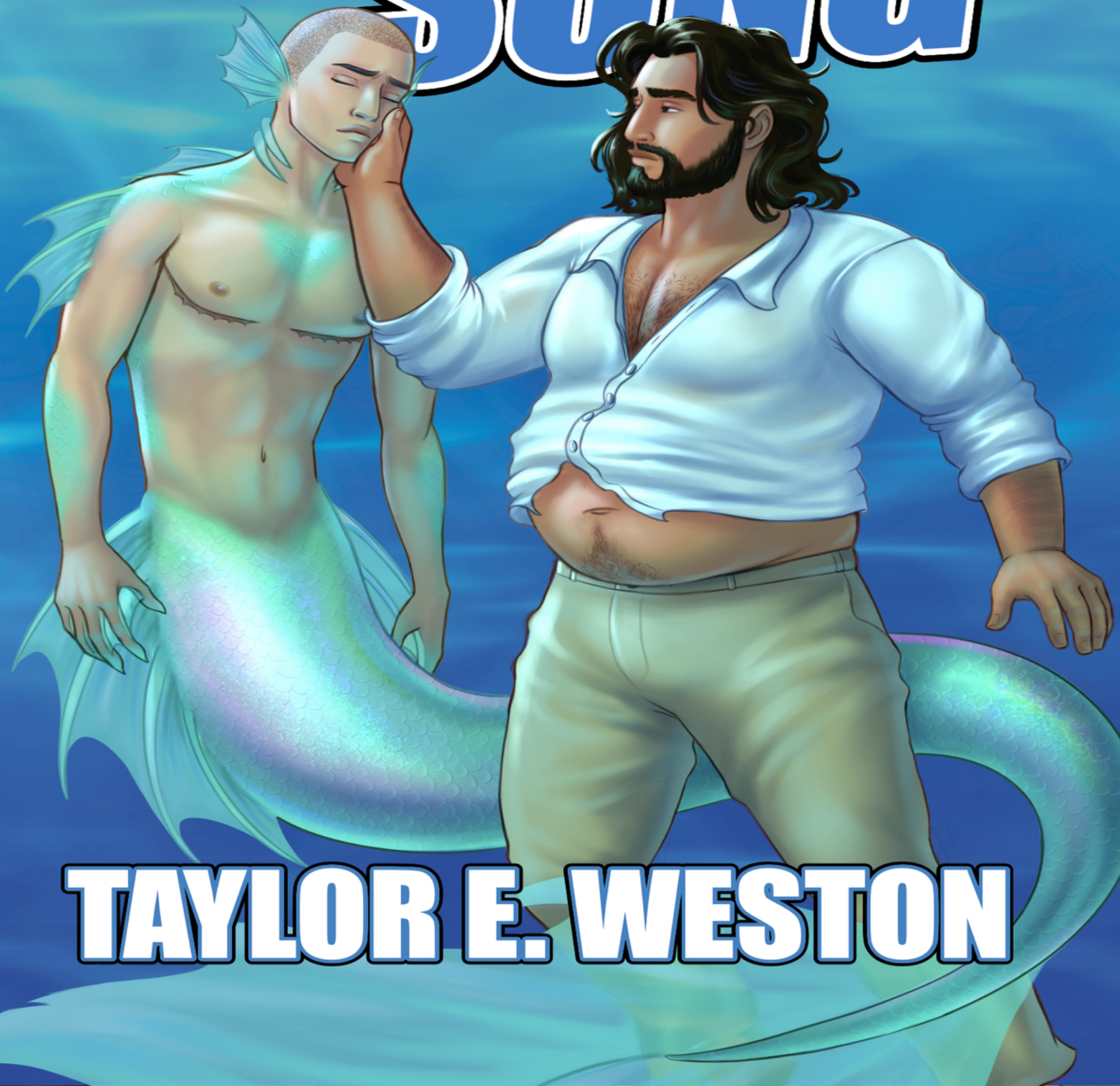


CLASH OF CREATURES

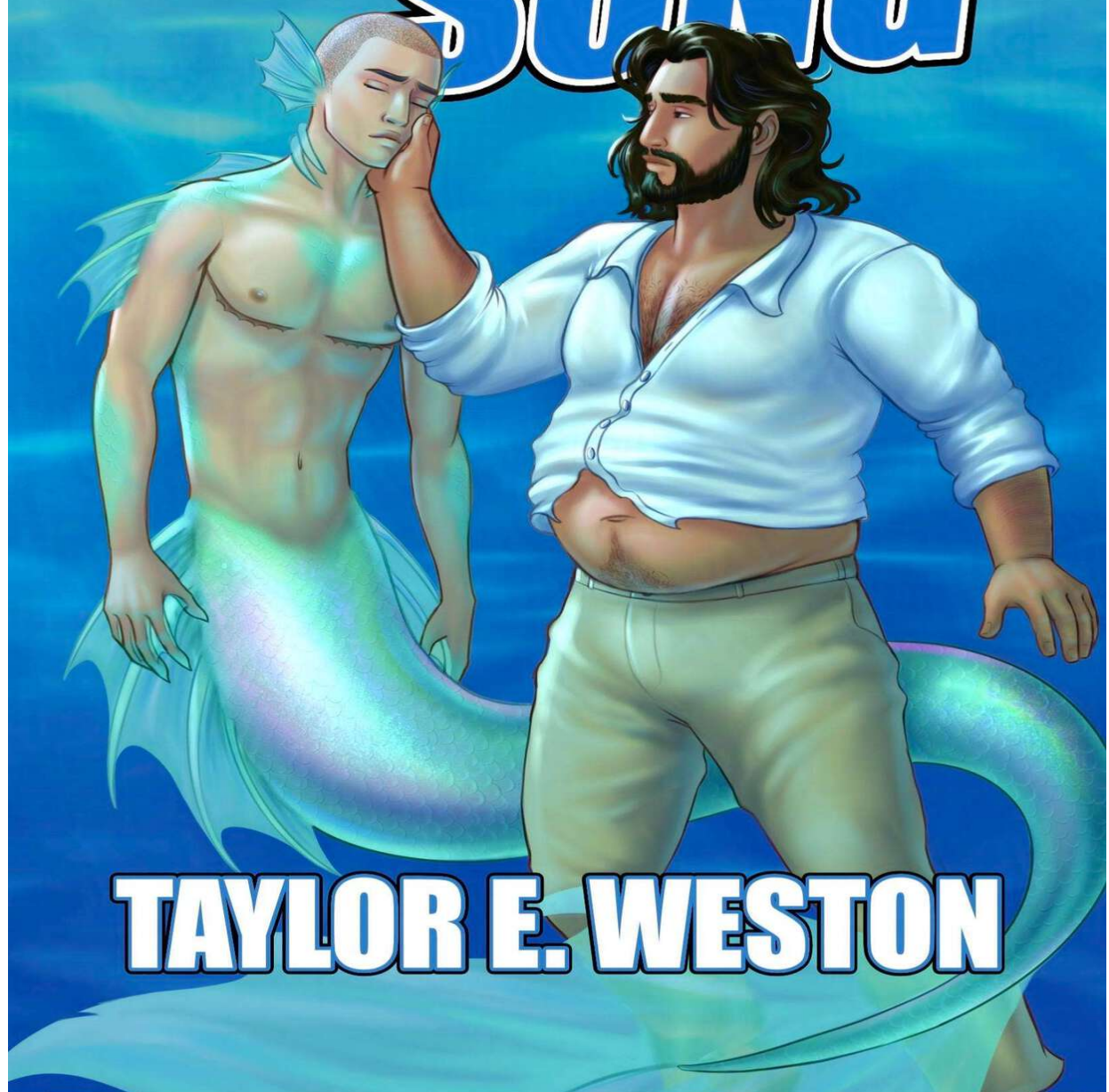
SIREN SONG



TAYLOR E. WESTON

CLASH OF CREATURES

SIREN SONG



TAYLOR E. WESTON

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Author's Note

Potentially sensitive content includes:

Mentions of transphobia in sports; Openly transphobic parent who has limited time on page and never speaks directly to their child; Use of a deadname (not directed at the character); brief internal reference to deadname, on page HRT shot; open discussions of wearing a packer; Daddy/boy dynamic (no age play); thumb sucking. This book contains multiple scenes with graphic, explicit sexual content between two consenting adults.

If you are uncomfortable with any of these, please prioritize your mental health and skip this book.

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**For anyone who has told the world:
“This is who I am.”
And for all those who wait in the wings.
This is for you, too.**

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Welcome to the Clash of Creatures

Every four years, the Clash of Creatures gathers species from all nations around the world to compete for the ultimate prize in sports. From humans, minotaurs, sirens, demonkin and more, the greatest sporting champions will stand shoulder to shoulder and compete over a two-week series.

Every sport imaginable takes the stage where strength, skill, and strategy are highlighted across all nations. For some, the gold medal represents victory. For others, it is the symbol of triumph over adversity and inner struggles. But sometimes, the hardest game isn't on the playing field; it's the one in your heart.

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Prologue

Javier

EVEN THOUGH I HAVE none of the magic, I feel the pull of the water. The siren blood inherited from my mother itches under my unremarkable human skin, and the waters where I was born call to me.

Normally, I jog the two-lane highway in the evening, but tonight, I veer off the main road onto the dirt drive.

There is no official name for this place. The sirens who live here call it *the colony*, while the local ‘Tecanos say: *donde viven las mujeres fatales*. Where the deadly women live. My human father’s mother, my *abuela*, a plump Yucatec’an who always wears her black hair pulled back in a long braid, told me the stories passed down to her.

Hundreds of years ago, women with shimmering tails and scales peeking out from their skin climbed out of the ocean. The Daughters of Parthenope, they had called themselves. They came from the arid, rocky coasts of a place called Olympus on the other side of the world, and wanted to make the sandy, tropical jungles of Yucatec’a their home.

The place where they settled was remote, separated from the Yucatec’an villages tucked throughout the jungle. But the sirens needed human men for mates. Generations of human men, unable to resist the conquest, kept answering the call from the Daughters of Parthenope. My father, a soft-spoken silver miner I barely know, was no exception.

The jungle opens up in front of me. At this time of day, the siren colony is uncharacteristically quiet. I check my watch—there is about five minutes until the evening meal is served at the dining hall. It is easy to imagine them all lining up, generations of long-legged, willowy women who spend their days training in the water.

I pass the stone-lined central pools. No one is there, but the water is never still. Their depths render the water a rich, intimidating, dark blue. Hours after training is done, the surface still ripples.

My eyes skip over the dormitories where the younger sirens sleep, and the smaller *casitas* where the older sirens live surround the central buildings. As always, my gaze lingers on the cabin where my mother lives, but the windows are dark.

I take the path skirting the edges of the colony. I would not come out here if it weren't a mealtime. The *cenotes*—naturally occurring sinkholes that expose the pooling groundwater beneath the limestone bedrock—are scattered throughout the jungles of Yucatec'a and provide a refuge for the sirens. With their protective walls, they are one of the few places in the world where sirens can sing freely without risking their lives.

It was only three years ago that an older siren was swimming out along the Caribe Coast, confident she was far enough from shore, only to have a boat of fishermen come upon her. We were told her death was sudden, swift and ruthless, her body joining the bodies of the drowned men who had leapt into the ocean, called to her song.

My knees start to ache and I slow my pace as I follow the flat trail. Jogging is not as easy as it used to be—my belly, which has always been stubbornly soft, seems to get rounder each year.

Maybe this is life after thirty-five: becoming a little more brittle and soft with every passing day. I feel things differently in my body. A night of sleeping funny on my shoulder leaves me with a three day crick in my neck. My hips get painfully tight if I forget to stretch.

I do not mind. I have had a life full of incredible food and love and laughter. Even now, my simple concrete house sits on the lot behind my human grandmother's home in Cuzamá. There isn't much going on in Cuzamá, other than a fruit stand, a local *soda* where I pick up a bag of fresh *carnitas* after work some days, and the brightly painted plaster houses clustered around the dusty stretch of road. My boyfriend, Aapo, lives right

down the road, close enough for me to take care of him, and to cook him dinner when we both finish work.

My *abuela* says fate brought me back to the colony. There is no logical reason why I returned to the place where my siren mother lived. She made her position regarding her male child clear when she allowed me to live and then promptly handed me off to my father.

It is a fate better than most male children born to sirens, who are typically left to drown after their underwater birth. Unlike our mothers and sisters, we carry none of the gifts—no transformations, no shimmering tail or fins, no grace in the water.

We are also free from the curse bestowed upon all sirens by the goddess Demeter, when sirens failed to protect her daughter, Persephone. Ever since, the compelling song of the siren has become their greatest weakness—if they are heard, *they* will be the ones to perish.

When I returned to the colony as a teenager, the sirens were confused. They had nothing to offer me—a plump human boy who had none of the innate talent needed to swim competitively. But the moment I saw the sirens dance in the water, there was nothing more I wanted than to somehow, some way, be a part of it.

It was mesmerising: the way their bodies moved in perfect unison, the colorful scales catching the sunlight like polished silver. The fins sprouting from their ears and the fine webbing between their fingers—they looked like creatures from another universe.

“Artistic swimming,” one of the sirens around my age explained. “The humans claim to have invented it, but we have been dancing like this since the time of the gods.”

I am still not sure how I went from a kid watching them dance in awe, to coaching the sirens in artistic swimming competitions. But fifteen years into this career, there is nothing else I can imagine doing with my life.

The trail curves and my breathing gets heavier. I pause long enough to take off my threadbare t-shirt, mopping the sweat from my chest and face. I tuck the shirt into the waistband of my running shorts before picking up my pace.

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

Suddenly, my feet tangle beneath me. I try to find my balance, but my body stumbles off the trail, crashing through the dry underbrush.

“What...?” I start, but it feels like a hand has reached into my chest and wrapped around my spine, yanking me forward. Branches scrape my skin, but the cuts and scratches are nothing because there is *something* in my head overpowering everything else.

Singing.

No.

The singing grows louder.

I try to dig my heels into the dirt, but I keep running forward. I will my hands to grab onto something, *anything* that might slow me down. They refuse to cooperate.

No. Please, no.

It is beautiful. Tears taste salty on my lips, and I open my mouth to scream. Nothing comes out but a choked, wretched cry.

The jungle thins out before me, and I put every bit of my strength into throwing my arms around a thick, rough tree trunk. I must break through the haze, because my body complies, my breath punching from me as I land in a heap on the ground.

The song fills me so completely it battles with the oxygen I need to breathe. It is haunting, notes wandering, the voice powerful enough to render me completely helpless.

We are raised on warnings about the siren song. As soon as the sirens hit puberty, they are fitted with a custom muzzle—a vocal filter—they wear whenever they swim. It keeps their song contained and filtered through some magic I have never had explained to me.

The *cenotes* have always been the place where they could go to swim and sing freely without the vocal filter.

Or it was supposed to be.

In all the years I have spent around sirens, I have never heard any of them sing.

I was never supposed to hear them sing.

Without loosening my desperate grip on the tree, I force my eyes to focus on the *cenote* below me. This one opens to the sky unlike some of the others, which are almost entirely enclosed. Thick vines trail down over the exposed limestone into the shadowed cavern.

At first I do not recognize the siren below. All I can see are dark ripples on the surface of the water, and the flash of scales.

But when I do, I am hit with a staggering wave of pain.

Alejandra.

Alejandra Parthenope. One of the daughters of Alina, head of the colony. Alejandra is on my team. One of the sixteen-year-old girls I coach. Her fins and scales are an almost-mint green I would recognize anywhere.

Gods, what have I done?

I stay there frozen, afraid to let go until she finally climbs out of the water and her song fades, leaving a heavy silence in its wake. I close my eyes, grateful I landed so far from the path. My breath burns in my chest, the reality of what I have done sinking in.

By hearing Alejandra sing, I have condemned her to death.

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Chapter 1

Twatwaffle

Aleks

EIGHT YEARS LATER

“GET UP.”

Damian groans, rolling over where he lay sleeping on the couch. “Leave me alone, Aleks.”

“No.” I nudge him in the thigh with my foot. It’s after ten in the morning—I don’t feel bad for waking his lazy ass up to share my news.

“You’re a brat,” he mutters.

I grin, pleased by the accurate character assessment. “I know.”

Finally, Damian sits up, pushing his ashy brown hair back from his face. “Remind me why I let you move in?”

“Because I’m your brother and you love me.” We’ve had this conversation a million times in the six years since I moved in with him. Even though he gives me shit, my older brother has never shown me anything but support since I first stepped off the plane, hundreds of miles from our childhood home. I kick him again, harder this time. “Now get your ass up and read the letter I got back from IASA.”

That gets him up. I've been waiting for this letter from the International Artistic Swimming Association for months.

"Oh, shit. You finally got something back?"

I hand him the letter and watch as his eyes—dark brown, unlike my own pale green—skim across the words.

Growing up with a mother who served on the IASA meant I was already familiar with artistic swimming's governing body when I started researching returning to the sport three years ago. I knew, generally, they let each individual species determine their own qualifying criteria, just like I knew their anti-discrimination bylaws like the back of my own hand.

It turned out banning an athlete based on a gender transition was, in fact, a violation of those bylaws. I wish I'd been there to see my mother's face when *that* ruling came across her desk.

Like kicking me out of my home when I came out to her at eighteen wasn't enough, she'd also done everything in her power to blacklist me from artistic swimming. She probably thought I'd give up years ago. Joke's on her—mama didn't raise a fucking quitter.

I got word I'd been cleared to return to international competition only weeks before the qualifying meet for the Clash of Creatures, the largest, multi-sport international competition for both humans and creatures alike. Every four years, teams come from all over the world to compete at the highest level.

I used to be on one of those teams. The siren colony where I grew up was one of the best in the world. We were champions. *I* was a champion. But I wasn't myself then.

"Okay," Damian says, interrupting my thoughts. "This isn't bad."

I hop up onto the kitchen counter, leaning my back against a cabinet. "It's not good, either." I snag a banana from the bunch sitting at my side.

"You get to compete at the Clash, Aleks. This is what you've been fighting for."

"As long as I have a coach," I retort, peeling the banana. "And you know how well *that* shit is going."

He grunts an acknowledgement.

Ever since I was reinstated for international competition, I've been trying to find a coach. I naively thought with my talent and history, there would be someone out there willing to work with me. But artistic swimming is a sport rooted in tradition, and in my case, having a mother who is one of the most

influential artistic swimming judges and IASA members on the international stage is biting me in the ass.

She disowned me, and the artistic swimming community followed suit.

I've called almost every coach I worked with when I was growing up in the colony. The ones who had the decency to answer told me they were already committed to other athletes for the Clash of Creatures. It's a bullshit excuse, but it doesn't sting as much as the cold shoulder from the coaches who never responded. I don't expect much from coaches in this sport—not since the best coach I've ever had walked out on my team years ago.

"Any responses to your ad?" Damian asks.

I shake my head, chewing a large bite of banana. I had gone so far as to post ads for a coach on the largest international artistic swimming networking websites. It was humiliating, a last resort, but I wasn't going to let my pride get in the way of getting what I want.

I don't *need* a coach. I've handled everything up to this point—my training, my routines, rebuilding my swimming career. I qualified for the games all on my own. Wrote out my own routine, handed the judges the coaching card with all of my elements clearly spelled out, without the help from anyone else.

All I need is someone to stand there, stay quiet, and let me do the work.

Damian goes for the coffee pot, his baggy shirt and pajama bottoms hanging loose from his smaller frame. "Did you see what they said about your appeal to solo?"

I press my lips together. In most other competitions, artistic swimmers can compete in solo, duet, mixed duet, or ensemble, which is composed of eight swimmers. At the Clash, there are only two categories: duet and ensemble.

What I don't know how to tell Damian is I've tried to find a duet partner. I've reached out to siren colonies around the world, but the same bad luck I've had trying to find a coach has followed me in my search for a partner.

"They'll agree," I reply, swallowing the last of the banana. "In Section H of the bylaws, Rule 4a states an athlete may receive a solo exception in the duet category if a qualifying athlete has exhausted all attempts to find a qualified partner."

"And you have?"

Shaking my head, I jump down from the counter, crossing to the fridge. I don't look at Damian as I grab a ViperVenom energy drink. "Yeah, D. I

have. Not only will no one coach me, but no one wants to swim with me, either. Swimming alone is my only chance.”

Damian’s arms wrap around my middle, and I sink back into the contact. He’s shorter than me, but his solid warmth is comforting. “People are shit,” he says, voice muffled against my back.

“Yeah.”

“I wish our mom wasn’t such a twatwaffle.”

I snort. “A what?”

“Twatwaffle.”

“That sounds vaguely offensive to British women.”

“Maybe, but our mom deserves it.” He sighs. “I should probably stop spending so much time on AO3.”

Laughing, I turn in his arms and hug him back. His face tucks right under my chin, the patchy stubble on my jaw catching on his wild, messy hair. “I don’t know. I think we have the right amount of trauma that makes us specially qualified to write gut-wrenching and smutty fan fiction.”

He pats my back. “Thank you, brother, for encouraging my delusions.” Stepping back, he puts his hands on my shoulders, gripping me tightly. “But back to you. The letter says they’re going to make their ruling after the start of the games. You know it’s bullshit, right?”

I nod.

“If they reject your appeal to perform a solo, you’ll have no time to practice.”

“Yeah, it’s a shit sandwich, isn’t it?”

“Fuck,” he breathes. “It really is.”

The sympathy in his eyes borders on pity, and I can’t take it. I can’t think about what I’ll do if they reject my appeal to compete as a solo dancer. It feels like every step closer I get to competing again, there’s another obstacle standing in my way.

“I need to go practice.” Turning, I crack open the energy drink—Sonic Mango, the best flavor—and grab a jar of peanut butter and a spoon from the drawer.

“Grab more chicken and rice on your way home,” Damian says, picking up a controller and cueing up the minotaur combat game we’ve been playing recently. “You know being an athlete doesn’t mean you have to eat the most boring food on the planet, right? You could try, I don’t know, a recipe that requires...spices? Chopping? Simmering?”

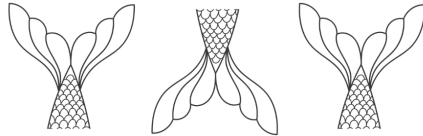
“I like condiments!”

“Condiments don’t count!”

“You’re an asshole,” I call out, but I’m laughing as I grab my backpack and slip my feet into my sneakers. “Call me if—”

“If a coach magically shows up on our doorstep, yeah, I know. Love you, bro!”

“Love you, D.” I slam the door with a huge smile on my face.



It takes half an hour to get to the Frio River from the apartment I share with my brother on the outskirts of the large city of Soledad. It’s an easy enough drive in the old sedan Damian and I share, and I relax as the traffic-filled freeways give way to the narrow, two-lane roads winding through the rolling hills.

I’m still not used to the muted greens of the Central Lowlands. Everything looks dull, like all the growing things are one drought away from death. It’s nothing like where I grew up in Yucatec’a, where every leaf is competing to “out-green” the next.

I park on the dusty shoulder and climb through a sagging barbed wire fence. The place I’ve found to swim is on private property, but as far as I can tell, no one actually lives there. It seems to be a Lowlander thing: buy land with stunning natural water features, put a fence around it, and then ignore it.

In the two years since I’ve found this spot, my almost daily visits have worn a path through the scrubby tufts of grass on the hillside. I duck under the juniper branches, careful not to disturb the orange pollen clinging to their tips at this time of year.

I may be a mythical creature, but I’m not immune to these stupid fucking allergies.

Even before I see the flickering of blue, I can feel the water. My pulse flutters, and the ever present patch of pale green scales where my shoulder meets my neck itches.

I’ve trained my entire life to dance in the water. My childhood was spent in crystal-clear *cenotes* and the stone training pools in the center of the

colony, feeling the water against the scales covering my tail and the sun hot against the long, dark hair that used to flow down my back.

Being a siren is in my soul, passed down to my sisters from my mother, and her mother before her.

It was passed down to my body, too, which only now feels like my own. My head, shaved to nothing but a layer of dark fuzz. My jaw covered in stubble, my chest *finally* flat, thanks to the twin scars curving along my ribcage. The patch of pale scales at the junction of my neck and shoulder are always there, no matter how far away I am from the water.

The Fates don't make mistakes, my mother always told me. It was what she said when I worked up the courage at eighteen to try and explain that I wasn't the daughter she believed me to be. It was ironic, really, coming from someone who sat around with her sisters sipping vodka sodas and talking shit about those same goddesses for the curse sirens still carry to this day.

My body, finally right, but still cursed. Still a siren in my blood.

When we are born, our mothers dive deep into the water, and we breach their bodies in our true form: tail, fins, gills, and all.

At least, that is how it goes for the female offspring. Males are born weak and human, and it is only through the mercy of their mothers they are brought to the surface. It is only through the mercy of their mothers they live.

I wonder if my mother had known then who I really was in those fragile first moments of my time on earth, if she would have brought me to the surface.

She's made it perfectly clear she has no interest in me now that I've become myself.

The swimming hole in front of me is tucked at the base of towering, pale limestone cliffs, likely the result of thousands of years of floods carving deeper and deeper into the earth. I love the water here. Against the browns and rugged greens of the landscape, the clear blue-green water is breathtaking. The rocky shore holds the swimming hole like hands cupping something sacred and precious.

I toss my pack down and strip off my clothes. No one will see me here. No one will see the thin line of brown hair trailing down my stomach I absently rub with my thumb when I'm thinking, the leg hair I refuse to

shave, my too-long toes or the questionable tattoo of a Fresca can on my ass.

The leather of my training vocal filter is soft against my cheeks. It's been years since I've swam without it. When I was younger, I used to flee to the remote, spring-fed *cenotes* while the colony was eating dinner, desperate to swim and sing without anything holding me back. It was the closest I ever felt to myself back then.

Tightening the straps, I adjust the filter over my mouth. I still don't understand how they work, something about diamond shards arranged in some geometric pattern that strips the power from a siren's song. The only thing I care about is it keeps me alive.

Even out here, even though I know I'm alone, I wear it. The mildly annoying discomfort of the filter is worth it, when the potential risk is death.

My transformation begins the moment my toes touch the water.

Gills split the skin on either side of my neck. Webbing stretches between my fingers, and my back arches as the dorsal fin sprouts from my spine, starting at the back of my neck and ending at my tailbone. My legs fuse, pale green scales replacing my skin, and something *right* clicks into place as my tail pushes me toward the bottom of the pool.

My eyes have changed too, a thin protective membrane enabling me to see clearly under the surface, and I can feel the drag of the water against my elongated ears.

I begin to dance.

I spiral through the water, my rotations growing tighter and tighter until my body is arched into an almost-perfect circle. I float upside down, and use my hands to propel my lower body up and out of the water. My tail moves in sharp, precise movements.

It isn't my mother's voice I hear in my head as I dance. It isn't the voice of any of the sirens—teammates, sisters, or cousins—who surrounded me at the colony.

It's the voice of the stocky, gruff-voiced human coach who used to tell us: "Dance like you are the water. Dance like the water loves you." To me, he would say: "Stop fighting the water, Alejandra. You are made of water, too."

In my head, now he calls me Aleks.

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Chapter 2

Alive, Breathing, and Whole

Javier

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

“I am sorry,” I repeat, even though it is not enough to make up for suddenly breaking up with my boyfriend of two years. “Jordie, I know it does not make sense—”

His blond brows knit together. I know his face, know it as well as my own, and I can tell he is well into the transition from shock and confusion to anger. I deserve it.

“Da—” Jordie cuts himself off, stopping himself from using the common moniker between us. “Javier,” he tries again. His nose wrinkles, like my given name does not feel right on his tongue. “Is it me? I thought things were working, but maybe I’m—”

“It is not you, sweetheart,” I rush to reassure him, even though my words sound hollow. It has nothing to do with him, and knowing I am ending a perfectly good relationship makes the whole thing more painful. He has given me the gift of his submission, and in turn, I found purpose in caring for him. Life with him has been good. Great, even.

“Then why?” His fair, pink skin flushes, his messy blond ringlets escaping from under the sky-blue stocking cap I gifted him last Christmas, and *gods, he is lovely*. His blue eyes glisten with tears. “This morning you made me pancakes in bed. You put me in my favorite sweater and made

sure I had an alarm set for my noon meeting. Everything was good, Javier! So help me understand what the hell happened!”

I open my mouth, and then close it. How could I possibly explain to Jordie that an artistic swimming industry newsletter had, in an instant, turned my life upside down?

First one article, which led to another. I read and read and read until my eyes ached from staring at the screen.

The headlines themselves had not shocked me—the Daughters of Parthenope are not known for their tolerance or their open-minded view of other beings, especially those who culturally embrace a more broad and unrestricted understanding of gender. But the face underneath those headlines—*that devastating face*—glaring up at me from my screen made me pause. There was something distantly familiar about the pale eyes and downturned mouth. Something about it brought up a haunting memory, one I have been running from for years.

Impossible, I told myself as I frantically scrolled through the articles. *IASA appeal...artistic swimming...Clash of Creatures...first trans siren...rejected by his colony...overturned his ban on account of discrimination...* and then, there it was: *Aleks Parthenope, estranged child of Alina Parthenope, siren representative to the International Artistic Swimming Association.*

“Aleks.” I sat my ass in the sand as I whispered their name, the sound quickly swallowed up by the wind. “Aleks,” I repeated, and the name tasted perfect on my tongue, like spring water against hot skin.

Everything has been a blur since then.

What explanation could I give Jordie? Should I lead with: *Well, you see, eight years ago I overheard a sixteen-year-old siren sing and that should have caused their death, only now it appears this siren might be alive, and if it is true, then it means—no. No. I cannot even think it yet, much less say the words out loud.*

I grew up with the siren legends. I know what they say about the deadly song, that there is one, singular exception to their fated death, something that has not happened in centuries. *I know, I know*, and still...

“I do not know how to explain it,” I begin. “There was an athlete I coached years ago, back when I lived in Yucatec’a. I thought she—*they* died in...an accident. It was my fault, and I...I ran away.”

“Why?” Jordie asks, looking at me like I am a stranger.

I let out a pained laugh. "I was scared. I left my home and the team I coached and never looked back." I walk to the couch, sitting down heavily on the over-stuffed cushions. Spreading my legs to accommodate my belly, which has only grown since moving to the Mazarine Coast eight years ago, I lean back and sigh. "And I just found out the athlete might have survived."

The couch dips beside me. "Oh." His voice is small. "So you want to go see them."

It is not a question. "Yes. I do." *I need to know if the guilt I have been carrying for years has been a lie. If my entire life is about to be turned upside down, I need to see them with my own eyes.*

"Have you told the merpeople you're leaving?"

"Not yet."

"Zephyr is going to kill you."

A pained laugh bursts from my chest, and I try to imagine the look on my best friend's face when I tell him I am leaving. "Oh, I know he will." I turn then, looking right at Jordie. His knees are tucked up against the thick sweater enveloping his soft curves. "I am so, so sorry. I wish it was not like this," I say, softly.

His smile wobbles and tears slip from the corners of his eyes. "So this is it, then? You decide we're done and that's that?"

I swallow. "Jordie," I start.

"I...I would have come with you, if you'd asked. I would have followed you wherever, because...I sound stupid, but that's the kind of love I thought we had." Jordie's voice cracks, and I hate how much this hurts him. It is taking all of my willpower not to comfort him, even though I know I will only be making things worse.

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

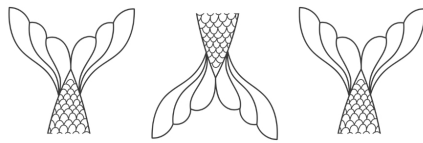
"Who is going to water your flowers?"

I think of the bright ceramic pots lining the bare ground on either side of my front door. The pale aloe and yellow hibiscus, and the pink and orange snapdragons finally blooming as the weather warms. They had not crossed my mind when I was making my whirlwind decision to leave. "I do not know," I admit. "I will probably give them away. You are welcome to take them, if you want."

He shakes his head. “Fuck you, Javier,” he whispers, but there is no heat behind his words. There is nothing there but quiet grief and defeat.

Later, I stand alone on the beach, the bitter, salty wind tearing at my hair as my bare toes sink into the coarse, black sand. I called Jordie’s best friend Sam and asked her to come over and be with him. He needed comfort and friendship from someone other than me.

I wish my mind was filled with Jordie. I should be mourning the life I am about to walk away from, but instead, I am haunted by pale green scales and the memory of a siren’s song.



“Coach,” the familiar voice says on the other end of the line.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead with my forearm, I lean back in the driver’s seat of my parked rental car, staring at the modest apartment complex in front of me. “I am not your coach anymore, Zeph.”

“It’s only been a week, asshole, and I can’t call you *Javier*. It’s too weird.”

“We have been friends for a decade. At some point you should learn how to say my name.”

Zephyr lets out a melodic laugh, and I cannot help but smile. It has only been a week since I got on a flight halfway around the world, leaving behind the Mazarine Coast for the hot and arid Central Lowlands. This is also the most time I have spent without seeing my best friend in eight years, and I can admit I miss the merman.

“Where are you?” Zephyr asks. I hear the rhythmic sound of waves in the background, and guess Zephyr is sunning on one of the wide rocks scattering the edge of the beach. It is easy to picture in my head: the rocky cliffs of the Mazarine Coast and the strip of black sand below them, the submerged caves where the merpeople live, the constant taste of salt in the air.

As a human, the small house where I lived was in a village adjacent to the beach, but Zephyr and the merpeople of his community always went out of their way to include me in their lives. I got used to eating most of my meals in board shorts next to the tide pools, often with Jordie at my side. The

merpeople embraced me, the human son of sirens, and my human boyfriend, more than my mother's siren colony ever had.

I miss them already. I miss the familiar warmth of the merpeople who welcomed me when I fled my home.

I did not want to leave the Mazarine Coast. I was able to coach artistic swimming at the highest level, and the merpeople I worked with—Zephyr included—made my job easy.

My life was good, better than I had imagined it ever could be.

But that was before I saw the articles.

Heat creeps in through the windshield, the air conditioning struggling to keep pace with the midday sun. Those distant beaches I called home could not be more different from the asphalt and manicured crepe myrtle trees in front of me. "I am in Soledad, over in the Central Lowlands," I finally say, drumming my free hand on the wheel of the new model sedan I still have not gotten a good feel for.

"What the fuck are you doing in the Lowlands?"

"Something stupid," I admit.

It is quiet on his end, but for the echo of the waves. "You know what? I actually don't hate the idea of you doing something stupid."

I snort, even as I feel a wave of affection for my friend. *Perceptive little shit.*

"Does this have to do with the siren? The one in the articles?"

I let out a ragged breath. I am exhausted. I have not gotten a good night of sleep since I left home. Not since... "Yes."

"Want to talk about it?" Of course Zephyr cannot leave things be. He has been like this since I met him, always digging and digging and digging until I find myself fessing up to how abandoned I feel by my mother, or how relieved I was to find a man like Jordie whose desires and needs were a complement to mine. How much I miss my home in Yucatec'a, even though I am the one who left.

"Not really," I start. "There are...it is too big to grasp, at least right now."

He waits.

"It is a coaching gig," I say, like it is simple. Like me sitting in a car on the other side of the world after walking away from a good life is only about a *coaching gig*.

"Okay," he says slowly. "I'm going to act like it doesn't hurt that you're leaving *us* for another athlete."

I wince. “It is not like that.” Even though it is *exactly* like that.

“Coach. Of course I’m pissed you left. You’re the best coach I’ve ever worked with. You’re good at your job. Fuck, you’re the reason we beat the sirens for the first time in fifty years at the last Clash, and I was ready to do it again this year.”

I remember the moment like it was yesterday—the gold medals resting on the merpeople’s proud chests at the Clash of Creatures four years ago after placing first in the ensemble category.

Zephyr is not done. “But you’re my friend, too, and more than anything else I want to know you’re okay.”

“I wish there was more I could tell you, Zeph, but right now all I know is the siren in the articles should be dead, because I *heard* them. I heard them sing eight years ago, back in Yucatec’a. It is why I left, and now, if they are alive...”

I hear the soft whoosh of Zephyr’s exhale. “Fuck,” he whispers. “I heard about you breaking up with Jordie and I didn’t understand, but now I—fuck, Javier.”

Of course he gets it. Zephyr has always loved the legends, the dusty old books detailing the plight of the selkie and the curse of the sirens.

It is a relief to not have to explain it all to him.

“So the gig itself is not stupid. It is...you understand why I have to do this, right?”

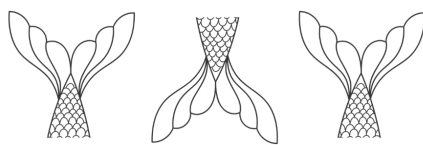
“Do they know?” He asks quietly. “The siren. Do they know?”

I rake my hand over my beard and close my eyes, remembering what it felt like to run in the wet, humid heat of Yucatec’a. The certainty I had felt following the trail out to the cenotes, because it was dinner time, and *no one* was supposed to be there.

“No.” My voice is a rasp. “There is no way they know. They probably hate me for leaving the way I did, all those years ago.”

“So why did they hire you?”

“They did not.” I let out a rough breath. “They have no idea I am coming.”



I knock on the white apartment door, glancing down at myself. It is too late to do anything about the wrinkles in my short sleeved, button-up shirt. I look like I have spent the last two days in airports and smell like stale sweat and recycled air.

I wish there had been time to take a shower at the hotel. But, as Zephyr noted, I do not make a habit of impulsive decisions. I needed to move, to follow through before I convinced myself I am making a mistake by doing this.

I push my shoulders back as the knob turns. *I am not nervous. I am not fucking—*

Oh.

I do not know what I am expecting when the door opens.

I do not know why my heart rate doubles or why sweat starts to slide down the back of my neck. I stare at the person from the articles, at their features. I compare the ones I recognize side by side with the ones I do not. I *know* them, and yet this person is a stranger. The two realizations tug at me, splitting me down the middle and leaving behind a panicked, shameful pain that has been my near-constant companion for the past eight years.

Alive. They are alive. Alive, breathing and whole, and alive, which means

Their head is shaved down to a crown of brown fuzz. Their facial features are sharp, their jaw angled and dusted with a hint of dark stubble. They are wearing a white, translucent undershirt stretched tight across their flat chest and stomach, while loose sweatpants sit low on square hips.

“What the fuck?” Their face is pinched with confusion as they look me up and down. Their voice—lower, with a husky rasp I do not remember—is yet another part of this stranger I have to learn.

It is too much. Seeing them, right there in front of me, close enough to touch. I make the mistake of inhaling, and catch a hint of cinnamon, tobacco smoke, and mango, and *why do I like that smell?*

I shake my head. *Breathe, idiot. Get it together.*

I clear my throat. “Hello, Aleks.”

They glare at me, and the eye contact makes my stomach heave. I brace myself against the doorframe. *Green, their eyes are so fucking green.*

“What...what are you doing here?”

Again, I clear my throat. “I am here to speak with you.”

“Why?”

“Because I hear you need a coach.”

Aleks’ mouth twists into a sneer, even as a look I recognize as fear flashes through their light green eyes. “You’re joking.”

“I am here, am I not?” It is not what I want to say, but the careless words slip out anyway. My mind is still trying to play catch up, trying to connect the threads of my memories to the harsh-featured, pissed off person standing in front of me. Everything about this interaction is going poorly, and yet... Something about their stubborn disdain is lighting a fire in me.

Aleks glares at me, chewing on their reddened bottom lip. I meet their stare head on. Finally, after a painful silence, they shake their head. “No. No fucking way.”

“So you found a coach, then?”

Their eyes focus on a spot over my shoulder. I watch their jaw tighten, and then my focus is pulled downward to their fingers fiddling with gray cotton. The sweats hang low enough on their hips to expose a band of bright blue briefs. I force myself to look away.

“I don’t need a coach.”

They believe it. I can tell. They have always been stubborn, even before. There is a deep furrow between their eyebrows, and I have to fight the urge to press my thumb to it, to soothe the worry etched in their skin.

“What is your plan?” I ask instead. “You qualified for the Clash, but we both know that is only the first step. Athletes need to report to the Clash of Creature grounds in three days. So, what? You fly to Monstralia, only to get turned away at the gates because you ignored the demands of the IASA? Are you going to find some stranger to stand in as your coach? Someone who can offer you nothing?”

Pale eyes drop to the floor. I am fucking this up. When I imagined our reunion, I had not made it this far. Part of me was convinced it would never come to this, that it was all a mistake, that there was another siren, another of Alina’s children who transitioned and now called themselves Aleks.

I need to do better. Taking a deep breath, I refocus on the person in front of me. Before I say anything else about the games, I need to meet them, as they are, right now. “What are your pronouns, Aleks?”

They shuffle their feet. “He/him.”

He is here. He is every bit of a man, he is *alive*, and we both know he needs a coach. “Aleks,” I say out loud.

He shakes his head, and my hands twitch at my sides.

“Please look at me.”

When he looks up, I am reminded of how much he hates me. He should, after I left the way I did. He was too young then to understand. Probably still is, even now with the years and transformations between us. He was a kid, and I was his coach, and then I disappeared without an explanation.

I do not expect him to trust me. I have made my peace with that. But if me being here gets him a shot at competing in the Clash, then I am not going anywhere.

It is the least I can do for him.

I do not look away from his loathing stare. He is grown now, tall enough that I have to tilt my chin to hold eye contact. “I am sorry,” I begin. “I am sorry for leaving the way I did. There was...” But there is nothing more I can say about my leaving. Not now. How can I look him in the eye and tell him I heard him sing? That I ran away because I thought *I* had killed him? “I am not here to ask you to forgive me. I do not expect that. But I am here, and you need a coach.”

“I don’t trust you.” The words slip from his chapped lips, and I can tell from the look on his face he had not meant to say them out loud.

I shrug. “Fine. You do not need to trust me. Write my name on the form and keep me around to satisfy the IASA.”

He shifts his weight, scowl deepening. “I deserve better than you,” he says roughly.

“I know.” I want to step closer to him, but I stop myself. “You are an incredible athlete. You always have been. I watched the film of your routine from the trials this year, and you were incredible. Almost perfect.”

“So then why—”

“You do not need me to tell you people are stupid, and narrow-minded. I imagine you have experienced it more times than I can ever imagine.” I feel my own anger, my own frustrated indignation on his behalf tightening between my shoulder blades. “I hear people talk. Your mother’s words are poison, Aleks, and some people in the sport listen to her.”

“Like you?” He throws the question at me, a direct challenge.

“No. Not like me.” I choose my words carefully, needing him to hear me, to understand that despite all of my shortcomings, for every human flaw I possess, hatred and bigotry are not among them. “You have every right to exist on your own terms and to compete as yourself, and you will find there are many others who agree with me.”

Aleks stares at me, his expression hard, and calculating.

"It would be an honor to coach you," I say, and it is the truth. "Not because there is no one else, but because I think you deserve to be at the Clash."

"Fine."

I raise my brows. "Fine?"

The nod is clipped. "I mean, it's not like I have a choice."

I bite back a retort. He agreed to let me coach him. That is enough for today. "I will see you in Monstralia."

He steps back into the apartment. "Stay out of my way."

I grin, unable to hide my amusement. I try to cover it with my hand, but Aleks' narrowed eyes show me I failed. "Safe travels," I manage to say.

The last thing I hear before the door shuts is a muttered, "Fucking asshole."

It takes me a moment to drag myself away from the door. In all the articles I read about Aleks Parthenope, they all used the same, blurry picture of a young man in a black hoodie with a shaved head, scowling at the camera.

The picture does not do justice to the man I just saw. It did not capture the eerie pale green of his eyes or the tiny expressions his mouth made when he listened to me speak. They miss the lean muscles of his arms and the effortless nonchalance of his posture.

Finally I walk away, even though there is a quiet, deep place in my chest telling me to stay.

Chapter 3

The Audacity to be Fucking Decent

Aleks

I'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT INTERNATIONAL competition feels like.

The last time I was at the Clash of Creatures, I was sixteen and so full of repressed rage I only remember flashes of the experience. I remember the practices. I remember wanting to crawl out of my skin. I remember winning the silver medal for the ensemble, and the gold for the duet I did with my cousin Mira. I still have the medals, tossed in a box under my bed back in Soledad.

Now, at twenty-four, everything is different. My body is finally my own, and the relief it gives me is almost enough to make me forget I'm alone. It would be easier if Damian was here with me. Most of the space in my suitcase is taken up by the gaming console I packed so I can still play with my brother while I'm here.

The heat in Monstralia feels like home. I spent the short drive from the airport ignoring my surroundings in favor of scrolling through some of the latest articles written about me. Damian calls me a masochistic idiot for reading them, but I can't stop. Even when it hurts, even when the comments are full of my dead name and the same sort of transphobic bigotry my mother believes in, I keep coming back.

It's an impulse, at this point. Maybe it's the twisted fact that knowing people still care enough to rant about my existence is better than slipping

into anonymity.

At least my phone is buried in my backpack now as I walk through the Clash of Creatures village. I light a cigarette, taking in my surroundings.

I pass all kinds of creatures walking through the village: minotaurs, fae, the unmistakable pallid skin of a vampire here and there. Some, like me, are in their human forms, indistinguishable from the humans who will be competing this year.

There's been no sign of Coach Zamora. Not yet. It's not like I have a way to reach him either. A part of me thinks it was all a dream—the man showing up unannounced on my doorstep offering to coach me like he hadn't disappeared from my life eight years ago without any explanation.

The last time I saw Javier Zamora, I was sixteen years old. We'd just finished practice. My mother paced the concrete on the edge of the pool, her words as sharp and cutting as always, pointing out our flaws and imperfections. *Penelope, your fingers are limp. Sonora, see me after practice about updating your diet plan. Alejandra, you're late.* When she finished, she saved one last stare for me. Even then, it felt like I had done something wrong simply by existing.

After the click of her pointed heels had faded, Javier would walk over to replace her. I remember his black hair, thick and unruly, long enough to tuck behind his ears. With his beard, hairy arms, and stocky frame, it was easy to forget he was siren-born.

He'd look down at us, my sisters and cousins, and offer some gruff words of reassurance. *Penelope, your arch on the jump was perfect. Sonora, the lines of your arms on the clam are exactly what the judges are looking for. Alejandra, do not give up. The timing will come.*

Some days, those words from Javier at the end of practice were the only reason I got out of bed in the morning. They were what I thought about when my aunts would *tsk* at my posture and my boxy clothes. I played his words over and over in my head: *Alejandra, do not give up.*

And then one day, he was gone.

I'll avoid him until the competition. He can stand there at the edge of the pool and take credit for my hard work—I don't care. I don't need him.

I did what the IASA asked me to do. There are no more excuses they can hide behind. They have to let me compete.

I can ignore him. I take a long drag of my cigarette, and pretend like my body doesn't buzz with interest.

According to the map, most of the sirens are housed on the outskirts of the village. The merpeople are nearby, their lodgings partially submerged caves in the wall of a secluded cove. The sirens are inland, each cabin built with access to a small, freshwater pond with about a half-mile distance from the next. Based on the instructions I got when I checked in with a parasol-toting vampire, mine is the last on the gravel path.

The cabin I've been assigned looks like a bungalow: a small wood structure with a peaked roof, big windows, and a little front stoop. I unlock the door and duck inside. I've slid one of my sneakers off when I notice I'm not alone.

Javier Zamora stands in the middle of the room.

The first thing I'd noticed when I opened my apartment door two days ago was how much Javier has aged. Deep lines radiate out from the corners of his eyes, and there's a hint of gray at his temples that wasn't there before. His hair is longer, drawn back into a ponytail at the back of his head. There's an additional softness to his belly and chest that makes me wonder how it would feel to put my face between his pecks and...I'm not sure exactly what I want to do there. Take a nap? Nuzzle around a bit?

All of it—and him—sounds tempting.

In a lightweight fishing shirt with rolled-up sleeves and khaki shorts, Javier looks like a suburban dad on vacation. A part of me, the part that wants to forget the hurt and history, wants to tell him how stupidly competent he looks, and how all he needs is a fanny pack to complete the bit.

He's also fucking hot, but that's none of my business.

"What are you doing here?"

His thick fingers drum on a wooden countertop beside him, and my attention catches on a worn leather fanny pack. *Of fucking course*. His expression gives me almost nothing, but I hate the hint of concern in his eyes. "Apparently, this is where I am staying, too."

"You're joking, right?" In all of my times competing at the Clash, we have never, *ever* roomed with our coaches. Of course, I was a part of something then—a piece of an ensemble, a team who went everywhere and did everything together.

When I was on a team, it made sense for us to stay together. Now, because I'm here alone, I expected my lodging to reflect that.

It's one thing to accept Javier is the only person willing to be my coach. It's something else altogether to share a tiny room with him. This is supposed to be my moment. My redemption. I don't think I can do it with him here, watching me with those dark, patient eyes that make me feel naked and exposed. I've gotten used to living a life where it's me and Damian against the world. Being around Javier makes me want to hope that things could be different.

Javier has the decency to look apologetic. "This is where they sent me."

"You should have said no!" I know I'm being petty, but I can't stop myself.

Javier sighs.

I walk past him, careful to avoid brushing against his body. Ignoring the fact that I'm still wearing one of my shoes, I take in the kitchenette, the small two-seater sofa upholstered in a seafoam green that was trendy years ago, and an open door with a bathroom on the other side. A ladder leads up to a vaulted loft where I can make out the end of a wide mattress on the floor.

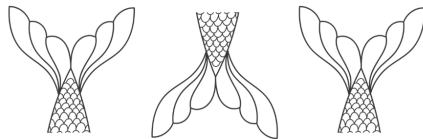
It's nice. Simple. It's the perfect place to focus and prepare to compete.

It's definitely *not* designed for two.

I walk to the door, feeling like an absolute idiot as I put my one sneaker back on. "I'm going to talk to somebody."

"Who?"

"I don't know, Javier," I snap. "But rather than sit here doing nothing, I'm going to go do something about it."



Apparently this place is run entirely by incompetent asshats with sticks up whichever orifice they defecate from. After talking to three different staff members in garish lime-green polo shirts and another supervisor, it's become apparent I'm stuck sharing a tiny, remote bungalow with Javier fucking Zamora.

"So?" Javier looks up at me from where he's sitting on the front steps as I approach.

I shake my head, slowing to a stop a few feet in front of him. I wish I had changed into shorts—I'm sweating in my packing boxers and baggy jeans.

"I will take the couch," he offers.

I'm almost disappointed he doesn't put up a fight. I want to shout at him, to tell him exactly what I think of his hot face and his hot dad-bod and hairy arms. I can't believe he has the audacity to be hot *and* fucking decent. Asshole.

"Fine."

He's staring at me, and I know the look well. It was a look he'd get sometimes when he stood behind my mother, watching us in a calculating way that felt both impersonal and discerning at the same time.

Brushing past him, I go into the cabin I shouldn't have to share. I grab a tall can of ViperVenom I picked up in the airport and crack it open, taking a long sip.

"What is your plan?"

I glance over at Javier, who now stands in the doorway. His shirt has ridden up his front, exposing the soft underside of his belly, and I feel a throb of *something*. With the countertop between us, I reach my free hand down and adjust my packer, the press of it against my dick almost painfully arousing.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to [Lokepub](#) for more romance novels.

He'd said something. *Right. My "plan."*

I take another drink. "Don't worry about it."

He raises a single thick brow, obviously unamused. "What is the degree of difficulty rating of your routine?" He steps inside, closing the door behind him. Even with the windows open and the slightly cooler breeze moving through the small space, something shifts in the air. "You have not told me who your partner is, either."

I lean one hip against the counter. "I don't have one."

The first look of genuine surprise crosses Javier's face. "Explain."

“When I appealed to the IASA to compete, I submitted a request to perform a solo.”

He moves closer. “There are no solos at the Clash of Creatures, Aleks. There is no way they agreed.”

“They haven’t yet,” I say. “I have a strong appeal, citing rule 4b from Section—”

“Section H in the IASA bylaws, yes, I am familiar.” He scratches his beard, eyes narrowing like he’s thinking hard. “And you have tried to find a partner?”

“Yes, I’ve tried,” I snap. “They’ve granted exemptions before, like in 1954 when—”

“When the selkie Hermia Solomaya went into labor right before her performance and they pulled her partner because she was threatening to kill him? That was the last time they allowed for a solo at the Clash. Your situation is not the same, Aleks.”

“They haven’t said no yet.” The longer this conversation goes on, the more annoyed I feel. I want Javier to leave this alone, to stop bringing up the holes in my plan. I need this to work. I need this win. I force my shoulders back, trying to feign a confidence I don’t feel right now. “The letter I got from them said they’ll give me an official verdict when the committee is assembled at the games. I’ll probably hear from them tomorrow.”

Javier rubs a hand over his mouth, like he’s trying to conceal his reaction to what I’ve said. “You are smart, Aleks. You only have a week before the qualifying round. You cannot seriously think—” He cut himself off, pressing his lips together. “Okay. So then what is your plan when they say no to a solo?”

“If,” I correct. *There is none*, a part of me screams, but I don’t let the thought sink in. Stubborn determination has gotten me this far. I can’t stop believing in myself now. Not when I’m so fucking close. “They won’t say no.”

Javier snorts, shaking his head.

Anger flares in my chest, hot and sharp in my lungs. “What?” I snap.

Across the room, Javier lets out an audible breath. “Nothing. You obviously—what did you say? *You’ve got this.*”

I need to get out of here. There isn’t enough room to breathe, and Javier’s presence feels like it takes up the whole room. Everything about him—his

steady gaze, his refusal to look away from me, the barely-there hint of whatever cologne he wears and sweat lingering in the air—is *too much*.

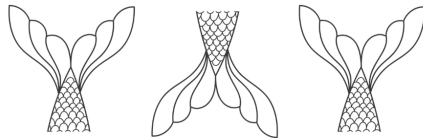
It only takes me a moment to grab my backpack from the corner and sling it over my shoulder. I can feel Javier's eyes on me, but I don't look at him.

The cabin door slams behind me, and it's too quiet.

I fish out a cigarette from the crumpled pack in my pocket, sparking it and taking a deep drag. The way the cigarette sits between my lips and the burn of the smoke on my throat settles me.

I need to train. I have a solo to practice, and I don't need anyone.

I sure as fuck don't need the judgement of the man I just walked away from.



It's not quiet at night. Far from it. Insects buzz and whistle and scratch, and there's a constant rustle of the wind through the dense trees surrounding the cabin.

It's hot enough that I'm stripped down to boxer briefs, laying on my back and staring at the ceiling. Even when I stretch my arms wide on either side of me, my fingers barely touch the edges of the bed.

I need to sleep, but something about knowing Javier is below me has my senses sharper than they should be at this time of night. Through the open loft I hear the couch creak as Javier shifts his weight. He's been moving since I turned the lights off and climbed up here. I can't imagine he is comfortable.

I almost feel bad.

Rolling onto my side, I tug the thin sheet over me. I don't need the warmth, but I struggle to sleep without the feeling of *something* tucked around me. At home, I sleep with the air turned up and a fleece blanket wrapped tightly around me, and without the pressure I feel like I'm going to float away.

I'm still wide awake when Javier's voice slips through the darkness. "I am going to ask you a question," he says, not bothering with a whisper.

I wet my lips. "Okay."

He takes a moment before speaking. "Is it enough for you to have made it here, to the Clash, or do you want to win?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. Would it be enough to be in the water in front of judges? To feel the rush and pressure of competition again?

"You being here is making history," he continues. "Getting in the water in front of those judges is already sending a message to every person out there who has ever felt belittled or excluded because of who they are. Whatever you decide, your courage will touch the lives of strangers."

I imagine my mother's face. Even after eight years, I remember how it felt to have her gaze on me, her blue eyes somehow marking every single flaw and none of the truth. She was never warm, not when we were children, and certainly not when she began to coach us when we turned five years old. *You look just like her*, my aunts had said, as though being a mirror to such a cold, harsh face should have been a point of pride.

I think of the moment she saw my shaved head, the day I stopped hiding behind things that don't matter. The long hair and the sundresses and strappy sandals didn't reflect who I was, who I'd suspected I was before I knew there were others who had come before me and words to describe how I was feeling.

I never expected love from her. I sure as fuck didn't delude myself into expecting understanding. But knowing all of that didn't soften the hurt of seeing it all play out across her face.

What have you done? She'd asked, her face twisting with horror.

Through the manic hurt, I'd grinned back at her. *My name is Aleks, and I'm your son.*

Now, wrapped in the warm embrace of the darkness, I chew on the soft side of my thumb. "I want to win," I whisper.

"Then let me do my job. Let me coach you."

Not you, I want to snap back. *Anyone but you*. But the exhaustion is finally catching up with me.

"Why did you leave?" I ask.

It's quiet for a long moment. "I cannot tell you that," he finally says in the darkness. "But you need to know it was nothing you did. Nothing any of your teammates did." I hear a huffed breath. "It was just time for me to go."

"That's a shitty answer," I mutter.

He must have heard me, because he responds. "I know, and I am sorry."

There's nothing more to say, not after such a bullshit response.

“I am not going to leave, Aleks,” he goes on.

“Again,” I add, because I can’t help it.

“Again,” he echoes without hesitation. “I am not going to leave *again*.”

“I don’t believe you.” I’m left feeling empty, hollow, the stubborn optimism that has fueled me for the past year out of reach. My eyes are heavy, but I force them to stay open, trained on the shadowed white ceiling above me.

“You do not have to believe me. Not yet. But I will be here, through all of it.”

I sigh, the air escaping from around my thumbnail, which has found its way into my mouth again. This would be easier if it was someone else. If it was *anyone* else. But Javier is a good coach. Like me, he’s always been one of the best.

“Fine,” I say, voice muffled by my thumb, and I’m dragged under, sleep finally staking its claim.

Chapter 4

So Blatantly Bratty

Javier

STANDING AT THE EDGE of the practice pool, I stretch my neck from side to side. I am too old to be sleeping on the particle board couches they bring in for the Clash of Creatures. My back and neck feel like a single, interconnected knot.

Still, it is better to sacrifice my body than Aleks’.

Watching him in the water now, a wave of emotion fills my chest. He slides along the surface of the water, one hand extended in the air above him, before turning and diving smoothly below the surface. My breath catches; he still dances beautifully.

Coaching artistic swimming requires an impartial, almost ruthless assessment of the body. In a sport governed by precision and synchronicity, my focus is trained on the little things: the angle from elbow to wrist, the timing of a head popping up above the surface, or the twist of a tailfin spiraling underwater.

Aleks is accurate. Meticulously so. There is still the unmistakable stamp of his mother’s coaching on him. Flexion past what is typical was gained through hours and hours of stretching when the sirens were children. Aleks’ arms stretch out on either side of him on the surface of the water, wet scales catching in the sunlight, so straight they hyperextend at the elbows, and his webbed hands make perfect right angles where they stand upright.

When he finishes showing me his routine, he treads water, staring up at me. Even through the transformation, Aleks' pale, sea-green eyes are hard and angry. He watches me like he is daring me to criticize him.

His vocal filter is stretched tight around his face, the leather strap pressing hard enough into his skin to indent his cheek. It is an older model, made with brown leather and obviously worn with time and use.

He should loosen the straps. It looks uncomfortable.

I rub a hand absently over my beard, considering how I want to approach him. Everything about him screams *skittish*, and even after our conversation last night, I do not think he is ready to hear what I think.

Underneath the technical perfection, there is something...not quite right.

"Overall, it is good," I begin.

Aleks snorts. "But," he says, and I can hear his voice, even if it is slightly muffled. The vocal filter is designed to contain their magical song, not to block their spoken words.

"Your routine is fine. The elements are...fine. You have done well adapting to a solo, highlighting the high difficulty elements that look the best on their own."

"Spit it out, will you?" Aleks rolls his eyes, leaning his elbows on the edge of the pool like he does not have a care in the world.

I should not enjoy this, but he is so blatantly bratty I have to bite back a grin. I should not feel an itching in my palm or my cock taking interest. No, it cannot be like that between us, no matter how my body responds to him.

I am here in Monstralia because Aleks needs a coach. Nothing more.

"You dance like you are trying to impress your mother."

His eyes flash, then narrow. "What are you talking about?" There is a hint of a snarl in his voice.

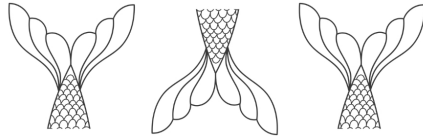
I crouch down, trying to get closer to him. I want to make sure he hears me, that there is no room for his mind to run away with his own interpretation of what he thinks I said. "You have changed, Aleks," I start, holding his gaze. "Your body is not the same. *You* are not the same person who was trained to dance. There is dissonance now, between your style and who you are."

He listens, eyes wary, but focused. "The way your mother teaches artistic swimming is grounded in precision and refinery. We both know how she teaches young sirens to eat, to try to sculpt their gods-given bodies into her

idea of perfection. You,” I point right at him. “You have liberated yourself from her thinking. You are *free*. So dance like it.”

His eyes swirl, like an oil-spill on the surface of a roiling sea. I dare him to look away.

“You’re full of shit,” he says, but his heart is not in it. As he dives down below the surface, his tail slapping the water, I push to standing, shoving my hands into the pockets of my khaki shorts, and watch him swim away.



“How’s it going with your siren?”

I sit at the edge of the dining hall across from Zephyr, in a seating area like the swim-up bars in the hotels of Monst-Vegas. He is able to swim up to the chest-high table from the pool side, while I can sit on the dry, sunken stool on the other side.

It is good to see him, especially after the disorienting past twenty-four hours sharing a room and trying to figure out how the hell I am supposed to coach Aleks. A part of me wishes I was still Zephyr’s coach. My life was easier, before. He is a great swimmer, and I have no doubt he and Sylvan, his duet partner, will do well. Hell, after watching Aleks swim today, they will probably beat us.

My dinner, a steak with some balsamic-glazed carrots, and a side of pasta with pesto and diced tomato, is slightly above average. I am in the habit of cooking for myself, and mourning the loss of my normal routine, especially getting to eat my food exactly the way I like it.

Zephyr eats a raw swordfish filet with some sort of seaweed salad on the side. How the Clash of Creatures manages to meet such a wide array of dietary needs for the varying contestants is beyond me.

He chews, his thick red beard bouncing with every bob of his jaw. “You’re stalling, Coach.”

I scowl. “He is stubborn.”

“So are you,” Zephyr parries, and I resist the temptation to shove his face into his plate. “Who is his partner?”

“He does not have one. He has appealed for an exemption to perform a solo, and so far the IASA committee is stringing him along, delaying their

decision.”

Zephyr whistles, matching red brows shooting up his forehead. “Bold move,” he says, shaking his head. “And when the committee denies him? What then?”

What then? It is the question that has been echoing in my own head all day. In the five days between now and the preliminary round, they can decide Aleks has to perform a duet, and all of his preparation will have been for nothing.

I tried to bring it up to him again as we broke for lunch, but, again, he brushed me off. “There is no backup plan. If they deny him, he is out.” I let out a heavy breath. “He says he tried to find a partner. Says he reached out to others, but everyone said no.”

“Fuck,” Zephyr mutters. “I’d offer, but—”

“You already have your duet,” I quickly cut him off. I appreciate the thought, but I care about Zephyr too much to ask him to jeopardize his own medal dreams.

Whatever happens, it is going to be up to Aleks to find his way through this. And, if he will let me, I plan to be right there beside him.

We finish our meal, catching up on what I have missed from the Mazarine Coast. When I ask, Zephyr tells me he has seen Jordie down at the beach, sitting alone.

For a moment I am angry, so, so angry. My life was good, coaching the merpeople, living in my small, simple house with my flowers, loving a man who fit easily into my life.

I want to be angry with Aleks, even though none of this is his fault.

By the end of the meal, I leave Zephyr with a promise to catch up at the beach where the merpeople are staying. As I wind my way through the crowded tables, I catch a glimpse of a shaved head along the far wall. Something makes me hesitate, and I slow, letting myself watch him for a moment.

Aleks sits alone, hunched over the table, a bowl tucked within the confines of his arms like he is guarding his food—and himself—from the world. From where I stand I can see his face clearly, and it hits me like a punch to the gut.

He is hurting.

There is an aura of anger over him I now recognize. It is there in his tightened jaw and narrowed eyes, glaring at the world around him. It is

there in the hunch of his shoulders, like he is bracing himself for a fight.

Corded ear buds hang from his ears, and I wonder what he is listening to.

I can feel it the moment he notices me watching. His eyes widen, his lips part, and there, for a brief moment, the anger slips, and what is left behind is a frightened man sitting alone in a room full of people who do not see him.

Beautiful, sweet, and scared.

Longing rises in my throat. I want to go to him. There is so much I could do for him, if only he let me. If only I let myself.

I am here to be his coach. I am going to give him every chance at the dream he is reaching for, every advantage I can possibly share, because more than anything, I want to see him happy.

I want to see the fear replaced with confidence.

It is why I am subjecting myself to this, to *him*, even if it hurts me.

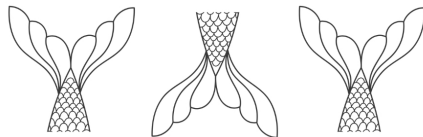
I watch his mask slide back into place. Any glimmer of softness is quickly replaced by cold, hard indifference.

I give him a nod and turn away.

I wonder, then, like I have wondered for years, what Aleks would say if he knew why I left eight years ago. If he knew why I abandoned my responsibility to the athletes I had coached for years.

Would he thank me for leaving? Would he understand?

Or would knowing make the hurting worse?



I have always been a late night snacker. As a boy, it was *tostones con limón y sal* while I sat on the rusty swing in the backyard. In my adult years, I have shifted to making smoothies: traveling with a handheld blender, protein powder, and then using whatever local fruit I can get my hands on.

Thanks to the tiny freezer box in the mini fridge, I have frozen bananas, strawberries, and quandong, a tart stone fruit native to Monstralia. My hands keep busy as Cafe Tacvba plays on the small travel speaker I propped up on the countertop.

As the blender whines over the music, I think about Aleks sitting alone in the dining hall. At this point in an athlete's life, especially someone as

decorated and accomplished as he is, events like the Clash of Creatures are typically filled with socializing and connecting with other athletes. But, if what I have seen so far is any indication of Aleks' relationship with his peers, he has lost more than his siren family in his transition.

I wish...I wish there was something I could do for him. Maybe I can introduce him to Zephyr?

“¿Qué más puedo decirte?/Tal vez puedo mentirte sin razón,” I sing. I love this song: the tragic, heart-wrenching voice of Rubén Isaac Albarrán Ortega asking *What more can I tell you? Maybe I can lie to you without reason*. No matter how far away I travel, or how many years pass without setting foot in Yucatec'a, the music stays with me, woven into every part of my life.

The door slams, and I look up, my voice cutting off mid-song.

“Shit, my bad,” Aleks says, wincing at the loud sound.

I turn the volume down. “No problem. You live here, too.”

“Yeah.” Aleks shifts his feet, looking uncomfortable and unsure of what he should do next.

I am about to offer to take my smoothie outside and give him some space when he asks, “What are you listening to?”

“Cafe Tacvba.” When there is no recognition on his face, I go on. “They are a Yucatec'an band.”

“Oh. Cool.”

He makes no move to shift from where he stands by the door.

“Would you like some smoothie?” I hold up the blender. “There is plenty, if you want.”

“Are there strawberries in it?”

I nod.

The smile on his face is a fragile, brittle thing. “No, thanks.”

This moment is growing painfully awkward. Aleks seems frozen in place, and I feel myself starting to sweat. “Would you like to go outside? It is a nice night.”

Aleks nods, shoulders dropping, like he is relieved at my suggestion. I pour my smoothie into a cup and hold the back door open for him.

The air is just cool enough to not be categorized as warm. Aleks sits on one of the provided plastic chairs, slinging one leg over the arm of the chair and tucking the other below him like a human pretzel. The chair creaks when I sit down.

My music, which I did not bother to turn off when we came outside, is barely audible through the closed door. The playlist has moved on to Maná now—another one of my favorites.

My gaze settles on Aleks, who looks out into the darkness, lost in thought.

“What piece are you dancing to?” I finally ask.

He blinks, but does not look at me. “Il Barbiere di Siviglia.”

“The Allegro Vivo from Overture?”

He nods.

I try to hide my disappointment, but the smile I force feels weak. It is the most popular part of the symphony, and a piece I have seen performed many times over my years as a coach. But for Aleks? It would be a shame for him to use such a standard piece of music.

“You hate it.”

He is looking right at me now, pale eyes almost glowing in the low light, and I inwardly flinch at the resignation on his face. A part of me wants to push back, to deny the accusation, but he is right. I do not think it is a piece of music fitting to him. To his historic performance.

“I do not hate the music,” I clarify, carefully choosing each of my words. “The Allegro Vivo is beautiful and moving.”

His sigh is loud enough to be heard over the music. “You told me what you think of my routine earlier, Javier. Why stop now?”

“Have you heard of Ahmed Alabaca?”

“No.”

“They are a contemporary composer.” I point to the door. “Could I play one of their songs for you?”

The light catches on his teeth as he bites down on his lower lip. When he nods, I get up, and return shortly with my speaker and iPod.

I watch Aleks as the meandering piano begins, and see his eyes widen as the thready, ethereal violin melody soars. The piece has just the right amount of dissonance, each tiny breath of resolution followed by another trail of unpredictable beauty.

When it comes to its quiet end, I sit back in my chair, hands folded over my belly, and wait for Aleks. He turns to me, eyes alight. “Holy shit,” he says, voice hushed. “That was incredible.”

“It is one of my favorites.” And then, because it is late and the darkness surrounds us like a blanket of anonymity, I add: “It seems fitting for you to

dance to something so beautiful, and so singular.”
He doesn’t reply.

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Chapter 5

Sounds Like a Nightmare

Aleks

I CAN'T DO ANYTHING right.

I thought that maybe the new music might help. Javier was—annoyingly—right, the piece is hauntingly beautiful, and uncannily perfect for my current routine. But even the better music hasn't fixed whatever is wrong with me.

I'm terrible. I can see the disappointment on Javier's face as I break the surface from another run through of my routine.

It feels impossible to focus. I don't think I've swam this poorly since I was twelve and had to practice after being up all night with a stomach bug. With every mistake, every wrong move and silly error, I feel my grip on my confidence slipping.

The water of the practice pool is almost hot against my skin, and my whole head throbs from how tightly I cinched down my vocal filter.

Treading water with my webbed hands, I wait, avoiding looking up at the man whose presence on the side of the pool is impossible to ignore.

"Your jumps are too low," Javier begins. I hate how kind and understanding he sounds, even as he criticizes me. I hate it almost as much as I hate how good the man looks in those short board shorts and a linen button up shirt. Seriously, between his thick thighs, his heavy, hairy chest,

and the bulge between his legs when he kneels down on the edge of the pool, it's like he's trying to send me into heat.

Not like that applies to me anymore, but *still*. Even transformed, I feel myself getting hard, my hole slicking just watching him.

No. Fuck this guy. Fuck him and his body and his unyielding nature.

You agreed to let him coach you, I remind myself, but I'm too pissed to listen to the more rational side of myself. "I'm tired," I snap.

He crosses his arms over his chest. "Why?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sleeping?"

I don't know how to tell him I didn't sleep well last night. How just *knowing* he's there under the same roof has me on edge. "It's not that," I say instead.

Javier looks at me with the same measured stare. "You are not weak, Aleks," he says.

"I know," I say, even though my arms feel like rubber and the muscles in my tail burn.

"If you know, then *dance* like it."

I look down at the water, the blue too bright for my eyes. The pale green scales scattering the surface of my skin glitter in the harsh, midday sun. I know I'm stronger than I'm performing right now. I've been training for this moment for years. I've worked to build every ounce of muscle on my body.

I know I'm not weak, but something is standing between me and the kind of effort I know I can give.

"Run the sequence up to the jump again, and focus on the height. Your tail needs to fully clear the water if you want to get full points."

As I sink below the surface, I already know I'm going to come up short again. I invert my body, holding my tailfins rigid as I lift and lower them from the surface on the precise beats I've memorized. My hands spiral on either side of my head, keeping me perfectly straight in the water.

Right on cue I dive down, careful to skim the bottom of the pool, and power upwards with one, two, three, beats of my tail before breaking the surface in what is supposed to be a dramatic arch above the water.

I know I've half assed it when my tail drags the surface. Rather than the splash-less entry, my whole body slaps down on the water. Somehow I've done worse this time around than the last run through.

Fuck, some part of me thinks, but even louder are the excuses clambering to the surface, tinged with an embarrassment that leaves me nauseated. I don't know what the hell I'm doing, why I'm giving anything less than my best effort.

I want this. I want to win. I need to win so badly I've been on the verge of panic since I arrived in Monstralia. I've been trying to manage it as best I can—smoking and walking through the village, reminding myself I need to win for *me*.

Your courage will touch the lives of strangers, Javier had said last night in the darkness.

I can already feel Javier's disappointment when I break the surface of the pool. He shakes his head. "You are wasting your time, Aleks."

He's right, but instead of agreeing with him I ride the wave of anger suddenly expanding in my chest. I don't even try to redirect it, instead letting the words spill from me without any regard for their outcome. "What the hell do you know about anything?" I'm shouting, my voice cracking from the strain. "You walk in here telling me what to do, and who the fuck are you? Some washed up coach who's never done anything? Some fucking loser who leaves? Don't tell me about how I'm using my time. You don't have to be here, so if I'm such a fucking disappointment there's nothing to stop you from walking away."

I slip under the water, letting the quiet wrap around me as I catch my breath. *What the fuck is wrong with you?* My skin is too hot, too tight, and I wish I could experience the way a human's lungs burn when they stay underwater for too long. I wish there was something I could do to quiet the roar in my head.

Movement catches my eye. There's a hand under the surface at the edge of the pool, and my eyes focus on the tiny black hairs waving in the water.

Like I'm being pulled, I swim toward it.

The hand slips above the water before I can reach it, and it feels natural to follow. I pull myself up, gripping the edge of the pool, and rest my leather-covered chin on the back of my hands.

"Look at me."

For a moment, I close my eyes. I'm not ready to see the way Javier looks at me in the wake of my latest tantrum.

He makes a quiet sound in the back of his throat. I can picture the disappointed frown on his face. "Aleks," he says, his voice close. "I am

going to go. When you decide you want to listen, come find me.”

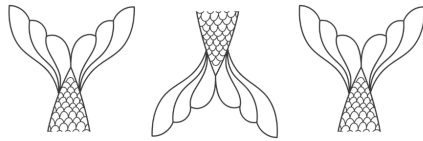
I look at him then, hope turning rancid in my chest. I narrow my eyes, meeting his patient gaze head-on.

“This is not me walking away,” he goes on, like he could hear the accusation I’d been preparing to throw at him. “I am here, on your side, when you are ready.”

Something burns in me as I watch him walk away. I clench my teeth, my jaw aching from the tightly cinched leather strap of the vocal filter. It doesn’t matter that the sun feels perfectly warm on my skin, or that I’m finally on the verge of doing what I set out to do two years ago.

All that matters is he’s walking away from me.

The sound I make isn’t even remotely human, and I slap a palm on the surface of the water.



As an elite athlete, I have to be disciplined. I’m disciplined in my training. I’m consistent with practice. I don’t make a habit of giving up.

Right now, though, my head is a fucking mess. After practice this morning, I’ve been hiding out in the bungalow. Javier is wherever the fuck he is, doing whatever the fuck he’s doing.

I don’t care about him.

I set up the gaming system in the tiny living room, and grab my headset when I see Damian is already online. It takes me a minute to join him in the game—our minotaur avatars are mid-battle with a twenty-eyed spider in an arena.

“Why are you up?” I ask him instead of a greeting.

He switches from a mace to a magical boomerang. “I hung out with Sara and Bayer after my shift tonight and drank one of those cursed energy drinks you left behind.”

I snort. Damian works as a bartender at a swanky hotel in downtown Soledad. “It’s not my fault you can’t resist the call of the ViperVenom.”

“Fuck you,” he retorts. On the screen, our minotaurs work together, Damian taking the close combat while I use a bazooka to try to take out the spider. “So how is the Clash?”

“Fine.”

“You’re full of shit, little bro. Tell me the truth.”

I stick out my tongue, forgetting for a moment he can’t see me. I’m so used to winding down like this at the end of the day, sitting with Damian on the other end of the couch and bickering about the AC temperature or who ate the last popsicle from the freezer.

“I don’t know,” I finally admit. “I’m swimming like shit.”

“Why”

“I’m in my head.” I pause as I reload my weapon. The spider’s health bar sits at twenty-percent...shit, we’ve almost got it. “And Javier stands there being all supportive and soft and it makes me feel weird and twitchy.”

Damian’s laugh is loud in my ears. “Oh, my dear little brother, you are so fucked in the head.”

“What are you—”

“*‘He’s nice and supportive and gentle.’* Sounds like a nightmare.”

“You’re an asshole,” I mutter, even as I grin. “I just need to get my shit together and then I’ll be fine.”

There’s an explosion on screen, and when the dust clears, the spider is unmoving on the ground. “I’ve always wanted to try that.” Damian’s minotaur waves his hands in the air in an awkward victory dance. “But seriously, Aleks. You’re under a lot of pressure. Relax a little, and trust you deserve to be there.” I hear a loud yawn. “And think about listening to the really hot nice man who is trying to help you.”

“Go to bed,” I say, rather than acknowledging the perfectly reasonable advice.

“Love you, brat,” he says as the game pauses.

“Love you too, asshole.”

There’s no point in playing without him, so I toss the controller and headset aside. Beside me on the couch, the three boiled chicken breasts and pasta I picked up from the dining hall for dinner have long gone cold.

Grabbing a cigarette and fishing the lighter from my back pocket, I go out on the back porch. I light up, pull out my phone, and open my notifications.

Oh, wonderful. My mother is giving interviews about me now.

I shouldn’t look. I know what I’m going to find. It doesn’t matter that I have had no expectations of my mother since she kicked me out of the only place I’d ever known. Even then, in spite of it all, her words hurt the most.

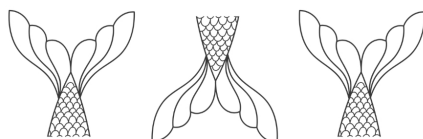
“It is unfortunate my colleagues in the IASA came to this decision regarding the Clash of Creatures participation of the siren called Aleks Parthenope. It is a stain upon the long history of siren kind and our role in the creation of this sport to have someone like this competing. It is one thing to have other species tolerate such things, but I refuse to accept this from one of my own kind.”

Five minutes later, bitter, angry tears are falling down my face. My teeth ache from how hard I’m clenching my jaw, but I need to get out, to get out of my head. I throw my barely eaten food away, and change my clothes quickly. Methodically.

Staring at my face in the mirror, I wipe at my wet cheeks. *She doesn’t know you*, I silently remind my reflection. *Her fucking loss.*

I spray cologne on my wrists, and adjust my packer so it’s sitting where I want it to.

Time to go find someone to fuck the pain away. But that’s not going to be enough. Not tonight, not with how twisted up my insides feel, like tangled Christmas lights. Tonight, I need to hand myself over to someone who will treat me like I matter. Who I can trust, even for a night, to take care of me.



It’s not hard to find a party.

The dormitory where the flower fae athletes are staying is up on high stilts at the edge of a garden, and each room opens to a wood-planked patio extending the length of the building. One of the many curving streams that allow water-beings to move through the village borders the patio, and I can see the silhouettes of merpeople and undines lingering at the edge of the party. The flower fae have set up lights, house music plays from a speaker, and the dance floor is already crowded.

It’s exactly what I was hoping for.

I’m not entirely sure what I’m doing here. I should be focused on the qualifying round in six days, and why I’m swimming like shit. I should be watching film of my practice, picking each motion apart with the purpose of fixing everything that is going wrong.

None of that matters right now. Tonight, I'm not thinking about the Clash or my mother or why, ever since Javier showed up at my front door I've felt off, like a space in my chest that used to be full is now vacant and hollow.

Tonight, I'm going to get drunk, and pray to the gods a handful of orgasms and riding a cock will quiet the unsettled feeling I can't seem to shake.

A soft-bodied centaur presses a cup of swirling silver liquid into my hand as I walk onto the porch. He looks me up and down, amber eyes lingering on my top surgery scars, clearly visible with the short-sleeve shirt I have hanging unbuttoned, and on my bulge against the placket of a ripped pair of jeans. I see him note the forest green bandana tucked into my back right pocket, and his smile turns fond, but apologetic.

"I'm not your type," he says, his voice melodic as he leans into my space. "But there's a few polar bear shifters on the dance floor who might be what you're looking for." He waggles his heavy blonde brows. "I took one for a ride last night—he'll leave you happy and begging for more."

I grin back, shifting my weight and stifling a little sigh at the pressure on my cock. Thanking the centaur, I weave my way through the crowd. The air turns musky as bodies press in around me, and I shudder, my body already waking up at the thought of what might come next.

It's impossible to miss the polar bear shifters. Huge, both in height and stature, with thick white hair across their chests and stomachs. One wears a leather harness across his chest and leather shorts that leave nothing to the imagination, while the other, with his white hair shaved close to his head, has thick piercings through his nose, lip, and nipples.

Yes, please. I move toward him, draining the entire contents of the drink I'm still holding. I lick my lips, wincing at the almost sickly-sweet honey taste, before setting the cup down on the porch railing behind me.

The shifter smiles at me, and his eyes mirror the same movements as the centaur. His smile widens, turning hungry, and *fuck* I'm turned on. I'm hard and needy, and I'm pretty sure if he slid one of his wide thighs between my legs I could come in a matter of seconds.

A big hand reaches out and snags my waist. I go eagerly, putty in his hands as he spins me around and tucks my ass back against him. He's hard and thick, and I wiggle from side to side to slot his length between my cheeks.

“Hello, boy,” he whispers, his voice hot against my ear. “Looking for a Daddy tonight?”

I shiver. It’s not quite right. None of it ever is. But if I close my eyes and sink into the feeling of a soft belly against my back, the soft catch of body hair on my skin, the firm hold of a hand on my hip, the thumb slipping into the waistband of my briefs—I can pretend.

Just for tonight, I can pretend the man I tell myself I hate, the man who has stumbled back into my life and turned my head inside out, that *he* is the one touching me. That the phrase “Good boy,” is slipping from his soft lips, that it’s a salt and pepper beard tickling the side of my neck.

My head is hazy, and I can finally breathe. I dance, sweat on my skin, and do nothing but feel.

When the shifter turns me to face him and kisses me, I try to let go, even as something inside of me stays clenched, tight and tethered to some unknown harbor.

One more drink, and then, maybe, I’ll be free.

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Chapter 6

Good Boy

Javier

I HAVE NEVER BEEN someone who glorifies staying up late. On the contrary, I have always appreciated long, uninterrupted hours of sleep. My *abuela* still tells stories of me sleeping on the floor while all of the *tias* danced to Ana Gabriel around me.

The last place I want to be is out of my bed, but here I am, hours after dark, stalking through the lamplit village to get the man I walked away from.

So much for holding boundaries.

Watching Aleks swim, watching self-sabotage overtake everything he has worked for, is leaving me with a sense of helplessness I hate. He is better than how he is dancing right now. I kept adjusting my wording, hoping if I changed the delivery of feedback it might actually sink in. But nothing was working.

Walking away from him today was the right thing to do. I stand by that. But I cannot help but wonder if I am somehow to blame for him running off to a party, and, if Zephyr's text is in any way accurate, *throwing himself at a polar bear shifter*.

It is normal for athletes to cut loose before and after they compete. An occasional night out has very little impact on athletic performance. If this

were any other athlete, I would have ignored Zephyr's text and gone to bed.

But my friend knows Aleks is not like any other athlete. The merman may be an interfering asshole, but he is also the only one here who knows exactly who the siren is to me.

Aleks is a consenting adult who is not mine to worry about, I remind myself as I approach the growing noise of the party. *Dios*, but that would be a lie. What I *should* do and what I *want* to do could not be more contradictory.

It only takes me a minute to find Zephyr, sitting with his elbows propped on the bank of the waterway passing below the patio. The music is loud enough to be annoying, and I already feel a headache coming on. He is not alone—Martyn and Holdys, two other mermen I know from the Mazarine Coast, float beside him, steins of some silver liquid gripped in their fists.

I give them a nod before turning my attention to my friend. "Where is he?" I ask Zephyr.

He looks amused, but has the decency not to run his mouth. *Asshole has always been able to read my mood from a pool away*. He points up over his shoulder. "There."

I follow his finger and...there.

There he is. Under the golden string lights, everything looks like a scene from a movie, or maybe a well-funded stage production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I take in the scene—Aleks' body pressed against a large, white-haired man, their mouths moving together like they have been at it a while. I trail my gaze down to where Aleks' hips roll against the thigh slotted between his legs.

My body goes still. Quiet. I try to breathe, but something foreign obstructs my lungs. It is pain and dread and a sudden stab that leaves me winded.

The moment oxygen reaches my lungs, I am moving, jogging up the stairs and shouldering my way through the mess of dancing bodies. I am not calm, nothing close to cool or collected, but there is no cautionary voice telling me to take a minute. I cannot think of a single damn reason to slow down when another man has his mouth and hands all over Aleks.

"Aleks!"

He turns his head toward my voice, and one tiny piece of me settles. The shifter keeps their bodies connected, his arms wrapped around Aleks' waist,

and he turns his icy blue eyes on me. I hold the stranger's gaze even as he lowers his mouth to brush Aleks' ear. "Who is he?"

"No one."

Only then do I look, *really* look, at Aleks. He is clearly drunk, his eyes hazy and heavy, and there is a slack softness to his mouth I am not used to seeing. His lips are swollen, wet from the shifter's tongue, and I fight the urge to wipe his mouth with the hem of my shirt.

He looks good. Gut-wrenchingly handsome, and full of youthful life. Muscles defined enough to cast shadows, and a trail of dark hair below his outie bellybutton. I do not let my eyes venture lower, to the place where his crotch is still pressed against the shifter's thigh.

You are no one to him, I remind myself. He does not know what you do.

I crack my neck. "I am his coach, and it is past curfew. Come on."

"I don't have a fucking curfew," Aleks protests, looking at me with an incredulous scowl.

"You do now," I respond.

Something crosses Aleks' face then, a flash of desperation I recognize, and I glance down. My body tightens, shoulders bunching and jaw clenching, like I am bracing myself for a fight. My hands flex at my side.

Little brat thinks he is being subtle, grinding on that thigh. He thinks I do not notice his breath hitching, the way his hips roll, chasing pleasure.

Absolutely not. I am willing to take a back seat to many things, to ignore everything I know with the goal of letting Aleks have a full, happy life.

But I refuse to stand by and watch him get off with another man. *Absolutely the fuck not.*

"Aleks," I growl.

"What?" He snaps.

I see it, then. A bandana is tucked into his back pocket, hanging from his jeans. A flag. A visual communication of a need. A forest green hanky in the back right pocket cannot possibly be random.

The quiet, possessive rage in my head shifts. It is one thing to know Aleks is out trying to hook up with a stranger. But to see the green hanky, and know the kink he is flagging for is the complement to mine? It would be too perfect. A cosmic joke, to make the man I am coaching exactly my type.

But if I am honest, a part of me wondered. I have tried not to look too long at his body in the water, at the way he works his mouth when he is

thinking too hard, but I am only human. I see how the fire in him burns unchecked, like he is daring someone to brave the flames and find him within. Sometimes he looks at me when something goes wrong, clearly waiting for me to step in.

Dios, I have not been giving him what he needs. The way I talk to him in the water, the way I have peppered him with questions, my whole approach to him—now, knowing *this*, changes everything.

I have spent the past two days watching him. How he practices, how he walks, how he leans so close to the bathroom mirror his breath fogs the glass. How sometimes he wraps his hands around himself, like he is starving for touch.

Even though I should not, I have thought about his body. Imagined his pale, muscular legs sprawled out on a mattress or quietly kneeling between my thighs. I have imagined his mouth swollen and wet with spit. Now, seeing him like this? I do not want to imagine anymore.

My mind made up, I shove every lingering doubt to the side, and take two steps toward him. Aleks watches me warily.

“Now, boy.”

His eyes go wide, and I smile, something inside of me settling when I see his reaction to my command. Those wet lips part, and I notice with pleasure that his body is frozen. His hips still.

I hold his gaze as I reach my hand toward him. “Now, boy.”

Aleks stumbles toward me. My hands are there to steady him, and for a moment I sink into the way his skin feels against my fingertips. Soft. Hard-earned muscle. I have never touched him before, and the realization hits me, sending a giddy rush to my head.

As soon as he is steady on his feet, I let go. I would love to hold him tight against me, but it is not time for that yet. Neither of us are ready for that.

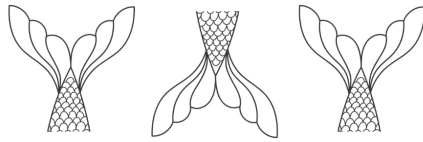
I turn away and move through the crowd.

I do not check behind me. Maybe it is a test, or maybe it is my naïve belief that I have figured something out about Aleks tonight.

When I reach the gravel path, I hear the crunch of footsteps behind me.

I smile.

Good boy.



We walk in silence.

The night is full of the inevitable ambient noise when thousands of people are brought together. Generators hum, insects buzz—different from the cadence of the bugs in Yucatec’a. Occasional laughter punctuates the background.

We veer onto the winding path leading to our cabin when I hear the click and hiss of a lighter behind me.

I turn, incredulous, as the first sharp note of tobacco hits my nose. “Seriously?”

“What?” He takes a long drag, the cherry glowing orange at the end of the cigarette, staring right at me, daring me to do something.

He is testing me. Everything about Aleks tells me he will push and push and push, and it is all a desperate plea for interference. He will never tell me when he is floundering. He is too stubborn.

He must recognize this about himself, too, because why else was he walking around with a green bandana in his back pocket, telling the world exactly who he is and what he wants. A Boy, looking for a Daddy. He knows what he needs, and now it is up to me to prove I can be the one to give it to him.

I am going to crack him open, and then I will watch him soar.

“Smoking is a bad habit.” I drop my voice to the lowest register.

He rolls his eyes. *Brats, always so predictable.* “Can you not?”

“Do you want me to lie?”

He does not say anything. His lips press the cigarette tightly between his lips—it looks unnatural, his posture missing the ease of a seasoned smoker. Everything about him is tense. I want to take the tension away, to tell him I am here now, and it is my job to take care of him.

It is easy to steer him off the path, to use my wider body to box him into a dark stoop alongside a building, the doorway shadowed from the dim lights lining the path. Aleks leans back against the door, and I crowd closer.

“What were you hoping to find tonight?” I watch my words land, goosebumps spreading across his bare chest.

He looks at the ground when he responds with a muttered “I don’t know.”
“We both know that is bullshit.”

Aleks looks up then, and even in the dim light I can see the storm in his eyes. “I wanted to hook up,” he spits out. “It’s not a big deal.”

I hold my gaze steady as I reach behind him, careful to not let my touch linger as I pluck the bandana from his pocket. I hold it up between us. “Now look me in the eye, boy, and tell me you were just looking for a hookup.”

His cheeks stain red. He takes an almost frantic drag, and the sharp smoke crowds the air between us. As much as I want to wait him out, the smoke is pissing me off.

Enough.

“Spit it out,” I instruct.

Gone is the moment of bashful shyness, replaced by the kind of rage that sinks its teeth in and refuses to let go. His upper lip curls. “What the fuck are you going to do about it?”

I pluck the cigarette from his mouth, ignoring the way his sweet, pursed lips chase me, drop it to the gravel walk and crush it below the heel of my sandal. When I look back up, Aleks stares at me with his mouth wide open.

I lean in close enough to feel his shallow breaths. “Watch your mouth, boy.”

Red spreads over his cheeks, but this time he does not look away. “Make me,” he whispers.

It is a plea, and I soak it in.

“No empieces una pelea que no puedes ganar,” I whisper. *Do not start a fight you cannot win.*

I am braced for anger, ready for a surge of defiance. I almost expect him to try to hit me or lash out physically. I do not expect him to shrug out of his shirt, throwing it to the ground before dropping to his knees as his hands fumble with my leather belt.

I reach down and grab Aleks’ wrist, holding him still. I should stop him. We have not talked yet. There are conversations we need to have before indulging in our desires.

As much as I want to say *fuck it* and indulge him, I would not be doing my job if I let us go on without making sure there are safety measures in place. He has been drinking, and I need to know he can communicate.

“I need a safe word, boy.”

He blinks up at me. "Traffic light system," he says without hesitation.

"Good," I praise, dragging my thumb over the soft skin of his wrist where I still hold him. "And what happens if you say 'yellow'?"

"We slow down."

"And 'red'?"

"We stop."

I nod. "We stop, and we make sure you are safe."

"And yours?" He asks.

For a moment, I am lost. "Mine?"

"Safe word."

I want to kiss him, but I settle for smiling down at him. "The traffic light system is perfect."

I look at him carefully, and see his expression closing and hardening the longer I wait, and I cannot. I cannot fucking help it, because this is *him*. He does not realize it yet, but I will do anything to make him happy. *Anything*.

"Ask me nicely," I growl out, releasing his hand.

"Please," he whispers. "May I?"

"May you what?"

"May I suck your cock...?" He trails off, and I know what he is asking. I want to give it to him, but not here, in the dark of a quiet doorway, where there is no room for anything but impulse.

"Yes," I whisper. "Good boy."

Aleks returns to my belt, freeing it and working the zipper down over my already thickening cock. I let him do the work of pushing my cargo shorts down and over my hips, followed by well-worn boxers I have not had a good reason to replace. When I feel his warm breath on the thick hair below my waist, my knees threaten to buckle.

He handles me tentatively, like he is determined but unsure of where to start. His fingers circle the base of my cock, and he looks up at me, eyes wide and glassy, as he licks his lips.

"Do you need me to tell you what to do?" I ask.

When he nods, a pleased sound vibrates from my chest. *He is perfect*, a voice in my head whispers. *Of course he is; he was made for you*.

"Lick the shaft," I begin. "Start at the bottom and work your way up to the tip." His eyes never leave me as he dips down, tongue extended, and licks a slow, indulgent line up my cock.

It is a light, teasing touch, but knowing it is him makes a sharp, almost desperate pulse of need tighten below my belly. When he reaches the tip he stills, his tongue flicking uncertainly around my foreskin before his lips close around the tip.

“Fuck,” I breathe. “That is perfect, boy. Suck on me like that.”

He tightens his mouth, drawing more of me in. His mouth is hot around me, and he finds a steady rhythm of sucking me, nursing the head of my cock like he is trying to suck me dry. “You like having something in your mouth?”

He nods, the motion sending my cock sliding deeper.

What he is doing is good, so fucking good, but I want more. I *need* more.

“Pull off.”

He starts to shake his head, his lips squeezing around my cock.

“Now,” I warn.

His brows tighten, but he slowly lets my cock slip from his glistening mouth. I watch the strand of spit trailing from my tip to his lips, and my cock throbs. *He is perfect.* I reach a hand out, rubbing over the closely shorn brown hair that covers his head.

“Now, pull my foreskin back.” I hiss as he complies, revealing the wide, purple head. I know I am proportionally dramatic. It has always been a thing past lovers fixated on, the flared head that is so much wider than my shaft. If Aleks’ sharp little intake of breath is any indication, he is impressed, too. “Taste what you do to me, boy. See what my body does when you are so fucking good for me.”

Aleks does not hesitate. He practically dives forward, swallowing me so deep he gags and sputters around me. “Slow down,” I say soothingly, running my fingertips across the sides of his head. “Take your time.”

The whining sound he makes has me closer than I should be. It is the desperation of it all, like he cannot possibly imagine slowing down now that he has what he wants.

I feel him move below me. Looking down, I see him fidgeting, shifting his weight where he kneels.

Concern fills me. “Do your knees hurt?”

He shakes his head, taking my cock deeper.

“Are you uncomfortable?”

Again, he shakes his head.

I crane my neck to look down below the swell of my belly and—*oh*. One of his hands is pressed against his crotch, and he is rocking desperately against it.

“Oh, sweet boy,” I murmur, and I trail my thumb across his cheek. “Move your hand.”

Carefully, I slide my foot along the gravel, maneuvering it so I am slotted between his thighs. I press forward until I feel a soft bulge against my shin.

For a moment he is still below me. His body is motionless, stiff, even, although his mouth never stops sucking steadily on my cock.

“Take what you need. I have you,” I repeat, and nudge my leg forward in an effort to encourage him.

It is the permission he needs, because his hips press forward, almost experimentally at first. His eyes widen, and he groans around my cock.

“Such a good boy,” I praise. He finds his rhythm, humping my ankle with a horny desperation that leaves me lightheaded with pleasure. “You are doing so fucking good.”

My orgasm is close, but I do everything I can to hold off. I am not ready to be done with this dark doorway, the dry, still night where anyone could find us. There is too much newness, too much anticipation, and I want to hang on to every detail.

I am determined to remember everything.

His movements are growing frantic, hips circling hard against me while his mouth grows sloppier with every second. Spit slides down his face, and I trace the wet lines on his skin with my fingertips.

“Do you need more?”

He shakes his head.

“Good boy. I want you to come as soon as you feel it. No waiting, do you understand?”

He nods, drawing back so only the head of my cock is engulfed in his mouth.

“I am going to fuck your throat now,” I tell him. “You have done so good, sucking and exploring. So good for me. And now I am going to go deep, and if it gets to be too much you tap my thigh twice.”

He is staring up at me, but there is a frantic haze over his eyes that leads me to seek additional confirmation. If I am going to do what I want to his throat, I need to know he has a way to stop.

“Show me how you say stop, Aleks.” I wait, and when I feel two distinct taps on my thigh, I give him a nod of approval. “Good. Now, take a deep breath.”

His head fits perfectly between my hands, and I unleash myself. Oh, the way my cock wedges into the back of his throat is sublime, and I feel the muscles constrict around me as he swallows and struggles for air. I barely pull out, just enough to give him the chance to sneak in a quick breath before I thrust in again.

Again, again, again, chasing the building pleasure low in my belly. The delicate trails of spit have turned into a sheen of drool surrounding his mouth, and he looks stunning like this, with his breath, his *life*, in my hands.

A retched whine starts to build in the back of his throat, and I both hear and feel the sound as his movements become more precise and consistent against me. He is close, chasing whatever iteration of pleasure he feels in his body as I am reaching for mine.

It would be poetic to come together, I think, but reality crashes over us as I tip over the edge, pleasure unlike anything I have ever felt sending my vision white. It feels too good, almost, leaving me not only struggling to remain standing but emotionally raw, like something in me cracked open and I do not know how to close it up again.

Aleks swallows me eagerly, lapping at my pulsing cock until it grows soft on his tongue.

I shift my trembling legs, and notice belatedly how my hands cradle his head like he is someone precious.

“Get after it,” I command, my voice breathless, as I nod down at where our bodies are still touching. I regret my phrasing for a moment, but it is too late to craft my words into something more tender, more gentle. Something to more accurately reflect the aching hole I feel growing in my chest.

Aleks’ eyes drift shut, and I watch him chase his release. I see the moment he crests, his head tossed back and exposing his long neck. His body jerks and stutters, and I murmur words of encouragement.

“Good boy,” I whisper, reverent.

His body slumps down, heavy on my foot. After giving him a moment, I gently guide him to stand. “How are your knees?”

He blinks down at me, eyes still glazed. “They’re good?”

“Are you sure about that?” I do not think he meant it as a question, but I cannot help but tease him.

With a soft scoff, Aleks rolls his eyes. “My knees are fine,” he mumbles.

“Good.” Without overthinking, I reach out and thread our hands together. His mouth is swollen and wet, his skin flushed—he looks perfectly wrecked.

Tell him. I turn, leading us down the path toward our cabin. His footsteps crunch behind me. *I should tell him. He should know what this really is, who he is to me.*

When we reach the cabin, I shove my thoughts aside. “Go get changed for bed,” I say, careful to keep my voice soft. Aleks must be too exhausted to fight me, because he nods and shuffles over to the bathroom.

While he is busy, I take off my shirt, tossing it on the back of the couch, and go to the little kitchen. I have grabbed some different things from the dining hall and stashed them here, and I have everything I need for a smoothie.

I remember Aleks’ question about strawberries when I offered him some of the smoothie I made yesterday, so I grab a banana and some mango instead. With the addition of whole milk and some vanilla protein powder, it is the perfect snack for an athlete.

I feel Aleks’ presence behind me. I am not sure what it is—a feeling, maybe, or a shift in the air in such close quarters. I pour the smoothie into a cup and turn to face him.

He is only in a pair of boxers now. My eyes trace over his body—the slender muscles under his skin, the line of fine dark hair trailing down to his boxer briefs, his ankles, which look so skinny it is hard to imagine them holding the rest of him up. He is nervous, too, fidgeting with the cotton hem.

“Drink.” I hand him the smoothie.

Aleks’ body stills, and he drinks. I watch him, standing there until he finishes. I take the cup from him and wash it in the sink. He watches me, silent.

“Now brush your teeth.”

“Okay.”

When he walks back to the bathroom, I smile.

“Now go to sleep,” I tell him when he comes out of the bathroom, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. I see the protest in his eyes, and add,

“You need the rest, Aleks.”

The way he keeps glancing back at me as he climbs the stairs to the loft almost breaks me. There is uncertainty in his expression, like he is trying to make sure I am still here.

I listen to the shuffling of blankets, the quiet creaks of the floor above me, and tell myself I am doing the right thing by staying downstairs. Every instinct I have is telling me to tuck him in. To make sure he is comfortable and safe.

It hurts not to go to him.

There is too much there, hovering between us. Right now, I hold the knowledge of something that could change everything. It is not fair to him.

And so I hold back. I wait, listening for the moment his breaths even out, and then I walk out the door.

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Chapter 7

Without Meaningful Romantic Relationships

Aleks

IF THERE'S ONE THING I'm good at, it's channeling frustration into exercise.

The weight room is full, teeming with athletes of all disciplines. It's loud, and the air is almost nauseatingly thick with sweat and pheromones. That's the downside of putting so many of us together—between the heats and ruts and general collective horniness of this many beautiful beings all in one place, there's a constant feeling of tension in the air.

I'm not much of a weightlifter. It was never a part of our training growing up, but I've gotten into it more since transitioning. It's been an undoing of so many deep-seated beliefs about myself and my body, seeing muscles grow and shift, seeing hair thicken on my legs and in my armpits, watching my neck thicken in the mirror.

At home, I lift with Damian. It's something we started doing together, in an effort to get out of the house. We're both novices, but generally keep each other from getting hurt. He's got upper body strength that makes me look pathetic, but at least I can humiliate him with my squats.

Without him with me, I'm not sure where to start.

I move toward the rack of free weights, trying to ignore the off-kilter feeling that has haunted me since I woke up.

Javier was gone when I climbed down the stairs. The single pillow on the small sofa was perfectly placed. The kitchen was tidy and empty. For a minute it felt like he'd never been there at all, like I'd hallucinated the past twenty-four hours fueled by horny delusion.

But no. His bag was tucked under a side table, all of his things put meticulously away.

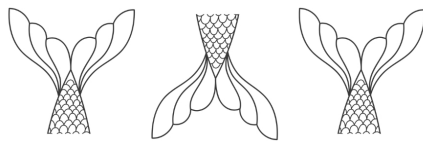
So last night did happen, which means my hookup with a stranger was actually interrupted by my coach, who went full, growly-Daddy and called me "boy." It also means I really sucked his cock while humping his leg.

I grab two 30-pound weights and start a set of lunges. I lower down slowly, ignoring a little twinge in my knee. Working out like this is reckless days before my qualifying performance, but I'm desperate to get out of my head.

What the hell was I thinking? I can't hook up with my coach. But now that I know that Javier *fucking* Zamora is...*fuck*, he's exactly the kind of man I was out looking for last night.

A part of me hates that he saw me like that—on my knees, desperate and begging.

And another part of me can't wait to find an excuse to do it again.



My legs and arms are shaking as I make my way to the gym door, doing my best not to waddle.

"Ale?"

I stop dead in my tracks. My shoulders curl forward, shielding myself as my mind races to identify the voice calling out that name—a version of the name I left behind, and one I haven't heard in years. Finally, I turn.

I immediately recognize my cousin Cora, but before I do more than give her a cursory glance I look around, trying to get a grip on the panic squeezing my lungs. Was anyone else with her? I scan my surroundings with new attention to detail, trying to pick out any familiar faces and

expecting to see more of them. More of my family, my clan, the people who'd turned their backs on me.

"It's just me," Cora says, and her voice is so familiar I want to fucking cry.

Now that I know it's only the two of us, I actually look at her. She's grown up since I last saw her. Her style has evolved too—there's no sign of the golden-blond highlights and glittering pink lip gloss that were her signature style when we were seventeen. She looks like a badass, hair dyed black with a few bleached strands framing her face, and a piercing in her eyebrow. The patch of purple scales where her neck meets her shoulders sparkle in the white light.

"They let you pierce your eyebrow?" I press my lips together, squeezing my eyes shut. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* Of course, *that's* the first thing I say to someone I haven't seen in years. I open my eyes. "Sorry. Hi?"

Cora snorts, her dark brown eyes flashing with amusement. "My mom and I fought about it, but yes." Her expression turns serious. "I'm...would you mind introducing yourself? I know I *knew* you, in that we grew up together, but I'd love to meet you, officially."

She looks nervous. It's odd seeing discomfort on someone who had always been so fearless in my eyes. She was the one who would do flips from the cliffs into the *cenotes*, and the only one who was ever brave enough to try a prank on my mother.

But now, here she is, looking at me like she's afraid of stumbling over her words. Like she really, sincerely, doesn't want to say the wrong thing.

I extend a hand. "I'm Aleks," I say softly.

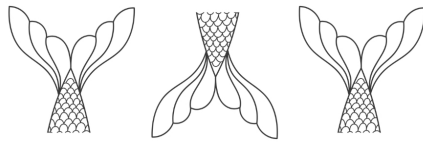
There's nothing but kindness on her face when she takes my hand and shakes it. "Nice to meet you, Aleks."

"Yeah," I say back, swallowing against the emotion rising in my throat. "Want to, uh—" I point toward the doors, aware that we are having this conversation in the direct path of foot traffic.

"Fuck yeah. Want to grab some food?"

I nod, and hope my smile hides some of my nervous energy. "Sure."

She loops her arm in mine, and drags me out of the gym.



“So.”

Cora sits across from me in a crowded cafe just outside of the village. There’s a charm to it, the sparkling vinyl upholstery on the booth seats and the jukebox tucked into a corner. I haven’t ventured out since I got here, other than my failed attempt to get laid last night.

Well, I can’t call it a failure when I got to suck Javier’s cock and come on his foot. And then he made me a fucking *smoothie* and sent me to bed. What the actual fuck was that?

I know I’m queer. I know I like dominant men, but have no interest in pain play. I know, from the past five years of exploration and experimentation at clubs in Soledad, the kind of partner I’m looking for is firm, but nurturing, strict, but soft.

It’s why I started going out with a forest green hanky in my pocket. Better to put it right out there in the open that you’re looking for a Daddy, than go through dinner and drinks and have it all go sideways when you ask to be called “boy” and told what to do.

“Where are you living now?” Cora asks, watching me over her diet soda.

“Soledad, up in the Central Lowlands. My brother Damian and I have a place.”

Recognition crosses her face. “I remember him,” she says. “He left with his dad when he was pretty young, right?”

I nod. She doesn’t say *your dad*, even though Damian and I share the same parents. Sirens don’t recognize the men who sire them. They’re nothing more than a necessary sperm donor in the eyes of our mothers. I grew up knowing nothing about the man, other than the occasional glimpse of his old red pickup truck when he dropped Damian off to visit for a weekend.

“Who are you swimming with this year?” I ask.

“An ensemble.”

“Oof.” Ensemble performances are hard work. It’s one thing to synchronize your movements with one other person in the duet

performances, but to perfectly match your every breath with seven other sirens is almost impossible. “What song?”

She rolls her eyes. “*Toccata and Fugue*.”

I snort a laugh before I can stop myself. It was a piece we’ve used before—one of Bach’s most famous—and it matched every dramatic stereotype people had about artistic swimming. “Again?”

“It’s won before, I guess.” She pushes her plate of fries across the table toward me, and I grab the two kinds of mayo I ordered: one tangy and herby, and the other a spicy chile. “It’s the same routine with a few more complex lifts added in.”

“How’s...” I stop, waving a hand around clumsily, unsure of how to word my question. Yucatec’s isn’t home. Not anymore.

“The Colony?” She prompts. When I nod, she lets out a sigh. “It’s the same. Better, now that I’m older. We still practice twice a day and eat the same meals in the dining hall. It’s boring, but predictable. Sometimes I hang out with some of the jaguar shifters who live in Tetochi—did you ever meet them?”

I shake my head.

“They are so hot, Aleks. Disgustingly hot, and fun to party with.” She tucks a lock of dyed hair behind her ear. “Other than that, I go to the coast to see my dad, and hang out with the girls.”

“You see your dad?” I must have misheard her—those of us raised in the Colony didn’t have relationships with our other parents.

“Oh, totally.” She leans forward, pressing her chest to the table so there is barely any space between us. “Between us, I don’t think my mom ever got over him. She would take us to the coast to visit him when we were little. He’s a sweet guy, and actually seems stoked to have a relationship with us. My mom still goes to see him. Not that she talks about it. You know how it is at the Colony—there’s no space for anything but training.”

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“Damn,” I say. “It’s so fucking sad when you think about it—we are basically cursed to live a life without meaningful romantic relationships.”

Cora laughs as swallows another fry. “Welcome to sirenhood. You have a tail. You can’t stop from singing, and when people hear you, they will try to drown themselves to get to you. Oh! But wait! It gets better: if anyone hears you sing, you die!” Her smile is saccharine. “Yippee.”

I wave my hand in front of me, putting on a deep, overly-dramatic voice. “Yet hold out hope, yee tailed ones! There is a chance you have a mate! One fated by the Gods! If *they* hear you sing, you will live!”

“Ah, true love worth dying for. We seriously got the shit end of the curse stick.”

Cora starts to laugh, and I join her. Soon we are both snorting and struggling to catch our breath, and with my cramping sides and my aching face, I don’t feel lonely. Not anymore.

“At least we can still get laid and have a great time,” Cora said, raising her glass of water. I mirror her, the plastic of our cups clicking together with a dull *thunk*.

“Cheers to that,” I agree.

Cora leans back in her seat, stretching her arms over her head. “Who are you swimming with?”

“No one.”

“What?”

I munch a fry, the salt and malt vinegar biting on my tongue. I do my best to explain the situation to her, not at all surprised when she echoes all of the concerns Javier has vocalized over the past few days.

Cora stares at me with a mixture of uncertainty and pity that doesn’t help my confidence. “And what’s your backup plan?”

I pick at the hangnail on the side of my thumb, wincing at the sharp bite of pain as the skin tugs. “Don’t have one.”

Diverting my attention to the fries in front of me, I pop another into my mouth. They’re starting to get cold, and there’s nothing worse than fries when they lose their crisp heat and become cold and floppy. Closing my eyes for a second, I think about the last time I had good *panucho*, one of my favorite Yucatec’an foods from childhood.

When I look back at Cora, she’s watching me, thoughtful. “What?”

“Nothing. You look good. Like yourself.”

My lips quirk up into a genuine smile. “I *am* myself.”

She grabs a fry and holds it between her teeth. “Did I see you got Coach Zamora? How did that happen?”

I wonder if my face gives anything away, if she can see the heat I feel on the back of my neck at the mention of him. “He showed up at my place out of nowhere and offered to coach me.”

“I mean, you’ve always been one of the best.”

I roll my eyes, even as the praise warms something inside me. “I don’t know,” I finally say. “He says it’s because I deserve a chance to compete as myself.”

“Seems like a good enough reason to me,” Cora offers.

We finish our meals, trading small talk. It’s nice, seeing her, talking with someone who knew me before and who doesn’t seem to have any trouble seeing me as I am now. This feeling, though, the ease and kernel of hope in my chest starts to grow, making me wonder what my life would be like if my mother had accepted me. If my family, my clan, had met me with this same sort of easy, effortless acceptance.

I hate hoping. It makes the inevitable disappointment hurt that much more.

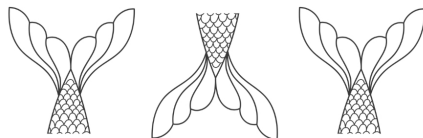
“Good luck out there,” Cora says after pulling me into a tight hug. “I can’t wait to see you dance. You’re going to be incredible, Aleks.”

“Thanks,” I say, a little caught off guard by how tight my throat feels. “I’ll make sure to see you perform, too.”

She leaves me with a wave, striding off into the crowds like she feels as at home here at the games as she does anywhere else in the world. The already vacant feeling in my chest expands, slightly, like her departure somehow widened the sense of emptiness I’ve been running from all morning. I rub a hand over my head, feeling the soft, short hairs under my palm, and will myself to get it together.

I can’t avoid the water any longer.

It’s time to get my shit together and train.



I work on the same jump for ten straight minutes, but everything about me is off—my timing, my alignment, the angle of my head. This is the same

routine I've practiced thousands of times over the past two years, that I have memorized to the point where I can do the movements in my sleep, and now, when I know I need to be at my best, I'm failing.

I'm falling apart, and it's Javier's fault.

My hoodie clings to my still-damp skin as I jog up the path to the cabin. I want a cigarette, a nap, and then *maybe* when I wake up I can start over again, give this day another try.

The cabin is empty. I light a cigarette on the front porch, sucking down smoke like maybe the burn in my lungs will fix the incessant emptiness in my chest. When the first one doesn't work, I smoke another one.

I feel like shit.

I take a shower, but the water on my skin makes me horny, which makes me think about growly Daddies with soft bellies and whispered Spanish falling from their lips. I turn the water as cold as it will go, and only when my fingers are purple and I can't stop shivering do I get out.

Laying on the floor doesn't help. There's nothing but dust and cobwebs on the beams above my head. Pacing is equally worthless.

I do crunches, but that achieves nothing but a burning in my core muscles.

Nothing helps. Nothing is fucking helping.

When the door opens, everything snaps.

"Where were you?" My hand grabs onto the first thing I see—a worn, white t-shirt, the fabric so thin it'll rip if I tug on it. I'm shouting, loud enough to feel each word, sharp in my own ears. "You fucking left. Where have you been? You said you wouldn't leave, and after," I make a choking noise, and realize I'm sobbing, and I can't stop, but I'm not fucking finished telling this man what I think about him. "After what we did? You're not there, and what am I supposed to do with that? You took something of me when you walked away, and now there's this hole, this fucking hole in my chest and it hurts, Javier, it really fucking hurts."

I'm not in my body, not anymore. My fists beat his chest and when I try to breathe, I get a noseful of his sharp sweat. An anguished sound rips from me and I can't get enough air to think straight. Things are moving so quickly around me and all I want is to stop, stop, stop, *please, Daddy, make it stop.*

"Aleks."

There are hands on my shoulder, but I try to twist away. “No! Get off of me!” *Please, fucking please, Daddy, make it stop.*

“Aleks.” His voice is louder, more commanding.

Forcing my eyes to focus, his face becomes clear before me. There’s concern there, his mouth drawn into a thin line made by those two soft lips pressing hard together. His eyes—so deep, so dark and steady—watch me carefully. His hair is wild around his head, dishevelled, and I wonder if it was my hands that tugged it loose from his ponytail.

I can’t do this.

“I don’t know what to do.” The words are weak, small, and I hate myself. I hate that I’m not stronger, that sometimes I struggle to let it fucking go and *not* carry the weight of it all on my shoulders.

Another surge of anger gives me the energy I need to keep going. “If you’re going to go, then go. I’m scared if I let myself want more with you, and if I...if we actually make something together, and then you leave? I’ll be broken. Completely broken. I know better than to set myself up for that kind of hurt.” My voice is hoarse, but there’s still more. My hands meet his chest, and *fuck*, it’s soft, and I can feel the thick hair through the thin cotton of his shirt. I shove him, but he doesn’t move. A pained sound falls from me. “If you’re messing with me, then put me out of my fucking misery.”

My vision blurs—I’m crying, again—when I feel pressure around my throat.

Chapter 8

Right the First Time

Javier

HIS THROAT FITS UNDER my palm perfectly. Skin taut and so, so smooth. I squeeze, just a bit, to remind him I am here.

His mouth works, trying to form words between his ragged breaths. I imagine him gasping for air, but that would never happen. Not in the water, where he is as much at home as any fish. His pale green eyes are wide, panicked, like he does not know what exactly he is afraid of.

“Go, Javier...” he starts, and I cut him off, pressing my mouth to his.

Mi sireno.

His mouth is mine the moment I taste him. I do not waste time with gentle pillowing of lips or sweetness. Not when he is like this, so far outside of himself, so wrapped up in his fears. I slip my tongue in, curling around his, and *Dios*, this boy is going to ruin me.

This is what they talk about in stories. Knee-buckling, overwhelming rightness that leaves you changed. Transformed.

I turn my head so I can get deeper. I need to learn every bit of Aleks, this sad, bratty boy who will not shut up.

He is quiet now, but for the breathy sighs he makes every time I flick my tongue against his. His long, hard body crowds mine, his lean frame meeting the softness of my stomach and chest.

I am fucking hard, keyed up for him, and when I feel the soft give of his package against my thigh I let out a groan, wrenching my mouth away.

He stares up at me, pupils blown and mouth already red from my beard. *Perfecto. Mi sireno.*

“Are you sure you know what you are asking for?” I need to know, because once my mind catches up with the rest of me, I will not be able to stop.

Aleks’ eyes harden. “Don’t pull that bullshit with me now.”

“Language, boy.”

He scoffs, but when a quick glance up at me shows how serious I am, he shifts. I loosen my hand around his throat, thumb stroking over the place where his pulse flutters. I watch his cheeks flush, and feel him swallow.

I lean down, licking up the side of his neck. I cannot help myself, and the bite of salt on my tongue has my cock filling, pushing against the confines of my shorts.

“Javier,” Aleks whispers above me. I draw back so I can look him in the eye. He holds my gaze, letting out a soft, shaky inhale. “Please?”

Everything in me softens. “Okay,” I tell him, tenderly. Letting go of my hold on him, I step back. Without looking away from him, I sit on the couch. It takes me a moment to shift my weight to get comfortable, but when I am settled with my thighs splayed wide, I beckon him closer. “I want to see you.”

Uncertainty crosses his face.

“I want to see your body. I want to know you. To *meet* you.”

I can tell he is still not convinced. “Sireno. Look at me.” When his eyes lift to mine, I give him an encouraging nod. “Do I seem indifferent to your presence?” I watch his eyes drop to my hand as I press against my hard cock. Even through the denim, there is no hiding my erection. When his eyes widen, I smile. “Now, take off your shirt.”

Aleks rushes to comply. There is nothing graceful about the way his arms get tangled or his head twists in his shirt. Finally, he frees himself, and tosses his shirt aside.

He is stunning. My palm presses to my mouth, failing to contain the low sound I make. Dragging my hand down, I clear my throat. “Now your jeans.”

He does better with his pants. And then he is standing there in nothing but a pair of pale blue briefs with an obvious bulge. I feel my own cock throb.

Aleks looks right at me, a little bit defiant, but under it, there is still so much fear. He is ready to bolt, I can tell.

“You are stunning, boy.” I am pleased to see a blush spread over his cheeks, the flushed color trailing down his neck and onto his chest. “Now tell me about your body.”

“Um,” he starts, a hint of panic creeping into his dazed eyes. “I don’t know what—”

“Do not be coy with me.” I lean forward, bracing my arms on my thighs. “There are things you should want me to get right the first time, yes? When you cum on my fingers first, and when I lick your release up before letting you taste yourself on my tongue, I want to know which words to use.”

Aleks shifts before me. “I wear a packer,” he starts. “I’m wearing it right now.”

“And it is fucking hot, boy.” I glance down at the bulge in his boxers, before looking back up at him. “Do you like to wear it when you are fucked?”

His cheeks are flushed. “Sometimes, like when I’m face down and can, you know, get off grinding on the bed.”

A sudden and sharp wave of arousal hits me and I grab myself, making a desperate, tortured sound. “Gods, Aleks.” I give in to my own needs for an indulgent moment, palming at my cock through my pants before focusing back on the man in front of me. “And what about when the packer comes off?”

Aleks’ tongue darts out to wet his upper lip. “I...” he trails off.

“You are not going to scare me,” I say, softly.

These are the vulnerable moments that truly matter in any sort of relationship. They matter even more because of who Aleks is, and because of the kinds of things I want the two of us to do together. Saying the wrong thing when it comes to his body is a sin I have no desire to commit.

“I have a t-dick,” he starts. “Or cock.”

“Beautiful.” I watch his eyes flutter shut as my words land, and I am struck by how perfect he is. Even knowing what we mean to each other, knowing things I am not sure I will ever tell him, he is everything I have ever searched for in a partner. “How do you like to be touched?”

His knees press together. “With the bottom growth I’m super sensitive, but, yeah, I guess stroking or touching or sucking are all good.”

Pushing up to standing, I cross the room to him. I reach out, pressing my palm against his cock, and relish his sharp intake of breath. “Good boy,” I praise, pushing against him with steady pressure until he rocks his hips forward. I find a slow, circling rhythm, watching his cheeks flush and eyes turn even more vibrantly green as he grows more desperate. “Now.” I grind the heel of my hand against his cock. “Penetration. Do you like to be penetrated?”

His response is breathless, needy, and my cock twitches. “Um, yeah.”

“Good. Where?”

“My ass...*fuckkkk*.”

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“Language, boy.” The admonishment falls from my lips, and I silently berate myself. It is too easy to jump ahead with him. I watch him carefully, gauging his response, and any doubts he is ready for this—for us, for *me*—slip away as his pupils blow wide.

I breathe through my nose, trying to gather my thoughts. It is my job to keep this conversation on the rails, and at the rate Aleks’ hips are bucking against my hand, it is clear he is past the point of caring about what we are saying.

“Any questions for me?” I ask.

He blinks down at me, and I wrap my hand around his packer and squeeze. “Any—*oh*,” cuts off with a gasp, eyes growing desperate. “Um, limits or anything? For you?”

I kiss him hard, before drawing back. “Fuck,” the word comes out low, right from my chest. “You are already so good for me, Aleks. For now, this is all you need to know: no teeth on my cock, no pulling my hair, and never, ever, call me *baby*.”

A smile tugs at his lips, and a flash of amusement cuts through the desire. “Do not get any ideas now, boy,” I murmur, resuming the circling pressure on his cock.

“So what should I call you?”

“I think you know,” I lean in and press a kiss to the base of his slender throat. “You will say it when you are ready.” I carefully guide him toward the couch. “Now. Lay back and let me take care of you.”

My knees click as I kneel to pull Aleks’ briefs down his long, tan legs. His skin is soft against my fingertips, but I barely notice, eyes fixed on this man’s stunning, *brehtaking* body.

Dark hair curls around his groin, trailing down his thighs and up toward his stomach. His cock sits, hard and flushed, and I groan, mouth already watering at the idea of tasting him.

Something bumps me in the side of the head. It is the single throw pillow provided with the couch, the same one I have been sleeping on. When I look up at Aleks, he is smirking down at me. “For your knees,” he says, eyes flashing with amusement.

“You are such a brat,” I huff, shaking my head as I trail my hands up his thighs and push him down on the couch. I put the pillow under my knees, and, as much as I want to ignore Aleks’ behavior, the smile that spreads over his face is too breathtaking to ignore. It might be the first real smile I have seen in all my years of knowing him.

I tease his cock with my thumb as I look up at him, clocking the way his breath catches and his eyes flutter closed at the soft touch.

“So,” I begin, as I trail my thumb up the underside of his cock. “Here is how this is going to work. We have five days until your first swim. We are going to work together, as a team, to make sure you are proud of your performance. There is plenty of time.”

Before he can respond, I dip down and take his cock into my mouth. I suck gently, swirling my tongue around him and tasting the sharp, heady flavor of his arousal. He writhes beneath me, and I hold him in place as I work my mouth up and down his t-dick, marveling at how *hard* and *hot* he is.

He is trembling when I pull away, my lips and beard wet from him. He looks completely wrecked above me, slumped back on the couch with his thighs splayed wide. Sweat curls the dark hair against his legs like shadows on the surface of water.

“When things get too loud in your head, you come to me. When you need to be held, you come to me. When your cock needs attention, you come to

me. When you need your ass filled, you come to me.” I kiss his tip. “Do you understand?”

I bring him to the edge again before moving my mouth to his thigh and planting wet, open-mouthed kisses against his sweaty skin.

“What about you?” Aleks pants, struggling to catch his breath. “What do you need?”

“Your trust. Knowing you will come to me with your needs, and I am the man who has the honor of holding you, touching you, hearing your fears. *That* is what I need.” His cock is swollen, twitching, and I lick languidly around the base. “It is my job to earn it all. To earn *you*.”

Aleks jerks below me. “F—please. *Please*. I can’t hold it anymore.”

“You have been so good, boy. So strong. So good,” I murmur the words against his cock. “Now come for Daddy.”

I suck hard, wrapping my mouth around all of him. I feel his cry in my chest, and try to keep steady pressure as he strains against me, like he is not sure whether or not to run from what is coming.

When he comes it is a violent shudder, a vulnerable quake that starts in his core and rips through his whole body. His thighs squeeze around my head, and *fuck*, nothing has ever felt this good. Slowing my mouth until I am only gently licking with my tongue, tasting every bit of him, my hands rub soothing lines up and down his thighs.

Eventually Aleks pushes me away with a low groan, and I climb up to sit beside him. Pulling his pliant body to me, I kiss him deeply, making sure he can taste himself on my tongue. When he sucks on my lower lip, I feel it in my cock.

I pull away, slumping back into the couch. A whimper falls from Aleks’ mouth, lips moving like he was not done with me yet. I remember the way he works a cigarette between his lips, and, without second guessing, I reach down and slip my thumb into the side of his mouth.

For a moment Aleks stares at me, mouth slack. I hold his gaze and nod.

The first suck is tentative. Uncertain. But then his eyes close, his shoulders drop, and he quickly finds a rhythm sucking on my thumb. I smile. “Beautiful boy,” I whisper.

His eyes flutter open. “Will you sleep with me?” The words are muffled around my thumb.

“Are you sure?”

He nods.

I kiss the tip of his nose. “I want nothing more.”

We brush our teeth side by side. Aleks uses cinnamon toothpaste, and the smell of it fills the bathroom. He teases me for using loose floss. I warn him when I take a piss, giving him the opportunity to leave the room. He does not, watching me, instead, with those sharp, curious eyes.

I start to put on a t-shirt with my boxers to sleep in, but Aleks stops me. “No shirt,” he says softly, like it is a question.

I indulge him.

Up in the loft, I crawl to the right side of the bed, adjusting the pillow before laying back and watching Aleks. He is naked, and his skin almost glows in the silver moonlight slicing through the window.

Aleks sleeps curled up in a ball on his side, long limbs wrapped around himself. His back is pressed to my side, and I exhale, exhaustion and relief rendering me spent.

I press a slow kiss to the back of Aleks’ shaved head. He smells like sweat on skin after a day at the beach, the hint of salt there behind the warmth of sun-baked skin.

My breaths, rather than slowing, pick up slightly in pace.

Mine. Mi sireno. Mine.

Chapter 9

Reassuring and Romantic Things

Aleks

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

Javier walks ahead of me down the path between the stadium that houses the track and field events and the tennis courts. He’s in a pair of practical khaki shorts, a button-up linen shirt with a bright floral pattern, and a pair of sandals, reminding me of a Lowlander dad on vacation who is supervising his kids playing in the river.

He’s hot as fuck, and I still can’t believe he gave me a blowjob last night. And then falling asleep with his steady, soft body behind me—I don’t think I’ve ever slept so well.

This morning, I woke up to the familiar smell of *chorizo*, and the spicy pork, potato and egg tacos Javier made for breakfast were infinitely better than the food from the dining hall.

“Shouldn’t we be training?” I ask.

Javier turns back to look at me. A piece of his salt and pepper hair has escaped his low ponytail, and is fluttering against his face in the breeze.

“Patience, boy.”

I sigh, annoyed, but also relieved I don’t have to worry. Not yet.

When we reach the huge, open-air practice pool, Javier leads us up into the stands. Once we sit, I turn my attention to the water.

Merpeople are practicing. There are two of them working on a duet, moving through a routine with the kind of precision you'd expect this close to a competition.

For a moment, I'm fucking jealous. It's easy to see their strength from afar, the power imbued into every movement. And when they jump, perfectly executing a synchronized, mid-air twist, I let out a heavy breath.

I don't have a fucking chance against athletes like this.

"Watch them."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Oh, I am."

Javier looks at me sharply. "What is that supposed to mean?"

I wave my hand in the direction of the two men moving through the water with their tails lifted at an exact, ninety-degree angle above the surface. "Look at them, Javier! I can't do that."

His expression softens. "Yes, you can. You were raised to dance in a very particular way. You were taught to dance in the water like a flower petal slowly sinking to the bottom, twirling, a thing of delicate beauty. Sirens are taught to slip through the water like you have no substance."

I remember how my mother had praised the girls with slender bodies, how lean muscle had always been the goal, but never at the expense of the visual appeal.

"But you have substance," Javier says, placing a hand on my bare thigh where my athletic shorts have slid up my leg. "You are strong, Aleks. Dance like it."

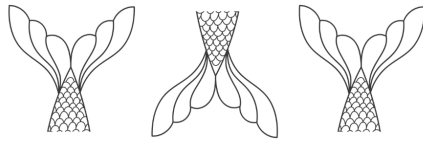
Reluctantly, I listen to Javier as he points out the way merpeople swim, the way they wield the strength in their tails to get more lift on their jumps, or how they create beautiful wave patterns on the surface of the pool using their bodies to move the water.

I learned to dance in a way that avoided making waves. Like divers, we tried to slip below the surface without a splash. Our tails sliced, fingers trailed delicate lines, bodies sliding through the water on the path of least resistance.

Watching the merpeople dance is something else entirely. They make no effort to hide from the rush and push of water around their bodies. They slap their tails down in perfect unison with the music.

It's liberating, imagining moving my body with the strength I've worked so hard to gain, to not feel like I need to restrain myself in the water.

I'm itching to practice.



“This time, when you are sculling, rotate your head to the side so we get the silhouette of your ear,” Javier calls out from the side of the pool.

I nod, reaching back to tighten the strap of my voice filter. It’s hard to breathe above the surface with it on, but I’ve noticed my breathing slows more easily now, as if having Javier around has eased some of the anxiety I’m accustomed to having as a constant presence in my chest.

This practice has been better. Maybe Javier has reached new heights in his coaching abilities, or I’m so fucking turned on by the way his soft, hairy belly peeks out below his shirt when he squats down on the edge of the pool that I couldn’t possibly imagine doing anything other than my best for him.

But I know it is more than that.

My body holds the memory of every practice I’ve ever had in a pool and every suggestion made by my mother and our other coaches. Some of those early adjustments had even been made by Javier himself. Me and my cousins and sisters were perfect copies of each other, breathing together in and out of the water.

When I was a kid, my Aunt Sofía used to tell us stories at night while we braided each other’s hair. “A siren’s first love is her family. Her sisters. One of the reasons we dance so beautifully together is because our hearts and bodies share a bond. They call what we do *synchronized*, and we are. Your heart will match the beat of your family. Your lungs will breathe with your sisters.”

For most of my childhood, that had been true. I felt it when we swam together, when we sat shoulder to shoulder on the wooden benches in the dining room eating *sopa*, and especially at night when we lay in our beds. It felt like the pull of the tide, my heartbeat and lungs slowing by some external wave carrying me along.

And then, one day, it stopped. One day, instead of feeling like a part of a whole, I felt like a severed limb with no knowledge of the body it used to belong to.

Maybe it was the growing sense of dysphoria I was feeling each time I felt the weight of my chest or put on the delicate, floral clothing my mother

picked out for me. Maybe it was the crushing feeling of abandonment when Javier left the colony and never returned.

I'd never felt so alone.

"Show me." Javier's voice reaches me through my tangled thoughts. His voice is more resonant—musical, almost, in my ears when I'm transformed.

I slide onto my back on the surface, my hands working tight figure-eights down by my sides, gently propelling me backwards. I tilt my head.

"There. That is it."

I smile, feeling like I'm on top of the fucking world.

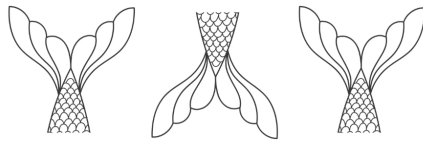
"Now, finish the transition into the vertical sequence." His voice is a distant echo, but the words are still clear.

I count through the beats as I lift my left arm from the water, holding my webbed hand up like a sail: *five, six, seven, eight*. After the eight count, I tip back, flexing my core to lift my tail from the water as my upper body sinks, upside down in the water.

My hands move to scull above my head, the movement keeping my tail lifted above the surface. Being able to breathe underwater is an undeniable advantage many of the water beings in the Tail Division have in artistic swimming. Of course, humans and any of the other two-legged beings have the distinct advantage of moving both legs separately in their routines.

Javier's words play in my head, weaving between the bright notes of the violin: *You have substance. You are strong.*

And as I sweep my tail in a wide arch above me, every muscle in my body, every hard-earned hour in the water working together, I believe him.



"Would you mind if some friends join us for dinner?"

I almost trip over my feet on the sidewalk, glancing over at Javier, who is looking at me with an obnoxiously placid expression on his face.

After our practice at the pool had wrapped up, he'd gone off to run errands (whatever that meant), while I went back to the bungalow. I'd planned to nap, but instead I gamed with Damian for a bit.

Now I'm tired—I *really* should have napped—and I don't have the energy or brainpower to read between the lines. Why is Javier asking me? I

know he has friends here. Of course he does. He's been coaching away from my old colony for years now—shit, have I been holding him back from being with his friends?

"You should go eat with them, if you want." There's a cigarette butt in the mulch at the edge of the sidewalk, and I itch for a smoke. I settle for biting at a stubborn hangnail on my thumb. "You don't have to ask if you want to see your friends," I add.

I hear Javier sigh. "I would like for them to join *us*, sireno." He stops, and I unconsciously slow beside him, my body is aware of his every move. "Tell me what you are thinking."

A sharp hiss slips from my lips as the skin peels from my thumb—*too much, too far*. I drop my hand down to my side. Javier is watching me. I can tell by the way my skin pricks and whatever other sixth sense a guy develops when the man they're fucking around with stares at them.

What am I thinking?

"I don't," I start, and then try again. "This is new. Whatever we're doing. I don't totally understand it, or you, or if you have any boundaries about, you know, being seen with me. Or if you even want to hang out with me. I know you're coaching me, and I think you want me, you know, *physically*, and maybe our, uh, kinky needs line up."

I glance over at him then, only to find him already staring right at me. There's a hint of concern in his eyes, but mostly there's a big, sappy smile making his already handsome face even more stunning.

"I'm trying not to assume you want me tagging along with you all the time." I rush to get through this part, because even though these thoughts and worries are a constant in my head, there's something nauseating about saying them out loud. No one wants to be with someone plagued with insecurities. "I don't want to be holding you back from your life and the people you want to hang out with, and I don't want you to feel like you have to drag me along if you need time alone with your friends."

"Aleks." Javier's sandals scuff on the path as he moves to stand in front of me. There's dark hair on his toes and on the tops of his feet, and I wonder what they look like covered in wet sand after a day on the beach. I wonder if Javier ever wears a Speedo—he'd look fucking hot with his big belly and chest out in the sun and a tiny slip of stretchy fabric covering his junk. Maybe he'd let me put sunscreen on his back. Maybe he'd rub sunscreen on mine.

“Aleks. Are you listening to me?”

I look up, finding Javier watching me, obviously amused. “No?”

He smiles and shakes his head. “And here I was saying very reassuring and romantic things.”

“Sorry,” I say, embarrassed I’d missed whatever he’d said.

“The summary is: I find you enchanting, I want you to come to dinner with me, and trust me to tell you if I ever need space.”

“Oh,” I say, and it comes out a little breathless. “That’s...that’s good.”

“Yes, boy, I would say it is.” He reaches for my hand, threading our fingers together. “We should consider not putting our relationship on display in public places. People will talk, and until we hear about your solo, I do not want to risk jeopardising your ability to compete.”

“Yeah, for sure.” I try to hide my disappointment. Of course he’s right, although with every day that passes I think the committee is less likely to reject my solo performance. They wouldn’t, with the competition only days out.

For a second I’m tempted to say I don’t care, that getting to be with Javier out in the open is worth whatever bullshit the artistic swimming committee might have to say. The thought of pretending Javier isn’t my... someone important to me, makes me feel sick.

A firm hand grips my chin, angling my face down. Brown eyes look at me, an almost aggressive intensity to the way he watches me. “I see you making up stories,” he murmurs, voice low. “Give me a chance to say my piece before you decide we are not worth it.”

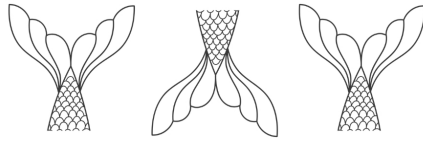
I open my mouth to tell him I *do* think we’re worth it, and that’s the whole fucking problem, but he’s not done.

“A part of the dynamic I want, the kind of relationship I *need*, is the absolute joy and privilege of seeing the person I care about accomplish the things they hope and dream of. Seeing them—seeing you—get the chance you have been fighting for? That brings me more pleasure than my own success. So, when I say I do not want to risk your chance to compete, it is because I care about you, more deeply than you can imagine.” His thumb drags over my cheek, and his eyes follow the movement. “This will only work if you trust my feelings for you, Aleks. Just as I have to trust your feelings for me.”

I swallow, and nod. He makes it all sound easy, like trust is something simple that can be turned on and off. I want it to be that easy.

His lips brush my cheek and he steps back. “Now, I am starving, and we need to get you fed. Come.”

I fall into step beside him, slowing my stride so my long legs don’t leave him behind.



Our dinner companions turn out to be three intimidatingly hot merpeople.

Javier introduces me by name to the group: Zephyr, a massive, built athlete with a chest to rival the minotaurs I’ve seen wandering around the campus, Cadmus, his equally large brother, and Amara, Cadmus’ wife, who has the largest biceps I have ever seen.

The table sits abutting one of the many pools for the aquatic beings on the edge of the dining complex. Javier and I sit on one side with our thighs pressed together under the table. Across from us, the three merpeople eat more sushi than I can imagine putting away in one sitting.

Javier is comfortable with them, easy jokes and banter tossed back and forth throughout the meal. They are from the Mazarine Coast, a place I’ve only heard stories about. From their descriptions, the black sand and freezing waves couldn’t be more different from the tropical waters I’ve always known. There are inside jokes about their time together, memories from past competitions and from having intertwined lives for many years.

I get it—he was their coach, and as adults, the barriers of friendship between coaches and athletes tend to blur. Doesn’t mean I don’t feel like a loser kid who doesn’t know what is going on.

“So, Aleks,” Amara asks, pointing a tempura-fried carrot at me. “What’s your story?”

I shrug. “I’m a trans guy who lives in the Central Lowlands. I like to swim, sometimes I have fins, my song is deadly, and apparently I don’t know when to shut my mouth.”

The merpeople laugh, and I grin, pleased at their response. Javier shifts in his seat beside me.

“I’ve always wondered,” Cadmus asks. “About the song. Sirens always look badass wearing the—” he cuts himself off, gesturing his hands around his face and looking at me with a question in his eyes.

“Vocal filter,” I offer.

“Right, the vocal filter,” Cadmus continues. “See, I always heard the reason sirens wore them was to protect the audience members from being lured into the water and, you know, drowning.”

“Oh, that’s a thing.” It’s true. Our song calls to the listener. I’ve been raised on the stories and songs of my ancestors, cursed to lure sailors to their deaths along the rocky coasts of the Aegean Sea. “But what no one talks about is the fact that if a siren’s song is heard, we die.”

The silence around me is almost harsh. Brittle.

“But that makes no sense,” Amara says, disbelief in her voice. “You have to sing when you dance, right?” Her eyes go to Javier. “You always told us the sirens can’t swim without being compelled to sing.”

I look at Javier’s face then. He nods in response to Amara’s question, but there’s something off about his expression. There’s a tightness around his eyes and mouth I’m not used to seeing. I want to ask him about it, to put a hand on his chest and invite *him* to lean on me, to let me care for him the way he cares for me.

But before I can do any of those things, Javier speaks. “It is true. The sirens are cursed in many ways. Cursed to sing the moment they start to dance in the water, and cursed to die if their song is heard.”

“It’s a great time,” I offer, hoping some humor will diffuse the tension hanging in the air. “Being a siren. Ten out of ten, would recommend.”

“There is an exception.”

Surprised, I look over at Zephyr, who is watching me with a weird expression of sympathy. He must see the confusion on my face, because he adds, “I like old stories. There are legends about sirens whose lives were spared if the person who hears them is their fated mate.”

I think back to my conversation with Cora over lunch, and the dismal fucking fate of our species.

“How would that work?” Amara asks, incredulous. She looks over at me. “Are there any sirens who are willing to risk dying in the hopes of finding a mate?”

“Fuck no,” I laugh. “It’s just a story. My siren grandmother always told us her mother had been mated to a human man, but none of us believed it. We sirens love ourselves too much to risk our life for something as saccharine as a fairytale.”

“That’s horrible,” Cadmus says softly, moving closer to his wife. “Our matings are beautiful things to be celebrated. To find a mate is to feel a sense of totality and wholeness I could never imagine living without.”

When my gaze slides to Javier, I feel like the breath is punched from my lungs. He stares unseeing into the air in front of him, and his eyes are full of sadness, the kind of desperation you’d expect to see in the wake of a loss.

Who died? I want to ask him, but I settle for placing my hand on his warm thigh below the table. He sends me what he probably believes is a reassuring smile. I squeeze his leg, hoping with every place where our skin touches he can feel my words: *I’m here, let me carry it with you.*

“It’s not so bad,” I say to the table, not taking my hand from Javier’s thigh. “Like you said, we get to wear cool leather headgear, *and* we get to walk on land.”

The merpeople respond to my teasing exactly as I’d hoped, protesting that they’d take their beautifully adorned, partially submerged, living coral homes to a dryland residence any day.

I still prefer being able to move through the human world with ease, but they did make a solid point about the benefits of fucking in the water.

The look Javier gave me when I mentioned finding a merman so I could get some firsthand experience made my toes curl in my shoes. Gods, the man was hot, and the possessive way he looked at me had me squirming in my seat.

When the conversation shifts to memories from the years Javier spent coaching the merpeople, I sit back and relish the opportunity to learn more about the man beside me. There’s a distinct difference between having someone in your life when you are young, and truly knowing them as an adult. The more I listen to the merpeople swapping stories, the more the truth settles into me: I don’t know Javier at all.

A part of me hates them for it. They got to have Javier as a coach after he left us. I wonder if they still hear his encouraging words in their heads when they swim. But even below the bitterness, there’s a sadness that accompanies a painful realization: for all the admiration I had for him as my coach, and the weight I put on each of his words, he was still a stranger.

I was deeply familiar with his crouching silhouette on the side of the pool, and the way his voice sounded through the echo of the water. I was around him, in the same places as him, and yet our lives and worlds could not have been more distinct.

Now, the same man sits beside me, head tilted back in laughter. The tension and sadness has faded, leaving nothing but open warmth on his face.

Now, he's not a stranger. Not anymore.

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Chapter 10

Is This Your First Shower?

Aleks

THE LAST OF DAYLIGHT is fading behind the trees when we get back to the bungalow.

Javier is quiet and steady behind me as he guides me inside with a hand on my back before pulling the door shut behind him.

I walk into the kitchen and stand there, gnawing on my lower lip. It's the first time in the last few days I've wished I was alone in this space. Not because I want to be alone, but because there are things about my life I hate having to explain.

I need to do my shot, and I don't know how to bring it up.

Javier's broad body fills my vision, and a finger under my chin tilts my head up. I meet his concerned gaze uncertainly. He frowns. "Talk to me."

Forcing a shaky breath, I whisper, "I need to do my shot."

"Shot?"

"Testosterone," I clarify.

"Okay," he responds, encouraging. "May I be with you?"

I'm not expecting that. "Um, sure."

Javier nods. "Go get your things."

I do as he asks, moving on autopilot to my bags where I keep my medical kit. When I get back to the kitchen, Javier has cleared off a section of the

counter. I approach, a sliver of uncertainty still stuck in the back of my head. Javier moves aside and gestures to the open space. "Will this work?"

I hadn't considered Javier might be as nervous as I am about getting things right. Now, looking at him, I see the glimmer of hope in his eyes. "It's perfect," I say, and then add, "At home, I do it on the kitchen counter so Damian can be with me. I don't like needles, but it's better if I'm not alone."

He watches carefully as I disinfect the counter and then set down my kit. It's a straightforward enough process: strip down to boxers, clean my hands, and grab my individually packaged syringe, vial of medication, and alcohol wipes. After six years of taking T, I've got it down.

I'm used to having Damian as an audience, but everything feels different with Javier watching. His eyes follow my movements as I prep the correct dose and clean the middle of my quad, trying to relax the muscle as much as possible. Even as the needle pierces my skin, I feel him right there with me, his steady presence a reminder I'm not alone.

Quickly, I deposit the needle into my portable sharps container. Once that's dealt with, I let out a ragged breath and press an alcohol swab against the injection site. Javier moves closer, hands hovering above my thigh. "May I," he asks, looking from his hands to my face.

As soon as I nod, he's replaced his hand with mine, holding steady pressure against my skin. After a minute, he pulls it back, checking to make sure there's no bleeding, before starting to gently massage my quad. It's barely sore, more like a bruising ache, and the careful touch feels like what I never knew I needed in the tender moments following this ritual.

"You are incredible," he says, voice quiet, and reverent.

I shrug, feeling oddly vulnerable. "It's only a needle. It's not that big of a deal."

"I am not talking about the needle, Aleks. I am talking about everything you have done and who you have become. You are brave," he pauses, leaning close and pressing a kiss to my forehead. His beard tickles my nose. "You are the strongest man I know."

It's funny, the way those words land on my skin like water, trailing over me until I'm submerged in the kind of affirmation I've always wanted. It feels so good, so *fucking* good, I can't help but ask: "Say it again. Please, say it again."

“Good boy,” he whispers as his hand trails down, knuckles dragging over my cock. “Such a strong, brave boy.”

“Javier,” I beg, voice cracking.

He kisses me, stealing my breath and what little bit of coherence I had remaining. I sink into him, meeting his mouth and tongue and touch with equal enthusiasm. His hand rubs my cock firmly, the friction sending hot, overwhelming throbs through me.

I tear my mouth from his, trailing kisses over his coarse beard and licks down his neck. His skin tastes like salty sweat, and I latch on, sucking hard enough to bruise. I don’t care, loving the idea that I might mark him, and he’ll move through the village and everyone will know he’s mine.

He fondles my cock, each movement of his hand intent on pleasure. I squirm under his attention, needing *more fucking more please*.

I hike a leg up around his waist, opening my body to him as much as I can while holding myself upright. The low, pleased groan he makes as his free hand shifts to grip my ass has me canting my hips forward, meeting each of his touches with as much force as I can.

When Javier’s hand stops, I cry out, empty and aching in the absence of him. “What the fuck,” I whine.

“Watch your language, boy.” I get a hard slap to my cock, sending a sharp and hot throb through my body. “Shower,” Javier commands, pressing a hard kiss to my lips.

My legs are trembling as I follow him over to the small bathroom. He gets the shower on before turning back to me and, without any further conversation, removes the rest of my clothes. When I step out of my briefs, he reaches down, and with a gentleness that makes my chest tight with emotion, he lifts my packer up in his hand.

I picked the packer I did for a number of reasons. Good reviews, durable material, and realistic feel and appearance. It’s flaccid, not overly large, and uncut around the swell of the head.

Javier brushes his thumb over the shaft, and looks up at me. “I love your cock,” he says, voice reverent. “Both of them.” He nods at my crotch where my own t-dick protrudes, hard and flushed. Setting the packer next to the sink, he removes his own clothing.

I watch him hungrily as he unbuttons his shirt, revealing the thick, dark hair covering his chest and belly. His nipples are pink buds on his full, soft chest, and I make a note to suck on them later. Tugging his shorts and

boxers down his strong, equally hairy legs reveals his thick cock, already getting hard where it sits above his low hanging, heavy balls.

The man is a wet dream, every inch of him. Steam billows around us, and I wonder if I can convince him to fuck me bent over the countertop where I can watch him in the fogged mirror.

His mouth tips into a grin as he notices me staring. "In," he says.

I pout and give my cock a teasing tug.

"Boy," he warns, shaking his head. "Get in."

Of course I fucking listen. The hot water burns my skin in the best way, and I sigh, spinning around to get every bit of me wet. Javier gets in behind me, and I shudder at the press of his belly against my back. He shifts me with his hands on my waist until both of our bodies are under the spray.

I blink at him. He's a little bit shorter than me, his chin probably level with the base of my throat, but everything about him looms large. He took his hair down at some point, and the thick hair trails over his shoulders, turning from dark brown to black as it gets wet.

"Hi," I say, suddenly unsure of what to do next.

He smiles up at me. "Hello to you, too."

A nervous laugh slips from me. I press my lips together, before asking, sheepishly, "So what do we do now?"

His responding laugh is loud, his chest and belly shaking with each breath. "Is this your first shower?"

"You know what I mean," I protest, even as a smile stretches my mouth wide. There's a tingling on the surface of my skin, a pleasant, almost itch. "Oh, and just so you know, I might—"

"Beautiful," Javier murmurs, trailing a hand over the iridescent green scales appearing in patches on my skin. His touch feels electric, sending shocks of pleasure through me. "I forgot about the partial transformations."

My hearing shifts, the sound of the shower taking on a ringing tone, and I reach up to touch the elongated ear. "An occupational hazard," I joke. "But this is where it stops in the shower. Only my ears and skin."

Javier makes a low humming noise as his hands continue to explore my body. Between the pinpricks of water on my skin and his firm touch, my whole body buzzes with wanting, but also with a terrifying sense of security.

I'm here, in this moment, with him. Every touch reminds me Javier is here. He has me, safe in his grasp.

“Aleks,” he asks, his whisper barely audible over the water. “Will you wash me?”

“Of course.” It’s not what I’m expecting him to ask, but something about the idea of being the one to clean him settles me, finally setting my mind at ease.

He’s got a travel sized bottle of shampoo in the shower, and I grab it before maneuvering myself behind him. His hair is already soaked, so I dive right into washing it.

I’ve never done this before. I carefully massage the soap into the thick strands, working my way methodically around his head. I lose myself in the task, everything in my head going quiet except for the feel of his hair slipping through my fingers and the knowledge I’m taking care of this man who means so much to me.

When I’m done, I tilt his head back under the spray, combing my fingers through until nothing is left but clean, dark hair punctuated by the white and gray hairs at his temples.

It takes me a minute to figure out a position that works, but I find a way to start soaping up his body. He uses a bar of soap—something homemade, by the yellowish-brown color and gritty texture of it. I do his back first, hands tracing large circles over his skin. I’m on my knees washing the backs of his legs when I hear him speak.

“I love this.”

I smile at the soft admission. “Being washed?”

“Receiving something like this from a lover.” I stand up, trailing my soapy hands over his ass a few times before turning him the other way so I can wash his front. He goes on. “Being washed is something I treasure.”

“Why?” I ask. “What about it?”

I start to work soap into Javier’s chest. He lets out a pleased hum and his eyes drift shut. “In some way, you are taking care of me. So much of what I love is to take care of the person I am with, and so these moments feel especially precious. Intimate. You are showing your devotion to me in every touch of your hands.”

My hands trail down over his curves, fingers tracing along the wet swirling paths of hair on the surface of his skin. I feel it—the devotion, the intimacy of what we are doing here. It’s heady, acknowledging the depth of it all.

When I reach his thighs, the muscles flex under my palms. The low noise he makes in the back of his throat makes me smile. "It is also vulnerable for me," Javier adds. "I put my wellbeing in your hands."

I cup his cock in my hand, loosely circling my fingers around him. "I like it." Wanting to give him more, I try to figure out what it is about washing Javier I like. "All of what we've done, it feels like, I don't know, like I'm set free from myself?" I shake my head. "No, that's not...fuck, I don't know how to describe it."

The look Javier gives me is overwhelmingly fond. "Language, boy." A smile teases his mouth, and his cock begins to harden in my grip. "Now clean my cock."

I tighten my fingers around him and stroke him down to the mat of dark hair at the base of his cock. He stops me, shaking his head. "With your beautiful mouth, boy."

I don't hesitate, falling to my knees. The tile bites at my skin, but it feels good. Grounding. Focusing. It helps to cut through the haze of wanting to be touched enough to keep me from touching my own dick, which is jutting out, hard, between my legs.

Above me, Javier looks like a god. Hair hanging long and wet around his face, beard bejeweled with water droplets. He grabs his cock, giving it slow, indulgent strokes as he looks down at me.

I open my mouth and extend my tongue in a silent invitation. The sound he makes is pleased as he tugs his foreskin down, revealing the flushed head, slick and shiny with precum.

I need it. I need him in my mouth. I'm vaguely aware of making a whimpering sound, but I can't think straight with my cock throbbing and his *fucking fat dick* right in front of me.

"Be still," Javier commands.

Somehow I manage to remain frozen in place as he slaps his cock onto my tongue. When he starts rubbing the head in circles around my mouth, smearing his precum across my lips, I nearly lose it. "Please," I whine.

"Keep that mouth open and still if you want a treat, boy."

Well, fuck me. I squeeze my thighs together in a desperate attempt to get some sort of friction or pressure between my legs. I try to focus on keeping my mouth open, but the sight of Javier, serious and focused as he slides the smooth head of his cock up and down my outstretched tongue, is almost too much.

I'm shaking as warm water slips over my skin. I need, I need, I fucking need—

“Good boy,” Javier murmurs, thrusting his hips and sending his cock deeper into my open mouth. “Listening so well for me. I know how hard it is, how badly you want to put that sweet mouth to work. You are doing so, so good.” Drool joins the water trailing down my face. His words light me up, both calming and igniting something inside of me. I feel the gentle brush of fingers against my cheek. “Daddy is so proud of you.”

My eyes burn, and I let out a pained, wanting, desperate groan, hoping this man—my *Daddy*—can hear everything I can't say with his cock in my mouth.

I've wanted this. I never thought it would be you, but it is so much sweeter when I look up and it's your soft body and brown eyes above me. I need this—can't you see how tangled my head is? How desperate I am to trust someone with the tender parts of me? How badly I need a place to let go?

How fucking sweet it is that it's you, Javier.

Daddy.

“Oh, my sweet boy,” Javier croons. “You can suck now. Daddy's got you.”

Relief apparently tastes like a fat, leaking cock filling my mouth.

I lose myself in the blowjob, my mind going blissfully fuzzy and warm with my mouth occupied. There's nothing but the reassuring touch of hands cradling my face and the intoxicating taste of dick and musk and Daddy—*holy fuck I actually have a Daddy*—on my tongue. My lips ache at the stretch around him, but it's perfect, like everything else about the man standing above me.

“*Dios mio*, Aleks, I knew you would be good. Watching you smoke, the way you worked the cigarette with your mouth. You will not need them anymore. Now you have something better to do with your mouth, no?” He grunts when I pull off, burying my nose in his groin while I lap at his sac. “That is it, right there. You are a little slut for cock, boy. Hot for it. Desperate for it.”

I nod, staring up at him as my tongue works.

“Daddy has you,” he repeats, and this time it sounds like he's saying the words for himself, like he doesn't quite believe we're here either. “One more suck, boy, one more good, long suck.”

I comply, putting my mouth around him and swallowing as much of him as I can. I bob my head once, twice, and then—

“Fuck, yes,” Javier’s voice is a broken growl punctuated by a groan. He stiffens, his cock pulses. “I am coming, boy. Fuck, so good, so fucking good, take it...yeah, so good, swallowing Daddy’s cum. So perfect for me.”

I swallow, and swallow again, taking everything he gives me. I keep sucking, even as he softens and his hips stutter to a stop. It’s funny how the anxious buzz that typically fills my head is quiet with the taste of his cum on my tongue.

“Enough, boy.” Gently, he tries to push my head off of his cock. I ignore him, filling my mouth with him again until he, more forcefully this time, steps back from me. He lets out a low laugh. “Those puppy eyes will not work on me, sweetheart. Come on, up you get.”

My mouth is aching and empty without him, and I’m feeling dazed as he helps me to my feet. I stumble, my knees protesting after kneeling on the hard tile. But Daddy holds me steady, shifting so I’m directly under the spray.

He’s efficient as he washes me, but there’s still so much care in every gentle touch of his soapy hands. He avoids my cock, but gives special attention to my crack and hole. I push back into him as he presses a soapy finger against my ass, but he keeps the touch too light and teasing.

“What the fuck, Daddy?” I protest as his hands return to my hips.

His eyebrows arch. “Want to try again?”

On another night, maybe I’d push. A pulse of pleasure tightens my core when I imagine Daddy all growly and serious. Maybe there would be spankings. Maybe he’d let me come all over his thigh while he delivered hard slaps to my bare ass.

But I don’t want that tonight. Tonight I want to hold onto the tenderness, the quiet care I haven’t always known how to ask for. I want to let go, and let Daddy take care of me.

“I’m horny,” I whisper, biting my lip. “My cock aches, Daddy. Make it better, please?”

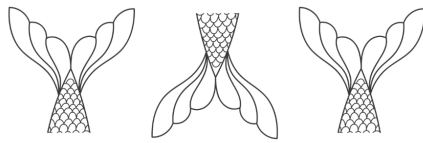
“Good boy, using your words.” He leans forward and pressing a kiss to the tip of my nose. “I will make it better. I promise.”

He turns the water off. I follow him out of the shower, and he wastes no time wrapping me up in a towel. I feel a little bit silly with my arms stuck at

my sides.

I stand there quietly, my attention floating between bone-deep relaxation and the ever-present arousal like a heartbeat between my legs as he dries me from head to toe. Javier wears his nudity comfortably, and I let myself stare: at the dusky pink of his nipples, at his calves the size of softballs, and at the copious hair on his body starting to curl and fluff as it dries.

He tosses the towel up over the shower curtain rod. “Bed,” he says, pulling his damp hair back into a bun. “I have a promise to keep.”



I'm hot all over. The sheets are scratchy against my naked skin, sweat beading on my upper lip. I lick the sweat away before sucking my lower lip between my teeth.

Javier hovers above me, propped up on one arm while his other hand jacks me off. His fingers slide up and down my cock, slick with the lube he procured from his wallet.

It feels good, *too* good, but every time my body tightens on the edge of orgasm he eases off.

“Javi,” I groan when he stops again, fingers moving to trail through the sparse brown hairs I let grow around my crotch. Everything is hot, and I swear I can feel the air against my dick, like a cold breeze could easily trigger my orgasm.

Whiskers tickle my cheek as he kisses me. “You are doing so good,” he says against my skin. “Working so hard all day, you deserve to rest. To be taken care of.” One of his fingers brushes my cock and I buck up into the touch. A whine starts in the back of my throat, and I'm seconds away from taking things into my own hands. Edging is great and all, but I need, *I fucking need*—

Something slides into my mouth, and on instinct, I suck. It's Javier's thumb, the texture and taste of his skin familiar now. Familiar like the deep grooves in his forehead, like the ratio of dark brown to gray hairs in his beard.

Everything settles as my mouth finds a comfortable rhythm. It feels silly, and a part of me still isn't sure about him, or me, or any of this, but there's

nothing but adoration in his eyes when he looks down at me.

He's back to jacking me off, and it only takes a moment before I'm there again, hovering on the cusp. My warning is a whimper he somehow understands, because he chuckles as he diverts his touch to my crease. It's nothing more than fingers caressing my skin, and I'm grateful, so fucking grateful to him for the way he has approached me and my body. For the way he asked, right from the beginning, about how and where and what I wanted to be touched. The way he has been determined to get it right.

"This time," he says, his soft gaze fixed on me, "When you get close, you are going to come. You have been so patient, so good, and now Daddy is going to take care of it." He paused as he gave a hard tug on my dick. "Daddy is going to make the ache go away."

I nod around his thumb, and lose myself in him. In the way his touch winds me up, building to what feels like the kind of orgasm that might crack me completely open. It's the kind of good that scares me, the kind of pleasure that, if it really does build to be as good as it feels in the lead up, will leave me ruined.

Sounds fall from my occupied mouth, muffled, thready gasps and whimpers and cries. I'm not in control, not of anything anymore, and for some reason it doesn't scare me.

He shifts above me, even as his rhythm on my cock stays steady. His face fills my vision, leaning in close, and I'm filled with the stupid urge to grin and say *hello* even though he's already giving me the world's best handjob known to men.

The arches of my feet cramp as my thighs shake. "I'm close..." My words are muffled by his thumb.

He gives me an encouraging nod, eyes full of hunger. "Now come, sireno."

I come.

Nothing, *nothing*, has ever felt like this. I crack apart, sharp pleasure blooming out from my core in waves. Javier hovers above me and catches my cries in his open mouth, and he's here, he's with me and I'm his—fuck, how did I let myself fall so hard?

But there's no second guessing now, not when my body trembles, the echoes of orgasm shaking my thighs. I don't know when his thumb slips from my lips, only that he's kissing me now.

It's tender and slow, and so fucking sweet I want to cry.

He's got me. One hand cradles my cheek and the other holds my cock—not stroking, just firm, steady pressure even as I pulse and twitch in his grip. Drawing back, he looks down at me with a fond smile. “You need sleep, sireno,” he murmurs.

I nod. There's no reason to argue, even if I love the idea of lying here with him and talking, asking him every question I can think of about his tastes and fears and what kind of cereal he likes. But I'm exhausted.

Javier settles down on the bed beside me and tugs me close. My eyes are already slipping shut, but I manage a soft, “Daddy?”

His beard tickles the short hair on my head. “Hm?”

“What kind of cereal do you like?”

It's quiet for a moment. “The sweet one with the cinnamon.”

I smile, and, with my heart beating slow, steady in my chest, I fall asleep.

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Chapter 11

Not Yours

Javier

“*WHAT KIND OF CEREAL do you like?*”

Aleks’ words from two nights ago still echo in my head.

In front of me, the refrigerated case stocked with sports drinks and sodas blurs. The pre-made poke bowls in my hand are starting to sweat, little beads of condensation dripping onto my skin. There are people all around me, jostling my body as they move through the crowded dining hall, but I ignore them.

I am supposed to be grabbing lunch for Aleks and I, only I cannot stop thinking about his breathy little sounds and the way his whole body goes soft when his lips wrap around my thumb. I can still feel the way his dick pulsed in my grasp when I got him off in the shower this morning, so hot and needy and *Dios, I need to keep it together*.

I want to lose myself in being with Aleks, in training and supporting and giving him everything he needs to have the kind of life he has always dreamed of. I want to devote myself to being the only man in the world who can meet his needs.

But until I tell him the truth, every hope and promise tastes hollow. Shallow.

Two nights ago at dinner, with Zephyr staring at me across the table and talking about *exceptions* and Aleks laughing as he said *no one believes it*, I

almost opened my mouth. I almost told him, in front of my closest friends, that there was a reason to believe in the old stories.

The moment passed. I stayed quiet, and then I went home and lost myself in my boy, telling myself I was waiting for the right time. I wanted a few days to be with him without interrupting what was happening between us. He was choosing me freely. He was with me because he wanted me, not because of a fate out of our control.

All of those excuses feel silly now.

Today, after lunch, I will pull him onto my lap and tell him everything. He deserves to know.

He should be rested and ready when I get back to our bungalow. After a hard, early morning practice, I sent him to nap. He grumbled and stuck out his lower lip like he thought it would make a difference. I did not budge—the qualifying round begins in two days, and he needs to be ready.

I frown down at the drinks, trying to choose between brands of coconut water when I sense someone hovering beside me.

Straightening slowly, I turn to find my previous employer watching me.

“Coach Zamora.” Her voice is meticulously controlled, using just enough volume to be heard over the crowd without inviting the whole room into the conversation.

I take in Alina Parthenope. She is tall, slender, with bony ankles and wrists, wearing a coordinated white linen ensemble and deep blue pumps. She stares at me down her long, straight nose, and, adjusting my posture to my full height, I stare back.

“Hello, Alina.”

Her smile is as brittle as the rest of her. “Your mother sends her greetings.”

That is surprising. In the years since I moved away from the colony, I have only seen my mother once or twice in passing. The remnants of a childhood tinged by sadness and a feeling of abandonment have long ago been replaced by the constant love and support I always had from my father’s family. “I have a hard time believing that,” I reply, careful to keep my tone indifferent. “She had little interest in me even when I was a twenty-minute drive away.”

“You’ve become a topic of conversation among us now that you are coaching my Alejandra.”

It is one thing to know, peripherally, someone is a bigot who has no interest in seeing beyond their narrow, limited view of the world. It is another thing entirely to hear it, to watch the denial play out right in front of me, to feel the sharp twist of rage in my belly knowing this person has no interest in seeing or knowing their own child.

“Aleks,” I say, slowly. “Your son’s name is Aleks.”

Her nostrils flare. “Children do such silly things in the name of self-expression. She’ll find her way back to—”

“Aleks is not a child.” It is a fight now, to keep my voice low. Hate and indignation unlike anything I have ever felt threaten to burn through the control I am barely holding on to. How *dare* someone speak like this about their child. How *dare* she twist Aleks’ existence into some imagined affront? I shake my head. “He is a man, one who was willing to walk away from everything he had ever known for the chance to be himself.”

Alina steps closer, towering almost half a foot above me. “*Himself?*” She scoffs. “Alejandra is lost, but she cannot run from who she is. She is a dancer, *my* dancer, and she will find her way home.”

I let out a harsh laugh. “The thing is, Alina, in your twisted way, you are not completely wrong. Aleks is a dancer. He is not running from who he is. He fought to be here, at these games, because he is a siren who loves, *loves* to dance.” I raise a finger and point right at her. “He did all of this in spite of your attempts to interfere.”

Alina makes no attempt to deny it. “It isn’t right. Not when she’s mutilated herself—”

I hold up a hand. “I am done listening to your shit. Artistic swimming is an open-species division, with participants of every gender under the sun. Sirens compete alongside merpeople, humans, undines, shifters, and water-sprites. Aleks has every right to be here, and to compete.” She opens her mouth as if to cut in, but I am not finished. “I cannot wait for you to see him swim. He is sensational, more beautiful, more raw and strong and alive than he has ever been. When you see the way he moves through the water, I hope your soul is stirred. I hope you feel something. But know this.” I lean toward her, holding her gaze. “I am going to protect him from *you* and whatever bullshit you have planned under the guise of maternal love. He is not yours, not in blood or in name.”

Her blue eyes narrow. “My daughter will not compete. Not like this. Not on my watch.” She steps back, straightening her already meticulous shirt.

“If you care about your coaching career, you will walk away from her.”

A cruel smile pulls at my lips. “And that is where you are wrong about me, Alina. I will do whatever it takes to support *him*. I will coach *him*. I will protect *him* from bigots like you who have built a worldview so fragile any deviation threatens catastrophe.”

My hands tremble as I grab a bottle of the pink-tinged coconut water and a bottle of Coke. Without saying anything else, I walk away.

I am barely cognizant of paying for our food. Anger simmers under my skin as I walk back to our bungalow. I understand intolerance, and have lived a version of it myself as a gay man. I have taken slurs on the chin, and have considered potential partners with my safety at the forefront. But to hear it from a parent? It is sickening. Absolutely fucking sickening.

I want to wrap Aleks up in a blanket and surround his slender limbs with my larger frame. I want to put my body on the line for him. To shield him from the words of the woman who may have given birth to him, but does not deserve the title of *mother*.

He deserves so much better than her.

I wish there was a way for Aleks to compete without interacting with Alina. But she is a judge, one of the longest sitting on the interspecies panel, and I cannot imagine that changing in the next twenty-four hours.

Aleks needs to win. He needs to stand up there on the podium in front of the cheering crowd, and walk away with a medal around his neck. It is not enough for him to settle for a single performance in the preliminary round. Not enough for him to show his face and then walk away.

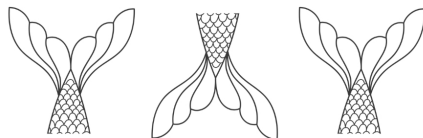
No. It is not enough. Not for *him*.

Not for my boy.

Not for my...

I exhale loudly, shake out my stiff shoulders, and then pick up my pace. First, lunch. Then, the truth.

And then, I have to help him win.



I smell the sharp smoke right as our bungalow comes into view. I frown, disappointed. There is only one day before the preliminary round, and Aleks

has been so focused. So disciplined.

So good.

But right now he sits slumped on the front stoop in one of my t-shirts and a pair of athletic shorts, gripping a burned-down cigarette between his fingers like it is the only thing keeping him tethered.

I pick up my pace. I feel my heartbeat accelerate to an almost unnatural speed, frantic anxiety loud in my chest. Whatever is going on with Aleks, it is not good.

“What happened?”

He looks up at me then, eyes harder than I have ever seen them. “Read it,” he says, tossing a piece of paper at me.

I snatch the letter out of the air.

Aleks Parthenope,

As promised, the committee has convened to make a final ruling on the petition for Aleks Parthenope to compete as a soloist at the Clash of Creatures.

Aleks Parthenope’s petition, which cited Section 4b in the IASA bylaws as grounds for a solo exemption, was carefully reviewed and discussed. What our committee found was that, while an initial search for a duet partner may not have been fruitful, it is clear the search was not all that extensive. Attached you will find the names of seven qualified duet partners, all of whom are available for the qualifying duet round.

The IASA officially denies Aleks Parthenope’s request to compete as a soloist, and welcomes a duet performance from him in the qualifying round.

It is worthy of note that, as long as they are able to pass a banned substance screening and are not already committed to another duet team, any athlete of any species will be eligible to join his duet.

Any questions or feedback can be submitted to our office at the International Archive of Artistic Swimming.

Signed,

International Artistic Swimming Association

My eyes close. *Dios*, I knew this was coming. I wanted to believe—*fuck*, I did believe there was a way for Aleks to do this on his own terms. He has made it here on his own, without a team standing by him.

I cannot fault the IASA for refusing to change the entire Clash of Creatures on behalf of one man. However, I can wish for them all to die by drowning for the way they drew out their decision, and for the emotional wreckage it will leave in its wake.

Aleks competes in two days. The committee has to know there is no way to put together a passable duet in that timeframe. Their ruling has completely ruined Aleks' chances—not only to medal, but to walk away from this experience feeling like he had a fair shot.

My eyes go to the list of seven athletes at the bottom of the letter. I scan them, my frown deepening as I go. “These are all Daughters of Parthenope,” I say, looking up at Aleks.

He glares unseeingly over my shoulder, smoke trailing from the corners of his mouth.

“You did not reach out to them? When you were looking for a duet partner?”

He scoffs. “Why the fuck would I? None of them stood up for me. None of them did *shit* when I came out, Javier. None of them could fucking look me in the eye when I started walking around with my shaved head, when I asked them to call me Aleks. So don't come at me for not reaching out to them when I needed help. They already had a chance to stand up for me, and none of them fucking did.” He takes another long drag, exhaling smoke from his nose. “I'm done.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, taking a step closer.

A sharp, bitter laugh falls from Aleks' lips. He points to the letter. “You can read, right?”

I shake my head at him. “That was unnecessary.”

“What? What do you want me to say? That I'm sure my mother is the one behind this? That my own mother sabotaged my chance to compete as myself?” He throws the cigarette butt to the ground, grinding it under the heel of his shoe. “And yes, *Daddy*, I'm going to pick up my fucking trash.”

Putting my hands into my pockets, I watch him carefully.

“Honestly, it isn't even that big of a deal,” he says, now nudging the crushed orange paper with the toe of his sneakers. “It's not like this sport has ever given me anything in return. This is the confirmation I needed. I'm done. I'm fucking done with all of this. My life at home is fine. I'll go back to living with Damian.”

I stand, silent and steady, and wait.

He looks down at the cigarette butt, and then back up to me. No matter how hard he tries to hide his feelings, to pretend he is unfazed, his eyes cannot lie. They are so green now, green like his siren song, and every betrayal and disappointment are right there on the surface.

“What if I don’t want to pick up my trash?”

I take a slow breath. “There are consequences. Littering is...thoughtless. Childish.”

Aleks picks anxiously at his thumb, scowling at the ground. “Fine.” Turning, without looking at me, he stomps up the stairs and throws open the door to our bungalow. “If you care so much about trash, *you* can deal with it!”

When the door slams behind him, I press a hand over my mouth and sigh. My heart aches for him. Even though I knew, *I fucking knew* this ruling was likely coming, no amount of foresight can take the edge off of this kind of hurt.

Watching the devastation playing out across his face gutted me.

Now, on the other side of the heartbreak, Aleks needs me. He needs me to stand with him as he mourns and moves through the anger and disappointment in a way that feels safe to him.

Kink is a funny thing. Create a dynamic container for our humanity with someone you trust, and then watch all the raw, real bits come rising to the surface.

Right now, taking care of him as his Daddy comes first. And on the other side, as his coach, I will fight for him.

Chapter 12

What it Means to be a Siren

Aleks

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'm doing.

Nothing makes sense except for the kind, patient man who is standing outside with those dark, knowing eyes. It's easier to think about him than the letter, and my mother, and what a stupid thing it is to hope and hope and hope again, only for it all to come crumbling down around me.

For a second, I wonder if Javier is going to leave. What if I've done all this—throwing a tantrum over some trash, for fuck's sake—and he decides I'm not worth it? What if there's another man out there who will be easier, who will submit more quietly, who will—

The door clicks open. I freeze where I'm pacing in the kitchen, watching as Javier closes the door carefully behind him. When he turns to face me, his face is firm, serious, unwavering.

He takes off his sandals and sets them by the door, before walking slowly toward me. My skin feels too tight as he approaches, and I resist the urge to fidget with something, *anything*.

This is uncharted territory. In all of my experiences with Daddy doms, there have always been specifically negotiated scenes. Some of them included discipline. Some of them were just about sex.

What I'm doing with Javier isn't orchestrated. It has bled out into my life, to the point where I'm standing here trying not to think too hard about this

latest disappointment by throwing my broken heart in Javier's direction and trusting that he will catch it.

Without a word, Javier kneels down in front of me. I can't breathe as his large hands make quick work of untying my shoelaces. He taps one ankle and I lift my foot obediently. I'm in a daze, and it's only the taste of salt in the corner of my mouth that makes me aware of the silent tears tracing down my cheeks. After taking the shoe off and setting it aside, he repeats the action with the other foot.

Javier's knee clicks when he rises to stand, and then he takes my hand in his and leads me over to the couch. Emotion rattles around in my chest, crowding my head, and leaving me a mess of unsettled feelings.

When he lowers himself to the couch, I wait, painfully unsure of what to do next. My eyes blur, the *too much* of it all hitting me like a kick to the ribs.

"Daddy," the word comes out as a quiet whimper. I'm done, I'm so done, and I need, I need, *I need...*

"Come here," he says, patting his lap, his voice firm, but not without warmth.

I rush to straddle his thighs, even as the tightness in my chest squeezes my lungs. My fingers find the buttons on his shirt, fiddling with the little wooden circles.

"Sireno," Javier says softly. "I am going to tell you my plan, and then I want a traffic light color from you."

It's a relief that he's not actually asking me to put my needs into words. *Thank you, Daddy.*

"First, I will take off your shorts, lay you over my lap, and spank you fifteen times."

Yes. Please. I nod furiously.

"Color?"

"Green, Daddy."

He leans in close, his breath warm on my lips. "When the spanking is done, we sit down together and we pick up the pieces. We make a plan together." His thumb brushes over my cheek, and I lean into the comforting touch. "This is not the end, sireno. Not for you."

It's too much to look him in the eye, so I fall forward, pressing my nose into the side of his neck. I feel the kiss against the top of my head. "Up you go, boy."

Reluctantly, I stand up. Javier quickly tugs my shorts down, leaving me in my socks, a black jock, and one of Daddy's worn t-shirts that smells like his sweat.

At Daddy's encouraging nod, I clumsily drape myself across his lap. My face presses to the cushion as strong hands maneuver my body into position. Nerves war with anticipation—I've done this before, but it feels different with Javier. He's got all of me, laid out and bare, completely at his mercy.

Daddy is here. Daddy is going to make it all better.

I whimper at the first brush of fingertips over the tops of my thighs.

"Later, we are going to talk about this tattoo," I hear him whisper, and can feel his touch on the spot where the silly Fresca can is inked on my skin. "But right now, I need your color."

"Green." My voice is muffled by the cushion.

"Green...?"

My face heats. "Green, Daddy."

Soft fingertips trace up my crack, barely brushing over my hole. "Good boy," Daddy says, his voice an authoritative growl that has my thighs clenching together.

The first spank lands on my left cheek with a dull thud. It's not painful, not yet, but enough to send warmth spreading over my skin. Another follows, and my toes inadvertently curl.

Another, then another, the head building with each *thwack* of Daddy's hand.

Yes, Daddy. More, please, harder, yes.

"You are doing so well," Daddy rasps, voice rough. "Taking your spanking beautifully."

I must have spoken out loud. Nothing makes sense, really, beyond the bright, blooming heat smarting on the surface of my skin. My head is hazy, and through the fog something slices through the last bit of control I was clinging to.

Tears flood my eyes, and I don't try to keep them in.

It takes me a moment to realize the spanking is over. Fingers trace circles over my overheated skin, so tender and sweet, and I try to bite back the sob, but it's too late. The cries wrench from my throat, and my whole body shakes as I lose myself to devastation.

“Sireno.” The voice is soft in my ear, and hands gently maneuver me up so I’m once again straddling Daddy’s lap. Tears blur my vision and the skin on my ass burns, but I press forward until I find the stubble on his neck, pressing my face there as I try to breathe.

“Let it all move through you,” he says, as his hands rub soothingly up and down my back. “Look it right in the eye, and then let it go. I am here for you. Feel it all, and let me hold you, sireno.”

It’s too easy to do what he says. I let go.

I’m not sure how long we sat there, Javier’s body steady under mine. Even my heart, which so frequently feels like it’s racing out of control, slows down to mirror the slow, steady up and down of the chest below me. Eventually, I draw back from my favorite place tucked against his neck, rubbing at my swollen eyes. I am empty, drained and hollow, but at least I can breathe now. The disappointment is still there, but it’s not choking me anymore.

“I am going to give you a half an hour,” Javier says, his dark eyes holding mine. “Get cozy, play your game, and forget about everything for a bit.” He carefully moves me from his lap, propping me up in the corner with the pillow behind me. Within seconds I have a second pillow behind my head, a lightweight blanket draped over my legs, the controller in my lap, and a bottle of water on the floor next to me.

“I hate her,” I admit, speaking the words to his broad back.

Turning back, Javier kneels beside me, the same way he crouches beside the pool when he coaches. “She has not given you any reason to feel otherwise. She keeps doing hateful things to you, things that threaten you and the life you are trying to build. There is *no* excuse or rationalization that can take the hurt away.”

“I know, but sometimes I wish...” My throat feels thick and I look up at the ceiling. “I guess I wish there was some part of her that cared enough about me to try.”

There’s a tender brush of fingertips against my chin. “Try what?”

“Try to change, maybe? Or be willing to challenge her beliefs about what it means to be a siren. It’s like she thinks me being something else, me changing my body to reflect the person I actually am, is a threat to her.”

“I wish I could change her for you.” I look at him, and Javier’s eyes are full of pain—pain and hurting on my behalf. “You deserve everything,

Aleks. Being seen and known, family, opportunity, *love*. I am so sorry Alina has robbed you of them.”

My eyes burn. “Okay,” I manage to say, because I’m not ready to tell him how sometimes, when he’s with me, I feel all of those things.

He cradles my jaw in his hands, and pulls me in for a brief kiss. I try to suck on his soft bottom lip, but he pulls away. He must see my pout because he shakes his head, chuckling. “We do not have time for that now, boy. There is something I need to do. It will not take me long. Meet me at the practice pool in forty minutes, and when I get back, we train.”

“There’s no point, Javi. I don’t have a—”

“Trust me. I have you, sireno.” He pauses, rummaging in the fanny pack he’s already buckled around his waist. He pulls out a plastic-wrapped sucker of some kind and hands it to me. “It should keep this needy mouth of yours busy while I am gone.”

I look at him, incredulous, but he’s grinning down at me with an arched brow. “It is even made with real fruit,” he adds. “I would not want to hinder your performance diet.”

I try to summon a scowl, but my fingers tug at the wrapper and pop the sucker into my mouth. It’s a mildly sweet mango flavor, and as my lips close around it, whatever tension is lingering in my body bleeds away.

Fucking Daddy always knowing exactly what I need.

He smiles down at me. “I will be back soon.”

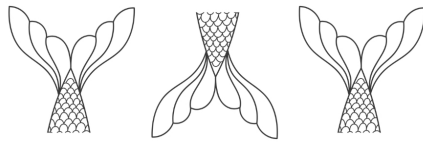
I nod, and queue up my game. The familiar music fills the room, but before I start, I call out, “Daddy?”

The name still feels clumsy on my lips when we aren’t in the middle of a scene. It’s still terrifying, thinking about the kind of trust a relationship like this requires.

I still can’t figure out why he wants me. I still haven’t asked him why he left, all those years ago. Right now, this thing between us is new, fragile, and I don’t want to bring reality crashing in on us. Not yet. As he stops in the doorway, looking back at me over his wide shoulders, I wonder what he’d say if I asked him right now.

“Thank you,” I say instead, popping the sucker out of my mouth. “For everything.”

He smiles, like I’ve given him something precious, and blows me a kiss. Surprised, I snort out a laugh even as something warm and safe and *right* fills my chest.



I'm already in the water, fully transformed and with my vocal filter strapped into place when I hear Javier's sandals crunching up to the edge of the pool. Only he's not alone.

"Cora?"

My cousin lifts her hand in a wave. Her hair is pulled back into a sleek bun and her piercings glint in the sunlight. "Hey."

I blink up at her, treading water with my webbed hands. "What are you doing here?"

She glances over at Javier, who has his hands in the pockets of his cargo shorts. He's watching me with a quiet, careful expression on his face. "I took another look at the list of available duet partners from the IASA," he says.

"And?"

"Cora's name was on the list."

I turn to her, incredulous. "Wait, seriously?"

"Seriously," I hear Javier say.

Cora approaches the pool, grinning down at me. "I heard you need a duet partner."

"I..." I can't believe I missed her name. Although, looking back, I'd been so pissed off my reading comprehension may *not* have been at its best. I saw a list of names. I made an assumption. "Cora, are you sure? I know it's last minute, and I—"

"I want to." She looks down at me, beautiful and striking and defiant. "I don't have a duet this year."

"What about your team?"

"What about them? I'm still going to be fucking perfect for our performance. What I do in my free time is none of their business."

"Are you sure—"

"Aleks," Cora cuts me off. "I have the time, and if I can help you with your comeback tour, then I'm in."

I sigh, bracing my hands on the edge of the pool. "My mom will hate that you're doing this. They all will."

She waves a hand dismissively. “Being a siren controls so much of my life. The swimming and the practices and performing. I live where I live because of it. I have the friends I have because of it. But I don’t owe Alina *shit* when it comes to how I treat other human beings. She doesn’t define my morality.”

My eyes sting. “Ugh, too much crying today,” I whine, wiping at my eyes with the back of my scaled hand.

Cora shoots a look at Javier. “Are you making him cry?”

Javier holds his hands up, shaking his head. “No!” Tilting his head, he frowns. “Well, okay, *maybe*, but he asked me...or, well...”

I can’t help it. I snort, the sound muffled by the vocal filter.

“Actually, I don’t want to know.” Cora turns to me. “So are we doing this?”

It’s there, again. Hope, nestling between my ribs and making a home. Cora is an incredible dancer. If anyone can make this work on such short notice, it’s her.

“I owe you big time,” I say as she takes off her cut-off shorts and tank top, folding them neatly on top of her shoes.

In her racer-back bikini top and the water-soluble bottoms we wear on deck before transforming, she’s the perfect image of a siren. She dives in, transformation coming over her the moment she’s submerged in the water, purple and blue scales spreading across her skin.

When she surfaces again, her ears have lengthened and she flashes me a grin before pulling her own vocal filter over her face. Hers is more updated, the straps a slender elastic and the filter itself a matte silver.

Javier approaches, hiking up his shorts before he crouches at the edge of the pool. “Ready?” he asks.

I nod. I have to be. If I’m going to really go for it, there’s no room for distractions. Putting a duet together on such short notice is hopeless. Teams practice for years to qualify for the Clash of Creatures—who am I to think I can have a single day of practice with a partner and compete with the others?

But I have to try.

“The top twelve duets make it to the medal round,” Javier goes on. “That is all you need to do. Make it to the top twelve, and then we regroup.”

Cora and I nod.

“Aleks, run through the routine,” Javier says, and I see my own determination reflected back in his eyes. “Cora, I will talk you through it while we watch.”

The music begins, and I dive down.

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Chapter 13

Sometimes the Fates are Badass Bitches

Javier

I WATCH ALEKS PACE the tiled locker room with his leather vocal filter gripped tightly in one hand. Tension is tight in his shoulders, his face drawn with worry. Cora is in the locker room next door.

A thick blue line is painted across his eyelids and brows, with a barely-there dust of silver under his eyes. He looks striking, and I know the blue will look beautiful against the green of his scales as well as the blue and purple of Cora's tail.

When it came to costuming, Aleks and I had already decided on something more simple than the typically ornate and vibrant body jewels and paint worn by sirens. Aleks will wear his chest bare, while Cora's simple silver top covers her breasts.

The last forty-eight hours of practices have been exhausting. The two sirens put in long hours together in the water, and Cora did an incredible job committing the routine to memory.

She is a beautiful artistic swimmer. Aleks is a beautiful artistic swimmer, too. They share a training background, one I had a part in from the years I coached them under Alina's watchful gaze. Aleks and Cora have competed together in ensembles. Each of them have won international medals for

their talents. But now, when they swim together, there is something missing. Aleks moves like a modern dancer, his movements loose, raw, and fluid, while Cora has the precise and angular execution of a classically trained ballerina.

The sun had already sunk down below the horizon when I finally called an end to their practice last night. They had mastered the routine hours before, and had been trying to come to some middle ground on the style. I helped where I could, making suggestions they willingly incorporated, but none of it felt like enough.

No amount of practice could make up for their lack of compatibility as duet partners. Whatever stylistic changes Aleks has embraced in his return to the sport, Cora remains fully traditional in her techniques.

I glance down at my watch. There is only an hour before their qualifying performance. If Aleks goes out there like this, in this state, their performance is doomed before it begins.

“Come here,” I say, voice firm.

Aleks walks over to me and scowls. “I want a cigarette.”

I raise my brows, unimpressed. But then I look at him more closely. This is his first time competing in years. Nerves roll from him in waves, and I swear my own heart races.

“Do you need me to step in, boy?”

Relief crosses his face, and he nods. Light catches on the corners of his eyes like he is fighting off tears.

I glance around quickly. We have this locker room to ourselves.

Even so, I grab a towel from a stack on the bench and get up. Holding the shower stall door open, I look right at Aleks. He walks over obediently. I latch the door behind us.

Turning to face him, I take a slow, deep breath. His body mirrors mine. *Good.*

“I am watching the time,” I tell him, pointing to my watch. “You have forty five minutes until you need to be out there. Understood?”

Aleks nod, eyes fixed on mine.

Folding the towel in two, I drop it to the floor in front of me. “On your knees, boy.”

He lowers himself down to his knees. I watch his lips part in a sigh. I make quick work of pulling my cock from my pants. I am soft, although I know it will not be the case for long.

Aleks' eyes flutter closed as he wraps his lips around me, sucking on the tip before taking me deeper into his mouth. His shoulders drop, like the anxiety is melting out of his body.

Nothing in the world makes me happier than knowing I have anticipated the needs of my boy. Nothing, *nothing* compares to the high of getting it right.

"Just like that," I murmur softly. "*Perfecto, sireno. Perfecto.*"

I brace a hand against the stall in front of me, while my other hand reaches down to gently touch his face. His mouth feels phenomenal, but this is not about me. My body responds, but I try to keep my energy and attention on him.

"You have been striving for this moment, Aleks. Your hard work will not go unrewarded. Whatever happens out there, you are a dancer. Dancing is in your blood. It is your birthright, and you have found your way back here on your own terms. No one can take this away from you."

His eyes open, blinking up at me, wide and red-rimmed as his mouth stretches wide around my cock.

"Fuck, boy, you have me close." I swear I was not planning on coming, but his mouth is too hot and tight around me.

Aleks nods, the movement jerking him up and down my cock. With a groan, I push my hips forward slightly, nudging the roof of his mouth. When I get an encouraging whimper, I do it again.

"Boy," I warn as my movements speed up. "Pull back if you do not want to swallow."

If anything he doubles his efforts, and I let out a strained chuckle. "Greedy boy, so eager for Daddy's load." The whining sound he makes in the back of his throat hits me like a spike of pleasure and my balls draw up tight. "Fuck, Aleks," I gasp as the orgasm tears through me.

It takes me a moment to come back into my body. Aleks' mouth sucks rhythmically on my softening cock, and I smile down at him. He looks like there is nowhere he would rather be than on his knees.

Carefully, I pull my cock from his lips and tuck myself back into my pants. When I see Aleks' mouth still working as though he is still imagining the shape of my cock filling it, I give him my thumb. He starts to suck, and I crouch down in front of him.

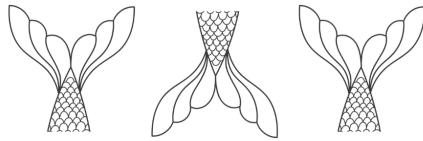
"I am going to talk you through your routine now." I keep my voice low. "Listen, and imagine yourself moving through it as I speak. Imagine Cora

in the water beside you. Imagine you are mirrors to each other, perfectly coordinated.”

His eyes are fixed on me as I talk through each of the elements of his routine. I watch the dazed uncertainty fade, replaced by determination and unmistakable confidence.

When I finish, he pulls off of my thumb. His shoulders straighten, and he wipes the back of his hand over his mouth. His green eyes are hard and full of fire, and he looks like he is ready to take on the world.

“Go show them who you are, Aleks.”



No other performance environment compares to artistic swimming at the Clash of Creatures. The competition pool is a feat of engineering: a tall, clear cylinder rises up out of the ground. The stadium seats rise up around it, so the audience and judges have a clear view of both the underwater movements as well as the aerial jumps and twirls above the water.

Aleks and Cora stand, poised, at the edge of the pool. Each wears a swimsuit bottom of water-soluble material that will melt the moment they enter the water and transform.

They look striking together, the blue stripes across their faces a few shades darker than the cloudless sky stretching above them. My eyes linger on Aleks, on his face, which has become so achingly familiar in the past few days. He is focused, eyes fixed on the water, jaw set in a hard line.

The opening piano notes begin, and, together, they dive in.

This is the hardest part of my job. As a coach, my work is in the preparation, the discipline built over years, all in the service of this one, singular moment. Now, with Aleks and Cora in the water, there is nothing I can do but watch. I am powerless to whatever outcome.

So much of their performance is flawless. Individually, each of them is a precise and accomplished performer, their individual skill is unmistakable. But whatever was missing in our whirlwind practices over the past two days did not magically appear overnight.

I try to hope. Aleks needs me to hope, but I have seen enough routines over the years to know this one is not working.

I glance over at the judges, who sit on a platform suspended right at the edge of the pool, so close they have a glass shield in front of them to keep them from being splashed. It is a panel of representatives from each of the species in the Tail Division: merpeople, sirens, shark and dolphin shifters, and undines. Most of them I know by name. Samuel, the shark shifter, was a dominant athlete in the sport ten years ago, competing alongside his mate, Uma. Shonka, the mermaid, is a respected elder from one of the northernmost communities, with striking white hair and pale blue scales.

Of course, I know Alina Parthenope. She has sat on the judging panel for the past seven years, and has the reputation of being ruthless in her evaluation of the technical skills demonstrated in a routine.

She, along with Shonka, are also known to be the most blatant in their favoritism toward their own kind.

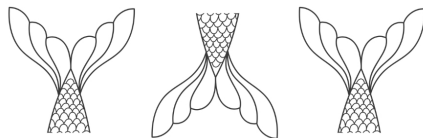
While other sports rely on the impartiality of the judges, artistic swimming at the Clash went in the opposite direction: a chosen representative of each species means they are all prone to bias toward their own athletes. By having all of them represented, they balance each other out, and the result is predictable scoring that is, at the end of the day, fair.

My eyes linger on Alina. When I spent years working on her coaching staff, learning about the sport through her eyes, I questioned her harsh treatment of the athletes. There had to be a better way to inspire medal-worthy performances than the physical and psychological trials she put the young sirens through.

Right now, I hate her. I hate her for delaying the ruling on Aleks' petition until the last possible moment. It is unlikely the IASA ever seriously considered the possibility of granting him a solo—and yet they drew out their decision for so long that they jeopardized his chance to prepare.

There is nothing to be done about her now. I return my attention back to the two sirens in the water.

All I can do now is stand by them as they do this together.



When the final duet of the preliminary round—a pair of undines who placed second at the world competition last season—is underway, Aleks and Cora

sit in twelfth place.

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If the undine duet scores as high as everyone expects them to, then this will be the moment when Aleks' bid to return and medal at the Clash of Creatures comes to an end.

My gaze drifts to Aleks, who sits beside Cora on plastic chairs tucked under the stands, their heads together as they watch the undines routine.

While I am happy he is not alone, I cannot help but glare at the back of the other siren's head. It should be me he is sitting with. It should be my shoulder pressed to his. It is my job. He is my boy, and, even though he does not know it yet, he is *mine*.

Dios, I was supposed to tell him. Two days ago I was ready, I had it all planned out, and then the letter arrived and everything has been a blur since then.

I look away.

This is his moment. Celebration or disappointment, this is *his*. This is his life, what he has been working towards for years in spite of the sport he gave his childhood to turning against him. He made it here because he fought for himself, every step of the way.

Who am I to demand anything from someone who has had so much taken from him?

At a collective gasp from the crowd, I look back at the water. There is a moment of confusion, where the undines tangle in the wake of a lift. It is a silly, clumsy error, one I would never expect from elite athletes who have been competing together for years. I inhale sharply, cataloguing the point deduction in my head. It is one of the highest scoring elements of their routine, and screwing up the dismount could knock off a significant amount of points.

They finish their routine, but it feels like the entire arena is holding their breath. The mistake will undoubtedly cost the undines—the question is how

much?

I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants as the judges deliberate, and I press the heel of my hand against my sternum. I glance over at Aleks, who is sitting ramrod-straight, watching the leaderboard projected above the pool.

Please, Gods, give him this. After taking so much from him, give him—

When the scores update, I let out a breath. The undine's score puts them just below us.

"Dios." I rub my face, disbelief fading to relief—not for myself. No, my own pride has no place here. But Aleks, my Aleks, *my boy*, has a chance now. His performance today may not have been pretty, and it certainly was not a true representation of his or Cora's skill.

None of it matters, though. Their path to the medal round is secured.

I duck through the crowd to reach the two sirens. Like he can sense my attention on him, Aleks turns around in his seat, eyes wide. Cora whispers something to him, and Aleks' lips tilt up in a smile.

My heart rate picks up in my chest.

"How did we pull that off?" Aleks asks as I approach them.

"Sometimes the Fates are badass bitches who throw in on the right people." Cora leans back in her chair, shrugging. "I don't think I've ever been so happy in the wake of a shitty performance. No offense," she adds, poking Aleks in the thigh.

"None taken." Aleks lets out a disbelieving laugh, before looking up at me. There, in his pale eyes, I see the beginnings of joy taking hold. "Coach?" He asks.

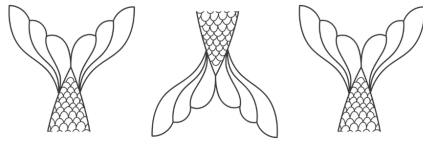
I shrug, even as a smile spreads over my face. "Sometimes, in sports, you need to take the win and not ask too many questions."

"What he said," Cora says, pointing up at me.

The noise of the crowd draws my attention, and I look up, surveying the audience before my gaze is drawn to the judges.

My heart skips a beat. Alina Parthenope is watching me, expression hard and unreadable. The smile on my face fades as I return her stare.

In two days, Aleks and Cora will have the chance to perform again. Second chances do not come along every day. I have to figure out how to help them, to bridge the gaps between them, so the next time they perform it is something they can both be proud of.



After spending the afternoon reviewing the video of Aleks and Cora's performance, I walk back to the bungalow with to-go food from the dining hall. It is early evening, the glow of the golden sky still bright enough that the little lights lining the paths have not turned on yet.

The bungalow is dark, and Aleks is not inside. The back porch is empty, too. I stash our dinners in the mini fridge, and find a note on the counter.

Javi,

Went to grab something in the village. Be back in an hour.

-Aleks

I frown, disappointed in his absence. It has been less than an hour since I saw him, and yet I am already itching to have my boy back in my sight.

I should go for a jog. Exercising always clears my head. Changing into shorts and a t-shirt and lacing up my running shoes, I grab my headphones and old iPod, and head out on the gravel path that curves behind our bungalow and into the thick forest.

I ignore the signs warning potential trespassers about the dangers of the siren song. It is standard, at these events, for there to be strict and extensive demarcations between areas set aside for different species. It would not do anyone any good if a werewolf ran loose through the village on the full moon.

Each siren team has been given access to a springfed pool with enough distance between them to allow them to swim without their vocal filters. I remember, when I coached the team of young sirens, hearing them complain about the hardware they were required to wear, even if it was for their own safety. According to every siren I have known, doing artistic swimming with a filter feels like the pressure and discomfort of holding one's breath—survivable, but still uncomfortable.

Aleks was assigned his own pool, and, by extension, the walking trail looping from our bungalow out to the pool and back. With him in the village, there is no chance of stumbling upon him singing as he swims.

My body moves slowly these days. My right knee acts up if I push myself, so I settle into an easy jog. The gravel crunches under my shoes, and I cue up *A Night at the Opera* on my iPod.

Freddie Mercury croons in my ears, and my lungs adjust to the strain of exertion. It does not matter how little I think of my age these days; running serves as a constant reminder that my body is moving past its prime.

I need to pick up jogging more seriously if I am going to keep up with Aleks. Aleks, with his swimmer's build and forearms lined in lean muscle. With his sharp mouth and the way the tightness in his posture melts away when I look him in the eye and call him "boy."

I came here to Monstralia with a plan. *Be the coach he needed. Give him the tools to win. Keep a professional distance.*

If I were stronger, if I did not have such a weakness for boys with a lower lip red from biting, for boys with the confidence to walk into a group of strangers with a hanky in their pocket clearly flagging for a Daddy, I might have stayed away.

But then I saw his desperate eyes and his hips grinding on the shifter's thick thigh. There was no way I could stand by and watch him get off with someone else. Impossible.

The trail curves, and the final rays of sun shine into my eyes. I wince, squinting against the harsh light.

Suddenly, I stumble, somehow managing to catch myself, even as the jerking movement yanks the headphones from my ears.

Ringings fill my head. Loud, familiar, *home and mine and come, come to me, come to me.*

I have been here before, years ago, in another jungle on a different continent. The song, though—the song is the same. Even after all this time, I would know it anywhere.

This was not supposed to happen. But maybe there is a part of me that knew, the moment I knocked on Aleks' apartment door, we would end up here.

It is too late for anything but surrender as my body is jerked from the path by an invisible force. Branches slap at my face, biting through my skin. At least one of the plants is thorned, but my body does not stop, legs and arms pumping as hard as they can.

Faster, faster, *get to the song, get to him.*

Water splashes under my feet. I cannot stop. Clear water fills my vision, and I barely have time to take a breath before my body breaks through the surface of the water, sinking, straining for the song.

It is louder here, clearer than before. It is not music as I have known it. Words feel too clumsy to describe the sound. Even “sound” is not fully accurate, because my bones vibrate, too. Even as my lungs burn, my body feels full and right and in awe of the beauty of this *thing* I am experiencing.

I cannot see clearly under the surface, but even through the blur I catch a flash of pale green. Surging forward, I chase it. Reaching, straining for him.

Down, down, down.

Closer. I am almost there...

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Chapter 14

You Did Not Die

Aleks

SINCE ARRIVING IN MONSTRALIA, I haven't been able to quiet the need to sing. It's there, ever-present in the back of my throat. Swimming with the vocal filter on isn't the same, and I'm left with a constant, unsatisfied itch like I need to sneeze.

I should be relieved we made it through to the medal round. I should be happy.

But as I watched the film, a feeling of dread took up residence in my stomach. The problems in our practice weren't magically solved when we performed together. We were out of sync. Incompatible. Both talented, sure, but in an event where you are judged as a cohesive team, individual talent can only get you so far.

What if what Cora and I did out there together today is the best we are ever going to be together? What if the incompatibility is something we can't overcome in two days?

I tried and failed to nap while Javier went to pick up our dinner, unable to quiet my head. As I lay in the bed that smelled like Javier's tea tree shampoo and his sweat, a part of me wondered if he was there beside me, if I'd had his finger in my mouth, if I would have been able to slow my mind down.

I gave up, and after writing a note to let Javier know I was going out, I went to the village to get cigarettes, but the need to open my mouth and *fucking scream* was clawing at me. *Daddy would be proud of me*, I thought to myself as I turned around, instead making my way down the path to my spring-fed pool.

When I went to the previous Clash of Creatures, each siren colony was given access to a remote pool where they could swim without vocal filters. Between extensive signs and written warnings in the info packets given to all the attendees, people knew to stay the hell away from the siren pools, like we knew to stay away from the nature preserve where the weres and other canine shifters could transform.

This year, the pool is mine alone. I haven't found time to visit before now. I've always preferred practicing in the designated practice pool that is a more comparable environment to the pool where we compete, even if it means wearing the vocal filter.

Tonight, I needed the water. I needed to sing.

The water is perfectly cool against my scales. Finally, *finally* my head starts to settle. I've run through my routine twice, my song filling the water and the air around me.

I'm curling lazy, slow circles around the rocky bottom of the pool. With my face turned up to the surface, my song is quieter now. Still strong, but no longer urgent.

It's hard to describe the tug of the song. There aren't recognizable words falling from my tongue, but frequencies and sounds speaking to something universal beyond the limitations of a singular language. I sing of transformation: the truth of the butterfly and the protandrous cycle of the ribbon eel. I sing of abandonment: the drought that steals the water from the banks of a river, leaving nothing but brittle, impermeable earth behind.

I sing of love, and surrender, and I imagine Javier's face in my mind.

I hear his voice, reminding me I am enough. It's so clear, so *loud*, at first I assume I've imagined his face moving toward me under the water.

But no. I'm not imagining this.

Javier is here. His hair billows around him as he swims frantically toward me, eyes wide and searching like I'm the oxygen he needs to breathe.

No. No.

Everything hits me all at once.

My song catches, tangles and dies in my throat. If he is here, under the water, then he is under my spell. *No, no, no.* He heard me sing, and now...

I shove it aside, refusing to indulge in mourning the end of my time on this earth. I won't waste time with rage or regret.

I will die, and I will die as myself. It's all I've ever wanted, really. To be myself. To live, and then to die as Aleks.

But right now, the man I love is running out of breath. Time seems to slow down as I reach for him, and through the terror my song bursts out—*Save him. Save the man who sees you, who treasures you. Save him before you die.*

I won't survive this. I know that. But, as I seal my mouth over Javier's cold lips and exhale the full capacity of my lungs into him, as his soft body relaxes into my hold, a flicker of hope cuts through me. *He has to live*, I think as I continue to breathe for him, cradling his body to my chest as I swim us up to the surface.

Clumsily, I shove Javier up onto the edge of the pool. I think belatedly about the discomfort of the rounded stones against his back, but I'm too busy watching him from where I hover above him.

The fabric of his shirt clings to his body. My eyes dart between the swell of his chest and his parted mouth. I lower my mouth to his, breathing, breathing, then press the heels of my palms into his chest, again, and again, and again. Waiting, waiting—*breathe Daddy, please, Daddy.* His eyes are closed, lashes dark against his wet cheek, and I'm about to panic when I hear it. The quiet hiss of an inhale. The rise of his chest.

One breath, then two.

I'm biting back a sob when Javier's eyes blink open and he pushes himself up, a look of confusion marring his face. He's here, he's alive, and *fuck*, is this really it for me?

My head drops, finding the dip in the middle of his chest. The sadness hits and my heart breaks as I brace myself for whatever form my death will take. Will the air be squeezed from my lungs? Will my heartbeat slow gradually, only to stop fully when I've drifted into sleep?

Or am I seconds away from having my spirit snuffed out of existence?

I don't know what death is going to feel like, but I know it won't be gentle. It won't be painless. Not for a siren.

I want to be as close to Javier as possible. Now that I know he's alive, it's all I can do to keep it together while I wait for my own life to end. I nuzzle

into his chest as a whine starts in the back of my throat.

“Sireno,” I hear Javier whisper, his voice hoarse and raw. “Look at me.”

The tears spill over, and *no*, I can’t. I shake my head. But then there’s a firm grip on my chin, and I follow when he tilts my head up to look at him.

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Javier takes me in, gaze sweeping across my face. I feel the brush of his touch against my cheek, and when he presses his thumb against my lips I open obediently, tasting the salt of my tears as I suck him in.

I want to sink into this moment, but there’s a looming reality not even Javier’s steady presence can help me ignore.

“I’m not ready to die,” I whisper around his thumb.

Confusion, then concern cross his face, and then something I must be imagining as affection curves his mouth into a soft smile. I let out a surprised gasp when Javier rolls us over—my back resting on the stones in the shallows at the edge of the pool. Now Javier hovers above me, his face shadowed in the growing darkness.

When Javier kisses me I arch up into him. His lips are warm now, his tongue hot as it caresses mine. Again, I want to lose myself in him, but—

“Wait,” I gasp, my eyes burning with another wave of tears. “If this is it, then—”

“This is not it, sweet boy,” Javier murmurs, kissing my cheeks and eyebrows, my temple and my forehead. “You are not going to die today.”

That breaks the spell. With my hands against his chest I try to push him off of me. “You heard me sing! You aren’t a human who knows nothing of sirens! You heard me, and now I’m going to *die*! This isn’t some fairy tale where the siren is saved from his fate by a—”

The words die in my throat. I stare up at Javier, who is smiling down at me.

“This is not the first time I have heard you sing, Aleks.” His voice is soft.

“What?” My body goes still, even as the gentle push and pull of the water caresses my scaled tail. He can’t mean that. It must be a mistake.

“Years ago, I was going for a run beyond the colony. It was during the dinner hour, so I assumed it was safe. I heard you, in a cenote, and I barely managed to stop from running to you by holding onto vines and roots.” A shadow crosses his dark eyes. “You were a *child*, Aleks. A child. And I believed I had killed you.”

There’s a quiet buzzing in the back of my head. I wet my lips as I try to piece his words together. “But I didn’t die.”

“No, sireno. You did not die.”

All this time, I’ve told myself a story about why my favorite coach walked away from our team and from the colony. In the story, I’m somehow at fault, for not working hard enough or not giving enough of myself to the sport.

In the end, I was right. He did leave because of me, but not for any of the reasons I could have imagined.

Above me, Javier looks at me with the same kindness he’s always shown, but now the softness is touched with devotion and wanting.

“You’re,” I begin, terrified to say the words out loud.

“Your mate, if you will have me.”

Everything stills. Time oozes and my heartbeat slows to a *thump, thump, thump* in the back of my throat. Everything is blue and green and the shadow of stones and dusk light and *Javier*, and I don’t think anything has ever been so beautiful.

Mate. Mate. Mate.

“Mate?” My voice shakes.

He nods, and his eyes are wet, tears making new, salty tracks down his wet cheeks. “Mate,” he replies.

The sob in my chest builds until I can’t contain it, and I make a choked, wounded sound. Javier’s face creases with concern, and I see it all there, I *feel* his fear, and his worry, the careful way he is holding himself back until he knows, until he knows I want him, that I want *this* as much as he does.

“This is why,” I manage to form the words. “You left because—oh, gods, I was a kid, and you, Javier, you must have been so pissed—”

“I did not know back then.” There’s an urgency in his eyes, like he’s pleading with me to understand. “I thought you died. I thought I had killed

you, Aleks. I thought you were dead, and I left. I was a coward, but I did not want to see someone die so young.”

“I’ve been such an asshole to you.” I reach for him, webbed fingers brushing over his beard.

His chuckle is wet. “You did not know, sireno.”

“When did you find out?”

Turning into my touch, he kisses my fingertips. “Only a few weeks ago. The articles. As soon as I knew I had to see you. And I know I should have told you sooner, but I did not know how.”

Things start to click into place. Javier on my doorstep, Javier standing beside me, Javier at the party with possessive hunger and rage in his eyes as he watched me with the polar bear shifter. They way my heartbeat slowed when I was near him.

Fate was supposed to be a distant, faraway thing, sometimes striking without pattern or reason. It upended conscious choices and interfered. For so long I’ve seen the force of fate as a swift current to be fought against. I fought for my freedom. I fought for my body. I fought for my name and for my return to artistic swimming.

But now the Fates have changed their tune, handing me something—someone—I already want. Someone who I trust, and who sees me and treasures the pieces of myself I’ve shown to him.

After all the shit life has thrown at me, could I be so lucky?

Chapter 15

Mine, as I am Yours

Javier

I WATCH ALEKS' FACE. I do not want to miss a single thing.

A part of me braces for rejection. Just because the bond exists does not mean we have any obligation to seal it. It would not shock me if he walked away, not when he has such a long and bright future before him.

The past few days with him have been everything to me. Having his friendship, his body, his breathy moans and *Daddy, please's*, and his mouth wrapped around my thumb when he falls asleep have given me a glimpse of a life I want. I do not know how I am going to walk away, but I will if he asks me.

I would do anything for him.

In his siren form, a glow of green hovers under his skin. I run a finger over the thin green membrane of his elongated ear, feeling a wave of satisfaction when it trembles under my touch.

I am caught off guard when Aleks initiates the kiss. Relief fills me even as heat and need and something almost animal in nature gathers in my chest.

He breaks away, breath sweet against my lips. "I want you," he pants.

"You have me."

"I don't know what I'm doing," he says, and there is a flash of uncertainty in his eyes. "But there's a tug in me, like on some level I know

what I'm supposed to do now, to...to claim you."

I watch his black pupils narrow into slits, and something firm presses against my thigh. Instinctively I push back. When his mouth opens in a breathy gasp, I smile. "Then claim me," I say as I start to rock my thigh up, and down, up, and down. "But I plan to claim you, in return."

Aleks' slippery, webbed hands yank at my clothes. I help him as best as I can, standing up to more easily heed the desperate pull of whatever it is we are moving toward. When I toss my soaked shorts and boxers up onto the shore, I look down at him and groan.

His long body is stretched out, floating on the surface of the water. Pale green scales glitter where they peek through the skin on his hip and at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. My eyes trail down his body, past the place where skin gives way to the scales of his tail.

I have never looked at another siren this way.

My breath goes ragged as I take in the rigid cock jutting out from his slit. There is nothing comparable to human anatomy, not in the pointed tip of the flushed pink cock tapering down to a wide, glistening base.

"Fuck, Aleks," I rasp. My palms itch at my sides, a burning pressure in my chest telling me I need to touch him. I grab my own hard cock, giving in to my desire. "Do you have any idea how incredible you are?"

Holding my gaze, Aleks lifts his green-tinted hands from the water. Slowly, he trails them down his body, touching himself with the same patience and reverence I plan to devote my life to giving him.

"Good boy," I praise, watching as he brushes the webbing between his fingers over his hard dick. It twitches at the touch, and I barely bite back my groan. Like he knows he is killing me, Aleks goes lower, sliding his thumb over another hole. It is tight, barely a noticeable divot between green scales. Glancing up, I see his teeth sink into his lower lip. "Is this your hole, sireno? Is this where you want Daddy to fuck you?"

He nods, and even through the shadow of green on his skin I can see the flush spread across his chest.

"You are going to have to help me, sireno," I admit, wishing there was not an undercurrent of vulnerability in my voice. It is my job to be strong for him. To be steady. Dependable. But right now, standing at the edge of this huge, cosmic thing between us, I do not know what to do next.

He blinks up at me. "Do you trust me?"

"I am in your hands."

Aleks lifts himself and pushes me into the deeper water. I back up, the stones slippery under my feet as he glides toward me. Staring into his eyes, I know I am exactly where I am supposed to be. Here, in the water, with my heart and life and fate in the hands of my mate.

Aleks pulls us under.

It is a blur, then. A dizzying dance, my arms wrapped around Aleks' body and his slippery hands tracing over my skin. Anytime I need to breathe, Aleks presses his mouth to mine, giving me the breath from his lungs. There are no words, not here, but somehow he reads me, and, shockingly, I can read him.

Aleks' tail propels us in wide arching circles, our bodies pressed tightly together. Between our breaths he sings, and nothing has ever sounded more beautiful. I am lost in the song, answering the call. *I am here, I want to sing in return. You called me, mate, and I came. I waited all those years. I stayed away. But I am here now. Estoy aqui, contigo. Here I am, with you.*

I feel Aleks in my chest. I swear there is a physical presence there, something new and precious that has taken up residence beside my heart.

His heart is mine. His fear is mine. His hunger is mine. Mine to feel, and mine to solve.

His need is mine, too. And right now, my mate needs more. He needs *me*.

Reaching down between us, my fingers find his hole. It is slick, soft and pliant like it has already been prepped with lube. I slip the tip of one finger in slowly, carefully, listening for his response, but all I get is a reverberating—*yes more please Daddy yes*.

Who am I to deny my mate what he wants?

By the time I have three fingers in him, he is bucking his hips to meet my touch.

—*Are you ready for my cock?* I ask, in this silent, telepathic way we seem to be able to communicate now.

—*Yes. Please. Ready for you. Take me.*

I hold my cock against his hole. We have stilled in the water, no longer propelled by Aleks' fins. Floating, suspended, everything around us is silent except for the soft, blue-green world.

My free hand slides down to his hip, the scales tickling my palm as I hold him steady.

—*Color?*

—*Green.*

—*Like your eyes, mate.*

—*Like yours, too.*

I pause. —*What?*

—*There's green in your eyes now. A tiny bit. Green like my scales.*

Warmth fills me at the prospect.

—*Stop stalling, Daddy.*

Perfect, bratty boy.

I do as he says. One thrust, and I am slipping inside of him.

Thank fuck his mouth is on mine, so I can kiss him the way I need to. So I can tell him with my lips and my tongue how deeply carved into me he is. I am sure when I die, they will cut open my bones and find spring-fed water and soft, green scales.

His hole is tight and hot, perfectly gripping me with each slide of my cock. I do not realize we have sunk down to the bottom of the pool until my back connects with sand. Above me, Aleks rides me, webbed hands gripping my shoulders as he finds a rhythm.

I do not let him pull his mouth away from me, needing his kiss, *needing him*. Even as pleasure builds in me, as my balls draw up and the coil of need tightens in my belly, I feel the echoes of Aleks—how my cock stretches his body to the perfect burn, how his orgasm is hovering just out of reach as long as his cock remains untouched.

Reaching down between us, I take his cock in my hand. I am close now, hurtling toward burying my cum as deeply in his body as I can—*Fuck, wait*

—*Come in me, Daddy. Don't you dare stop.*

—*Boy, I do not want to hurt you. Is there a risk of—*

—*No. No risk. My body doesn't work that way anymore.*

—*Are you s—*

—*Javier, I swear if you don't move your hand on my cock I'm going to—*

—*What, boy? Tell me what you will do.*

I feel his frustrated groan and grin against his lips.

There will be a time for games between us. So, so much time. But now, I cannot distinguish if it is his body or mine begging for release. Begging to come, to come *together*, like this, for the first time.

Bracing my bare feet against the sandy bottom of the pool, I snap my hips up, burying my cock in him. His head tosses back, and I watch, the breath held in my lungs, as he takes me.

My hand starts to work on his cock. He writhes under my touch, and his body ignites, the building pressure of his orgasm spiralling higher, higher, and higher. My own pleasure is a mirror to his. There is no separation now between his body and mine.

His sensations are mine. My cock is his; his cock is mine. My hand wrapped around him is his, his hands gripping my pecs are mine. His mouth comes back to mine, knowing I needed to breathe even before my own nervous system.

—*Mine, as I am yours*, I say.

—*I...fuck, Daddy. Come...can I?*

—*Yes, love. Come.*

The orgasm ricochets through both of us. I am lost to our pleasure, but even louder than our trembling, twitching bodies is an overwhelming sense of *mate mine Aleks boy* and *mate mine Javier Daddy*, twining together into the kind of braid never intended to be unravelled. Even as the aftershocks fade and my body goes boneless, cock going soft and slipping from Aleks' hole, I feel myself being rewritten into something I never imagined for myself and my life.

We are moving then, Aleks slowly swimming our still-intertwined bodies up toward the dark sky. As I crest the surface, our mouths part and I take in a shaky breath. My lungs ache, the air above water thin in comparison to what Aleks shared with me.

"Come here," I grumble, pulling him back into a deep kiss. My feet find the bottom of the pool, guiding us to the edge. This time, when he pulls away I can see how exhausted my mate looks. Happy, and thoroughly fucked, too, but still exhausted.

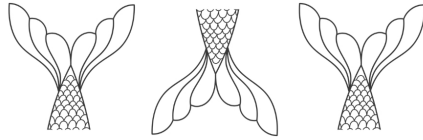
When he yawns, I take over.

I help Aleks out of the water first. He transforms as soon as his tail breaches the surface of the pool, and I admire his naked body as I—much less gracefully—climb out. I slip my discarded shirt around Aleks's wet body, leaving it unbuttoned as I help him into the shorts he was wearing earlier. I make quick work of dressing myself, and then, weaving our fingers together, I pause.

I am not sure I will ever get used to this—hearing him like this, *feeling* him with me in my body. But I am deeply grateful for the insight as I pick up on the hunger and sleepy contentment coming from my boy.

He is uncharacteristically quiet as I lead us toward the bungalow. I would be worried, but the peace of his breathing and heartbeat reassures me.

He is here. My mate is here.



Aleks' eyes go wide. "What did you put on this?"

I lean back against the couch cushion. Aleks sits on my lap, his bare legs straddling my thighs. "Dried chile de arbol, salt, and lime," I say, putting another sliced cucumber against his lips.

"Where did you get chile de arbol?"

My grin is smug. "I brought it with me."

"Seriously?"

"En serio." I pop a cucumber into my mouth and chew slowly before swallowing. "My abuela sends me bags in the mail."

"Lucky," he murmurs, taking the offered food. He makes a quiet, satisfied hum as he chews. "We have Tajin in Soledad."

"It is not the same."

He rolls his eyes. "Are you a food snob, Daddy?"

It still fills my chest with a tight, overwhelming warmth when he calls me that. Offering him my chile-and-lime-crusting fingertips, I smile as he licks them clean. "I cannot help it if no one makes food as good as my abuela does."

He regards me with his head cocked to one side. "You grew up with her, right? Your dad's mom?"

I nod. "She took me in as soon as it was clear I was not welcome at the colony."

"Were they good to you?"

It is such a specific question to ask. Not: *Did you like growing up with them?* Or: *How was it being raised by them?* No, my boy wants to know if they were good to me.

"They were the best. My father was not around much. He worked as a miner, gone most of the time, but he was never unkind. And my abuela—well, she is the most wonderful woman in the world. Kind, sharp, and generous."

I think back to some of my earliest memories: my mother handing me off with nothing but a sack of my clothes and the worn stuffed bunny someone had given me. I will never forget what she said to me as she stood there, watching me with the same detached look she gave everyone else. *"This is for the best, Javier. She will love you in a way I never can."* I never could have imagined, then, how right she would turn out to be. The love my grandmother gave me wrapped around me like another layer of skin, shielding me from the harsh pain of the world.

"Does she know about..." Aleks waves a hand uncertainly between us.

"About you?"

"About the mate thing."

I let out a loud laugh. "The mate thing? Is this what we are calling our relationship now?"

Groaning, Aleks covers his face with his hands. "You know what I mean!"

"I am afraid I do not, boy. I think you have called our bond, which, if I am not mistaken, is the first and only siren mating bond in centuries, *the mate thing*."

"Javi," Aleks protests, and I see his cheeks flushing pink.

"Is this what I should call you when we are out and about?" I clear my throat and pitch my voice low. "Yes, hello, may I introduce you to my mate thing?"

Aleks starts laughing, and it is the kind of laugh that moves through his whole body. His shoulders shake, his belly dips up and down, and his smile is stretched so wide I swear my own cheeks ache.

I bask in it: the sound, the sweat beading where our skin meets, and the joy. So much joy. It is vast, and I know it cannot simply be mine. It is *ours*, shared along the thread between us.

"You need to eat more," I tell him.

He reaches for another cucumber from the bowl cradled on my lap, and I gently smack his hand away, grabbing a piece and holding it up to his mouth.

Aleks' body relaxes when I feed him, and I am so full, my heart almost aching with the rightness and goodness of being here with him, of taking care of him like this. "Someday, when it feels right, we are going back to Yucatec'a together. We were both ripped from our homes, and I want to be there, in the place where we are from, with you. Get a spot on the beach, so

you can swim while I cook you a proper meal. I am going to sit you at my abuela's table and watch you eat her mole negro until you cannot move, and then find a cenote where you can sing." I press a kiss to his cheek and linger there, inhaling his scent. "I cannot wait to watch you dance in the waters there."

"I have to get through the next round, first."

"Tomorrow," I tell him. "We will tackle that together, tomorrow."

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Chapter 16

Take What You Need

Aleks

I'M PRETTY SURE I'M floating above the surface of the water. There's a new buoyancy in my bones, a carefree sense of contentment I'm not sure I've ever felt before now.

Mate. Mate. Mate.

I should be panicking about how we are going to fix our routine. I should be reviewing each and every move, but instead I'm laying here like a leaf on the surface of the pool, staring up at the clear blue sky.

"Aleks," Javier calls out.

Reluctantly, I swim to the edge of the pool. Cora is already there, watching me with a curious expression in her eyes.

Javier kneels down into a position that never fails to put his junk perfectly on display. I stare at it, already imagining how we might spend our time later. Maybe I can convince him to give us a break after lunch and we can—

—*Boy. Focus.*

—*I don't know what you're talking about.*

—*Brat.*

"Holy shit."

I turn my head toward Cora, whose gaze bounces between Javier and I. Her mouth opens, then closes, before she blinks like she's trying to clear her vision.

“You good?” I ask.

“Javier’s eyes. They’ve got green in them now.” It isn’t a question. “You’re mates.”

I turn to Javier, not sure what we should say, only to see him nodding. “Yes. Aleks is my mate, and I am his.”

A shiver goes through me hearing him say it out loud. *Mate, mate, mine, yours.*

Cora’s eyes widen. “You heard his song?” she asks Javier.

He nods.

“Holyyyy fuck. Do you realize what a big deal this is? There haven’t been fated mates in centuries! Have you danced? Oh, gods, please tell me you guys have danced together?”

I bite my lip. Thinking of sharing my breath with Javier as I rode his cock at the bottom of the spring has my cheeks heating. Above me, Javier grins, looking ridiculously pleased with himself.

“Yes, we have danced together.”

Cora turns and splashes water at me. “Then why the hell aren’t you dancing with him?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know this is the history of our duets, right?” Her eyes are bright, full of an almost child-like excitement. “The ensemble performances are imitations of the way we used to lure sailors to their deaths, but the duets? Those were something sacred and beautiful, shared between a siren and their mate. Once a siren finds their mate, their song is rendered powerless. The curse, for you, is broken now that your mate has heard you sing.”

“Seriously?” I whisper, trying to grasp the implications of what she is telling us. In all the stories I’ve heard about the curse that rules our lives, no one ever mentioned this.

“Your song is safe, Aleks. What you and Javier can do together would blow their minds. You can show the world the siren mating dance.” She pauses, arching an eyebrow. “Maybe minus the fucking. That might be too much.”

“Oh my gods,” I say, splashing her, even as her words start to sink in. I look up at Javier. “What do you think?”

“I am not a dancer,” Javier offers softly. There’s a thoughtful frown on his face, as well as an uncharacteristic uncertainty in his eyes.

—Daddy?

His eyes soften.

—*Look at me. This is not the body of a swimmer or a dancer.*

I do look at him. I look at his thick, powerful thighs, the heft of his belly and chest, and his soft arms hanging at his sides. I imagine him, then, as he looked under the water with me when we sealed our bond. He was stunning then in his strength, breathtakingly handsome, and *perfect* and *mate* and *mine*.

—*I don't deserve you, Aleks.*

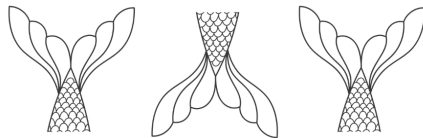
I smile up at him.

—*I call bullshit, Javier.*

—*Language, boy.*

Letting out an audible sigh, Javier looks up at the sky. “I will try,” he says, finally. Lowering his gaze to meet mine, he adds, “For you, I will try.”

Cora claps her webbed hands together. “Can I be your coach?”



“Aleks.”

“Hm?” I’m completely zoning out as we walk hand-in-hand down an empty stretch of sidewalk. Distantly, cheers from the huge outdoor arena where the rugby matches are held ring out in the late-afternoon heat.

“I have a question.”

I swallow, trying to play it cool, even as my heart rate ticks up. “Um, okay?”

—*Do not panic, boy.*

When I look over at him, the soft, amused smile on his face reassures me. “You never told me the story behind your tattoo.”

I groan, slapping my free hand over my face. “No. No no no no no.”

Javier tugs on my hand, pulling my body against his side. His beard tickles when he kisses my head. “Now you have to tell me,” he teases.

“You’re going to laugh,” I mutter, letting my hand fall back to my side.

“So it is a funny story?”

Snorting, I shake my head. “More like humiliating.”

“What can there possibly be that is humiliating about a can of Fresca?”

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I sigh. “One time when Damian and I were out, we were talking about our dream partners. Damian was saying how he wants a manic pixie girl with tits the size of tangerines, and I said some stupid shit about wanting a Daddy with a Fresca-can cock in his pants.”

We stop, right there in the middle of the concrete walk. My cheeks blaze, and I close my eyes and press my lips together, waiting for Javier’s reaction. There are thousands of alternative stories I could have invented, like maybe I’ve always liked Fresca—true—and wanted to commemorate my favorite beverage.

I can’t bear the quiet any longer. I crack one eye, catching the exact moment when Javier’s head tips back and the loudest, most melodic laugh I’ve ever heard in my life booms out from his wide open mouth.

He is stunning like this, tears leaking from his eyes while his whole upper body shakes, chest and belly heaving and bouncing and *fuck* I want this to be my life. I want early mornings where he cooks me breakfast as I watch him move competently through the kitchen. I want him crouching on the edge of a pool, coaching me in his steady, consistent way. I want to make him laugh at my stupid stories, to wash his hair in the shower, and to hold his hand.

“So,” he manages to ask between gasping breaths. “Now you have prophetic tattoos?”

I laugh. “Yeah, what can I say? I manifested *all* of you.” I look pointedly at his crotch.

Red appears on his cheeks, and I laugh harder at the smug smile that spreads across his mouth. “I cannot believe you,” he murmurs, lifting his free hand to cradle my jaw.

I lean into his touch. “You should see what Damian got.”

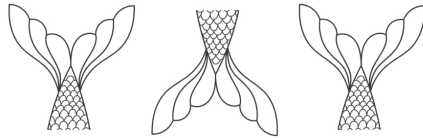
“Oh? Is there a—what did you call it? A maniacal pixie tattooed on his ass-cheek?”

Huffing a laugh, I shake my head. “Manic pixie girl,” I correct. “It’s a whole thing. But, no. Damian got two tangerines on his lower back.”

“And how have the powers of manifestation worked out for your brother?”

“No luck so far.” My stomach cramps, and I squeeze Javier’s hand. We both need to eat after the long morning of practice. “Can we get food and then cuddle up with a movie?”

“Sounds perfect, sireno.”



I’m barely watching the movie we put on. I keep looking over at Javier, who is quiet, a thoughtful frown on his face as he stares at the TV. Outside it’s dark, and even over the dialogue of the movie I can make out the chirps of crickets in the night.

Practicing with Javier was—*fuck*, it was intuitive and unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. With Cora’s help, we’ve reworked my routine to accommodate a human partner.

Javier was right. He isn’t a dancer. He doesn’t have the training and precision in his body, but it doesn’t matter, because he’s my mate and I’ve never moved as fluidly as I do when he’s there in the water with me. Rather than focusing on synchronicity, we’ve shifted to building a contrast between us, a comparison between my dynamic movements around him and his quieter, more subtle motions.

I can tell he’s exhausted. His hair, still wet from when I washed it in the shower, hangs in wet curls around his face. He put on a white t-shirt and soft shorts, while I sprawled out in nothing but a jock and t-shirt.

“Are you okay?” I finally ask.

Javier looks at me, and there’s something to his expression that makes my chest ache. I’m not used to seeing anything but certainty and confidence from him. He reaches for me. “I need you,” he says softly, like he’s admitting something.

I go to him, climbing up to sit astride his lap and draping my hands over his shoulders. “I’m here.”

His head tips back, looking up at me adoringly. “Yes, boy,” he breathes. “You are here, and you are perfect.”

Our mouths meet. It starts sweet and slow, a lazy, indulgent kiss like we have nothing but time. When Javier's tongue slips into me I groan, pushing my body against him.

Javier presses his palm against my packer and I gasp into his mouth. "Think you can come from me touching your cock like this?"

I thrust my hips, and the pressure—*fuck*, the pressure of the soft silicone against my dick is perfect.

I do it again.

"Good boy," Javier grinds out. "Just like that. Take what you need."

It's euphoric, humping his hand like this. His hand shifts to grip the base of my packer and it's real, it's perfect, he's jacking me off and it feels good, so fucking good.

"Do you like it when I play with your dick?"

I nod frantically. I'm close, so close—

—*Stunning*—his voice is resonant, melodic in my head.

—*Daddy*—I come with a shuddering whine, the pleasure shaking from my body. I can't see, I can't think about anything but *him* and *mate* and *Daddy*. My mouth latches to the side of his neck, sucking and licking at the salty, sweaty skin as I ride out the aftershocks of my orgasm.

It takes nothing but a shove of his loose shorts to free Javier's erection. A few pumps of my hand and then he's coming, cock pulsing and spilling over my fist. His breaths are ragged, like the orgasm I just gave him was so much more than a brief handjob.

"I cannot believe you are here," he says breathlessly, kissing my cheeks. "I never thought—"

"Hey." I curl my palm around his bearded jaw, the dark hair thick and soft. "Javi, I'm here."

"I know." Turning his face, he presses a kiss to my palm. "Sometimes you have to say these things out loud, you know? The impossible dreams that were always out of reach. You," he pauses to clear his throat. "I worry you do not have a choice in this, and whatever ancient magic this is means you are being robbed of a life or a partner who is young and vibrant like you."

"What are you talking about? I chose you without knowing about the 'mate thing.'" A smile plays on his lips and he shakes his head, expression fond. "You're exactly what I want."

I can tell there is still lingering doubt, but when I try to respond a yawn overtakes me. Javier helps me up, and strangely, it already feels routine to rinse off with him in the crowded shower, to brush our teeth side by side, and to climb up to the loft bed.

When I'm snuggled with my back pressed up against his hairy belly, his thumb brushes over the scars across my chest. "I can't wait to swim with you," I say into the dim darkness.

He's quiet for a moment before responding. "Rest, sireno," he murmurs.

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Chapter 17

Stuck With Me

Javier

THE BED IS EMPTY when I wake up.

Frowning, I crawl out of the bed, my limbs stiff and tingling as I carefully back my way down the ladder.

Aleks is not in the bathroom, although there is condensation on the mirror and a wet towel tossed on top of the toilet seat. Shaking my head, I hang it up over the shower rod.

He is not in the living room or the kitchen, and the little back deck is empty. I check the bathroom again, to be sure.

I am not worried. There is still plenty of time before we need to be at the pool for the medal round. I just thought—

Never mind what I thought. Aleks is perfectly capable of taking care of himself. There is no reason to worry.

I scowl down at my hairy belly as I take a piss. *Dios*, I cannot believe I am going to be competing today. Me? Artistic swimming? A part of me still thinks this is an elaborate dream, and I will wake up to find Aleks curled up at my side with his lips wrapped around my thumb.

The door slams open. “Javier? Where are you?”

Thank the gods. “In here, sireno.”

Bare feet slap on the floor and his face appears in the open doorway. When he sees me he smiles, wide and eager, and *fuck* I am putty in his

hands. “Hi,” he says.

I give my soft cock a tug and a shake and tuck myself back into the boxers I slept in. “Good morning, boy.” Turning on the sink, I rinse my hands off.

Aleks crowds me from behind and rests his chin on top of my shoulder. We make eye contact in the mirror, and his grin turns mischievous. “I’ve decided something.”

“Oh, really?”

“Mmhm.” One of his hands reaches around my middle, fingers trailing through the thick hair on the underside of my stomach. The light touch sends a shiver of pleasure down my back. “You shouldn’t ever wear a shirt.”

I cannot help it. I laugh—a loud, startled sound bursting from my chest.

He playfully smacks my shoulder. “Don’t laugh, Daddy. And, while we’re on the subject, I think I’m going to make a no pants rule for you, too.”

“So you make the rules now?” I shift my weight back slightly, pressing my back into him. He is slender, sure, but my mate is strong.

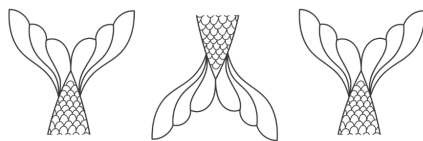
Rather than answering my question, he kisses the side of my neck. “I got us breakfast,” he mumbles against my skin. “It’s from the dining hall, but the bagels and smoked salmon looked good this morning.”

“Getting us breakfast is my job,” I grumble, even as warmth fills my chest.

“I wanted to. Even though nothing in the world feels as good as you taking care of me, sometimes I’m going to do things for you. I’m going to take care of you too, Javi.”

I swallow around the tightness in my throat. “How am I so lucky,” I whisper, my voice low and wrecked.

“We are lucky, Daddy.” With a playful nip at my skin, Aleks pulls me back by the hips, clumsily guiding me out of the bathroom and into the kitchen. “Now eat, and then we’re going to do some stretching on the porch. We have a medal to win.”



There is no way in hell this will work.

I tug at the loose-fitting white blouse Cora found at a clothing boutique in a nearby town. Paired with wide brown pants like something a yoga teacher would wear, I have never felt more ridiculous in my life.

It was Cora's idea to weave siren mythology into our performance. According to her, having me play the part of a fallen, drowning pirate will only add to the romance and drama of the piece. Aleks is without any makeup, any adornment beyond the green of his scales and fins, pale and luminescent.

The thing is, even though self-consciousness tugs at me, it is nothing compared to the looming dread making it harder and harder to breathe. This is Aleks' moment, and somehow he has convinced himself that bringing *me*, an inexperienced *human* man with a body more suited for cuddles and power lifting than a graceful sport like artistic swimming into his routine, is his best shot at winning.

We practiced all day yesterday. Cora was in the water with us, making suggestions and recommendations. She is an amazing swimmer, with an eye for composition I admire. It would not surprise me in the least if she becomes a coach someday.

Everything feels perfect and right when I am in the water with Aleks. That is not the problem.

As his coach, I have been able to help him, to take care of the man who means more to me than anyone else in the world. Being of service to him, standing by him while he achieves his dreams, is all I have ever wanted.

It is my job to take care of him, and the thought of letting him down has my breakfast threatening to come back up again.

"Javier."

I close my eyes and heave a sigh.

"Are you okay?"

I should lie. I should reassure him, because he needs to be focused, he needs to be at his best before he goes out there, but I cannot bring myself to lie. Not now, when he is looking at me with concern and care written clearly across his face.

"I do not want to ruin this for you," I say, rubbing my hand across my beard. "You have worked so hard for this, Aleks, and now you are stuck with me and I—"

Aleks' hands are on my face, fingers splayed across my cheeks as he brings his forehead down to press against mine. "Javier," he says, his voice

hoarse, before there is a rush across our bond, an unstoppable current of: *mate and yours and we are beautiful together, don't you feel it and in all of my years in the water it has never felt the way it does when I swim with you.*

I close my eyes, sinking into the comfort of *him*. "I am nervous," I admit.

Aleks' lips brush over each of my eyelids. It is such a sweet, gentle gesture. Funny how so much of my role in my relationships has been to be a provider, and now here I am in the hands of a man who gives me so much in return.

"I don't know how to describe it," Aleks says, "But with you in the water with me, I feel invincible. Swimming has never been as easy as it is with you."

Opening my eyes, I meet his pale gaze. He is frowning, and I reach up, smoothing the wrinkle between his brows. "I wish I could give you everything," I say.

"You already do, you big, silly man."

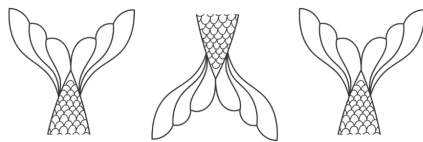
I scoff, indignant. "Big silly man?"

He laughs, his whole face alight with relaxed, unencumbered joy.

Fingers brush through my hair and he says: "We've got this. The first time we danced together it was *magic*. Now, we get to do it again."

A part of me wants to protest, but an even louder voice, one that comes from the full warmth residing beside my heart, believes him.

"Okay, sireno," I say.



It is too quiet in the arena. For the crowds of people packed into the stands, it is uncanny how still the air feels around me.

The judges looked at us like we had lost our minds when we handed over the coach's card, which outlined each element and point value of our routine. Maybe it was because Aleks had chosen a human partner, something considered a major disadvantage in a division where the competitors have the physical advantage of a tail. Or maybe it was because I informed them our performance would be without music. When I saw the flash of uncertainty cross Alina's face, I smiled.

We probably will not win. It is unlikely, given my complete and utter lack of skill. But we are going to do something worth noticing.

I can only imagine what people are saying. There has never been a human and siren duet before, and I bet the commentators are all over the storyline of “artistic swimming coach turned athlete.” I am not used to this many eyes on me, and I am struck with a surge of admiration for what Aleks, and every other person who competes at this level, puts themselves through. Simply standing here in front of the crowd is an act of courage.

The buzz of whispers and conversation from the stands as we took our places on deck has been replaced by a tense, anticipating silence.

The cement deck is hot on my bare feet, but it feels good, the heat reminding me to stay present in my body. My back is to the water, my heels right at the edge of the pool. Before me, a few yards away, stands Aleks.

He wears his vocal filter strapped to his face, at least for now. There is no way they would let us begin without him wearing it.

In his eyes, a storm rages. He, at least, is ready.

Funny how, even after years of coaching, I want to laugh in the face of my own advice. *Breathe*, I would tell swimmers in the final moments before performing. *Let your body do the work. Do not overthink it. You have practiced this.*

Aleks gives me a nod, along with a wave of warmth along the bond. He believes in this. In us. In *me*.

I nod in return.

Slowly he starts to move, walking toward me like a predator stalking their prey. When he is close enough to reach out and touch me he stops.

Even though we have practiced this part, I hold my breath.

The next movement is impossibly quick, one of his feet coming up to press against my chest. There is a long, suspended moment where he holds the position, and then, with a solid shove, I tip back into the water.

It is more tepid than cold. My clothes billow around me and I fight every instinct to swim back to the surface. Instead I sink, my open eyes fixed on the wavering surface above me. I remember to let my arms and legs hang loosely above me, creating the visual of a drowning man reaching for air even as I drop lower and lower into the pool.

My back bumps the bottom, and I wait.

There is pressure in my lungs, but it is not urgent. Not yet.

Green and peach flicker above me, and then there is a rush of pale bubbles. My vision is blurred, but I would know the tailed figure who emerges anywhere. I watch him swim in wide spirals around the glass walls of the pool.

All of a sudden, he is right there, hovering above me. Even with my blurred vision, I see his mouth, his lips soft and pulled into a smile.

The vocal filter is gone. He is here, without anything protecting the world from his song.

I reach for him, and it is instinct, want, *need* and *home* and *mate* as he dips down, pressing his lips to mine.

I breathe deeply from him, filling my lungs. And, pressing my feet to the bottom of the pool, I push off, and, with his song filling every part of me, our dance begins.

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Chapter 18

My Mate, My Breath

Aleks

OH, IT FEELS *GOOD* to sing.

My voice is a hum in the water, the warmth in my chest finally, *finally* can flow freely out of me as it's always longed to do. My throat is raw, but it doesn't matter, not when there is a song I need to sing for the world.

I have danced with many different sirens throughout my years of competing. Cousins, siblings, other sirens from the colony my mother deemed "compatible." I'm used to watching out of the corners of my eyes, trying to be one with those around me. We chased perfection, adjusting ourselves into the perfect piece of a whole—pulling back here and giving a little more there, moving an arm to the left to better align with someone shorter. All of it done in the interest of the team. Of crafting the perfect performance.

I don't have to do that now. I dance, and Javier is with me. I dance as myself, and he's right here, himself, with his beautiful body, serious eyes, and strength.

In our whirlwind of rehearsals, we discovered the power of Javier's egg-beater kicks. It isn't a shock, really, with those thick thighs of his. But beyond keeping his own chest elevated out of the water, he could support my weight above him as well.

Now, under the midday sun with the eyes of the judges on us, I beat my tail once and launch from the water. My song reaches a crescendo as I arch backwards through the air. After all those practices coming up short, of struggling to clear the water, the air on my tail feels like victory.

Reaching my hands back and over my head I listen for another song—the silent call of my mate—following the sound until my webbed fingers find skin.

I tighten my hold. It takes all of my strength and focus to push my tail upright toward the sky, to pause in a perfect handstand on Javier's wide shoulders and hold the position as Javier rotates us in a slow, clockwise circle.

Taking a steadying breath, I shift my weight to my right arm, lifting my left and extending it out into the air beside me.

Applause filters in from the crowd, but I don't pay attention to them. For the first time in my life I'm dancing with no care in the world but what my partner and I are creating.

When I dismount, diving headfirst into a tight spiral around Javier's body, my song shifts in my throat. My voice grows louder, more urgent, and it's a song of triumph and finding home.

Underwater, I fold my body in half, and with a strong pull of my arms, I push my tail straight up and out of the water in a seamless barracuda thrust. From my vantage point upside down, I watch as Javier brings his arms up by his head and twists them, the motion sending him into a slow spiral as he sinks down below the surface.

He's beautiful under the water. His hair flows around him, silky and dark as it obscures his features. Swimming with him shouldn't be this easy, this effortless. But it is. Dancing with him like this feels more natural than any routine I've ever performed.

I dance more beautifully with a big, soft-bodied man in his forties than any trained siren. *Mate, mine*, my song echoes through the water around us.

We are done with the tricks. Every figure has been executed, each lift done to the best of our ability.

Convention would have had us choreograph a dramatic ending, one to put our best, most show-stopping attributes on display. The problem is, our best attribute is our bond, a quiet and subtle thing carrying more weight than any physical feat.

This is my favorite part of the routine. We begin by circling the edges of the pool, moving opposite each other, maintaining the polarity between us for a full rotation before we both dive below the surface.

Gradually, we get closer, even as we get deeper and deeper into the water. I can feel Javier's lungs beginning to protest, but he is strong, so strong, and we have time.

I realize in this moment, as I gaze at Javier through the water, how close I came to missing out on this. It's an impossible set of circumstances that allowed me to discover my mate. I could have died all those years ago just as easily, alone in a cenote without realizing I'd been overheard.

There's a reason there hasn't been a mated siren in hundreds of years. The cost, the potential of an untimely death, the improbability of finding the one person who you are fated to be with—it's all beyond comprehension.

And yet, here I am, watching my mate change course, propelling himself toward me with powerful strokes. Bubbles trail over his face, and I swim to meet him.

Javier is doing all of this for me, and I love him for it.

I love him, I love him, and *fuck*, I love him.

We collide in the middle of the pool. My hands find his thick beard and his cradle my jaw, and his legs intertwine with my tail as we begin to float upward toward the surface. My lips press to his, opening, and I give my mate my breath.

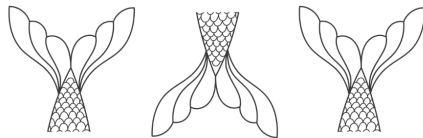
I want to stay here forever. Here, poised, at the end of my song, with Javier's eyes on me.

—*It is time, Aleks.*

—*What if—*

—*They do not matter. Not really. You made magic today.*

—*We did, Javi. We did.*



I've stood here before, on the concrete deck of a competition pool, dressed in track pants and an itchy polo shirt, with hundreds of eyes on me, waiting for a score.

No previous experience could have prepared me for this, though.

Javier's arm is hot where he stands pressed against my side. Occasionally, his knuckles drag over the back of my hand, as though I need to be reminded he's there beside me. As though I could forget him—*my mate, my fucking mate*.

We did it. After all of it, we did it.

I'm suddenly exhausted. Not my body—my legs are strong and steady under me. But something in me feels like it's deflating, the air slipping out of a balloon of rage and revenge that has sustained and carried me for so long.

There's nothing to prove anymore. I'm here, waiting for a score, to be recognized for the perfect performance I'll always share with the man who stood by me when everyone else in this sport looked the other way.

Even that notion is beginning to unravel. Cora is out there, and the merpeople I've met through Javier—Zephyr and Cadmus and Amara, all people who I can now call friends. There was a story I told myself about community, about friendship and abandonment. Now, I know there are exceptions.

Up on the elevated panel, I watch the judges calculate our scores. There are whispered conversations between them. Heads shaking. Quick nods. My gaze lingers on my mother, on her pinched face and rigid posture.

She doesn't love me. I hate that there is still a part of myself that feels betrayed by her rejection. *She doesn't love me, she doesn't want me, she never wanted you for more than your body, for more than you being an instrument in the water—*

—Sireno.

Javier's voice is a careful caress in my mind. I hadn't realized I'd been projecting my thoughts to him.

—*I'm okay*—I reassure him.

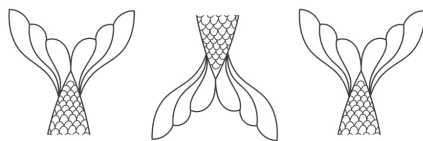
—*You are loved. You are wanted. You are incredible, and you are so much more than an instrument in the water.*

The crowd goes quiet around us as our score posts to the jumbotron. The final number is a result of dropping the highest and lowest of the judge's scores, and averaging the remaining numbers.

Oh, gods. A smile stretches across my face and I grab Javier's hand. It's a good score, good enough to—

The leaderboard shifts.

“Holy shit,” I breathe, and I’m full, so fucking full, only this time it isn’t rage or revenge buoying me. It’s love and hope and *mate mate Javier mine Daddy*, and when I look at him, he’s already watching me with a proud, brilliant smile.



“Javi,” I whisper to the sweating and fidgeting man standing beside me. “You need to stop moving.”

It works for about three seconds, before his large body starts shifting from side to side again. Once again, we’re standing on the pool deck, only now there’s a podium set up in front of the gathered crowd.

I’ve done this part before, too. I’ve given half of my attention to a producer with a headset and clipboard reminding us of the logistics of walking the twenty feet from where we stand to the podium. I’ve followed the exact cues for when to walk out, where to face, and when to climb up onto the correct step of the three-tiered podium.

Javier’s anxious movements are making it impossible to concentrate. “Do you need to pee?”

That gets his attention. “Are you trying to Daddy me right now?” He tries to keep his voice low, but the human producer still shoots us a disapproving look.

I press my lips together, trying not to laugh.

“Parthenope and Zamora, you are up,” the producer announces.

I move on auto pilot, and it takes me a moment to realize Javier isn’t moving. Reaching back, I thread our fingers together and tug him into step beside me.

—*You okay, Daddy?*

—*Yes. No. I am nervous.*

I squeeze his hand. —*This is the easy part. All you have to do is stand there and look pretty.*

Javier’s low huff is barely audible over the sound of the crowd, applause and cheers surrounding us. I smile, and my eyes burn because these strangers who watch us, at least, have accepted that I am here.

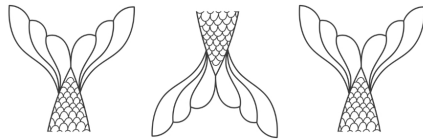
Hand in hand, Javier and I step onto the lowest level of the podium. We bend forward, and when the weight of the bronze medal settles around my neck, I watch a tear fall from my cheek, darkening the ground below me.

“In third place in the duet category, for the first time in Clash of Creatures history, siren and human mates, Aleks Parthenope and Javier Zamora.”

We straighten as the sound swells around us, but I only have eyes for Javier. His shirt is too small, and I love how it rides up his belly, exposing a strip of hairy skin. The medal resting on his chest looks almost comically small. It’s still hard to believe I get to call him mine.

His smile is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

—*I am so proud of you*—his words slip across our bond.



There’s a mic shoved in my face. I want to find Javier, but as soon as the medal ceremony wrapped up we were both swarmed by reporters.

I look around for him, but there’s nothing but a sea of people around the pool deck. Giving up, I nod at the green-haired basilisk holding the mic. I’ve met Clio Solandra before. Everyone knows the podcast she co-hosts with Kent Truthpelt—Behind the Ring, it’s called.

Now, I’m pinned in place by her glittering eyes. “So, Aleks,” she begins, her voice smooth and practiced. “Tell us what happened out there. What we saw from you and your human partner, Javier Zamora, was unlike anything in Clash of Creatures history. You broke international protocol by removing your vocal filter mid-performance. You had us all fearing for your life!”

A part of me wants to roll my eyes, but I resist. “Yeah, well, it’s been an eventful few days in my life.”

She laughs. “That’s one way to put it. For those who don’t understand sirens, can you explain the significance of taking off the filter and what it means?”

“Honestly, I didn’t even know this until it happened, but when a siren bonds with a mate, our song isn’t deadly anymore. Not to us, and not to others.” I see the excitement in her eyes, but I beat her to it when I add: “My partner, Javier Zamora, is my mate. We have bonded, and were able to do what we did because of our connection.”

“Incredible,” she says, eyes shining. “Your song certainly made an impression on the audience, and the judges. Other than one outlier, you received full marks for your routine.”

Oh, I bet she would love for me to talk about how my mother gave us the lowest possible execution score while the rest of the judges each awarded us perfect scores. Instead, I offer: “I’m just happy I was able to be here competing at the Clash.”

“Everyone is wondering about the story of your bond with your partner. From what I understand, fated mates are unheard of in siren communities. Can you tell us how your bond came about?”

“No. The bond is between Javier and I.”

She looks mildly put out, but quickly pivots. “There was a certain amount of controversy about your return to artistic swimming, Aleks. I understand that after qualifying for the games, you appealed to perform a solo—an appeal which was denied after you arrived in Monstralia. What can you say to those who think you or others like you should not have a place at the games?”

“I didn’t know if I was going to get a chance to come back to competing.” I glance down at the brushed-bronze sitting against my flat chest. “There were people who tried to keep me from artistic swimming. My own kind—sirens—didn’t want me to be here, but why? Because I’m a trans man? It’s hypocritical, when artistic swimming has never been divided by gender, but by the physical designation of having a tail, or not having a tail. My existence is not a threat. Today, the best athletes in the world were awarded for their efforts. A duo of sirens won silver. A mermaid and merman took gold. And, in spite of everything, in spite of having to scramble to change my routine and find a partner days before the competition, I am taking home a bronze medal.”

I see Javier, then, on the other side of the pool, looking unwaveringly confident as he navigates his own interview. Like he can feel me, he glances up. When his eyes meet mine I smile, watching his expression mirror mine.

My chest is full when I turn back to Clio. “None of this would have been possible without Javier. First, as my coach, and then as my partner. He believed in me when no one else did.”

“Well, I want to congratulate you and Javier on your achievement here today. One last question—can you tell us what is next for you?”

It's a good question. A perfectly reasonable one. It's also the first time I've thought about what comes after this. Every part of my life has been geared toward getting here, to this moment. Now I'm on the other side of it. I've medaled again at the Clash of Creatures...so what *does* come next?

"I'm not sure," I answer honestly. "Whatever happens, I'm going to keep swimming. Now that I can sing, I don't know if I'll ever be able to stop."

I've just broken through the circle of reporters when Cora comes running towards me, leaping into my arms and wrapping her legs around me. I stumble, laughing, before finding my balance.

"Oh my god, Aleks, you guys were stunning. Seriously, you should have *seen* the way everyone freaked out when you took off your vocal filter. And when you sang—ugh, it was beautiful."

It feels good to hug her back. For all my talk of leaving my family behind, something settles in me when the purple scales on her neck catch against my cheek. Even now, she feels and smells like Yucatec'a. No longer home, but still somewhere important. A place that made me who I am.

"Thank you for everything," I whisper against her skin. "For swimming with me, for helping us pull this routine off. We couldn't have done it without you."

She wriggles free and stands in front of me, looking perfectly like *herself* in her ripped shorts and crop top. "If you really want to repay me, can you and your mate come watch me in the ensemble performance in two days?"

"We won't miss it," I assure her.

The crowd shifts around us, and I catch a glimpse of dark hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail, and the smile slips from my face.

I know she is here. She was impossible to miss, sitting up there on the panel above the pool. But now, after it all? Of course it wasn't enough to award us a laughably low score in comparison to the rest of the judges. Of course she can't walk away and let me have this moment.

Her eyes lock on me, and I drop my gaze. I hate this, hate how after all of this I still feel so weak and small and *young* under her judgemental gaze. Cora, glancing over to see what has me going silent, mutters a quiet "*Fucking bitch*," I barely hear.

When a wide chest fills my vision, I melt, the tension and fear and *please don't make me see her* replaced with a steady stream of *I am here, boy, mate, mine. I am here.*

A finger tips my chin up, and I meet Javier's serene, brown gaze. He's searching me, looking for all the words I don't know how to say. "Would you like to speak with her?" He asks.

I swallow roughly, and when I reply, my voice is small. "No."

"Then we will walk away, sireno." Leaning in, he presses a firm kiss to my lips. "Come on. We have something to celebrate." He taps the bronze medal resting between his soft pecs and smiles at me like I'm the only man in the world.

"Beach club tonight?" Cora asks, watching us with a fond smile.

Javier nods.

"Perfect. I'll catch you guys later."

With Javier's firm hand on my back, I'm steered between people on the deck. Some say congratulations as I pass. Others ignore me. When I glance over my shoulder, my mother is nowhere to be seen.

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Chapter 19

Who You Are

Javier

“DADDY, HAVE YOU SEEN my blue shirt? The short sleeved one with the sparrows embroidered on the pocket?” I hear Aleks rummaging around up in the loft. “Ow, fuck, my toe!”

“Slow down, Aleks,” I call out. In the bathroom mirror, I tilt my head to finish trimming the underside of my beard. I stripped down to my boxers as soon as we got back to the bungalow, with the plan of cleaning up my beard before showering.

“I swear it was here this morning.” Another thud, and a muttered curse. “Damn it, I really want that shirt.”

It took us an hour to get back after the medal ceremony. After the interviews and gathering our things from the locker room, I insisted we stop at the dining hall to grab food.

Aleks has not slowed down to eat yet. From the moment we walked in the door, he has been pacing and buzzing and checking his phone. His thoughts are loud and jumbled along our bond, and he emits a wild, frantic energy that shows no signs of slowing down.

I carefully clean up the hair clippings. “Come shower, boy!”

He makes a loud, frustrated noise. “I need to find this shirt first!”

“Shirt later, Aleks. Shower. Now.”

He is in nothing but briefs and white tube socks when he stomps into the bathroom, face twisted in a scowl. He does not look like a man who just made history, a man who defied the forces who tried to keep him from returning to his sport.

I do not know what is bothering him, but I plan to find out.

“Come here.”

His shoulders drop as he approaches me, and I see exhaustion in his heavy eyes.

“Time to get these off,” I say, dropping my voice to the lower, softer register I reserve for moments like this. I pull his briefs down and over his hips, holding them steady while he steps out of them. Once his socks are off too, I toss them into a corner. “Help me with mine.”

His hands are on the waistband of my boxers, shoving them down and out of the way. I turn the shower on, adjusting the temperature to be as hot as Aleks likes it.

As soon as we are both in the crowded space, Aleks’ head tips forward, resting on my shoulder. His transformed ear tickles my cheek, and I feel his breath slow.

“It was a big day today.” I rub my hands up and down his back.

“Yeah.”

“It can feel destabilizing to be on the other side of a huge goal, especially something years in the making. Before today, you knew exactly what you were working towards. Every day had a purpose. Now, I imagine things are uncertain.”

Aleks lets out a groan. “Are you in my head right now?”

I laugh. —*No, sireno. But I can be.*

His laugh is a cool huff on my heated skin. —*I feel so weird. I mean, I’m happy, of course I’m happy, but people are talking to me like I’m a hero and I did some wonderful thing, when all I wanted was to swim. I just wanted to swim, and to be me.*

Steam billows around us, and I look down at the iridescent droplets clinging to Aleks’ skin. This man has given so much of himself in the pursuit of his dream, and now, for the first time, he is on the other side of it. The bronze medals sitting on the counter of the kitchenette are proof of everything he has worked for.

“We cannot control the stories the world tells about us,” I say out loud. “And whether or not you set out to change the world, your performance

today will ripple outward. It will touch the lives of others. Seeing you on the podium, joyously living as yourself, could be the reason someone lives to fight another day.” His breaths quicken. “But love, none of those things change who you are. This is your life. *Yours*. And I am here to help you fight for the life you want to live.”

Aleks presses closer to me, his arms wrapping around my body. “I don’t know what life I want to live,” he admits. “Everything has been about the Clash, about competing again.”

“Then we give you time,” I reply. “There is no rush. Every day, when we get up and eat and talk and love and fuck, we are making the tiny choices that all add up to this thing we call life.”

Humming, Aleks steps back, straightening to his full height. His smile is soft and so, so full of care as he looks down at me. “Where’d you get so wise?” he asks, sparkling with humor.

“It comes with the gray hairs.”

Aleks laughs, the sound loud and echoing in the small space. “What about you? What do you want to do with your life?”

It is something I have been thinking about ever since I stood up on the podium with Aleks’ hand in mine, the weight of a medal—a medal *I* had won—resting on my chest.

What do I want to do with my life?

“Right now, more than anything, I want to learn about what life looks like with you,” I begin. “Being here together has been a dream, but I am the most excited about mundane, uneventful days. I want to know how you relax in your own space, and see what you cook for yourself.”

“Um, I am a notoriously terrible cook,” Aleks says, even as his eyes go soft and his lips curve in a self-deprecating smile. “Damian says I need to use more spices.”

I reach a hand out, trailing my fingers up the thin line of dark hair below his navel. “Something for us to work on, then.”

“I’ve been told I’m a stubborn pain in the ass. You might get tired of me.”

He tosses the words out between us like a joke, but there, hovering under the surface, is uncertainty. It is small, barely noticeable through the waves of reassuring *mate mine Daddy Javi*.

His jaw fits perfectly in my palms, and I pull his face down until the tip of his nose presses against mine. “Aleks,” I say. “Aleks, my love. Do you understand how much I feel for you?”

I hear his sharp inhale.

“Sireno. Desde el primer momento en que comprendí quién eras realmente, todo en mi mundo cambió. Los huesos de mi pecho se han reorganizado para hacer espacio para tu alma y que pueda estar junto a la mía donde pertenece. He pasado la mayor parte de mi vida buscando un hogar, y finalmente, estoy aquí. Mi hogar es donde estás.”

It is easier to speak of love in my native tongue. I know Aleks understands, but I watch his eyes carefully as the meaning behind my words sinks in. *Sireno. Since the first moment when I realized who you really are, everything about my world has changed. My bones are reorganized to make space in my chest for your soul, so it can be in its rightful place beside mine. I have spent most of my life searching for a home, and finally, I am here. My home is where you are.*

“Javi,” he whispers, his voice thick.

“I am here, Aleks.”

—*Are you sure this is real?*

—*Do you hear my heart? Do you feel my skin?*

—Yes.

—*Then yes, boy. It is all real.*

Aleks buries his face into the side of my neck, and I hold him close. My chest is warm and full of every feeling my mate is not ready to put into words. For all the talking Aleks does, I have already learned he is more likely to show me the depths of his feelings with his actions than put them into words.

I know he cares. I know he mirrors my curiosity and desire to understand every tiny piece of him. I know a piece of my soul sits beside his heart, safe and protected inside his beautiful, scarred chest.

“I’m happy.” Aleks’ voice is cool on my skin. “I’m so, so happy.”

“Me too, sireno.”

“Can I wash your hair?”

A lazy, contented smile spreads across my face, and I breathe out, emptying my lungs. *Home. I am home, here in this shower, with a man I never would have sought out if the Fates had not put me in his path again. Here, with him, I am exactly where I am supposed to be.*

“Please,” I respond, pressing a quick kiss to his cool, wet mouth.

He grabs my shoulders and turns us so my back is to the spray. “Now lean your head back, Daddy. We’ve got to get all pretty before we go out to

celebrate.”

I comply, tilting my head back and sighing as Aleks’ long, webbed fingers trail through my hair.

—*Thank you*—comes across the bond.

—*Always, sireno.*

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Chapter 20

Something Cosmic and Inevitable

Aleks

IT'S LATE. SWEAT IS sticky on my body. I took my shirt off hours ago, and it hangs from the back pocket of my cut-off denim shorts. After hours of dancing in the sand, in the ocean, back to the sand, all with my body pressed tightly to Javier's, I'm not sure whose sweat is whose. I don't care, though. I like the feeling of having a part of him on me.

Our clasped hands swing between us as we walk up the path. Our palms, like the rest of us, are slick with sweat, but I don't want to let go.

"I think I deserve a cigarette."

Javier snorts. "Of course you do."

"What? We fucking crushed it. I should get a reward."

"Language, boy."

I melt at the admonishment. It's impulse, then, the next words that fall from my lips. They feel obvious, like putting words to something already true, already felt and known between us.

"I love you."

Gravel crunches under our feet as Javier stops.

—*Sorry, Daddy, I should have—*

Javier turns me around, tugging me closely against him so his belly touches mine. He reaches out with his hands, cradling my face as his thumbs brush over my cheeks. "I love you, too."

I feel it in our bond, in the presence of *him* in my chest every time I take a breath. I know he loves me when he kneels beside the pool and tells me I can do it, when he feeds me by hand and worships my body. The words he said earlier, spoken in Spanish over the soft roar of the shower, words I had never let myself imagine someone saying to me.

He loves me. My mate, he— I crash my mouth into his, shoving my tongue into his mouth without finesse or grace. He meets me with equal hunger, groaning as he matches my urgency.

I'm pressing into him when he pulls away. "Not here, love," he says, running his tongue over his spit-slicked lips.

"But the first time," I start, thinking back to humping his leg in a dark alcove.

He shakes his head. "It was not like this yet, and you know it."

"But you knew I was your mate." It's something I've wondered about, thinking back on those early days when we'd newly arrived in Monstralia.

"Understanding the existence of a potential fated mate gave me no ownership of you," Javier says, his voice firm, unwavering as he looks at me. "*Dios*, I wanted to help you, to care for you, but you did not belong to me until you chose me in return. I am the luckiest man in the world, Aleks, to know a bond like what we have. But if you had told me no, if you had not wanted this, with me, I would have walked away."

I tip forward, needing to touch him, to be close to him in the wake of his words. His neck is sweaty where I press my face against him, but I don't let that stop me from nuzzling into him. I lick his skin, the salty bite of his sweat egging me on until I'm sucking unabashedly at the base of his neck.

"Boy," he warns, his hands drifting down to grip my hips.

I respond by sucking harder. I'm going to leave a mark, and I find I rather like the idea of him walking through the rest of the games with my love bite bruising his skin.

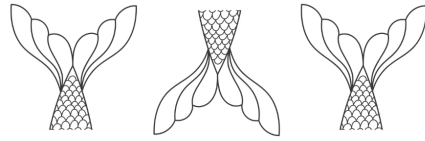
He yanks me back, and his gaze is all heat and want and stern Daddy and *fuck* I'm hard and I want him. I want him now, public indecency be damned. Before I can suggest stepping into the bushes to get busy, he unzips his fanny pack and hands me a sucker.

"Something to keep your mouth busy until we get home," he says, gaze fixed on my mouth as I wrap my lips around the sweet and suck.

"Better?" He asks, his voice gone low and rough.

I glare at him for show, but I nod.

He squeezes my hand, tugging me toward our bungalow. “Good boy.”



We barely make it to the bed.

When Javier falls back onto the mattress, he's naked, sweat has flattened his dark hair against his skin and his cock is hard and wet with my spit. His foreskin is pulled back to show the dark purple head glistening with precum.

I crawl over him, just as naked as he is. My dick is throbbing and standing rigid, wet from Javier's mouth when we sixty-nined downstairs on the couch.

“Come here,” Javier commands, reclining back on our bed with his head propped up on the pillows.

I do as he says until I hover over his chest.

“Closer,” he says, and I scoot until my cock is right there against his lips. His tongue darts out, catching the sensitive tip, and he makes a satisfied noise in his chest as I gasp. “My perfect, perfect boy with his perfect cock,” he whispers, his words reverent, before wrapping his lips around me and sucking, hard.

I cry out, the sensation of his mouth almost too much. I've already approached the edge more times than I can count, and I can't come yet, I won't come until—

I hear the *snick* of a bottle, and then a slick, wet finger presses against my hole. I sigh, relief warring with the overstimulation of his mouth on my dick.

“Daddy,” I plead as he toys with my rim, circling and tugging gently at the edges. “Please, I need, I'm so *empty*, Daddy, fucking please—”

He pulls off my cock, his beard and lips glistening. “I know what you need, boy. Bear down for me.”

I comply, pushing as one of his thick fingers slides into me. The pressure is intense, but perfect, so fucking perfect as he starts to move.

His mouth is back on me, and one finger becomes two, becomes three and I'm panting, whimpering, my feet cramping as I try to hold myself back from the edge. Maybe if I let go, if I come just this once, I'll—

—*Not yet, boy. Do not come.*

—*I—fuck, Daddy, I don’t know if I can wait.*

—*You are going to come with my cock in you. Not a moment sooner, sireno.*

He pulls his fingers out and his mouth off at the same time. I groan, every part of me hovering right on the edge of letting go, and a painful throb goes through my abdomen. The bottle clicks again, and I’m there, hovering and quivering, waiting, trusting he has me. He’s my Daddy, my mate, my love, and he’s going to take care of me.

He always takes care of me.

Hands on my hips guide me to lay on my back on the bed. My thighs sprawl, and I take in the man above me. Strong, steady, movements sure as he lubes his thick cock and smears the excess against my already slick hole. His chest and belly heave with his heavy breaths, and he leans over me, catching my mouth in a slow kiss.

“I love you,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I love you, too,” I reply, my voice wrecked and my heart on fire for him.

Bracing one hand above me, he places his cock against me.

“Come on,” I whine, desperate for him. “Daddy, come—”

He pushes into me, and it’s burn and pressure and ache and relief all woven together. My eyes flutter closed and I do nothing but *feel*. My muscles clench around him, adjusting to his size. Above me, Javier exhales a ragged, stuttering breath like he can’t quite believe this is happening, that we are real and here and together, like this.

As he pulls back and thrusts forward, his free hand falls to my dick. He jacks me off to the pace of his thrusts, syncing his movements with mine.

It’s all a dance, then. It was different, when we danced in the water and sealed our bond. I held his breath in my lungs, and there was something cosmic and inevitable about how our bodies came together.

Now, we are two men who want each other, who love each other more than I ever thought it was possible to love another person.

Javier’s pace quickens, his soft chest swaying above me. I crane my neck, latching onto one of his dark nipples. He groans as I suck, and the words fall from his mouth wash over me.

“Such a good boy, sucking on Daddy, taking what you need. Fuck, boy, your ass is perfect, your cock hard and ready for me. I love you, Aleks. Do

you hear me? I fucking love you, and—*fuck, yes*—I am going to take such good care of you. My boy,” his voice sounds broken now, like he can’t quite get enough air, and his fingers on my cock move faster. “Come for me, boy. Come for Daddy.”

I come with a sob. It moves through me, a crashing wave that starts at my cock and rolls through my body, stringing my orgasm out longer and longer and longer and *fuck* it’s too much, but Daddy’s got me and I trust him. I trust him as the *too much* turns my mind into a white haze, even as another orgasm hits me quick and violent. Wetness gathers between my legs and the only thing keeping me sane is his hard nipple in my mouth.

Javier follows, coming deep inside me with a gasping shout I feel in my bones. His cock pulses inside me and I clench around him, wanting to do anything, everything to prolong his pleasure.

“Boy,” he breathes. His nipple slips from my mouth as he leans down, but he replaces it with his tongue before I can protest. We kiss for long minutes that escape time, our bodies soft and sweaty and sated but unwilling to part.

Finally, Javier lifts himself up, pressing a quick kiss to the tip of my nose. “Stay put,” he says. “I will be right back.”

I feel empty when he pulls out, but I’m too exhausted to do anything other than lay there. I must drift off, because the next thing I’m aware of is a warm, wet cloth against my ass.

“Daddy?” I blink, trying to get my bearings in the dim light.

“I am here,” he says softly, running the cloth over my cock and crotch. I’m sensitive, but he’s quick and gentle with his movements. Tossing the cloth aside, he grabs a bottle of water and hands it to me. “Drink.”

He smiles fondly as he watches me drink. When I’m done, I hand it back to him and he drinks the rest.

I won’t ever forget how stunning he was in the water. I knew, because I could sense the echoes of doubt and uncertainty through our bond, how nervous he was about performing. How scared he was of letting me down.

And still he went out there and delivered the performance of a lifetime.

“Remember that one time when you, Javier Zamora, won a bronze medal at the Clash of Creatures?”

He rolls his eyes at my teasing. “I barely did anything,” he retorts.

I let out an exaggerated gasp. “Excuse me, I will not stand for this slander of my mate!”

Chuckling, he lays down, his soft cheeks scrunching as he lays on his side facing me. “What am I going to do with you,” he muses, reaching out a hand and touching my cheek.

“Love me?”

It’s a silly, vulnerable thing to say, but Javier’s eyes soften and he tugs me close. “Boy, you are not ready for the love I have planned for you. Every day, I am going to love you. Every day, I will wake up and thank whichever of the Fates brought me back to you.”

My heart overflows, spilling out of my chest and over my sweaty skin, and I press my face into Javier’s hairy body and breathe.

“Go to sleep, love,” Javier’s voice vibrates against the crown of my head.

I snuggle closer, hooking my leg up and over his thighs. Unconsciously I smack my lips together, my ridiculous mouth always anxious, always needing *something*.

Above me, Javier lets out a tired chuckle. “Go on. Take what you want.” He brings his thumb to rest on his chest right in front of me.

I wet my lip with my tongue. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, love. I am sure.”

After a moment I wrap my lips around it and suck, sighing as the familiar buzzing anxiety goes quiet.

There’s a hand on my head, stroking over my shaved hair. My eyes get heavier and heavier.

—*Mate*— resounds through our bond.

—*Love*— I send back.

Epilogue

Javier

“HOLY SHIT.”

I smile, leaning against a wall with my hands in my pockets as I watch Aleks walk wide-eyed through the beach house I rented. It is nothing fancy, but the open air kitchen, thick bougainvillea trailing along the walls in full, fuschia bloom, and saltillo tile floor make the space feel like paradise. Having the gently sloping beach and the rustle of palms above us is all I wanted when I picked this place.

I need time alone with my mate. Aleks and I have spent the past six months visiting friends and chasing good weather. It was a luxury we did not take lightly, but sponsorships with a gender-inclusive underwear brand and ViperVenom, Aleks’ favorite energy drink, gave us the freedom to take some time off before needing to settle back into working.

I will never forget the look of absolute giddy joy on Aleks’ face when he saw the cases of Sonic Mango stacked up in the living room of my old house on the Mazarine Coast, the first stop on our travels. I gave him a few days of unlimited access to the caffeinated drinks, but after two days of hearing him complain about his racing heart and insomnia, I took over. He pouted, of course. He told me I was a *fuddy duddy*, whatever the hell that meant.

Now he gets one a day, and the whispered “Thank you, Daddy” makes me the happiest man alive.

I am, probably, the happiest man alive.

Our days on the Mazarine Coast with the merpeople ended when the bitter, late-summer storms blew in from the sea. Next up was a month in Soledad, where we beat the heat skinny-dipping in Aleks' secret swimming hole and eating *tostadas* and *chile con queso* with Aleks' brother, Damian.

It was clear from the moment Aleks ran up to his brother and playfully punched him in the shoulder how much the two men meant to each other. Damian's good-natured ribbing and Aleks' sharp sarcasm played off each other, and I spent hours sitting back and watching the two of them verbally sparring like there was only a finite amount of time and oxygen to be had.

Now, though, we are taking some much-needed time for ourselves.

After our flight landed in Yucatec'a, we made a quick stop at a market and then drove our rented car for three hours to this remote and wild section of the Caribe Coast. It is the perfect place: far enough away from any towns to prevent someone accidentally stumbling upon us, and only a half an hour from my *abuela's* house farther inland.

"Can we swim now?"

Aleks has already pulled off his shirt, leaving his upper body bare and his sun tanned skin on display. My eyes trail over him. He is in a pair of cut-off jean shorts that show off the new tattoo on his thigh—a black-inked bust with barbed wire scars under the chest he got done in Soledad. Now that it is fully healed, I kiss it when I lay between his thighs. The scales on the side of his neck are even more vibrant against his sun-kissed skin. I know, when I look in the mirror, there will be tiny flecks of the same shade of green in my brown eyes.

"Have you brought your stuff in?" I ask.

"No, but—"

"And the food? It needs to go in the fridge."

Aleks throws his hands up. "Daddy, *please*," he protests. "Do you see the water? It's perfect. It's so clear and the waves are so gentle!"

I cross the room, crowding his body until my stomach presses against his. My hands come up to cradle his jaw, and I kiss him, slow and sweet.

I love you, I tell him with my body. *Every day I wake up and you are here, with me*. Drawing back, I shake my head at him. "I will put the things away," I say, because I love this man and all I want is to see him happy. "Go, boy. Say hello to the water."

He kisses the tip of my nose and takes off, running across the little back patio that opens onto the beach. Sand kicks up behind him, and I snort as he almost trips trying to get out of his shorts and briefs.

I watch him run naked into the sea. His transformation hits, legs fusing, scales covering his tail, ears elongating and fins erupting from his back. Diving into the oncoming waves, he disappears from view, and I hear the echoes of his familiar song.

It only takes me a few minutes to get our things put away and by the time I get to the beach, I am sticky with sweat and my inner thighs are chafing. Taking off my clothes, I fold them on the sand next to Aleks' haphazard pile.

I walk down the gentle slope to where the waves slip up the wet, glistening sand. My toes sink down as water rushes up over my feet before the gentle pressure tugs, tugs, calls me out into the deep.

The wind is warm on my skin. The air feels like home.

I wade into the water, my breath catching in my chest as a wave splashes against my cock and balls. *Dios*, it always takes me a minute to adjust, and I dive forward, letting the saltwater catch me.

Waves rock my body and I roll onto my back, splaying my arms and legs wide. I let out a slow, contented breath, only to yelp when something cold and slippery wraps around my ankle.

"What the—" I force myself upright in the water, coming face to face with Aleks' grinning face.

"Gotcha," he says, and I recognize the feeling now as his tailfin slides up my calf.

I splash him, unable to keep my own smile from my face. "You are a menace," I growl, but there is no heat in my voice.

"And you love me." His long neck tilts to one side, and his green eyes glow in the fading light. "Do you regret any of it?"

It is shallow enough that my feet are firmly on the sandy bottom, and I take a few steps closer to him. When I extend my hand, he slides his webbed fingers over my palm. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know." He looks out toward the open sea, a soft, contemplative frown on his face. "Sometimes I think about you, about how you heard me sing and your whole life was upended. You had to leave home, to leave your family and Yucatec'a. I see how you are here, Javi. You love this place."

“I do,” I agree, because he’s right. I *do* love it here. Yucatec’a will always be my homeland. “The love I feel here is...maybe nostalgic is the right word. I am grateful to this place, and I know it will always greet me with warmth when I visit.”

A bird wheels overhead, and I watch it, wondering if it, too, was born on these shores, only to migrate away with the changing season.

Looking back at Aleks, I smile. “But I do not regret any of it. I loved the years I spent with the merpeople on the Mazarine Coast. They became my family, too. And then, after all of it, the Fates brought me back to you. And I could never regret a life that has given me a chance at love with you, Aleks. Never.”

Aleks’ smile is wobbly, and his eyes hold the pink-tinged sheen of unshed tears. “Okay,” he whispers thickly.

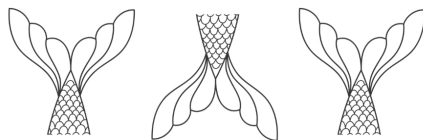
“Okay,” I echo.

—*I love you.*

—*I love you.*

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Through all the changes in the world, my *abuela*’s house is always the same.

The *limon dulce* tree in front is heavy with fruit. The concrete patio is spotless. A potted hibiscus with yellow blooms nods beside the front door.

Aleks clings to my hand, his grip too tight, but I do not stop him. It did not matter how many times I reassured him my grandmother is the kindest and most accepting person in the world—Aleks is still terrified.

—*Breathe, boy*—I command through our bond, sending warmth and love alongside my words.

“Javier,” a warm, wavering voice from the doorway calls out. I look up, and there, with her white braid wrapped around her head and her deeply wrinkled brown skin, is my *abuela*.

“Abuela,” I say, my own voice thick with emotion.

Her arms stretch out toward me, her thin wrists still adorned with silver bracelets. “Mira, mi nieto favorito está aquí de nuevo.”

I snort even as I pull her into an embrace. She calls all of us her favorite grandchildren, but I do not fault her for it. She has more than enough love to share with all of us.

I kiss the crown of her head, and she still smells like vanilla and fresh corn *masa*. “Quiero presentarte a alguien muy, muy importante, abuela. Alguien especial.” *I want to introduce you to someone very, very important*, I told her. *Someone special*.

She draws back, her eyes bright, and her warmth never fades or wavers as I beckon Aleks towards us.

He dressed up today. I told him he should wear what was comfortable, but he insisted on a pair of brown linen slacks and a pale blue button up. I helped him get dressed, reminding him with every touch that I am here, with him.

“Hola,” he says softly, his voice crackling. He clears his throat, before apologizing in broken Spanish for being out of practice.

I watch my grandmother meet my mate. I watch her wrap an arm around him and beckon him inside. I watch her serve him the food she carefully prepared, making sure his plate is never empty. I listen as she, in broken English, asks Aleks if anyone ever taught him to dance *cumbia* or *bachata*.

“Javi,” she says as she leads Aleks through the back gardens, “he tells me you are...were not always a boy.” Aleks’ posture stiffens, but my *abuela* is not done. “What is important is this—” she pauses, pointing to the left side of Aleks’ chest—“and that you love my Javi.”

I barely make out Aleks’ whispered “Gracias” as she gathers him into her thin arms. Aleks is almost doubled over, his face pressed to her shoulder, but neither of them are in any rush to move. Smiling, I head back into the house, where I start to clean up our lunch dishes.

I have been so lucky to live a life rich in love. Early rejection from my mother was quickly drowned out by the steady and unconditional love of

my *abuela*.

Aleks has never had this before. He has Damian, who is a consistent partner in crime, and of course he has me. But there is something different about the love and acceptance of an elder, and nothing makes me happier than sharing it with Aleks.

The afternoon slips by. Photo albums come out, and Aleks pores over pictures of me from my childhood. At one point, my *abuela* turns on the radio and teaches Aleks the steps for *bachata*. We dance together, Aleks and I, and he is perfect in my arms. His hips are stiff and he cannot help but frown as he concentrates on steps, but I have never enjoyed dancing with someone more.

"Can we come back tomorrow?" He asks me after we say our goodbyes and walk hand in hand to our car.

"Of course."

"She is amazing. Like I know you talked about how much you love her, but Javi, she's wonderful. She's so fucking wonderful."

I squeeze his hand. "I am glad you think so, love."

He leans against me. "Do you think she liked me?"

"I think she loved you."

I open the door for him, and watch until he is buckled before I walk around to the driver's side of the car. When I settle in my seat, I turn to find Aleks staring at me with a distant, wistful look on his face.

"Daddy?" He asks, transitioning seamlessly into the roles we fill in each other's lives.

Reaching across the console, I drag my knuckles along his jaw. "I am here, boy."

"Is this what life is going to be like? Days like today, over and over again?"

I think back to the morning, waking up to pale sunlight warming our naked, entangled bodies. We frothed lazily, sliding our bodies against each other until we both came with a gasped *I love you*. I cooked us breakfast tacos in my boxers while Aleks sat naked on the countertop and collected kisses every time I walked past.

We ate together on the beach, as the conversation drifted to what would come next. There was still time before Aleks needed to make a decision about continuing to compete at the international level. Opportunities are

coming through every day, and no matter what he decides he wants to do, there is no more doubt that there is a place for him in artistic swimming.

He belongs there.

As for me, there were coaching opportunities out there, some more appealing than others. The merpeople of the Mazarine Coast made it clear I would be welcome to return, and Aleks would have a place if he wanted to join their training and performance teams. There was also an invitation to join the coaching staff of an amateur, mixed-species team, exploring breaking the barriers between human and tailed performers.

We have choices ahead of us, but none of that worries me. Aleks and I will figure it out together.

Now, half of my mate's face is lit by the neon glow of the dashboard. I do not think I will ever get used to the stunning line of his jaw or his sharp beauty. "I cannot promise every day will be like this," I finally respond. "Some days will be hard. Some days we will have to get up and out of bed, and I am sure at some point we will be going to work. But what I can promise is I will be here. You will have me by your side, and I will love you, every day, over and over again."

The light has faded, and it is dark around us as I flip on the headlights and back the car down the narrow driveway. Happiness fills my chest, a warmth surrounding the awareness of Aleks that is as much a constant as my heartbeat.

I drive us back to our beach house with one hand on the wheel, and the other cradled between the soft palms of my mate, the man I love.

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About the Author

Taylor E. Weston is an emerging author of contemporary romance novels that follow real, flawed people navigating their way through love and the world. Her stories are people-centric, and include a realistic amount of eating and making out.

She lives in southwestern Wisconsin with her husband and son. When she isn't writing or reading, you can find her traipsing around her garden in rubber boots, talking about bald eagles, cooking with bacon, or making up stories about raccoons for her son.

Connect with Taylor at www.taylorweston.com.

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