, I stood up. As I was pulling my swimsuit up and tying the strings, the mermaid sat up. He looked at me and said:

"Thank you."

With those words, he jumped back into the water and disappeared into the ocean. I stood there, shocked. He spoke to me. In my language. I understood him. I stared into the water, mesmerised. So many things didn't make sense.

Suddenly, I felt two hands grabbing me by my shoulders and shaking me back to reality. I blinked,

getting a sense of direction. Ramon was shaking me and yelling something.

"Did you come inside it?" he screamed again, questioning.

His eyes were wild. He was fuming with rage.

"What?" I asked, still barely comprehending.

"If you came inside him, he'll make more monsters like him, idiot! He'll make babies, do you understand?!"

My teacher kept shaking me, yelling, and slapping my face while I stared at the horizon, still thinking of that mermaid. He had such beautiful eyes. The way he touched me so thoughtfully. The sex... I felt confused and satisfied. I thought I would forever wonder what it was.

Finally, a firm punch to my jaw broke all the illusions. Ramon kept yelling at me for ruining the day. In his words, I didn't just rob the others of a kill but also ruined his day by getting to the mermaid first. Then it clicked.

"You wanted to fuck him yourself," I said, realising.

Ramon shut his mouth. His eyes told me everything I needed to know.

"You wanted us to wear him out and then use him, didn't you?" I continued, "You wouldn't give him what he wanted so that he would come back. You piece of disgusting—"

My rant was interrupted by a fist to my face. I felt all the rage transferred through it, channelled right into one blow. Then Ramon turned around and started walking away. Like a puppy, I followed him to the main beach where everyone waited. I thought he would tell them what happen. Make them laugh at me. Instead...

"Well, the rest of you are unlucky. Isaac scared that monster away. Fabio, Elias, you pass automatically."

The guys cheered tiredly. The two left unharmed exhaled with relief. We left the beach together that evening. No one drowned. I wondered why the mermaid chose me. Once again, I was spared the suffering of a gruesome death or injury, instead gifted the time I would never forget. I was so bewildered by it. Why was it me?

Chapter five: Consequences

I never told anyone what happened on that exam evening. How could I? I couldn't talk to my friends, since they didn't believe in mermaids. I couldn't tell my family. A confession sounded crazy even in my own head. How could I tell my mother that her only son had homosexual sex with a monster that murdered our grandfather? How could I talk about it without sounding like a lunatic? I had sex with a mermaid. A creature of the ocean. Someone everyone considered to be a beast. And it was a guy. That fact added a whole other level of self-discovery. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know how to live with it. With myself. With the experience I had. And the only person I could possibly talk about it with I never wanted to see again. Ramon disgusted me. The way he used us. The way he treated us. He lied about the purpose of the exam, so what else could he be lying about? Also, everyone always told me the monsters didn't know our language, yet the creature spoke to me. It thanked me. In my language. I was lost.

The time passed. Soon after that evening, our small group of six had graduated this hell. At our humble ceremony, Ramon gave us our certificates. When I went on the podium before our classroom's

chalkboard and everyone clapped, I looked into the teacher's eyes, seeing nothing but utter disgust. He thought of me as much as I did of him. He hated me for stealing what he assumed was his pleasure. I hated him for all the torture and abuse he put me, my classmates, and that mermaid through. I received the piece of paper I suffered for, and I kept quiet. Ramon was always a respected man. Our town loved him as an expert and a role model of righteous life. No one would believe me if I told the truth. Also, no one would care for the suffering of a creature everyone called a monster. And who would care about me? I signed up for it. I could have left at any point, like Felix and Hugo. Yet I stayed. Persevered just like our wise teacher taught us. Like a loyal pup, I danced to his flute, obeying his commands up until the last day. When I walked out of that old building with that stupid paper in my fist, I couldn't believe I put myself through it all just for this.

The next day came around. The world wasn't waiting for me to get back on my feet. Twenty-one years old by then, and I felt like I was starting from zero. I applied for a job on a fishing boat. With the certificate on "surviving mermaids", the interview process was short. In a week, I was already in training, learning nets and rods,

harpoons, and more. I never thought it was that complicated. Navigating on the water, the technology commercial fishing required. I had to learn and remember it all, but at least I was finally out in the ocean. At first, it was sad to see all that fish being grabbed and packaged to be killed later. However, after some time, I got more used to it. Becoming a full member on the boat took two months. Another four, I finally could work without supervision. We spent days on the water, then rested for a couple on the shore. Time was flying by.

One late evening in December, I was strolling along the beach. The weather was stable, temperature moderate. I was still wearing a suit and tie from the event Ramon had organised for former graduates. He wanted to see the ones he taught and if it worked out for them. I attended just because I wanted to see my former classmates. I did, but it was outright boring. I sneaked out and went straight to the water. I craved the comfort of the ocean. My fancy shoes in my hands with socks in them. The cold sand under my feet, seeping between my fingers. Small waves crashed against the shore with a pleasant sound. The ocean was singing to me, speaking to me, and I heard its calling. I walked aimlessly in

one direction, looking at my footsteps sinking into the wet sand. When I finally raised my gaze, I saw familiar cliffs surrounding me. I ended up on the same beach it all happened. I stopped, staring into the horizon. I recalled that evening in my head. The big full moon lit up the surface of the ocean as if it was day. Stars in the clear sky reflected on the peaceful water. I thought of that male mermaid I encountered half a year back.

Suddenly, I heard it. A scream. A shrieking sound like that day. In the low waves showed two lines. Something was swimming towards the beach with great speed. I stood on the edge of the water, waves caressing my feet from time to time. I couldn't move. Then I saw a silhouette closing in to the shallow water. As dark brown hair and blue eyes rose in front of me, I recognised him. It was the same mermaid I had just remembered. As if knowing about my thoughts, he came to me.

"Hello," he spoke.

His velvet voice left no trace of previous high notes. As he greeted me with a slightly worried look, I felt my mouth open, yet I couldn't utter a word. I stood there, frozen in place, staring at him.

"I simply wanted to talk," the mermaid said.

I took a few steps back and fell on the sand. My jaw still hanging open as if I had seen a ghost. Sitting on the ground, hands in unsteady terrain, I couldn't feel my tongue. I should have said something, but I couldn't. At that moment, the mermaid pulled its tail closer and under himself, sitting on it like people do on their knees. In the shallow water, he sat quietly. Waiting.

"Hi," finally words came out with an exhale.

"Hi," the mermaid repeated calmly.

The sound of the water was filling the silence.

"What's your name?" I asked.

I still can't figure out why I asked that. I think I was so shocked that my brain reverted to what it was familiar with: when meeting new people, you ask their name. The creature thought for a moment before answering:

"I think in your language it would translate as Sakharkarkhan."

"Sak-har-kark-han," I repeated back.

"Yes," the mermaid nodded. "And your?"

"Isaac," I replied.

I felt tongue-tied and curious at the same time. It was as if my mouth produced questions without my awareness:

"What did you want to talk about?"

"That time about six months ago."

There was a note of nervousness in his tone. He seemed a little worried.

"I wanted to show you something," the mermaid continued.

He looked around, then made a quiet screech as he turned to the ocean. Somewhere from the deeper part, a reply reached us. I saw a line coming towards the shore. There was another mermaid. A shadow in the water approached, and a face rose in front of me. It was a female. She had similar pale skin, long black hair that swam around her in the water, and big blue eyes. I was already numb, experiencing nothing but overwhelming surprise. However, then I truly was floored. Next to the female, three little heads showed. They swam in one place, showing just their faces to me. I felt my jaw drop again. They were little children. Not much older than toddlers. One of them seemed to be a girl. She, like her mother, had long black hair and blue eyes. However, the other two were different: short black hair, but big,

beautiful green eyes. I thought I recognised those two.

"This is my mate, Karakhrane, and our children. Technically, your children as well," Sakharkarkhan explained.

"Mine?" I mumbled. "Do those two look like me?!"

"Yes, they do," the mermaid replied. "Females tend to inherit their mother's appearance, while males take after the owner of the sperm. In this case, that would be you."

As I was too stunned to speak, Sakharkarkhan turned to his companions and said something in their screeching language. The female gave a short reply, then took the kids and disappeared with them into the ocean.

"I'm sorry I can't introduce you properly," the mermaid told me. "I don't want to put them in danger for much longer."

"It's alright, I get it. You have to protect your family."

A slight smile slid over his lips. He still seemed nervous. His body tensed, like he was ready to run at any moment.

"I wanted you to see the children and ask you something," Sakharkarkhan continued. "Would you maybe want to meet me more often?"

I couldn't stop staring at him. The way moonlight hit his silky skin and made it glisten. The way his shape stood out under the night shine. His big, captivating eyes, his slender body, and the way I wanted to say 'yes'...

"You don't have to—"

"Yes!" I spoke over him. "Oh, sorry, what were you saying?"

"You don't have to, if you don't want to. I can leave you alone, if you wish."

"No, I want to see you more," I rushed to reply. I leaned forward, leaving my shoes in the sand and putting my arms over my knees. The mermaid smiled, showing his teeth. Sharp fangs would look disturbing, if only I wasn't mesmerised by his presence.

"We can meet this Saturday during the day if you want. Are you available?" Sakharkarkhan asked. I thought for a second. This weekend I would be on shore.

"Yeah, I am."

We sat staring at each other for a little while, the sound of the gentle waves keeping us company. I had no thoughts, no emotions, just pure awe. Then he moved slightly, saying:

"I suppose I should go."

"Wait," I asked carefully.

It caught his attention, and he listened.

"Can I... maybe... touch you?" I hesitated. "Nothing weird, just..."

I couldn't find the words to finish my sentence. The mermaid doubted my intentions, yet nodded. I stood up slowly. Walking towards him into the water, I trod warily, not to seem threatening. Despite my trousers being pulled up to my knees, it didn't save them from getting wet. As I gradually landed in the water on my knees right before him, I could feel the chill of the ocean getting to my legs and hips. He was so close now. I could hear his heavy, worried breathing. His heart was beating so fast, I thought I could see it. His gaze was concerned, yet he stayed. I stretched my hand towards him. My fingertips touched his shoulder tenderly. He flinched slightly at the sensation. At first, I slid my fingers over his skin, then carefully placed my palm. He was real. He was there in front of me. I had doubted my memory

all this time. I assumed I might have dreamt it, yet I hadn't. He was real. Sakharkarkhan was real. His eyes still seemed anxious, following my every move. I acted thoughtfully. Gently, I picked my hand off his shoulder and reached for his face. As my fingertips touched his cheek, he twitched. I waited for him to guide me. The mermaid stared at me with even more doubt. He looked right into my eyes. Those big, hypnotising blue eyes. I don't know what he saw in me, but the next thing I knew, he exhaled slowly, relaxing his muscles a little. I placed my palm on his cheek. I observed as his gills rose and fell with his breaths. He had such smooth skin. The long dark eyelashes. I explored his face with my gaze and touch. I caressed his cheek. Then I looked at his lips. Fondly, I moved my thumb to them, pressing on them lightly. Sliding my finger across them from the centre to the side. His lips were soft, despite drying out in the air. He didn't resist at all. He was majestic, otherworldly. Then I realised what I was doing. I exhaled abruptly as my gaze dropped. I made several steps back, still on my knees. Sakharkarkhan observed me silently. I think my shocked expression was as curious to him as he was to me.

"I'll see you Saturday," he said with a shy smile before jumping into the ocean and disappearing into the depths.

I stood in the water for a little longer. The horizon seemed so distant. Somewhere there... was he. A mermaid I would never forget. I bit my lip, thinking of Saturday. It was as far away as that moon. It couldn't come soon enough.

As I walked home with my pants dripping wet and chilled wind sneaking around my legs, I replayed the encounter in my head. There were children. My children. Does that mean I'm their father? Do mermaids have rules for the human fathers of their children? What did it all mean for me now? Why was I chosen for this?

Chapter six: The truth

All week, I couldn't wait for the weekend to come. I kept daydreaming about what it would be like. Concentrating on work was hard. The more days passed, the more I started doubting he would even show up. Maybe he would change his mind, and I would never see him again. Maybe it was all a hallucination. Maybe he didn't mean it. Sakharkarkhan. I repeated that name in my head a million times, trying to remember it properly, to make it slide off my tongue like my own. Sakharkarkhan. It was so weird. A name I had never heard of. A complicated one. However, I learned it, taught myself to speak it without trouble. Yet I kept wondering if I would ever get to use it again.

Saturday came around. The winter sun was surprisingly warm. The ocean was rowdy and active, showing off its big waves with beautiful curves. I wore jeans and a jacket, grabbing a backpack with swim shorts in case I got in the water. Wearing flip-flops, I went to the beach. I walked along the water to the cliffs. I thought it would be safer there, and at this point, I considered it our special place. When I arrived, I sat down not far from the shore. I didn't want to

get wet, but I also didn't want Sakharkarkhan to get too far onto the sand. I wanted him to feel safe with me. I wanted him to be able to run if he chose to.

I waited for about twenty minutes. The noise of the ocean was serene. Then I heard the call. That familiar shriek. It didn't sound as harsh to me anymore. Instead, it got me excited. I stood up, walking towards the water, closer to the shore, where the cliffs would protect him from unwanted eyes. The mermaid jumped out of the water. His scales shone in the sun as his gorgeous tail made an arch in the air. I observed him with astonishment. Soon, Sakharkarkhan rose from the water right before me. He had a nervous smile on his face. As waves framed his silhouette in their powerful embrace, washing over his body and messing up his hair with every blow, I couldn't look away. I might have been captivated by the simple fact of his existence, but I like to think there was more to it.

He crawled to the beach, leaving just the tip of his tail on the edge of the water. Waves wouldn't reach me if I sat next to him, so I did. Leaving about a metre of distance between us, I sat down in the sand, my legs crossed.

"Hi," I spoke first. "I wasn't sure you'd show up."

"Hi. Why wouldn't I?" his velvet voice replied.

"I thought maybe you'd change your mind."

"I thought we agreed to meet."

"We did, I just... I don't know. I doubted you actually wanted to see me," I rubbed the back of my neck awkwardly.

This guy made me feel nervous. I felt so stupid for every word I uttered, feeling hopeless in the conversation, yet Sakharkarkhan listened and replied, never showing he had any concerns.

"I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't want to," he smiled slightly, looking at me.

His smile was so sweet. He seemed more relaxed this time. I noticed that the scales on his tail and muscles of his body were softened. He was leaning back on his hands as his long claws dug into the terrain. He seemed to enjoy the sun and the air.

"Why *did* you want to meet me?" I asked uncertainly.

"I can't give you a confident answer," the mermaid admitted. "I simply thought after what happened,

maybe you had questions. I have never met someone like you before. So interested and kind."

I flustered. Why did he make me feel these emotions?

"I've never met anyone like you before either," I said, quickly correcting myself. "Or maybe I did. It was so long ago, I'm not sure anymore."

"You seem nervous. Do I make you uncomfortable?" he asked concerned.

"No, no, it's not that. Not you, I mean, it is you, but you don't make me uncomfortable. Ugh, sorry, I feel so dumb," I buried my face in my hands.

I could feel my face getting red. I probably looked like a schoolgirl in front of her crush. It was so embarrassing.

"Dumb, as in stupid?" Sakharkarkhan asked, softly tilting his head to the side.

"Yeah..." I exhaled heavily, dropping my hands on my legs. "I just... I imagined this day so many times in my head that I now feel lost. I have so many questions, I don't know where or how to start."

"Then let's start with something easy. Your name was Isaac, right? Am I saying it correct?" a caring smile put me at ease.

"Yup, that's right. And you... Sakharkarkhan," I tried not to fumble at that important moment.

"Wow, I didn't think you would remember."

His genuine surprise made me feel proud. However, I then almost ruined it with my next remark:

"I trained to say it perfectly this whole week."

He giggled, turning his face to the other side in an attempt to hide his amusement. I could hear his quiet laugh and see his body trembling from it. I felt so ashamed of my words at that moment. Yet he turned back to me with a smile on his face, saying:

"Me too. It took me some time to say your name. It has familiar sounds, but it doesn't translate so easily to my language."

He tucked his tail closer to himself, bending it to rest his hands on. Then he lay down on his arms, looking at me with a dreamy gaze. The soft smile on his lips seemed so caring. I opened my mouth just slightly, but no sound came out. I stared at him with my eyes wide open. He was so pretty. My long pause made him giggle again and hide his face shyly in his arms. I couldn't look away. His reactions were so human. The more I observed him, the more I saw similarities between us. He

was different, there was no doubt, but he was also so... familiar.

"What kind of questions do you have, Isaac?" he suddenly asked, turning back to me.

"Um..." I stuttered, "I guess... Was it you who almost drowned me three years ago?"

Sakharkarkhan hesitated for a brief moment.

"I don't remember. Can you tell me more about it?"

I retold the story to him: how I swam and heard the scream, how I was dragged to the bottom and then back to the surface, how I saw something that looked like a mermaid.

"No, it wasn't me," he said, shaking his head, "but it does sound like a mermaid. Maybe another male wanted to see if you wanted to mate."

"But why would they let me go, then?"

"It's also possible that you were first grabbed by the female by mistake and then rescued by a male to the surface."

"Why would a female grab me? Do they do that for fun?"

"Probably they were after someone else, and when they realised you weren't who they expected,

they released you. And no, not really. It is a complicated question, but you should know that your tales about us leave out a lot of details."

"I was lied to about you not knowing our language my whole life, so I can believe that. My teacher, if I can call him that, told us a lot about mermaids, but he never said anything about your mating or language. I wonder how much truth he actually taught us," I mirrored my companion, tucking my knees closer to myself and hugging them with my hands.

"Was it the man who ran towards you after I left that first time we met?"

I caught a note of worry in his voice. He was staring at the bottom of his tail, curling himself into a ball like I did.

"Yes. You saw us?"

Sakharkarkhan nodded slowly before replying:

"I know him. I knew you were there because of him, but I decided to trust you anyway. When I saw him running towards you, I felt worried, but I couldn't risk my life helping you."

"You know... Ramon?" I questioned with concern and surprise.

He nodded. He suddenly seemed gloomy, as if a dark cloud hung over him. I considered my options for a moment. It wasn't a topic I wanted to get into right now. I liked a smile on his face much more, and I wanted to avoid the thought of that horrible man for longer.

"So, your mate," I changed the topic. "What was her name again?"

At first, Sakharkarkhan gazed at me with confusion. He probably expected me to ask more about Ramon, yet I intended to make him laugh and smile again.

"Karakhrane. Why?"

"Another name I should probably know, if we're going to hang out more often," I smiled at him.

"I thought about it, actually. You can call me Han instead of my full name if you want. And for Karakhrane, she said you can call her Kara for short."

"All my work learning your name for it to be shortened to Han," I chuckled.

He giggled, saying:

"And it sounded so beautiful when you said it, too."

I pressed my lips together. Was it the sun, or was it just me flustering, that made me feel so hot?

"So... if you don't mind such a personal question..." I tried to find the right words. "How does the mating thing work?"

"Mermaids live in small communities, usually related as family. Once a year in spring we all meet in one place to seek out potential mates. If one finds a potential partner, one of them joins the other's community for a while. Mating usually happens in early summer, but many choose to mate a year after meeting. During early summer females produce eggs, while males seek out human males to get the sperm. Unfortunately for us, only human sperm works for insemination, so we search for someone who will provide it. When sperm is collected, it is used to inseminate the eggs, and then in three months the babies are born. They mature quickly, so they don't stay small for long. We spend most of our life as young adults, growing rapidly after birth and ageing slowly. Though, we do live less than humans."

He explained it with no hesitation. I expected this topic to be rather awkward, but the way he

informed me with such confidence made me only more curious.

"How do females know when to lay the eggs? And how many are there? Does it work like with fish?"

"Females lay eggs each year. Some have pets that eat unfertilised ones, some simply leave them for wild animals to find. They don't hold for long, so we have only one month to find a way to inseminate them. Usually, there can be up to five eggs. Karakhrane laid three, and all of them made it thanks to you. And I suppose fish would be a close comparison, yes. But mermaid males can't produce sperm. Because of that, we have to seek it elsewhere."

"Do you only come here, to this city, or are there more places?"

"We go wherever the ocean is. There are much better places for it than here, but this is the closest to my home."

"What do you mean by better?"

"It's a long story that I would rather tell some other time, but simply put, this is a very dangerous place. Humans here don't like us. You try to kill us, hunt us and... so much more." The

pause he made got me concerned. "It's not safe coming here. There is an island where humans welcome us. They enjoy our presence. It is where most go during mating season. Humans there are ready to share. They are willing to help. However, it created a problem. The number of humans there is limited, so finding a male who didn't have children with us before is very complicated."

"Too small a gene pool."

"Yes. Karakhrane and me went there when we first wanted to try, but seeing how many others came there for the same purpose... We decided our children's health was worth the risk."

"So, you came here? Something is telling me it wasn't the first time you tried."

"Correct. We tried for three years."

"Three?! Was this... third?"

"Yes. My previous attempts were... unsuccessful."

His tone was getting darker and darker. I had my assumptions why, but I didn't want to pry. Not on our first official meeting.

"Is Kara okay with you seeing me?"

"Why wouldn't she be?"

"Well, she's your mate and the mother of your children. I suppose you still count as their father."

He chuckled:

"I'm no more a father than you are. Our mating was more a deal we made than the creation of a family. Mermaids are reduced in number each year, leading not only to trouble finding a mate but also closing all of us to extinction. I wanted to avoid having children for longer, mostly because I thought I wouldn't have any way to do that, and also because of the danger. Yet I still went to that meeting, hoping to find someone to share my existence with. Instead, I found Karakhrane. We became close friends. She and her lover, Raskarerkne, were trying to find a male to help them start a family. Despite me being still too young for their taste, we became so close that they couldn't imagine asking someone else. I agreed because I love them as friends. They are both great mothers. Also, I wanted to be useful. If I will never have a family of my own, at least now I know that I helped someone else."

"Why would you never have a family of your own? You say it like it is predetermined," I was confused and curious.

"Humans have this too, as far as I know. Females don't always mate with males, and males also sometimes don't mate with females. We are the same. Part of us is drawn to our own: females to females and males to males. Well... Karakhrane and Raskarerkne are like that. I am... like that."

Sakharkarkhan spoke with sadness in his voice. It seemed it was hard for him to admit it. I felt something very similar. After that time we had sex, I kept thinking about it. Why was I attracted to him? Why was I attracted to a man? My whole life I wondered why I never felt anything romantic towards the women I dated. Why I never wanted to actively have sex with them. I thought maybe I was broken, or maybe everyone lied about their attraction, or maybe I simply hadn't found the one. I gave up on dating a while ago, spending most of my time in the company of men. My friends were my rescue. However, I never thought I might have been attracted to men. After meeting Sakharkarkhan, I started thinking back on my life. It made sense. For the first time in my life, it made sense. I did have crushes on my guy friends, I had experienced lust for a male body, I knew all those feelings everyone always talked about. I simply ignored them, thinking it was nothing. At the time, I was finding all kinds of excuses. 'He

was simply handsome. I just admire him as a person. I don't want him, I just want to be him.' Now it seemed so obvious. Now that I sat next to this mermaid guy, who looked so cute in the mild light of a winter sun, it all seemed so insignificant.

"I get what you're talking about," I said. "I think... I'm also... like that."

He turned to me. His expression was mixed. The guy seemed lost in my words. I smiled at him softly. I didn't know him well yet, but I wanted to. I moved closer to him. Gently, without rush. At first, I noticed his scales become tender. The spikes on them moved as if breathing, tensing up and softening. Han's gaze was unsure. He straightened up a little, putting one of his hands behind him to lean a little away from me. I didn't pressure him. I only moved a couple of centimetres, not really getting near him. I saw his gills flare up as I acted. When I stopped, assuming a new position, straightening my legs on the sand and leaning back on my hands, relaxed, I noticed my companion had calmed down as well. His tail was still tense, but his breathing slowed. I wanted to be careful. I didn't know what Sakharkarkhan had experienced before, but I got a hint it wasn't good. He knew Ramon. I also knew Ramon, and I

knew how cruel that man could be. Someday I would ask Han about it, but not today.

We sat in silence for a little while. The sound of waves crashing against the rocks and the shore. The lazy sun was starting to fall towards the horizon. It was still bright, but heavy clouds were starting to wrap themselves across the grey sky. I still had so many questions to ask, yet simply sitting next to the mermaid, enjoying the winter air together, felt nice.

"I'm getting cold," suddenly said Sakharkarkhan quietly.

Instinctively, I took off my jacket and slowly put it around his shoulders. He stared at me with astonishment.

"You can go into the water whenever you like. I just thought maybe this will help you sit with me for a little longer," I told him fondly.

"Will you get cold?"

"Don't worry about me. I'm used to this chill."

"I'm sorry I couldn't stay with you the first time we met," Han commented unexpectedly. "It took me so long to find someone who would give me what I needed that I couldn't risk losing it."

"It's good that you left. Ramon was there, and I don't think I would be able to protect you from him."

"Thank you for everything, Isaac. I don't know how to repay you."

"I'm glad I could help. You don't need to repay me in any way, but I do enjoy your company. Please don't feel obligated to meet me again, though I will admit, I'd really like that."

"I would like to see you again too," he paused. "You're nice. I still fear this kindness, if I'm honest, but you seem... different."

"I want you to feel safe with me. If I ever make you uncomfortable, just tell me, okay? I just want to know more about you."

We spoke for a little longer. I told him about my family and my life. Told him about my job and how it finally made me feel happy. It was refreshing to be so open. I didn't tell him anything about my mermaid course experience, and I didn't tell him how much I wanted to kiss him again. However, we sat there sharing stories of our lives. Small snippets of something that seemed so unimportant before. The shopping stores, the food, the land... I felt like I could talk to him forever.

Chapter seven: The beginning

Time was passing month after month. I kept working on the boat as a fisherman. On my days off, I kept seeing Sakharkarkhan. I could spend hours hanging out with him, simply talking.

He taught me more about his kind. Mermaids were far from monsters. They simply had a different life. They had their own customs, traditions, and celebrations. They had their own ways of raising children and interacting with each other. I attempted to learn their language, but my human vocal cords were unable to produce the required sounds. People had so many wrong assumptions about these creatures, and I was finally learning to distinguish truth from tales. Sakharkarkhan was always very patient and kind to me. Any questions I had were never too much. I could ask him about anything: their culture, life, biology, even sex. It seemed there was nothing I could say that would deter him, and the same was true for me. He asked about life on the surface, about people and what they could be like. He asked about legs and how they worked. I felt so stupid sometimes because I didn't know the answer. On the days I was free, I started going to the library. Searching for answers in books or on the internet, just to

write them down and tell Han about them later. My awkwardness amused him. When I struggled to read out loud, twisting my tongue on complicated words, he would giggle. Every time, he would cover his mouth with his palm and turn away to hide his reaction, but I noticed. I always thought it embarrassing: my poor education and slow thought process, my inability to read fast or out loud. Yet when he laughed at my stumbles, it didn't hurt. His sweet giggle would always make me smile. He never wanted to hurt me with his emotions, and I knew it. Maybe that's why I started to love myself more, because someone found those shortcomings of mine adorable. With time, I got better. I could remember more and read a tiny bit faster. I stumbled over my words less. However, sometimes I would do it on purpose, just to see that beautiful smile. We would have a complicated discussion, and I would stutter on a simple word. Then he would laugh slightly, facing away. I would do it again and again until he gave up trying to hold it in.

We would sit closer to each other, feeling more and more secure each time. We learned not to shy away from touch. Sometimes we could spend hours exploring differences in our biology. I learned so much about mermaids' tails, scales, claws, and

teeth. I had never feared them on him anyway, but finding out more about their use and structure alleviated any kind of mystery. The same with human anatomy. I learned so much by trying to educate Han: how gravity worked, why our bodies were the way they were, how humans evolved into what we are now. It was so fascinating. I still remember that day we lay down on the beach under warm sunlight, and I kept asking questions about his tail as I explored every scale on it with one finger. Then, another time, it was me who allowed him to examine my body. We never talked about having sex or kissing again. The blandness and innocence of those inquiries still impress me. I kept thinking about him in that way, though. Almost every night after seeing him, I would recall his image in my mind. His slim, sharp face. Big, wondering eyes with long eyelashes. His lips that looked so tasty. How his silky skin felt under my touch, and how wholehearted our conversations were. I always couldn't wait to see him again.

Then one time on the job, as we were perusing the ocean in search of a good spot, I heard my colleagues discussing something in the water. I came closer to the side of the ship only to see a familiar silhouette swimming by us. As Sakharkarkhan noticed me on the boat, he jumped

out of the water, flying past me. I remember my jaw dropping in awe while my co-workers panicked. They tried to grab me and pull me away from the board, but I wouldn't move. I wanted to keep watching Han. Only when my colleagues started yelling about shooting him did I finally say something. It took a while to convince them to leave the mermaid alone. I had to scream as loud as I could to warn Han to run away before they took out the harpoon. Next time at the beach, we laughed about it.

The more we spoke, the better Han's language became. When we first spoke properly in December, he had a curious pattern of speech. It seemed slightly off. Now, after discussing various topics for longer periods, he started speaking more clearly, more confidently. I taught him some new words, even showed him how to read a little. We developed together. Learned from each other.

Spring came around. As the weather was getting warmer, I began going into the water more often. At first, we would sit in the waves, talking our usual stuff. Then he would swim alongside me as I was getting back to a slightly forgotten exercise. Then one day I dived underwater to him. I felt Han's hands take mine. He swam, holding and pulling me after himself. Carefully and slowly, so

as not to hurt me. With time, I remembered how to hold my breath for longer, and we could swim in tandem again. He would hold me in an embrace, like on that fateful evening, pulling me with him on underwater journeys. I bought a mask to wear so I could see in the salty ocean water. He laughed at me the first time I brought it because, in his words, I looked funny with it on. Yet he was respectful. Han would never knock it off me or obstruct my view. He would remember that I needed to breathe more often than I did. It felt so nice to be together, and one day our relationship took a new turn.

It was another warm day. The sun hid behind the clouds, but the absence of wind made the temperature rise anyway. The ocean was calm, keeping its waves to a minimum. I came to our beach at our usual time, already wearing swim shorts, ready to get in the water as soon as possible. My backpack with spare clothes and shoes landed on the sand and was left unsupervised again. I ran into the ocean without waiting for Sakharkarkhan. I was glad to be in the water once more. The peace it brought me after the roughest days, the serenity and clarity of mind it provided, washing all of my worries away. I loved the ocean, and now there were only more

reasons for that. Han joined me just a couple of minutes later. As he stayed a bit further from me, I understood he wanted to talk. We went to the shore. I walked out to the sand, sitting right on the edge of the waterline. Han sat next to me.

"I assumed you wanted to talk," I said with a questioning tone, squeezing water out of my hair.

"Yeah..." Han's tone seemed nervous. "There is something I've been meaning to ask you for a while now but never knew how to do it."

I noticed his body was tense. His gills were rising and falling rapidly with his anxious breathing. I couldn't imagine what he wanted to ask me that would make him react like this.

"Do you remember our first conversation? About mating and stuff like that?" Sakharkarkhan inquired.

"Yeah, I do. What about it?"

"Do you remember I said that... some mermaids prefer the same gender?"

"Yeah..."

I was as clueless as only fools can be. Dumb as a rock.

"I remember you said that you, too... are... like that," the hesitation in his trembling voice made me concerned.

Han wasn't looking me in the eyes. He wouldn't even face me. He simply stared into the nothingness in the distance, avoiding any eye contact.

"What I wanted to ask... or rather... say..." the pauses in his speech drove me insane. "... I wanted to know if you felt anything for me."

When he finally spat it out, I exhaled with relief. I feared it would be some bad news, while all this time he was scared of rejection. If only he knew I would never reject him.

I had been falling for him since the day we met, keeping his image in my mind like a secret desire. The more we met, the more I learned about him, the more similarities I saw between us... The yearning for him was taking root deeper and deeper in my soul. I was in love. So much time spent exploring each other and the world around us, I always forgot there could be even more.

I chuckled. It alerted Han. He finally gazed upon me with apprehension. I looked at the ocean with a soft smile. I could feel his anxious stare, filled with fear and early disappointment. I turned to

him. I thought about how lovely he was. Then I leaned towards him abruptly, planting a short kiss on his cheek. I didn't move, staying centimetres away from his face. Shock in his eyes. Han held up his hand, touching his own cheek where I kissed him. Now it was he who was too stunned to speak. I wasn't sure how he'd react, but I decided to risk it. I gently took him by his chin and pulled him closer, kissing him on the lips. I closed my eyes as I did it, worried he would push me away, yet he didn't. I kissed him lovingly, slowly, savouring that moment. When our lips parted and I opened my eyes, I could see a smile I longed for. It seemed Sakharkarkhan still couldn't believe it was real. His breathing – fast, in short breaths, excitement and surprise on his face, a smile mixed with chuckles. He ran his hand through his hair, moving slightly away from me. Then he fell on his back into the sand, staring at the sky. I giggled.

"You are so cute," I said, staring at him fondly.

"Does that mean... you like me?"

"Actually," I leaned on my elbow to be next to him, "I think I love you."

Sakharkarkhan met my eyes. He reached for my face, caressing my cheek tenderly. Then he pulled me gently towards him and kissed me. His salty

lips were as soft as I remembered. I could finally let it all go. All the desire and passion I had accumulated inside me found its outlet. I climbed over Han's tail, getting above him. We kissed more. I wanted to touch his body but hesitated to be the one to do it first. Then, in between kisses, he stopped and asked:

"Do you want to go for a swim?"

I agreed eagerly. As we went underwater and I felt his hands wrap around me, I forgot about everything. Lost in the moment, I concentrated on his touch. Han's careful and delicate hands slid across my chest, stomach, and hips. I held on to his waist, feeling his back under my palms. As he left pleasant sensations around my body, I was ready to go. When he reached the region between my legs, I couldn't hold the air in anymore. I moaned, releasing bubbles into the water. Immediately, Han brought me to the surface. I refused to take a moment to breathe, going right back to him after inhaling some oxygen. I wrapped my hands around his neck, now facing him. I travelled a little lower down his body and to his chest. He started swimming again, but when I kissed his nipple, he almost stopped in his tracks. A screech left his lips. He craved this pleasant sensation as much as I did. He rushed to the

shore. I could feel the flow of the water around us become stronger. When we reached the sand, I couldn't wait to please him. Han reached down into my shorts, undoing the laces and pulling them down. I was so excited to be with him like this again. I was ready to go, and he was ready to receive. I watched him open up for me. I acted slowly. As I went in, he breathed with satisfaction. I felt his body respond to my movements. The warmth and wetness. We kissed. I didn't want to hurt him, so I was careful. Maybe a little too careful.

"Faster," I heard a whisper in my ear.

I obliged. It was so hard to keep it in, to let him orgasm first, but I managed. As he arched his back, with a shriek leaving his lips, I felt his insides tighten around me. It was only getting more lubricated. I bit my lower lip, trying to hold on. Han exhaled abruptly, falling back on the sand. I stopped moving. He looked at me, reached for my face, pulling me closer, and whispered in my ear again:

"You can finish."

I started moving again. I could see the satisfaction this sensation brought to my partner. I wished I could continue for longer. I came inside him,

erupting with a soft moan through my pressed-together lips. Like a wave, pressure left my body. I softened, holding myself over Han on my hands, sitting on his tail again. We both breathed heavily. My vision was blurry, head was spinning. I got lower on my elbows, almost lying on Han. I could hear his fast heartbeat in his chest. This feeling of sweet relief. The passion we shared with each other. It was like that first time all over again, but now no one was there to chase us away. I pulled out of him, putting my swim shorts back on. Then I fell on the sand beside him, still hazy after the action.

"It felt so... good..." Sakharkarkhan said softly, almost mumbling his words.

"I... can't speak..." I couldn't breathe properly either.

We lay there, being caressed by the gentle waves of the ocean. Staring at the sky and melting under the hot temperatures, like ice cream.

After that day, our conversations didn't change much. We still spoke of our lives and work, of our families and friends, but now we greeted each other with kisses and had occasional sex on the beach. We explored each other's bodies with a new perspective, finding new ways to bring each

other pleasure. Our dives got more intimate as well. I forgot how it felt to be desired and loved. I locked out that part of me for so long that reigniting that fire seemed overwhelming. Han was as patient as always, letting me submerge myself in him at my own pace. After our feelings blossomed into a beautiful union, I thought my life could never be better. I had a job I immensely enjoyed that provided me with a steady living, I had friends and family who shared their time with me, and now I had romantic love. I found it in the weirdest of places, from someone I had never thought would be in my life in the first place, yet it made me so delighted. I felt fulfilled. I felt truly satisfied. Happy. Just happy...

Chapter eight: Ramon

I was trying to forget this name, but it haunted me everywhere I went. Ramon was always a popular man. In his late twenties, he opened his own business teaching people about mermaids. A charismatic personality combined with a hot-topic idea brought him quick success. Nowadays, he is an icon. A lonely man in his thirties, living alone in an old apartment, wearing cargo shorts, sandals, and dirty T-shirts. Not someone you would expect to become the face of a peaceful city. However, Ramon was famous. Everyone knew him either personally or through local news. His services as a mermaid expert were called upon after each incident on the shores, weird sightings on the water, or simply for debates with non-believers. He had everyone in the city wrapped around his finger. Only a few knew how cruel he actually was, and of those, even fewer thought he was wrong. People who doubted him or disliked him were considered brainless haters. Because of that, each time his name came up in a conversation, I had to keep my opinions to myself. Biting my tongue and staying quiet as a survival strategy. I couldn't erase his face and being from my life, but I tried to push it to my periphery. The next time I heard

his name was from the one I never expected to bring it up.

It was the end of May. A foggy evening on the beach with Sakharkarkhan. We were lying on the sand in each other's arms, looking at the sky. It was a little chilly for the last days of spring, yet it never worried me. Suddenly, Han interrupted our quiet peace.

"I need to tell you something," he started.

His nervous and sad tone immediately woke me from my daydreaming.

"I won't be able to see you until autumn."

"Why?" I questioned in surprise.

"Summer, especially the early months, is too dangerous for me. There are people who would try to hunt me down. I can't risk it, no matter how badly I will miss you."

I thought about it for a moment. Han was right. Ramon and his new batch of lapdogs would be waiting for their chance to prove themselves, and this summer our government wanted to organise a full-blown campaign to hunt mermaids. I would never want Sakharkarkhan to get in the middle of it.

"Is there any way I could see you during those months? Like on the water, or if I travel somewhere else?" I asked, hoping to find a way.

"I understand why you are asking this, but I don't think it would be wise. It would be much safer for me to just lie low and wait until it's over," he explained.

"I get it," I kissed him on the forehead.

I thought the conversation was over and lay back, wondering about the three long months of loneliness waiting for me. However, Sakharkarkhan had something else to share.

"Remember I told you long ago that I know the man who came with you to the beach that evening? The first time we met."

"Ramon. What about him?" just the thought of him made my tone rougher.

"He's the one who makes it dangerous for me to come here. He knows me, and he tries to get to me every year."

"What do you mean?"

I felt Han's body tense up. He pressed closer to me, avoiding my gaze.

"I told you before that my attempts to find a human to mate with were unsuccessful for two years before you. Well, I want to tell you why," Sakharkarkhan spoke in a heavy voice.

I said nothing, simply held him tight, and listened to his story.

"When I came here for the first time, I already knew what I needed to do. My parents made sure I was ready before the day for it officially came. I still remember that summer. It was late evening. The beaches were empty. I came only to look around, but I saw someone in the water. It was a young man, swimming alone. It was a perfect opportunity. I took him, pulling him underwater. At first, he panicked, trying to swim away and escape my grip. I brought him to the surface to breathe, trying to show him he could trust me. After he took a couple of breaths, I pulled him under again. After a second ascent he stopped resisting. I pulled him around, still figuring out if he knew what was going on. When he started to mimic my movements, I began the usual routine of trying to seduce him. He responded well. I thought myself lucky to do it on the first try. If only I knew how mistaken I was. I brought him to the beach, allowed him to have sex with me, but he was rough. Very rough. Despite me being aroused, it was painful,

yet I kept thinking it would be worth it. If he did what I needed him to, then it would be over and I could forget about it. However, when the moment came, he pulled out and came on my stomach instead of inside. I tried to ask him why he would do that, and he said that it didn't matter. I explained why I needed him to come inside me, but... he laughed. He left me on the beach and went away. At the moment, I was very disappointed, but I moved on. You might have guessed who that man was."

"Ramon," I replied dryly.

"Yes. It wasn't nice, what he did, but it wouldn't stop me from trying again. I came back. One evening, I saw a man swimming alone again. I took him. Immediately, I sensed that something was wrong. It seemed he knew my moves. He touched me first. As I brought him to the surface to breathe, I recognised him. It was the same man as before. It was a bad idea, but I decided to try it again with him. I brought him to the shore, everything like usual, but he was rough again. Even worse this time. It was so painful that I couldn't take it. I attempted to throw him off me, but he pressed me down and used me without any concern for my wellbeing. He didn't give me what I needed again. I lashed out at him, yelling that it wasn't

fair, but he only pushed my head into the sand and told me to be thankful for what he did."

"That piece of shit," I commented, holding Han closer to myself.

"That summer, I saw him several more times, but I avoided him. I learned that he wouldn't give me what I needed and would only hurt me, so there was no point in attempting to take him. In the end, I left with nothing. Next year I came back, hoping not to see that man again. There were many more hunters that time, so my options were extremely limited. When I saw an unfamiliar young man swimming along the coastline, I took him. At first, he panicked, then he mimicked me. It didn't raise any suspicion in me, so I did the whole routine and brought him to the shore. I was ready to let him in, but then I heard someone running. It was that man again. He pushed the guy off me, taking his place. I tried to fight him, but he and that other man beat me up until I allowed him to use me. As he did that, the second man grabbed my face and forced my mouth open. I'm sure that if not for my sharp teeth, he would have forced himself on me as well. When they finished, not giving me what I needed again, they beat me up some more. I remember them laughing, enjoying my suffering. I managed to escape into the water and

run home. After seeing what those people did to me, Karakhrane and Raskarerkne wanted to hunt and eat them, but I convinced them to leave both of them alone."

"Why? Why not make them pay for what they did?" I was indignant.

"I'm not at liberty to be their judge and executioner, neither are Karakhrane or Raskarerkne."

"But they hurt you, they raped you! They should've been punished."

I was so angry. Just the thought of that monster hurting my sweet Han made me see red. I couldn't comprehend why he was so eager to let him get away with it.

"It was never my place to make that decision. If they wanted to live the rest of their lives with the knowledge of what they did, I would let them. In any case, I didn't want to go back for a while, but the eggs were on their last days, and I was getting desperate. When I came back, I learned just how dangerous humans can actually be. I still hadn't healed properly, and I couldn't have imagined that that man would organise a whole army to capture me. He and several others attacked me as soon as I arrived, as if knowing

that I would come back. That time I learned to evade blades. I'm so glad that our bodies regenerate so successfully, otherwise I would be covered in scars."

"Why did he do that? Do you know?"

"He wanted me alive, but hurt. To tire me out so that I couldn't fight him when he got his hands on me."

"Tell me you left after that," I almost pleaded, knowing well that it wasn't the end of the story.

"That year I did. It took me almost a month to heal the wounds."

"I know you came back the next year, it's obvious. What I can't understand is why? Is having children worth all of that?"

"It is in our case," Han admitted in a sad voice. "We didn't have much choice if we wanted our descendants to be healthy. And yes, I knew that man and his new army waited for me. I don't really know why I still went for all of you that time. I knew it was his doing, but I thought... maybe this time one of you would take the final blow."

Sakharkarkhan mumbled the last part of his sentence. I was fuming with rage. He was such a kind-hearted young man, lying here in my arms.

Despite my knowing well how cruel Ramon was, I couldn't even imagine how much worse it was for Han. The pain and suffering Ramon caused him. The actions of that monster made this beautiful mermaid wish to die. I couldn't hold my anger in. However, then I thought of something I had wondered about for a long time:

"If you knew I was with Ramon, why did you take me?"

Han kept quiet for a moment, probably thinking how to respond. I felt his muscles relaxing in my tight grip. Only then did I notice how strongly I was squishing him, pressing him to my chest as if it would shelter him from the bad memories. I loosened my arms, relaxing my body with a deep exhale. Still without meeting my eyes, Sakharkarkhan said:

"You seemed... different. As if you didn't want to be there. As if someone made you do it. You were the only one without a weapon, and you weren't hostile towards me. Others came in screaming, trying to pretend to swim with me only to attempt stabbing me. I threw them around for a little, just to cool them down, and let them go when they seemed to be getting weak. Then there was you. You walked into the water slowly, swam elegantly,

like you didn't even care that I was there, and then... I didn't have to pull you. You simply dived in and went for the bottom. I remember observing you with confusion, how you stood there, enjoying the flow of the water around you. When you wouldn't swim up to take a breath, I became slightly concerned, so I took you myself."

"I remember that. It was so strange seeing everyone return bloodied, while it seemed like you didn't care about me being there at all."

"Despite you being strangely calm, I still distrusted you."

"And yet you seduced me and took me to the shore."

"If you're searching for a logical reason, I don't think there is one. I want to think it was luck or destiny that motivated me to do that, but you also responded so well. You seemed to be into it, the way you touched and kissed me."

"I had no idea what I was doing," I chuckled. "I was so worried I would hurt you without knowing."

"And then you gave me the best sex I had in years," Han said, finally making eye contact with me.

A slight smile crossed our lips as we stared at each other. I kissed him gently, embracing him tightly once more. We moved on from that horrific conversation, but I would never forget it. It made me hate Ramon even more.

Later, I looked into it and figured out that Ramon opened his practice as a 'mermaid expert' after his first encounter with Sakharkarkhan. By the second year of Han coming here, that man had already grown his business and found followers who apparently were willing to listen to him. Now that I knew much more about mermaids and about Ramon, I couldn't believe I ever trusted him. I went through his bullshit training, for gods' sake, that barely taught us anything except how to resist being drowned. So many lies he fed us as facts were nothing more than his own imagination. I was ready to rip him to pieces with my own bare hands, but Han was against it. His pacifist soul craved no revenge. He was still saddened by the events of the past, yet refused to dwell on it. If only I could do the same.

Chapter nine: Life

The summer came around. I tried to bury myself in work to avoid thinking about Sakharkarkhan. However, being out in the ocean, looking at the waves and the horizon, only made me feel lonelier. I kept going to the beach for a swim any time I got. I knew it was aimless, hoping to see him, yet I kept dreaming about it. I had never felt so alone. Nothing like love to make you feel empty when it's gone. Days passed one by one. My eyes were itching to see Han again. Some nights I couldn't sleep, thinking about him and crying from how much I missed him. Several times I slept on the beach, simply refusing to go home, just in case he would show up. It was all pointless. Despite the heartache killing me, I worked my ass off that summer. I earned twice as much for all the overtime I did. It was the first time I thought about buying my own boat.

When autumn came, I was shaking with impatience. I would go to the beach every free moment I had, but Han wasn't showing up. With each day of September, I was growing more hopeless. Intrusive thoughts kept crawling into my mind. What if something happened? What if he forgot about me? What if he found someone else? I couldn't drive

these ideas away. I was frantically checking the news for any mermaid sightings, spending days by the ocean, waiting for him. I slept on the beach more often, not to miss him when he showed up. I felt anxious and worried. My family thought I was going crazy. I couldn't explain to them why I was acting that way. I still couldn't find the courage to tell them about being gay. Adding to it that my boyfriend was a mermaid would surely drive them to a hospital bed. In a way, I'm glad their concern was so quiet. They never pried or pressured me to tell them what was wrong, they were simply there for me to cry on their shoulders.

I was twenty-three years old by that time, crying about a guy who told me he would be back but left me with no goodbye. I started doubting I would ever see him again. As September went by, I came back to work with a new motivation. I was planning to kill my broken heart with endless shifts. I didn't leave the boat for almost another two months. Working day and night, through all the holidays and celebrations, doing everything I could to lose myself in the one thing I knew – fishing.

It was the end of November when my boss sent me off for a forced weekend on the shore. I

remember he said something about my eyes being dead and that I looked like a zombie. He was right, of course. In an attempt to drown the pain of loneliness, I was killing my body and soul. He promised to pay me for that week off if I didn't come back to the boat until December. I obliged. I needed rest, even though I didn't want it.

On the second day on the shore, when I came to the same beach and sat on the sand, staring aimlessly into the horizon of the unruly ocean, I suddenly saw something in the distance. I couldn't believe my eyes. In the big, rowdy waves, there was a line. Something was moving towards me with great speed. Then I heard it. The familiar shriek that I had learned to distinguish among hundreds of other sounds. The mermaid call of the man I longed for. I jumped up, running towards the ocean. Wearing long pants and a hoodie, I rushed into the cold water, disregarding any logic. I felt my clothes getting wet and heavy. Waves were pushing against me, persuading me to turn back, but I wasn't listening. I could see his silhouette closing in on me. In the next second, he jumped out of the water, flying into me and knocking me off my feet into the ocean. As cool liquid swallowed us, I could only feel his arms around me and his lips kissing mine. Underwater, I kissed

him like there was no tomorrow. I squeezed him tight in my embrace, refusing to let go. Soon I felt my lungs burning, begging for oxygen, yet I was prepared to drown if it meant holding Han in my hands. He brought me to the surface and to the shore, so that I wouldn't suffocate. As I lay on the sand, still holding him tightly, he tried to make me stop kissing him so that he could say something. I didn't care. It was the first time I ignored his wishes and was selfish about it. He giggled under my kisses, turning and twisting, attempting to wiggle his way out of my grip.

"Stop moving already, you're getting me excited," I finally stopped, smiling at him.

Another wave hit us. Salty water rose over him, flying around us in millions of drops. He was so beautiful. Just how I remembered him. A big smile on his handsome face, gorgeous blue eyes sparkling and staring at me with enthusiasm. I was all wet and cold, but so glad to see him.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come back earlier," Sakharkarkhan said before grabbing my cheeks and kissing me again. "I missed you so much."

"I was afraid I'd never see you again," I replied, with tears in my eyes.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I wanted to come back earlier, but I couldn't."

"Tell me about it later, okay? I just want to hold you for a little longer," I asked.

Sakharkarkhan smiled lovingly. With a sigh of relief, he embraced me, and we spent a while lying motionless. Holding him in my arms finally gave me the opportunity to relax. I felt my eyes closing, as if a constant anxiety had crumbled like a wall, allowing accumulated exhaustion to wash over me. Soon my body started shaking. Han, like a weighted blanket, was lying over me and breathing down my neck.

"I'm sorry I pushed you into the water," he suddenly apologised.

"I don't mind being cold if it means I finally get to see you. Also, it was me who ran into the ocean despite everything."

We both chuckled. I let go of Han to get further onto the sand. We sat down on the shore. I was slowly freezing, but I didn't want to go home. Not now. Not when my love was finally by my side.

"So, why couldn't you come back for so long?"

"Hunters. Since during summer all of us left and the campaign was unsuccessful, some decided to

take it upon themselves to continue in the autumn. As soon as I neared the coast in September, I was met with harpoons and nets. I attempted to sneak past them several times, but they kept following me. It took a lot of time to shake them before running back home. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you what was going on," Sakharkarkhan explained.

"It's alright. Most important is that you and your family are safe, everything else doesn't matter."

I couldn't stop looking at him. Every detail of him seemed dreamlike.

"You are also important," Han said. "I noticed you lost some weight, and your face looks tired. What were you doing this whole time?"

I had to tell him how I freaked out after he never came back. His concerned gaze made me feel embarrassed. I felt nothing but shame as I explained how I buried myself in work instead of dealing with my emotions in a healthy way. Sakharkarkhan was disappointed yet tried not to show it. He made me promise I would never do that again, that I wouldn't hide from my feelings and would take care of myself even when he couldn't make sure I did. Then he sent me home to change into something warmer. I ran as fast as I possibly could, flying into the house at the speed

of sound. I took a quick hot shower, put on some winter clothes, grabbed a thermos of tea, and rushed back like my life depended on it. That time, we spent the rest of the night at the beach. Only at four in the morning did I go home to sleep. I wouldn't if it were up to me, but Han insisted.

After that, life started to go back to normal. Sakharkarkhan was back, meeting me from time to time on the weekends. I got back in touch with my friends and revived my social life. In another couple of months, I came out to my family. To my surprise, they were understanding and even supportive. I was doing great at my job, earning a stable income. Sometimes the stresses of existence still got to me. It's impossible to avoid politics, mistakes, or embarrassment even at your best time of life, but I was alright.

Next summer came around. Han had to leave again. Too much risk in staying around when men like Ramon try to get their disgusting hands on any mermaid they can see. This time apart was less painful for me. I still missed him like crazy, of course, but I didn't ruin myself or my life in his absence. I took a couple of overtime shifts while I could, yet I rested and spent time with other people as well. In October, Sakharkarkhan came

back. Life was stable. I was twenty-four and happy. New ambitions were driving me. Support from my family, friends, and Han motivated me to pursue new goals. I couldn't wish for a better outcome.

Chapter ten: Birthday of 25

It was June, my birthday. I celebrated with my friends in a pub: drinking, doing karaoke, and simply enjoying ourselves. I didn't like overdoing it with alcohol, so we kept it on the low. Closer to the evening, we stumbled out into the streets. With singing and loud laughing, we were making our way around the town like morons. I don't remember, how but we ended up on the beach. It was probably because of me, but I can't remember ever making that suggestion. In any case, we began our drunken walk along the coastline. Our conversations had calmed down by that point, which made the stroll much more intimate. We talked about our lives and how different we had become. There was one particular question that still bothered them. I was the last of them still officially single. I had told them about being gay before I told my family, so they knew about that aspect. Some of them offered to be my wingmen and hook me up with someone, yet I refused. They couldn't understand why, but I didn't know how to tell them I already had someone in my life.

The universe is a very unpredictable thing. Its ways of changing people's lives in unforgiving ways always fascinated me. That day became such an

event. As we actively discussed my, in others' eyes, unfortunate love life, we saw a group of other people in the distance. They waited on the shore, looking at something in the ocean. We didn't pay them much attention until we came closer. Suddenly, we heard a mermaid call. It wasn't Sakharkarkhan, but it was another male. I turned to the water with haste. Confusion on my friends' faces. There was a mermaid in the water fighting some human. As my company stared in disbelief at the creature, I turned to the group in the distance. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was Ramon and a new band of young men. Suddenly, I saw them all cheer. Looking at the water and at them, I observed as the man in the water dragged something towards the group. I started running. My friends, despite their shock, followed me. They called for me to stop and explain, but I knew there wasn't time. I approached Ramon and his guys, pushing some of them away to get into their tight circle. Amongst them, on the sand, lay a hurt mermaid: a male they had captured. Deep cuts from the knives on his body bled, colouring the terrain under him red. His horrified brown eyes were jumping from one human to another. His long blond hair, which the guy had used to drag him by, was covered in blood and sand.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" a familiar voice of a man addressed me.

I looked up to meet Ramon's disturbed gaze. My friends joined me in the circle of moral opponents. Most of my ride-or-dies didn't believe in mermaids at all, so seeing the creature shook them to the core. However, they still stood strong by my side.

"Leave us alone!" one of Ramon's boys growled at me.

"Now, now, chill," the leader said to his loyal followers, "this is Isaac, one of my most successful students. You should show some respect."

"Release the mermaid," I commanded.

Ramon laughed for a moment, replying:

"Why would I? It was an honest catch by my Thomas. Also, the monster dared to show up here itself. It probably wanted to eat or drown someone."

"You and I both know it's not why they come here," I answered angrily.

"Wait," one of Ramon's lapdogs interrupted our conversation. "Isn't it the guy who's rumoured to help the monsters?"

"What... what are you talking about?" I questioned in bewilderment.

"You're right, Adrian. I see you know what's up," Ramon's lips widened in a cunning smile.

His wild eyes, angry and hungry for action, fixated on me like a new target. I thought he would attack me at any moment. Instead...

"How about you leave us with this monster, and we forget this ever happened?"

"I can't do that," I replied.

I was about to regret my confident statement, as a second later a fight broke out. Ramon's boys jumped me like I was their biggest enemy. Their leader didn't even need to give them any commands. Fierce and full of rage, the young men lashed out all their emotions on me. In the moment, as a punch landed on my jaw, I thought I would be done for. However, my friends were sure whose side they were on. I had never felt as thankful to have those guys by my side as then. Without hesitation, they rushed to help me. In the heat of the moment, I lost sight of the mermaid and Ramon. When my friends sent most of the boys running with their tails between their legs, I noticed the devious leader attempting to drag the poor mermaid away from the action. He pulled the

creature by its hair across the sand, as the tired and hurt male tried to resist his attacker's assault. I ran after him. Ramon saw me approaching and crouched down to the mermaid. He pulled out a blade, putting it to the frightened male's throat.

"One more step and he'll be nothing but a snack for the sharks!"

I stopped. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't allow Ramon to get away with the creature, but I also couldn't let it die.

"Look at you, Isaac," Ramon spoke, still holding the male hostage. "You were the best of my students, yet now you try to hold me back, why? Do you really care for these things?"

"They're not things. They are kind-hearted creatures that just want to have their own families. How can you do all of this, knowing that?"

"I see they never hurt anyone of your own before. Maybe someday, when another one of these things eats someone you care about, maybe then you will finally see why I do it."

"Let him go, Ramon. Come on, we both know he doesn't deserve it."

"How do you know? You've never met this specific monster before. What if he ate a tourist just yesterday?"

"Males don't eat people. And they don't touch anyone unless you try to hurt them."

"Oh wow, I see now. You think you know more than I do. How about I show you what they are really made—"

Ramon didn't get to finish his sentence. While I kept him talking, my friends came up with a plan without my knowledge. Two of them sneaked behind Ramon's back, but one of them, a professional boxer, decided to take the man head-on. He flew past me so quickly I didn't even register him. He jumped Ramon, pushing him onto the sand. In shock, Ramon let go of the mermaid, losing his grip and balance, succumbing to my friend's powerful grapple. It happened so fast I didn't get to react. Two of my friends incapacitated Ramon, taking away his knife and subduing him, while another picked up the mermaid and carried him to the ocean. As the creature rushed away into the waves, and Ramon was left unconscious on the sand, reality set in. My friends and I were bruised after the fight, one had a cut on his hand from Ramon's knife, but we gathered

back together and moved on towards the closest emergency room.

As we walked, it was time for me to get clean. These men had proven to me once again that they would stand by me even at the toughest moments, so answering their questions was the least I could do. I told them about my training with Ramon, and I told them about Sakharkarkhan. Now that they saw a mermaid with their own eyes, even those who doubted the creatures' existence before had to believe me. I wouldn't even be able to name the number of inquiries that followed, but the guys I have known for the majority of my life continued to impress me. Not one of them stopped being my friend after that day. They stuck with me despite all the differences and complications of our relationships. I knew then that I wouldn't trade those guys for anything.

If only I could say it was the last of my adventures that week. Life truly is an unpredictable twist of fate. Just a couple of days later, I was taking a walk with my grandmother. Her age was showing more and more, and it was becoming hard for her to walk, yet her spirit was as young as ever. That day, she asked me to spend time with her by the ocean. She knew how much I loved the water, so it was her idea to go

to the beach. We strolled slowly, discussing the beauty of nature, when I heard something that made my heart skip a beat. A screech of Sakharkarkhan, who was approaching the shore. I stared at my grandmother, mortified about her reaction, but she gazed at the ocean with surprise and no fear. As my handsome boyfriend swam up to the shore near us, I felt nothing but pure horror. Mermaids, in my grandmother's eyes, killed her husband, and now she was about to see one up close. I could only hope that Han would read the room and that this encounter wouldn't land my granny in the hospital.

"Hey!" Sakharkarkhan called out, getting to the shore.

His excited expression quickly changed when he saw I wasn't alone.

"A mermaid," my grandmother murmured.

Her tone seemed soft, only bewildered. She stared at the creature, mesmerised.

"Hi, ma'am," Han tried to greet her carefully, making a slight and awkward smile.

"A mermaid... Here... Now?" the woman said out loud, not addressing anyone in particular.

I stood frozen. I didn't know what I needed to say, or if I should have said anything at all. If I addressed Sakharkarkhan, my grandmother would realise I knew him. If I said nothing, it would also be weird.

"Sorry to interrupt your day. I didn't know you would be here... together," replied my nervous friend.

"What about the hunters? Won't they get you?" my granny asked, to my complete perplexity.

"I know it's a big risk coming here at this time of year, but I wanted to..." Han stopped mid-sentence, staring at me.

I saw confusion in his eyes. He was as lost as I was. However, my grandma decided that it was her time to shine. She pulled me with her, coming closer to the water. I hesitated but couldn't resist. Despite my panic, I was glad to see Sakharkarkhan. The woman came so close to the mermaid she could touch him. Han stayed in his place, not knowing if he should stay or run. The elderly, fearless madam stretched her hand out and said:

"Marcela Juana Ruiz Alvarez."

"Sakharkarkhan, but you can call me Han," replied my friend, shaking her hand.

"This is my grandson, Isaac," my granny continued, as if nothing strange was happening.

"I know, ma'am," chuckled Han.

At that moment, I knew it was over. If I could play it cool and pretend I didn't know what was going on before, now there was no way to avoid this uncomfortable conversation.

"What are you doing here?" I finally uttered.

"I knew it was your birthday recently, and I thought I'd surprise you by coming here unannounced, but I guess I didn't think it through completely," Sakharkarkhan explained, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Is this your friend, mijo?"

"Um-m..." I hesitated. "A little more than that, actually."

It came out so naturally that I couldn't stop it. I wanted to tell someone for so long, and the recent support of my friends was reassuring. The secret was out, and there was no going back.

My grandmother looked at me, then at Han. Her face showed no distinct emotions. I couldn't understand what she was thinking, or if she even understood what I was talking about. Suddenly, a

firm slap to the back of my head foresaw her next words:

"What are you waiting for? Kiss the guy already and let him go before any of those crazy maniacs notice us."

My jaw dropped. Han chuckled, saying nothing. She pushed me forward towards him and turned slightly away. It was so weird to embrace Han with her right behind my back.

"I'm sorry I chose such a bad moment for this," my boyfriend whispered in my ear.

"Don't think about it. I'll deal with it a bit later."

He kissed me lovingly, caressing my cheek, then wished me a happy birthday and promised to be back around autumn. I didn't want to let him go before kissing him again. When he swam away and my grandma and I watched him disappear into the distance, she said something that completely turned my world upside down.

"I remember the day my Sharkrakney died. No man after him made me feel the same."

If I was shocked before, now I was absolutely floored. I spat out question after question, trying to get as much information as possible out of that woman. We spent hours talking about it. That

day, I found out that despite my mother's biological father being some man my grandmother found at the bar, my actual grandfather was a mermaid. Unfortunately, Sharkrakney was caught and murdered before my mother could remember him, leaving my granny to raise their child alone. She never officially got married and had to lie about her life and her daughter to protect them both from scrutiny. She never told my mother the truth, thinking it would never matter. Seeing Han now reminded her of her long-gone true love. She promised to keep my little secret until, or if I was ever ready to tell my parents. I never felt so close to my grandmother. All this time, I thought she'd be the first to hang me for my sins, instead, she became my closest confidant.

That week of my twenty-fifth birthday changed my life for the better. I didn't have any more secrets from my friends, and I had granny to talk to at home. When autumn came around and Han could return, my grandmother asked to meet him again. The evening it finally happened, we spent hours talking at the beach, eating cookies she made with a special recipe for mermaids and drinking tea. It was such a blessing to finally have someone from my family officially approve and welcome Sakharkarkhan into my life. She told us stories

of her youth and time with Sharkrakney, their travels, and years of happy memories. I found out why all the stories before never made complete sense. Now they did. I saw how delighted my grandmother was to share this part of her life. I understood her. Han understood her. We all understood each other.

Chapter eleven: The beginning of the end

Life went on. After twenty-five came twenty-six. Then twenty-seven. I was nearing my thirties and had plans to finally move out of my family house. Over these years, I kept working hard, taking overtime shifts wherever I could. I saved up enough to take out a loan and buy my own boat. It wasn't big, and it was far from new, but it was spacious and fit for living and fishing. I left the firm I had worked at for six years and started my own business. Now I could be my own boss, spend my days however I wanted, doing the job I had always dreamed of. Sakharkarkhan and other mermaids helped me with fishing, showing the best spots or even herding fish into my nets. In addition, I started my small personal project of taking tourists for boat rides in the ocean. Running two businesses at the same time was crazy and frantic, but I persisted. At first, I took my friends and their families for a ride, telling them about mermaids, introducing them to Han and some others. Then my own family. Telling my mother the truth about her real dad was painful to watch. Everything she had ever believed was crushed and rebuilt, but it became a foundation for a new turn

in our relationship. Meeting Han, meeting his children, who had already grown into beautiful young adults, and meeting the mothers, Karakhrane or Raskarerkne. The two boys really turned out to look almost exactly like me. The trip with my family was something none of us would ever forget. Some time later, my friend's niece decided to pursue a career in marketing and convinced me to take her in for practice. That high-schooler, still seventeen years old, turned my side project into a profitable tourist attraction. I'd take more and more people to observe the ocean, telling curious listeners about the flora and fauna of the region. On rare occasions, mermaids would come around, freaking everyone out but also giving me the opportunity to change human perception of those creatures. Tourists in late summer and autumn, fishing in winter and spring. I kept spring and early summer free of rides to protect my beloved friends from unnecessary intrusions during their most vulnerable period.

When I was twenty-eight, Karakhrane or Raskarerkne decided to have more children. Sakharkarkhan and I became their donors again. This time, they had three girls and one boy.

A year later, my grandmother passed. I was one year from being thirty. She went peacefully in her

sleep. Before her gradual weakening and eventual death, she showed my mother her secret will. Since the secret of her life was finally out, she wanted a proper mermaid burial. I asked Han and his family to organise and carry it out. They agreed. In August of that year, my grandmother's remains were sent off into the ocean in the trusted hands of our underwater relatives. We all mourned her for a long time. Her absence showed. The house was emptier, quieter. Me, living on the boat instead of with my parents, made the remaining inhabitants of that home feel lonely. After the New Year celebration, my parents packed all their essentials and moved into a smaller apartment by the ocean shore. All of us seemed to move closer and closer to the water.

My life was going well. Two successful businesses that kept me afloat, a loving relationship with my family and my partner, stable and close friendships. I felt fulfilled and confident. I helped willing people from my city learn more about those they had always considered monsters and learn not to fear them anymore. TV stations and journalists attempted to get me into the same room with Ramon, to put us in a friendly debate about creatures of the ocean, but I always refused. I didn't want fame. I didn't want to make my

personal life the centre of everyone's attention. My life finally went as smoothly as a gentle sail on calm water. That was until I hit thirty...

As usual at the beginning of summer, Sakharkarkhan went away to hide. I took that month off, turning June into an annual vacation. I spent my time renovating the boat at the docks, meeting friends and family more, learning new skills and hobbies. This time, I picked up painting. I went to classes or communal gatherings for enthusiasts. In the evening, I would hit the beach, get some laps in the water and under. After, I would visit my parents for dinner or go back to my boat I lived on now and cook something. This cycle would repeat in variations week after week. On my birthday, I went out with friends, meeting my family in the evening. It was a whole day of celebrating me, my accomplishments, and so much more I could achieve in the future. Like each year, I missed Han a lot. His name slipped into the conversations several times, but I wouldn't be able to forget about him even if it didn't. Nevertheless, it was a great day. I finished it off with a bottle of wine on my boat, staring at the clear night sky over the ocean. The stars were very beautiful that time. The next day, I woke up late. Late coffee, late breakfast, late everything. By

the time I stumbled off my boat, it was already twelve in the day. I went to my favourite spot, where Han and I usually spent most of our time together. Familiar rocky cliffs that embraced a secluded beach, big and strong waves of the ocean that filled the air with crushing sounds. I thought it would be a simple, peaceful walk.

When I came to that beach, I saw something in the distance. At first, I couldn't distinguish what it was, but as I got closer, I recognised the silhouette of a mermaid. It was Sakharkarkhan. He was lying in the sand not far from the water. A giant smile crossed my lips, eyes widened in excitement. I ran towards him, screaming his name with glee, but... Soon my delighted, easy run turned into a terrified sprint. It struck me as weird before that he wasn't moving, yet when the sun reflected off his shiny body in a bloody red sparkle, I knew it was bad. My excitement turned into horror. I ran as fast as I could. Upon laying eyes on him, I almost didn't recognise him. His face was beaten up so badly that blood and swelling made it seem indistinguishable. Cuts seeped red liquid that gathered in his eye sockets and rolled down his cheeks as tears. All over his body, hands, and tail were deep cuts and bruises. Someone had mutilated him with what seemed like a hunting

knife. I had never seen so many wounds on one being. The sand was red from his blood. As I fell to my knees next to him, I felt my legs getting drenched in the wet substance. I didn't know where to start. I had never seen so much blood. I was calling for him, yelling for him to wake up. I was afraid to even touch him. Tears started to drip from my eyes, making the picture hazy. My heart ached, beating fast. I grabbed Sakharkarkhan by the shoulders, gently attempting to shake him. When it didn't work, I had no other choice but to pick him up. If he wasn't dead yet, he would die without water. Carefully but hastily, I took him in my hands and carried him to the ocean. I walked against the waves until Han's and my bodies were submerged. The water around us was coloured red from his blood. I knew it would trigger other mermaids to come and help. They were like sharks, able to smell blood from kilometres away and distinguish when it was one of their own. Then I looked down at him. The sight brought so much heartbreak, fear, and anger, I felt like I couldn't breathe. However, this time I saw his sleepy, tired blue eyes staring back at me.

"I'm here. Please, hold on. Please!" I whimpered. I heard female mermaid calls. Two of them were almost flying towards us, making waves in the

ocean. I kept talking to Han, pleading with him to stay alive. I felt him breathing weakly in my hands. All I could think of was begging the universe, a higher power, or fate to help him pull through. Soon Karakhrane and Raskarerkne emerged from the ocean before us. Their eyes were burning with rage and horror. At first, they were ready to jump me, yet after recognising me, they stopped.

"Please, help him!" I cried out. "I don't know what to do. Please, I can't lose him!"

The females swam closer to take Sakharkarkhan from my hands. However, before I could let go, I heard the man speak. He raised one of his hands out of the water, reaching for me. I leaned towards his tender touch as his weak voice said:

"Isaac... kiss... me..."

I obliged. As I kissed him lovingly, tears kept rolling down my face. Then I had to let him go. The females took him and rushed away. I started backing out of the ocean as I felt my legs giving way beneath me. I couldn't catch a breath between sobs. When I reached the shallow water, I fell to my knees, screaming in pain. My heart was tearing apart. Emotions were breaking me, bursting out in tears and yelling. I was afraid, angry, desperate. I didn't know what to do. My head was spinning, my

body wasn't listening to my commands. I couldn't move. All the noise of my suffering mixed with the clashing of waves. I can't even remember how I ended up in the hospital.

Next time I came to my senses, I was tied down to a hospital bed with some kind of liquid being delivered into my vein by IV. Next to me sat my mother. She jumped from her place when she saw me waking up. I broke down crying in her arms. She sat with me for half an hour, consoling me. I told her everything. We cried together. I was mortified, and I felt so useless. I couldn't help him, I couldn't save him. I didn't even know why he was there. Later, when I calmed down a little, my mother told me how I ended up in the hospital. Apparently, I was yelling so loudly, some people on the nearby beach heard me. They came to check, seeing a pool of blood on the sand and me sitting in the water, bawling my eyes out. Since my clothes were soaked in blood, they assumed it was mine. They tried to pull me out of the water, but I fought them, resisting any reason. I was refusing to get to the shore or tell them what was going on, so they called for help. Police dragged me into the ambulance, where they had to sedate me because I was throwing punches in all directions, attempting to escape back to the

ocean even from a moving car. While I was unconscious, they checked my whole body, found nothing, then tied me down and gave me fluids because I was slightly dehydrated. I could only apologise for my behaviour. Police came to take a statement, attempting to understand whose blood I was covered in. However, as soon as lab results showed it was a mermaid's, they dropped it. The official report said that a mermaid attack led to my temporary insanity. The news talked about it, trying to get an interview, but I avoided it all like the plague. I didn't have time for it. I had to go to therapy to talk it all out. It was weird having to lie about a real situation, changing the reality of it to a fake story. The hardest part was not knowing if Han survived. Though therapy helped a little, I was still fuming with rage. I had my suspicions about what happened, all I needed was a confirmation.

In about two weeks, Karakhrane and Raskarerkne came to me. I was on my boat, trying to fall asleep when I heard their calls. I jumped up, running outside, fearing that they would inform me of the unthinkable. However, they didn't. Sakharkarkhan was expected to pull through and be well enough in another week or two. I cried with relief. Yet something about those women's

eyes told me it wasn't the reason they wanted to meet.

"Revenge. We crave. Revenge," Karakhrane said with a strong accent.

"Do you know who did it?" I asked.

I could feel my heart picking up pace.

"Ramon. The man... called... Ramon," Raskarerkne replied.

I saw red. My blood was boiling. I clenched my teeth as my hands gripped the edge of the wooden pier with such strength, I felt the boards bending slightly.

"I knew it," I growled.

All three of us were out for blood. For revenge on the man who had brought so much pain into our loved one's life. That night we conducted a plan. I was to bring Ramon to them.

Chapter twelve: Blood in the water

On my next weekend, I went to Ramon's apartment. Old building, stinky stairs, rusty metal door – his place hadn't changed a bit in all these years. When he opened the door with confusion on his face, it took everything in me not to punch him right there and then. He asked me what I was doing there.

"A monster hurt my friend," I replied, growling through my teeth.

Ramon's eyes lit up. He didn't even ask what kind of monster. He simply assumed what he wanted to believe, agreeing to my proposition without any further questions. Even when I told him to leave all his weapons at home, that we would use my net and harpoon, he never protested. He was so excited. So eager to get on my boat. All the way there, Ramon kept telling me how he always knew I'd see the truth. How, in his mind, I would always understand and choose the side of good. I just kept nodding. Keeping my mouth shut, I pretended I agreed with him.

We got on the boat. For the last time, I asked him if he had any weapons. Ramon showed me his

empty pockets, enthusiastically telling me how he would torture the monster with his bare hands. So stupid of him. But it all worked perfectly.

We set sail into the ocean. I told him I knew where we would find the monster, that I had tracked them to their home. Ramon was so proud of me. He said:

"I always knew you would come around. You are like a son I never had."

I kept silent, only squeezing half a smile out of myself to play pretend. That thought sickened me. I wanted nothing to do with this sadist. Him calling me his son made me nauseous. Yet he never saw it coming. The wind was on our side. Looking overboard, I could see that, with time, the current changed, being tampered with. The women were in position. When we came to a stop, Ramon was so thrilled. He kept looking around in the water, searching for the target. We heard a screeching sound of a mermaid call. Several years of pretending to be an expert and Ramon still couldn't distinguish a female's call from a male's. He ran to the side of the boat where the sounds were coming from. Seeing movement near us, he yelled for me to shoot the harpoon. However, I simply stood there. Still as the undisturbed water

of a lake. He turned to face me, confused about why I hadn't shot yet. I started to walk over to him. Only seconds before my boot hit his chest, he seemed to finally understand what was going on. In his eyes, I think I saw it dawning on him: the realisation of what we were actually doing here. My foot landed in the middle of his chest, sending him over board and into the water. With a splash, his body landed and disappeared in the deep blue of the ocean. I came closer to the edge, trying to see into the depths. I could see three shadows in between reflected sunlight. Pieces of Ramon's clothes started to float up to the surface. Then I saw one of the shadows being sent to the air. Ramon's face showed under my feet. Horrified and bloodied. His body half-naked, covered in deep claw marks. Water around him was mixing with his blood. The capillaries in his eyes were burst, making his brown irises disappear in redness. His frightened gaze brought me so much satisfaction.

"Help me!" he screamed, pleading and stretching his arm out of the water, reaching for me.

I could have helped him. But I stood there. Watching him. Observing how realisation sank in. Desperation setting in. At that moment, as I stared at him with pure rage and clenched fists, he knew. He knew why I was doing it. He knew...

In a second, his pleas were drowned in the ocean's salty water. I saw his shadow being dragged deeper and deeper. More blood was rising to the surface. I saw his silhouette being disassembled. I couldn't hear his screams, but I saw bubbles coming from the depths. Piece by piece, the women were tearing him apart, like a wild dog rips its prey. Any trace of him was erased. I felt anger. So much of it, I couldn't do anything else but stare. When there was nothing left of him, I could finally exhale. Relief washed over me. It was done. He was done. He would never hurt another mermaid. Never teach anyone else how to do that. Ramon was dead.

Chapter thirteen: No regrets

My life got back on track. I acted as if nothing had happened that day. I came back to the docks, parked my boat, and went to my painting class. That day, I avoided red colour. I could finally breathe with my full chest. The air seemed lighter, fresher, even tastier. A meal at my favourite restaurant was better, more filling. The ice cream – sweeter, cooler, maybe smoother. Life felt brighter and easier. I had no guilt, shame, or remorse for what I had done. I knew my role in it well, and I embraced it. I was even proud of it. However, in two days, I would be made to regret my decision.

In the deep night, while clouds slowly crawled along the sky, I sat on the beach where I once found Han, looking at the horizon. Suddenly, I saw something in the water. I jumped up from my place when I recognised the face. Sakharkarkhan was in the ocean, staring at me, but not coming to the shore. Tears immediately welled in my eyes. I ran towards him. Ignoring the fact I had clothes on, I rushed into the water towards him. However, as I got just one metre from him, Han moved backwards.

"Oh my God, I'm so glad to see you!" I said, yet he kept his distance.

I noticed and stopped. The water was a little higher than my waist.

"What... what's going on?" I asked with concern.

"Why would you do that?" he asked in a disappointed tone.

My heart skipped a beat. Of course, Sakharkarkhan would find out about it and, of course, he disapproved. I knew it, yet I never stopped to think about it before. I was blinded by rage and encouraged by the females.

"I'm sorry, Han," I started. "I know it was wrong, but... what else was I supposed to do? I couldn't let him get away with it."

"You were not in the right to be the judge. Neither you nor Karakhrane or Raskarerkne," Han explained. "I know why they wanted to do it - it's in their nature - but you... you knew I would be against it. Why would you do that?"

His voice was so painfully sad. I could see tears in his eyes as well. The scars on his face and body were still fresh, bringing back even more memories of that day. I wanted to touch him so badly, embrace him, kiss him to finally know he

would be alright. Yet I couldn't. He wouldn't let me get close to him.

"Listen, I'm sorry, I really am, just... why can't you understand, I couldn't let him threaten your life again. Your life or anyone else's who comes here."

"I understand what led you to it, though I disagree with it. But have you thought about what will happen next? Despite whatever I say or think, it doesn't matter - you will be persecuted for what you did."

"I'm not scared of Hell or God if it means I can keep you safe!"

"It's not what I'm talking about, Isaac," to hear my name spoken by him felt both like a blessing and a curse. "You killed a man. And it doesn't matter what reasoning you had, because humans won't listen. They will hunt you down and punish you for working with the monsters. Persecute you for betrayal. They will lock you up for the rest of your life, and I will never see you again."

I couldn't utter a word. I had never thought of that.

"I will lose you forever because of what you did," Han continued, heartbreak in his tone. "I love

you so much, Isaac. I want to hold you and kiss you. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you, but I can't now. I... I can't even look at you now. I hated that man, I did, but I always hoped that he would never take you from me. Yet here we are. I would rather you had never found me that day, because it would be less painful to die than to know I will never see you again."

He turned to swim away. I panicked.

"No, please, Han, don't go! No! I'm sorry! Please, come back! HAN!"

My pleas did nothing. He left me fighting against the waves, screaming aimlessly into the distance. Sakharkarkhan left as quietly as he came. Not a trace of his presence in the night. I swam back to the shore, breaking down, crying on my knees again. I didn't mean what I said about being sorry. I didn't regret my actions one bit. However, seeing how disappointed Sakharkarkhan was with me, how my actions tortured him, made me feel pathetic.

Time moved on. Life wouldn't wait for me to pull myself together. At first, I thought Han could have been overreacting. For two weeks, I lived peacefully. Job, therapy, dinners with friends or family, hobbies – all as usual. Then people noticed that their beloved mermaid expert hadn't been

around for a while. The police started an investigation, while I started to come up with a plan to run away. There wasn't a way they wouldn't track it all back to me. While there wouldn't be any traces in the ocean, there could be blood on the base of my boat, or recordings from street cameras of us going to the docks. Paper trails of my outings to the ocean, random bystanders observing something. It could come crumbling down on my head like a house of cards. Sakharkarkhan was right. There was no way people wouldn't blame me for Ramon's death.

I kept myself informed on the police investigation through the news. Every day, I took small, seemingly unrelated steps to prepare for an escape. I still didn't know exactly where to run, yet I didn't want to be caught. Buying more canned food with my groceries, taking money out of my bank account in small amounts, gathering resources, and saying especially endearing goodbyes to my social circles. My mother caught on to my strange behaviour. I had to tell her what was happening. Her gaze, the pure disbelief in her eyes - I will never forget it. I didn't tell her I had murdered Ramon. All I said was that I knew he was dead. Yet I think she figured it out. What

surprised me most, she didn't stop me, but she didn't help me either.

When the police first came to me, I was all ready to get away. I complied with their investigation so as not to seem suspicious. I played it cool. The story I came up with had holes in it, and I expected them to get to the truth sooner or later. After rounds of interrogations, they let me out, warning me not to leave the town. I never planned to listen to them. When they find the proof they need, I will only find out about it as cuffs close on my wrists, so I wasn't about to sit around and wait.

That night, I sat at the pier, staring at the water. I had sent letters to my friends and parents, explaining everything from my perspective. I wanted them to know at least a little bit of the truth behind the narrative on the news. When the clock struck twelve, I would leave on my boat in an unknown direction. I had no particular hiding place in mind, I simply wanted to get away.

Suddenly, I heard a familiar mermaid call. At first, I couldn't believe my ears. I assumed I was only hearing what I wanted to hear. However, soon I noticed a line in the water, closing in on me. My hands started shaking. A face I had longed to see

all this time showed from the ocean under my feet. I gasped quietly. His blue eyes gazed upon me with an empathetic smile. I couldn't speak a word. Then he dove underwater, accelerating and jumping out, he landed next to me on the edge of the pier, sitting by my side. My eyes widened. My breaths were fast and short. Heart beating so quickly I could hear it in my head. Sakharkarkhan was next to me. With a soft stare, he pulled me into his arms and I melted. I broke down in tears, wrapping my hands around him, squeezing tightly. He held me in an embrace as I sobbed. When I calmed down a little, he finally spoke:

"I heard you are planning an escape."

I nodded silently.

"Do you know where you will go?"

I shook my head.

"I knew this would happen, but I hoped I'd be wrong."

"I thought you never wanted to see me again," I murmured.

"I never said that," he held me by my chin, raising my eyes to meet his gaze. "I still love you, Isaac. I never wanted to lose you."

I bit my lower lip. I wanted to kiss him. Han caressed my cheek gently, observing me with a tender expression. Then he pulled me closer, leaning forward, and kissed me. I remember tears rolling out of my eyes as I felt his lips on mine. I felt safe. Like nothing in the world mattered when I was with him. In his embrace. Under his gaze. Next to him.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here all this time. I needed some time to think and to heal," Han said.

"Don't apologise. I did it to myself. You have nothing to say sorry for."

"Still, I feel like I failed you."

"It was me who ruined it all. None of this is your fault."

"In a way it is. If I hadn't come over that day without notice, maybe none of this would ever have happened," Han paused. "But I wanted to see you so badly, I just couldn't wait any longer."

"It's not your fault, Han. Please, just stop blaming yourself for the mistakes of other people. You don't deserve it."

I took his hand in mine, caressing it fondly. It was time for me to leave. He knew it too.

"Before you go," Sakharkarkhan spoke up, "I have a suggestion."

I let him continue.

"I don't know if it will work, or if you will agree to it, but... what if I help you fake your death?" he paused. "Then I will carry you to the island. The one we talked about a long time ago."

"Where people welcome mermaids," I whispered in disbelief.

"Yes. There still might be a risk that they will find you there, but maybe that way we can stay together for longer."

I agreed. It didn't matter what his plan implied or required, I was in. I was ready to drown for real if it meant I could start over in a new place with Han. There was still hope to be together. To escape the purgatory. There was a way to get away from it all.

Chapter fourteen: Future

That fateful night, I left my hometown, escaping into the vast ocean. I would never see my friends, parents, or familiar streets again. It saddened me that I had to leave it all behind. The happy, successful, and fulfilling life I had, my built paradise – all of it lost because of one decision. As I rode against the waves and watched my home dissolve into the horizon, I cried. I could never imagine I would be in this situation. I was a criminal, a fugitive, a murderer. I disagreed with those titles, but everyone else would never see me as anything else. It broke my heart, realising my life would never be the same. Constant instability is stability in itself, but being used to one balanced way of life and then getting my ground knocked out from under my feet felt overwhelmingly painful. My head seemed to spin from the stress I experienced. Tears kept rolling down my cheeks even when I was calmer. Not even a day passed before I started to miss my home and the people there. However, at least I had Sakharkarkhan with me. He would travel by my side or on my boat, holding me in his tight embrace when I felt especially broken. We would

spend nights and days together roaming the wild waves of the unforgiving ocean.

The plan was simple. We would keep our heads low, staying out on the water. I would use my prepared provisions as planned, but without worry about them running out, because we counted on them to. I'd spend a couple of weeks like this, after which a more complicated part would begin. Han would find a place for me to leave my boat. Leaving traces of empty cans and signs of presence, we would abandon it for someone to find. We would make it look like my provisions had run out, and in desperation combined with starvation, I drowned myself. In reality, Sakharkarkhan would carry me kilometres away to a distant island. That underwater trip would take a whole day, and we both had to prepare for it. Yet if we were successful, I could start over in a new place.

We did as planned. I packed some of the provisions to take with me, together with some sentimental essentials. Clothes, photos, technology - anything I had on that boat that had been my house for many years - was about to be abandoned and forgotten. There was no way for me to take my stuff with us because that would be suspicious and would add additional weight to the already demanding travel. While I staged the boat to

appear messy, Sakharkarkhan lay on the nose of it, saving power for the upcoming journey. By nightfall, everything was ready. My boat had never looked so chaotic, yet it perfectly painted the picture of a frantic survivor clinging to his last bits of hope. Empty cans and water bottles, contraptions for rainwater collection and fishing, empty gas tank. I left a note on my desk inside:

"I, Isaac Lopes Ruiz, am tired of running. My supplies have ended, the ocean refuses to provide me with sufficient food, and my boat is out of gas. I can't travel, I can't keep fighting, I... I want to give up. There is no life for me after what I've been accused of. There's no way for me to prove my actions were justified. If you find this boat and this letter, please tell my family that I loved them. I miss them greatly. I know it will hurt them to know of my fate, but I can't keep running like this. I wish there was a different way, but I guess... I'll join my grandmother in the ocean's depths much sooner than I anticipated."

There was much more I wanted to say in it, yet I couldn't. I didn't want to make it too long, giving out information that could lead someone to my trail.

We left during the night. When I dived into the cold early spring water, I felt my limbs getting numb. My lungs seemed to shrink under the pressure of the temperature. However, I felt no fear. The arms of my beloved Han wrapped around me, taking and holding me in a sweet embrace. I put my hands around his neck, holding close to his body. A small backpack on my back with provisions and essentials, closed tightly not to leave a trace. Chills ran through my body. I would have to endure this cold for the next twelve hours. Sakharkarkhan kissed me gently, then transferred me to his back and rose to the surface. I had to stay over the water to breathe, but it was about to slow our travel. We had planned for it, yet I still wasn't thrilled about it. As we started swimming, all I could do was think. I was leaving the last pieces of my home behind, going into the unknown of the future, with only my boyfriend to help and support me. I loved him, of course, but now he was the only one I had in my life, which made me feel very lonely.

We swam the whole night. We would do it in intervals of faster and slower swimming. Sometimes I would hold my breath for as long as I could so we could cover more distance; sometimes we both would stay on the surface to

relax and take a break. When the first rays of sunlight showed over the horizon, they lit up the silhouette of our destination like light at the end of a dark tunnel. Sakharkarkhan and I exhaled with relief when we saw the island. On the shore, we were already awaited by the residents. People with torches and mermaids we were familiar with waited for both of us to reach our new home. Han brought me as close as he could. My body was so cold I couldn't stand. The people who greeted us had to carry me to the shore and straight to their local hospital. Sakharkarkhan was so exhausted he couldn't hold himself afloat anymore. Other mermaids picked him up and carried him away to the safety of the deep ocean. I didn't get to say thank you or goodbye to him that morning. We were both drained and in need of care. Thankfully, we had others to rely on.

My life didn't end that day, it had only begun anew. Another branch of a complicated tree called survival. Like a phoenix, I got to begin my story from the start, being reborn into a new way of living. The island wasn't big. It was nothing in comparison to my hometown. People there didn't like to rely on technology, had a simpler lifestyle, less of everything. Food was self-grown or hunted. Farming, fishing, and other manual jobs were a

necessity, not a luxury. My skills as a fisherman weren't as useful there, because everyone knew how to catch a fish, so I had to learn new skills. Pottery and craftsmanship became my choice, since I already enjoyed doing them as a hobby before. My expanded knowledge after many visits to the library came in handy to teach kids basic language. I started working as a teacher for older kids on most days and as a ceramist on others. The community welcomed me with enthusiasm. People there indeed loved mermaids. They had common spaces where humans and creatures of the ocean could spend time together. Relationships between species were seen as normal, though they weren't common. Sakharkarkhan and I stayed together. It was unusual to be out like that in the open. We would spend hours in communal spaces, hanging out together or with our friends. Some days, we would swim far away into the ocean to get away from the small, though friendly, island, and spend some time with no extra eyes around.

A year later, I proposed to Han. The island recognised official unions between people and mermaids, even if it would hold no legal strength anywhere else. My proposal went astray from the beginning. It was hectic and awkward, but Han said 'yes'. I was as happy as I could have been. I wish

my family and friends from my hometown could be there for the ceremony, to see me glowing with bliss. I could never imagine myself married before, yet with Sakharkarkhan it felt right.

Two years later, when I was 33, we built a house where both Han and I could comfortably live. Right on the edge of the shore with a view of the ocean. Now we had a place that was only for us to share. No unwanted eyes on us while we got lost in each other's touch, no need to count days to see each other again. We were free to do what we wanted, the way we wanted. Free of judgment, opinions, or needless drama.

On our second anniversary, Han surprised me with a gift I could never have imagined. He brought me a stack of letters from my parents and friends from my hometown. I was speechless. I cried reading them. Then I wrote back. Without Ramon to fuel the propaganda against the mermaids, my town became more peaceful. People still hated mermaids. Fear isn't easy to uproot. Yet my face was forgotten quickly. I still couldn't come back, since I was considered dead, but communicating through letters was now an option. I started writing to them periodically. Sakharkarkhan or other mermaids would carry it to the town and

hide it in a designated place. The system worked well. However, I still missed seeing them.

Life was good again. New community, new job, new way of living. A husband I adored, a house I could call my home, and an overall feeling of fulfilment. It all was good. It all *is* good.

Now I am 35 years old. My birthday was yesterday. As I'm writing this down, my parents and close friends are on their way to the island to finally meet me after these five years. I'll give this manuscript to one of my friends, who will hopefully find a way to get it out to more people.

What was the point of this story, you might ask? It's simple. I want people to know about it. Mermaids aren't monsters. Far from it.

Differences between us might blind us, but the truth is, no matter who you are, we all come from one mother: the great, mighty, and magical ocean.