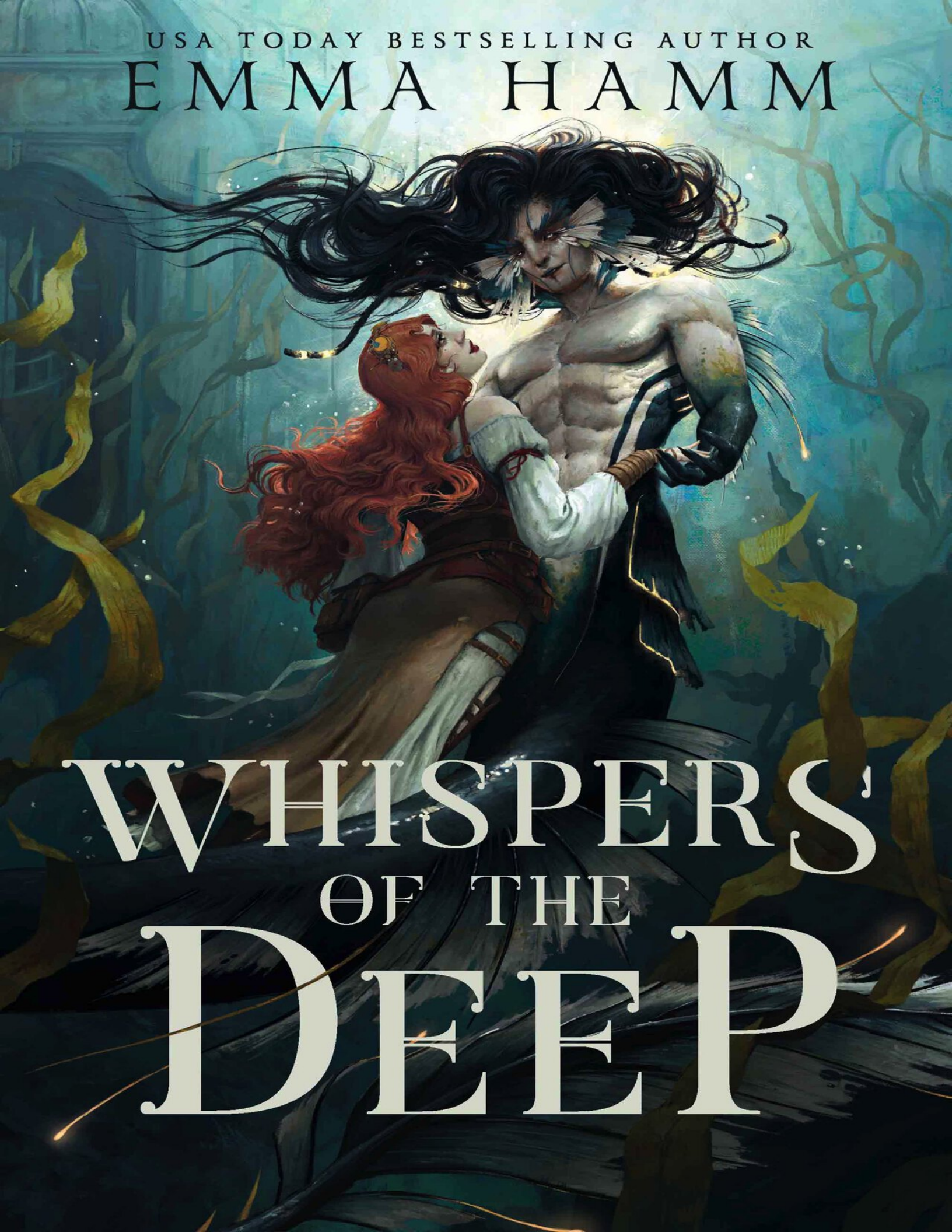


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EMMA HAMM



WHISPERS
OF THE
DEEP

WHISPERS OF THE DEEP

EMMA HAMM

Copyright © 2023 by Emma Hamm

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

*For all my nerdy girls out there -
You can't tell me you weren't thinking this while you played Bioshock.*

CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

FOREWORD

Thank you for reading this super exciting book that I am THRILLED to have in your hands!

First and foremost - DISCLAIMER.

DISCLAIMER.

DISCLAIMER.

I am not a scientist. I fully realize a lot of what is said in this book simply could not happen. Human bodies are not meant to be in the water for

a long time, and they certainly are not made to withstand pressure changes easily.

I say some things in here about an invention that allows our heroine to breathe underwater for a bit, and avoid the bends.

Do not try this at home. It's entirely made up, and honestly, probably impossible.

Please suspend your disbelief for this monster fucker book.

It's a book about fucking mermen. Let's not get into a scientific conversation about whether the bends would happen or if she could die doing half the stuff she does.

K?

K.

smooches

ONE

MIRA

“Get away from that window, woman!” The shout echoed through the glass dome, anger vibrating in every word.

But Mira had grown up in the engineering dorms. She knew every nook, cranny, and obstacle in her way. The glass wasn't going to break. She'd already tested its capabilities long before she started welding the metal framework. It was fine.

Taking her finger off the welder's trigger, she yanked her goggles up and glared down at the man ten feet below. "Really, Hermon? You think I didn't test everything before I started welding?"

"All the sparks sure made me think you didn't." He jabbed a finger at the opposite side of the glass. "That looks like a crack to me."

"That's because it is." She released her hold on the suction cup in front of her and dangled in the air above him. Her rigging was attached to the ceiling of the giant room. A currently blocked off room, because of all the leaks. "But that panel of glass isn't attached to the rest of it. It's not leaking from a crack, you old dolt! It's leaking from a rusty rivet that I am currently removing. So unless you want to drown with me, I suggest you go back to your office and let me work."

He grumbled underneath his breath, but she heard something along the lines of idiotic women who thought they knew how to weld.

Mira knew how to weld. She'd been doing this her entire life. It was her father's lifelong career before he'd drowned and left all his tools to her. And she'd gotten really good at it over the years.

Sighing, she shook her head, slammed her goggles back into place, and swung over to the suction cup handhold again. But before she let the sparks fly once more, she stared out of the glass dome that was only a few inches away from her face.

The ocean.

It was terrifying and beautiful all at the same time.

Their city was built underneath the sea. Deeper than the other cities, but still connected through tunnels and long rail systems that allowed people to travel back and forth between cities. This was just one of the many domes currently cut off from use because of water leakage. But she was one of the few who got to see inside the sealed rooms. She got to see what it was like to sit at the very edge of a drop off that disappeared into darkness.

About thirty feet beyond the glass was the edge. There were still plants growing out there, long tendrils of kelp that waved in the currents. Tiny schools of fish coasted in large groups, pausing to look at her, and then zooming on by. The water was crystal clear. She felt like she could see for miles, but really, all she could see was the rest of their city. Glowing in the distance, faintly blue with all the lights of tall towers, gleaming with glass and metal.

Her quadrant, owned by the Beta Corporation, was mostly industrial. But there were rooms like this one that were intended to entertain.

Mira would never be able to scrub the beauty of this room out of her mind. Even though it hadn't been used in her lifetime, it was still beautiful. Gold and white checkered floors, massive sculptures of muscular men holding up the ceiling on all four corners, and all this glass. It was a wonder it hadn't broken years ago.

That crack, though. She'd have to fix that sooner rather than later.

When her boss had told her to take the lead on this project—apparently some rich person wanted to hold a party in this room and wouldn't take no for an answer—she'd almost lost her mind. Of course, she'd take a room that had been sealed for years. Of course, she would risk her life and potentially die tragically if she got to see this. This beauty. This magic that no one had seen in years.

Testing the welder in her hand, she let the flame burst white hot before setting back to work replacing the rivet. It was a slow leak, but real frightening if it was in a room not often used. Someone would close the doors and then find ankle deep water in just a week or two. Living underwater like they did that was a real concern. So they'd shut off access entirely, not wanting to risk the rest of the city. Every room had storm doors that were rubberized and water proof for just this reason.

Maybe everyone was a little "door happy". But no one wanted the entire city to flood, and they'd been having a lot of issues lately.

A neighboring city, Gamma, had suffered that. No one survived. It was years ago, of course. Her father had told her stories about it when she was little. He'd claimed the entire city flooded, everyone dead. And the corporations had decided it was too big of a city to lose. So they'd sent in a team, him included, and they'd found the leak. Then they'd pumped all the water out and watched the bodies float back down to the floor.

Shaking off the ghosts and ever present anxiety, she finished sealing the rivet for good. The melted metal would last quite a while, but eventually she'd probably be back up on this wall fixing it again. For the time being, though? Their water problem was fixed.

Pushing her goggles back up, she clicked the release on her harness and down she went. It took a bit to untangle herself from the ropes, but then she had the room to herself. No one would expect her for a few hours yet. So instead of returning to her boss with her report, she pulled an apple out of

her metal lunch box and stood in front of the twenty-foot glass wall. It went higher in the center, the dome stretching so far up she guessed it might be thirty or forty feet.

Crunching into her apple, she walked around the room. There was so much water outside that glass. So much.

She remembered getting a little sick looking at it when she was small. Sometimes, looking at the vastness of the ocean was too much. She'd grown up in engineering quarters. They weren't so lucky, like other professions. Most of her life she'd only had a single window in her room, and even then it was just a view of a rock wall. A tiny porthole barely bigger than her head was a lot different from this.

Some lizard brain part of her mind whispered this was dangerous. So much glass surely couldn't hold up the entire weight of the ocean. And there was a lot more water than land.

Still. It was pretty.

A brightly colored fish flashed next to the window, and she followed its path. It seemed to be drawing her along, its silver side flickering every time it moved about five feet and then waited for her.

Did fish play with humans? She'd heard the rumor that people in Alpha Quadrant actually kept them as pets. They'd make another glass jar, like the ones they lived in, and then watch the fish swim around. Was it doing that to her? Maybe, to these fish, she was the pet.

Snorting, Mira bit another too big bite of her apple and paused right in front of the largest glass pane. No way. The fish wasn't playing with her, just like the folks in Alpha weren't playing with any fish in a bowl.

A shadow passed over her hand. Strange, because she hadn't seen any large animals since she'd started welding. Every now and then, she was treated to the sight of a massive whale in the distance. And sometimes at night she listened to their haunting songs as they swam by the city. It was beautiful, and for some reason, it always made tears sting in her eyes.

Mouth full, still chewing, she looked up to find the source of the shadow and froze.

A monster hovered in front of the glass. His black tail, so long it tangled in the kelp, was at least ten feet long. Blue slashes of fins, so deep they blended in with the water, undulated all along the black scales. It stretched up to his waist, seamlessly turning into that pale, almost gray skin. His body

was as all the rumors claimed. So handsome it was painful to look at, and eerily like the gold sculptures that surrounded her.

Dark claws on his hands were intimidating enough, but it was his black eyes that felt like they'd somehow captured her soul. Black, entirely. Inky and dark, they stared straight through her as though she was nothing. Just a maggot wriggling beneath him. Long dark hair floated around him, perhaps waist length, although there were thick cords interspersed through the strands, much thicker than her own, almost like tentacles.

And if the rumors were true, his plush mouth was full of razor-sharp teeth. He tore through his prey like a shark, but so much more intelligent. So much more dangerous.

Fuck, she shouldn't be here alone. The undine—what her people called his—rarely came around the cities. And if they did, it was only for a shitty reason. They were known to attack cities like her own and perhaps had been behind the sinking of Gamma. But they weren't seen around her city. No one in Beta had seen an undine in... years.

Unless they were watching her people. Using routes like this one, where they knew no one was going to be in the room while they passed by.

How long had he been watching her? Had he seen her working? The fire should have startled him away. It scared everything else.

Why was she frozen here staring at him, terrified, when she should be running?

Her eyes darted to the crack in the glass and after a second, she realized he looked in the same direction. So they were intelligent. He'd watched her body language as though he was familiar with it, and when he saw the crack, a wave of rippling electricity lit up his body.

He looked down at her and grinned. Those sharp, gleaming teeth were a clear threat.

There was so much hatred in that gaze. Beyond anything she'd ever seen before.

They moved at the same time. She bolted for the door and he swam for the crack. She heard him. The massive bulk of his body as he slammed down on the glass and... and...

It held.

She spun to look at him as she reached the door. Some curious stupidity made her look back. The black, undulating tail laid on top of the glass, and the undine stared down at her. He lifted his claws and scraped them down

the surface, the sound echoing and ear piercing. He snapped his teeth, then looked up and sped away. She watched him getting smaller and smaller toward the surface, and then he turned around.

Oh.

Oh, no.

She was frozen again, her mouth open as he torpedoed through the water toward the glass and she thought for an insane second, “He’s going to kill himself.”

If he hit the glass, the force of his body would surely send him catapulting into the room with the water. What did he think was going to happen? He’d be in the glass dome as well. He’d be stuck in here, like those fish the people in Alpha supposedly kept.

But he wasn’t stopping, and she wasn’t dumb. Mira spun around and hit the button to open the door. She slid underneath it as soon as there was enough room for her to crawl and hit the button on the opposite side with a punch that almost broke her finger. The blast doors started coming down and she hissed out an angry breath.

“Come on,” she muttered. “Come on.”

Impact.

The sound of his body hitting the glass was a sickening thud, like someone had jumped from too high. It shook the room like an earthquake. Everything rumbled around her, the metal framing that she’d just fixed whining with the pressure and then the rush of water.

Liquid rushed out of the room over her feet and then stopped as the blast door finally sealed shut. The rubber held. The metal was so much stronger than flimsy glass. It would hold even if the undine got ideas.

But some part of her, some worried, fearful part, opened the tiny viewing door that was even smaller than her porthole in her bedroom. Her hand was shaking as she slid it open and peered into the now flooded room.

Bubbles obscured most of her vision, but she could see her lunch box floating in the distance. Water filled the space, but there was no giant sea creature floating inside it. How had he managed that? She was certain he would strike it so hard that he wouldn’t be able to...

A hand slapped the viewing door. Black claws raked down it, leaving deep furrows in its wake. And then she saw him. So close she could see her own reflection in those black eyes. His tail coiled behind him, looping like a large tentacle of its own.

But oh, he was so beautiful. Those hard edges of his face, almost human but not quite close enough. The sharp teeth bared at her, like this was her fault. Like she had somehow done this. As she stared into his gaze, she wondered why there was so much hatred in those eyes.

Everyone who had ever whispered about undines claimed they were unfeeling monsters. But this one wasn't. Hate like this burned through a person for years before it ever got this hot. He wanted to murder her, and he didn't care if anyone would miss her. She could see all of that in his angry gaze.

So she bared her teeth at him as well, mimicking his expression as best as she could. "Sorry, you pretty bastard. Better luck next time."

He made some kind of noise, eerily similar to a whale, and then launched away from her. He swam with so much grace through the water toward the center of the room. And then she watched him look up at the blasted glass he'd nearly blown to smithereens. With one final look back at her, he swam back up through the crack.

The shards tore at his tail as he moved through it, forcing him to slow down for a few moments as she got an eyeful of the end of his tail. So stunning it didn't look like it should be attached to his body at all. The fin was delicate and fine, with veins of blue rioting through it. And then she realized the blue was pulsing, glowing, like a bioluminescence that she'd only seen in pictures. With one last, final flick, he was gone. Leaving nothing but his blueish, black blood in the room.

"Fuck." She drew the word out long and low.

She'd almost died. And now she was going to almost die again when she told her boss that the room she was in had flooded.

Their client wouldn't want to host a party in a room filled with seawater. And wasn't it supposed to be in less than a week? She'd have to get out there, fix the glass, and then a cleaning crew would need to be hired. There wasn't supposed to be a cleaning crew at all in the budget.

If she wasn't fired, she'd definitely have to pay for all this out of pocket, and...

"Ooohh," she muttered, again drawing out the word before she turned to look at the blank hall. There were very few windows here, only halogen lights blinking above her, stretching down the long metal tube. "I am so fucked."

Two

ARGES

Arges hated the achromos, as they called the colorless ones who lived in the walled in city. He'd been but a child when he had his first run in with their kind. He'd been small enough to be stupid, finding time to stay in front of their windows so he might see them. Their bodies were so strange. Those ugly, two finned monstrosities had once been intriguing to his young mind.

He remembered the searing pain of their weapons. It was hard to forget the sensation of heat blasting along his side as one of them had shot him in the tail. The blood had bloomed in the ocean that day, not just his own, but also that achromo's.

His father had murdered the creature who had dared to attack his son, and he'd paid with his life as they had all started shooting at his father. The achromos were monsters. They had ruined this sea and they would continue to ruin it if they were allowed to do as they wanted.

Thus, he became the monster who fought them.

Arges moved a strand of kelp out of his way, eyeing the piping system he and his pod had been planning to attack. It was their secondary choice, unfortunately. The achromo who had challenged him, the woman he'd seen in the last dome he'd broken into, had ruined his first plan.

The piping system he'd scoped out was right in front of the dome she'd fixed. That would have caused an issue if they returned and there were achromos there. She'd ruined everything, that little sea nymph who had stared back at him with too much bravery.

He'd shown her why that was dangerous. Arges still got a flash of pride when he remembered the fear in her eyes as he approached the crack she had so foolishly pointed out. It had proven difficult to break, but he'd managed.

Unfortunately, that had only brought more attention to the room. The achromos were ever so effortless in their tenacity. A trait that might have been admirable if they hadn't taken over far too much of his world already, polluting it with their stench and refuse.

"Ready?" his brother asked. Daios was the eldest of his blood, a terrifying brother whose coloring was mostly blood red. Considering the amount of scars that covered his body as well, it was difficult to see Daios as anything but a weapon.

"Ready." For all Daios's aggressive visage, Arges had led their pod for years, much to his brother's discomfort.

Even now, he could see Daios eyeing him as though seeking out any form of weakness. Arges knew what he was thinking. They should have attacked the achromos weeks ago. They should have drawn them out of their larger domes and into the tunnels that were easy to collapse.

But they couldn't fight like that. Not with the weapons the achromos had, or the strange metal creatures they'd been creating that crawled all

over their homes. He'd seen what had happened at Gamma. Their mother had spoken of the city they'd captured that had suddenly come back to life only a few cycles after.

He had to be careful. They all had to be careful around these weak creatures who used their minds to their advantage.

"You know the plan," Arges said, coiling his body and flicking his tail powerfully through the water. They sped away from their hunting grounds, and instead returned to where their pod waited. "There are six different pipes. Each one needs to be broken."

"Why are we breaking the pipes?"

"The achromos need air to breathe." Air like he and his brothers didn't need.

Just like the first time he'd been told of their air needing bodies, he shivered in disgust. Fluttering his fingers over the delicate gills along his ribcage, he feathered his touch over their barely noticeable texture before he focused his attention on the pod waiting for them.

Six other males. All massive specimens who had fought sharks, battled against the achromos, and lived to tell of both. One of them was rumored to have fought a squid longer than the achromos' homes were tall.

Arges paused in front of them, floating next to his brother, who had crossed his arms over his chest. "The pipes hold the air the achromos need to live. We will kill many of them when we destroy these pipes. And the ones who flee will be stuck in the central tower. We are leaving only two pipes for air. If that does not kill them all, then it would leave them exactly where we want them. The second attack will be ours to win."

All the others released out their battle cries like the orcas that attacked without conscience. His people were terrifying and great. They would take this sea back from the achromos who thought they deserved to live here.

Pride flushed through his chest, turning his normally gray skin mottled with dark splotches. He could feel that pride coursing through his veins. It heated his blood and sent him careening along the currents. The ocean drew him to the farthest corner of the achromos' city. To the place where he knew his pipe waited. This was where he would make his final stand. This was where he would destroy them, force them all into the smallest section of their city, and then they would drown.

Baring his teeth in a feral grin, he lashed his tail behind him as he descended toward the pipe.

It was gray and long, a silly contraption that had no use on the ocean floor. It dug through the plants, bubbling in a few places where the air escaped. It destroyed everything around it, and the metal gave off a horrible scent. Like blood. Nothing grew around it, and he knew that it never would.

The achromos coated their pipes in some disgusting material that burned anything that touched it. He knew the feeling well. His webbed palms had been calloused since he started this work, after he dared to touch what the achromos created.

And still, it had never stopped him.

Arges gathered the largest rock he could find and turned his attention to the pipe. With a ferocity that his mother would be proud of, he beat upon the metal. Over and over again, he lifted the heavy stone above his head and used his coiling body to strike it down.

Fighting against the ocean with every movement, he continued until his muscles burned. Until his body ached, and still he continued. Blood rose from the webs between his fingers where the stone had bitten through the thin membranes. But he would persist. He would defeat the achromos, and avenge his father, and...

The pipe burst.

Air blasted through the water and sent him tumbling away from the pipe. It struck him so hard that it threw him back against the stone wall behind him. A far distance to be thrown, for certain.

He hit his head against the rock. Speckles danced in front of his eyes, white and black, glimmering like the scales of his favorite fish. No, that wasn't right. He shouldn't be thinking of food. Not right now. Where... Where was he?

Shaking his head, he let the salt water sting the wound as he rapidly blinked. Right. The air that blasted diagonally was now rising through the water. Bubbles, so many of them that surely his brothers could see them even where they were in the distance.

His pod cried out. The long, echoing wails of their glee could be heard from miles away.

And again, pride puffed out his chest. He had been the first. Of all the pod, all those who had fought and battled, Arges was the first to destroy his pipe.

Daios might think he wasn't worthy enough to lead this pod, but he had been the first. The only one with the dedication to actually crack through

the metal in such a short amount of time.

Breathing hard, gills flared wide, he found that he couldn't stop himself. He had to see what he had done. The pipe trailed along through the rock, straight through the peaks of stone, blasted with fire and explosions. He followed the trail of destruction, looping over the broken stones and through a kelp forest before he found where it connected to their metal tubes. There were no windows on this one, though. He couldn't see them.

And oh, he wanted to see them. He wanted to see the terror in their eyes as they realized all their life bringing air was running out. He wanted to see their expressions as they looked through the glass and knew he had been the one to do this. Arges, the black tailed monster, who haunted their dreams.

Left or right?

He looked toward the right and saw the dome he'd already cracked through. The woman had been there, fixing it for some reason or another. The achromos always liked to spread.

But did that mean... His eyes trailed along the metal tubing from that dome. It led to a spiderweb of tubings that eventually went to the tall buildings that had more levels than he could count.

Which meant if he went left, that should lead him to the quarters where she must have come from. So he went left, letting the currents carry him all the way to a larger room with flat panels of glass that allowed him to see the few stragglers. They hurried through the tube, heading toward a much larger section where he'd seen rooms opening and then disappearing into higher sections.

Some of the dirty achromos held their hands near their mouths, their forms shuddering as they staggered toward the life saving room that opened and closed far too slowly. They might all die. Ah, and he would stand here watching them suffer for all they had wrought.

Until one of them saw him.

The male was larger than the others. His chest was barreled out, his shoulders wide, and his jaw strong. He pointed at Arges, face red and mouth open wide. He could just barely hear the man's shouts.

Who knew what he was saying? the achromo's language was simplistic and grating. Short, staccato sounds like the cracking of stones striking against each other. It grated on his ears and anger flashed again.

The pride he'd felt at killing them wouldn't be ruined by this one fool. He swam closer, antagonizing the man. He wanted to see the life

disappearing from his eyes. He wanted to watch the man gasp and writhe like an eel in the throes of death.

Like a school of fish, the others parted around the man who stood shouting at him. Most of the achromos wilted next to the strange disappearing room. They waited for their opportunity and then darted into it. Packing in so close that they looked like one being, with many eyes and many limbs.

And still, Arges drew closer. Like he and the man were connected. They drew so close that they could have touched if the glass hadn't been between them. He glared into the man's eyes, which glowed with hatred just as much as Arges's did.

He hated them. He wanted them all dead. But this was the first opportunity he'd ever had to actually watch the life flood out of one. Strange and wondrous it would be.

Until the man hit a button on the wall. Red color flashed all around them. The color was one he'd seen from the achromos before, a warning signal they used for the others. But a small flare of worry hit him hard in the chest as the man backed away from the glass.

What was he doing?

Why did he suddenly appear so... pleased?

Something struck Arges hard in the back. He tried to spin, but a metal arm had gripped him from behind. It wrapped around his waist in three sections. And though he wriggled in its grip, pushing at it with his arms until he thought they might break, he could not free himself from the demon the achromos had created.

It dragged him through the water, closer and closer to the wall of the metal tubing.

the achromo was going to crush him, he realized. He would be flattened against the side of their wall until his blood billowed around him.

But then the metal tube opened. Water rushed into the space beyond, dragging his tail with it as the suctioned force yanked him and the metal arm in. It deposited him before the wall closed with him and the metal arm inside.

Panicked now, he slammed himself against the glass. Once, twice, three times, snapping his shoulder out of place in the process. The damned metal wouldn't give. He couldn't get enough room to move his tail, so he had to bunch it underneath him and use only his abs to thrust himself forward.

They'd trapped him. Trapped like he had trapped the tiny schools of fish in his palms when he was a child.

His twin hearts fluttered in his chest and he felt a flash of oil slick his skin. The panic reaction was meant to make him glide faster through the water that would no longer pull upon him, but there was nowhere for him to go. Only darkness surrounded him.

A hissing sound flooded through the room and suddenly, another rush of movement.

He was forced out into bright light, tumbling head over fin and striking yet another hard object as he landed. Trying to get his bearings, Arges stared around him and immediately sealed his gills along his sides. He was inside the tube.

He was inside the achromos' home.

Horror sank in. They'd not only trapped him. They'd drawn him into their own death. The big man stood in front of him, though his face had paled as Arges drew himself up to his great height. His tail looped behind him, long and deadly as spikes slowly rose along the back of it. They dripped poison already, and each drop sizzled as it hit the metal floor. He had to balance himself on the glass of the tube, but that wouldn't stop him from killing the man. He opened his mouth, all his teeth flashing in the red, blinking light, and he hissed long and low.

The man didn't hesitate. He turned and fled down the tunnel to stand with the few remaining achromos.

They would seek their safety in the upper levels. And though he dragged himself toward them, slow and lethargic already with lack of air, he knew he'd have to take a breath soon.

The water.

He needed the water.

But he would terrify them with every ounce of his remaining life, if that's what it took. And if he could destroy one of them in the process... all the better.

He'd always wanted to know what an achromo's blood tasted like.

THREE

MIRA

Of all the times to be late, Mira had to pick the one time red lights flashed through the halls. The ones that meant, “*Seriously. Get the fuck out.*”

She’d been deep in the tunnels, though. Hermon had told their boss that he’d warned her about the crack in the glass and she said it wasn’t a big deal. Sure, she’d pointed out the giant scratch marks from the inside. She’d

told them all about the monstrous undine that had attacked the glass and then blasted its way into their home.

Did anyone believe her? Of course not. They laughed right in her face and then sent her off to do grunt work that was a waste of her talent. But what did they care? She was now a liar on top of taking too many risks. An employee who wasn't worth investing in.

She was going to scratch someone's eyes out. It wasn't too much to ask for a little god damned respect around here.

Careening around a corner, she swore under her breath as the air got even more thin. She wouldn't be able to keep running if they ran out of air. She only had a few minutes.

Where were the crowds of people? Only engineers lived in this wing, but no one was so crazy that they would just ignore the blaring lights. And they'd all been taught from day one to not be a hero. Red lights? Run and leave your friends. Everyone for yourself.

She was going for the elevator. That was the quickest way to go, and probably everyone had gone the same way. Which meant there would be a line, but the elevator was quick. It always made her stomach bottom out when she rode it. That had to mean it could get them all out in time. Right?

Right.

Except then she saw the elevator at the end of the hall and her fucking boss was the last one in. She couldn't mistake that giant for anyone else. And the red light at the top of the elevator meant the heartless fucker had turned the emergency on *inside* the elevator.

"Wait!" she shouted. "I'm almost—"

The doors shut, and she was stuck down here.

"That mother fucking, god damned, bitch ass... Ugh!" Kicking the floor, she had to think about what to do next. The engineering wing was intentionally difficult to get out of, considering they had the most mishaps.

There was another elevator. A glass one that was definitely not repaired enough to ride yet. But it would have to do. She might have to hold her breath for a while, but she'd get to the upper levels.

The damn thing was outside.

Hissing caught her attention. Another leak? That would explain the emergency protocol, but... She turned just in time to see the massive black tail that hit her in the chest and sent her skidding across the floor. Her hip

hit first, sending a bright spark of pain up her spine until she slid to a stop ten feet away.

And her jaw fell open as she stared at the massive undine crouched on the floor. His clawed hands scraped the metal, the screeching making her wince almost more than the glare on his strange features.

“You,” she hissed.

It was the same damn undine. The same one who had ruined her first dome work and then tried to kill her.

She couldn’t mistake him. That black tail and vibrant blue edges had to be uncommon in his species. Besides, his strangely handsome face mottled with anger and those black eyes glared at her with so much hate it could only be him.

And then he made a noise, deep and booming in his throat. She swore it was the same word she’d just said.

You.

They stared at each other, and she wondered if she’d have to fight him. Mira had the upper hand. This wasn’t underwater, after all, and he didn’t seem to be moving all that well. But then she saw him make a strange gulping motion with his entire body.

Was he... holding his breath?

Oh shit. Her eyes widened as she looked him over. It made sense that he’d be holding his breath. But she had the strange feeling he should be able to breathe like her. He had a similar face to hers. A kind of nose and a familiar shaped mouth. A chest that rose and fell outside the glass, but apparently not inside here.

No one had ever gotten their hands on an undine, dead or alive. No human knew how they actually functioned. They’d always thought undines were like fish. They had to be in the water to breathe. So... how long could he hold his breath?

It shouldn’t matter. He’d shattered her first big project, and somehow gotten himself stranded inside their building. He could rot like the rest of the fish for all she cared, but... it felt wrong.

This wasn’t just a fish. He was an intelligent, thinking being who had bested her even though she’d given him the damn answer. Letting him die felt like she was letting a person die, and that wasn’t who she was.

So now she had to get both of them out of here. Without either of them dying.

Because that was the easiest option, apparently.

Sighing, she coughed into her sleeve to clear her lungs before rolling onto her hands and knees. “Okay, big guy. I know you can’t understand a word I’m saying, but we need to work together to get out of here.”

His black eyes followed her every move, tracking her. He clearly didn’t trust her.

He had no reason to. Their kinds had been fighting against each other for centuries, if the legends were true. Undines killed humans out in the ocean. Humans killed undines whenever they got the chance.

Tit for tat, she supposed. One person hurt, so did the other. It was their way of life.

He could get her to that elevator outside these walls, though. And she could get him out of here. Her boss would probably fire her for it, but, hey. Maybe he wouldn’t figure it out.

This whole plan would require her to touch the undine, however, and he was looking rather sickly. Or that the sight of her made him want to vomit. Whatever it was, he was definitely more pale than he’d been just a few minutes ago.

Damn it, she had to stop worrying about the fish in front of her and figure out how to save them both. Okay, plan. Plan, plan, plan.

Mira frantically looked down the hall where she’d come from. If she flooded this area, none of the engineers would be able to return. All their things would be destroyed, and that meant, unfortunately, that the entirety of Beta would struggle to fix anything. They really needed better city planning.

So first things first...

Bolting back the way she came, she ignored the undine as it swiped at her legs with an ugly growl. The thing really hated her. Feral beast.

The end of the hall had one of the blast doors. It had never been used, because why would anyone seal the engineers into their home? Skidding around the corner, she slammed into the wall and hit the big red button. And then darted underneath the blast door back into the tunnel.

It sealed her in with the undine, with less air than before, so she was really running out of time.

Mira sprinted back toward the undine. He’d coiled around himself, hacking and coughing until he finally seemed to... leak? Water gushed out

from his ribs and she was certain that he'd died. Maybe undines turned into goo when they passed and that was going to make this whole thing difficult.

But the water splashed out of him, rolling over her feet, and then he didn't collapse. The opposite, in fact. He stood up straighter and those sealed nostrils flared as he took a deep breath of the limited air still in the tunnel.

"Oh," she whispered. "You have two sets of lungs."

Considering the dark glint in those black eyes, she had a feeling he was going to use the limited air he'd just gotten to murder her. He lifted those clawed, webbed hands, coiled his tail underneath him like a snake, and she only had a few seconds to convince him to stop.

"Hold on!" Mira shouted, holding up her hands as though that might give him pause. "Wait, wait!"

And for some strange reason... he did. He paused right where he was, his head cocked to the side, watching for her next move.

She backed toward the nearest panel of glass and pointed at it. Gesturing with her hands as she mimed what she was saying, Mira tried to explain her plan in the best way possible. "I'm going to break through this glass. The room is going to flood with water, and you're going to pick me up and carry me to that glass box over there."

Pointing to the elevator wasn't going the way she wanted, because he didn't really seem to understand what she was saying. The air was so thin now, already used up by too many people. And she'd sealed off the rest of it, which wasn't...

Damn it, she was going to start hallucinating if she didn't hurry up.

Adding a frantic, "Please don't kill me," Mira turned her back on the undine and put her attention on the wall in front of her.

The glass paneling was attached by industrial grade metal. It was almost impossible to break the glass this deep into the ocean, unless it was weakened by repeated strikes as the monster behind her had proven. He'd busted through the crack easily enough, but she thought it was probably a massive stone after an earthquake that had originally caused that crack.

Her only option was to melt the rivets. They would give, and then she could hit it hard enough to pop the panel.

Firing up her welder, she started on the bottom ones. It took a bit to melt them. They were damn thick beasts, but she got the bottom done quick enough. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck and into her eyes,

blurring her vision. Speed was of the essence, though, no time to wipe it away.

Hands grabbed onto her waist, lifting her to the higher rivets.

Mira gasped and looked down at the massive, clawed hands suddenly spanning her entire stomach and hips. “Fuck, you’re big,” she muttered, before turning her attention back to the remaining bolts she had to get through.

Just a few more, and she’d be done. Just a couple more, and then she could slam her feet into the panel and knock it free.

The air was gone. All of a sudden, just gone. Every breath she took was a struggle, like she was trying to breathe underwater. There just wasn’t enough oxygen because her fucking welder was using it all up to spark the fire.

The last rivet was almost melted. Almost, and suddenly, her welder went out.

“No,” she muttered, slamming it against the glass as if that would help. She sparked it again and again, but there wasn’t enough air to get the flame going. Nowhere near enough.

They were dead. Goners. They’d find her body floating with the undine’s. Or maybe he’d still be alive, eating her flesh in a tank of his own creation.

Fuck. This was bad.

She went limp, her lungs heaving as she tried to suck in what little air there might still be. But she was getting a little sluggish now. What had her father always said about breath? She exhaled something that wasn’t oxygen, that’s for sure. And she always had to be real careful to not use her welder in areas that didn’t have enough oxygen.

Mira just couldn’t remember why, as her brain struggled to keep her heart beating.

Heavy thuds broke through her thoughts, and she watched as the undine coiled his body and struck the panel. Again. Again. It had to hurt. His shoulder already hung awkwardly out of the socket, but he kept going. Hitting the panel over and over until a little water came out from the bottom.

She was delirious enough to giggle at the sight. If she’d had more air to speak, she might have even said, “Oh look, now I’m going to drown.”

But he didn't stop at the sound she made. The massive, powerful tail of the undine did a lot of the work as he slammed his upper body on the panel so many times that it eventually bent back like the top of a sardine can. Peeled back and jagged too, just like she'd seen some of the engineers eat out of.

The water rushed in, sweeping her body back against the wall and pinning her there until the entire world turned into slow motion. Everything floated. Her welder, her hair, the undine who glided toward her with so much grace it made her eyes sting with tears.

Oh, wait. That was the saltwater.

He moved closer to her, those sharp teeth flashing, and she wondered if this was when she would die. It would be nice to not be awake for whenever he took a bite out of her body.

Instead, he moved closer and then sealed his lips over hers.

Oh, he was cold. That was her first thought. And she was surrounded by deep, icy ocean water that already squeezed her chest and made what little air was in there come out. Mere minutes and she'd go into hypothermic shock, if she somehow managed to breathe. Somehow, his lips were colder than all that, but smooth as they slid over hers.

His tongue swept out, licking at her lips and she was so shocked that she opened them without thinking. Maybe he was giving her some kind of mercy before she died?

His clawed hand came up and pinched her jaw, forcing her to open wider, and then he breathed into her. Her lungs sucked up the air, and she scrabbled at his arms, his shoulders, anything she could hold onto to suck in that air she desperately needed. Again he exhaled, and she inhaled even more before wrenching away from him, coughing into the water as her lungs tried to remember what to do with air.

She was drowning. Oh, she was drowning.

But the undine drew her face back to his and breathed again into her mouth. Mira had the delayed thought that she was pinned to the opposite panel, glass at her back, icy water surrounding her, making out with an undine who had just tried to kill her.

Inhaling again, she held her breath this time as he slowly drew away.

She could only barely see his face now that all the halogen lights had blinked out of existence. There were only the lights outside the tunnel illuminating his unimpressed expression.

Then he gathered her up against his chest and swam out of the hallway with her. Into the wild ocean.

The cold started settling into her fingers and feet. She couldn't move them. Couldn't even hold onto him as he swam toward the glass elevator she'd indicated.

And somehow, even though she was almost blacking out, she saw the depths flash before her eyes. So vast and dark. Never ending space that was both overwhelming and so freeing.

She'd spent her entire life trapped inside Beta. She knew every hallway that she was allowed to go in, every room where engineers were allowed to walk. But this? Oh, this was so much bigger.

The undine wrenched the elevator door open and threw her inside so quickly that water only filled it about halfway before the door slammed shut.

Mira took a few seconds to blink at the horrific amount of strength that took before she lunged toward the controls.

"Push... buttons..." she chattered through her shuddering teeth and managed to push one. She didn't care which one, just any level.

The glass box heaved, clanking and shuddering, but it moved. She dropped onto her knees, freezing in the icy water as the box moved up.

Through the glass that fogged with her breath, she saw the undine watching her. He hovered in the water, his brows drawn down in confusion or anger as he watched her go up and up outside of the city. His long hair floated around him, all those electric blue flashes glowing up and down his beautiful body. And then, with a flick of a tail, he was gone.

Just in time for the door to open behind her and spill her out onto a very expensive floor.

FOUR

ARGES

His mind was all frayed after the interaction with the achromo. She was not at all what he had come to expect from their kind.

Her plan was solid, although told to him through confusing hand gestures and words that made his head ache. She was like listening to a chirping child, constantly prattling on about things he didn't care about.

The achromo was rather clever, though. If only she were stronger, she might have finished her plan impressively fast. Apparently, air was more

important to them than it was his own people. She'd nearly passed out, and he was still holding his breath comfortably.

He'd seen her drowning, watched as the ocean had her way with the limp body and he just... hadn't been able to let her die. It was stupid. He'd taken a risk in letting her live now that she'd seen him.

But the moment his lips had touched hers, as he'd breathed air into her lungs, he'd known it was the right choice. Deep in his bones, he felt the rightness. As though the ancients of the ocean had touched his heart and told him that she needed to live. The lights along his tail lit up when her tiny hand had rested on his shoulder, and then the other, frantically sucking up any air that he could spare for her. And his gills had fluttered along his ribs, even the ones that usually laid flat along his jaw burst out.

He'd never *fluttered* in his life. Arges had always known his gills to remain flat and unaffected, no matter what female was around him. And yet, this one made him shake like a child. Like he'd never had a woman touch him before.

As he watched the strange contraption take her up and away from him, he found the sight didn't settle well, either. It wasn't that he wanted to follow her. He couldn't go into her realm any more than she could exist in the sea.

But the muscles of his tail bunched, regardless. He wanted to touch her again. He wanted to feel the powerful heat of her body, even underneath the cold press of the waves.

How strange it was to watch her leave him. To know that he'd likely never see her again, and if he did, then it would be her floating body. They were going to conquer the beast that was the achromos. They were going to wipe them out of the sea, and he would not rest until they all floated up to the surface or were food for the sharks.

His gills fluttered again. This time, even his tail shook. More of the lights flickered through his body, lighting up like he was a beacon for her attention.

Damn it. What was happening to him?

Running a hand down his scales, he slapped at his tail a few times before forcing himself to turn away from the city under the water. Arges needed to find his pod and his brother. Surely they had succeeded as well, and if the achromos were stuck in the center building, then it was time to figure out how to attack the monolith.

Even the whales couldn't harm this building. They weren't strong enough to tumble the metal structure, but soon they would find its weakness. They always did.

He picked a current and let it guide his body home. Though he flicked his tail every now and then to keep up his pace, he mostly allowed the ocean to draw him where it wished for him to go.

Arges had always loved this feeling. The few times he'd been to the surface, he had seen strange creatures in the sky. It was the same sensation, he supposed. When the ground dropped out from underneath him and water surrounded him. Nothing that he could see for miles on end. Just water, darkness beneath him, and the quiet movement of the sea, carrying him farther and farther from that city that always tainted his gills.

Flipping over onto his back, he popped his shoulder back in black and tried to relax as the salt water buoyed him closer to what he knew was success.

Though he hadn't heard his pod's excitement, he knew they had succeeded. He'd broken one of the metal tubes, and he was the least of the men he guided. Surely they had done more damage. There was only celebration to be had tonight.

Something struck him out of the current. His tail coiled as he spun restlessly through the water. Flaring out his webbed hands and slapping at his attacker with the powerful whip of his fluke, he managed to stop himself and the other from wildly spinning out of control.

Righting his body, he puffed out his chest, so he looked bigger and faced whatever was foolish enough to attack one of the People of Water. No shark sought out its death so foolishly. Neither would the speckled whales that hunted in pods like his own people. None would be so foolish, so blind, so...

Enraged.

His brother floated before him. Daios heaved breath in through his gills, everything flared wide and angry. Ropes of glimmering red pulsed from the top of his head all the way down his back, to his tail, even into the fine filaments of his fingers. He was beyond enraged. So close to berserker that Arges feared his brother didn't even recognize him.

Holding up his own hands, pulsing a faint, calming blue, Arges asked, "What has happened?"

“What do you mean, what has happened?” his brother hissed. “You weren’t there. You were supposed to lead the pod, and you weren’t there!”

“For what?” He had been so certain everything was exactly the way it was meant to be. Nothing could have happened to the pod. He watched the achromos for months before this attack. He knew where everything was, and he’d told them everything to do as it needed to be done.

Daios pointed behind them, his claws jabbing through the cold water. “the achromos knew we were coming.”

“They couldn’t have known.”

“Ekhetes is dead,” Daios said. His words fell flat in the water, but the current brought them back to Arges’s ears over and over again.

Ekhetes is dead.

Dead.

“How?” he rasped. “Everything was exactly as it was supposed to be.”

“Where. Were. You?” Daios asked again, but then he swam a little closer and his eyes widened in horror. Those dark orbs narrowed on him and Arges knew what his brother had scented.

Her. Of course her scent clung to him. the achromos all had a specific taste in the water. Even now, if he focused, he could taste her on his gills. She was sweeter than most achromos, not quite so terrible to breathe in.

She tasted like the deep candies that his people liked. Tiny pods of bright flavor that burst on the tongue and made the back of his mouth salivate. Not quite sour, but a flavor that both hurt and intrigued.

She was all over him, he realized, and that was his fault. He should have swum through a kelp forest, brushed all the scent off his scales before going anywhere near any of his people. And yet... His scales seemed to clasp her scent underneath them. As though he wished to taste her later, when it was just him and the sea.

His brother’s gills flared again, and this time Daios did lunge. With a flick of his thick tail, he was upon Arges again.

Arges put up a fight. Blood bloomed around them, clouds of their black blood thickening around them until he could barely see. And then a clawed hand clasped around his throat. Though he fought against his brother’s grip, they were already plummeting to the depths.

He twisted, trying hard to get the upper hand, but his brother was massive. Large enough to rival some whales. Arges was dragged to the deep, only exhausting himself further as he tried to get away.

Eventually, he fell limp. He let his tail streamline them because he already knew where Daios was taking him.

Home.

Where else would they go?

In the distance, he saw the light of their homeland. Okeanos. His heart filled with love as it did every time he saw it, although he winced as pain flared in deep cuts dug through the flat planes of his chest. The blue, glowing lights of his body soon dimmed in the bright white of the glowing plants that lived deep inside their home.

Coral mostly, larger than he was long. So tall they sometimes looked like the buildings the achromos had made. Long tendrils of glowing pale coral that bathed their world in an icy glow. His people made their homes in the base of the coral, underneath the rock and stone. Long tunnels, dug with claws and kept clean with quick sweeps of their tails.

And in the distance was the largest coral that stretched its tendrils throughout the entire city in which they lived. A root system that could never be broken, even this deep in the depths.

The People of Water swam throughout all these clinging, thick roots. Tiny ones crawled through them, getting stuck in certain places and lashing their tails until their laughing mothers pulled them free. He remembered getting stuck in the same root systems. He'd scraped the scales off his back so badly that his mother had been concerned he wouldn't ever grow them back.

Daios shifted his grip to the back of Arges's neck, forcing him to stare down at everyone who looked up at them. Until finally they reached the center of all that coral. Where it spiraled in one central area, flattened out, and became a swirling pattern upon which all of their greatest decisions were made.

Daios slammed him down so hard in the center even the coral complained. Plumes of sand burst up around him, scattering small schools of fish in their wake.

Groaning, Arges spat out sand and dust. His tail stretched out behind him as he leveraged himself only up onto his hands. The elders were already here. They'd swum from their homes, now hauling themselves over the lip of the central coral. Their ancient fingers curled, the webs almost gone with age. But it was only one of them that his eyes locked upon and stayed.

“Mitéra,” he said quietly, watching as she swam above all the others.

The Matriarch of their people was stunning and otherworldly. Long ago, she’d given herself to the coral. She’d died in the roots, and then allowed the sea itself to fill her. Her hair had turned into a bell of shimmering color, like a jellyfish lived atop her head. Her skin was entirely transparent, flickering with electric lights that rolled across her entire body. Her tail was covered in scales pale as a pearl that changed color when she was angry or happy or sad. But it was her eyes, those iridescent, terrifying eyes that had always seen right through him.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked, her melodic voice floating through the currents.

His brother was so agitated that his hair floated in front of his face. With an angry shove, Daios pointed at Arges and said, “He left the pod to fend for itself and Ekhetes is dead.”

A murmur broke through the crowd that watched. Big, black eyes watched him with a hundred colors of tails and textures of skin and faces. These were the people he fought for, had always fought for.

Would they really believe this?

Mitéra paused, her eyes looking over both of them before she inclined her head at Daios. “I have heard you, little brother. Now I will hear your blood speak.”

She turned her attention to him and Arges nearly forgot how to speak. Those eyes saw right through to his soul, as they always did.

“I fought the achromos,” he croaked. “Their air supply is destroyed. But when I went to see what my attack had wrought, I was trapped by one of their kind.”

Daios snorted. “Is that why you reek of one?”

Cutting a glare toward his brother, he let out a little growl before returning his attention to the more important person. His hands curled in the sand, and the icy touch of an unknown current carried his words. “I was trapped, as I said. I was inside their city when one of the achromos was trapped with me. She devised a plan to get us out of their home in return for my assistance in bringing her to one of their clear boxes. She saved my life and, as such, I had to repay her in kind.”

The current played across his shoulders and drew the scent out from underneath his locked scales. He couldn’t stop it from taking her scent and drawing it right to Mitéra.

She sucked it into her gills, her frail ribs spreading with the effort before she frowned at him. “There is no fear in this scent.”

He’d noticed it, too. The female hadn’t been afraid of him, not really. Just a spark of it here and there, enough to be enticing to say the least.

He shook his head. “No, she was not afraid.”

“Why?”

“I do not know.”

Mitéra hissed, and the bell of her hair spread around her body. “Have you seen her before?”

“Only once. I scouted out the seventh air tube that we abandoned. She was fixing a glass dome that I needed to remain broken, so I destroyed it.”

“Did you speak with her?” Those flickering lights were not a good sign. Red, like his brother. Yellow, a color that spoke of fear.

“No. I nearly killed her both times.”

Mitéra’s colors rippled again, this time turning a soft blue that eased the tension in his shoulders. “You are not lying.”

“No, Mitéra.”

A low hum rumbled from her throat. She twisted closer to him, spiraling through the water until her hair billowed around them both. She cupped her hand behind his neck and drew him forward. The thin tendrils of his hair coiled together with hers. “She is not afraid of you, my son. This is a blessing and a curse.”

No, he didn’t want another curse. He didn’t want a blessing, either. He’d said goodbye to the little achromo, and that was enough. Even though it makes his gills ache and his tail ripple with color.

Her claws pierced through his neck and he scented his own blood on the water. Again. Bleeding out for his family as he always had.

“She is a current,” Mitéra said, her voice low and quiet. Her hair swallowed them up, like they were the only two people in the ocean. “You will follow that current. Use her to the best of your ability, my son, my child, soul of my soul. You will take her from her safe home. You will make her trust you. And in doing so, you will learn the secrets of the achromos.”

“I do not wish to return to her. I wish to serve our people.”

“And so you will. With every secret you unveil from her pale soul, you will save us. Arges, you are the first to find one unafraid of our kind. Draw her to us.” Mitéra backed away, just enough for him to see a hundred colors

swirling in the depths of her eyes. “Go collect your strange new friend, Arges. With her at our side, we will finally destroy them all.”

FIVE

MIRA

Mira leaned over her boss's shoulder, looking at the reports that the drones had given them. Unfortunately, she'd done a lot more damage than she'd thought.

Of course, no one else knew that. They assumed that the undine had done it, and if she wanted to keep her head attached to her shoulders, she would let them continue to think so.

He hissed out an angry breath, leaning back in his chair and throwing the controller onto his desk. “Damn beast. There’s no way we can patch that.”

“Are you sure?” She pointed at the section of the wall where she’d removed all the bolts. No one could see it from the drone, thankfully, but any video feedback through the water was hard to tell details. “Look right here. It’s just one panel we have to replace, and we could probably get in there.”

“Yeah, if anyone could get there.” Dennis swiveled all the way around, glowering at her. “The lift isn’t working, Mira. You know that. I know that. None of the electrical works at all.”

“Then we get one of the suits to head down there and patch it up.”

“They don’t know how, and those suits aren’t rated for any detailed work and you know it.” He sighed and shook his head. “Damned shame. All of our work is down there, and we can’t get to it. Not to mention the heads are going to have a field day trying to re-home the rest of us.”

Mira honestly hadn’t thought it would come to this. She was certain, in fact, that they would be able to fix the tunnel. That’s why she’d blocked it all off.

They could see the blast doors had held. She claimed that she’d closed it from the inside and then used one of the escape pods to get to the elevator shaft. But... They’d see the lie in that story once they got back to their section of Beta. All the escape pods were exactly where they were supposed to be.

This was why she wanted to be part of the team to fix it. If she could release one of the pods, then the ocean would do the rest of the work for her. It would be dragged naturally in the elevator's direction and anyone who wondered why it wasn’t right up next to it, would assume that the currents had caused it to drift.

Mira shouldn’t lie, because this was the problem with lying. She was dragged in every which way, trying to keep the lie going when she should have come clean hours ago.

Dennis looked her up and down, then rolled his eyes. “Listen, you’re in no state to be giving advice on this. Go get warmed up, put on some dry clothes. They set the kitchens up for us for the time being. I’ll come get everyone when they know where they’re going to put us.”

She could use a warm shower. Mira had spent her day with the other engineers, mostly in that damned elevator shaft, trying to get down to their old home. Unfortunately, that left her crusted from top to bottom with salt, stiffening her hair and clothes. She had a blanket over her head and tucked underneath her armpits, but she couldn't let this go. Not when she knew there was a way for her to get her coworkers back to their section of Beta.

"Dennis?" she asked as he strode out of the control room.

He paused at the door, looking at her over his shoulder. "What?"

"Will they make us leave Beta?"

His shoulders rounded forward. "Every city needs engineers, Mira. Just... maybe not so many of them."

So they weren't going to another city, which was good news. But it also probably meant most of the engineers would end up in other jobs. Herself included, considering she hadn't been on the team for very long.

She sank down into the wheelie chair he'd vacated and stared at the computer screens. They had drones all over the facility to keep an eye on everything, plus cameras on every external surface they could put them on. She'd always known they existed, but Mira had never been up here before.

Engineers kept to their own quarters unless there were areas for them to fix. Like she had when she first saw the undine. But this? She'd never thought there was a room with sixteen different screens, all set into an ancient silver table with so many buttons and joysticks that she didn't know what she could or couldn't touch.

But it seemed rather self explanatory. She peered around her, making sure that no one had remained in the room. She was still alone. Just her, a bunch of screens, and a wall of windows that looked out onto a quiet ocean. They were so high up in the tower, most likely all she would see were the whale migrations when they happened.

Oh, she bet they had a great view.

The only thing out there right now was deep blue. So much blue that sometimes it made her eyes go out of focus, like there was something massive out there just waiting for her to see it.

Shivering, she touched one of the buttons. Just a green one, since red seemed like a bad idea. One of the screens in the middle flickered, then changed what it was looking at.

Okay, so the green buttons changed cameras.

She looked around her again and then gently pressed a red button. Just to see. One camera going out wouldn't be that big of a deal, right?

But the red button didn't implode a camera or make it start shooting bolts. Instead, she saw an answering red blink on the same camera. Was it recording? She'd heard that the Commander liked to record whatever he found in the ocean. New species, different creatures that they'd never seen before. Whatever it was, he liked to keep a documentation of it.

Humming under her breath, Mira made sure all the red dots were turned off and poked around for a little while longer. After everything she'd done for these people, she deserved to at least see what was going on.

It took her only fifteen minutes to find one of them. An undine.

This one wasn't the same creature she'd seen before. She was a little ashamed by the flash of disappointment once she realized she didn't recognize this one. He had bright yellow flashes going up and down his fins as he hunched beside an oil drum. His hands were spread wide against the metal, leaning around the edge as he watched... something?

"What are you looking at?" she whispered before clicking the green button next to the screen.

It took her three cameras to see what he was watching, and then she hissed out an angry breath.

Bright blue. Glimmering in the darkness of the sea like a damned beacon saying, "Look at me, I'm back."

"What are you doing, you idiot?" Mira found herself irrationally angry that the undine had come back. He was supposed to realize that she had helped him for a reason, and it wasn't for him to continue attacking her home. Because that was clearly what they were doing. Both he and the yellow finned undine were peering into glass windows, then gliding away the moment they saw someone.

He was going to get himself killed. Or his friend. The Commander had recently outfitted the entire city with weapons on the exterior. She knew, because she'd helped install a few of them.

Her rage turned into concern. What did he think he was doing? He was going to get himself killed, and they had just survived. Together.

The damned beast was likely attacking their city again, but even if he was... Even if Mira didn't want to admit it to herself, he had saved her life. She'd gotten the story out of the other engineers. Their section of Beta had

run out of air, and the undine came after that. If he hadn't gotten her out of that hallway, or if he hadn't been there at all, she would have died.

Plain and simple.

"Damn it," she hissed through her teeth. "I owe you, you big blue bastard."

Mira wiggled the controller of the camera back and forth. The joystick moved, and with it, the camera. She hoped it was enough to get his attention, and she was right.

Her undine was more aware than the other. He spun almost immediately, his black eyes narrowing upon the camera she moved. Switching to the next camera, she wiggled that one. He was a pretty significant distance away, but he noticed.

The yellow finned one disappeared somewhere in their game of chase. She didn't know why or where he'd gone, but she could only control so many cameras at once. And she owed nothing to that one.

So over and over again, she drew the undine farther away from where he was and toward... herself, she realized. Mira had unintentionally drawn him to the control room, which would get her in even more trouble if people realized.

Frantically, she made sure every single camera had the recording turned off, or she'd be sent off into the ocean with no gear on. They'd drown her, she was certain of it.

While she did that, she was vaguely aware of a dark shadow appearing on the other side of the glass. She'd look in a bit, but first she had to save her own ass before she saved his. And hadn't she already saved his life? He was away from those dangerous parts of the city, right?

But then she looked up and her heart stuttered in her chest.

Because he was right in front of her. Of course he was.

Somehow, through the glass, he was ten times larger than she remembered. Or maybe it was just that his tail was all spread out now. She could see it, all ten feet of it vertically, which made him... what? Fifteen? Sixteen feet long, maybe? He was massive. Huge. Enormous. All the words that meant big. Good fucking god. He was right in front of her.

Swallowing hard, she rolled the chair a little closer to the window, hoping he wouldn't startle or try to break through this glass too.

He looked back at her with those dark eyes reflecting her image, his hair floating around his head, those gills glowing blue along the edges. His

black tail hardly moved. He just... hung there. Right in front of her.

Not moving. He watched her as if she were supposed to do something.

So she did. Mira pointed at him, then gestured with her hands like she was swimming. "You need to go."

He didn't move.

She shooed him with her hand, but then realized they probably didn't use the same hand signals. Why would they? He was a different species, and he'd never seen her people before.

Or... maybe he had.

Frowning, she looked down at the computer screens before she looked back up at him. Circling one hand in the air, she gestured at the room they were in. "This room is where these come from." Then she turned her hand into a gun shape and fake blasted it at him.

That made his eyes narrow, but he still didn't move.

She didn't know what he wanted. He clearly recognized the weapons they used to get the undine off their city walls. So why was he not swimming off into the distance to go do whatever it was they did all day.

"Come on, man," she muttered. "You have got to go."

Then he pressed a webbed hand against his chest and drew it back toward her. He repeated the motion, as though he wanted her to see or understand something that he couldn't convey. But she didn't know what he was trying to say.

He wasn't thanking her for anything, that much she knew for certain. He didn't know the cameras were attached to the guns. And he definitely didn't think she'd saved him. Maybe she had in the beginning, but then he could have left her for dead.

She cursed. Right, that was the correct way to think. He owed her now, because they were even up until this point. He would have died in the tube with her. She'd gotten him out, he had gotten her to the lift. They were even. And now she'd gone and helped him again.

"Fuck me," she muttered, looking back at the door to make sure no one had come in. "You need to leave. Both of us are going to be in serious trouble if anyone realizes we're trying to communicate with each other."

He did the motion again, looking a little frustrated this time before he swam even closer to the glass. She stood, the chair rolling behind her into the room. But she felt like a magnet pulled her closer to the glass and then he put his hand flat against it.

She stared at that palm, so unlike her own. His fingers were massive, long, and tipped with those deadly claws. The webs between his fingers were thinner than she'd thought, and light pierced through them.

Without thinking, she reached up and put her hand on the glass as well. The size of his hand dwarfed hers, but for a moment, she let herself believe that she could feel the coolness of his skin through the glass. Like that icy touch could reach her, even in here.

"Hey, Mira!" The sound echoed down the hall, but they were too close for comfort.

Flinching away from the glass, she turned to stare at the door, her breath ragged in her lungs. Someone was going to see them. They were going to see him, and every part of her screamed that she couldn't let that happen.

"Go," she hissed, but when she turned, he was already gone.

Licking her lips, she pressed herself even closer to the glass and peered out into the ocean. He wasn't there, though. Not even a trace of him.

"Ohh, Mira," she muttered to herself. "You seeing things, girl? I didn't think the pressure got to people if you've spent your whole life in the ocean."

"Hey, Mira?" One of the younger engineers poked his head through the door. "You got a second?"

"Considering we're all out of commission for a while, yeah."

"What are you looking at?" He walked up to her side and looked out the window. She couldn't remember his name, but knew that his whole face lit up when he smiled. She'd always thought he was handsome. And tall. Tall always made people more handsome.

"The ocean."

"Yeah," he chuckled, then rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Guess there's a lot of it to look at."

"Sure is. What did you want?"

"Oh." His eyes hardened a bit, but then he leaned forward like he didn't want anyone else to hear what he had to say. "Do you remember the new suit the techs were working on? I thought... Well, with your little project..."

"How do you know about my project?" She reared back, looking him over again. She hadn't told him about that, had he?

"People talk." He shrugged. "Look, I thought with one of those new suits, and if your project is working, we could probably get that glass wall

fixed. Pretty easily, actually. The drones could carry the new plate over and then it would just be sealing it from the outside.”

“What new suits?”

He grinned, and she just knew he was about to get her into a lot of trouble.

SIX

ARGES

Watching her was incredibly boring. How did the achromos live like this?

Arges had never wasted his time trying to understand her people. He was more interested in finding flaws in their city. Dents in the armor that he could use to his advantage as he attacked and destroyed. Now, he was forced to watch them. He had to see what they did with their lives as he tried to find an opportunity to steal her away.

And by all the seven seas and the gods within them, they were boring. How did the achromos survive like this? They did the same thing every day. They walked the same corridors. Seemingly performed the same jobs. Day in. Day out. They even seemed to eat the same food. Some wet looking gloop that made him want to vomit the first time he'd seen it.

No wonder they were so aggressive. He'd have gone mad long ago as well if he was forced to live such a life.

Of course, his achromo did the same thing as the others. It only took two days for him to know everything she was going to do every day.

She got up and went to one of the halls where there were many achromos. She ate that horrible, wet substance, then walked down the same corridor. They appeared to meet with large groups of achromos often. She didn't make a lot of effort, nor did she often speak at those gatherings. Instead, she did a lot of head bobbing, which he assumed was meant in an agreeing gesture, not aggression.

Then she would sneak off with another male, one he already hated, and they would disappear into one of the rooms he couldn't see.

Was she mating with him? The idea shouldn't be so frustrating, but it made him very angry the first time he'd seen the pattern. Why else would a female and a male disappear into the same room? The thoughts dug through him like puffer fish spines, angering him even more.

He told himself it was because he would smell the other male if he had to steal her away. She'd smell like someone else, and her scent was the only one he found... tolerable.

It took days for anything to change. the achromos bored him with their monotonous schedule and never ending patterns. At least until he saw his achromo disappear with the other. Not to the same room that they had been going before, but to a different part of the city. A deeper part. Nearly at the bottom, where they had never been before.

At least, not while he watched. So he followed them, alone this time rather than with one of his pod. The others had given up on hunting with him.

After all, nothing ever changed. They weren't learning anything about the achromos other than that they were boring.

They'd already known that.

Arges swam to a hidden part of the city, ducked deep into the kelp and behind a very large boulder while he listened to his achromo and the male

wander over his head. They chattered in that horrible speech, and he almost wished he could understand them. Perhaps then he would know their nefarious plan.

But then he saw the opening into their city.

How had they missed this? He remained where he was, watching as two metal plates shifted and then revealed bright lights and metal panels. There was an opening *inside* the city that he'd missed.

An opening that could easily be pried open with sharp weapons. And the achromos had hidden it from their eyes for such a long time.

He ground his teeth in anger. Who was supposed to be watching this part of the city? Likely, no one. He'd never assigned anyone to the very bottom of the city because there was nothing here. Just a wall that dug into the stone and leaked rust into their gills.

Arges was the fool, then. These achromos had tricked him well enough, and now there was nothing he could do about it.

They'd wasted so much time. He could have attacked them from the inside. And he'd proven himself within their tubes. He could fight them even there, and a whole pod of his people? They would decimate the city until their corridors ran red with blood.

Seething, he pulled himself closer to watch and see what the achromos were doing now.

One of the plates that he and his achromo had destroyed was slowly lowered into the sea. He bared his teeth in a silent hiss as a metal arm helped guide it through the water and then propped it against a stone at the bottom. He hated seeing those arms now that he knew what they were capable of.

But then he was both shocked and horrified to see an entire metal creature drop to the ocean floor. It fell through the water like a stone, plummeting to the bottom where sand and debris plumed around it. And it didn't react. He'd have thought such a jarring thud, one that he could hear from some distance away, would have made it at least shake the pain off.

It didn't.

A soft grinding noise rippled through the water and then twin antennae appeared over its head. Another click, and beams of light speared out of them. And then the being turned. It looked right at him. He was certain it had seen him and he readied himself to flee, but then it just... didn't move.

It stayed so still it was almost like it was made of rock. No movement. No breath. Nothing at all.

The water above it rippled and Arges wondered whether he should leave. He could take this information back to his people. They should know the achromos had weapons they had not seen before.

They all knew about the weapons on top of the tubes and attached to the city. He knew many People of Water had been touched by their flames that somehow lived even in the sea. They had all been seared, or knew someone who bore scars from an attack.

But this? the achromos had birthed a new being made of metal, and it would be one who was extremely difficult to kill.

Another form dropped out of the city, this one lithe and gleaming. For a moment, he thought it was some kind of pale fish that they had tamed, but then he realized what it was.

It was his achromo. In the water, swimming with him.

He'd never mistake the shape of her body. He'd had her pressed against his chest, her tiny hands skating over his gills even though he thought she had been unaware of the intimate touch. And this was... her.

Her body was covered in some silvery material, and it moved with her like a second skin. Bright and lightly colored, it mimicked fish scales in the light. Her hair was covered as well with the same material, and some strange device covered her eyes. But what covered her mouth had his attention like nothing else.

It was clear, like a bubble. He could see her lips moving as though she were talking to herself. But it was clearly doing something to allow her to breathe. He could see her chest moving in and out as she sank through the water toward the metal monster.

Some insanity pushed him forward. He had to flick his tail in the opposite direction, so he stopped swimming toward her, as if to... save her? No. He didn't need to save her from that metal creation. If she approached it and it crushed her, then that was her own fault. And all his problems would be fixed.

But it didn't attack her. Instead, she swam around the back of it and fiddled with something there. He moved a kelp frond out of his way to see her better, and yes. It appeared she must have spoken with the creature, because it turned around and reached for the glass pane.

His gills flared as he saw with horror that it picked up the side of a tube with ease. The entire panel, metal frame and all, as though it weighed nothing. Now he knew that he could likely have lifted it, but the achromo certainly couldn't.

She watched the creature move and then made a gesture above her head toward the surface. He watched the panels close and thought this was his moment. He would take her now, but the damned metal creature certainly made that a little more difficult.

Instead, he resolved to watch her. And he was glad he did.

She had fins on her feet. Delicate and thin, like he did, but very narrow and very long. Shocked, he watched as she glided through the water after the metal creature that stomped across the ocean floor.

The gills on his neck flared as he watched her swim. She moved with an innate grace that he hadn't expected. The first time he'd seen her underneath the waves, she'd been shivering and struggling for breath. When he'd breathed into her lungs, perhaps he had given her a part of himself. Because she moved like a fish.

Her body slowly rolling, she kept one arm in front of her as she swam, parting the resistance of the ocean as she followed the metal creature. And with the lights on the exterior of her city, she looked like she glowed.

Then she reached up and touched something next to her head. A beam of light erupted from her skull, and he was shocked once again. Did the achromos have the ability to create light?

Glancing down at his hands, he flickered his own lights in his palms. They were faint though, bioluminescence rather than the massive swath of light that now illuminated everything in front of her. She was creating light like some of the deep-sea creatures did. How was that possible?

He swam alongside them, following them across the ocean floor. And he noticed that his achromo did not flinch away from fish or the massive crabs that hid underneath the tubes of her city. She watched them with careful attention before dismissing their danger. If there were sharks in the area, or any of the other more aggressive fish, she would have been in trouble. But those were so rare in these parts, considering the sights and smells of the city.

These were terrible hunting grounds for any predator.

He soared over an outcropping of stone and hung over the edge, watching her work with a tilted head. She followed the metal creature

without hesitation. His attention rarely strayed from that strange being who moved a little too stiltedly to be alive... Surely they had created it, not birthed a new species?

He heard the sound of something swimming toward him long before he scented one of his pod on the water. Maketes was one of his best warriors, and a strange one at that. His yellow tail made him rather easy to spot in the water, but if one had seen him, then they were already dead.

His warrior quietly swam up beside him, peering down into the depths before rearing back in shock. "What is it?"

"Hush."

"They cannot understand us. The achromos have always been deaf to our language." Maketes pointed at Arges's achromo, who had yet to hear them or notice that they were watching. "It will not look up."

"She," he corrected, "has another creature with her. Do you not see it?"

With a roll of his shoulders and a flutter of his fins, Maketes showed he cared very little. "Another tool made of metal that would break down within five moons. It will fail like all the others. I do not fear their metal creations."

"Hm," Arges replied, staring down at the female and creature, who continued to stomp across the ocean floor. "I do not share your confidence."

"She?" Maketes rolled onto his back, arms cushioning his head as he watched a fever of rays swim above them. "How do you even know it's female?"

It was hard to tell. The achromos were not as obvious as the People of Water. The females he was used to had pretty frills along the fronts of their tails, and lovely colors that burst to life when they were ready to mate. They were delicate and fearsome all at the same time. Their flukes were wider than Arges's narrow, sharp spined tail. Instead, they were broad and fluttered in the currents with a lovely grace. And of course, their females were significantly larger than Arges or Maketes.

Looking down at the achromo and her metal machine, he couldn't compare the two species. She was finless. Completely incapable of protecting herself, no matter how many weapons she had. Helpless, even worse than their children.

Maketes rolled back over, his hair billowing around him like a cloud, and hummed low under his breath. The sound carried through the water, and would have easily been picked up on the opposite side of the achromos

city. He would have heard it and known who had made the noise. But this achromo? She didn't even look up.

His pod brother shook his head in disgust. "You see? Broken, these achromos. They think all the sound in the ocean is just that. Ocean. There is so much they do not know, and yet, they think they own it all."

He nodded, agreeing with his brother. Still, there was something about her that caught his attention.

She might not have fins or pretty frills, but she moved through the water like she'd been born to it. She used her hands now, pulling herself up and over rocks as the metal creature took the long way around. It was still carrying that panel, and he couldn't imagine what they were going to do with it.

Until Maketes pulled himself completely over the edge of the stone, hanging with one hand on it as his tail loosely swayed in the water. So easy for her to see if she just looked up.

Sometimes, his pod brother was far too careless.

"She's going to fix the section of the city that you broke," Maketes mused.

"What?"

"That's why it's carrying the panel. They're heading in the right direction for it." He pointed, and damn it, his pod brother was right.

That little mudskipper was going to fix what they had broken together. He hadn't gone through all this trouble to have her fix everything that easily. Didn't she realize what destruction they had wrought together? This was a good thing. The ocean could take back what they had destroyed.

Already there were barnacles and clams growing in that tube, through the hole they had created together. Life continued, the sea took back what it was owed.

"That little—" he ground his teeth, flowing over the edge and past his brother.

"Go on and get her, brother!" Maketes called out. "Bring her back for us, yeah? I think most of the people would like to speak with her."

How they were going to do that, he had no idea. But Arges refused to let her fix any broken pieces of her city. If the metal creature tried to fight him, then he would learn the best way to battle it for his people. He would fight with honor.

She might not know it yet, but that achromo was his. And he intended to take her.

SEVEN

MIRA

Mira was shocked the suit was holding. There was a decent amount of pressure this deep in the ocean, not to mention the insanely icy temperatures. Most people couldn't dive even with suits on for very long.

But the engineers had really gone out of their way to make sure this suit was perfect. Most likely because they wanted to get back into their home, not because they wanted to keep her safe. Still, a girl could dream.

The drone meandered ahead of her, so slowly it made her eyes roll more than a few times behind her goggles. They'd insisted on sending this one with her, something about the undines being a little too close for comfort these days. And she understood the fear. Really, she did.

But wouldn't it have been better to send her with six of the tiny gliders? They could hold on to the panel and move quickly. Faster install meant she was in the water for less time, and that limited the options for the undine to interact with her.

Apparently, such a thought was "beyond her pay grade".

It made her want to hit her head on a rock and get it over with. She'd never be anything other than a useful tool to the heads of Beta, and she knew that. She'd grown up with those punches, and shouldn't have expected that to change just because she'd made a device that allowed her to breathe underwater without a tank of air. Still. It took a while every time for the stinging ache of rejection to leave her body.

The drone moved forward, still holding that panel over its head like a shield. But they eventually made it to the engineering tunnel, and she sucked her teeth at the sight. The ocean didn't wait long to take everything back.

There were barnacles on the walls. Starfish on the glass. Even a few little sea urchins that slowly meandered across the floor that was now covered with sand. Thankfully, it looked like her blast door had held.

Swimming in that direction, she kicked her fins and moved a little closer to one of the windows. Peering inside, she was pleased to see it was all dry.

No oxygen, maybe, but still no leaks.

It was a good start. They'd have to fix a lot more than just this panel, but at least they could get back to their things.

She pressed her fingers to the glass. Inside that room were her only belongings, and the only ones that made any impact on her happiness. A picture of her parents, her mother's bronze bracelet, and her father's tool belt.

They'd been injured inside, of all places. Her father had been fixing a rather large heating element and her mother had been working on the wires above him. No one really knew what happened, but neither of them made it out of that room alive.

At least she had their things, though. At least she had some way of remembering them beyond fragile memory.

Sighing, she turned and let the air bubbles filter out of her rebreather. She'd been working on this invention for a very long time. Twin tubes at the back of her head sucked oxygen out of the ocean and allowed her to breathe. Not quite like a fish, but really close. She'd never tested it underwater like this, though she had known eventually she'd have to wear it.

Thankfully, it worked. She honestly hadn't been certain it would.

Mira saw the dark mass out of the corner of her eye just moments before it struck her. She hadn't expected anything to move that fast through the water, let alone attack her. They'd already searched the area with drones to make sure there wasn't anything large in the general vicinity.

Three other men were joining her. She had the belated thought as she was smashed against the side of the tunnel. She just had to make it until they got here.

Mira reached to the belt around her waist and tried to grab her serrated knife. It wouldn't do much against a shark, but it might keep her alive. Or at least, make the creature think twice.

Whipping out the blade, she blindly struck but soon realized that every one of her attempts to hit something vital was stopped by what felt like a... forearm?

Twisting, she tried to turn in the water, but the damned deep sea flippers on her feet made that hard. They were built for long, graceful movements. They propelled her through the water quickly, but she had to be in control of her body.

Peering down, she saw a thick forearm wrapped around her waist. The darker skin, the slight yellow speckles that she'd not quite been expecting to see, and the thin fissures of bright blue that glowed like veins on top of those clawed hands.

Damn it, she knew exactly who had her in his grasp.

The undine, the idiot who had come far too close to the city and now he was grabbing her in the water?

Mira fought with even more intent. How dare he? He thought he could attack her outside the city? They had a deal. Or at least, some semblance of a deal. She'd saved his life. He saved hers. They were even. The damned thing needed to leave her alone.

Twisting in his grip, she finally spun herself around in his arms. But now he was holding onto her suit and she couldn't wiggle without risking damage to the material.

If she somehow got away, there was no way she could explain the claw marks on an expensive new piece of equipment. Besides, she needed this suit to stay alive down here. The pressure, the cold, all of it would kill her instantly.

Nervous, she punched her fists into his ribs, but he didn't budge. Didn't even look down at her as he swam her far away from this place and toward who knows what.

Speaking of... She craned her neck to look at where they were going and all she could see was the edge of the cliff where Beta had built their city. A cliff that dove deep.

Real deep.

"No," she said, her voice warped through the rebreather. "No, you can't take me down there."

She didn't know what was that far underneath the waves, but that didn't matter. She knew what the pressure would do to her. She needed a better suit, a much better mask, and if they kept going like this...

Mira struggled again, slamming her hands over and over against the muscular prison. "Stop! Listen to me, I can't. We can't. I don't know how deep you want to go, and I have no idea how far down that even goes. I'm an engineer, not a pilot. But listen to me, undine, I can't!"

He didn't pay her any mind. She stared up at him, wondering how much it would hurt if she grabbed a handful of his gills. But then she remembered the knife in her hand. Stupid. She was so stupid when she panicked.

Fear controlled her body. Fear of the unknown, the depths of the ocean, of the blackness behind her and how the currents seemed to work in his favor. They were already at the lip of it, already so close to the abyss that opened like the maw of a massive sea creature.

And she had no idea what he wanted from her. Only that his kind killed hers.

She reacted. Mira slashed out at him with the serrated blade and felt his shock ripple across her body. His fins flared, his arms loosened, and those gills around his neck puffed out like some fancy collar she'd seen in the history books.

But then she was falling. No, she was floating away from him and a current had snagged onto her. She didn't have any way to control herself, nor did she know where it was taking her. Only that the current ripped her out of his arms and down over the edge.

"Fuck," she grunted, screaming out a growl of anger at the end of the word.

She kicked her feet, flailed her arms, anything to stop the rioting movement of her body tumbling down into darkness.

Her flashlight illuminated dust particles and a rock wall. That was all she could see, and even then, it swirled around her as she wildly spun through the water. Dust turned gold, then red, then white as all the light disappeared other than her own. Color was hard to see or decipher. And then the rock wall fell away too.

She had the unnerving sensation that she no longer existed. There was nothing around her, no sense of ground or where she might be. Just nothingness that even her light could not penetrate. Particles came and went. Little dust motes that floated by her. She swore at one point she stared into an open mouth full of teeth.

There was nothing. Just her and the open darkness of the abyss. She did not know where up or down was. She couldn't even hazard a guess. But she had the image of herself as a single speck of dust on a blank canvas of darkness and a monstrous being beneath her that she could not see.

And then suddenly her back struck something hard and unyielding.

Mira turned. Her legs tangled together as her long fins caught on each other, but somehow she reached out and grabbed onto the rock she had hit.

It wasn't much. But it existed. It was sturdy, and that was enough right now. Breathing hard, she could hear the gears at the back of her head churning to make enough air for her to gulp down, but it wouldn't last forever. She hadn't built it for someone to breathe so frantically.

Fingers digging into the rock, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to control her breath. In and out. She couldn't count to five on the inhale, but she could count to three. So she did that ten times before switching to four, and then slowly focusing on the rest of her body.

Her toes were intact. She could wiggle them in her fins. Her suit was fine, although she could feel the cold water seeping through a hole in the back. Eventually, that would be a problem, but right now, she was okay. It

would last. The integrity of the suit hadn't been overly damaged, so she could relax about dying of hypothermia.

Draped over the rock as she was, she couldn't see much other than stone. At least the light attached to her head still worked. She peered down at the rock between her fingers. Black, porous. She'd seen these specimens come into Beta before.

They were volcanic. She tried to pull up the other words for them, but couldn't. She panicked a bit. Had she hit her head? Maybe that was the problem.

"You didn't hit your head," she assured herself. "You would remember if you hit your head. This is a panic attack. You've had them before. You're all right."

But she didn't feel all right. She lifted her head to look around, adjusting her light so it was the smallest, most intense beam it could be and still... nothing. Just water. Just vague shapes in the distance that she thought might be other rocks. Or deep-sea creatures she didn't want to meet.

The current moved just over her head. Mira reached her hand up and could feel it shoving against her palm. She must have fallen out of the bottom and now she was lying here, on volcanic rock, and there had to be another drop off somewhere nearby.

"You're alive," she repeated to herself, folding again over the stone and trying not to think about pressure changes and what they did to a body. "You're alive, and you're not hallucinating. You would see things moving in the distance, you would..."

See dark shapes.

She would see dark shapes moving a little closer with every heartbeat and she would probably think they were alive. Mira's brows wrinkled as she turned her attention back to the shadows in the distance. She didn't think they were moving yet, but what if they were?

Nitrogen poisoning. It affected divers, and she knew it made them see things.

But wait, no, she was panicking. Her rebreather didn't do that. She wasn't carrying tanks of oxygen, nitrogen, and everything else they breathed. The device she made turned the water into air just like the fish did. She wasn't going to hallucinate, which meant the dark shape approaching her was not in her head and right in front of her.

Fear spiked through her body and she moved without thought.

Mira turned from the stone and kept her body low as she swam away. Whatever trailed her, speeding after her like a bullet through the water, it was hunting. But she was smaller and swimming through tight spaces would give her a lot better chance at surviving.

She didn't take the time to fear that she might swim farther away from Beta. It was a risk she would have to take to stay alive. Dodging through the stones, she found what she was hoping for. Tall spirals of volcanic material that had fallen over each other, creating a labyrinth of tiny cracks where pale fish schooled.

Cracks she could fit in. But whatever was following her? It couldn't.

She didn't stop to see what manner of creature hunted her. Mira darted across the volcanic ruins, hoping it wasn't still active. Black dust floated up around her, and she could only see as far as her hand, but she knew the spirals were right here. Right in front of her. She just had to make it before whatever was behind her caught up.

One more thrust of her feet and she was there. She grabbed onto the edge of the stones just as one of her fins was caught in the current. It dragged her upward, cutting her hands on the sharp stone, but she refused to let it stop her. Gritting her teeth, Mira tunneled beneath one of the stones, wedging herself so deep inside she didn't know if she'd be able to get out.

But she couldn't stop wheezing. She had never once in her life felt like prey, but now she knew what it felt like to fear teeth digging into her without ever seeing her attacker.

Spinning around, she moved too fast and her light hit the stone above her head. She couldn't hear the sound of breaking glass, but she could feel it crunch and then everything plummeted into darkness.

She thought she was scared before? Now she knew real fear.

Nothing existed. She didn't exist, if not for the feel of the stone around her and the icy water gathering at the base of her spine. There was no light. And she'd thought she knew what it was like to stare into the darkness, but she had been so wrong.

This was like she was dead. This darkness was like someone had plucked out her eyes and taken her ears. She was nothing and everything all at once.

Until a soft blue light bloomed ahead of her. It was some distance away still, but it was baby blue like the bird eggs in the hatchery. So soft and unassuming that it almost cajoled her out of her hiding place.

Blinking her eyes into focus, she realized that blue light was familiar. Her undine floated across the volcanic ravine, pulling himself with those webbed, clawed hands. He searched for her, she realized. He was looking in all the cracks and crevices, his brows furrowed in concentration and those gills fully extended.

They were so fragile. So thin. Fluttering around his head, moving on their own as the water toyed through them. So many shades of blue, all glowing with bioluminescence around his face. Cutting that muscular chest deeper with shadows and faint blue highlights. His long, powerful tail moved him with barely a flick. Like an eel drifting through the current.

He was beautiful, she thought. If she died here, she was grateful that it was at the hands of something like him.

Then those gills stopped moving, a ripple stiffening them as he turned in her direction and she knew, somehow, he'd found her. But, she supposed, it was never easy for prey to hide from a predator.

Especially not one like him.

EIGHT

ARGES

What was he supposed to do with this creature?

His achromo could barely fight while he dragged her through the water! He hadn't a clue what she was chattering at him about, but he figured this was the best time to take her. She was already in the water. The metal creature that followed her hadn't seemed to care in the slightest that he'd stolen her away. Luck was on his side.

Until she'd caught him with that sharp weapon of hers. He had made certain the sea ate it. Those sharp edges would not come near him again. The depths could take that weapon that was surprisingly deadly, if she had known how to wield it.

But then the depths had taken her. He'd never thought the ocean would work against him. To his people, the depths were a goddess. She looked out for them, just as they looked out for her.

His entire life, Arges had always known her touch. Luck followed him wherever he went, and the currents favored his movements. He swam easier than the others. Kelp never tangled in his tail, nor did the creatures of the ocean outright attack him.

He was favored. So why had the sea taken this achromo out of his arms?

Frustration set in rather quickly, especially when he could not find her. This was his role, his job. He had to deliver her back to the city, and that was the only option. Until he realized he was following a scent of fear and pain. It was easy to drag her scent through his gills, to play with it through the delicate filaments. But he hated the taste of her fear.

He tried to think of what he knew about her kind. They couldn't breathe underwater, but that was fine. She had her attachment to her face and clearly she'd been breathing if she could speak. Her suit was still intact, and he assumed her second layer of skin helped her swim. Even her fins were still on her body, so what had she been trying to tell him?

As he searched across the volcanic remains, he remembered a certain fish he'd wanted to bring home as a child. His mother had been so sweet as he held the tiny, shimmering creature in his hands.

"Arges," she'd said, opening the cage of his fingers. "You must let it go. We live deep in the ocean, my son. If we bring it that far down, it will die."

It will die.

Ah, he was an idiot. Of course, he couldn't drag her down to his people. Not to mention that wasn't what Mitéra had asked him to do.

He was supposed to use this little achromo. He was supposed to convince her to help his people, even if that was through lies. How was he supposed to do that? He had no idea. It wasn't like he could seduce her. He was lacking in many ways, he was certain, considering how grotesque she was to him.

They were two very different species who had learned to hate each other from a very young age. She didn't trust him, and he hadn't helped to build

that trust by attacking her and trying to drag her into the abyss.

Carding a hand through his hair, he turned his attention to finding her. Thankfully, he could taste where she was. Tangled up in one of the lava crevices where she thought he wouldn't find her. It was such a shame that this achromo had given into her fear. He liked her better when she was brave.

Arges swam close, keeping his movement measured and slow. He didn't want to scare her even more, but he needed her to come out.

"Achromo," he said. "You cannot stay in the stones forever."

She wriggled farther away from him, pressing her hands against the sides of her head. There was the scent of pain again, so strong he feared she would draw a swarm of sharks in their direction. He needed to get her away from this place.

So he tried again. "Listen to me. I have no intention of harming you—"

This time she let out a very loud chatter that he had no way of understanding. He didn't know what she was saying, nor did he really care. She needed to come out from there.

But then he realized she was pointing at the side of her head, both sides. Then she pointed at her mouth and her head again, before shaking herself.

What was she trying to say now? This little achromo would be the death of him.

He'd been watching her for such a long time. All he wanted was to go home, and she was making that impossible to do.

Arges opened his mouth again only to have her frantically wave her hands and then lower them. Slowly. Almost as if...

Was she saying he talked too loud?

He drew back, his fin flipping him almost the entire length of his tail away from her. Was she really trying to say that he was loud? He had never been the boisterous brother, and many people asked him to repeat himself because he was so quiet!

The idiotic, ridiculous, horrible, fool of an achromo had no idea how insulting she was. She didn't know that his people would laugh at him if he told them she'd asked him to speak quieter.

He took a deep breath, the gills along his sides flaring with the movement and tried to let go of the anger. "I need you to come out." This time, he almost whispered the words.

But why was he even doing this? She couldn't understand him. She didn't care that he wanted her to come out, and clearly she had no intention of doing so. If anything, she'd wedged herself in deeper.

Staring up into the darkness, he muttered, "Galene, give me strength." The goddess of calm seas was the only one who could save him now.

He didn't have time for this game. If she wanted to hide from him, that was fine. But he wouldn't let her succeed.

Lashing his tail, he whipped through the water and collided hard with the lava rocks. His scales would protect him, so he looped his tail around the largest pillar and squeezed. Tightening all those powerful muscles from years upon years of swimming, and he felt the lava stones crack.

Perhaps she'd heard it as well, because she yanked the fins off her feet. He wasn't sure why she was doing that, considering she'd need them if she wanted to flee from him, but then he realized she was going to wiggle deeper. One fin popped off, revealing multiple tiny flippers at the base of her twin tails.

If he hadn't been so startled, he would have used the moment to snag her. But he was horrified at the sight of them.

They were mangled. Cut at the ends as if someone had taken a sharp stone to her flippers for decoration. They were so small, too. Was she deformed? Was that why her people had sent her out on her own?

The achromo took that opportunity to wriggle deeper into the lava stones. He could see a long gash down her back, faint and pale where she'd scraped her scales clean off.

Or did the achromos not have any scales at all? Like his chest?

He touched a webbed hand to the smooth plane of his chest, and that was when she caught him off guard. One of those horrible, mangled flippers caught him right in the gills. Wheezing out a breath, bubbles erupting from his mouth in a rather embarrassing display, he shifted just enough for her to slide past him.

For a moment, he let her swim. Where would she go, after all? There was only open ocean, and he doubted she knew where her glowing city was. The currents should have turned her head inside out and upside down.

But here she was, swimming so slowly away from him, and he realized there was a small cave where she was headed. The lava cooled and created long tunnels, sometimes. If she got in there, she would claw her way to the

bottom and be so far out of his reach. He'd have to be here for a day at least waiting for her to stick her head out like a turtle in its shell.

"No you don't," he growled before he flicked his fin. It took so little effort to catch up to her.

His claws dug into her suit, dragging her closer to him and then into his arms. She fought against him, of course. Wiggling like an eel and almost just as slippery. But soon he had her under control, even though bubbles blasted him in the face as she let out a long scream that sounded eerily like a word in his language.

She didn't mean to say "safe", he knew. That wasn't at all how she felt in this moment, but a male could dream.

"Hush, female," he said, wrapping his arms tighter around her. He turned her so her face was smashed against his chest, and then squeezed hard until she finally froze in his grip, still stiff but no longer moving.

It was good enough for him. He just needed her to stay still.

Arges glided his hand down her back, his fingers twitching as he hit the top of her hips. This felt remarkably similar to his own people. Although she was unusually small for a female of his kind. They were larger than the males, so it was a rather unique experience to know he held a full-grown female in his arms and her head only just grazed his shoulder.

His tail was longer than her dual tails. He should try to untangle those so that they weren't just flapping in the water. But then she shifted in his arms and he was rather shocked at her sudden comfort.

Those twin tails moved stiffly, but she jabbed their sharp bends into his gills and tucked those ugly flippers in against his hip fins. Those were usually reserved only for a trusted female of his kind, and he certainly hadn't had a female touch them in a very long time.

Sucking in a breath, his gills fluttered against her strange second skin as she curled those flippers into him. To stay warm? Perhaps. They had looked very much like they were fragile. Too thin, too bony for this deep in the ocean.

So he let her do whatever it took. He swam for them, letting the current take him not deeper, but up a little so he could bring her somewhere safe. But the entire journey, all he could think about was her little flippers pressed against one of the most private places on his body.

Did she know what she was touching? Was she aware that if he'd been even remotely attracted to her, that she would have a significantly more

concerning appendage pressed against her soft belly?

Or rather, between her strange tails, he supposed. He was much larger than her, after all.

Finally, he reached the cave system. They were a little closer to the other tribes of his kind, but not so close that he would lose her to someone who might try him for her ownership. No one knew about these caves, anyway. He'd found them when he was just a child.

She'd stopped shaking so much. He wasn't sure if that was because she'd given up, or if the water here was that much warmer. It didn't feel all that different to him, but he was used to the rapid temperature changes.

The entrance to the cave was in the side wall of a cliff that dropped off toward his home. The opening wasn't so large that it was easy to find, but he could swim through the small crack without touching the stones. And then it opened up. Oh, it opened up significantly.

He remembered the first time he'd mustered the courage to come in here. His whole tail had quivered with delight as he realized almost all the bioluminescent plants had made their home in this cavern. Tiny schools of silver fish stayed here almost all times of the year as well, feeding the plants, which in turn, fed them. The entirety of the cavern was filled with golden light from giant petals of glowing sea flowers and pale white coral. Not a single shadow in here, other than those he cast upon the jungle of color and light.

The achromo in his arms struggled again. But this time, he could see that it wasn't from fear. She was twisting this way and that, trying to see where he'd brought her.

So he let her go.

She drifted out of his arms, so slowly without those false flippers. Those she'd left in the lava fields, and he already knew he would retrieve them for her.

Arges could only barely see her eyes behind the strange contraption she'd attached to her face, but he could see her surprise. Her gaze had widened, and she flapped her hands to turn slowly in a circle.

What did she see?

A place to exploit? A cavern to turn into dust because there might be a rock she wanted or a plant her people would tear up by the roots? He should never have brought her here.

Every bit of color in his body flared as she swam to one of the rarest plants in this area of the ocean. The giant yellow flower puffed out seeds at her approach, nearly as large as her fist. They cascaded around her in a glittering wave of golden light.

Instead of flinching away or batting at them, she reached out her tiny hands and caught one in between her palms. Carefully—he could see how careful she was being—she lifted it up to her gaze, watched it for a few moments, and then let it go.

Why did that make his heart twist so much in his chest?

He flicked his tail, brushing against her hip and down one of her tails to get her attention. His achromo turned to him and he pointed up.

He had the distinct pleasure of watching her realize that there was air above them. She shot toward the surface, wiggling those horrible appendages as hard as she could until she broke the surface.

Arges followed her, already knowing what she would find. Some achromos had been here before, but his people had killed them years ago. Now, it was a relic of her own people. He'd never gotten out of the water here, nor did he ever intend to. But if she could make something of it, then he supposed he could leave her here.

After all, without him, where would she go?

The female had already dragged herself out of the water. And he watched with horror as she ripped the strange things off her face, showing that they had left deep red marks on her flesh. Then she pulled at the second skin around her face, slowly peeling it off her head and revealing all that red hair, like she was birthing herself. It was monstrous to watch.

Stomach queasy, he shook his head when she chattered at him. He much preferred listening to her when they were underwater and she had both the weight of the ocean and that contraption muffling her horrid voice.

“Stay here,” he intoned, watching her cover the sides of her head again. Sighing, he said much quieter, “I will bring you food. But you are trapped here until I can figure out how to communicate with you.”

She was already waving those hands around, trying to convey some message to him, but he had no idea what she was trying to say.

“You have water and light.” He pointed into the water. “Now I will bring you food.”

And then he sank beneath the surface because he couldn't stand to listen to her for much longer. His head hurt.

NINE

MIRA

“Fuck!” Mira screamed, kicking a sizable rock toward the water. It made a very large, satisfying splash, but that didn’t change her situation.

The fucking undine had kidnapped her. He’d followed her through that volcanic field, fished her out like she was nothing but a nuisance, and then left her here.

To die.

She was so deep underwater, there was no way she could sneak home. She didn't have her flippers, so swimming would be far too slow. Her feet would freeze off, and it was only a small miracle that the undine put off an insane amount of heat around those waist fins of his. Otherwise, she'd have lost her toes on the journey here.

But now what? He'd left her in a cave, with nothing but the natural light that emitted from the strange pool. She had to sit here and wait for him? She'd die.

He'd left her to die.

Her heart thundered in her chest and the words played over and over again through her mind.

He'd left her to die. She was going to die here. This cave would be her tomb and no one would know what had happened to her. No one would really care, either. Engineers went missing all the time when they took on an out-of-Beta job.

She could have hit a strange current. She could have hit her head and then floated off the cliff. Maybe a couple of people would be disappointed that they'd have to take up her work, but no one would outright miss her. Mira didn't even have a friend who would ask what had happened to her.

They all just did what they could. No one in Beta liked to make attachments because what if something happened to them? Just like what had happened to her.

She set her rebreather down on a nearby stone and then slumped down beside it. She couldn't take her eyes off the contraption that had worked so well.

The others would think her design was flawed. That something in her rebreather had gone wrong, and that's why she hadn't come back up. No one would even give her the credit for creating something that *worked*. Her design was perfect, and it had not only given her air during the assignment, but under a lot of pressure beneath the ocean as well.

"You were perfect," she whispered, her voice echoing a bit in the cavern. Ghosting her fingers over the device, she stared into the glowing yellow water.

It was pretty. The natural motion of the sea turned into soft, undulating waves. Barely noticeable unless she stared at the water. Then she could see the flickering sparkles that drifted left to right. It lulled her senses, setting her mind into something almost like a trance.

“You are safe,” she murmured to herself. “You are alive. You are not dead yet.”

Over and over, she repeated the words until some of the tension in her body had eased. Her heart eased upon the hammering in her ribs like an insistent child. I will relax, it seemed to say. But soon we need to run again.

And run where? She was only feet from the icy water, and the ground wasn't entirely warm against her toes. Not cold, but definitely not warm.

“You have to get up and do something,” Mira told herself. So she stood.

Maybe she stayed frozen there for a little while longer. Her stomach twisted as she thought about drowning herself. It would serve that undine right to return and find that she'd done the work for him. If he'd wanted to kill her, he could have at least fought her.

Starvation was a horrible way to go.

Finally, though, she tore her eyes away from the glimmering lights and turned her attention to the cave itself. Maybe this would give her a little more details on where she was. She couldn't be on the surface, no undine would bring her there. Besides, wouldn't she be hearing a lot more thunder from the storms that never abated?

She had to still be underwater. He must have brought her to a cave system that... that...

“Is that a crate?” she asked.

It was more than just a crate.

There was an entire computer system here. All set up in the back of the cave. She'd recognize the look of that anywhere. The hardware was similar to the ones in the engineering section of Beta. Old, but not impossible to turn on.

Taking a staggering step forward, she paused and then scrubbed her eyes hard to make sure she wasn't hallucinating.

“You can't have nitrogen poisoning,” she muttered. “You weren't breathing gas.”

But it sure seemed like she was hallucinating.

She took another step forward. Then another. Her body started moving of its own accord as she lunged toward the equipment. A few clicks here, a swift kick to the side there, and three bangs of her fist on the top of the old generator and voila. She was in luck.

Apparently, the energy was derived from the water. She heard a soft churn before lights flickered on above her head. There weren't many, most

of them were on their own stand and a few of the bulbs were broken.

But she had three lights. Three white lights that weren't coming out of the ocean.

And an entire computer system at her disposal.

"Oh, you stupid undine," she muttered as she grabbed onto the side of the computer. "Messaging system, turn on. On."

There were two words on the screen, and they crushed what little hope she'd had to send a message.

Systems Offline.

So, she wouldn't be able to tell anyone that she was still alive. But at the very least, she had lights. She had crates of stuff to look through, although most of them appeared to be empty. And there was a cot in the corner with a very moldy blanket that had sunk into the mattress itself. She'd have to get rid of that.

It wasn't the worst place she'd stayed by far. Neither would this be a very comfortable stay. But maybe if she tried her best, she could get that computer working. The signal would be weak, and it would be really hard for her to do much other than send a single message repeatedly, but it was a start.

It was hope.

The sound of rippling water caught her attention. Mira turned and shrieked when she saw the undine floating behind her in the pool. Just the top of his head and his eyes showed, watching her with that black gaze that somehow was more unnerving out of the water than in it.

She hadn't realized he had so many gills on the sides of his face. Maybe they'd been flat to his skull the few times she'd seen him, but now they stood out. Sharp spikes with webs, rounded curves and edges, all blue and veiny and really gross.

How some people in Beta thought the undines looked humanoid, she would never understand. They were monsters. They were terrible beasts who kidnapped people who were *just trying to do their job*.

"What are you doing back here?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest and keeping a large distance between them. Could he get out of the water?

She thought he'd survive it. He'd been in the hallway with her just fine, and then he'd done that strange vomiting movement that had expelled water out of his gills. So he must be able to live for a while outside of the water.

The undine lifted something and threw it at her. She sidestepped, avoiding whatever projectile he'd tossed.

"Real mature," she muttered, looking around for something to throw back at him. "Two can play at that game, you know."

Maybe they'd left a wrench. It wouldn't be very smart to waste such a valuable tool, but, oh, it would feel so good to see it bounce off his thick skull.

Then something flopped against her foot and she realized with shock that he'd brought her a fish. A big one, too. With glittering gray skin and a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. But it was food, and there was definitely no food down here that she could still eat.

She fell on it immediately, putting her knee against its gills and reaching for the first heavy thing she could find. Unfortunately, that happened to be a very useful back up screen that she might have needed. She brought it down on its skull a little too quickly to think about it, though.

Waste of equipment in a trade for food. She'd take it.

The fish stopped flopping around, and she let out a relieved breath. The poor thing didn't deserve to die like this. Some nasty human bashing its head in because an undine had decided it was the one worth being the fodder to keep her alive.

"Fire, then?" Looking at the creature, who for some reason was taking care of her, she wiggled her fingers in the air as she mimicked the movement of fire. "You must have seen us make fire before. Clearly you were a peeping tom for most of your life."

He tilted his head to the side, clearly confused by her actions.

What else had he seen that made fire?

"Uh..." She looked around, trying to find something that might help her. And then she remembered he'd seen her welder. The torch wasn't exactly easy to find, but who knows? Maybe she could ask for anything and he'd bring it to her.

Oh, god. Was he keeping her as a pet? Was she some strange science project that he'd brought to this cave to see how long she'd survive?

Grinding her teeth, she mimed pulling her welder off her hip and using it in the air. Just like he'd seen her the first time. "Welder?" she asked, pointing to her hand that was in the shape of the small handheld gun. "This. This is what I'm looking for."

If anything, he only scowled at her even more deeply before sinking back underneath the waves.

“Right,” she muttered. “That was asking too much.”

She stared down at the fish and every part of her revolted. No one wanted her to work in the kitchens, and she’d never wanted to work there, anyway. Mira had eaten fish her entire life. It was practically the only meat they could get down in the depths of the ocean. Maybe Alpha had some secret red meat animals that they could eat, but in Beta they were lucky to get chicken when the birds eventually died. Even then, it was tough as nails and tasted a little... off.

But she’d never cut into a fish before. She’d never gutted one of the animals, even though she knew theoretically how it worked.

Damn. This was a learning experience, and she didn’t even have a knife.

Mira had no idea how long she stared at the poor creature, willing it to come back to life so she could just knock it back into the water and forget this had happened. And then the guilt stepped in. It had been so beautiful. Who was she to take a life when she wasn’t even hungry yet?

It was a lie. She was very hungry. But maybe whoever had been in this research facility had rations that would last however many years it had been since someone was in here. She hadn’t needed to kill the fish yet. And the undine...

The undine.

He was staring at her in the water again. How long had he been there this time? Watching her stare at the dead fish like an idiot?

She gulped and gestured at the fish. “I don’t know what to do with it now.”

Right, why had she expected any reaction out of him? He just hated her and wanted all of this to be over and done with.

Why had he brought her here?

His long dark arm lifted out of the water and again, he threw something at her. This time it was at her head. Mira had better reflexes than that, though.

With a hiss of disapproval, she caught what he’d thrown without knowing what it was. All she could feel was that it was cold, wet, and very hard.

Frowning, she brought it down to look at the ancient welder that he’d brought her. It was waterlogged, with barnacles growing along the handle.

But it was definitely a welder.

She sat down hard on her butt next to the dead fish, flipped the welder onto its side, and yanked the cartridge out. Mira then sighed in relief. The sparker was still in it. Theoretically, all she had to do was clean it out and let it dry. Then she should be able to hit the same trigger, maybe have to fix a few things for that to work as well, and she'd have fire.

That was a life saver.

The undine made a sound like something of a hum, and when she looked back at him he gestured at the fish. Making a strange grabbing motion with his hands, she assumed he wanted her to trade the fish back to him.

“Sure bud,” she muttered, kicking it in his direction. “I’ll figure out how to get my own.”

And then, to her complete and utter shock, he didn’t swim away with it. Instead, he pulled himself halfway out of the water. And boy, he was massive. So big that outside of the water, he looked like the monster he was. Lean and long, his muscles rippled as he dragged the fish a little closer, balancing with his hip bones against the rock, before he then sliced the fish’s belly open with his claws.

She’d never guessed her life would take this weird twist. This massive creature was... cleaning the fish out for her.

He swirled the body in the water every now and then, and she could see organs and blood soaking through the waves. It made her a little nauseous to watch, but she couldn’t pull her eyes away from him.

The undine who kidnapped her was trying to... feed her?

“Right,” she muttered to herself, working on pulling the welder apart. “This is normal. Just another afternoon spent with my undine friend while he prepares dinner and I work on some lost trash that he apparently thinks is a gift. Nothing to see here at all.”

He looked at her, flicking those black eyes in her direction. She had no idea how she knew he was looking at her, but the sensation of his gaze was like a physical touch along her arms and legs.

Looking down at her suit, she set one of the welder pieces on top of a stone with the others. “Yeah, I know. I’m gonna have to figure this suit out so it can dry or it’ll rot right into my skin. There’s gotta be something in those crates to cover myself with if it survived.”

The undine finished with the fish, then laid it on the stones and slipped back into the water. Every movement was eerily and disturbingly graceful.

“Thanks,” she muttered, looking at the fish and then back at the creature, who moved like he intended to leave again.

She couldn’t let him go. Panic made her heart thunder in her chest again. She’d be alone in here. Completely and utterly alone, hundreds of feet below the surface, and what was she supposed to do? One fish wasn’t enough! What about water? Light? Energy? Heat?

“Wait!” she shouted, lunging for the water as he started to disappear.

At least he came back up at her shout. His brows furrowed and his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

What would keep him here? Maybe communication? Obviously, he’d kidnapped her for a reason. Maybe the creature had a little crush, she had no idea. All she could think to do was tap herself on the chest three times.

“Mira,” she said, tapping again. “My name is Mira.”

He watched her, and she swore he understood what she was trying to say, before he sank into the depths. She watched his tail flick through the golden light, then disappear.

TEN

ARGES

He had an achromo in a cave, and he had no idea what to do with her. Arges had tried going back to his people. Mitéra had made it very clear that she had no intention of allowing him back unless he had figured out new, useful information about the achromos. Unfortunately, he had not. It was almost impossible to communicate with the creature in the cave.

He'd gone back once, but she'd been curled up on a disgusting wooden crate in the back. He'd not been certain what she was doing, but she didn't

stir when he popped his head up to look at her. Arges could only assume that meant she was asleep.

His people slept little, but he had observed the achromos resting often. They would sleep for hours on end, sometimes even longer than the moon was in the sky. He'd watched them for what felt like forever before realizing that they would remain in that helpless state far longer than was safe.

This one was apparently the same. He usually slept floating next to his siblings, but only a few hours at a time. His people watched out for each other while they rested, although sometimes his body could even swim while he was asleep.

the achromos, however, clearly needed more rest.

He'd frowned at her and then sank beneath the waves again. What was he supposed to do while she was catatonic? His Mitéra wouldn't let him return to his people without information. He couldn't talk to this achromo, even though she clearly tried to communicate with him.

Arges realized that his patience was drawing a little too thin, and he needed to get control over himself. He'd be too rough with her, and that wouldn't help either of their situations. Unfortunately, it also meant that he had to sit and wait for her to wake.

So he did. He coiled his tail around one of the larger glowing flowers, hidden underneath its massive petals as he waited for his achromo to join the land of the living again. Perhaps he even dozed himself for a time. Just floating there, comfortable and at peace, even though he shouldn't have been able to relax. Not around her.

Though, in this quiet space between reality and dreams, he could admit that she set his mind at ease. This strange achromo had seen him at his worst and she hadn't even flinched. There was not an ounce of fear in this creature, and he supposed that was something honorable.

Disgusting, yes. But honorable, just the same.

Finally, he saw her shadow moving above him. He wasn't quite certain what she was doing, and he took a moment to uncoil himself and watch as she moved back and forth along the opening into the water. Her strange flippers took her from one section to the other, and he could see the faint outline of her arms moving.

Was she talking to herself? Strange beast. No one was here to listen to her.

Unless she knew he was here.

In which case, she should know he couldn't hear her. The water dampened most sound and made it impossible for him to hear anything other than the faintest burble.

Flipping his tail over, he glided through the water and soundlessly breached the surface. He watched her with narrowed eyes while she paced. Back and forth. Moving through the air as smoothly as he did the water.

She was muttering. He had no idea what she was saying, but the cadence and fervor of it seemed to be repeated. Over and over again. As though she was repeating the same thing.

He'd never understand this strange creature.

Pinching his pointer finger and thumb, he flicked water at her. A few droplets sailed through the air and splashed against her bare fins, suddenly reminding him that he'd intended to go back and get those additional flippers she'd used to speed her movement. At least that would be helpful for her.

She let out a frustrated noise and glared at him.

Oh, how he adored that expression. She wanted to fight him. He could see that. She wanted to reach into the water, rip him out of it, and gut him just like he'd gutted the fish for her. Thankfully, it would take a lot more than her meager claws to do that to him.

Still, he couldn't help but goad her.

"You think you are such a warrior?" he asked, the spines in his fins raising. "Such a shame, achromo. If you step foot in this water, I will rip you apart. The waters will turn red with your blood, and I will watch it plume from your wounds—"

A small pebble hit him in the center of his forehead. Freezing where he was, he touched a hand to the now stinging part of his skull. Had she just thrown a rock at him?

Apparently so. This fearless little creature had no problem at all rising to the occasion of his threat. She stood there with her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

And then she started talking. He didn't need to understand her to know what she was saying, because she was surprisingly succinct with her gestures.

She wanted to kill him. And if he came close to her at all, she would throw another rock at him and then... Well, she drew a finger across her

throat, so he could only assume that was even more of a threat.

Sighing, he wondered if she realized that his people never backed down from an offer to fight. He was a warrior, a true warrior, not just some little pale scraggly thing with weak fins and tiny flippers. He could so easily destroy her.

And yet, here she was. Acting more confident than she had any right to. Foolish achromo. He almost admired her bravery.

But for now, he needed to prove a point.

Lunging forward, he flicked his tail hard and catapulted himself out of the water. She let out a harsh, shrieking noise that grated on his ears, but that attack did not stop him. It only took the slightest movement to grab onto her arm, and even less effort to throw her across the cave and into the water.

She hadn't been far enough away from him. In truth, he'd thought that she was likely a little farther than he could reach, but she wasn't. His tail was still in the water partially after he'd thrown her, just enough to drag himself back into the depths and sink beneath them.

He wanted to see the frustration on her face. He wanted to feel some perverse sense of glee at her turmoil and fear. But instead of scenting fear in the water, as he'd expected, he only scented her rage.

She stayed underneath the surface longer than he'd expected, as well. She lingered, the salt water scooping up her hair in a billowing cloud of red around her features. And oh, he hated that he had the momentary thought that she might even be lovely.

That silver skin she swore looked very similar to many fish in the sea. It glimmered with every one of her movements, even the tiniest twitches that she used to turn herself toward him. And he much preferred her like this. With her face bared for him to see, and her eyes slightly squinted in the saltwater.

She was... lovely. Damn it. He hadn't wanted to think about it, but she really was. The kelp tangled around her legs and the golden light made her turn into a hue that his people so rarely saw. She was a rare and delicate creature, if a little ugly, and he had captured her.

Long ago, his people hunted for their brides. They chased and prowled and fought each other for the right to win a woman's heart, and apparently there was still some part of that inside him. His nature screamed that he had claimed her.

This woman was his.

He'd hunted her.

He'd bested her.

And now, she was his to do with as he wished.

He needed to shake these thoughts. They were unnatural, and certainly not the thoughts he should have while staring at one of her kind. But as she kicked her short fins and rolled her body through the water, toward the surface, he couldn't stop himself.

Pretty. She moved with so much control over every aspect of her body and he just... He'd forgotten that her kind were capable of that.

Subdued now, and satisfied that he'd bested her, he joined her in swimming to the surface. His fins fluttered at his sides, extended as he would when he was trying to impress a potential mate. She had no way of knowing that, but he still felt embarrassment burn through him.

Arges even tried to smooth the ones around his face down, pushing at them until they flattened again. He was not trying to impress her. And he certainly wasn't presenting himself to her like a damned idiot.

They weren't even compatible. Achromos and his kind were so far different from each other, they would never fit.

He didn't think, at least.

His achromo swam over to the edge of the cave, muttering the whole time while she dragged herself out of the water. Arges leaned against the edge, a little farther away from her this time so she wouldn't throw a rock at him.

"You were saying, achromo?" he asked, chuckling. "You would kill me if I gave you the chance?"

She ignored him. Instead, she stomped to the back of the cave. And not for the first time, he wished he understood what she was saying. Without her gestures, he could only guess.

Putting all his weight on his arm atop the stone, he tilted his head to the side as he watched her. "The People of Water are more cunning than I thought," he said for her, his voice low and soothing. "This one kidnapped me and none of my people came to get me. They probably don't even care that I'm gone."

Of course, he knew this to be the truth. He'd returned to her home, making certain that the achromos wouldn't cause any problems for his own people.

And he was frustrated to find they didn't care that she was gone. Not a single one of them appeared to be gathering a search party, or even attempting to find out what happened to her. They were all just going about their day, doing the same things they did every single day that he'd observed them.

Did they not realize she was gone? He had a hard time believing it.

But then again, the achromos rarely made sense to him. If they didn't care that she had disappeared, then it wasn't his problem.

"I should probably try to escape," he kept going, eyes narrowing as she finally reached the back of the cave. "If he leaves for even a second, I'll swim out of here to my death, most likely. Because I am an idiot. But it would be better than staying here like a pet for him to stare at."

And then she did something he had never expected.

She moved the massive length of her wet hair to the side, reached for the back of her silver skin, and pulled it in half. He watched, awed, as she peeled that second skin off and revealed lovely, pale flesh beneath it. He'd never seen an achromo so bare, and certainly never so close.

She was smooth, the long line of her back revealed with twin valleys of muscles rising along the sides. Those muscles flexed as she pulled the skin right off of her arms.

Then she looked back at him and her face turned bright red. He hadn't known they could do that either. Some of his people could change their color with emotions, but he could only make his skin light up.

Flinching at her glare, he told himself the reaction was only because she changed color so rapidly.

She flicked her fingers at him, indicating that he should turn around. But he didn't want to. He wanted to see the rest of her body, if only to know how different they really were. Obviously she had mounds on her chest, unlike his people. But what if the achromos hid terrifyingly ugly bodies underneath all the scraps of fabric they wore?

Again, she turned her fingers in a circle and pointed at him. He tilted his head to the side and watched her.

She let out a huff of frustration and then bent down to pick up another rock. It didn't escape his notice that she held the strange silver skin to her chest, as though shy about him seeing her body.

Hadn't she already seen all of his? He wore no coverings like the achromos did, although most of his more... private appendages were tucked

inside his body.

Frowning, he did as she asked. If she wanted privacy, he could give her that. But if she used this opportunity to attack him, she would be very surprised at how quickly he could move.

Instead, he heard the quiet sound of her breathing as she struggled to get the second skin off her body. A few stomps suggested she'd pulled it off her tails as well, which was as strange to think as it was in practice. Why would she be peeling off that skin? Clearly, it kept her warmer.

Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He turned around, half hoping to catch a glimpse of what that silver skin had hidden. But she'd wrapped a large swath of fabric around her body, revealing only those ugly fins and just a few inches of her tails before the rest of it was covered. She even had it over her head as she placed the silver skin out on the ground.

His achromo turned to look at him and grunted when she realized he was staring at her again. She said something, although the words were quiet, and he didn't think they were a threat. Not this time, at least.

He narrowed his eyes and watched as she picked something up from the small box in the corner and then approached him. Was this some kind of trickery again? He would not be toyed with.

She sat down on the edge of the water and he got the briefest glimpse of more pale, smooth skin as she crossed those fins. He winced at the movement. "Doesn't that hurt?" he asked, before remembering she couldn't understand him.

She couldn't respond, anyway. His achromo had one of the tools he'd brought her in her hands. Flicking it on and off, she moved it back and forth between her hands before holding it out to him.

Arges did not take it. He knew well the dangers of the achromos' weapons, and he had no interest in them. Apparently, it was not the right response. Again she gestured with it, then pointed at herself. Pointed at the weapon, pointed at herself, then pointed at him.

"Do you want more junk?" he asked, his lip curling in disgust. "You want me to bring you more broken things?"

She clearly had no idea what he was saying, but he understood her request.

"All right, achromo." His gills flared again before he could stop them. How could she know it was the correct mating ritual for her to request that he bring her treasures? "I will bring you more junk."

With a flick of his tail, he sank beneath the waves and fled from that golden light. Fled from the thoughts in his mind where he had thought, for a moment, she might understand what she asked.

ELEVEN

MIRA

Mira had no idea how long she waited for him. Only that she stared at the wall for hours on end before she had the first whispering fear that he might not come back. And maybe, just maybe, now was the time for her to plan her escape.

She'd tried to search through all the gear for flippers. Any kind of swimming fins would do, but unfortunately, she had little luck. Most of the

items left down here were rusted beyond repair. And even then, there was nothing made of rubber or plastic.

How old was this place?

Given a little more time, she might be able to parse it out. But she was more likely to sit and wallow at this point.

She'd officially reached the "depression" stage of being kidnapped days ago. Denial had taken quite a while, and then she wasn't sure if now this was acceptance or if she was back to drowning herself before he came back.

Eyeing the glowing yellow water, she had to admit, death by drowning at this point sounded better than what she was doing now. There were a few fish in there today—if it was day—and she could only guess that was because her undine hadn't been around in a while. Otherwise, they all scattered for many hours.

She'd tried counting once. There were tiny marks on the floor where she'd used a pebble to scratch out every minute that ticked by. But then she'd gotten bored with all that about six hours in and abandoned the project.

Even now, cross-legged on the floor with the console panel's base ripped open, wires decorating the ground around her, she couldn't find the curiosity to keep digging. Apathy hung over her head, dripping down the back of her skull and into her spine with wet plops.

What was the point? Why try to fix the console when she knew there was nothing she could do to get it to work? Not down here. There weren't any components to add to the sodden thing, not to mention nothing she could use to fix the rusted wires or bolts that had long since crumbled into dust. The only working tool she had was the damned welder, and that thing was at least six models old.

Sighing, she banged her head against the metal doors in front of her. Once, twice, three times, enough to knock her skull around and maybe make her see a little reason.

Mira was not the type to give up. She did not wallow in self pity. She needed to get up, make a plan, and start...

The strange whale sound of the undine's speech interrupted her thoughts. Pausing in her banging, she told herself to just keep going. Maybe if she hit her head hard enough, she'd forget that any of this had happened at all. She could be a vegetable that he rolled around and did whatever he wanted with.

But that wasn't the right way to think, either. She couldn't give up, not when he was making that horrible noise over and over again. It was like he was singing to her, and she didn't like any guy that pinned her down and tried to sing.

Of all things.

Sighing, she turned around, ready to glare at him or maybe argue for a little while. That might feel nice. She wouldn't mind doing that.

Except she froze when she saw him. Because he was holding in his arms the single most useful item, he could have gotten her from the bottom of the floor.

"Oh, you brilliant monster," she muttered, launching her body toward him with her arm outstretched. "Where did you find this?"

The hunk of metal might not look like much, but she recognized an android when she saw one. Her father used to tinker with these in his spare time. Relics of a time long past, they had been first used to scope out potential areas of the ocean where the cities could easily be built. It looked a bit like a square box right now, but she knew how to wake it up.

Frantically grabbing it out of the undine's arms, she turned the android right side up and set it onto the floor. "Please don't be waterlogged. Please don't be rusted. Please fucking work."

The undine watched her with a curious gaze, and she wondered if she should let him see this. The robot he'd brought her could be dead, after all, but it also could be her salvation. It might even send a message to the surface if it was one of the newer pieces.

"Ah, you can watch, I suppose," she muttered, casting a suspicious glance in his direction. "It's not like you understand me, anyway."

The undine had made zero attempt to converse with her. For the most part, he'd just vaguely gestured at her and then did whatever he wanted, anyway.

Snorting, she turned her attention to the box on the ground and started in on it with her wrench. The rust was pretty extensive, more than she'd ever seen on the robots her father had toyed with. But once she got her screwdriver in the seam, the whole thing popped open with a hiss of ancient air.

"That smells awful," she muttered, covering her nose with her hand and waving at the air. "Rank, like rotten fish."

Even the undine reacted, although he seemed to only seal his nostrils shut and glare at her a little harder.

“It’s fine.” Mira turned toward the box and gave it a little shove with her screwdriver. “Are you awake? Or do I have to—”

A small, metallic head popped out of the box. It had larger eyes than most of the robots she’d seen before. She called them eyes because they were shaped like binoculars on top of the metal pole holding them up. It didn’t blink or have any screens to give it actual eyes, but it did have little wipers that cleared away some of the gunk with a squeaky sound.

The droid turned to look at the undine and then a flash of bright light filled the room. It had taken a picture of him, and apparently that was enough to startle the creature back into the water.

Mira lunged for the droid and held it over her head as a wave splashed into the cave. The undine left in such a hurry that he’d caused a mess in his wake. Thankfully, none of the water had gotten onto the android, which might have fried all the delicate wires that had somehow survived being under the ocean for god knows how long.

“Well, and fuck you, too,” she muttered.

Mira brought the droid over to the console table just to be safe and then popped it onto the counter. “There, better. At least now you won’t get wet.”

It wiped the binoculars clear again before replying, “Thank you, strange woman. How are you under the sea as well?”

“We’re in a cave.”

“Ah.” It looked around, those eyes swiveling on the rod before it turned its attention back to her. “My designation is Beta Iota Epsilon 427. Main function is mapping the ocean floor. Upon first encounter with alien species, I was trapped underneath a rock for sixty-three thousand, eight hundred and seventy-five days.”

She couldn’t do that kind of math in her head, but that sure sounded like this droid had been down here for more than a hundred and fifty years. “Subordinate function?”

“Knowledge gathering and database preservation.”

Well, that wasn’t what she was hoping for. Some of these metal hunks had been fitted with antennae so they could contact the cities wherever they went. Clearly, this wasn’t one of them.

Sitting down hard on a stool, she stared at the little being and wished it were easier than this. “Database preservation, huh? Sounds thrilling.”

“The ocean is full of unusual life forms. I have categorized at least two thousand separate species and multiple layers of the ocean floor. Even while I was pinned underneath that rock, I was able to discover many life forms.” It paused, and one of the eyes suddenly shut off before the light blinked back into existence. “I would show you, but it appears my projector is broken.”

“That’s all right.” She knew how emotional these AI could get. Their function was to complete two jobs, and two jobs alone. This one, apparently, could only move and record what it was seeing. Useless to Mira right now, but she could see why people would create it.

The last thing she wanted was for it to overheat its motherboard because she made it angry.

It wiped its eyes again, clearly a little confused. “My designation is Beta Iota—”

“You said that.” She leaned forward, clasping her hands together and staring down at her loose fingers. “Do you have a name?”

“Names are for personal androids, not for deep sea trawlers.”

“I see.” Beta Iota Epsilon. “What about Byte?”

The little robot seemed to shiver at the name, and its box even rocked back and forth a bit. “I would be happy to have a designated name if you so wish.”

“I’ll be honest, Byte. I’ve been down here for a while. I don’t know how long, but the undine you previously saw kidnapped me from my home while I was trying to fix an external panel. You’re the first person I’ve talked to in a while, and it feels good just to be able to have a conversation. So if you don’t mind just talking to me... That would be really nice.”

The side panels on the box opened, shifting to the inside so she could see the droid actually had tiny arms. They were thin and delicate, coming out of the internal pieces like little pinchers. But it used those arms to move itself a little more securely back onto the console. “I can speak with you. Of what would you like to speak?”

“Anything,” she said. “Tell me everything that you’ve seen.”

A daunting task for a droid who had seen the entire sea.

Byte started to talk, and that robotic tone made her drift through a world she’d never seen before. Jellyfish and hundreds of species of crab. Silver fish, fish that glowed in the dark, some with lights on top of their heads. It talked about the countless kinds of sharks it had seen, some more terrifying

than others. Whales larger than cities were tall, and even sharks that were the same size. It spoke of the undines, and all the different kinds it had seen.

Byte had lived a life of adventure. Even though it had been pinned underneath the rock by itself, at least it had seen so many incredible things.

At some point in its storytelling, Mira had laid out on the cold stone floor. With one knee hooked over the other, she pillowed her head on her arms as she stared up at the three meager bulbs.

“Was it lonely?” she asked. “Being down there in the cold by yourself?”

“I cannot feel loneliness.”

“Oh, come on now. My father used to work on all sorts of droids. I’ve met at least twenty of your kind, and I know for a fact you were programmed with personalities. So tell me, was it lonely?”

Byte took a long time to reply. Perhaps it was firing up the parts of its hard drive that gave it a bit more emotion than other droids. But eventually, it quietly replied, “The first few months were peaceful. My functions would not work, and there was nowhere for me to go. I was afraid, and then I was at peace. Because the ocean continued on around me, and there was so much to watch.”

“But?” Mira asked.

“But eventually it was very lonely. I felt like I was the last thing alive in the entire world, and nothing could understand me.” The robot’s voice was much quieter as it responded. “I am glad to have met you, my new friend.”

“Mira,” she said quietly. “I forgot to tell you my name. But it’s Mira.”

“Mira,” Byte repeated. “It means admirable, or ocean. Depending on who you ask.”

“I didn’t know that.” But it fit. Her mother had loved the ocean, and her father had been so pleased for them to move to Beta because it was deeper than some of the other cities. They’d both loved the sea.

“I know most everything.” Byte seemed very pleased with itself. “I have spent a hundred years learning, and I have the capabilities to learn almost anything new. It is difficult, sometimes, but not impossible.”

“You can really learn anything? How?”

“Downloads are my main function, as I can hack into any other robotic system. However, I can also observe and learn.”

Observe and learn... anything?

Rolling over, she sat straight up. Perhaps she looked a little fearsome, as the little robot scooted itself away from her. “Anything?”

“Repeat the question, please.”

“You can observe and learn anything?”

Byte’s eyes zoomed in closer to her face, perhaps to read her expression better. “I can.”

“Could you learn... another language?”

“Yes.” One of its arms raised in the air like a child in a classroom waiting to be called upon. At her nod, it added, “What language do you wish me to learn? I already speak exactly thirty-seven different human dialects, including languages that are no longer spoken.”

“The undine. The one that kidnapped me and brought me here. There is no way for me to speak with it. If you could learn its language, can you then make a dialect chip for me?”

The implants weren’t hard to make, especially since they were so widely spread out. She’d seen a lot of robots that could make them on the go. It was easier for them to be made by almost every android, considering all the people who traveled between the cities. All one had to do was stop any droid they came across, ask for a chip, and then the conversation could continue as usual.

If she could get a chip implanted, then she could understand what the undine was saying. They could speak! She could tell him that this was ridiculous, and he could tell her what he wanted with her.

It was a start.

It was hope.

Byte zoomed out from her face and nodded its binocular head. “I can create a chip, yes. But I will need to listen to the language for a considerable amount of time before I can create it.”

“It’s a start,” she breathed. And it was the first time she’d felt like this could all be fixed. “I just have to figure out how to get him to talk, then. He sounds like a whale.”

“Whales have a language,” Byte replied. “I have translated that language before, and though it is quite minimal, it is very beautiful in comparison to many languages.”

“Do you think they’re comparable?”

“I would have to hear the undine speak.”

“Then I will get him to speak,” she muttered, her brows drawing down in concentration. “How? I have no idea. But you and me, Byte? We’re a

team in this. And together, we'll get back to a city. I'll clean you up, make your metal shine the moment we get back. You hear me?"

The little robot wiggled with excitement, and it took everything in Mira to not do the same.

TWELVE

ARGES

This woman seemed to always be surrounded by metal creations that did what they weren't supposed to do. When he finally got his heart rates down, Arges pressed his hands against his twin hearts and tried to will himself back to the cavern.

And somehow, he just... couldn't.

No People of Water would ever forget the sight of a box opening up in front of her and then *speaking*. Was she a witch? Perhaps. That would make

sense, considering that her own people wanted nothing to do with her. They hadn't searched for her after her disappearance and that was maybe because they knew what magic she had cast upon them.

But he had seen her many times. The logical part of his mind reminded him that she hadn't been in comfortable living quarters. She never even spoke when the achromos were all gathered together, as they had been multiple times. And that her people knew how dangerous it was for her to be in the water, alone, with multiple undines having been sighted nearby.

So she was not a witch. She could not cast spells upon inanimate objects and bring them to life in front of him.

Which meant there was so much more about the humans that he did not understand. Perhaps he could learn from them, but every fiber of his being rebelled at the mere thought. There was nothing that her people could teach him other than death and destruction.

He had no idea how long he floated outside that cave entrance. Even some of the sea creatures came to investigate his still form. A sea turtle, slightly deeper than most of them went, coasted by him on its side. Those ancient, wise eyes looked him up and down. It knew he wasn't here for a reason he wanted to be. It could see the guilt in his eyes as it looked away.

From below, a squid wrapped its tentacles around a rock to peer up at him. Those overly large eyes saw far too much, but Arges flicked his tail at it. He'd tangled with a few of their kind before, and thankfully, this one was small. Their sharp beaks cut through even his tough scales, and he was in no mood to entertain a creature with such a sharp bite.

Eventually, he knew he had to go back and see what the achromo was doing. She had made it almost impossible to return to that now-cursed place, but he couldn't stay out here forever.

With his luck, Mitéra would send his pod to come find him. And then he would be in a world of trouble for an entirely different reason.

Sighing, he turned toward the entrance and steeled himself. He was brave. He was one of the most dangerous creatures in this ocean. He could, and would, get answers out of her and that strange... box.

Still, he wasn't proud of how he slunk into the cavern with his tail a little too close to his body. Even his gills were flattened more than usual, trying to make himself look smaller and easier to hide.

As if it would ever be easy for a creature of his size to hide. He was massive compared to the achromo who could have lifted but one of these

glowing leaves and ducked herself under it.

Surfacing stealthily, he peered around the cave before he even dared to let the water out of his nostrils.

His achromo sat on a box in the corner. Could she make that one come to life as well? Were all objects that the achromos had secretly hiding life?

The other box was sitting on a small stand in front of her. Was she worshiping it like a god? Perhaps that was the difference. He'd found a god for her at the bottom of the sea, and now she served the creature inside of it.

Oh, that was a terrifying thought.

He must have made some kind of noise, because his achromo turned around and seemed to... brighten when she saw him. He hadn't expected that, and it only made him even more suspicious.

She had never been excited to see him. He was more used to the furrow of her brows and something thrown at his head. Or at the very least, she liked to wave her hand at him like she was shooing away a school of hungry fish.

Perhaps she saw his darkening expression because she stood and approached him. Those twin tails holding her upright would never stop disgusting him. And then she sat down, bending them at odd, painful looking angles right at the edge of the pool.

What did she have planned?

"You are not a trustworthy creature," he muttered, trying to keep his voice lower and quieter, like she'd asked. "I do not know what you want of me, achromo."

Every word he said brightened her features. And she was... pretty, in a way. If he looked past her face, and ignored her hair, and tried not to think about the way she'd peeled her silver skin off of her body... Right. Well, now he was thinking about it.

She held her hand out to him, chattering away in that childish voice that set his teeth on edge. Still, it was something that he could work with. Perhaps he could learn her language this way. If he listened hard enough, then he could perhaps converse with her.

Learning their language would certainly satisfy his Mitéra's need for information. They could listen through the walls of their home, know what the achromos' plans were and when they were going to attack.

Yes, this was a good plan. Even if it meant having to listen to her prattling voice.

He drew closer, only flinching slightly when he noticed she'd brought the box with her. And this time, it had opened even more. The cursed thing had tiny arms that it waved in the air at him.

Not a single god in the sea would make such a being. Was it a child? Was it her child? Had she created some abomination out of the junk at the bottom of the sea floor?

She moved a hand to her chest, a gesture he recognized from the first time that he'd brought her to this cave. And then she said a word and held her hand out toward him.

He had no idea what that meant.

Then the achromo did it again. She tapped a finger to her chest, said the word, and then tapped the box. This time she said a different word and then gestured for him to say something.

"I am one of the People of Water," he intoned, his voice deepening with reverence. "You are a achromo."

Those brows of her furrowed, a much more familiar expression on her face. Again, she repeated the same words. Two different ones. One for herself, and one for the box.

Were these... names?

"Again," he said, swimming a little closer so he could watch her lips.

And then... Oh, his gills flared in excitement even though he was embarrassed to make such a display for her. Because he heard her name, and it was a word that was similar to another in his language.

Mira. For his people, it meant hope.

"Mira," he repeated, and watched as a smile stretched across her face.

She was prettier when she did that. When there weren't signs of anger in her expression, she appeared more kind. More open. Simply... more.

He hated it. And adored it at the same time.

She gestured at him, pointing at his chest mostly, but he had to wonder if she was pointing at the gills that flared out from his neck. Yes, he was presenting himself for her now. He almost preened, knowing that she'd seen how pretty the gills were.

In his mind, for a moment, he thought her reactions to be that of his own kind. One of his people would have noticed the reaction of his body and they would have stroked down the delicate fins of his gills, the wisps that only a mate could touch. He would have let her if she touched him. He'd

already stolen her from her people, gifted her treasures just like she'd asked for. The next step was for her to accept him, but that would not happen.

She was an achromo. He was of the People of Water. They could not, and would never, be together. Their kinds were far too different and hated each other far too much.

Sighing, he pressed a hand to his chest. "Arges."

Her eyes widened slightly, and then she nodded many times. "Arges. Mira."

"Mira," he repeated.

It wasn't much. The rudimentary conversation should have been frustrating, but now he knew her name. Somehow, that made her more of a person to him. She wasn't just the achromo he had captured to be a means to an end. She was Mira of the achromos. It wasn't much of a difference, but it still caused some old song to strum in his hearts.

"You should eat," he said quietly, flicking his tail as he peered around her. The fish he'd brought her was gone, and she'd made another strange contraption behind her that appeared to be a bucket with flattened metal over the top. He couldn't guess what that was. "You have finished your meal, I see."

He sank back into the water, ignoring her frustrated sound of disapproval. Perhaps she wanted to speak with him. To try to have more of a conversation than just names. But first he would see her fed, and then he would return.

It took very little time to track down a sizable fish. The cod that swam by him was not an impressive catch for one of his people, but it was large enough to sustain her for a while yet. Arges didn't know what achromos ate, but he remembered the strange mush that they'd eaten every morning. He couldn't hazard a guess at what that might be, but he assumed they couldn't exist on meat alone. He'd need to return to their hunting grounds soon and get her handfuls of kelp, perhaps kombu as well. Edible vegetation in the ocean was hard to come by, but he would discover it for her.

Arges cleaned the fish quickly on his way to the cave, choosing to let the blood and organs soak the waters far from their hiding spot. He did not need to draw unwelcome attention to that place. Just in case he wasn't there to help her.

By the time he returned, she was pacing again. He wasn't sure why Mira did that, but she moved from end to end of the cave often.

She turned at the sound of water splashing, her eyes widening in fear for a few moments before she relaxed when she saw him. Again, she chattered. There weren't even recognizable sounds in her speech, and he feared it would take a very long time for him to understand her.

He swam to the edge of the rock and set the fish down on the ground for her. "My people speak slowly," he said, catching her gaze so she would know to listen to him. Arges touched his mouth, then brought his hands down low. "Slower words, achromo. Perhaps then I might mimic you."

This was getting them nowhere. The next time Mira spoke, she did so quietly. It wasn't what he wanted. He could hardly hear her now.

"No, achromo. I need you to speak slower, not softer." Growling, he gnashed his sharp teeth in the air in frustration. "This is getting us nowhere. I don't know what madness has led me to believing that I could learn your language. It would take both of our lifetimes for me to ever understand a word you're saying."

But every word he said seemed to make her happier. She nodded, that wide smile still on her face. She pressed a hand to her chest and said, "Mira," then moved that hand over the fish.

Some of his anger eased, and amusement took its place. "You will not be able to say any of our words, achromo."

She insistently hovered that hand over the fish.

He rolled his gaze up to the roof of the cavern and prayed for patience. "It is a cod."

Again, she waved her hand over it and then rotated the other in the air. What did she want from him?

Swimming a little closer, he braced his arms against the rock and stared down at the fish with her. "Cod, is what we call it. It's a rather flavorless fish, I suppose, but considering how the achromos eat, I cannot imagine that you will find any fault in it. I've already cleaned it for you, Mira. You can eat it."

He mimed eating with his hand and then glanced up at her again. But she wasn't looking at the fish. She was looking at him.

Her eyes a little wide, her face a little pink. He hadn't noticed that humans could change color like a cuttlefish, but here she was. Changing color right in front of his eyes.

He met her wide gaze and wondered what she was thinking. She'd asked him to explain the fish to her, and he was. Not that she could understand a single thing of what he was saying. But Arges had always been the brother who enjoyed talking.

It was why he was a warrior. Why he had taken control over the pod rather than his brothers. He was the one who knew how to speak and when to listen. That was his gift, according to Mitéra. And he wanted to use that gift now to help his people.

But it was hard to think about his people at all when she watched him like that. A strange mixture of awe and curiosity played across her features. He had to wonder if he was reading her right, because the expression was so eerily similar to that of his own people.

Then she blinked frantically and shook her head. Coasting her fingers over the fish, she pointed to the water.

"Yes, it came from the sea." He lifted a clawed hand out of the water, showing her his claws. "They are very easy for one such as me to catch. I imagine it would be harder for you to catch them."

Her fingers were tiny and her nails were blunted. Any fish would get away from her long before she had the chance to use those soft claws. She didn't swim fast enough to even catch prey that was mortally wounded.

He'd have to take care of her for the rest of her life.

Arges frowned at the thought. She wasn't going to be alive for very long, anyway. Here he was, thinking about years away when he'd have to hunt for her every single day. And yet, he knew she would die at the end of this.

Mira was a means to an end. That was all.

Another voice interrupted them, clanging and metallic with words he could not understand. But he knew that it came from the box and he'd forgotten it was still here. It had listened to them clearly, and that magic was enough to send him careening back into the safety of the water.

He didn't even try to stop the splashing wave that likely soaked the metallic being. He had to go. He couldn't stay here, talking with her as if she could understand him.

But even as he swam away, the memory of her pink cheeks and the color that played down her throat haunted him.

Perhaps she was a witch, after all.

THIRTEEN

MIRA

This wasn't working. She'd been able to get him to talk a little, but nothing like she needed him to speak. He came back once or twice a day; she thought. There was no way to tell time down here, but she could see how much water she was going through.

Mira had set up a freshwater contraption her father had taught her to make before. When she was a kid, it was like setting up a bubbling laboratory. But her dad had known that maybe someday she might need to

use this. Large portions of the city often ended up stranded, isolated from the rest by flooding, and there was a lot of salt water but very little fresh water.

The bucket she'd set on a small bunsen burner that she'd found in the crates. It only worked for a little while before going out, so she'd taken it apart and placed the welder there instead. At least that used oxygen to keep the flame going and some new technology that didn't require fuel. Thank goodness it was a model that had upgraded to that, or she would have no fresh water.

As it was, she could boil all the saltwater and catch the condensation above the bucket with a piece of metal she'd hammered into a 'v' shape. The condensation mostly gathered together, rolled into the channel of the v, and then into the other bucket she'd set up there.

It wasn't a lot of water, but it would at least keep her alive.

Sighing, she stared up at the ceiling and let boredom overtake her mind. Sometimes, she just didn't talk for an entire day. Byte did all the talking for her, if she wanted. But today she'd asked for silence.

She needed to think.

They weren't getting enough conversation happening, and when the undine spoke, he mostly used the same words.

"Are you sure?" she asked for a hundredth time. "You're sure that he's just repeating words?"

"I have deciphered many different languages," Byte grumbled. "I am certain he is repeating words. But he likely believes he is teaching you his language, so he is using the proper teaching techniques. Merely, the wrong techniques for our plan."

"Damn it."

"Indeed."

This would take forever. Perhaps longer than she had time for, because she was going to dehydrate. Or maybe he'd get bored with her, and she would die here. Leaving poor Byte with her rotting corpse when she'd promised the little android that she would get it out of here.

No, they needed to figure this situation out. They needed to be able to converse with the undine and... and...

Mira slapped her forehead hard enough to leave a mark. "Damn panic and stupid, stupid nonsense of a brain. Byte!"

When she rolled to her feet, the little droid used its arms to push itself away from her. “Don’t like. Don’t like that expression.”

Grabbing it off the floor like a ball, she marched to the end of the cave and popped it back on top of the server. Leaning low so they were eye level, she asked, “You said you could make a translation chip. Right?”

“Right.” Its wires were shaking.

“Then make one for English. I’ll give him the chip.”

“Him?” The robot shook its binocular head. “No, that won’t work. You’d have to get close enough to put it behind his ear, and if you did that, then you’re close enough to kill. Translation chips hurt, Mira! Not enough to kill him, but absolutely enough to startle him. That will easily be enough reason for him to murder you.”

“It’s a risk we have to take.”

“I will not do it. There is no logic in your plan. He’ll kill you.”

She hadn’t wanted to do this, but... “Beta Iota Epsilon 427. I order you to make me an English translation chip.”

Though the droid grumbled, there was nothing it could do. The programming required it to do whatever it was ordered to do, and she hated using that against it.

Whirring, crackling, and a few sparks scattered out of the box, but then there it was. A translation chip that was smaller than the nail on her thumb, resting on a small platform that came out of the robot’s belly.

“Thank you,” she breathed, before taking the chip and holding it tightly in her palm. “I’ll be careful, you know.”

“Just don’t get killed.”

“That’s the plan.”

Now, all she had to do was wait. It took quite a while for her undine to show up, and then she reminded herself to call him Arges. He was an undine, but his name was Arges and that was going to work to her advantage.

She’d seen his expression when she’d said his name. And if that’s what he wanted from her, if he was even remotely curious about her, then it was time for her to try to flirt.

As if she’d ever been good at that.

Stomach churning with nerves, she sat on the edge of the stone with her feet in the water. This was different, and she hoped that would make him come a little closer. He was clearly curious about her and her body. Their

species were similar, but not in every way. She'd seen him eyeing her feet before, although she was pretty certain he was looking at them in disgust. At least if they were in the water, they couldn't distract him.

Arges appeared at the mouth of the cave, a dark shadow that swayed through the depths like a shark. Or perhaps like an eel. She knew it was him, though. Because the moment he looked up, all that blue bioluminescence burst to life. It rioted the moment he realized she was looking at him, and maybe this would be easier than she thought.

He silently broke the surface of the water, black eyes already watching her.

"I thought we could talk again today," she said, her words echoing a bit. She spoke a little slower for him, although she still didn't know if he was trying to learn her language. He listened to her, but still conversed with hand signals.

This time, she touched her fingers to her lips, and then mimed speaking with her fingers.

A soft expression crossed his face. Almost like a smile, but his lips didn't even remotely twitch. Maybe this would be easier than she thought.

All she needed was for him to get close enough for her to put the translator on the back of his ear. It would do the rest. The neural link might not work with him. She had no idea what their anatomy even was, but she hoped that it would work. They were close enough to each other in species that it would make sense. At least, from the top up.

"I thought we could learn more words today," she said, watching as he came even closer. It was so effortless for him to move in the lapping eddies of the pool. She could see his tail moving beneath him, guiding his body until he was almost right in front of her.

Her cheeks burned, as they always did. Though he was still a strange, mottled gray, and dark lines were painted onto his muscular body from shoulder to navel, there was still something about him that was... alluring.

It made her uncomfortable, and she didn't know why.

"A little closer," she said, frowning when he stopped an arm's length away. This wouldn't do.

She had to trick him, apparently. And there was only one way she could think of to do that.

He clearly wanted to learn her language, and she was going to give him that. If he would just swim a little closer. Mira pointed to her bicep, flexing

it a little to get his attention on the limb. “Arm.”

Arges narrowed his eyes at her.

Right, so back to the original tactic. She flattened her hand against her chest and said, “Mira.” Then pointed to her arm again, flexing the muscle, and then saying, “Arm.”

He narrowed his eyes and moved maybe an inch closer. Curiosity always did kill the cat, so the saying went.

She moved throughout most of her features like he was a toddler. She pointed to her eyes, making them big and wide. Then pointed to her nose, flaring her nostrils in a way that made him rear back before chuckling. Ears, mouth, brows. But she didn’t mistake the flaring of his gills around his neck when she pointed to her mouth again and said, “Lips.”

She parted them, and he swam even closer. Just enough for her to finally get a good reach. She could lunge forward, but that wouldn’t work either. She was trying to get him to *not* kill her and lunging at him would certainly ruin that chance.

What she needed was for him to be lulled into submission. If the heat burning in his eyes was any indicator, she had to keep playing this game.

Which, surprisingly... she didn’t mind at all.

Mira licked her lips, watching that heat flare even hotter in his gaze. “You like that,” she whispered. It wasn’t a question, because she knew.

This could get out of hand if she let it. Although she had her doubts about how far it could even go between them. Still, maybe keeping his mind off those thoughts would be best.

She lifted her hand and exhaled on her palm. “Breath.”

That made him straighten.

She did it again, repeating the word and then freezing when he reached for her hand. Wet hands caught her own, but he was surprisingly warm. Those webs brushed against her fingers as he turned her hand over and made her spread them wide.

“No webs,” she said quietly, watching the top of his bent head as he turned her hand this way and that. “Just fingers.”

She spread them even wider, laughing quietly at his soft sound of amazement. He had seen her hands before! Many times, in fact. And yet this time, he seemed infinitely more interested in them.

Or perhaps, what they could do.

Biting her lip, she wondered what he thought of her body. In her opinion, he was still... passable. Strange to look at, but not so unusual that she couldn't see past their differences. The sculpted planes of his face were infinitely beautiful, not to mention the muscles that ran throughout his entire torso. If he had been a human, she'd want to lick every drop of water out of those deep hollows.

No, she couldn't let her mind drift down that lane of thinking. She was here to make him understand her, so she could tell him that she needed to get back home.

So she curled her fingers around his, lifting his hand to her mouth and exhaling on his palm. "Breath."

His eyes were black, so she had no idea how they darkened even further, but she could almost taste his arousal in the air. They were locked together, trapped in each other's gazes as she breathed against his palm. The webs between his fingers shook, vibrating with some emotion she was terrified to name.

But then he rotated his wrist, trapping her hand in his. Carefully, he drew her hand down his torso.

Heat made her cheeks burn and the tips of her ears ache. Was he... No, certainly not.

Was she going to let him?

Arges stopped her hands right below his ribs, and she ripped her gaze away from his when she felt air moving over her palms. Not just air, but it felt like someone was blowing on her fingers.

"Breath," he repeated, the word drawn out and so guttural she almost didn't make it out.

He was breathing out of his gills, she realized. An exhale through his ribcage that feathered over her fingers and turned them icy hot. Not warm breath, not like her own. But cold as the ocean. It made goosebumps pop all down her arms, or maybe that was the strong grip that slowly hovered her hand over his ribs, his chest, his collarbone.

He stopped her fingers at his throat, and again murmured, "Breath."

She felt it again. Another long exhale that whispered over her fingers, but warm this time. So he had gills on his neck as well, and that's what the frills were that slowly lifted.

They were so pretty. Compared to the diamond shape of his tail, or the razor edged spines that dotted down his back, these were almost delicate.

They looked like silk in the water, but even in the air, there were very specific parts that made it flare around him.

Water dripped down one, beads of it trickling into his gills and then leaking out to drip down his muscular shoulders and collarbone. She couldn't stop herself. Maybe it was the innate curiosity of her own species. Maybe she had just lost her mind entirely.

Mira ghosted her fingers over the gills at his neck. Gently, of course. She could only guess how sensitive they were. But the moment her fingers touched those soft gills, she was struck by how much they felt like velvet.

The longer frills seemed to reach back, curving around her fingers and sliding through them. He arched into her touch, that strong thick neck bowing as though he couldn't quite handle the touch. She thought maybe she'd hurt him, and then she heard him groan.

And oh, that sound, so filled with raw need and desperation. It made every nerve ending in her body fire hot and wild. She'd never thought it was possible to want something that wasn't even remotely human, and yet, here she was. Breathless at the sight of this massive undine, his tail lashing in the water as she stroked her fingers through his gills.

He was magnificent. All those muscles drawn up tight, his hand wrapped around her wrist, holding her in place even as she caught the edge of one of those frills and gently pinched it between two fingers, sliding her hand down them like she would a bolt of silk.

Another groan, this time from deep inside the hollow of his belly. She looked down and saw even the gills near his ribs were fluttering. And below them, another strange-looking gap in his scales that looked... looked...

It all came crashing down on her head. She was stroking a damn undine near to completion like a complete mad woman. She'd gotten so wrapped up in the moment, so full of wonder at the sights and the sounds of all this muscle and handsome man in front of her, that she had forgotten the reason she was doing all this.

The translation chip. Put the fucking translation chip on his fucking ear and stop touching him like you're trying to jerk him off!

Berating herself for forgetting, even for a moment, she took the chip out of her pocket with her free hand and then reached for the other side of his head.

His eyes opened then, and he looked at her with a wild expression. Almost as if he was afraid of her, or what she would do to him next. But

there was desperation in that gaze as well, a need that he hoped she would satisfy.

And oh, if they were in another time. Another place. Maybe she would have indulged the darker curiosities in her mind.

“Sorry,” she whispered, her voice a little raspy with her own need. “I hope you can forgive me for this.”

Hitting the on button with her thumb, she stuck the translation chip behind his gills. She knew the moment the pain hit him. His tail flipped out of the water, catching her with the sharp spines on the arm before he suddenly turned into churning waves. There was an undine in that foamy, white water, but she couldn't pinpoint where he was. He lashed and rolled, then one more flick of his tail, and he was gone. At least, she thought. The surface of the water was so covered in sea foam that she couldn't guess where he was.

Mira quickly yanked her feet out of the water, just in case he tried to drag her into it and drown her.

She might even deserve it. That chip could kill him if he reacted too poorly to it.

“You're bleeding,” Byte said, rather matter-of-factly.

“I know,” she said, cupping the injury with one hand. “I think I kind of deserve it, though.”

FOURTEEN

ARGES

The pain was blinding. He writhed, his hands pressed against his head as a shrieking sound enveloped every part of his mind. Arges couldn't tell if it was his own shrieking, the screaming of the depths, or the very mother of the ocean coming to claim her dues.

He was cursed. The witch had cursed him, and he hadn't known such pain could be inflicted by a creature so small.

Surely the achromo had done something. Had she ripped his gills off? He was a fool for letting her touch him. Trusting a achromo was only for the young and the stupid. Her kind always betrayed his. They were meant to fight just as the sea was meant to be cold. He rolled, scales scraping against the sharp stones outside of the cave.

If he could get to Mitéra, then perhaps she could piece him together. She could rip this curse out of his body and then fling it back upon the achromos. He would tear his achromo's hair from her head. He would bite off her fingers, one by one, for doing whatever this was. This Mira would know pain unlike anything she had ever felt—

And then it stopped.

All the pain, all the torment, all the bone deep *ache*, disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Breathing heavily, gills flared wide around his ribs as he sucked in as much water as he could, he floated against the ocean floor. His body pressed against the stones, the soft glow from the cave still merrily beaming out into the ocean. He didn't know what to do with himself now that there was the sudden lack of pain.

His mind fractured. Part of him wanted to return to the cave and destroy her. Rip her limb from limb for the pain she had caused, and the other half... The other half wanted to continue what they had started. He wanted her to stroke his gills again with those talented fingers. No webs between her digits, and that meant she could reach so much farther while touching both sides.

It had been... exquisite. The pleasure before the pain. He'd arched into her touch, wanting more, needing more, and the heat of her body had called to him worse than any siren song his kind had released into the sea.

She was every temptation he'd ever had, all wrapped up in a body he should hate and a mind that was far too devious. Mira was dangerous, he knew that. And yet, some part of him still wanted to keep her as his own.

Punish her? Absolutely. He would punish her for what she had done, but even as he uncoiled his knotted tail and started back toward the cavern, those dark thoughts turned into something far more pleasurable.

She would know what it felt like for his kind to dominate hers. He would make them fit together, if that's what it took. Because he had seen the heat in her eyes, and he had seen the way her soft lips parted when she

looked at him writhing in her grip. She'd wanted him, just as much as he'd wanted her.

For now, that was enough.

Even the glowing plants in the cave leaned away from him, sensing the anger that burned inside his chest. He was dangerous. He was terrifying. The creature who came out of the depths was not Arges, but a beast made of rage and ruin.

He slowly crested the water, his eyes already narrowed and his gills sealed shut. If she tried to attack him again, he was ready for it.

She stood near the back of the cave, hands gesturing wildly as she chattered with the demon he'd unearthed and something snapped inside him. She didn't look ashamed or upset at all. Perhaps this had been her plan all along. Maybe she didn't care if she died in this cavern as long as she took him out with her.

He would show her that it was worthwhile to fear his kind. That she should never have been so foolish as to tempt a creature like him.

It took so little to dive back underneath the water and to the bottom of the small cave. Even less effort to propel himself through the water with a speed so fast that he ripped a few petals off the plants. He launched himself free from the safe grip of the ocean and out into the cave.

He had the distinct pleasure of watching her eyes widen in shock, then fear as he reached his claws out for her. And he knew his sharp teeth were on full display. All the colors in his body rioting as he lunged for her. To her credit and proof of her bravery, she didn't flinch or try to run away from him. She just stood there, watching with wide eyes and locked muscles as he grabbed her.

Rolling her underneath him, he pressed all his weight down to keep her from struggling. He would tear out her throat with his teeth, if that's what it took.

But the moment his lips touched her shoulder, she shouted, "Wait! Hold on!"

And he... Understood her?

Arges froze, certain that he'd heard wrong. Certainly, she had not just spoken his language. The creature before him did not know how to speak the language of whales or the tongue of the sea.

His brief moment of hesitation gave her a chance to purge the words from her lungs just as he did water.

“I’m so sorry. I wish I could have told you that it was going to hurt, but how the fuck was I supposed to mime that to you? You’d never let me put any of our devices on you, anyway, so I just had to take the chance.”

Another odd chirping filled the room, this one with metallic clunks. “I told you he’d kill you for this!”

“Shut up, Byte!” she hissed.

And the room fell silent as he drew his face away from her neck and stared down into those wide, strange eyes.

“Again,” he said, gruffly.

“I still don’t know what that word means, but I assume you want me to repeat myself?”

He’d never been so close to her eyes. The strange orbs that looked like the shimmering kelp on a rare day of sunlight. White surrounded the color, and strangely, it made him uncomfortable to meet her gaze. He could so easily track where she was looking. The dark spots in the centers of her eyes contracted, growing smaller, perhaps with fear when he did not move off of her.

“The device I put on your ear is a translator. It knows my language, so now you also know my language. I have absolutely no idea what you are saying, though. I don’t know your language, and neither does Byte.” She pointed to the strange box demon in the corner of the cave, and it gave him a little wave with its metal arm. “The more you talk, the more the robot can understand your language and give me a chance to get my own translator. Then we can speak.”

He barely followed what she was saying. “Robot?”

Apparently, he’d repeated the word close enough in her own language for her to wince. “Right, you wouldn’t know that word. The thing back there. The box? My people created those to help us. They are... servants, of a sort.”

The small box squawked, though fell silent when he glared at it.

“And you?” he asked, leaning a little closer to her. “What do you call yourself, achromo? I would know the name my enemy has given itself.”

She swallowed, and he watched her throat work before she quietly replied, “I have no idea what you’re saying, but you seem very angry at me.”

He was. Of course he was. She had gifted him a magical device that allowed him to understand her words, while also betraying him with

horrible pain. And he'd admit, he was more than a little angry at himself for falling under her spell that easily. He was ashamed that he'd let an achromo touch him, and that she'd affected him.

In his world, they were as good as promised. He'd hunted her, gifted her treasures. She'd touched his gills with such exquisite tenderness that it still made every part of his body vibrate with need. And it was wrong. Every bit of it was wrong.

She'd stolen this from him. Because he had never done any of this with any other female, and now he would always remember his first mating trials. His first attempt at having a mate, and neither of them had even wanted each other.

It was a shame upon a warrior to have a mate deny him. But to deny a female? Even one like her?

It was unheard of.

Perhaps his frustration showed. Her pale face turned even paler, and that bright pink tongue came out to lick at her lips. "You don't seem happy with me."

Whatever would give his achromos that thought? He licked his own lips, watching her eyes follow the movement of his dark tongue. Even more of that color drained out of her face, and he was suddenly very aware of the position they were in.

Though his fluke was still in the water, he had her pinned in every other sense. Both of her wrists were trapped by his webbed hands, high over her head. It arched her body into his, much like he had done only moments ago. Her strange tails were parted on either side of his body and he hadn't realized they could spread so wide. It tucked him against her core, so unlike his own kind and yet strangely... compelling.

The heat that had been between them before flared bright and hot again. He could feel it coursing through his veins, turning all his colors on like she'd lit him from within. The blues flared, and his gills rose again. No matter how hard he tried to keep them down.

Just the faintest arch from her, only a little. But it tilted her body against him even better, and he had to do something. He had to touch her. Had to feel what this strange achromo had been hiding.

Transferring one of her wrists to his grip, he freed one of his hands and ran it down her side. "We are so similar," he said quietly, watching his hand

as it drifted down her ribs. “I have these. I have felt these on my women before.”

But she had no gills. He paused, his hand spread wide over those ribs that rose and fell, but there were no gills there to toy with his fingers. Nothing but the strange silver skin she wore and the delicate bones beneath.

“You are so small,” he muttered, his hand moving down to the dip in her waist where there should be the start of scales. But there was nothing. Just blank space and those twin fins that trembled on either side of his tail. “So... breakable.”

“I can’t tell if you’re going to kiss me or kill me,” she said, her eyes following his every movement. “I’m not sure if I want either of those.”

He had no idea what this kiss she spoke of was, but he had a feeling she was affected by the same heat as him. He needed to get control of himself or she would realize the control she had over him. His body had never reacted like this. Not once.

Perhaps it was the strangeness and newness of her form. He was no stranger to pleasure, but certainly was when it came to the achromos. The People of Water, both male and female, had remarkably similar bodies. The same areas caused the same amount of pleasure for him and a woman of his kind, and such exchanges were brief.

Considering how hidden everything on this achromo was, he could only assume their pleasure was different. And the mere idea of chasing it with her was a heady rush to his head.

And... other areas.

Mira took a ragged breath, her chest brushing against his. “This isn’t talking, Arges. I need you to talk so that Byte can make a chip for me as well. So we can understand each other.”

She wanted him to talk?

Leaning down so his mouth was pressed to her hearing hole, he raggedly said, “I have seen what your people do in the dark. The movements might be strange, but the sounds your kind make are intriguing to me. I wish to explore this body of yours, Mira.”

He felt her shiver at her name. He knew he said it differently than her, rolling the middle of the word over on his tongue.

“I have no idea what you just said,” she whispered in response. “But it sounded less angry.”

“Oh, I am still angry with you. Very, very angry.” He pressed his teeth to her neck, pleased with the little noise she made in the back of her throat. “But there are other ways to punish you, *kairos*.”

Again, her breath caught, and he found himself obsessed with the sound.

“As long as you keep talking, you can say whatever you want to me.” She wriggled in his grip, trying to twist her wrists so he had to let her go. “But we will not get anywhere unless I can understand you as well.”

He begged to differ.

Even as her strange fins squeezed around him a little tighter than before, he felt himself drawing away from this moment. They would get somewhere because she would tell him everything. He would return to his people, triumphant, and take control of his pod again. All he had to do was get information to his Mitéra that could help them destroy the achromos.

Then he really heard what she said. He rolled the words over in his mind as the sea did a stone, and finally he growled, “Are there more of these devices?”

She frowned at him, and he hissed out a curse at the difficulty.

Perhaps she was right. She needed to be able to understand him.

His gaze heated with rage now, he barked at the robot in the corner, “You there. You can make more of these devices. Make them now, and I will bring them to my people.”

Mira was far too observant for her own good. She looked at his gestures, watched as he pointed to the device in his ear and it all seemed to click. “No,” she said quietly, before her words became more forceful. “I will not give you more of those devices. Not for your people. I have no way of knowing what any of you will do with them.”

He glared down at her, but that did not startle his little *kairos* in the slightest. If anything, she only struggled harder and became more determined.

“Absolutely not! I only gave this to you as a necessity because you have me trapped hundreds of feet underneath the ocean. Get off of me!”

He slammed her wrists against the stones, forcing her to stop moving. “Stop struggling. You will give me more of these devices, and my people will understand your language. We will take what we are owed from you, and you will do nothing to stop it from happening.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. Just like many of the women of his own kind did before they were about to fight. Let her try to draw blood. He'd enjoy the struggle.

Instead, she tilted her head back and looked at the box. "Beta Iota Epsilon 427, do not print any translators for any undine. That is a direct order. Do you understand?"

The strange head of the creature lowered into the box before it let out a chirping, "Understood," and then sealed itself inside the box.

Had she... Had she just commanded the box to never listen to him?

Anger surged forward again, and this time he loomed over her. He tightened his fingers around her wrists until it must hurt. It must be painful. And still, she didn't even wince.

"If you're trying to hurt me, you'll have to try a lot harder than that," she said, so matter-of-factly that it made his head spin. "I'm an engineer, undine. I've been burned, hit, and trapped in engines more times than I can count. I've got calloused hands and tough bones. Do your worst."

FIFTEEN

MIRA

He almost seemed impressed at her words, but Mira didn't want to impress him. She didn't care what this asshole thought of her, even if she had tilted her hips a little, so he was more comfortably resting between her legs.

Their position was horribly intimate. And yes, maybe her nipples were sharp little points, but that was just because he was icy to the touch everywhere other than his hands and gills. She didn't care what he thought

of her, or what he wanted to do right now. All she cared about was getting herself out of this damned cave.

Arges bared his teeth, the sharp points very similar to that of the sharks she'd seen swimming in the depths. But that would not scare her.

She hadn't been kidding. She was an engineer, and she was made of tougher stuff than he thought. If she had to prove that to him, then so be it. She would.

His hips flexed against hers, or were they even hips? She could feel there was boning in them, maybe a pelvic bone like hers. But then there were individual spines that continued down the back of his tail. What she wouldn't give to see one of their skeletons just to know what the fuck she was feeling against her.

Did he even have a dick? She knew some fish just... sprayed sperm. Maybe that's what he did. Maybe his species laid eggs and he would just soak her when he was done, leaving her unsatisfied and grossed out.

There, that did it.

Baring her own teeth in a mockery of his grimace, she growled, "Do you need me to roll you back into the water? You sure seem like you're going to need some air soon."

His rib gills fluttered.

"Don't you dare."

Again, they fluttered, and she swore she saw him start to choke.

"If you spit all that water out of your gills onto me, I will stick my welder up them and burn you from the inside out. Get off me."

He made an odd, grating sound, and she realized that might be the sound of his laughter. But at the very least, he finally released her hands and then scooted himself off her. Although, it didn't escape her notice that he dragged himself down her entire body. The feeling of that muscular chest would take a while to get over. Good god, he was built.

And once he was in the water, glaring at her like he always did, she had a hard time getting the feeling of him off. Like she could still conjure up the image of him. All those muscles bunched as he braced himself above her.

There was no way he had any idea what that position reminded her of. They probably had sex in the water, upright, fertilizing eggs in a completely emotionless transaction.

Right, get a hold of yourself, she thought.

Sitting up, she wrapped her arms around her knees to hold all the puzzle pieces of herself together. “You need to talk so the robot can translate your language for me.”

He stubbornly remained silent. The only sound in the cave was the slight dripping of water that tumbled out of his... not hair. What did he call it on top of his head?

“I really wish I could understand you,” she muttered. “It would make all this easier.”

And still, he just stared.

“Right. Well, the other thing I thought I would ask you about is fresh water. I can’t drink salt water.” She pointed to what he was in, as if he wouldn’t understand her. “Humans need water with no salt. Do you understand that? I’ve been boiling salt water and collecting the condensation, but it isn’t enough. Not really. I’m going to get sick, or worse, and—”

He sank underneath the surface. Just like that. Like he was done listening to her, and didn’t care at all what the little human had to say. He wasn’t even going to speak, so the robot could record his language.

Her father’s voice echoed in her mind as she launched into movement. “*Mira, girl. You think with your gut, not with your head. You’ve never been all that good at thinking a plan through before you’ve already started doing it.*”

Lifting her hands over her head, body arcing, she dove into the water with an embarrassingly loud splash as she tried to swim after him. But she didn’t have her flippers. She didn’t have her rebreather. And he was so damned fast. All she saw was the tip of his dark tail before he disappeared into the darkness.

Brightly colored glowing plants brushed against her sides, trailing along her skin as she struggled to reach the mouth of the cave. Once there, she held onto the side of the wall and stared out into the abyss.

There was nothing out there. She knew it was because her eyes hadn’t adjusted, and the bright light behind her made it even more difficult to see into the distance. But it looked like she stared out into a black wall of nothing. There could be anything out there. A hundred sharks. Killer whales. Monsters from the depths that she couldn’t imagine or even dream up.

Her heart thundered in her chest, racing faster and faster until she was forced to turn around. She kicked her feet a little faster, moved her arms quicker, because her very soul screamed that something was following her up from the depths.

Breaking the surface, she gasped and slapped at the surface before dragging herself out of the water. Scuttling back, she slammed her back against the stone wall and watched the rioting waves.

Her mind conjured up all manner of sea creatures. A giant squid that had followed her up, hungry and desiring only to devour. Its long tentacles would hit the stones any minute before it pulled its gelatinous body up to consume her.

“Mira?” Byte asked, the tinny voice cutting through her fear.

She struggled to even speak. But eventually, she licked her lips and said, “Yes?”

“You’re going to get sick.”

Right. Her suit. She’d gotten it wet and there was water inside it, considering she’d recklessly dove in without even putting her hood on. The cold speared through her, and she realized how icy her toes and hands were. Even her face felt a little numb, making it difficult to speak.

Was her hair crunchy with ice? No, thank goodness. But as she wrenched the wet strands away from her face and tried to wring out the water, she chastised herself for the dangers of what she’d done.

“Stupid,” she muttered. “So fucking stupid.”

Peeling off the wetsuit exhausted her. She hadn’t eaten well lately, nor had she been sleeping regularly. Not to mention the dehydration and if she kept going down this thought spiral, then she would hit that wall of depression again.

“Damn it,” she said, her voice a little watery as she kicked the wetsuit away. “Damn it, this was so... so...”

Mira didn’t finish the sentence. No one was listening to her whining, anyway. Wrapping herself in the one blanket that had somehow survived the mold and algae, she turned back to the water to find dark eyes watching her.

He’d come back.

Quickly, this time. Even though she knew he didn’t like to come back at all.

“Oh,” she said, standing there in the middle of the room like an idiot. “I... uh... How much of that did you see?”

A long, drawn out song was her response. He didn't stop talking for a while, and she had no idea what he was saying. Not an ounce of it.

Glancing over at Byte, she asked, “How much of his language do you think you have a hold of?”

“Two point seven percent,” the robot replied, and then sealed itself shut again.

Apparently, it would not help her get the undine to speak. So it was up to her to figure out how the hell she was going to get out of this mess. Sighing, she started back toward the water.

“The wetsuit I wear is only for going in the water. Being wet is actually a little dangerous for humans.” Seating herself at the edge of the water, she rested her chin on her bent knees and tucked the blanket in tight around herself. “That must seem a little silly to you. Considering... Well.”

Gesturing up and down his body, she struggled to make herself seem like nothing was wrong. She wasn't stuck in a cave far below the ocean with an undine who likely thought she was a pet. Because those thoughts led to much darker thoughts, and she refused to wallow right now.

Maybe he knew she was struggling. Maybe he was just being a good pet owner. He tossed a dead fish at her, already gutted and ready for cooking. Then pulled out what looked like a purse. Kind of. It was green and covered in a thick layer of goo, but it was definitely the shape of a large bag.

He handed it to her, watching her with eyes that saw far too much.

“Thanks,” she muttered, turning it a bit in her hands. It was definitely full of something. “What's in it?”

Please don't be something gross, she thought. The last thing she needed was some weird mating ritual where he'd filled this with the entrails of her enemies or something else equally traumatizing.

He mimed lifting the bag and opened his mouth. Like he was pouring something.

Turning it a bit more, she could see there was a spout at the top. Kind of like the lemonade pitcher her mother had been so proud of having.

“Well,” she muttered, lifting the strange green plant. “Here goes nothing.”

But when she poured the substance over her tongue, she realized it was... water. Fresh, clean water. No taste of salt at all. And even though she

knew she should test it a bit, make sure it didn't run right through her and turn every hole of hers into a fountain of liquid, she drank until she coughed. And even then, she only paused for a little while and then drank even more. Until her belly swelled with the liquid and her mind screamed, she was going to puke.

There was even more water left over. Enough for a full day, maybe two, if she was careful with it.

"Water," she whispered, sitting with the bag in her lap. "You brought me fresh water."

He inclined his head, nodding at her like some prince in a fairytale story. But that didn't match up. He wasn't the good guy. He'd kidnapped her. Stolen her from her home. Tried to kill her multiple times. And now he was... taking care of her?

"Why am I here?" she asked. "What do you want from me?"

That set him off. He talked for a very long time, even bringing up his hands and gesturing with them wildly. Every now and then, water splashed up from his movements and spilled over her toes. She had no idea what he was saying, but only that he was talking a lot. This was good. This meant that Byte could get even more of his language than before.

And listening to him was strangely beautiful. She'd lay in bed for years, listening to the haunting calls of whales. Haunted by the sound of their melancholy from miles away, and now she got to listen to it up close and personal. Although, his deep voice didn't quite sound like a whale. It sounded more like he was... singing.

Finally, he stopped and looked at her expectantly.

"I don't know what you're saying at all," she said with a wry smile. "But I assume you have plans for me."

He nodded.

"Right. Well, until I can understand what you're saying, those plans are probably not going to happen." She stood and placed the bag of water on the cot where she knew it wouldn't get knocked over, before joining him back at the edge of the water.

He'd moved closer to her, she realized. His webbed hands were pressed against the edge, and he'd lifted himself a bit. Maybe to see what she was doing in the back of the cave.

"There's nothing useful back there," she said, settling back on the floor beside him. "I've already looked. The computer is fried. There's no signal

to the surface, and any of the other electronics are so rusted out that even I can't fix them. You have trapped me, undine."

The feral grin on his face said he was quite pleased with that.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure that was your plan all along."

Again he spoke, this time using his hands, so she got the gist of it. He had followed her. He used one of his hands and kicked two of his fingers, kind of like how she swam. The other hand he undulated like the undine did as they swam. It was a remarkably good way to speak and mime what had happened. Apparently, he had been above her the entire time she was swimming, and she'd had no idea. He was very proud of that.

Shaking her head, she had to admit it was almost cute how proud he was of himself. This was clearly a difficult mission for him to take on, and he'd succeeded. Even if it was at her own expense.

"I can't swim like you. I'm not meant for the ocean." She poked her feet out from under the blanket and wiggled her toes. "These are obviously not made to help me swim."

She watched him eye her feet, and then recoil when he realized she could spread her toes wide. Laughing, she let him look at them. Arges even made his way a little closer, clearly wanting to investigate their differences but not sure how to go about it.

Mira reached down and twisted her foot side to side, showing him the limitations of her movement. "We have a bunch of bones in our feet. They help us stay upright when we walk. I'm not sure if you have bones in your tail or—"

He silenced her with a dirty look.

"Or clearly you do have bones in your tail," she corrected herself. "Probably like a spine. We have long bones in our legs instead of many little ones. You can touch if you want."

Why had she said that? She didn't want him to touch her. But then he reached out with those strangely warm palms and delicate webs, and slid his hand along the delicate bones of her foot and up her shin.

She watched with strange fascination. The sight of that gray hand, with the glimmering rainbow webs, touching her? It should have been disgusting and instead it just... was. Like anyone else touching her shin.

He hissed out a long sound the moment he found the prominent bone of her shin. Words poured out of his mouth as he was suddenly much closer, yanking her to him so he could use both hands on the bone.

He was gentle, at least. She thought for a second he was going to try to snap it, but no. He just lifted her leg slightly and then moved it around. Watching her skin move with the pressure of his fingertips as the bone remained stiff and unmoving.

Apparently, this was fascinating to him. He asked her a question, although she had no way of knowing what it was. And instead, he finally mimed her kicking her feet, and then undulated the same hand.

With a laugh, she nodded. "I'm sure there's a more efficient way for me to swim, yes. But that doesn't make me any faster. My feet and legs are short and there aren't muscles in them like you have. That's why I had the flippers, to help me swim like you do."

She watched him mouth the word "flippers" before moving down to her feet. He took his time, gently prodding the delicate bones. He looked her over so thoroughly, she wondered at his curiosity, and then his gaze flicked up to hers.

He spoke as he asked his questions, but she could see he was talking about a fish. And then he touched his hands to his ribs, then to her feet.

"You think the bones in my feet are like fish ribs?"

He nodded, then mimed snapping something between his hands.

"Fragile," she snorted. "I guess they would look easily breakable in comparison to you."

His gaze turned calculating. Pointing at her, he mimed the breaking motion again.

"I'm not as easily breakable as my feet, no."

He gestured all around them, at the cave, the water, the rusted metal in the back, then pointed back at her.

Pride made her want to tell him that she was fine. That nothing in this place would break her, and she was made of tougher stuff. But the reality was that she knew she wouldn't last long in here. It was a wet, damp cave with very little promise that air would even stay where it was. She had no idea how old the pipes were that stretched up to the surface, or if the power would eventually go out.

She could probably fix the generator a couple of times. There were enough spare parts lying around that she could make something work. But that would only last for so long.

So, with her pride smarting, she replied, "This place makes me a little more breakable. Being cold and wet means I could get sick easier. There are

no vegetables, only the fish you bring me. So I will eventually not have enough of what I need to eat, and I'll likely die. If you have something you want from me, Arges, you probably need to ask sooner rather than later."

His brows furrowed and his expression grew troubled. Without another word, he sank beneath the surface and disappeared.

She sighed, watching him go with a strange mixture of relief and worry.

"Byte?" Mira asked. "How much of that did you get?"

The lid of the box popped open. "We're now at exactly four point two percent. That was a good conversation, Mira!"

Groaning, she fell onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. "I'm never getting out of here."

SIXTEEN

ARGES

Arges was rather horrified to realize how fragile she was. He'd thought those strange tails were a problem right from the start, mostly because they didn't bend in the water the way they should, but he assumed it was some past injury that had made her defective.

Now he'd touched them.

Now he knew her tails wouldn't ever bend, because there was a thick, straight bone preventing them from ever bending the way his tail did. What

had she called them? Legs?

The word was immediately matched with something grotesque in his mind. Achromos who wandered about their homes on stiff tails that couldn't bend no matter how hard they tried to do so. Legs that defied all logic.

But along the current of that memory was the feeling of her warm skin. No scales, unlike his tail, more like touching his own chest. She'd been so soft. Delicate to touch and pliant underneath his hands. She'd let him lift those legs up, and stare at her feet, as she'd called them. She had trusted him to touch her, even wore that smile on her face, and he was... humbled.

She'd let him touch her. And oh, it made him burn.

Even now, far from the cavern through the ocean currents, he knew this was becoming dangerous. He should return to his pod. He should listen to how her kind had caused more trouble and how many more of his own had died.

Arges desperately needed to get a hold of himself. He needed to remember that their species had been warring for centuries for a reason, and not that he was a weakling who wanted nothing more than to touch more of that soft skin.

The current buffeted him away from returning to her cave, and he knew what it was saying. He had drifted too far from his mission. He was supposed to be learning more about her kind so that he could destroy them. Not so that he could become fascinated with them.

But even with that knowledge, even knowing the sea herself was against this oddity in his mind, he couldn't stop himself from wondering more about her people. She'd explained how fragile they were, and that worried him. So, she couldn't stay in that cave. He couldn't keep leaving her there when the cold and the wet could *kill her*.

He'd never had a more difficult pet in his life.

Although he couldn't consider her a pet anymore. Or even a mission. Arges rolled his body through a current, switching to another and joining a family of stingrays that eyed him. Their dangerous barbs at the ends of their tails remained flat, though, so he ignored them to get lost in his own thoughts again.

Mira was a person. She talked, and he understood her, and she told him all manner of ridiculous stories from her kind. Perhaps, in time, he could

converse with her. The robot clearly didn't have a handle on his language yet and didn't seem to be making much progress.

He could use that to his advantage.

Ignoring that his stomach twisted at the mere thought of using her, he made his way back to her cave. He needed to move her. If she was going to get sick and die before he got what he wanted, then he had to do something about it.

Could she be lying? Yes, of course. But he didn't think she was.

She was strangely honest. Easily speaking about her people and kind whenever he quirked a brow in question. She acted like there were no secrets she knew or that there was anything he shouldn't know about her kind.

Like she didn't realize how he would use this information against her people.

Troubled, he swam through the crevice into the cave. But as he took a deep breath to steady himself, he froze at the bottom. He could smell someone else had been here. One of his own people, with the faintest hint of sulfur and ash.

A depthstrider? Certainly not. Their kind rarely came out of the deep, and they wouldn't dare overstep their bounds when they could smell his scent here. Arges had made certain it was very clear whose cave this was.

Which only left one other person. There was only one in his tribe who reeked of the depths, of the endless layer of gasses that hid yet another layer of the ocean from prying eyes.

"Daios," he snarled.

His brother had been here. He had stared up at the achromo through the currents, and she likely didn't even know he'd been there. Lurking in the depths, like the predator he wasn't supposed to be, Daios had likely thought about stealing what was Arges's.

And then his blood turned icy.

What if his brother had killed the achromo? What if he hadn't been here and his enraged brother had ended this job for Arges?

His gills flared wide in worry and all the lights along his tail flashed bright and hot. He wouldn't stand for it. No one would take Mira from him, not this soon, not when she had just ignited the spark of interest in his chest.

With a flick of his tail, he launched himself to the surface. Splashing loudly, he whipped his head around in the air. Searching for her. Hoping

and praying to every ocean god out there that would listen that she be right where he left her.

A startled shriek echoed through the cave, and he had to dodge a launched rock that would have bludgeoned him. Though the projectile should have angered him, all he could muster was a relieved sigh.

His feisty achromo was still alive, then. No one else would dare throw a rock at his head.

Mira pressed a hand to her chest, her face startlingly pale. “Arges! You scared the shit out of me. What are you doing, splashing around like that? I thought you were some deep sea squid who finally decided I would be a tasty snack.”

Luckily for her, he was not. But he hadn’t even considered that there were plenty of creatures here who would happily take a bite out of her.

Swimming closer to the edge, he held out his hand for her. “Come, achromo. I cannot keep you here when it is so clearly dangerous. I would like to keep you alive.”

She shook her head. “I have no idea what you’re saying.”

May the sea gods curse this infernal obstacle between them. Grumbling under his breath, he couldn’t quite shake the fear that his brother had been here. All the more reason to move her.

What had Daios wanted with her? His brother wasn’t good for much, other than killing. He was very good at murdering her kind and had many scars along his tail to prove it. He was not a creature who enjoyed speaking with or understanding others.

Surely this was a bad sign. An omen of warning that his decision to move her could have been too late.

Lifting his hands out of the water, he held one of them over his face like her contraption that allowed her to breathe. Lifting an arm over his head, he mimed the strange way she swam.

“You want me to go swimming with you?” Her eyes widened in shock. “Absolutely not. It’s dangerous out there. I don’t have my flippers, so I could lose my damn toes. You realize that, right? The water is too cold for me.”

Of course it was. Everything was too dangerous for her.

Scrubbing a hand down his face, he spoke while he mimed out his words. “This cave is too dangerous for you. You said it yourself. You’ll die if you stay here. I am taking you somewhere else. Somewhere safer.”

How could he mime safe? He tried to think of something that might make him feel safe, so he wrapped his arms around himself. Maybe that would make her realize what he wanted.

“Hug?” she muttered before it dawned on her what he wanted. “You want to move me out of this cave?”

He nodded. “Yes, achromo. This is not your final resting place.”

The robot poked its head out of its box, and he watched as Mira turned to the little creature. “I have to bring Byte.”

He couldn’t... no. They were not going to bring the abomination. It could stay down here and rust like all the other creations of her people. He shook his head, only to find her glaring at him.

“What?” he snarled.

Apparently, she knew what he said, because she pointed to the box again and replied, “We’re bringing it. Or I’m staying right here and you can leave me to rot.”

He would do none of that. “You’re reliant on me for everything. Do you think I cannot make you come with me?”

She took a step deeper into the cave. “If you try to make me, I will kick you back into that pool as many times as is necessary. Unless you can suddenly grow legs, undine, I don’t think you’re going to win this fight.”

He would drag himself across the stones if he had to. There was nowhere she could hide from him.

His thoughts caught on a word that he’d heard her say many times. “Undine?” he repeated. “What is this word?”

She blinked. “Did you just say undine?”

As was their usual sign to continue, he quirked a brow. Clearly telling her that he wanted to hear more about this word, or what it meant.

She pointed at him. “You’re an undine.”

“I am one of the People of Water.” Arges pressed a hand to his chest, then gestured to her. “You are a achromo.”

She mimicked his movements. “I am a human. You are an undine.”

They stared at each other for a few moments longer before he sighed. Giving up. She would have no way of understanding what he was saying, anyway. These achromos and their words that weren’t quite right.

He gestured with his hand, trying to get her to hurry up before his brother decided to return. “Come, *kairos*. You’ve already had a visitor today

that makes me nervous. Get in the water with me and carry your box. I will hold the both of you so we can flee this place.”

She made quick work of readying herself. She rarely took off the silver skin that covered her body, anyway. He’d only seen her remove it a few times after she’d gotten wet. And unfortunately, he feared this would not be a journey she would enjoy.

But there were only so many places he knew of that were safe, and she was a delicate creature.

“I can’t go any deeper in the water than this,” she said, strapping a makeshift rope around her waist and securing her trash to her hip. “My body will explode. Do you hear me? It’s already hard enough to breathe down here.”

“Hard to breathe?”

She pressed a hand to her stomach, inhaling and letting it out. “Too much pressure. My lungs can’t get enough air. I don’t know how deep we are, but I assume it’s only a couple hundred feet.”

He did not know these measurements. But she was correct that they weren’t as deep as she likely thought. He’d noticed how the depths seemed to crush her kind, having dragged their bodies far deeper than this. He’d seen them pop, as she said. He did not want to do that to her.

Grunting his agreement, he twisted to look down into the water. Perhaps it was just his mind, but he swore he could feel eyes on them. There was no one in this cave with them, though. Unless an attacker waited in the darkness outside, just far enough so that the depths protected them from Arges’s sight.

“Hurry, *kairos*,” he muttered.

She did no such thing. Mira picked up the robot and then turned to look around the cavern one last time. “It was fun living here, even if it wasn’t all that safe. I’ve never had an adventure like this before. Are you bringing me home now?”

He didn’t have the heart to tell her that he would never return her to the home of the achromos. She knew too much.

Mira would either die or stay with him for the rest of her life.

He watched as she strode over to the metal remains of her world and slapped her hand down on it. With a guttural groan, something stopped moving in the water and all the lights over their head flickered out.

Suddenly plunged into darkness, she was the faintest outline in the distance, lit only by the warm yellow glow of the water where he waited for her.

As she came closer, he could see those bright yellow lights sparkling in her eyes like the rare glimpse of the sun on the surface of the sea. The determination in her eyes only made her all the more appealing. He didn't even see those strange legs. All he saw was a woman who would fight the very sea itself, if that's what it took to keep her alive.

That realization made the waters boil around him.

He reached out his hand for her to take, sucking in a sharp breath at the feeling of those strange fingers slipping around his. She didn't flinch away from the webs between his, and he didn't mind that she didn't have them. This strange, fragile creature was a mixture of strength and aching delicacy that turned his mind into mush.

She let him help her into the water, gracefully sliding her legs into the depths before hissing in a sharp breath. "So cold."

"I will carry you," he murmured, wrapping one of his arms around her back and drawing her closer to him. "Let me keep you warm, Mira."

A soft smile crossed her features before she yanked down the first of her face coverings. Magnified eyes stared up at him, blinking a few times and overly large. "Sexy, right?"

The translator she'd attached to his ear wasn't helpful for the first word. But he could guess by the rounded sounds and the way she quirked her lips before putting the device over her mouth. And oh, it made all the colors in his body flare bright.

Was she... interested in him? Surely not. They were two very different species and that wouldn't work. They didn't fit.

But then she swam a little closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and slotting her feet back into the fins at his hips that were always a little warmer. Warm to keep his offspring safe should he wish to mate with someone. A position he was certain she did not know was so tempting that it made his hips buck forward.

"Sorry," she muttered, the words muffled by the device over her mouth. "Let me just get situated."

Any more situating and he'd be pressing something other than fins between her legs. Angry at himself, he grabbed onto her a little more forcefully than he'd anticipated. But then they were drifting underneath the

water, and her fingers slid through the gills on his neck before he moved her arms away from them.

They both shuddered, and he allowed himself to pretend they shuddered for the same reason. Perhaps she was remembering that fateful first touch, when he'd arched into her fingers and she'd played with his gills. And he was thinking about the same thing.

But realistically, he knew she shuddered only because the water was icy.

So, dragging her scent through his gills and letting it play underneath his scales, he speared them out of the cave and into the waiting depths so quickly that no one else could follow them. Surely.

But he thought he heard her murmur something about red lights in the distance.

SEVENTEEN

MIRA

Mira had no idea the undines could swim this quickly. He moved like he was made of water, or like he could part it so that nothing hindered his path. Swimming had always felt like she was pushing against something, trying to move through the water rather than with it.

But the undine? Oh, he was part of it. He was the water, and the water was him.

With her toes tucked into his hip fins like he wore a saddle, she could almost imagine that she was born to this. And though she didn't look like herself at all—the wetsuit wasn't going to last forever—at the very least, she could pretend.

They soared on their journey, slicing through currents and speeding past all manner of creatures. It was almost impossible to watch all of it happen as they zipped on by. He moved so fast; it was like she had attached herself to a darting drone.

And she suspected this was slower than he'd liked to go. Though he had started with one arm around her waist, now he had the other arm underneath her bottom. Perhaps he didn't realize that he cupped one of her ass cheeks rather possessively as they swam, or maybe he didn't have any idea how intimate his touch was, but it certainly made her squirm.

His fingers were just a little too close for her to focus on anything else but where his touch heated. If he moved his thumb even the slightest, he'd brush against her core and she'd really wiggle then. He was handsome. She was interested in a strange way, and all of this was hard to think about.

Mira was a human.

Arges was an undine.

They didn't fit together in any way that would work. She knew his people hated her. Hell, he had been hunting her people as far as she could tell. He knew more about her than she'd expected, even if he was curious enough to touch her legs. That was just natural curiosity, not that he hadn't realized her legs were... legs.

Still, it was impossible for her to not look at him while he swam. All those muscles flexed against her stomach and torso, shifting them just slightly so they flew through the water. Every now and then, his gills would flare, and his eyes would look in a direction. Every time she peered where he was looking, only to find nothing that her eyes could see in the distance.

But he could see something. A few times he changed their course, his hands tightening on her just barely before he let her situate herself a little more comfortably. Mira wished she didn't have to crane her neck to see where they were going, and eventually, she gave up. She propped her chin on his very muscular shoulder and watched the darkness behind them.

She thought perhaps they were going up. The water was lighter here, at least. She still couldn't see her hand in front of her face, and there was absolutely no color at all, but it was definitely more gray than black. Still, it

was a bit like living in a black and white world. Unnerving, and it made her heart race until they had gone up far enough for her to see more.

And then, suddenly, the ground came up to meet them. Or perhaps they had swum over a drop off that she hadn't seen before, but now they were surrounded with life.

She felt like one moment she was clinging to him, terrified that she would blink and see massive eyes staring back at her from the depths, and the next, she could see everything.

Schools of fish glimmered as they swam around them, catching the faintest hint of light and turning it into a sparkle of gemstones. Giant kelp fronds toyed with her legs, binding to Arges's tail as he moved through them. Giant seed pods floated around their heads, some of them eerily similar to the bag of fresh water he'd given her.

Once they were far away from the drop off, he released his grip on her ass and then removed his hand from her back too.

Still, she clung to him. What did he want her to do now? They were still in the water. Still in danger and yet...

Pulling away from him, one arm still wrapped around his neck, she looked around. There was a small space here in the kelp forest. Fronds didn't grow here as easily because there were countless bell shaped plants that were larger than she was tall.

They were all a faint blue, although everything was a faint blue down here. And she could see shadows moving halfway up the bells.

Fish she couldn't name swarmed in a hundred different colors. Sea turtles lazily moved along the bottom, poking at rocks and then moving along when they found nothing to eat. One in particular had scars all over its shell, and it looked back at her with a slow, lazy grin on its face. They all moved like she was in a dream. Slow and easy, taking their time to drift through the calm current.

It was beautiful. She clenched her hand on his shoulder as she filled her gaze with the sights.

"Wow," she whispered. "There are no words for a place like this."

She didn't think he could hear her, but apparently he had a lot better hearing than she did. Arges touched a hand to her waist, turning her in the water so she faced slightly down and across from them.

He pointed over her shoulder, and she followed the line of his pointed claw to see an octopus moving out of its underwater home. It was bright

purple, with dark speckles all up and down its sides. And though she'd been terrified by the idea of a giant squid, this was a creature she had always dreamt of meeting.

A bright sound of delight bursting out of her mouth, she kicked off of him and propelled herself down to the octopus. Cold water be damned. She wanted to see this creature in the wilds again.

Arges joined her very quickly, a worried expression on his face as he tried to put himself between her and the unsuspecting sea creature.

"I don't want to hurt it," she assured him, trying to talk as loud as the rebreather would let her. "I've seen them before in picture books! Everyone in Beta always talked about how intelligent they are and how it's such a rare species to see. We never saw them that deep in the ocean, but I always hoped someday I would meet one. My father met one before, back in the days when he worked off site."

Kicking her feet to force herself upright in the water, she mimed trying to yank something off her mask. "He told me it grabbed onto his face and gave him a little shake, like it was reminding him that he wasn't supposed to be in the water. It didn't hurt him, just gave him a good rattle before it floated off. It didn't ink or even seem all that angry apparently, it just... wanted to remind him that he wasn't supposed to be looking at an octopus and he was supposed to be working."

Throughout her story, the concern had softened on Arges's face. Instead, it started to look a little something like amusement before he tilted his head back and let out one of those musical sounds.

And...

"Wow," she whispered, losing all sense of reason.

In her fear, she hadn't realized how the sound of his voice was so much better under the water. So much more than it had been before when she'd tried to speak to him in that cave. The depth of it wasn't so painfully loud. Instead, he sounded deeper, more smooth, infinitely better in a way that sent heat zinging throughout her entire body.

And then he gave her a strangely knowing look before he pointed at one of the bells.

Nodding, she gave the octopus one last lingering glance before swimming toward the nearest bell. It seemed to be even larger up close, perhaps two of her own height. And there were things swimming in it. A tiny school of fish the same color as the bell, as far as she could tell, at

least. They swirled in the middle of the bell, a tiny whirlwind of fish that scattered from underneath and raced to other plants at their approach.

It was so magical. Every bit of this made her hold her breath as she watched something new and wondrous happen. Then she looked over at Arges and saw him watching her. The soft expression on his face was eerily close to pride.

She was glad there were masks over her face and the water was cold. Because Mira was quite certain she turned a rather embarrassing shade of red. Kicking her feet, she watched him as he watched her. Their eyes locked. Her breath fogged the inside of the rebreather only to clear every time she inhaled.

She must look so monstrous to him compared to the beauty of his own kind. She'd only seen a few undines in her day, but they were all like him. Born to be in the water. Their gills and fins delicately waving with each movement, floating there like they didn't have to fight to stay upright. They just *were* in the ocean.

And oh, she was so envious of them.

His gills flickered, slowly lifting around his neck as he looked her up and down before he pointed at the bell shaped plant.

"I don't know what you want me to do," she said.

He scooped his hand, motioning for her to go inside the plant.

"That's not happening," she muttered, pinwheeling her hands to shove herself farther away from the plant. "Here I was thinking you were just moving me somewhere safer, but I see now that I am just supposed to be food for one of your other pets. I'm good, Arges. I'll just go to the surface or back to my own home rather than be turned into goo for a plant. Deal?"

He let out another one of those melodious chuckles before gesturing for her to go inside the bell again. Under no circumstances was she going to do that. She wasn't going to be plant food at the end of her life. She'd rather try her luck with a deep sea squid than that.

A mere flick of his tail, a twitch really, and he was at her side again. He placed a hand against her back and shoved. No matter how hard she tried to swim away from him, and no matter how long she struggled, he somehow just kept bumping her closer and closer to the damn plant.

"If we were on land, this would be a totally different dynamic," she wheezed through heavy breathing. "I'd be pushing you around. Rolling you on the ground like a giant seal."

Again, he made that gorgeous sounding laugh, and it was hard to not get distracted. Besides, there was no way she could fight him.

And would he be laughing if he intended to kill her? Maybe. Probably, actually considering the history between their people but... Well, she chose to trust him. Because what else was she supposed to do?

It wasn't like she had a choice in any of this.

He guided her through the water and shoved her underneath the bell. Squeezing her eyes shut, she waited for the sickly feeling of the plant closing over her body. Perhaps dragging slime in its wake as it mashed her or dissolved her with acid.

But that didn't happen. Instead, all she felt were warm, webbed hands that slid up her sides until they rested against her ribs. Waiting, she supposed, for her to open her eyes.

Peeling first one open, then the other, she was startled to see only his face. Arges hovered so close to her that it would only take a slight tilt of her head and she'd bonk him with her forehead. And those eyes of his were narrowed with amusement.

"What?" she asked. "Clearly you were feeding me to the giant plant."

In a startlingly human gesture, he rolled his eyes and then pointed above her head.

And there was... air. Above them.

"Can I..." It sounded stupid to even voice the words, but she muttered, "Can I breathe in here?"

He quirked a brow as if to say, I don't know, can you? And then shoved her up a little higher.

She had her rebreather. The worst-case scenario was that she couldn't breathe that air, and she had to put the breather back on. And that was a hell of a lot easier to do in maybe not breathable air, but still not water.

Kicking her feet, she made it up to the surface and pulled the rebreather off. There was plenty of room above her head, and even a few tendrils hanging down from the inside. Perhaps stamens, she thought, like plants that needed to be pollinated.

Arges joined her, looking very pleased that she could breathe.

He spoke, his hands moving quickly along with each word, and she got the general idea of what he was saying. The plants made a kind of oxygen, and it was breathable for her kind. Then he reached up and grabbed one of

the tendrils, gently looping it around her waist and then making a motion like he was sleeping.

So he wanted her to sleep in here? Why?

“I don’t understand,” she said slowly. “Why do you want me to sleep in here? I could drown in my sleep. Wasn’t the cave better than this?”

He spoke, his words like a song, as he gestured so quickly that she couldn’t quite make out what he was saying. Did he want her to stay here? She wouldn’t survive alone in the water for that long. Surely he knew that.

“Food?” she asked. “Fresh water?”

He pointed to the tiny fish, reaching his hands out slowly and cupping one between his fingers. It was easy to catch them, apparently. Maybe because they didn’t have natural hunters. Then he spoke, that voice going on and on before he dragged her down into the water for a few moments so she could see the floating seed pods were actually similar to the ones he’d brought her. There was water in them, apparently, that she could drink.

She shook her head when he brought her back up into the glowing blue light of the bell. “No. It’s too cold.”

The damned undine faked shivering, then pointed to her. Clearly, she wasn’t shivering anymore, and the water was warmer here. Despite the rip in the back of her suit, she wasn’t as cold as she might expect.

But that didn’t mean this was a good idea. “What about sharks? Squid? All the other creatures in the ocean that would love an easy meal?”

He said something that sounded familiar, then gestured around them like this place was safe.

“And what if I run out of air to breathe?”

He gently lifted the rebreather still attached to her neck and then pointed to the other bell plants. Like it was obvious. She had options for air, it just wasn’t the best option she might have.

And then, to her absolute horror, he sank out of the bell and swam away before she could catch him.

EIGHTEEN

ARGES

Arges hated to leave her undefended in a strange new world that likely she was terrified of. He understood how scary it must be for her to be underwater where she could not breathe, and now there was no one else there to help her. It was... horrible what he had chosen to do.

But he had no other option. Daios had come to the cave, and he couldn't leave her where his most dangerous brother had found her. So he had to

move her. He had to bring her elsewhere until he could find a more permanent place for her.

In the meantime, he had to return home. He needed to show his face to the others, so they knew he had not run. He hadn't turned to the depthstriders in shame and asked them to take him in.

Arges was still the leader of his pod. He was still the favored son of their Mitéra and no mission with the achromos would change that.

At least, he didn't think.

Soaring through the waters away from Mira felt like he'd left a piece of himself behind. He feared for her safety, and what would happen during their distance between each other.

She could be attacked by all manner of sea creatures. Even sharks frequented that area of the ocean, and she was an easy snack for them to take a bite out of. Although, with all those bones, he didn't think they would actually eat her. Just likely try a bit, and then she'd bleed out in the kelp. He'd find her surrounded by a plume of her own blood.

And though the thought was concerning, he found himself wondering what color her blood even was. His was dark, almost inky, like the emission of an octopus. But she didn't seem to be made of the same stuff.

His thoughts clouded with worries about her and musings about what her body was even like. He found himself at the heart of the ocean far sooner than he had expected. And what he found there made his blood turn icy in his veins.

His pod. Larger than before, with more males than he could count and females armed to the teeth. They swirled in a slow circle around the central meeting place. Around Mitéra and Daios, who raised his arms into the air and jabbed his clawed hands toward the surface.

They were not supposed to be here. Not his pod.

Not with him.

Anger raging bright and colorful, he used the currents to push himself through the tangle of arms, weapons, and tails. Someone's fluke caught him hard in the back, shoving him forward so he raced into the center with a little too much speed to be polite.

But he did not care about politeness right now. Not when his brother had clearly gone too far.

Though the silence that fell after his arrival sent ripples down his spine, he would not back down. "Brother," he hissed. "What is the meaning of

this?”

“There is no meaning. We have been hiding from the achromos for too long. With all your plans of watching and showing our curiosity and not our teeth, we have wasted too much time. We will attack them and we will tear their kingdom apart with our claws.”

“This is madness,” Arges replied, shaking his head and looking at Mitéra. But the undulating mass of her hair was still.

She... agreed with Daios?

His Mitéra, the woman who had always favored him above all others, wished for his brother to hunt?

He turned around, watching the others as they swirled in a circle around them. The pale light of their home flickered on scales and sharp, bared teeth. They agreed with his brother. Then they circled him like sharks. All of their sharp tails and weapons held with clenched hands and emotions bared for all to see. Bright colorful lights danced down their tails, filling the ocean with a rainbow of angry colors.

“We will lose many lives,” Arges murmured, his gills flat with displeasure. “The achromos have weapons unlike anything we’ve seen before. We cannot just attack their home, or I would have led our pod into battle a long time ago.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Daios drew himself up high, his tail coiling and red electricity flickering up and down his body. He really thought that Arges was just too weak to lead them. He thought that Arges wouldn’t have taken the chance, even if the time was right.

With a flick of his tail, he met his brother head on. Their rib gills slapped against each other, his tail already coiling around his brother’s and ready to flex, to make him bend should this fight require it.

“I am no weak leader,” he hissed. “This is my pod, and you will take them nowhere without my permission.”

Although Daios growled back at him, teeth bared, he knew that his brother would not fight him. For even if Daios was a capable fighter, even if he wore the scars of many battles, he was no match for Arges. This was a fight he would not win unless Arges was weakened.

Mitéra’s hand passed between their faces. Her pale webbed fingers were likely the only thing that might have stopped Arges from ripping his brother’s head off. Even so, he still bared his teeth in a snarl and wrenched their tails apart, rocking his brother forward before he turned to Mitéra.

Bowing his head, he ground out, "My apologies. You do not enjoy seeing violence in your own home, and I have broken that covenant."

"Indeed, you have." She still brushed her fingers over his face, though, drawing his eyes up to hers. But the warmth he usually saw in them was not there. Not in the slightest. "My favored son, you already have a mission. You are to speak with the achromo you stole and learn their secrets."

"It will take time for us to converse."

"I understand that. This is why your brother has stepped in to lead our pod. Our weapons are strong, and our hearts are brave. Daios is quite certain he can lead us to victory, and I have given him permission to do so."

It felt like she'd shoved a knife between his ribs and twisted.

"Why?" he rasped. "Why would you do this when you know we will lose so many?"

His brother answered. Harsh, grating laughter filled the waters between them. "You have such little faith in me, brother. There will only be a few lives to lose today, and the rest will be those of the achromos who will scream and writhe as they drown."

A cry echoed his own. A hundred of their people, so pleased with what they were about to do and not capable of seeing the future.

Mitéra dropped her touch from his chin and turned to his brother. Ashamed that he had been cast aside, Arges wilted to the ground of their home. He pressed his hands to the dirt, feeling the grit of it against the webs of his fingers as he sent out prayers to every ocean god and goddess that he could remember.

"Watch over our people," he said, his voice low and quiet. "Bring them to battle, but do not make them scent the blood of their loved ones. Show them their folly, but do not take their lives as payment."

He murmured the words over and over again as the pod above him took off into the distance. He could hear their tails lashing through the water, the clinking of weapons that knocked against each other as they made their way toward the achromos' home. But mostly, he heard the happiness in his brother's voice as he led them toward what he was certain was victory.

And it would end in all their deaths.

Quiet descended upon his home. The only people left were the elderly, the young, and the women who had just given birth. Those who could not fight, and likely still wished they had enough muscle in their tails to go.

A cold, webbed hand glided down his back, delicately plucking at the spines pressed flat to his skin.

“They must learn the hard way,” Mitéra said. “You know the violence in your brother’s heart. You have seen the darkness that lingers underneath his skin, and how he will not give up his desire to kill and harm.”

“There are better ways to learn.”

“Not for him. Daios speaks a language that is only blood and pain.” Mitéra tapped a long tail on the back of his skull, forcing him to look up from the sand and at her. “He will learn this time. He will see that there is a great demon in this ocean, and it does not live with the depthstriders.”

“I could smell them on him.”

“I know. So could I.” She turned those colorless eyes in the direction all her people had gone, and for a split moment he saw a flash of fear cross over her features. “This was not an easy choice.”

“You sent them to their deaths.”

“I have given them a head start.” She turned that emotionless gaze back to him, and he already knew he would not like this plan of hers. “They need to be reminded who leads this pod, and why. So you will go after them, Arges, and you will save all that you can.”

He frowned. “I can catch up with them now. I can stop them if I need to.”

“You will not go now.” She nodded her head, acknowledging that he was faster than most. “You will finish your prayers. To every ocean god and goddess, that they will guide your hand and that you will be able to save as many of your people as you can. And you will ask for forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness?” he repeated.

“For me.” Mitéra’s colors flashed blue, then a deep black. “For I was the one who sent them to their ends.”

He would waste no more time. Arges bent back into the sand, whispering the words of his prayer to every god he could think of. He asked for speed. He begged for their grace and to allow him to find their people quickly. None of them could afford for him to waste any time in getting to them. He would rush through the waves, and the currents would toss him to the achromos’ home.

And when he finished, he didn’t even look at Mitéra. He threw himself into motion, his tail springing into action and his gills opening wide so he could get enough air to chase after them.

Hearts thundering in his chest the entire journey, he rushed forward into the unknown until he met the massive wall that led up to the human home. Even looking up, he could see the bright flashes of light that preceded the blinding pain of the achromos' weapons. Small explosions rocked through the water, raining debris down on his head.

His people were fighting. As he surged forward, up the cliff, closer and closer to the battle, he could see they were losing.

Badly.

A body floated down into the depths past him. Her hair had been seared off, and part of her face was missing. Though her gills still fluttered, he knew she was already gone. Her torso led the way back into the arms of the abyss, her tail trailing after her.

And then another.

Another.

So many that he could hardly count through the bodies floating past him and disappearing into the darkness of the deep.

Arges moved faster. He pushed the muscles of his tail and back hard, until they screamed with overuse, then he burst above the cliff and out into the madness beyond.

His people had swarmed the achromos' home. So many People of Water were attached to the glass structures, arms flexing in the bright flashing lights the achromos used. Their weapons glinted, striking the metal and glass tubes, and then bouncing right off.

They didn't have the right weapons for this. They had nothing that would help them defeat the city.

Frantically, he searched through the crowds of his own people for anyone who would listen to him. Maketes. His brightly colored, yellow finned brother was in the distance, dragging a body toward the edge of the cliff.

"Brother!" Arges shouted, swimming closer and hooking his claws underneath the injured man's arms. "We need to get them out of here."

Dark blood already bloomed from Maketes's ribs, and he winced. "You think? This was a terrible idea."

"I did warn you all."

"And yet, here you are." Maketes grinned, even through the pain. "Here I was believing you didn't have a hero complex. Yet you cannot keep your nose out of our deaths, even!"

“Shut up,” he growled. “Where is Daios?”

“I don’t know. He led a larger group toward the central tower. He said that was where the weapons were kept.” Maketes pointed up.

Arges swore. “Of course he did. The fool.”

“I’ll gather the others. Get them to start heading home and lick our wounds. Yeah?”

“Don’t forget the dead.”

His usually playful friend’s features darkened. “I never forget the dead, Arges.”

Leaving Maketes to do the right thing, he speared through the water toward the command tower. What had been his brother’s plan? Take out the weapons with sheer force, and then perhaps the achromos would have nothing left to fight them with? This was a foolish mission, and he should have seen it from the very start.

Anger heating his blood, he pivoted to round the central tower only to find himself immersed in even more chaos. He’d never thought to see such folly from his own people.

So many dead floated around his brother and a small pod of others who were still alive. They wrestled with one of the mechanical blasters, similar to Mira’s junk that she insisted on bringing with her. But their wrestling was only blasting more pieces of them into chunks.

As he watched, two of their people fell away from his brother, and Daios lost his mind. Enraged, colors flickering brightly and teeth bared in a grimace, his brother grabbed onto the blaster and wrenched. It gave one final pulse of heat, then his brother twisted. He couldn’t rip it off the platform and instead, the weapon took his arm.

Arges watched as though time itself had slowed. His brother’s arm fell first, black blood pluming in the water like his brother had startled an octopus. It didn’t seem real that a limb could come off so easily, and so quickly, and yet... it had.

He raced forward, wrapping an arm around Daios’s waist before forcing them both back. Toward the edge, toward safety. He could save one person, and let it be his blood brother, the idiot who had been with him in the womb.

“Stop!” Daios shouted, and Arges had to wonder if the pain had yet to hit him. “We almost succeeded!”

“You almost died!” Arges argued, throwing him down over the edge with those who remained. “You killed nearly everyone. When will it be enough?”

Daios shoved him, clearly trying to do so with both arms. And then his brother noticed the wound. The lack of a limb and the pain that came with it.

All the lights in his tail went out. He lifted a shaking hand to the piece of him that was no longer attached, and his gills shook along his sides. “What—”

“We stop,” Arges said, then shouted it again. “We stop this now before we lose even more!”

A small murmur started up through the crowd of his people. Some were dragging the injured back, but he saw the truth in their eyes. They were afraid. They understood why he had made them wait for such a long time, and he was sorry they had to discover his reasoning like this.

He saw movement at the edge of the cliff and watched as his dark brother backed away from them all. “No,” Daios muttered. “No, this isn’t over yet.”

“How is it not over? You’re missing an arm, Daios. You need help.”

“There is another who can give us answers. You have never done your job right, Arges. Never completely.” And something black flashed through Daios, something down right evil. “I will get us answers if you cannot.”

And then his brother took off into the depths. Toward the one thing that made Arges’s hearts stop beating before he raced after death itself.

Not death for him.

But for her.

NINETEEN

MIRA

Not for the first time, Mira was a little overwhelmed. And by a little, she really meant a lot. Getting stranded in the middle of the ocean with only her prototype rebreather to keep her alive was a little more than she expected to handle right off the bat. She might have hyperventilated the first night, certain that she was going to die. But at least the bell had more air in it than she had expected. It hadn't run out of

oxygen through all her crying and panicked heaving, which was a reassuring start.

The plant did eventually run out of air, though. And then she moved onto the next one. By the time the water had turned into that crystalline blue again, which she assumed was daylight, she had gotten a hold of herself a little better.

Her stomach eventually grumbled for food, and she'd convinced herself that she could do this. Even if the undine didn't come back for her, she was capable of taking care of herself.

Her father had always said she was a force to be reckoned with, and now was her time to prove that.

So she had settled her rebreather back on her face, made sure that her goggles were clear with spit and wouldn't fog up, and then she dove to investigate her new... home.

The kelp forest was surprisingly diverse with creatures. She'd known it would have some kinds of sea creatures in it, obviously, but she hadn't expected there to be quite so many of them. All the fish she'd seen, even the ones that Arges had told her to catch, came in every color she could imagine. They swam around her in tiny schools. Swirling like she'd used to do with her mother's scarves, trailing them around herself as she spun in circles.

And then there were the octopi that called this place their home. She'd counted three of them, very different in color, although they were constantly changing. She'd tried to poke at one, only to have it ink at her in frustration before it moved on.

Snippy little things.

She'd spent what must have been an hour sitting on a rock at the bottom of the ocean floor, holding another rock in her lap to pin her in place, and just... watched. Two turtles swam by, eyeing her with curiosity before they kept going. All the fish eventually ignored her and drifted off. She even got to watch a crab catch a meal and then slowly eat it.

This place was... otherworldly. She didn't even feel like herself sitting here. She was warm enough, and she'd learned to tuck her toes into the backs of her knees, sitting cross-legged so she didn't get too cold. Otherwise, she'd pull herself into the strangely warm bells and anchored her feet to the sticky walls.

But when she sat on this rock, she didn't feel like Mira. She felt like some sea goddess who watched her entire kingdom move in slow motion. After a time, she'd even foolishly taken off the hood of her wetsuit just to feel her hair billowing about in the water.

It was a fantasy, and one she would likely pay for if her hair never dried. But something deep in her soul wanted to experience this like the undines. She wanted, for just a few moments, to be something other than what she was.

She couldn't get her hood back over her head. So she left it down, instead, focusing on getting herself something to eat. Unlike Arges, she still refused to eat mystery fish raw, even if they were easier to catch. Once she'd cupped one in her hands, watching the tiny thing swim around in circles like it had no other care in the world, she just couldn't kill it.

But she'd had raw oysters before. And she knew what they looked like.

It took a bit for her to find the right kind of rocky outcropping. Mira was hesitant to leave the bell plant area for very long, or even to go very far. It would be too easy to get turned around in this kelp forest that looked the same from every angle. However, she found the oysters not too far from where she was.

Surprisingly, there was enough to satisfy her for a while.

The only problem was that she didn't have a knife. Not even something sharp to open them with. So she returned with an armful of oysters to the bell shaped plant with a plan. Some of those bags that held fresh water could be emptied. So she did that quickly, then filled them with air from inside one of the nearby bells. Bringing those into the bell, she used them as a simple flotation device and then plopped Byte onto them.

Still not in the water, and therefore it could open up its metallic plates without injuring the delicate wires inside of it. Precarious? Absolutely. But did it work?

It sure did.

"Byte," she said, letting her rebreather drop into the water at her chest. "You're okay to open up now."

The top panel cracked only slightly before she heard an angry voice mutter, "This is too dangerous. You're going to kill me."

"I'm not going to kill you. I just need you to open these oysters for me and then you can seal yourself back up."

"No."

“Yes,” she replied with a laugh, holding one of them up. “I need to eat.”

“Figure out something else.”

“I don’t have a knife. There’s nothing else for me to eat. I will starve, and you’ll end up on your own again.”

Though the robot grumbled, it extended one tiny arm and pried the oysters open for her. One by one, she slid the sweet meat into her mouth and rolled her eyes into the back of the skull. They tasted so much better than any other oysters she’d had before.

Maybe that was some byproduct of hunting them on her own. Or maybe they were better this far from Beta. With no human waste to contaminate them, the oysters were absolutely divine.

“You’re enjoying this too much,” Byte said, and she swore it was somehow glaring at her. “This is a terrible situation for us to be in. We probably won’t make it out of this alive.”

“We’re alive now, aren’t we?”

“That doesn’t mean we’ll be alive in a few hours. Let alone days. The undine has left you to your own devices, and soon you will realize that humans and robots aren’t meant to live in the sea.”

“I think I’m doing all right.” She sucked down the last oyster, making a face as she let the empty shells drop to the bottom of the ocean floor. “If he doesn’t come back in a couple days, we’ll figure out something else.”

“Like what?”

Shrugging, Mira refused to allow the anxiety to come back into her mind. “I don’t know. Somewhere else. There have to be other cave systems like I was in before. Clearly, people were mining or researching something down here. There has to be more.”

“And you’ll be able to find them so easily in an entire ocean’s worth of space to search.” Byte chirped, the sound almost like a snort. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, I know someone who has spent a lot of time on the ocean floor.” Arching a brow, she tilted her head so she could peer into the box. “Care to share any of your vast knowledge?”

“No.”

“But you do know something.”

It sealed the box shut with a very loud snap, and Mira rolled her eyes. Of course, it knew somewhere they could go. But that was perhaps also dangerous, and droids were always the type to pick the easiest route. If

there was too much danger, they simply wouldn't do it. Which was the reason it had remained on the ocean floor for such a long time. Too much danger, therefore, it froze and did nothing at all.

Placing her rebreather back over her face, she sank out of the bell and left Byte where it was. If the bags popped, it was easy enough for her to find the box. It sank like a stone, and there wasn't much to compete with that shape on the bottom of the ocean floor.

Once she got down there, the only thing she wanted to do was sit on that rock again. She ran her fingers through her hair, and they got stuck in the snarled strands. Already the ocean was causing tangles that she might have to cut out if she didn't brush them.

And what better way to feed her undine fantasies than to sit on a rock in the middle of the ocean, brushing her fingers through her hair?

When she was a little girl, she'd used to dream of undines doing this. Their graceful tails all folded up beneath them, humming a haunting song through the water. She'd thought they would look so beautiful, even if everyone told her to hate them.

A little euphoric thrill ran through her veins that she could do this. She'd feed that inner child who had always wanted to live in a fantasy world. This exciting, this... beautiful.

She didn't know how long she sat before she saw the shadow in the kelp forest. It was very long, and a different shape than anything she'd seen thus far. But she wasn't going to move. Nothing so far had been dangerous.

Then the shadow lunged out of the kelp, so quickly it was hard for her to even get an idea of what it was before it struck her. Her ribs screamed in pain, but the water seemed to cushion her wild slide before she hit rocks.

Shark, her mind screamed. There's a shark and there is nowhere for you to hide.

She grabbed onto the stones with her hands, shoving herself farther away from the creature and kicking her feet. But she wasn't a fast enough swimmer, not even slightly.

Black water bubbled around her, and she didn't have time to wonder where all the ink was coming from. Perhaps it was an octopus trying to help hide her. She didn't care. Again it struck her, shoving her into the kelp forest and away from the safety of the bells. Away from Byte.

Away from anywhere Arges would find her.

Panic swirled, making it hard to focus on anything but the terror that ran through her veins and the way her mind screamed to hide.

She turned her body in the water, forcing herself to look, even though that was the last thing she wanted to do. She didn't want to see the giant shark, the sharp teeth, or the nightmare that likely waited for her. But when she turned, she saw nothing. Not even the dark shadow before she bumped into something equally hard.

She screamed. Her rebreather sent out a wave of bubbles that obscured her vision. She kicked and fought against the tentacle wrapped around her waist, completely lost to her panic as she swore she felt sharp teeth breaking through her skin.

But then...

Then a voice rumbled in her ear. Like a song of peace and quiet, insisting that she settle in his arms.

And *oh*. It was Arges.

She relaxed in his grip, easing her spine against his chest and feeling the flare of his gills against her ribs. She shouldn't find such relief knowing that it was him. He was still a dangerous undine who had attacked her people countless times and she shouldn't want to find comfort in him, but... she did.

At least in this place, knowing what she did, she knew he would keep her safe.

That was a strange enough feeling without the shadow that loomed in front of them. Not a shark, after all. Another undine.

Yet again, she wished she could ask him questions. Had he stolen her without the knowledge of other undines? Did this one want to get rid of her? What reason did he have to kidnap her and then hide her from his people? Because his arm was banded around her stomach, and he dragged her even closer into himself, like he could wrap his body around her and keep her safe.

The undine in front of them was badly wounded. She felt her face crease in worry as her eyes skated down his missing arm that leaked black blood sluggishly into the waters around them. And he seemed to be struggling to breathe. His gills were flared far wider than she'd ever seen Arges's, and his eyes kept closing for longer times than a blink needed.

Tapping her hands on Arges's forearms, she said, "Arges, he's injured."

The arms around her waist flexed, tightening at the sound of his name. The other undine lurched forward, rocking at the name as well. They said short words to each other, the farthest from song she'd ever heard from an undine.

They were angry? At each other or at her?

Mira felt like this was a rather important bit of information that she needed to know. If this undine wanted to kill her, then she had to get out of here. Arges could protect her, but he shouldn't fight this injured undine on her behalf. She didn't want him to...

More shadows joined them. Two others who floated down from above. One with bright yellow slashes, another with purple lines like veins throughout his entire body.

Then they were all talking. Saying so much that it made her ears hurt. But some part of her said yes, talk more. Byte had to be listening to everything being said, and this was a good amount of conversation for it to translate.

Please, she thought. Please be listening, Byte.

Finally Arges jerked her behind him, and she floated into the kelp. Maybe he didn't mean for her to get so far from him, but she wanted to put some distance between herself and the wall of angry undine that all glared at her like she was an invasive species of algae.

She supposed to them she was. A new and disgusting plague upon their people.

They all gestured to her often. Their claws slashing through the water so quickly they became a blur. Colorful tails whipped behind them, carrying them closer and closer to Arges, who seemed to be more than ready to meet them in the middle. She'd never noticed he had spines down his back, but they rose now and she couldn't help but fear that they were raised in her defense.

She didn't want anyone else to get hurt because of a stupid engineer who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And then it just all... stopped. The undine missing an arm seemed to faint. Of course, they were in the water, so he just floated up. His tail drifted toward the surface while his body hung there, strangely graceful, almost upside down, as though he were asleep.

The other two were quick to gather him up, and then they all disappeared into the kelp.

Shoving the billowing mass of her own hair out of her face, she stared at Arges in shock. He looked back at her, those odd features seemingly conflicted before he snapped his tail and then he was upon her.

His claws scooped underneath her chin, and she was certain this was the moment he killed her. Obviously, he'd told the others he would follow them after he dealt with her.

But he didn't snap her neck. He didn't sink those claws into her skin, either. Instead, he turned her head from side to side, searching for... injuries? Why would she be injured?

Arges turned her face left and right again, moved her around so that he could run his hands down her spine and waist, making sure she was well before he leaned back and stared down at her. Then that melodious voice, singing to her and saying something that she had no idea how to decipher.

"Arges!" she said, hissing out a breath when she finally took a second to look at him.

There was black blood coming out of him, too. His shoulder looked like it was a mess, all ragged looking meat and sharp edges. She hovered her hand over the injury, not touching in case there was some rule against that or if her suit would make him sicker.

"You're hurt too." She looked up at him through her stupid goggles and tried to convey her worry.

But he said nothing in response. He just looked back at her, and she felt something inside her click into place. She cared that this strange creature was injured. Even if they couldn't understand each other, she now considered him a... friend.

TWENTY

ARGES

His safe place for her, the one area in the entire ocean where he thought she wouldn't be found, had proven to be flawed. Any of his people could smell her from a mile away. She had a scent that wasn't found otherwise in the ocean, and clearly they all knew where she was.

It was time to move her again.

But first, he had to make sure that she was safe. That his insane brother hadn't injured her. When Daios had struck her, Arges thought he'd lose one

of his hearts. She'd looked so limp, flying through the water before striking the stone hard enough to make him wince. She must be bleeding. Or perhaps one of her brittle bones had snapped.

He had no idea how to heal her kind. He didn't even think they *could* be healed. The People of Water were a hardy bunch. He'd broken countless bones himself. A significant amount of them were still broken in his tail and they would never be fixed. But they didn't hurt.

He could still use his body without having to stop and heal himself, but he knew it was very different for her people.

Running his hands down the delicate bones of her spine, he counted each of her ribs before grunting in frustration. He didn't know how many ribs she was supposed to have, so this wasn't getting him anywhere. He couldn't even ask if she was all right, because they couldn't converse with each other.

Mira grabbed his hand on the next pass down her body, holding the web pinched between her fingers so he had to look at her. "I'm fine," she said, squeezing his webs a little too hard. "I'm absolutely fine. No one hurt me."

"Good," he said quietly, knowing that she couldn't understand him. "Because I would have turned the waters black with their blood. I don't care that he's my brother, or that the others have been in my pod for years. They do not understand the value or the worth of your life, *kairos*, and I will not stand for their mistreatment of you." Brushing his fingers gently through her hair, he added, "You are dear to me now, Mira. I fear I have brought you into a world where you can only meet your end."

She tilted her face into the palm of his hand and he felt the entire ocean shift. A current pressed against his back, drawing him even closer to her. So close he could feel her chest rise and fall against him, and he noticed there was the slightest catch in her throat at his nearness.

He drew their hands down. Together. The back of his hand brushed down her chest, and he was delighted to see a shudder run through her. So she was sensitive there. It was something he would remember. Her fingers flexed in his.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice a little ragged.

He didn't know. He was only certain that he was pleased to see her alive. And he wished he could speak with her. To tell her how relieved he was, how terrified he'd been when he had realized his brother was coming

straight for her. How he needed her to know that he had never intended to risk her life when he brought her here.

Again, a current pushed him closer to her. Not for the first time in his life, he listened to the ocean. He drew her into his arms and rested his hand on top of her head. Red, like a plume of delicate coral, coiled around them. He ran his fingers through her hair, letting it float across his shoulder and tangle around his neck. Just as he wished to feel her.

Tangled up in him. Just as tangled as he was in her.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, he tugged her even closer before letting the current take him onto his back. He allowed her to rest against him, buoying both of them toward the bells where he'd left her. There were other caverns, other caves that existed. And though they would have to move in between all the monstrous hovels her people had made centuries ago, at the very least, he knew she would be safe. He could take care of her. He could do this.

Some voice whispered in his mind that these thoughts went beyond a mission to keep his people safe. Beyond a means to an end.

He'd come to care for this little creature, and that was the most dangerous choice he'd made in his entire life.

Mira pointed at something just over his shoulder, and he tensed for a few moments before she said, "Don't forget Byte."

He twisted to the side as they passed by the small box and palmed it. Though it was disgusting for him to touch anything the achromos had made, he could admit this felt more like a rock than a demon of the deep. It didn't even click or whir like it had the first time he'd picked it up off the bottom of the ocean floor.

Then his mind wandered. He'd found a few caverns like the one he'd brought her in, although none of them had been in such complete states. Most of them were too dangerous with falling rocks and earthquakes that could easily shake more free. But there was one, rather bare bones, with tunnels that disappeared into the earth. He thought perhaps that one would be safe enough.

So he brought her and her box to this new cave system, holding her against his hearts the entire time. He couldn't quite get himself to release her. Not a single finger wanted to peel out of her hair or from her back, where he could be certain she was inhaling and exhaling. The rhythm calmed him as nothing else ever had.

Finally, they reached the cave. There were no glowing lights in this one. No natural light at all. Just a black hole in a wall where he could see the faintest outlines of gray shapes.

This wasn't good enough. Even as he crested the surface of the water, poking his head up and flaring his nostrils to see if he could breathe in here, he knew it wasn't good enough.

"I'm sorry, *kairos*," he muttered. "This will have to do until I can find another."

To her credit, Mira didn't seem to be nervous at all. Though she didn't look around, her weak eyes could see nothing in the darkness. She still smiled up at him. "Is this where I'm staying the night?"

"It is safe," Arges grunted in agreement before lifting her out of the water. She got significantly heavier without the ocean holding her weight, but he still tossed her up onto the rock like she weighed nothing. "I wish it were better. You deserve somewhere comfortable to sleep. But I will find a better place for you tomorrow night. My brother will not be able to find you here, at the very least."

"I still don't understand you," she said with a bright bubble of laughter. Then she reached out for the box that he was still holding.

He released the robot, surprised that he'd forgotten he was holding it. Mira tapped on its top three times, and then the box opened. Only a slight peek allowed light to spill throughout the cave. He threw up an arm to cover his sensitive eyes. The damned creature was trying to kill him! He should throw it back into the ocean and see how long it took for the droid to drown.

"Sorry," Mira muttered. "I need light to see by, and thankfully Byte's lights aren't broken like mine were on the way down here."

"That seems like a long time ago," he murmured, lowering his arm as his eyes got used to the light. "You were terrified of me. And now, you welcome my touch like we have been friends for a very long time."

"Still can't understand you," she sang, her voice a long lilting song before she tapped the robot on the head. "Byte, how are we coming with the language chip?"

"Twenty-two percent," it replied.

"Ah." Mira's brow furrowed in a frown before she tapped another side of the metal box. "Can you open this side? I want to see if your trauma pod is still intact."

Amused, he understood the robot could get frustrated with humans. Its odd shaped head popped out of the box and with a rather indignant sounding voice, it replied, "All of my functions are in perfect working order."

"Then do you have a trauma pod?"

He swore it looked at him before it opened up the side of the box. Mira reached in and pulled out something that looked eerily similar to her other trash that she still wore strapped to her hip. But this one, when she clicked the button near her forefinger, emitted some kind of strange pale liquid.

"There we go," she muttered. "Still in working order, then."

What in the seven seas was she holding?

Arges watched her suspiciously, his brows furrowed as she gestured for him to come closer. "I'm not coming anywhere near that," he said. "You achromos and your strange devices. There is no need for any of them. The ocean gives you what she wants you to have."

"It will heal you." Again, she gestured for him to come closer to her. "If you give me just a few seconds, I can put this on your shoulder and it will feel better."

He highly doubted that. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with it. Arges moved away from her, but then the air hit the wound on his shoulder. With a sharp hiss, he pressed his fingers to the ragged edges.

Perhaps it was worse than he thought. He didn't regret getting his brother out of the line of fire. He hadn't even realized that he'd been caught in the shoulder by the same weapon Daios had been so certain he could destroy. Apparently, the achromos had weapons that were as indestructible as they were painful.

Again, Mira gestured for him to come closer. "Come on, big guy. You want me to think you're all brave and impossible to kill? Then show me how brave you are. This is nothing more than a salve that will seal over the wound and make sure it doesn't get infected. Like a bubble. I have nothing else to heal you with out here."

A bubble? He could deal with a bubble.

Coming a little closer, he grumbled the entire way. "I have no interest in being healed, female. The ocean will heal me just fine."

"I'm sure you're saying how big and strong you are and that healing has no purpose when you could just walk it off and rub some dirt in it." Mira rolled her eyes. But when he got close enough, she cupped his jaw and

gently ran her fingers across the gills on his neck. “Everyone needs to be taken care of sometimes, you know?”

He didn’t. But looking up into those strange eyes, even if they were surrounded by white, he wondered if it wouldn’t be too bad to be taken care of by her.

She brushed her thumb along his chin before turning her attention to the wound on his shoulder. “The twenty-two percent that Byte mentioned is how much of your language it has learned. It’s not a lot, but that’s a significant jump from listening to three of you talking at the same time.”

“It’s hard to imagine it’s only gathered that much of our language,” he muttered, turning his head to the side so she had better access to the wound on his shoulder. “I talk significantly more than the others of my kind.”

“You should tell me a story,” she said, ignoring everything that he’d said. And he wondered if she made up what he was telling her in her head. Like she was actually having a conversation with him. “There have to be some words that you haven’t said. At least Byte can translate those.”

He wasn’t so sure that there were stories he could tell her. Mitéra would likely want to murder him if he told her about their gods or any other secrets of their kind. Though he was coming to trust his achromo, he certainly wasn’t sure that the robot wasn’t collecting everything he said for later use.

Perhaps she recognized his hesitation, or maybe she mistook it for him being in so much pain that he couldn’t think. Either way, she slid more into the water, until her bottom was on a ledge in the water. “This might be an easier position. It’s going to take a while for this solution to set, anyway.”

She hadn’t even started doing anything, as far as he was aware. But he allowed her to draw him forward, even though there was nowhere for him to go. Without words, she guided him to lay his head on her lap.

She couldn’t know what this was doing to him. She had no way of knowing that by resting his head against her thighs, that she had pressed his gills between them as well. That her scent was nearly overpowering here, tantalizing his senses and filtering through his very breath. He could taste her on his tongue, sweet and musky and entirely unlike anything he’d ever tasted before.

Mira cleared her throat, her fingers playing over his exposed gills for a second before rasping, “Is this okay?”

It was mouthwatering. Arges wanted to turn his head, to use his other senses to find out where that delicate scent was coming from. He wanted to split her strange tails, to see if she was built the same as his kind or if she was something different. He wanted her to run her fingers through his gills again, the way she had before in that cave where he hadn't been so afraid that someone would find her.

Every color in his body burst into light, lighting up the surrounding water with a bright glow. And he wasn't even ashamed about it. He refused to think too much about how all of his gills flared and then fluttered. No voice interrupted his thoughts to tell him that fluttering for a creature like her was a direct insult to the gods of his kind.

None of it mattered. The only thing that mattered at all was the feeling of her fingers brushing through his hair, and the taste of her on his tongue.

"I'll take that as a yes."

He couldn't trust himself to speak. He'd say something foolish, like beg her to give him permission to discover more about her body. To see beyond the silver suit that covered her from head to toe. He wanted to know what that little hollow on her belly was, or what was between the split of her twin tails.

There was so much about her that he didn't know. So much that he wanted to discover.

Instead, he let out a little hum and heard her gasp. Perhaps the sound had vibrated the water between her thighs, and it was something he stored away for later. Because that taste bloomed even more before she cleared her throat.

"I'm going to start healing you. If that's all right?" she asked again, her voice a little deeper than before.

Nodding, he lifted his arms to frame her hips, dragging her a little closer. She could do whatever she wanted if he could stay right here for a little while longer.

TWENTY-ONE

MIRA

They moved through a lot of different caverns in the next week or so. Byte had been very helpful in that. Mira had fixed its projector with parts from one of the caves, so the droid could then use the projection mapping to show all the other caves that were nearby. It had taken a few tweaks and fiddles, but eventually she figured out the old droid system.

Byte did not appreciate her poking or prodding. It took many long hours until they could see the droid's journey projected onto the surrounding stone

walls. And then they would move once they found the next cave that should be open.

They were always difficult to find, of course. Byte didn't like to show them the ones that were closest, apparently because of the dangers that it kept repeating.

"Not that one," Byte would say, flicking through its memory with a very annoyed clank. "It's too deep. Too far. Too dangerous."

Even Mira was ready to throw the damn thing into the water by the end of it. But Arges remained a never ending well of patience. He asked the robot questions, even though it couldn't really understand him. But she had noticed that the robot was beginning to speak back to him. Or at the very least, respond like it knew what he was asking.

At least, mostly. They muttered with each other by the end of the week, leaving her out of the conversation that would lead them to the next place.

She wasn't a diver. And she certainly wasn't a scientist who had led expeditions or knew the ocean floor like the back of her hand. But she was the one who had made Byte capable of even showing them where it had been. So clearly, she should be part of these conversations.

Finally, she'd had enough. In the fourth cavern, one that was little more than rock rubble and only two feet of space beside the water, she'd had enough.

"Byte, there has to be a better spot than just the caves." Mira tapped her foot against the ground, looking at the water, then the walls of rock between them and the surface. "There were expedition pods in the old days, weren't there?"

"They've all been destroyed by the undines."

"That's impossible. There were hundreds sent out into the ocean. There have to be more of them."

"None." Byte flicked to another cavern it thought might be habitable. This one looked even worse than the one they were standing in. "This one you could put your feet up out of the water, but that would be all the room available."

"It has not escaped my notice, droid, that these caverns are getting smaller and smaller." Mira planted her hands on her hips and glared down at the little box. "I assume you have some ulterior motive for these choices."

“None at all.” Its little metallic arms came around and pressed against the box like it was holding a belly. “I just want you to remember that there are very limited options. We could, perhaps, return to the original cave and then continue in the same order.”

Arges made some song-like noise, which clearly Byte understood. The undine floated in the water much closer to them than usual. His eyes followed her movements a little too much, aware of her in every area of this cave.

Byte chattered, some gears grinding deep inside its belly before it sighed. “I understand the other undines know where those caverns are. But you are supposed to be learning about the humans, are you not? Surely there is only the one who wants to attack Mira. And one is very easy to defend against.”

“Wait a minute.” Mira held up her hand for silence, even though both the droid and undine staunchly refused to look at her. “What do you mean, he’s supposed to be learning from me?”

Neither of them replied. But she knew that look on Arges’s face. He wanted to punt the little droid into the ocean and get rid of it for good.

“Arges,” she said, waiting for him to look at her. “What does Byte mean? What information do you need from me?”

He just glared at the droid like it was the problem. Obviously he wanted something from her. That wasn’t hard to guess. After all, he hadn’t kidnapped her because he wanted to have a human friend, even though she wouldn’t mind if that was the real story.

But she’d forgotten about it. Maybe she’d just tricked herself into thinking that he wanted her to be around him. Just because she was... Mira.

Not that anyone had ever wanted that before. It wasn’t surprising that an undine felt the same. She was just one person in a very large group of people who had been living underneath the ocean for far too long.

The flare of disappointment made her hands tingle again. Rotating her wrists to get rid of the feelings, she winced as pain flared at the movement. She’d been awfully creaky lately. Even her joints ached if she got too cold, but she wasn’t necessarily feeling like she was getting ill. She just... wasn’t herself. That was all.

Maybe it was the fear of what might happen under the ocean. She was so close to the water now, even the slightest wave made her jolt awake, certain that something was reaching for her.

They'd even swum by a giant squid who had an eye the size of a dinner plate. She refused to see one of those on her own without Arges to bare his teeth at it and watch as it slowly drifted away.

Byte noticed her movements. It clicked, shifting the box to look at her a little more clearly. "Are you feeling all right?"

Now they were both staring at her again, and god damn it. This wasn't about her! She was fine, just a little sore from all the moving around, and they would not change the subject.

"I'm fine," she snapped, pointing at the droid, then the undine. "You know far more than you're letting on. And you are not telling me everything which I don't appreciate. I should be allowed to help with these decisions! We wouldn't even be able to see what Byte has seen without me."

Arges said something, and that made her even more frustrated. She wanted to understand him. She didn't want to feel like this delicate little pet he had to keep moving around the ocean because he didn't know where she would be best suited to live.

"This is ridiculous," she snarled. "Everything about this is ridiculous! Why don't the two of you pick where we're going, then? Just like always. And I'll stand here, staring at the wall to give you privacy."

She stomped the two steps away from them that she could, crossed her arms over her chest, and stared at the stones.

Yes, it was childish.

She knew she was overreacting, and they had every right to laugh at her antics. But for fuck's sake, she was a grown ass woman, and she just wanted to be alone for a few seconds. But she couldn't get away from these two for even enough time to pee by herself!

Cheeks flaming, heart racing in her chest with anxiety and anger, she bit her lip and tried very hard not to cry. This was hard. That was the thought she eventually landed on. All of this was really hard.

She was hungry. Exhausted. Needed something other than fucking fish to eat, because she was so god damned tired of fish and mussels. Her stomach constantly clenched for something fibrous, and that had made even more embarrassing moments between herself, the undine, and the droid that she couldn't avoid.

She missed her bed, and not feeling wet all the time, and not having her fingers and toes peeling because she spent so much time in the water. She

wanted a fucking hairbrush.

Anything that would remind her she wasn't totally buried underneath the sea and that she wasn't supposed to be here.

It just... sucked.

Everything about this sucked right now, and she was so fucking tired.

"Mira?" Byte asked. "Would this suffice?"

"I'm sure it's fine," she bit out, before grumbling, "Everything so far has been just fine."

Why was she acting like this? She wanted to get ahold of herself and be better than this. Nothing was going her way, and that was okay. She would make it. She would survive this like she had survived everything else, because that was what she did. Survived. No matter what the cost.

A cold, wet hand slid around her ankle and gave it a little squeeze.

Even though she had to bite the inside of her lip hard so she didn't cry, she still looked down at Arges.

He lifted a hand to his mouth, as if he thought she was angry because she was hungry. Wasn't that just like a man to think food would fix her bad mood? Like it had nothing to do with him stealing her away from her home and then sticking her in cold, damp caves for weeks on end? She was going to die like this.

But she nodded, so she didn't have to say any of that. So he wouldn't think she was losing her mind in the darkness, like she was. And maybe a little because she wasn't ready to talk about it yet.

He sank underneath the water, and the blue light of his body disappeared out of sight. He'd taken to lighting up every time he saw her, probably so she could see him easier in the water and she knew that was for her benefit, but still it...

"Ugh," she muttered, sinking onto her bottom and sitting on the ground finally. "This sucks."

Byte muttered something before saying, "Please do not take this the wrong way, Miss Mira. But when was the last time you had your menstrual cycle?"

Fucking... No, the droid wasn't masculine in any nature. It wasn't feminine either. The droid was merely stating the obvious, rather than insulting her emotional state because she was female.

Her brain stuttered, and she thought maybe this was the right time. Roughly. "I don't even know how long I've been missing."

“Perhaps you should check.”

“Exactly how do you expect me to do that? Do you want me to shove my hand down the wetsuit and show you the blood?”

Byte rocked side to side. “I don’t need to see it, thank you very much. My function is not in healing.”

Muttering under her breath how all droids must have been created by men, and it was very clear how inappropriate that was, she shoved her hand underneath her wetsuit. Maybe if she embarrassed the small droid, it would leave her alone. Because this was inappropriate to even ask someone to... to...

Her fingers came out coated with blood.

“Fuck me,” she hissed. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

She had literally no options here. Sitting in a bubble of her own blood that was just... pushed around through her wetsuit wasn’t an option. But there was nothing else for her to wear. There was a blanket in the original cave, but they weren’t anywhere near that as far as she knew. So that meant she had to sit in her own blood until Arges came back, and who knew when he was going to get back?

This sucked.

This royally. Fucking. Sucked.

“Mira?” Byte inquired.

“I’m fine,” she said, which apparently was her mantra these days. “Just bleeding out of my vagina and into my wetsuit. It’s fine.”

She leaned forward to wash her hands off, only to freeze when Byte shrieked, “Don’t do that!”

“Why?”

“We are very near the disphotic zone. You are lucky to even withstand the pressure down here, but there are plenty of sea creatures who will smell that blood and there is nowhere for you to hide. If a giant squid, or whale, or shark decides they are interested in the scent of your blood, where will you go?” Byte rattled again, very upset about this. “Do not let that drip into the water.”

Right. She had a feeling this might be one of its dramatic moments, but also didn’t want to risk it. So. Shit.

Holding her hand away from her body, she stared at the blood and tried hard not to cry now. “So what do I do?”

“Just let it dry and then wipe it off. I don’t know how humans work.”

So she was just supposed to... sit here? With period blood on her fingers and... “Nothing could make this day better,” she muttered, flopping awkwardly onto her back with her hand in the air.

“Well, I am pleased to report the dialect of the People of Water is at seventy-two percent.”

Seventy... She sat straight up, ignoring her hand now. “Seventy two?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take my damn chances with that.” She staggered to her feet and then walked over to Byte. She grabbed the small robot with her clean hand and set it on a much higher rock. “Give me the translation chip.”

“There are a lot of their conversations that you will not understand. Particularly the nuances of their languages, their gods, and many other uncertainties. It is best if I continue to listen and provide you with a complete translator first before I—”

“Nope,” Mira interrupted. “I can’t stand not understanding him anymore. This would all be so much easier if we could just talk. I fully understand the risks of implanting a translation chip that does not have the complete language, but languages are always growing and evolving. I’m sure there are things I’ve even said to you that you don’t understand.”

Byte grumbled. A little tinny noise echoed inside its box before it muttered, “There have been a few things, but I have updated my database accordingly and now I understand the language fully again.”

“Then you will continue to update your database the more we are around the undine. But for now, I want that chip in my head so I can at the very least understand where he is taking us and why.” She held out her hand expectantly. “Don’t make me use protocol, Byte. I will order you to do it.”

It grumbled again, but this time, she heard the slight whine of a translator chip being created. It might be the last one that the robot had, in which case, she would be stuck not knowing the entire language for the rest of her life. But still.

Seventy-two percent was a lot of a language to know.

The little drawer on the side popped open and there it was. Her salvation and perhaps the end of how she saw everything. It didn’t matter. Now she could talk to him. She could understand what the fuck was going on.

And that would have to be enough.

She wasted no time tapping it against the side of her head. The blinding pain seared through her skull. Simultaneously the worst headache she'd ever had mixed with the sensation of someone taking a fork to her brain and twirling. But it didn't matter. She'd endured this before.

Mira opened her eyes a few moments later. She'd fallen onto her knees, clutching her head between her hands as if trying to contain the feelings rolling around in there.

It was over.

"Really," Byte muttered. "You humans and your dramatics."

"It's not exactly comfortable, you know."

"Endure it. You're learning a new language in seconds. Of course your brain is going to complain."

She could have argued. She could have wallowed in the shitty feeling of her period and the knowledge that she was going to keep bleeding into her wetsuit for the foreseeable future.

Instead, she laid down on her back and stared up at the ceiling, knowing that she'd be able to understand him for the first time. It wouldn't sound like a song when he popped his head back up. She could know what he was saying in response to literally everything she said.

And damn. That felt good.

TWENTY-TWO

ARGES

Though he wished for it, Arges knew he couldn't stay with her forever. They weren't getting anywhere on his mission to learn more about the achromos, and he knew the other People of Water were losing their patience with him. He was supposed to either lead the pod, or find them ways to harm the achromos. That was his purpose in life.

And yet... It was so hard to consider doing either of those when he was so well and truly obsessed with her.

She'd taken the time and energy to continue healing his wounds, no matter how long it had been or how much it was healed. Even now, a full week after he'd been injured, she still made him show her his shoulder as though it would somehow open up again. He didn't have the heart to tell her that his people healed so much faster than hers.

She wouldn't believe him, anyway. His *kairos* was decidedly bossy and ordered him around whenever she got the chance. He rarely listened to her, of course, but he still appreciated her bravery.

Soon enough, they had a routine of where they were moving, and why. She didn't even mind it when he came to get her, apparently more than prepared to move every two or three days.

Arges just wished he knew of a place that would be safe for her. A place that wasn't directly in the line of his kind, while still being nowhere near hers. If he brought her back to that place, that glowing monolith under the sea, he had a feeling he would never get her back.

So when he popped his head into the air in this newest cave, larger than the others, he was pleased to see she was ready for him. She didn't even seem to mind that they were underwater anymore, although there had been a few days where she'd been less than excited. At least she wasn't yelling this time.

"Arges!" she said, pleased to see him. Her eyes lit up and sometimes he swore she knew what he was saying to her. Unfortunately, her robot friend hadn't gotten any closer to creating the translation chip for her.

"Hello, *kairos*," he replied, swimming a little closer and propping his arms on the edge of the stone. "Are you ready for your next journey?"

He looked over at the box and waited for it to poke its head out. He wasn't sure if he thought of the creature more like a crab or a turtle. Some days it was prickly like a crab, far more likely to nip at him with its claws than it was to be kind.

The box did not show its face. In fact, it had been suspiciously quiet these days. Choosing to linger inside of its shell rather than look at what was happening around it. He found this new behavior to be rather disturbing. Byte always seemed to want to be involved in everything.

He supposed it wasn't worth the energy to be suspicious of the two of them. In all the time he'd spent with Mira, he had never once thought she was trying to deceive him. She was honest to a fault, it seemed.

Mira rubbed her hands up and down her arms, and he caught the faintest shiver trail down her spine before she stopped herself. “Is there anywhere warmer?” she asked. “I know that’s a rare thing to ask in the ocean, but I’ve been struggling a bit lately. I can’t seem to get warm, and my hands...”

She held out her hands for him to look at, and he could see how the joints were curling in on themselves. Was she sick?

“Do your people have some illness I need to know about?” He reached for her hands, still speaking even though he knew she couldn’t understand him. “Your achromos are so fragile.”

She made a soft snorting sound, and he looked up in surprise. Was she picking up on his language, after all?

But then she shook her head with a wry grin. “I can only imagine you are scolding me for not taking care of myself. Is that right?”

It was close enough. He nodded before gesturing to the water. “There are hot springs that come out of the vents in the sea. Many of the creatures there are startling, but they will leave us alone if I am close to you. You can get warm there, but we cannot take the heat with us.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion, but then she smiled at him and he forgot how to breathe. “I trust you, Arges. Wherever you plan to take me, I will go.”

Again, that blind trust that he hadn’t truly earned made his hearts race. This woman, she gifted him such wonderful trust without ever needing him to prove himself.

“Thank you,” he murmured, holding out his arms for her. “We can leave the box for a while. I know there will be valuable conversation that it misses out on, but the vents are no place for a crab made of metal.”

Byte poked its head out at that. “I am not a crab,” it muttered.

“You understand me quite well these days.” Arges slotted his hands above Mira’s hips, tucking his fingers into the valley that always entranced him. “And here you are, saying the translation is not ready for human ears.”

“It isn’t,” the robot muttered. “I’ve told you both that countless times.”

He did not intend to waste more time arguing with the creature. Instead, he lifted Mira into the water, allowing her to slink down his body until it almost made him groan. She was so different from him, not at all compatible and yet... the longer he spent with her, the more he wished it were not true.

Usually he would hold Mira against his chest and drag her through the water. But this time, she turned to face him as she had in the beginning. When she slipped her toes against the fins of his hips, he had to grit his teeth against the sudden spike of pleasure.

“You have no idea what that touch does to me,” he murmured, his hands flexing against her hips and drawing her tighter against him. “It is a private touch, and you give it so freely. I can count on one hand the amount of people daring enough to touch those fins, let alone with such confidence and ease.”

He wanted to explain to her how personal it was. How touching him like that was an advance by females of his kind. That she was telling his body that she was ready to mate, that he should release the cock he hid beneath a panel of scales.

But she did not mean to do that, and he should not antagonize himself with such thoughts.

And yet... They journeyed away from the cave and her strange fins flexed against him. Toes, he remembered her calling them. Then her fingers stretched up to his neck. Usually she held onto his shoulders, but this time she brushed her fingers through his gills. They flared for her, fluttering even though he was moving fast enough to flatten them with the movement.

He tilted his body, slowing just barely and swimming as though she was lying on top of him. “That touch as well. It has meaning, achromo. I know you do not know it, but that touch boils my blood.”

He was burning up from the inside out. Wanting to touch her. Wanting her to touch him more. And he knew it was impossible, but oh... He had never been one to shy away from temptation.

Mimicking her touch, he scooped his hands underneath her hair that she had allowed to flow freely. She rarely did this, and he was going to take advantage of this unusual opportunity. Her hair was so long, and such a pretty color. It coiled around his fingers, clinging to him as he wished to cling to her.

Even though he knew she couldn't see him right now, he still wanted her to feel him. Perhaps that would work to his advantage. She couldn't see the differences and could only feel the webs on his fingers. He traced a long nail down her jaw, watching her skin dimple even as they arrived at the vents.

He could feel the warm water instantly. It was almost too hot for him, but he heard her long, relaxed sigh. It was at least lit here, so she could see through the small fissures of red that warmed the water. Even the strange, pale crabs with long legs and antennae that moved in their direction watched as he brought her closer to the heat.

“Tell me when to stop,” he murmured, slowly turning her in his arms, so she was facing the warm vents. “And I will keep us where you find it most comfortable.”

She shivered, and he could assume it was the depth of his voice in her ear that affected her so. “Arges?”

“Yes, *kairos*?” Perhaps he leaned a little too close. Perhaps he slightly nuzzled his lips against her ear as he said the words.

“I’m going to remove my suit. It keeps me warm in cold water, but keeps me cool in warm water. Just the top, but... Will you not look?”

She asked the impossible. He had to hold on to her. The currents were far too strong for her to stay in one place without them whipping her away from him. So that meant she would be pressed against him, skin to skin, for the first time. He would surely die remaining still and not looking or touching everything he’d never seen bare.

Still, she had asked. And he had promised that he would take care of her.

Mindful of the device on her face, he moved her hands, so that she reached behind herself to grip his hips. If she slid her fingers around the fins at his hips, holding on a little too tight with that nimble grip, he had to ignore it. And then, with gentle hands, he reached for the back of her suit. She called it a zipper, and she’d shown him how it worked many times.

He’d been fascinated by it, but now, with the red glow playing on her front and the sudden brilliance of his own luminescence, he drew that zipper down to reveal her back. All that lovely, pale skin looked almost white in the blue light shimmering through his chest now. Every gill on his body stood straight out, vibrating with need as he saw the delicate hollows of her ribs and the expansion of her breath. In and out. So delicate. So impossibly thin skinned.

Oh, he could see her veins underneath as well. The slight flex of her shoulder blades as she tightened her grip on him, even as he drew the suit down her shoulders.

Voice guttural with desire, he leaned forward to murmur in her ear, “I have to draw this down your arms. If you wish to continue facing away from me, then I will have to touch you.”

With no way for her to confirm if she understood, all he could do was reach his arms forward and gently slid the suit down her front. It was difficult to remove. She’d said before that it was tight to maintain her body pressure or something along those lines. He couldn’t even think about what she’d told him before when the pointed peaks of her breasts brushed his forearms.

She made a little noise in the back of her throat and he thought he would never forget the sound. He wanted to bite down on her neck. To grip her hips and pull her back against him, as he would have done with one of his own kind. But then he would not know what to do. Her tail wouldn’t coil with his. He wouldn’t even know where on her body was the right place for him to slide against or touch or linger.

But then, impossibly so, she pressed back into him. Those hips rocked, and oh, he was going to embarrass himself. He had never once released his cock without intention or purpose. And yet, here he was, about to reveal just how different they were because she fingered his fins and rocked against him.

Sliding her wetsuit down, he skimmed the backs of his fingers down her ribs and the soft plane of her belly. Unlike his own kind, she was the softest thing he’d ever touched.

And, oh, he wanted to look.

It would take just the slightest shift for him to peer over her shoulder and see what she looked like. If she was just as pale over her entire body.

It was a temptation he could not feed. But she did not understand a word he was saying, so he shifted them a little closer to the heat and wrapped an arm around her soft waist.

“When I first saw you, I was certain you were monstrous. Your people are so different from my own kind. With your two tails and your strange, white eyes, there was nothing I thought I could find tempting about you. But then, every day that you have been with me, I have found something new to admire.”

He swallowed and froze when she stroked her hand down his arm. He stopped moving forward, keeping her hovering where it was warm enough for her. And here he was, boiling alive.

“The graceful sway of your hips. The way your eyelids widen and then droop halfway closed when I do something you like. I wish to touch all of you. To find every part of your body that makes you gasp or hiss. I want to know the sounds that come out of your mouth when I pleasure you. When you realize that the ocean itself would guide me into you, and set a pace that neither of us could deny. My people believe that lovemaking is the purpose of the sea.”

Then he drew her scent deep into his lungs. Tainted only slightly by the sulfur of the vents, but he could still taste that sweet scent of her again.

“I can smell how excited you are,” he groaned. “I draw that scent into my gills and tuck it underneath my scales for times when I am not by your side. *Kairos*, Mira, I grow so weary of seeking release in my hand.”

Again, that scent bloomed, far stronger than he’d ever scented it before. He knew it was only because she was warm, finally, when she had been so cold for such a long time. And yet... Oh, he enjoyed pretending that scent was for him.

TWENTY-THREE

MIRA

She hadn't expected it to go that way. Of all the things he could have growled in her ear, all the threats that her people likely deserved. Instead he told her how beautiful she was. How much he wanted to touch her and then he... had. His fingers lingering on her ribcage, his thumbs just barely brushing the underside of her breasts... It had taken her breath away.

Even now, as they headed back to the cave from the hot springs that had finally warmed her to the very bones, she couldn't get her mind to stop

whirling. He wanted her. He had proven that there was some kind of link between the two of them, even though that was likely the strangest thing that had happened in centuries.

They were... What? She didn't know.

Her mind whirled as he carried her back toward the cavern, and she felt the shift in both of them as the icy waters sank into the small hole in the back of her wetsuit. With that touch, her thoughts slowly changed from heated to cold as well.

What had they done?

They shouldn't be interested in each other. It shouldn't even be possible that they were interested in each other. They were too different. Barely fit together. They were puzzle pieces from two separate boxes and no matter how hard they tried to jam themselves together, it wouldn't work.

He could breathe underwater. And her? Mira needed air.

Nothing they ever did would fix that. They would never be able to be anything other than two people who wished they could be together. And that would break them, eventually.

When the cavern came into view, the dark shadows swirling before her eyes, she wondered how long they could keep this up. He wouldn't be able to hide her from his people forever. In fact, he would need to bring her to them if she never told him the secrets he thought she knew. And she would try to flee. Escape. Hide from whatever it was they wanted with her.

Byte had already alluded there was more that she did not know. The sudden stiffness in his arms suggested he might be considering the same thing. This was doomed from the start.

They had indulged themselves a bit. Forgotten that this wasn't their world to mold and shape into what they desired or wanted. Once they returned to the cave, everything else would come crashing down around their ears.

They were too different.

Life did not want them together.

Neither did their people.

He released her from his arms a little too early, and she dragged herself back into the cave by touch alone. Water brushed against her sides, pushed by his tail as he moved into the opening as well. Only Byte's dim light illuminated her path to the surface.

Once she broke through, she pulled off her rebreather and gently set it on the rocks. Holding onto the edge, she ripped off her goggles as well. “What if I hadn’t found the way back into the caves, Arges?”

His eyes seemed to darken. And for the first time in a long time, she saw the same undine who had threatened her people. The undine who had been locked in the tube with her, and wanted to kill as many of her kind as he could before he died.

This wasn’t the man who had kept her alive. This wasn’t the magical creature who had shown her so many wonders under the waves. She was a fool to have forgotten that he had taken her against her will, trapped her in a network of caves, and that he refused to let her go home.

She pulled herself away from him, narrowing her eyes on the sudden tension in his shoulders and how the colors along his body rioted with emotion. His hands flexed below the water, just barely illuminated by the tiny dots of blue that lit up and then died as he stared at her.

“What?” she snarled. “Are you mad at me for wanting to go into warmer waters? Is that it? Are you angry because I insisted that I be comfortable for once?”

He stayed absolutely silent.

The glare was starting to get to her, though. He watched her like there was something wrong with her, like she was the problem.

She wasn’t the problem here. She wasn’t the one who... who...

Lifting a dripping hand, she pointed at him. “Don’t look at me like that. You have no right to be angry with me. None at all. You’re the one who took me from my home, trapped me in caves all around the ocean, forced me to be wet and cold and shivering. You’re the one who did all of those things to me. So really, what the fuck could make you angry at me, Arges?”

She had to remind herself that he didn’t think she could understand him. That he only said the next words because he didn’t realize that she understood every single word, and the hatred in each and every one of them.

“Because your people have destroyed this ocean. Because you came here, so confident that this place belonged to you. You filled our waters with metal and rust. When we tried to fight against you, you shot at us with flames and weapons that were so beyond our understanding that we had no way to fight back.” He moved a little closer to her, his tail flicking

underneath the surface. “You, who are so tempting and so new, forget that you have destroyed so much.”

Had her people destroyed the ocean? Hardly, although she knew they had destroyed a lot around the city. But she wasn’t the one making decisions. She was the worker who shut up and did what she was told or she’d be tossed out a pressurized tube.

Perhaps this was the time to tell him that she understood what he was saying. But something in her screamed to not let him know. She had lied. She had tricked him. Telling him now would only make this moment worse and she couldn’t afford for this to get any worse than it already was.

So instead, she gritted her teeth and muttered, “I have no idea what you’re trying to say to me. But clearly, you are being rude and I have nothing more to say to you.”

Planting her hands on the rocks, she yanked herself out of the water. The heat from their visit to the vents had already disappeared. Yet again, she was uncomfortable. Wet and sodden, tired and so fucking exhausted that she wanted to collapse into a ball on the rocks.

“I can’t stay here for much longer,” she hissed. “This ocean is killing me.”

His dark voice rumbled through the cavern. “Perhaps this is what the ocean wants. Your death would be reparation for all the deeds you and your people have wrought.”

That’s it. She refused to listen to him berate her like she was the one making all the decisions. And no, he had no idea she could understand what he was saying, but for fuck’s sake! His tone was pretty damn obvious.

Whirling around, already trying to yank one of her arms out of the damn wetsuit, she yelled, “I don’t care what you’re saying, Arges! You are still the person who kidnapped an innocent woman and brought her to her death! My people call that a murderer. I have no idea what your people call it. Probably a Friday night, but that doesn’t make it okay. Humans value life.”

“Humans value nothing,” he hissed. “I should be asking you about where your tunnels go. I should be forcing you to the ground with a knife to your throat so you will spill all the secrets about your castles under the sea so we can infiltrate your kind and destroy them. All of these things are what I was sent for, and I have done none of them. Why? Because you make me weak, *kairos*, and I should have killed you long ago to prevent that weakness from spreading.”

Don't react, she told herself. Don't react and reveal that you know exactly what he just said to you.

So that was the real reason why he'd taken her. Spinning around, she gave him her back as she peeled herself out of the wetsuit. They'd returned to the original cavern days ago, which meant there was a tiny blanket in the corner with mold worn holes, but enough to dry off. It was important for her to do so, and even then, it allowed her to hide for a few moments.

He hadn't taken her because he was interested in who she was, or that she had captivated him in some way. Of course he hadn't. She'd fooled herself into thinking this monster had feelings when he didn't in the slightest.

She was just a job. Duty, honor, a creature he had to put up with while he was forced to understand her language.

Oh, he must have been laughing every time he returned to his home. The little achromo, locked away in the cave while she wasted away into nothing. This was some complicated form of torture and she'd readily walked right into it in the hopes that she might make a friend with someone who was so different from herself.

"Stupid," she muttered, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders and bending to peel off the rest of her wetsuit.

When she'd gotten herself together, she finally turned to him and met his angry gaze. She had to talk to him. Had to make it seem like she wasn't affected by any of what had just happened, or that she wasn't getting whiplash from his rapidly changing emotions.

"I don't know or care what you have to say," she settled on saying. "Your words mean nothing to me, and I don't think they would, even if I could understand you. Clearly, something has changed your mind about me and that is fine. I don't need you to like me, Arges. I just need you to keep me alive."

He wouldn't do that after this argument. She'd already been difficult for him to put up with. If he only had her here because he wanted to know more about her people, then he would be sorely disappointed.

"If I could leave you, *kairos*, I would." He lifted his chin, looking all the more like the untouchable undine who had attacked her people. "But I will learn how I can attack your kind. I will use all your words to my advantage and I will take down your city once and for all."

She ground her teeth together, clutching the blanket so tightly in her hands that her nails bit into her palms. "I don't know why you kidnapped me, but I have a good guess. Considering how much energy you've put into trying to speak with me, you think I hold some secrets. You think I know something about my people that would help you. Is that it? Byte already said it in not so many words."

Mira had to hear it from him. She wanted him to admit it. She needed proof that she never should have trusted him.

He said nothing, but nodded.

It was enough. She bit out an ugly laugh that only made her feel even worse. This wasn't the life she wanted to live. This wasn't the hope she had for all the time they had spent together.

She'd fooled herself into thinking this was an adventure when it was just an elaborate prison.

"Sorry to disappoint," she replied, her tone perhaps a little sullen. "But you picked someone who knows the least about anything. I'm not some high up leader who makes the decisions and knows every secret about Beta. I grew up in the base of the city, with barely enough food and water to survive. And then even less when I was orphaned and sent to live with all the other kids without families. Trust me. If you wanted secrets about Beta? You should have picked someone else. I'm a nobody, Arges. I know nothing useful."

Perhaps her words shocked him. He stared at her with wide eyes, like she'd told him that the humans were planning on setting the entire ocean on fire. But it was the truth. She had no secrets to tell him, nothing that would help him in the slightest. She was just... Mira. An engineer with a big mouth and a superiority complex that often got her shuttled from boss to boss.

She wasn't the person to pick if he wanted secret entrances into the city or codes that would allow them to open blast doors. She wasn't even certain Beta had that.

The building was impossible to get into from the outside. She'd seen so many divers die trying to do just that, and he really believed she could help an undine do it?

No one wanted the undines in Beta, and they had taken every single measure necessary to be sure it didn't happen.

She lifted her arms up and down in defeat. "We both just have to live with each other, Arges. It's not like I can help you murder my people, and

even if I could, why would I do that? All you've done is stick me in a cave and threaten to kill me. I'd rather be dead than have hundreds of lives gone because of my selfish decision."

She'd rather not be dead at all, of course. But she didn't think she could be the person to make this call. Her people deserved to live. Just as much as his did.

Still, he said nothing, glaring at her while his body practically vibrated. Until she couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't take the judgment in those eyes or the bullshit response of just hatred because she was a human.

"Fucking hell!" she shouted, yanking the blanket even tighter around her shoulders as she backed toward the console table. "I just told you I'm useless, Arges! So fuck off. Clearly, there is nothing I can do for you, and there's nothing you can do for me, so just leave me to rot here! I'll make it a couple of days, but that was the whole point of taking me, wasn't it? I was never getting out of this alive. So stop toying with your food and let me fucking die."

She hated it. She didn't want to die, but she wanted him to look at her even less. He didn't get to... stare. He didn't. Every fiber of her being wanted to hit him, fight him, grab that stupid welder he'd given her, and melt off a couple of those damn scales.

Maybe she was just mad because her feelings were less real than they had been only moments before. He'd stolen that rare, wondrous feeling he'd caused in the hot springs. Now, she just felt used.

And she was so damned tired of it.

"There's nothing we can do for each other, Arges," she added, her breath ragged and her voice catching in her throat. "So just end it."

Before she could take another breath, the undine before her was surging out of the water with his claws outstretched for her throat.

TWENTY-FOUR

ARGES

He should break her.
Shatter her.

Let her blood drip into the water and bring the animals that would devour her body so he could forget this had ever happened. Mitéra would understand. She would know the truth when he said it was an impossible task, that he had failed and he would take the punishment that came after.

The achromos were destructive in everything that they touched. They were impossible to tame, and as such, there was no way for him to get information out of her. It was the achromo's fault that he had failed his people. But soon enough, the People of Water would forget. He would get his pod back from his brother, and he would lead them to attack her people with even more fervor.

All it would take was one slash of his claws, and she would be dead. The life dimming from her eyes as he dragged his nails along that long, beautiful neck.

But his gaze lingered on that neck instead. Arges couldn't stop staring at it even as he tackled her to the ground, forcing her to submit beneath him. He wanted to scare her. He wanted her to realize that tempting one of his kind would only lead to madness and ruin. And yet...

Ah, and yet she was so lovely. So pretty. An otherworldly creature who had somehow captivated his mind, body, and soul. He couldn't harm a hair on her head, and it killed him that he'd already done so. She deserved so much better than this. Than him.

His mind came back to the present, and he realized their position was a rather compromising one. He'd laid out between her legs, where her heat pressed against his scales. Her hands were caught in one of his, held over her head with a webbed grip that looked so luxurious against her pale flesh. And those eyes... Oh, her eyes spat fire just as the humans' weapons did.

Arges had never seen such a beautiful woman. He'd never known someone to meet him head on, no matter what he did. She did not fear him, and that was intoxicating.

Though still glaring at him, she didn't move as he dragged his free hand down her throat. Tiny bumps rose on her skin. Captivating, although he had a feeling it might be a fear response.

Good, she should fear him.

But then she tilted her head to the side, baring more of that lovely neck until he reached the prominent muscles of her shoulders. And still, his fingers caught on the blanket and he thought, "I could tear this off her."

He would then finally see what an achromo looked like underneath all those layers that they hid beneath. Even more than that, he could see what she looked like.

His skin still tingled as he remembered their moments near the hot springs. He could still feel the sensation of her skin against the back of his

hands, dragging as she shifted and moved. It was... More than he'd expected. Even now, the thoughts were tempting.

Hissing in a long, deep breath, he told himself that there was no place for thoughts like this. She was pinned beneath him, likely terrified, and yet he pressed himself harder against her. The strong muscles of her legs surrounded his hips, and he'd thought this would disgust him, but instead it... intrigued him.

Those delicate arms lifted above her head, and those big eyes that stared at him with so much determination. How was he supposed to function normally when all he wanted was to press their lips together? To do what he had seen achromos do a hundred times, but his people had no reference for it?

"Why do your kind touch mouths?" he asked, knowing that she had no idea what he was talking about. "I always saw it through the glass and wondered why you were doing it. Was it to pass food between the two of you? It disgusted me. But now I find myself looking at you, and I am curious what your people were doing."

She almost... reacted to his words? He couldn't really tell. Her pupils dilated until he stared into a black-eyed gaze, and he thought she shifted a little closer to him. It was a strange reaction from a woman who could not understand him.

Did it matter, though? He was already so deep into this that he couldn't remember what he had planned before. He didn't even notice that he'd rocked against her, pressing them a little closer as he got dangerously close to showing her everything that his people hid underneath their scales. Already he could feel his cock pressing against the backs of the armored plates, wanting to release and take her.

He hadn't taken a woman in ages. He hadn't felt the bite of their claws or the gnashing of their teeth. Mating for his people was not a kind event. The male frequently left the interaction with scars that he'd carry with him for the rest of his life.

Still, he had to wonder if the experience would be similar with an achromo. She was too delicate to damage his hardened scales, and his tail was so far out of her reach that she wouldn't be able to lock him in place. Those tiny nails on her hands would impede her and barely break through his skin on his back. And she had no fangs or sharpened teeth in the slightest.

He wondered how they protected themselves. But he would not complain about needing to protect her, because for some strange reason, it made him feel rather powerful.

Arges tightened his grip on her blanket as he stared into her eyes. He swore there was acceptance in that gaze, maybe even need. She wanted him to tug it down a little farther. She wanted him to see her, and perhaps find himself captivated even more by what he found there. Was she this pale all over her body? Were there really no scales to protect her?

But then a loud clunking noise made him freeze, and her stupid little robot dragged itself closer to them.

“Mira?” it asked, those strange metallic eyes blinking. “Are you well?”

She turned her head toward the robot, and he swore she was a little breathless. “I’m fine, Byte. He’s not going to hurt me.”

Or maybe he would. Their bodies were clearly not compatible, and he was considering doing the impossible. Fitting them together might hurt her more than she thought.

The little robot clunked again, clicking a few times like a dolphin before it muttered, “Should scan. Something is wrong.”

He returned his attention to the woman beneath him. Something was wrong with her? Perhaps her cheeks were a little pale, but that wasn’t surprising, considering he had her pinned to the ground underneath him. She wasn’t shaking or vomiting or spewing anything out of her orifices, so surely she was all right?

But then she made a slight coughing noise, almost clearing her throat, but he heard the rattle in it. Perhaps that was what the robot had heard as well. The rattle, the strange sound that erupted from her lungs when she spoke. He only sounded like that when he was trying to clear the fluid out of his second set of lungs so he could breathe on land.

Mira didn’t have another set of lungs for underneath the water. He should have known something would go wrong after he’d kept her underneath the surface for such a long time.

Sliding his hands down her arms, webs trailing across the delicate skin underneath her wrists, he moved his body off of her. She almost protested. He watched her eyes flash in disappointment before she drew her hands back down to catch the blanket that slid. He caught the slightest glimpse of endless pale skin before she hid herself yet again from his gaze.

“Scan her,” he grumbled to the box. “If there is something wrong with her, I wish to know.”

Why? He had no idea. He should be happy if she was getting ill. That was the purpose of his mission, after all. Learn what he could when she was this weak and then learn how to fix what her people had broken. That information would be significantly easier to get from her if she were weakened.

Still, he didn't want to see her harmed. If only because he so admired her bravery and ability to survive despite everything that he'd thrown at her.

Byte dragged itself a little closer to her with those short arms. The metal clunked again, clicking and whirling as a new tool he hadn't seen erupted from behind its head. He hissed and sank deeper into the water as a new light emitted from the strange device. Green and slicing, it broke through the air and traveled up and down Mira's body.

“As I suspected,” Byte muttered. “You've been hiding your health from us.”

Hiding what? Mira looked fine. Maybe a little rattling in the lungs, but that must be something fairly easy for achromos to fix. It was easy for him to address.

“You would have visible injuries if you were mortally wounded, would you not?” he asked, hating that he couldn't actually converse with her. “Surely it would be easy to see.”

But it wasn't, apparently. Byte chittered a few times before whirring again, that light running over her body again. And Mira? She wouldn't even look at him.

“Severe vitamin d deficiency,” Byte said. “Significant vitamin depletions in multiple other forms. Significant fiber loss and blood pressure is far too low. You've been sick for a while, Mira. Why haven't you told us that?”

Arges let out a frustrated huff. He didn't know if the strange robot could understand him, but he had to try. “What can I do to heal her?”

“Bring her back to the surface,” Byte replied.

“You know I cannot do that. There are questions that need to be answered, and she is the only one who can answer them. She will remain down here until we get what we want.”

“Then she will die.” The robot was so matter of fact with its tone.

Every spine down his back rose and his gills flared wide in anger. “She will not die. You will fix her.”

“I am not a medical droid.” The tool went back into Byte’s box and the robot seemed to shrug those tiny arms. “There is nothing I can do for her down here. She should be taking supplements, eating vegetables, doing all the things that keep humans alive. You are doing none of those.”

“What do you mean?” he hissed. “I bring her food. I bring her to the caves with light. She lives, does she not?”

“Light is not sunlight! The humans have been taking supplements for years now that they live underneath the surface. The depths are not made for humans, not like your people. Humans need sunlight. They call it vitamin d, and it fuels so many important functions in their body. And fish are not food!”

“They are food!”

“Not like humans need to eat!” the little droid shouted back. “A varied diet is important for humankind. You might be able to eat the same thing every single day and still swim about with your tail flipping around, but a human needs proper food. Food that can actually sustain them. You have not brought her any of that.”

He was going to crush the box. That was the only way to ease the anger in his chest. Some part of him knew that he was angry at himself, not at the box, but it would still feel good to crush something between his claws.

Sinking lower in the water, he glared at the droid. “Tell me what I can do to help her.”

“You can bring her back to the city, so she can be seen by a medical droid and be treated for all these issues.”

“Tell me something else I can do.”

“Unless you can magically find an abandoned human home underneath the sea that is not connected to the city, then there is nothing else you can do to help her.” The droid looked at Mira, then back at him. “Am I not speaking English? Are you having trouble understanding me?”

“I understand you fine, abomination. But there are no options. I cannot bring her back to the city and I cannot find another way to heal her.”

His hearts raced. Would he lose her so soon? The guilt in that thought alone threatened to swallow him. It was his fault that she was here. And she’d told him she knew nothing. She wasn’t meant to even be here. He

could have taken one of their leaders if he had been more patient and less intrigued by the glimmering light of her suit.

For all the murdering and killing he'd done in his life, he'd never harmed an innocent. In this, he knew she had no guilt to carry and didn't deserve to die because he'd made a mistake.

Oh, he had never thought it would come to this.

He met Mira's gaze, looking at her from the water and seeing the way the light played off her green eyes. He couldn't stop himself from saying the words, even though he knew she couldn't understand him. "I am sorry, *kairos*. Perhaps I never should have brought you here, but know I will do what I can to save you. Throughout all of this, you have been brave, and that is something to honor. Even if I have proven myself incapable of honoring much in your time here."

He pressed a fist to his chest, watching her eyes dart between him and the droid.

Finally, she sighed. Her shoulders curved in on her body, like she was folding into a new being. "I'm fine," she said. "I don't feel all that sick. It's just my joints that ache and my stomach that's a little off, but nothing is going to kill me here. I just need some sunlight and some vegetables and I'll be fine."

"You won't be fine," Byte muttered. "You need multiple injections and perhaps a healing pod."

"I'll be fine," she repeated, her words a little harder than before. "You don't have to worry about me. Either of you."

But this still didn't settle well with him. The only option was to return to the depths, to Mitéra, and beg for her to allow the release of his *kairos*. Even if that meant his honor would be forfeit, Arges found himself willing to do it.

"I will be back," he murmured, his voice low as he sank beneath the waves. "I will save you, Mira."

TWENTY-FIVE

MIRA

Mira watched him disappear into the water again, and she felt all the energy in her body simply drain out. It wasn't possible for her to keep up this charade any longer. She'd been trying so hard to feel like she was healthy and normal, but... she wasn't.

She knew she wouldn't last very long. Byte was right. She didn't have unending time here while her body slowly deteriorated, because she needed

more from every part of what kept her alive. Food. Water. Shelter. Light. All the things that humans had given up to live underneath the sea.

Down here? She would die all too quickly.

Byte shuffled a little closer to her, those metal arms pinging against the stone as it dragged itself a little closer with every movement. “You know, there are better ways to prove that you’re strong.”

“I don’t need a lecture.”

“Well, it seems like you might.” Byte settled beside her, watching her with those unblinking eyes as she put her feet into the yellow glow of the water and swished her toes there. “If you keep doing that, your toes will rot off.”

“No, they won’t,” she replied with a chuckle, surprised it could make her smile so easily. “They’ll be fine. I know everything has been a little damp lately, but at least I can dry out in this cave.”

“Where all the other undines know you are. It’s a risk for us to stay here too long. You’ll be wet again soon enough.”

“I don’t really mind it,” she said quietly. “I like the ocean. Swimming is something that I’ve always enjoyed, even though we were only allowed to do so in the moon pool where there were a hundred cameras underneath to make sure nothing would come close to us. Even the engineering wing had a small section of the ocean we could dip our toes into.”

She swished her feet in the water, watching delicate foam rise from her movements, and it captivated her. Just as it had when she was a little girl.

Byte made a little clunking noise that sounded rather like a huff. “Humans have always been so interested in the ocean. Even when I was made, lifetimes ago for you, you all had a fascination with the sea. It’s always the depths that you couldn’t understand and the creatures far beneath it.”

“You remember?” She turned to look at Byte, noticing the rust gathering on its edges. “How much do you remember?”

“Everything.” Byte picked at one of those rusty pieces. “I told you, I was meant to be a record keeper. I remember everything that happened in those old days. The beginning of our journey underneath the sea. The first construction of Alpha and the secondary constructions of others.”

“How?” She pulled her feet out of the water and gently picked Byte up. “How do you remember all that if you were mapping the sea floor?”

“Transmissions. Even underwater, there are ways for droids to keep in touch with each other. I have many memories of those early times.” It tapped the side of its box, and the little projector appeared off the top of it. “Would you like to see?”

A glimpse into a world long gone? She would be honored to see what the droid had archived, but even more than that, she just wanted to see how people used to live.

“Why don’t you show me while I clean off some of this rust? There were a few chemicals in the back that haven’t degraded yet. I think I should be able to get you shining so the rust doesn’t get any worse.”

She placed Byte on top of the computer console and gathered her things to clean it while the droid settled in. She watched as it flicked through memories, speeding through some and then dismissing others. But eventually, it settled on images to project that immediately captivated her.

Memories from above.

Together, they watched a beautiful landscape unfold before them. A young woman with blonde sparkling hair and a smile that showed far too large teeth. She was so full of life, though, bubbling with laughter as she raced after an older gentleman. They were running on bright green grass, endless blades weaving around their knees. Not inside a pod or inside the cities, but above ground.

“What is that?” Mira asked, pointing at the bottom of the memory as the image suddenly left the grassy plain.

“That was a rock formation that was found often above the surface. They called it lava flow, and it was cooled lava from the volcanoes up above. The land there was difficult to live on. That’s why humans turned their attention to beneath the surface. It’s very warm. And sometimes the lava would get into homes and towns, and kill people.” Byte zoomed in on the background of the memory, showing what looked like a tall peak of land. “That’s one of the volcanoes.”

“It looks very tall.”

“They all were. Are. Likely, there are plenty of them out there, but the drones that humans built to fly above us were long ago destroyed. Unfortunately, all the robots they left on land stopped broadcasting one by one.”

A wave of sadness rushed through her as she started polishing Byte’s sides. “Do you miss them?”

“The humans?”

“The robots that were left on land.”

“Ah.” A few gears whirred and clicked before Byte sighed again. “I have not heard from them in one hundred and sixteen years. It has been a long time, and I know they are gone. But some part of me hopes that perhaps they are simply waiting for someone to find them. As I was.”

Oh, if that didn't break her heart. Mira winced before continuing to clean Byte's sides, picking off rust with her nails as she worked. “Who were the people in the memory, then?”

“Ah! Miss Alys Fairweather and her father, Professor Norbert Fairweather. They were two of the most intriguing adventurers I ever met in my life.” Byte flicked to another memory, one of the two people getting into what looked like a submarine, though the model was clearly old. It was little more than a round ball that floated in the ocean.

Professor Fairweather got in first. His white hair waved in the sea breeze, and there was a faint sheen of sweat on his face. Perhaps because it was so warm above the water. He lifted a hand and waved, the older style clothing he wore billowing with his movement. He likely should have been wearing a suit jacket, but then again, she didn't expect to see him wearing that, considering the heat.

His daughter stepped in after him, standing on top of the round submarine with her eyes cast out to sea. She wore a pretty yellow dress with a wide leather belt around her waist. And as the breeze moved her dress, Mira could see that she was also wearing a pair of immaculate knee-high boots beneath.

“He brought his daughter on adventures with him?”

“Oh yes.” Byte zoomed in on Alys's face, and she could see how tenderly the droid had taken care of the memory.

There was so much detail in the projection. She could see how blue Alys's eyes were, and how she had the faintest abrasion on her chin, like she'd scraped it on something. Her lips were chapped, and her brows had a few flyaways that gave her a rather roguish expression. How strange to look at a woman like this and see so much, when she had most certainly passed away years ago.

“What were they doing in this memory?” she asked.

“Scouting out the first location for Alpha. Professor Fairweather was the lead architect on the project. He led many people to the location after this,

but the first exploration was first and foremost, him and his daughter. They traveled the entire planet together once. Or at least, that's what they claimed." The projection blinked in and out of life before showing yet another memory.

This time, it was an image from inside of the submarine. There were so many wires and ports and strange buttons that Mira couldn't even hazard a guess at what they did. But the professor and his daughter sat in matching chairs, looking out into the ocean with matching expressions of awe.

Alys leaned forward in her chair, pressing closer to the glass as she stared at the magical world they had revealed. It was stunning. Beyond stunning. So many kelp forests and fish and turtles and fluttering creatures she couldn't even name.

"That doesn't look like Alpha." She pointed at the forest and all the other creatures around it. "Alpha is set on a barren rock. Nothing can get near it for miles out to sea without someone seeing it."

The memory blinked out of existence. "That is because Alpha was built on what was once a thriving biome of sea creatures and plants. It was all destroyed to build Alpha."

"I..." She didn't know what to say.

Instead, she thought about it. Silence descended between them as Byte instead played images from above. Even those weren't enough to distract her from what it had said. There used to be so much more where their cities were built. She'd assumed, of course. But why go through all the trouble of clearing out an area of the ocean when there were plenty of blank spaces?

"The professor and his daughter..." She cleared her throat, licking her lips before asking her question. "They didn't seem like the kind of people who would be happy with others destroying the ocean. I saw the expressions on their faces. They were captivated by how beautiful it all was."

In a sense, she'd be disappointed if they were proud of themselves. She was so in love with the sea, and she'd seen a kinship in the way Alys had looked at the ocean as well. There was a bit of love in her gaze.

"Alys wasn't happy with proceeding the way they built the city. She fought against them, quite hard, and then her father eventually understood why she was so angry. It took him a while to understand. He was..." Byte paused before continuing with a harder edge to its tone. "The professor wanted to build something great. He would have done anything to see the

city built the way it was, even destroy the surrounding landscape to satisfy his need to be remembered after he died.”

How horrible. It was hard to even imagine the rift between this young woman and her father. It was even harder to imagine seeing the ocean she loved so much, the one she was so fascinated with, slowly disappear before her eyes.

Clearing her throat, Mira picked at a few more of the rust pieces before turning Byte so she could reach the rest. There wasn't much left anymore. Just a few flakes, so she had something to fidget with. “So Alys fought back. She didn't want them to build Alpha?”

“Not at all. She still thought there were other places for them to scope out. She pushed for them to build at higher levels. Though the volcanoes would still affect people who lived in the levels above the sea, it wouldn't affect them anywhere near as much. She even worked on a design that would have been protected from any projectiles thrown out by the volcanoes.” Byte sighed a little dreamily. “She was an impressive woman.”

“It sounds like.”

It also seemed if the humans had actually listened to her, then they would have still lived above the ocean. People could have smelled fresh air, not recycled air that hummed out of a box for their entire lives. They would have felt a real breeze, not one from standing in front of a fan. Her world would have been so different if Alys had gotten her way.

“What happened to them?” she asked, even though she feared she didn't want to know the answer. “The professor and his bright daughter?”

The projection disappeared. Byte even shuddered in her hands before it finally clicked its hands against the sides of the box. “Professor Fairweather became a rather renowned individual. He was the first person to introduce filtration systems, so humans no longer needed to pump air into the cities. That's why Beta is so much deeper under the sea than the others. He was an inventor for most of his life, and a majority of the objects that you use even to this day were first started by him.”

“Why does this feel like the story ends in sadness?”

“Alys disappeared.” Byte's head retreated almost entirely into the box as it looked at her with those strange eyes, blinking. “She went off in the submarine, certain that there were more discoveries for her. And she refused to be anywhere near the people who would so willingly destroy so much. I was supposed to go with her on that day.”

“What happened instead?”

“Her father was already commissioning me to be one of the deep sea trawlers. He wanted a personal droid to be on the ground floor of the sea so that he could get direct reports rather than waiting for anyone else.” Byte’s hands tapped against its side again before retreating into the darkness of its box. “She never came back. And they never found her.”

“Surely she found land somewhere else. It would make sense for someone like her to have found another home, perhaps another group of people who had similar thoughts as her.” Hope bloomed in her chest for the woman she had never known. Then, that hope was crushed.

“They never found her, Miss Mira. They found the submarine, though. It returned as expected to the city. Empty. The top was torn off and all the equipment was ruined.”

“Torn off? What kind of creature could do that?”

Byte glanced toward the water and then back to her. “There were claw marks on the sides of the submarine. Not teeth, Miss Mira. Claws.”

“Oh,” she breathed.

Alys Fairweather had found the undines as well, it seemed. Glancing around, Mira could only hope that Alys had found herself in a similar situation. Perhaps there was a history of undines having human pets. Or perhaps Arges wasn’t the first undine to find himself intrigued with the thought of another creature with two tails who didn’t have gills to help it survive. Pity or intrigue, it didn’t matter.

“Maybe she survived,” Mira murmured. “Maybe there is hope for us yet, Byte.”

But the little robot had already ducked back into its box. If she listened very carefully, Mira could hear the projector was still going. This time inside the box, playing memories that Byte wished to watch alone.

Setting it down gently on the computer console, she gave the droid a little privacy to mourn someone who had been so dear.

TWENTY-SIX

ARGES

Weaving between the thick coral roots and curving bridges, he sank deeper and deeper through his home. All was quiet this time. The People of Water were licking their wounds, mourning the loss of their loved ones, and trying to hide from the folly of what they had done.

No one would even meet his gaze. Arges dragged himself along the bottom, scraping his belly and scales upon the homes of those who were lost. His blood marked the water, hopefully giving their families some

peace as the true leader of their pod passed by. Giving his all to prove that he missed their loved ones as well.

He should be here with them. He shouldn't be hiding away with a little mortal who had no idea what they had done or what they had lost. That was why he'd been so angry with her. That was why he'd argued and pushed and tried to hide his feelings by allowing her body to overwhelm him.

He hadn't wanted to think about this. About his people and their loss and their sadness that filled the sea with a bitter scent.

It was not fair that they had suffered so. But he did not see his brother either. Catching his hand on the top of their shared home, he moved into the cavernous underwater room. Brushing aside the kelp that hid their home from prying eyes, he was disappointed to find it empty. There were only the few swaying nets that they used to hold them in place when they slept. A small bag of berry shaped food that tasted sweet, Daios's favorite, although he would never admit such a thing. And a few of their favorite woven decorations on the walls. Gifted to them by their blood mother when she was still alive.

"Empty," he muttered, touching the edge of a tapestry that had recently been ripped.

Where had they brought his brother after his injury? He needed to be treated. That arm wasn't going to heal itself and there was nowhere for them to bring him other than the healing centers, but he hadn't scented his brother there either.

Had Daios gone off by himself? His brother should know better. The People of Water were strong, but even a shark would test its luck when it saw one of them was weakened.

Stupid. His brother was so stupid, and it made no sense to him why Daios was suddenly risking his life so often for something that, in the end, didn't matter.

The kelp shifted behind him and he drew his tail inside to make room for the newcomer. He'd expected perhaps Maketes, who had helped his brother away from that original kelp forest. The yellow scaled brother might have brought Daios somewhere safe, and therefore would have tried to find Arges. Who he did not expect to see was Mitéra herself, slowly gliding into his home and casting her gaze over the weaving he touched.

"Your mother had a talent."

The tapestry fell through his claws, already ripped, but tearing more with every current that pressed along it. “Yes, she did.”

“You are not supposed to be here, Arges. You are supposed to be with your achromo, convincing her to tell us all her secrets.”

“She’s dying.” He’d intended to ease into this conversation. He had wanted to convince Mitéra of his *kairos*’s use, or perhaps that they could trust Mira to come back, even though that was unlikely. Instead, he was the idiot who blurted out the truth the moment Mitéra looked at him. “She will not last much longer without the achromos’ medicine that they take. She will die and we will get no information out of her.”

Mitéra waved her hand through the water. “Then she will die. Now we know how to take them, and that their people will not follow anyone who has been lost. You will get another.”

“I do not wish to take another.”

It was a hard truth to tell her, but one that he felt deeply. Arges was not meant for this. He wasn’t supposed to take people out of their homes and watch while they died. He couldn’t torture anymore people like this.

He was loath to admit that the achromos had become people to him. He hated that. And also knew it was right at the same time.

Mitéra watched the emotions play across his face with all-seeing eyes. “You feel something for this achromo.”

“She is honorable,” he begrudgingly admitted. “More than I expected her to be.”

“There is no honor in their kind.”

“There is in this one.”

Her usually serene expression warped with confusion, and he knew that she couldn’t understand what he meant. There was no way she could even see what he saw in Mira, and that was the problem. Mira was the enemy. And that was the only way any of his people could think.

Mitéra’s frown deepened. She shifted closer, the bell of her hair billowing around her and glimmering a hundred colors before she brushed her hand through his hair, over the glowing tendrils mixed in with the tangled locks. “You know there has never been such a pairing. We are not even the same kind, my son.”

“I know.”

“You know it is impossible, then. And that future cannot change, no matter how hard you fight against the sea.”

He did. And yet there was still something in his chest that whispered, “Maybe.”

Mitéra shook her head and backed away from him. “You need to seek the ancients. Beg them to show you the future, so that you may understand why I warn you. You seek only a life of sadness and ruin.”

“The ancients only welcome you, Mitéra.”

“They will welcome you this time.” Her features hardened, and he saw the tendrils underneath the bell of her hair lifting. “I will tell them you are coming, and you will go to them now. My son. Tell them to fix you and give me back my warrior.”

He did not want to be fixed. He didn’t want all of this to change his mind about who or what he was, it simply wasn’t... right. Arges didn’t want to forget her. Mira was so much more than just an achromo that he had stolen, and yet he was powerless to disagree with Mitéra.

If the ancients wished to speak with him, then he would do so.

Arges moved through his home with his eyes on the ground and his thoughts in the billowing sand. The sea would drag him farther down, into the very depths where all the lights went out. And even then, he did not care. He kept his own bright blue lights dim and close to his skin, so as not to attract the attention of the creatures far in the depths.

The ancients were monstrous beings who lived in the depths. They no longer moved, although legends claimed they used to in the old days. Apparently, there were many of them. Massive sea beasts with long necks and lights that dangled off the fronts of their heads, like anglerfish but infinitely larger. Their mouths were wide enough to swallow a whale whole, but they could not move very quickly.

Many of them died early on, and now his own people took care of them. Every year they made sacrifices to the depths, sending whales and sharks and other large sea creatures into the depths in the hopes that the ancients would remain hidden.

He had never seen one before, and he wasn’t certain he was prepared to see them at all.

But as soon as he neared the depths, three lights illuminated everything around him. He saw in a sudden flash the skeleton creatures who had trailed along with him. Fish with sharp, massive teeth. Sharks larger than he was with dead eyes that had not seen anything in the darkness for a hundred

years. Strange, alien squids with tiny bodies but arms that were longer than he was in thin, razor sharp lines.

All of these creatures fled the moment he came close to the ancients. And he knew why.

They truly were terrifying. Their massive bodies were nearly as large as the achromos' cities were tall. Covered in massive, thick plated scales, they were impossible to kill unless through starvation. Their long necks led only to mouths. He could not even see their eyes. Didn't know if they even had eyes. His gaze remained on their teeth, and their gills that opened and closed with breaths that were so slow, he feared they might no longer be living.

"Arges." They spoke as one. Three of them with booming voices that were so loud he felt the delicate membranes of his ears seal shut in an attempt to not bleed through the power of their voices. "You are here. Mitéra said you would come."

"I seek my future," he said quietly, trying not to show fear. "She said you would show it to me."

"You have two." The nearest ancient shifted, and he realized they actually had fins. Short, stubby fins, like a seal. With bones inside them that moved like a hand, even though they were encased in a thick layer of blubbery fat and leathery hide. "Your futures have always intrigued us. You are an outlier, Arges. A creature who can defy the natural order of things."

He didn't want to hear their opinions of who he was or what he could do with his life. He wanted to know what the truth was. He wanted to know... "Two?" he asked. "How is that possible?"

A great wave of energy blasted against his spine. Though he knew it was a deep sea shark with smooth skin that had bumped him nearer to the ancients, he couldn't stop himself from struggling. He also did not want to get anywhere near these massive creatures and yet, he was forced. He wasn't given the option to remain far from them.

Instead, he was ushered closer to the first one's teeth. He stared into that maw and then froze as the mouth opened. "Come." He watched as the massive tongue moved to shape the word. "Seek out your future, Arges of the sea."

The current moved him even closer, and before he knew it, he was inside the maw of the monster. There was only a split second for him to feel the massive tongue against his back before something sharp nicked through

his scales. He arched into the pain, surprised by the sudden poisonous heat that flowed through his veins and then... he disappeared.

Arges wasn't here. He wasn't in the monster, nor was he even in the sea. He was in the middle of nothing, darkness that stretched out from all angles until a light bloomed in the distance. The moment he noticed it, the future barreled toward him.

Striking the wall of that memory, he floated like he was observing himself. He was right there, in a kelp forest with a strange device attached to his hip. He had more tattoos, more muscle as well, but he hunted through the kelp with a single-minded intent. Perhaps this memory was to warn him that if he wasn't careful, the achromos would spread out into the water just like Mira had done.

But what moved through the water toward the image of himself was not a strange achromo or even a creature he was stalking. Instead, it was her.

Mira.

Unbound red hair trailing behind her as she swam up behind him, fins on her feet and a smile on her face beneath that strange bubble around her mouth. She attached herself to him, wrapping one of her legs around his waist because that was as close as she could get.

He noticed the tattoos of his pod winding down her arm and across her chest. She wore a top woven out of kelp, just like his mother used to make. And her belly was so round she could barely hold on to him.

She tilted her head back with laughter, eventually allowing herself to flatten out in the water and gripped him with only her legs as the image of himself reached for her belly. He watched as he touched the rounded mound, running his fingers carefully over her skin and then pressing his webs against her. There was slight movement underneath her skin, large and rippling, just like a tail moving inside her.

It wasn't possible. Surely the ancients weren't telling him that he could start a new species. That he and Mira could be the link between their kind. It wasn't possible.

But the smile on her face... It was one of so much love as she looked down at his hands on her belly.

The memory was ripped from him, and he felt it tear away from his mind like he had been clutching it close to his chest. He wanted to look at it a little while longer. He wanted to see them together. Just like that. The

happiness on both of their faces had been so far from anything he'd ever experienced. And he... he wanted it.

A second future barreled toward him, striking him even harder than the first. He saw himself and his pod. He saw Beta falling in the distance and knew they were chasing the small escape bubbles that achromos used to get out of their city when anything went wrong. His brother, one armed and angry, speared through the glass of one such bubble. It shattered, and he heard the muffled screams of those within it.

Maketes swam ahead of him, zeroing through the water with all the speed of lightning as he slammed against the side of another bubble. His people descended upon it, ripping the glass open and yanking out achromo bodies that writhed in their grips as they drowned.

And him? He moved toward one of the escape bubbles and froze above it. He saw himself staring at Mira. He saw her glaring back at him, one of her welders in her hand.

“Stop,” he cried out at the image of himself. “Don’t do it.”

But he did.

Arges watched himself wrench the glass free and yank her out. He saw the spear sliding through her soft flesh where he had just seen their child. She hung suspended in the water by only his weapon. And then he watched as she turned her welder on and tried to burn him through his chest. His kind were too strong for it, so she would be the only one who died in this battle, but he would wear her scar over his heart in more ways than one.

The visions faded, and he was spat out by the ancient onto the foggy, sulphuric seabed around them.

Hissing, he coughed out whatever strange poison had flowed through his veins. “What was that?”

“Your futures, warrior.” The ancient shifted, its massive fin placed on the ground too close for comfort. “There is benefit and loss in both futures, Arges. You are the only one who can choose. Lose her, or lose your people’s dream.”

“I will lose neither of them.”

“You have to lose something,” the ancient chuckled. “No one has ever beaten their own fate.”

As he forced his tail to move, forced his body to rise from the dirt, he vowed that he would be the first. He would keep them both.

Because he wanted that future with her. But he also wanted to see her city fall.

TWENTY-SEVEN

MIRA

Mira waited for him for quite some time. She even caught herself a fish, although the whole situation was more luck than skill. She'd trailed the poor thing through the glowing lights until it was finally so tired that it just... stopped swimming.

She still felt terrible about it. Like she had blood on her hands that she couldn't ever get off. Quite literally, at some point, because she was sitting

on the edge of the rock with fish blood and guts on her hands as she cleaned it out to eat.

Even Byte stayed silent the whole time she hunted. They both mourned the life that she hated she had to take.

Then she felt even more guilty as she ate it, because the poor thing tasted horrible. She hated the taste of fish. She'd had it so many times in the past few weeks that she was certain she would never want to eat it again after this ordeal. All she wanted was to taste chicken, or egg, or countless vegetables for the rest of her life until she could forget how awful fish tasted and smelled.

Gagging a bit, she set it down by the water and stared up at the ceiling. "I should tell him."

Byte stirred out of its stasis. "What?"

"I should tell him I can understand him."

The silence that came after her declaration was almost enough to make her second guess herself, but she steadied her resolve. She couldn't keep lying to him, or pretending that they couldn't converse. It was wrong. Mira had never been a liar, and this made her into some kind of monster.

It wasn't like she was a spy sent by her people to learn more about his kind. She was just an engineer who had found herself in a rather difficult situation.

So when he finally returned, she rolled onto her side on the cot and stared at him. She searched his eyes, as though there was some balm for the terrible way she felt in his gaze.

He watched her in return, those dark eyes so large in his head. She'd thought those black eyes were soulless the first time she'd seen him. She remembered how unnerving they were and how she'd thought he looked like a shark watching her. But he wasn't. He was just another person who didn't deserve to be lied to.

Maybe she was sick. Maybe she was dying. Because these thoughts weren't the thoughts of a person who had fought against his kind for her entire life.

"Byte finished the upgrade," she said. "The translation chip isn't entirely complete, but I installed it. I can understand you now. Almost every single word you say."

Instead of talking, like she'd expected, he didn't say a word. Arges held out his hand for her, gesturing for her to come to the edge of the water.

She couldn't imagine why.

Stiff, her bones aching, she walked over to the edge and heard her knees creak as she sat down at the edge with her feet in the water. A cold rush of ice trailed up the back of her calves, almost painful, but she kept her limbs in the water, regardless.

He swam closer, his gaze somehow darker than ever before. Then he placed his hands on her knees and she felt the webs even through her wetsuit.

He just... looked at her. Watched every twitch and movement of her features as she looked down at him. Mira didn't know what to do with this. She didn't know why there were emotions bubbling up in her chest and how those feelings pressed against the back of her throat, urging her to say something, do something, cup his jaw with her hand or maybe dig her fingers into those gills as he'd liked before.

She wanted to touch him. She wanted to let those bubbling emotions take over her body and tell her what to do.

He moved his fingers along her wetsuit, gliding them up and down her leg before he finally said, "I have thought a long time about what I would like you to hear me say first. A part of me wishes there were kinder words I could say. That I could tell you how rapturous it is to see you swim through my world and to see you love it as much as I do. Or perhaps I would remark on the way your hair looks like blood underneath the water and that stirs some feral part of me. But what I settled on, the first most important words you must hear from me, are that I am deeply sorry."

Breath caught in her throat, Mira bit at her lips. He wanted to apologize to her? Why? He was... was...

She reached down and cupped his face, finally giving into the urge to touch him. Drawing him a little closer, feeling his rib gills press against her inner thighs, she breathed out a small sigh of relief as she watched those big, black eyes. "You are not a monster," she whispered. "You are not what they told me you were. I accepted your apology long ago, Arges, even before you were able to speak it out loud. You have done what you had to do. For your people. Because of our history. And I will not, ever, hold that against you."

"I am the reason that you are sick," he replied. His hands lifted, and those webs skated along her wrists, delicately pressing against the heartbeat

that sluggishly beat there. “You could die because of me, and I will not have that.”

“Wasn’t that the point? Our people have always fought against each other. Always tried to kill each other. I don’t think there is another way for us to move forward. One of us has to die.”

“I will not allow it.” His features hardened into an expression that almost made her believe him. “We will both live. This future that we seek together will come to life. I will not accept any other way.”

She supposed that was one way to look at the future. She admired his belief that he could manipulate the very fabric of time.

“The future will happen no matter what we do. Our lives and the will of the gods have been carved into our very being from the moment we first took breath.” She smiled, even if the expression felt a little sad. “Unless you see another way out of this, then I suspect our fates have already been decided.”

He shook his head and then shifted his grip from her wrist to her hips. “Gather your Byte, achromo. We are leaving this place.”

“Another cave?” she sighed. “I suppose it is time, after all. We’ve been here for a bit. I really don’t think any of your people are looking for me, though.”

“My brother has yet to return to our home. I do not know where he is, or why he has disappeared. He could easily plan to hunt you down.”

“I think you’re worried over nothing.”

“I did not suspect our first conversation together would be you scolding me,” he teased as she stood to go get Byte. “But I suppose knowing that you understand me does not dull your teeth.”

“It’s rather easy to talk like this, isn’t it?” She returned with Byte in her arms, biting her lips with nerves. “I wasn’t certain you would be this happy, or this easy to talk to.”

“Mira.” Her name rolled off his tongue so easily. Said in the same song-like voice she’d gotten used to, but this time she knew even more that it really was her name. And it still affected her just as much. “We’ve been talking to each other for quite some time now. Just not in so many words.”

She supposed they had. It was easy to be around him now. Easy to float through the water and trust that he wasn’t bringing her to the mouth of some massive creature to sacrifice her to whatever water gods they had. She

hadn't even thought he was going to kill her for a while, so that had to mean something.

Still, it was rather reassuring to be able to return to him and ask as she got into the water, "You aren't going to kill me this time though... Are you?"

He grinned, those sharp teeth flashing. "No, Mira. I'm going to keep you."

She wasn't all that certain his answer was much better.

But she fixed her rebreather on, tightened her goggles, and sank into his arms with the same amount of trust as always. He gathered her up to his chest, even moving his hands to shift her feet into his gills as they slowly swam away from the darkness. She didn't know where they were going, nor did she need to.

It startled her how much she trusted an individual who had tried to kill her. Multiple times. He could have drowned her at any point, and the rebreather was the only thing keeping her safe now. Even that was a little clunky now that she'd used it so much. But if it stopped working, she had faith that he would breathe air into her lungs until he got her to the surface.

That amount of trust in someone like him? It was... unprecedented.

Stupid, maybe.

But then she remembered how his fingers tucked her toes a little tighter into the warm gills at his hips, and how he regularly checked her fingers in the gills at his neck to make sure they weren't icy and she forgot she was supposed to be afraid of him.

Soon the water lightened again. Turning from the depths of dark blue where all color disappeared into bright lights where she could see that they were fairly close to the bottom of the ocean. The ground seemed to come up from underneath them. Suddenly it was right there, sandy white with dots of starfish and shells of creatures she couldn't name. Though there were not a lot of sea creatures around them, it was still beautiful in its own way. Endless, it seemed.

She could see the small tunnels left in the sand by all the creatures who had moved about in their shells. And soon, she could see the surface. She'd never been this close to the upper levels of the ocean where she could have swum up and poked her head out if she wished.

And there was sun.

Spears of sunlight that shattered through the water, like great weapons that were soft to the touch and broke against her skin. So beautiful that tears fell from her eyes and gathered at the bottom of her goggles. It was... unlike anything she'd ever seen before.

"Why are we here?" she asked, her voice muffled around the rebreather. "Isn't it dangerous?"

He looked down at her and that booming voice shattered through every truth she'd ever had. "It's been a long time since your people have seen the surface, achromo. A great many things have changed."

"Are you... Are you taking me to the surface?"

"No. That is a wild, untamed land now. There are many creatures who rule it and you are not capable of protecting yourself. But I found something here, a rumor that turned out to be true, and I thought you would be more comfortable. Even if it is very far from me."

How long had they been swimming? This was far?

She craned her neck to look behind him, back into the depths of the sea that disappeared from view. But then he flicked his fins, forcefully turning her, so she had to look at something else entirely.

It was a dome. A glass dome with panels on each side outstretched like little fins. Black structures that looked remarkably similar to the diagrams she'd seen of solar panels from the old days. It was connected with a single rod to the ocean floor, but the rest of it hovered in the middle of the water. Though the glass was covered in algae, making it difficult to see what was inside, she was certain it was a room.

He swam her over to the strange dome, then underneath it.

"There," he said, pointing to an opening in the bottom. "I assume you are familiar with this?"

She startled, surprised he was talking to her. She'd gotten so used to them not talking and communicating through gestures that it was still rather strange to converse. "Oh, uh, yes. It's a moon pool."

"Why is it called that?"

"I don't know." She drifted out of his arms, through the warmer water and to the button that she could only assume was rusted, but was pleased to find still worked. Hitting it with her thumb, Mira moved away as the moon pool opened and revealed a room above her head.

She didn't hesitate. Mira kicked her feet and ripped off her mask. She didn't care if the air was stale or smelled like wet seaweed. She didn't care

even if it was breathable, because it had to be. There was a person living here. A human person who could... could...

No one had been here for ages.

She looked around, noting the thick layers of dust that coated everything and the strange, stagnant air. No one had been around to push buttons or maintain this space in a long time.

The steps down into the moon pool were very bland, but everything else in this room wasn't. What little walls there were, mostly half walls of metal underneath glass, were hand painted with faded yellow flowers. Delicately and meticulously made to look like daisies. There were two levels inside. One with a table and half a kitchenette, small but enough for a single person. And the next level with a comfortable bed with a yellow comforter that somehow was still in perfect condition. It even had pillows. So many of them.

Spinning in the water, she turned to look behind her and saw the rest of the dome was full of life. Plants that overflowed with so many variations of zucchini, tomatoes, grapes, countless others she couldn't name that weren't bearing fruit yet. Food. Real food.

Her jaw hung open in shock. It wasn't possible that there was a place like this under the ocean and yet, here it was. More food than she could eat and various tables and jars everywhere. A person had lived here. Not even just lived, but thrived.

A small rescue pod, out in the middle of the ocean. Far away from any of the cities. Who had built this?

Swallowing hard, she pushed herself out of the water and sat on the edge of the moon pool, trying to devour everything with her eyes. But her mind couldn't keep up. This was beautiful and remarkable and far too perfect for everything that she needed.

Arges joined her, slowly rising out of the water like some kind of sea god who had brought her to salvation. "Will this suffice?"

"I don't even know what this is."

"There were rumors, years ago, of my people keeping... pets." His lips wrinkled in distaste. "There was one in particular who had been brought to this area by her owner and I thought perhaps it was still around."

"So it is."

"This will keep you alive?" He stared at her a little too intently. "You will not die here?"

She could feel the warm sun at her back and was surrounded by food. No, she wouldn't die here. "I don't think so."

Arges swam a little closer and tapped his knuckles on Byte's exterior. The little robot opened the top hatch, glaring as much as a robot could.

The undine snarled at her droid before repeating, "She will not die here?"

"This will suffice."

"Good." He swam a little farther away from her, looking like he wanted to stay. "I have a few things to do, our trail to cover up, and I need to find where my brother is. Stay alive, human."

"I—"

But he was gone before she could thank him.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ARGES

It took him far too long to figure everything out. He returned to his home, still hoping that Daios might have been there. But his brother was suspiciously absent, as were more of the members of his pod.

A bitter ache churned in Arges's belly the longer he was with his people. He knew that there was some undercurrent of disrespect, but he didn't know how to deal with it. His people had never not trusted him. They'd always looked to him to lead.

Now, after he had taken the job that their own Mitéra had given him, he was suddenly an outsider. People didn't want to be around him. They tugged their children away from him when he moved through the coral city. They even glared when they thought he wasn't looking. Did they forget how he had just saved them? Did they think he had forgotten how they used to treat him?

But perhaps it was her scent. Even he could smell her, no matter where he went. She clung to his scales as a constant reminder of what he had done and what he planned to do.

Still, it took many days for him to ease Mitéra's mind and to make sure that his brother wasn't returning. He hated that he had to leave his *kairos* alone to do so. It made his stomach churn and his hearts beat in his chest a little too hard. He wanted to go right back to her. To stand guard outside of that dome, and maybe that was how the original owner had felt.

He'd lied to Mira. There were no rumors about anyone living there, nor had he been aware of its existence. He'd asked the sea to guide him to where she would be safe, and it had brought him there.

Outside of the home, he'd found two skeletons. One that was clearly of her people, the bones of her legs had been eerily interesting. And laid out next to her were the bones of one of his own kind. A massive male, with a tail nearly twice as long as Arges's, speaking of his age and power. They had been curled up next to each other, almost as though the sea didn't even dare move their skeletons. Together, even in death.

But when he had looked into the dome, he had seen there was much of their life still there. So much that his *kairos* could live on, and perhaps even thrive on. So he had decided to move their bodies. Even if it was against every part of him, he moved them so his Mira would be safe.

Perhaps his people could smell the death on his hands as well.

Troubled, he started the long journey to where he had hidden Mira. It took even longer for him to get there, namely because he doubled back multiple times, trying to shake anyone who might follow him. He hated to bring anyone to this place, considering the awe in her eyes when she had seen everything inside the glass dome.

He'd felt like he had done something right for the first time in a very long time. Her eyes had been so wide, so pleased with what he'd found. And he'd felt his gills raise and his chest puff out in pride.

He had taken care of her. Provided for her in more than just the way that his people had stolen mates in the past. She was safe for the first time since they had come here, and that was... rare. For her, for her kind, for even his people. It was hard to ever be safe in the sea.

His thoughts were so scattered, he hardly realized what he was doing until he made it all the way back to her dome. Swimming above it, feeling the warmth of dim sunlight on his back, he hovered above her small bubble of air in the ocean.

She'd cleaned, he noticed. Perhaps she'd come out here with her rebreather on and rags in hand. But a majority of the algae had been scrubbed off the glass, giving him a perfect view into the dome.

Arges had thought she would notice him, but she didn't. Not at all.

Instead, his little captive *kairos* pattered about the dome. Completely and utterly ignorant that he was above her.

Her arms were laden with green fronds, and she was clearly talking to Byte. Wandering about with those fronds, she gathered more and more, stacking them on top of each other as she chattered. But what she wore captivated him far more than the movement of her lips. Instead of her usual wetsuit, she wore a bright blue dress. He'd seen humans wear them before, the fabric cupping underneath her breasts and lifting them in such a tantalizing way. The flare of fabric around her waist moved like waves around her body as she shifted, swinging this way and that with such lovely movement.

She was so stunning. Even though his people might never understand his infatuation with her, he understood now why there had been one of his people laid out with one of hers. There was an undeniable connection between the two of them. One he was done fighting against.

He laid himself out on top of the glass, watching his shadow spread across the room she stood in. She jumped, everything in her arms tumbling to the ground before she looked up to see him laying there.

Twitching his tail, he grinned through the glass at her. And he watched the most lovely smile split across her face in return. She waved for him to come underneath the dome, to join her in this home he had found. He almost wanted to tease her more. To stay laid out where he knew his tail was most impressive and his muscles were very obvious.

He just wanted her to look at him. That's what it all came down to. He wanted her to look at him and see temptation just as he did with her.

Still, maybe this wasn't the right moment. He still had no idea how she felt about his kind now that she'd been here for such a long time. She was in this new home where he had brought her without asking if she even wanted to be here.

There were so many barriers between them, and he didn't know how to start ripping them down.

Or perhaps he did. Because he slid off the glass and underneath the dome, only to lift his head out of the water and find her waiting for him. There was no hesitation in her gaze or her words as she spun in front of him.

"What do you think?"

Up close, he could see the tiny details of the stitches. Just like his mother used to do in her tapestries. Tiny, neat rows of stitches made by a loving hand. Each stitch came together to depict waves on the hem of the skirts, rising up into little white foam near Mira's waist. She held onto the edge of the fabric, lifting it just slightly with the movement so he could see the delicate bones of her ankles all the way up to what she called knees.

Ah, his damn gills were fluttering again.

Clearing his throat, he gave her a little nod. "You look well."

"Well?" She shook her head at him, clearly disappointed by something he'd said. "Men. It doesn't matter if you live underneath the sea or in the cities, you never say compliments easily. This is the first time you've seen me out of a wetsuit and that's all you have to say?"

"I've seen you out of the silver suit," he reminded her. "I have seen you in many different ways."

She rolled her eyes. "Not before we could actually speak with each other. And certainly not before you knew I was a person and not just some horrible human intent on destroying the ocean."

She had a point, but that really changed nothing. She was still an achromo, and he had seen her in clothing, as she liked to call it.

Frowning, he looked her over a little more before replying, "You are beautiful in a strange way, Mira. I have always found you to be intriguing, no matter what you wear. Although I will admit, the silver suit you wore before does make you feel a little more familiar to me."

"Familiar?" That grin never budged from her face. "Why would you ever wish for me to be familiar, undine?"

And he supposed she was right. He didn't want her to be familiar. He wanted her to be... her. Holding out his hand for her to take, he gestured for her to come closer. "There is more in this area that I would like to show you, *kairos*."

"And ruin this dress? I just found it!"

He sighed. "Then find another, Mira. I wish for you to return to the sea with me."

More than anything. He felt out of his element here. This strange bubble was not safe for people like him, nor did he wish for her to remain in it for too long. Some fearful part of him worried that if he let her leave the grasp of the sea, and perhaps the grasp of his arms, that he would lose her to the land and the air once again.

"Fine," she said with a flirty grin. "Let me change, though."

He watched her walk up to the second level where the bed was and pull curtains shut. The great swaths of fabric hid her from his gaze, or at least, she thought it did.

He couldn't see details, but he could see the silhouette of her body. The sun blasted through the glass behind her, and he watched as she pulled that fabric off her body. The long lines she revealed were graceful in her movements, and so tempting in everything else. He moved forward slightly, leaning his arms against the edge of the pool and resting his cheek against a forearm.

The shadow of her figure shifted, and his eyes caught on the shape of her hip and the strange triangle of light between her legs. He could stay here and watch her forever. And though there was the temptation to duck underneath the water and peek at her from outside the glass of the dome, he remained steady where he was.

Someday soon, he hoped, he would see the rest of her. Perhaps she would let him discover the secrets of the differences between them. Maybe she would let him spend hours indulging himself on all the parts of her body that he so readily wished to see.

Not only because he was curious, but because he wanted to hear the sounds she would make while he lingered in soft shadows and hollows of skin.

When she finally pulled the fabric back again to reveal herself, he was treated to yet another clothing item that he'd never seen before. Pale fabric poked out from beneath a layer of brown skirt. Straps held the white fabric

to her legs, weaving up her torso where she had strapped her welder, the ties of her breathing apparatus, and her goggles.

She ran her hand down her stomach where the many straps crossed and smiled. “This is called a corset. It’s an old style, so whoever used to live here must have been from a long time ago.”

Considering the state the skeletons were in, he wasn’t surprised. There had been a long time since anyone had remembered this place existed.

“Are you ready?” he asked, wanting to get away from those dark thoughts of death and destruction.

“Sure.” She marched over to him, all confidence and bravado, before pulling the device over her mouth. Her goggles she left on top of her head, and she wore strange boots on her feet.

“Why do you have those on?” he asked.

“They’ll keep my feet warm, and I won’t have to use your gills this time.” She shrugged. “I couldn’t find any fins here, unfortunately. Otherwise, I might be able to keep up with you on my own.”

All the spines down his back rose in shock that she thought she could keep up with him, but then he noticed the grin on her face and the teasing glint in her eyes. “*Kairos*,” he muttered, already tired of her talking. “You would never be able to keep up with the People of Water even if you had one of your devices strapped to your waist.”

“I am an engineer, Arges. I have all the time in the world to create whatever I want now.” She held out her arms, clearly expecting him to pull her into the water with him. “Now, where are we going this time?”

For a moment, the vision of their future played in front of him. It was the same expression she wore. The same device on her face. The same laughter that bubbled out of her very being and floated through the air. And though they were not underwater, nor was she pregnant, he couldn’t help but think of it.

Yes, this was very much the right choice. He didn’t want a future without her in it, even though there were countless things he had yet to discover. He looked forward to learning more about her, and her kind, but mostly he just wanted to see her smile like this.

She wiggled her fingers in the air, still waiting for him with her arms outstretched. “Well, undine? Do I have to get in the water myself, or are you going to be a gentleman?”

“What is a gentleman?” he asked, sliding his hands around her waist and not even attempting to stop his gills from fluttering this time. He drew her into the water, leaning back so she was forced to rest against his chest. They floated there for a few moments, together, staring at each other with obvious surprise in both of their gazes.

Finally, she cleared her throat, but he didn't miss the way she smoothed her hands along his chest. “A good man, I suppose? Someone who helps others, and goes out of his way to make them comfortable. I don't really know, to be honest. It's just a word we've always used for men who are kind to women.”

“You humans and your names for everything.” He snorted, lowering them into the water and keeping his arms around her so she was close to him at all times. “The People of Water call that being a good person. That is all. There is no name for someone who is kind, that is the expectation.”

“So what do you call someone who isn't kind?”

The water closed around her head, her blood red hair floating around her, and he caught her gaze. She squinted her eyes a few times, blinking in the saltwater before he watched her gaze clear and she could see everything he could see. Without the goggles. Without needing the help.

Oh, he had never known she could be more captivating, and here she was. Starting to acclimate to his world without needing her devices and he... He was undone.

“Arges?” she repeated. “What do you call someone who isn't kind?”

“Dead,” he replied without thinking. “We call them dead.”

With the shadow of his aggressive brother trailing them, he drew her away from the dome and toward the open sea.

TWENTY-NINE

MIRA

Mira wasn't certain what she was expecting from him or the adventure that they were on, but it certainly wasn't this. She had thought he would bring her back into the depths, into the dark, where she could see very little that he did not light up himself.

Instead, he kept her on the same level they were on. He coasted along the sandy belts. Rolling until she was on the bottom and she could feel the

sand tangling in her hair. Her giggles apparently sparked something in him that she had never expected.

Arges rolled again, his hands just underneath her ribs as he lifted her high away from his body. And with her arms out in front of her, it felt like she was flying. Soaring through the water that was so crystal clear and blue, surely it wasn't real. She'd never seen the ocean like this, not when it was endless and speedily passing by her.

He stayed that way with her for quite some time. Lifting her up and bouncing her sometimes over the sand dunes far beneath the sea. He never took her close to the edge. Not once. Like he wanted her to be able to see another version of his home.

Maybe she should have been looking at the ocean itself. She should have been enjoying the dim spears of sunlight that were drifting away as the clouds grew over their heads. Or perhaps she should have been enjoying the sensation of the water through her hair and the warmth of the waves that weren't too cold for her to stay in them for once.

Instead, all she could do was stare down at him.

His gills were fully out on display, like petals of a flower decorating his neck. All his hair shifted away from his face as they swam, revealing the angular planes that were just so lovely. He was delicate and broad, a mixture of both masculine and feminine that tempted her gaze every time she looked away. Mira had never noticed the tentacles in his hair that glowed bright blue and yellow as well, but they were so intriguing. She wanted to run her fingers through the strands of his hair and see if he reacted the same way he had when she had touched his gills.

Until he turned her again, pointing ahead of them. "Look, *kairos*."

She followed his finger to see that the ocean floor dropped off just ahead of them. Above that drop off was a school of stingrays. They were massive beasts. Just their flippers were larger than she was tall, and they swam through the sea with infinite grace. Their long tails stretched out behind them. Speckled gray and white, they were so stunning.

"A whole school of them?"

He shook his head, and Arges reached forward to tap her forehead with a clawed finger. "You should know a school is only for fish. A group of stingrays is a fever, my darling. Remember that."

"Are the words so important?"

“They are to us.” He swam with her down into the depths and suddenly they were swimming beside the rays. She could see their mouths underneath the giant wings of their bodies. And their bellies were white, she realized. From above, they blended into the sea floor, but from below they glistened like pearls.

“They are so beautiful,” she murmured, her fingers itching to touch them. “A fever of them?”

“That is right.” He reached out his hand and trailed his fingers along the belly of one. “Would you like to touch them, Mira?”

“More than anything.”

He lifted her then, and she reached for the belly of the stingray above her. She swore it smiled when she touched the soft skin and slight pudge there before it changed its direction and another took its place.

Giggles erupted from her mouth. She couldn’t stop the sounds of happiness that burst out of her skin and bubbled out of her mouth. They were so adorable! Gliding this way and that, they coasted throughout the ocean without a whim. Perhaps they were going to some feeding or mating grounds or birthing areas. But where they were going didn’t matter.

The fact that they didn’t mind her being here, among them, made her feel more accepted than her own kind had in years.

At some point, Arges turned them away from the fever of rays. He tucked her into his arms again, safe and sound from anything that might find them. They moved slower, and she had the time to look up and see angry gray clouds overhead.

“So it does still storm,” she mused. “The tales I have always heard are that the land became uninhabitable. There were so many storms and volcanoes and treacherous waves. People had to run from the very weather, and we couldn’t get off this planet, so we had to figure out a new way to live.”

“There are still many storms. The gods above are always angry,” he replied. “I have only been to the surface a few times. Curiosity in a young mind can be a dangerous thing. There is much up there that I suspect your people no longer know. But the storms are still deadly. The sea tries to take back the land, and the land fights in return.”

She supposed that was a rather simplistic way of looking at the very complicated weather patterns that had almost destroyed this planet. “We call them hurricanes. And tsunamis.”

“So your people know of the sea’s desire to take back the rest of your planet?”

“We know the land is uninhabitable because of these storms, and that flooding had taken a lot of what we would consider liveable land. There will always be mountains to live on top of, but from what they said in my school, apparently the storms were so strong that the higher people went, the harder it was to live.”

It was a shame. Someday, she would love to know what it felt like to stand on land and have infinite air. To experience an unending amount of air and dirt that stretched as far as the eye could see.

“I will take you someday,” he said quietly, his voice pitched so low she almost didn’t hear him. “Everyone deserves to see where they come from. At least once.”

Mira couldn’t stop herself. She hugged him around the waist, twining her arms around his thick form in the hopes that he understood how much his offer meant to her. “You’ve already shown me so much, Arges. You’ve gifted me the sea in ways I never even dreamt of. How could I ask you to show me the land as well?”

He didn’t reply, but she wondered if he wanted to say he would give her anything.

Because that was exactly how she was feeling right now.

Together, they meandered through the currents until she saw the dome ahead. Mira was shocked at the sadness that blasted through her body. Partly because she knew she had to get out of the water, and partly because he would leave her. He always left, and every time it became harder and harder to say goodbye to him.

Maybe he felt the same way. Because he took a very long time bringing her underneath the moon pool and even more time letting go of her once they were back inside the dome.

His hands lingered on her hips even as he placed her on the edge of the metal rim. Her dress clung to her skin, but she suddenly wanted to rip it off in the hopes that maybe he would stay.

Even if it meant that maybe he would linger out of her line of sight, he would still see her.

Water dripping down her nose, she ripped her rebreather off and stared at him. Finally, she couldn’t take it. Because he already had that look in his eyes that meant he was leaving and she... she... “I don’t want you to go.”

He froze in front of her before quietly asking, "What did you say?"

"I don't want you to go," she repeated. "I don't like being here alone. Without you."

"You have your metal box to speak with."

"It's not the same." She swallowed, realizing that one of them would have to be the brave one. She knew he had feelings for her, and she did as well.

Even though her mind screamed they couldn't do this. That no undine and human could ever be together, in any way. She felt like it was important to get the words out. Even if they were hard.

Placing her hands over his at her waist, she decided that if one of them had to be brave, it would be her. "I prefer my time with you, Arges. Much more than anyone else I've ever met in my life. I want to know everything about you, even if those discoveries come without words."

Surely, he understood what she was saying. His black eyes searched hers, and then his hands spasmed against her hips. "*Kairos*, I believe there are perhaps some translation difficulties regarding what you just said."

"There are no translation issues." She lifted her hands and placed them on his shoulders, toying with the edges of his gills. "I think you should know that I want you. I find you strangely beautiful, and though that has plagued me for quite some time, I feel that now perhaps it is the right time for me to tell you."

"Why now?" he rasped, his voice guttural and deep.

"I don't know," she replied. "I can't think of any reason why I've waited this long, and I can't think of a reason why I couldn't wait longer. This moment felt right, and perhaps it wasn't. But I wish to know more about you, and I have wanted to touch you for a very long time."

His eyes closed, those gills vibrating next to his throat, and she couldn't stop herself.

Mira skated her fingers along them, barely touching him but knowing without a doubt that he felt her. A deep rumble started in his chest, echoing through the room with the sound of his pleasure.

His voice was somehow even deeper. "What you are doing is a very intimate touch for my people, Mira."

"I know." She leaned a little closer until their lips were barely a breath apart. "My people kiss. We press our mouths together. It feels good. Do your people do that?"

“No.” He never once opened his eyes. So she supposed that was as much of a yes as she was going to get.

Taking the risk, she leaned forward and kissed him. At first, he stayed very still. Even his gills seemed to freeze, completely outstretched and unmoving beneath her fingers.

But then he groaned, long and low in his very chest, before he hauled her closer. She wrapped her legs around his waist, gasping into his mouth as he pried hers open and plunged his tongue between her lips.

Fire sizzled through her veins, and suddenly she couldn't touch enough of him. She dragged her fingers along his gills, pinching them and stroking them until he bucked his hips against hers. And oh, maybe that was the same between their kinds. Because she swore there was a hardness pressing between her legs, though it was still hidden by scales. A hardness that tempted her to touch, to stroke, to seek out where it was coming from and how she could touch more.

She pressed back against him, arching over his arm so more of her could touch him. She didn't even care that they were both soaking wet or that her clothes clung to her body. She didn't care that her nipples were so hard they ached for his touch.

Then, oh, he touched. He lifted that webbed hand and cupped one of her breasts. They both groaned into each other's mouths, because she'd never felt her body come alive like hers did in this moment. She wanted to touch him back, but she didn't know where she could touch. The spines on his back made it hard for her to touch him there, and it certainly wasn't easy for her to grab onto his neck.

He had no problem touching her, though, and it seemed like he was enjoying himself far more than she had expected.

Again, he moaned into her mouth before ripping away from her. “You have no natural defenses, *kairos*.”

“You mean I don't have claws and spines?” Her voice sounded so breathless. “I know that. Are you complaining?”

He looked down at his hand on her breast, then she felt him gently squeeze before running his thumb over her hardened nipple. “Not in the slightest, Mira. By all the gods of the sea, I can touch any part of you I wish without fear of poison or pain.”

“Endless touching,” she agreed, arching into his grip so he would touch her more. “Don't stop. Please don't stop.”

And maybe he wouldn't have. Maybe she would have found out what was underneath those scales that pressed so deliciously between her thighs if they both hadn't heard an angry thud from the other side of the dome's glass. Then another. A pounding that rocked the entire dome and shifted her forward awkwardly in his grip.

She didn't have a moment to breathe. One second he was in her arms, and the next he'd tossed her away from the pool before shouting, "Close it! Now!"

Then he disappeared. The only thing left was the splashing of his tail and the foam he had left behind.

For a second, she was frozen. Staring into the water with wide eyes and a sudden fear at what had come for them. Surely nothing would attack this dome. There weren't any dangerous sea creatures that came into shallow water like this. Was there?

But then she saw the vague shadow of a fin pass overhead. Then she saw the black tip of a tail that was all too familiar. She lunged for the lever that closed the moon pool and shoved it so hard, she was afraid she'd snap it off and end up stuck in here.

"Come on," she hissed as it closed. "Faster, you ancient bitch."

Eventually, it closed. Sealing her into the dome like a tomb.

Byte's shuddering voice interrupted her fear. "Mira? What's going on?"

"I have no idea."

Snapping out of her panic, she raced for the windows of the dome. Cursing that she couldn't see through some of the algae that already had grown back, she sprinted for the bed. Not caring that she soaked the mattress and the blankets, she jumped on top of it and peered out the portion of the dome that was still very clear.

All she could see were the dark outlines of undines in the distance. One glowing bright red, another yellow, and one blue that she would recognize anywhere.

THIRTY

ARGES

A rges swam with rage coursing through his body. All the lights along his tail flared bright and hot. How dare they? His people knew better than to track him, of all people, through the water. They knew what his mission was, and that he was only doing his duty as he was supposed to do. Mitéra herself had given him this task, and he could choose to do it in any way that he wished.

These were the excuses he told himself for the anger and fear that surged through his entire body.

He knew better, though. The truth burned in his chest just as hot as the rest of the emotions. They had interrupted him. He had found a mate, a true burning light that even now warmed his chest. He'd almost had her, and now they tried to take her away.

She was his. His to take, to steal, to kiss.

And oh, what a kiss. He'd seen humans do it before, but he had never thought devouring another person would make him feel so complete. He had only wanted her more. Wanted to dig himself into her skin and coil around her heart until he was wrapped so firmly around it that he knew it would only beat for him.

Then his brothers had to ruin things. The other warriors that he'd led for years, the ones he had taught to track and hunt, had used what he'd taught them against him.

He'd seen the shadow pass over her dome, and he had thought it was just another sea creature. There were plenty of silhouettes that could make that shadow, and he hadn't wanted to stop kissing her. Touching her. Lingering on the soft feeling of her flesh giving underneath his fingertips. He had wanted to stay in that moment and that had nearly cost them everything.

His lower gills around his ribs had scented his brother first. The rough water that she'd splashed up as she writhed against him had been enough for the acrid bite of anger and blood to taint his tongue. He had known who'd come to see him. He had known who was coming for them.

So he had thrown himself into the water and sped away from the dome. Like any predator in the ocean, they saw movement and gave chase. There were three of them. Maketes, Daios, and another he could not remember the name of. But the lighter blue male couldn't keep up with the rest of them. He was smaller, weaker, and Arges was certain he could not get into the glass dome that kept Mira safe.

Now he had to deal with the other two. The two who were dangerous, even to him.

Even missing an arm.

He led them far away from the dome, but not into the open sea. Daios fought like the gods of the ocean were on his side in the open waters. Arges

had taken many a beating from his blood brother, and there were two of them to be concerned with now.

The shallow waters would work to his advantage. Though his brother was larger than him, Arges was more nimble. Even Maketes struggled to keep up with Arges's speed as he looped and wove over the abandoned achromo village that had sunk underneath the waves. The buildings were short and squat, but they created an obstacle course that would be difficult for his brothers to get through.

"Arges!" Daios screamed, his cry of rage blasting through the water as sure as the voice of a sea god.

He did not intend to turn and fight his brother properly. Neither of them could afford to do so. He feared they would kill each other. At one point in his life, that may have been an honor, but no longer.

Not with a woman waiting for him to return. A woman who needed his guidance and help.

A woman he perhaps had stronger feelings for than he wished to admit.

Rotating his body, he rounded one of the houses in a tight circle that made his fins scream as the water tried to force him forward. But they would expect him to exit the old base on one side, and he intended to do it on the other.

If they wanted a fight, they needed to remember that he was the tactician. Not them.

As expected, they raced for where they thought he would leave, not even looking at where he might have hidden. Arges took his time then, letting them sit and stew in their feelings until he knew it would be difficult for them to see anything but rage. They would think with less intelligence and more feeling.

He would need every advantage he could take.

Hissing out a low breath, he launched himself from the corner of a building and swam in a giant arc around them. Once behind their bodies, he shot forward. Tail working hard, his breath ragged through his gills, he struck Maketes first around the waist. The smaller brother, the lighter-hearted one, would be the first to give up when the fight no longer suited him. It was safer to keep him away from Daios. Far away from the fight.

Their tails coiled together, twining and tugging, digging long spines into each other and trying to find the soft places beneath scales where they could draw blood. That was always the game when fighting one of his own kind.

Who would give up first due to blood loss? None of his people would stop fighting, no matter what limbs they lost or how death called to them.

A fight was a fight. And they would not give in.

They crashed into one of the old buildings, tearing right through the wall and spilling into the interior. Arges barely had a moment to notice that some of the pieces in here were still intact. An old table, a few floating pieces of driftwood, and countless barnacles attached to every surface before Maketes slipped out of his arms.

His yellow finned brother flared out, both fluke and side fins standing straight to make him look even larger than he already was. “Stop running, Arges.”

He would not. Not until they were farther away from her. “You know I can’t do that.”

“You can.” Maketes looked like he had been struck in the belly. Disgust turned his body a sickly yellow, not glimmering with his usual brightness.

Arges turned his attention to the holes in the walls, waiting for Daios to join them. “I was given this job for a purpose. I am going to fulfill what our own Mitéra has given me.”

“That didn’t look like a job to me.” Maketes let all the stiff fins drop until it was just his friend hovering in the water before him. The dust and debris made it difficult to see his expression, but he knew the color of sadness on his closest friend well enough. Maketes had never been able to hide his emotions like the rest of them. “You cannot truly believe I cannot see it. You have gone too far, Arges. Too deep into this. You need to be released from whatever poison she’s injected into your veins.”

“Is that what he told you? That she is some poisonous sea creature who has turned my will into her own?” He sliced his fluke through the water, forcing his brother back. “Idiot. You have seen her for yourself. Do you really believe a creature like that could harm me?”

“I think there are many tiny creatures in the sea who can do more damage than we think.” He batted away a small clown fish that was trying to dart past him. “You are blind to her wiles. I see that now. But Daios is right. You need our help.”

“I don’t need your help!” Arges thundered. “The person who needs your help is stuck in a bubble of air halfway underneath the ocean with one of our own kind terrorizing her. I have not lost my ability to count. How long

do you think it takes before our brother cracks that glass bubble? Before he drowns an innocent?”

Maketes had never been a killer. He was the brother who mourned any creatures they had to kill, even the ones they killed for food. He was the brother who took the time to value life. This must have been eating him up inside because he was going to be the reason someone died. Arges could use that to his advantage.

His brother wavered for just a second, and it was enough.

Arges coasted a little closer, still with enough distance that he could flick his tail and disappear if he had to. “She’s scared, Maketes. I moved her here because I knew Daios would want to hunt her down. I tried to get her to a place where she could be comfortable. I can understand her language now. She can give you the same device. You can talk to her. Ask all the questions that you’ve wanted to ask for ages.”

“How?”

Arges turned his head and pointed to the small pinprick of metal beside his hearing holes. “It’s so simple. A small bit of pain, nothing worse than what we’ve felt before.”

He had him. Maketes had ever been curious, and he wasn’t the brother to be so serious. Fighting wasn’t in his blood and surely he would let go. He would turn away from Daios.

But then a blast of darkness erupted through the hole in the wall and Arges knew he had lost his chance. With a grunt, he was caught around the waist and thrown through the nearest wall.

“Maketes!” he shouted. “Get out of there!”

He didn’t have time to see if his yellow finned brother made it out of the collapsing building. Daios had a thick arm around his waist and he couldn’t wriggle free from his brother’s grip. He hated how deep he had to claw through Daios’s forearm, even knowing that it was the only one left. Surely his brother was not strong enough to fight like this. He’d only just lost his other arm.

The currents blasted them far away from the human homes, closer to the shore. Daios slapped his tail against his, coiling them together until they were locked. Impossible to get out of, and even more infuriating.

He hated grappling with his brother like this. Even when they were little brood mates, just out of the eggs, Daios had been bigger. He would wrap

himself around Arges and they would fight until they were both struggling for breath. This wasn't a fair fight. Not when they were so close together.

Locked in, he wriggled until his upper body was above his brothers. And then he used the sharp spines at the base of his elbows and brought them down upon Daios's shoulders. Over and over again, he fought against the thick water and didn't stop, even when black blood plumed around them. He would not, could not, stop.

Mira needed him. Every moment he was away from her was another moment when she was alone. Alone and scared, and it tore at him worse than his brother's claws.

Daios picked up speed. And for a moment, he didn't have the faintest idea why. Was his brother going to slam him into the rocks? Was that the plan? Would he scrape Arges's spine against the sharp ground until he had ripped all the flesh from his back?

He realized too late what the plan really was. With one more burst of his powerful tail, Daios thrust them both out of the water. But his strong arm continued the movement and with a terrible snarl, he launched Arges out of the water and out onto the sharp ground. Stones cut into his tail, ripping through the gills of his side and tearing through his hip fin.

The sound that came out of Arges was unlike anything he had ever made before. His hip fin was nearly ripped off his body. He didn't know if he could ever reattach it, and if he could, he'd never use it like before. His arm was bleeding from where he had skidded, and it hurt to breathe through the right side of his gills. Going back into the water would be painful. Though the salt would cleanse his wounds, it would also make them infinitely worse.

Gritting his teeth, he braced himself on the ground and leveraged himself upright. He wasn't far from the water, but dragging himself back into it would tear many scales from his tail.

Daios lifted his head above the water just as a crackle echoed through the air. Light flashed and then the sky itself cried out in anger, rumbling its rage that a creature of water was so far from its home.

"I saw you with it," Daios said, his voice mimicking the rumble that still rocked through the skies. "I saw the look on your face."

"She is the mission I was given by Mitéra."

"You have feelings for her. Abominable feelings that will tear you and the rest of us down. You will die if they see what you have become, Arges."

Our people will never accept her. It is unnatural, and the sea will destroy you both for how you feel.”

“How would you know?” Arges spat, his fingers curling so hard on the rocks that the webbing between his fingers split. “You have no right to speak for the gods. I have seen my future with the ancients. I know the path that I will choose, and the path I wish to choose.”

For a brief moment, there was a flash of sadness across Daios’s face. “The future you saw must be one of loneliness and hardship, then, brother. I have no interest in seeing you rip apart the very legacy you have built after years of fighting and proof that you are worth following. Your only future is one of pain.”

“Pain caused by you,” he replied.

“Yes.” Daios’s eyes flashed red, and the sea kissed the stump of his arm that had started to bleed again. “I will hunt you down for the rest of time if necessary. You will not taint my home with her scent, or any other scent of achromo. They are monstrous creatures who have no love for our home or our people. You deny our very existence by touching her.”

His brother sank beneath the sea, leaving Arges alone with the storm above his head and the thunderous noises of the land’s rage. He could feel it boiling in his own chest. Churning and tossing like he’d swallowed a kraken, and it wanted to tear him apart from the inside out.

The seas parted on a yellow gold head, and he met Maketes’s gaze. “I will take care of your brother,” he said. “But you have to know that it is a dangerous game you play. Soon enough, the land and the sea will fight again. What side will you fight on?”

With those words, Maketes left Arges alone. Stranded on the land, bleeding and broken.

THIRTY-ONE

MIRA

She wasn't sure how long she waited for him. There was another undine swimming around the dome, and she wasn't quite certain where it was at all times. The male, and it was clearly male, circled her multiple times. Every now and then she would catch a glimpse of his marked face, and the gills along the sides that were so similar and yet so different from Arges.

She could tell him apart from the others without any issue at all. The lighter blue color of this male, the size of it, none of these were the correct

features of her undine. But she knew how dangerous all of them were. And she knew how much danger she was in right now.

If the creature wanted a show, though, she wouldn't give it one. Grinding her teeth together in anger, she sat on the very edge of the bed and remained frozen in place. She didn't move even a muscle, not to reply to Byte's questions, not to do anything other than stare at the moon pool.

Apparently, this angered the creature.

The undine smacked the glass multiple times, trying its best to get her to move. She even saw it lift a rock to the dome, but the ancient glass held. Even if a couple places where he had struck were marked by the stone's dust, it did not shatter. Mira halfway expected it to.

What would she do then? She could swim to the surface for air, but then she wouldn't be able to see the undines that were hunting her. They were faster, stronger, more capable in every way, shape, and form. There was nothing she could do.

If they wanted her dead, she would die. And her only regret would be that Arges himself hadn't killed her. At the very least, she would have respected a death at the hands of an undine like him.

This creature? The one who swam in circles above her, baring his teeth like a shark? This was a child who did not scare her in the slightest.

"Mira?" Byte said, hours after she'd first sat on the edge of the bed. "There are more of them."

She stood a little too quickly. Her heart skipped a beat as she peered out of the parts of the windows that weren't quite so covered in algae. And sure enough, there were two more undines swimming toward the next. Both she recognized from before. The angry red one, missing an arm and trailing blood from the angry stump. And the yellow one who stayed farther back. But it was the red one who paused right above her.

He glared down, malice on every scale of his body. Mira glared back before pointing to his wounds and giving him a feral smile. "I know you can't understand me, but I'm glad he hurt you. You deserved it."

Mira didn't flinch when he punched the glass, and only watched with mild apathy as the others tugged him away. The three of them left, and only black blood remained in the water. Only then did she sink back onto the bed, her legs suddenly jelly.

"Where is he?" she whispered. "The others came back, but he..."

“Mira?” Byte asked. “There is plenty here for you. If he doesn’t come back, you will not starve.”

That wasn’t helpful. She didn’t want to be alive and stuck by herself for all eternity. It wasn’t living if she wasn’t able to speak with anyone other than a robot. Panic clawed its way up her throat. She could feel it trying to crawl out of her belly, trying to rip her mouth open from the inside with a scream that came from deep within.

She sat back down on the side of the bed. Folding her hands in her lap, she tried to still their trembling before she burst into movement. She needed to get dressed. First, she would wash in the small washroom that desalinated the water so she could actually get clean without being crusty. After that very short shower, she bolted out into the main chamber to see if he was back. He wasn’t. So she got dressed in another pale eggshell colored dress. Boring, plain, but it didn’t matter the color.

She was so scared he wouldn’t come back. Arges had said the other undines were hunting her, but what if they had actually been hunting him? What if they were mad at him for keeping her? What if he was dead?

Thunder and lightning rumbled above her head for what felt like hours. The darkness fell, and small solar lights blinked on in the dome. Their cold white light did nothing to stop the fear in her heart.

But then she heard it. A soft rap against the moon pool door. Clearly a knock, but not what she’d expected to hear. She ran for it, freezing when she heard Byte’s voice.

“What if it’s... not him?”

She didn’t know. If she let another undine in here, they would kill her. Death might not even be quick if they dragged her into the water. They might toy with her, drowning her slowly until she eventually gave in.

“What if it is him?” she whispered, the words feeling haunted on her tongue.

Opening the moon pool wasn’t a choice. It was a necessity. She had to know if he was alive. She had to know if he had come back to her.

At first, the moon pool opened slowly and revealed nothing. Just black water beneath her that the light from her dome didn’t penetrate. Her breath was ragged in her lungs, she felt her heart beating faster, faster, until...

The smallest glow of blue from the sand underneath the dome. Like he was lying there, like he...

“Arges,” she gasped.

Mira plunged into the ocean without another thought. Kicking her feet and spearing into the sea toward him, she hooked her arms underneath his. Mira felt along his body for whatever purchase she could get before she planted her feet on the sand and shoved them both toward the moon pool door. Other undines be damned. She wasn't afraid of them.

But she was afraid *for* him.

Together, they struggled to the dome. And once his head came out of the water, he let out a ragged gasp and seemed to come back alive. He reached for the edge, keeping one arm around her as though he was still trying to protect her.

"Stop it," she scolded. "You're hurt. Get out of the water, Arges."

"I can't... Have to get you..."

He wasn't making any sense. She clambered out of the pool and then turned toward him, grabbing onto his wrists and helping him drag himself out of the water. It took so much effort for him. Eventually, he gave one massive splash of his tail and threw himself onto the floor. But then his tail was still in the water and she didn't know if that was safe. So she bent and picked up the massive tail, heaving it out of the water with her whole body until she could finally slam the door shut again.

And then she was in the room with an undine. Again. Just like it had been in the beginning.

Their gazes locked before he made a strange undulating motion with his chest again, and she groaned. "Oh, not that again."

At least he had the decency to turn away from her as he expelled all the water out of his gills. Thankfully, whoever had designed this dome had put vents on the floor near the moon pool. All the water drained who knows where, but at the very least, it wasn't all over her floor for her to mop up.

But he didn't look good. As the water came out of his gills, so did more of that dark liquid. Blood, she knew. And that wasn't all. The lights illuminated countless scratches, wounds, and torn pieces of delicate fins. His breathing was even ragged, rougher than she'd ever seen before.

It hurt her heart to look at him like this.

"What did they do to you?" she asked as she walked around him to get to the medkit.

"Nothing I wouldn't have done to them," he replied, quietly grumbling even though she could see how much it hurt him to even speak.

"For what? Keeping me here?"

Medkit in hand, she turned it on him and clicked a button. It would take a few moments for the device to calibrate to his body, and then she could get to work healing him. Of course, he had no idea what she was even holding. She should explain. She should...

Her stomach turned as she rounded his side and saw the extent of the damage. First, rage swelled in her chest. She wanted to kick someone. To break something so that she might get a little of this aggression out. And then her heart just hurt. Mira felt like she might burst into tears as she sank down next to him, carefully reaching out with her hand and grabbing his.

"I don't know where I can touch you," she whispered. "Everything looks like it hurts."

"This doesn't." He squeezed her fingers in his and then drew her hand over his chest. She could feel his heart beating, though it was a strange beat compared to her own. "Neither does this. Nothing ever hurts when you touch me."

A ragged sob made its way out of her mouth. "Arges. You look awful."

"I feel awful." But then he rubbed her hand up and down his chest in a soothing motion, and he sighed. "Less awful now."

Her heart squeezed and every part of her wanted to weep. He didn't deserve this pain because she was in his life. Leaning down, she pressed their foreheads together and tried to will her own healthy energy into him.

With his wounded arm, he reached up and cupped the back of her head, holding her a little closer. For a moment, it felt like nothing had happened between their kiss and this moment. She could pretend he wasn't injured if his fingers weren't shaking as he tried to hold her to him. "I'm so sorry," she whispered again. "I have a tool that will help heal you."

"In a moment."

"You're bleeding all over the floor, Arges."

"I know." He inhaled again, and she watched the torn gills on the side of his neck attempt to flutter. But they were so torn up, it was hard for them to move at all. "I just want a few more moments, Mira. Just let me remind myself that you are fine."

"I am," she said. "Thanks to you."

They stayed still for a while. Just breathing each other in, even as she felt the shudders running through his body every time he breathed. He was in so much pain, and yet somehow this was more important.

Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore. Mira pulled herself away and picked up the medkit. It looked similar to her welder, but this one had a strange goo that healed everything really fast. She had no idea how it worked.

"This doesn't hurt when I use it on myself, but we have different make ups. I don't know if it'll..."

He tilted his head away from her, exposing the wounded gills to her with ease. "I am no stranger to pain, Mira. If it will heal me, then I would rather have it done. It cannot hurt worse than the water did."

She winced. "I imagine that was painful. If you don't mind, I'm going to get started. Can you tell me what happened while I do this?"

She thought only to distract him from the pain, but his story made her hands shake. Already she felt terrible as she lifted his torn gills and gently reattached them with the medkit. This time it didn't use goo like it would have for her. Instead, it seemed to reattach the pieces of his body with a strange, clear, jelly-like substance. But it held everything together, and she knew it would speed up the healing process. At the very least, when she was finished with his gill, his breathing sounded better.

He relaxed a bit into her grip, turning to face her as he told her more of his brother's anger, and the rage with which he had thrown Arges onto the stones.

He hissed a bit when she reached his ribs, but the worst was when she got to that torn hip fin.

"This looks very painful," she said, not sure where to start with it. "Should I just..."

"Do what you have to do, achromo."

Figuring she should just get it over with and not make either of them wait any longer, she grabbed the fin and put it back in place. He arched, his spine coming up off the floor as she apologized repeatedly. The sound of his pain, the deep rumble echoing through his gritted teeth, made every inch of her ache with him.

"I'm sorry," she said, turning the medkit on and filling the space so the fin would stay in place. "I'm so sorry. I know this hurts, it's almost done. It'll be okay."

And then she was done. Tossing the medkit away from them, she cupped her hands behind his head and drew it up to her chest. "You're okay."

You're going to be okay now, I promise. That'll fix you, and you won't hurt anymore."

But then she realized he wasn't shaking in pain. He was laughing, his arms already coming around her and holding her a little more tightly against him. He lifted his head, looking up at her with far too much humor for a man who had just been in significant pain. "You are more worried about my wellbeing than I thought you would be."

"You were in pain!"

"I have been in pain many times in my life. I've been bitten by sharks, attacked by squid, even had a turtle latch onto a gill when I was little." He shrugged. "It's all something that happens when you live as we do. I have never been cared for so gently, though. I will say that."

She shouldn't preen at the words. She shouldn't be proud that she had taken care of him better than others, but she absolutely was.

Still. He laughed at her when she'd been worried about him. "I should toss you back into the sea, you beast."

"Why's that?"

"I was actually worried about you."

"I know you were." He smoothed his hand down her back, tugging her a little closer until she had no option but to straddle him. Then he did the strangest thing yet. He arranged her legs on either side of his tail, then snuggled her against his odd heartbeat.

Resting her cheek on his chest, she toyed with his rib gills. "Are you really okay now?"

"I'll be fine. I just need rest." He never stopped touching her. Gently moving his thumbs over her spine, sometimes coiling his fingers through her hair. She even felt him touch the lobe of her ear once.

And when she was almost drifting off to sleep, she muttered, "This can't be comfortable for you. You're laying on a hard floor."

"You'd be surprised, Mira." Then she swore he added, "Having you in my arms is the most comfortable I've ever been."

THIRTY-TWO

ARGES

He came to the next morning, already significantly healed. His body, though still sore and a little aching, was no longer torn or bleeding. Arges could even flex the fin at his hip. And though it wasn't moving like normal—not even close, if he was being honest—he could at least move it.

And then there was the warmth spread out across his chest. The heat of a woman who had not only saved him but also wriggled her way into his heart. He wanted to hold her for longer. He wanted to cup the back of her

head and rub her over every inch of his scales so that he could keep her scent with him always.

It was a strange sensation. One he'd only experienced with her, and he knew that was silly. There were plenty of his own people who were very interested in him. If he wanted a mate, he could find one with a snap of his fingers.

But he wanted her.

His brother's warning rose in his mind, filtering through the warm fuzzy feeling of the morning. He would be hunted. His people would never understand their connection. Of course, that hurt his heart. He didn't want to give up anyone at all and certainly didn't think a love with this woman was worthy of throwing him out of their home. Nerves churned in his belly and he had the sudden desire to shove her off of him.

Then he remembered the skeletons outside of this dome. The way they had been coiled around each other, even in death. He knew what was the most likely story for how they had ended up there.

She'd died. She'd been in this dome, with her pretty dresses and all the beautiful things that undine had gathered for her from across the ocean. Age had caught up with her, or maybe she had gotten sick and no one had been able to help her. The achromos would certainly deny that any of their own people had ever had a connection with one of his own.

So maybe she had gotten sick and there was nothing her mate could do. When she had died, he'd gathered her in his arms and sank them both beside the home. Perhaps he had coiled his tail around her then, keeping them both beneath the waves until he had died.

Though the story was a sad one, there was also a lot of happiness in it as well. The love the male had for his mate was one that had extended beyond death itself.

He'd be lying if he tried to convince himself that he felt any different for her. For Mira.

Sliding his hands down her back, he felt the delicate bumps of her spine and the way she shifted in her sleep. She drew even closer to him, nuzzling her face against his chest and letting out a little sleepy sigh that went right into his very heart. She was so comfortable with him, knew she was so safe that she could sleep deeply. She didn't even wake when he touched her.

It was an honor. And it was one that affected him far too much. Already he could feel himself growing thicker, longer underneath his scales, until

soon he would embarrass himself in front of her. She wasn't singing the mating songs. She wasn't asking him to give her pleasure or coiling around him as his own people would do.

But then again, he had no idea how to court one of her kind. She seemed to always take the lead in that.

Her breathing shifted, changing a bit until he thought perhaps she was awake. Then he knew she was, because her fingers moved along his arms, gently feeling over the spines hidden near his elbow.

"Good morning," she said, her voice a little hoarse with sleep. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sleep on top of you all night. You must be so uncomfortable."

He was, but not in the way she thought.

Clearing his throat, he forced his hands to release their hold on the pale dress she wore as she slowly sat up. And then she was straddling him, arching up with her legs on either side of his hips and her arms over her head. She took his breath away. Even with sea wrinkled clothes and hair that tangled around her face, those lovely breasts lifted with her movement and the sun played across her pale skin. He wanted to taste her. Touch her. Linger in all the places that he couldn't touch because he knew such touches risked her life.

He just wanted to keep her. He wanted to live the rest of his life with her and his brothers had been a wake up call that he hadn't ever wanted. So for now, he would live in a dream with her. A fairytale where she was his, and he was hers and the rest of the world didn't matter.

She glanced down at him and her eyes widened. "Arges, your lips are cracking."

"Probably."

"Why are they cracking?"

"My people were not made to be out of the water for such a long time. I'm sure my skin is drying out and my scales will probably crack as well." He lifted his tail, letting it thump onto the ground behind her. "My fins will rip eventually as well."

He'd never seen her move so quickly. She bolted upright and ran for the handle that opened the moon pool. With a frantic slap of her hands, she opened it and then ran back to him. He let her draw his tail about, helping her move the heavier weight when he thought she needed the help. She

didn't notice, at least, grunting and shoving until his fluke hit the water with a slap and half of his body was dragged in after it.

He sat up, amused at her antics.

"Why are you smiling?" she grumbled. "You're going to shrivel up like a raisin!"

"I don't know what that is."

"It's not good." She shoved at his shoulders, trying to push him into the water. "Go."

He caught her wrist, dragging her closer to him. "What if I don't want to?"

"I don't care what you want to do! You're getting in the water."

Mira shoved at him again, and it took everything in him to not laugh. She was so tiny and her shoves felt like a little fish butting against him, trying to get him to move. Still holding onto her wrist, he reeled her into him.

She hit his chest with a soft "oof," before he tugged her back onto her knees beside him. She knelt there, staring into his eyes with so much worry.

"*Kairos*," he murmured, gently dragging his finger down her cheek.

She interrupted him. "You've called me that for a long time. What does it mean? My translator doesn't know what to do with that one."

"It is a word with many meanings," he replied. His throat closed a bit, knowing he was about to reveal maybe too much. "For us, it is a fleeting but crucial moment. An ephemeral rightness of time and place. A moment that brings you to where you were supposed to be."

Her eyes filled with tears, and he hated seeing that saltwater in her eyes. "Arges... You really need to get into the water. You're going to hurt yourself worse."

"You make my hearts bleed when you worry like that."

"Hearts?"

"I have two." Arges brought her hand to first one, then the other. "One beats for my people, and it will never stop beating for them. But the other beats for you, Mira. I'm sorry it took me such a long time to realize that."

Her lips parted, and her gaze was locked on her hand touching his chest. She spread her fingers, and that touch seared through him. "I have a feeling I don't really understand what you're trying to say."

"My brothers want me to return you to your city or kill you." He covered her hand with his own, holding her tight against him. "But I have

no intention of letting you go, Mira. You have captured my heart, stolen it just as you have my attention and my time. I cannot let you go. I would be denying my heart the reason it beats.”

That pale face turned toward him and he couldn't help himself. She had called it a kiss, and it sounded so important to her. So he cupped the back of her head and drew her closer to him.

This time, he kissed her. He pressed their lips together, gently tasting her and teasing her lips to soften. He'd never known how wonderful this would feel. And yet, the achromos were right about something.

This kissing made him want her even more. It made him want something that he knew he should not have, but that he would steal for a few moments, if only to experience it with her.

He devoured her mouth, nipping at her lips with his sharper teeth and trying to coax her to open her mouth so he could taste her tongue. And when she did, oh, it made his entire body ache. His gills fluttered, the scales along his cock shifting. He was so close to extruding right out and then she would realize how incredibly different they likely were.

“You have to get into the water,” she murmured against his mouth, her fingers digging into his chest. “You can't dry out. Especially not... If you...”

Did she want to continue this? He certainly did. He didn't want to let go of her, nor did he want to find out what would happen if he did. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Into the water.” Where else would he be asking her to go? He drew back enough to see that her eyes had drifted shut, and she weaved toward him when he pulled away. “Come into the water with me again, *kairos*.”

“*Kairos*. That's what you always call me.” She looked up at him in awe. “You've called me that for ages now. Surely you haven't known—”

He raked his claws through her hair, using them to tug her head back so she had to look at him. “I will call you whatever I wish, Mira. *Kairos*. achromo. *Mine*.”

He snarled the last word, every inch another creature that should have terrified her and yet, she looked at him with only more lust in her eyes. She wanted him.

It threw him off what he normally wouldn't have done. With any of his people, he would have bitten her neck. Marked her. Torn into flesh, and waited for her to do the same to him. She would have already marked him

with her spines or claws. But their females were so much larger than the males. She was so tiny, and he wasn't sure they would even fit.

They would. He was certain of it. They were made for each other, just as the sea gods had intended. If it took a little work to fit them together, then they would figure it out.

But then again, he had to figure out how to even get them to fit.

Leaning to the side, he hooked her device with his claw and held it out to her. "Come with me, Mira. I have many questions that I need answered."

"Wouldn't talking up here be a little easier?"

"I don't intend to talk." His gills quivered again, and he let his eyes wander down her body before meeting her gaze. "Make your decision, Mira."

Maybe he was pushing too hard. Maybe this would overwhelm her, but she looked at him like she wanted this. Like she wanted him. When he slipped back into the water, she didn't hesitate. She pulled the device from his grip, yanked it on over her head, and followed him into the water.

They had slept through most of the day and into the night. The storm had passed, and the moon turned everything silvery and bright. Spears of moonlight caressed her skin with a metallic loveliness that took his breath away. Her dress floated up around her hips, revealing long legs that were all the same color. No scales, only smooth, lovely skin that would have once disgusted him.

Now, it only made him want to taste her. To touch her.

She turned toward him, her hair floating around her head and not a single moment of fear in her movements. She swam toward him, using her arms to drag her through the water.

The currents shoved her the last distance into his grip. She twined her legs around him, already arching into his touch even though he knew this likely wasn't where she had expected any of this to happen.

But the cool water flowed over his gills, soothing the remaining aches and pains that still lingered. Then she touched him, and he forgot he'd been injured at all.

The currents flowed around them, coiling around both of their bodies and drawing a blooming scent to his gills that filled him with longing. He had smelled that from her before, but he had never realized that it meant she wanted him. Needed him. Desired him just as he did her.

Breathing it in deep, he had to force himself not to rub against her just to keep that scent. “Are you sure?” he asked, his voice low and booming. “Are you certain this is what you want?”

“I’ve never been more certain.” Even with her voice muffled by the device that helped her breathe, he could still hear the passion in her tone. “I want you, Arges. I have for a long time.”

Perhaps they both knew this moment would have to be stolen. That they couldn’t stay together for any longer than a few moments, because it was such a risk for them to even linger like this. To even be in the waves together meant that others could smell them, hunt them, find them.

He drew his hands down the smooth planes of her legs, feeling the warmth that radiated off her body even in the chilled water, and he found he just didn’t care. He had never been the one to risk anything, especially not her, but right now, this was worth every risk.

“I cannot kiss you,” he said, moved his hand over the device on her face. “Is this important to your people?”

“It’s nice, but not necessary.” She caught his hand and drew it down to her breast, molding his palm to her skin. “There are other ways to make this enjoyable.”

“I do not know your kind.” A small flare of nerves twisted inside him, wriggling like an eel in his belly. “Mating is rough and brutal for my people. The females are larger than us. We coil our tails together, fighting even while intertwined. There is much blood and much pain, along with pleasure.”

Her eyes widened in the water. “That’s not how it is for humans.”

“Then how is it?”

She cupped his hand in hers, easing his grip on her breast and softly gliding it over her skin. She used his thumb to ghost his touch over the peak, and to his fascination he saw her nipple grow harder beneath his gaze. “Soft,” she whispered. “Not always, but soft is always a good start. We touch. Linger. We use our tongue and fingers to bring the other person pleasure.”

“Tongues?” he tilted his head, watching her with a narrowed gaze. “You jest?”

“I do not.”

She leaned forward, and he had no way of knowing she was going to remove her rebreather. One second it was on, and the next he felt the warm,

wet glide of her tongue along his gill.

His scales slid to the side, and he popped out into the cold water. His gills shuddered, his body seized, and all the thoughts in his mind fled other than fight, fuck, or claim. By all the gods in the sea, he had never expected it to feel that good. He hadn't thought anything *could* feel that good! Her fingers had been stunning, but this?

She slid the device back over her face, hitting some button that cleared out the water as she leaned back. "Get the idea?"

"You'll do that again," he growled, gripping her a little too hard. "But first I'm going to do it to you."

THIRTY-THREE

MIRA

She had no idea what she was doing. Mira was wrapped around him like some kind of squid, coiling her limbs around him because that was what he said the females of his kind did. But she didn't think she could ever make herself seem larger than him. And if he was expecting a woman larger than him, one that would fight him and hurt him, it wouldn't be her.

It wasn't possible for her to overtake him, and she highly doubted that he would do anything but laugh if she tried.

So that meant she had to do things her way. She had to touch him the way a human would touch another. She had to convince him that there were other ways to have sex. Other ways to enjoy being with each other that weren't just fighting, blood, and fangs.

She was a little worried about the logistics, but they would see where this went. That was why she'd licked him. Just to see what he would do if she touched her tongue to him, to see what would happen if he realized there was another way to do this.

Perhaps his kind were violent, but she wouldn't survive that. Not with him. Not likely even with one of her own kind.

He had clearly enjoyed that touch, though. With an arm still around her back, he tilted her hips so her chest was spread out before him. "So you like gentle touches. That's what you say?"

"Human women do." She stared down at his black eyes, already burning with so much passion it made her heart speed up. "The men maybe prefer more forceful touches."

"I don't want to talk about other men."

"I have a feeling you're going to be very different, so neither do I." Maybe she was crazy to want him like this. He was an undine, not even remotely human, and yet all she could feel was more wetness pooling between her legs. His muscles were so tempting. She wanted to touch them, taste them, let her tongue trail between the valleys of his abs, even though she knew it was a risk every time she took off her rebreather.

And still, she wanted to risk it. She wanted to touch all of him.

Apparently, he was more interested in touching her. His hands slid from her collarbone all the way down to her belly. A wicked grin on his face, he drew his nails down the front of her dress. Not enough to tear her skin, or even to rip it from her shoulders. Just three lines on each side, enough for her breasts to peek out through the fabric.

But all the seduction in his gaze dropped away as he finally saw her breasts. He groaned, the sound rumbling through his rib gills and vibrating against her thighs.

"You're as pretty as I thought you would be," he said at the end of that groan, drawing her up through the water with his arm banded around her back. He brought her breasts right to his mouth, his hair tangling around her torso as he did so. "Taste," he murmured against her chest, drawing his lips over the tip of her nipple. "Humans like to be tasted."

He opened his mouth and oh, his tongue. That wasn't a normal tongue.

Mira couldn't stop her eyes widening as she saw that strange appendage leave his mouth. Dark blue and thicker than any tongue she'd ever seen before, it was covered in tiny bumps that she tried very hard not to think were growths until he flicked it over her nipple.

Then all she could think about was how incredible that would feel between her legs. The texture of it wasn't rough, like she'd thought. It was smooth and warm and almost clung to her skin as he licked at her again.

Groaning, fissures of pleasure moved through her body. Her stomach clenched, and she tried to squeeze her legs closed to help with the pressure between her thighs, but she couldn't with him between them.

"Good?" he asked.

She whimpered before nodding. It was all the permission he needed to devour.

He focused on nothing but tasting her skin. His tongue laved over her, moving from the sensitive place underneath her breasts, leaving tiny bite marks from his sharp teeth as he paid close attention to the softer skin where her heart beat against her ribs. Then he returned to her nipples, drawing them into his mouth with almost too much suction, rolling them with that *tongue* that was so much more than she'd expected. How hadn't she noticed the texture when she was kissing him? Maybe she'd been drunk with passion...

Like now.

Mira felt like she might fall apart at any second and all he'd done was taste her. But his hands hadn't moved. He held her in place, his tail coiling behind her, wrapping around itself because she realized he desperately wanted to wrap around her.

Why? She had no idea.

It didn't matter. She couldn't think beyond the need between her legs. Tightening her grip on his hips, she grabbed one of his hands and moved it between her legs. "Touch me."

"I am."

"Touch me here." She drew his hand down her stomach, down her pelvic bone. The skirt got in the way, but she knew he had to guess what she meant. Where she wanted him to touch.

Arges moved her skirts with a low growl that made even more liquid pool between her legs. She wanted to moan again, to tell him to make that

sound again and again because it vibrated his gills on his ribs and the vibration felt so fucking good.

His fingers slid over her stomach, almost like he was seeking something that he expected to be on the flat of her bone. But then his fingers moved lower, tentatively reaching between her legs until he touched her dripping folds.

Their gazes caught, and she watched his eyes roll back in his head and his gills stand out stark around his neck as he ran one finger down her slit. “So warm,” he murmured. “So smooth.”

“That shouldn’t be so sexy when you say it like that,” she murmured, arching into his touch. “More.”

“More?” He seemed almost pained when he said that, but then suddenly she was moving again. Thrust up by strong arms, through the water until her legs were wrapped around his neck.

And oh.

Oh.

The feeling of those soft, fluttering gills against her thighs was almost too much sensation. They were the barest feather-light touch that she’d always wanted but never knew how to ask for. Then he turned, just slightly, and his gills brushed along her pussy lips.

“Fuck,” she whimpered. He was... tasting her. Drawing the scent of her need into his gills, coating them with the fluid only she could create. It should be disgusting, but it only made her want him more as he turned his head back to her slit and licked his lips.

He murmured something, perhaps along the lines of being gentle, before he licked her from bottom to top. Unerringly, the bumps of his tongue slid along her clit and she couldn’t even think beyond that. It felt so good. So unusual. So right.

He would ruin her for anyone else like this. How would she ever fuck a human when she knew what it felt like to have an undine lick her?

“What else?” he murmured, drawing his lips along her folds like he was kissing her there. Soft and delicate, just like she’d asked.

What else? What did he mean by...

“Oh,” she muttered, trying to draw her mind out of the fog. “Inside.”

“Inside?” He seemed intrigued by the thought, then licked his lips.

He wasted no time in the slightest. His tongue sought out her opening and then plunged. Plunged deep inside of her and *oh* that ribbed texture.

She made a strange, hissing noise that she'd never made in her life before tunneling her hands into his hair. She held onto him, her thighs quaking as he ate and devoured and licked. Those bumps slid against every part of her that she'd never known existed, and then suddenly she was coming. Her muscles clenched around his head, likely too tight. He probably couldn't even breathe, considering she was clenching her thighs around his gills, but she couldn't stop herself.

Every part of her splintered apart, clenching down on his tongue and holding him in place while she let out a keening cry.

He seemed unaffected once she'd come down from it. Instead, he drew her down his body, sliding her pussy down his chest and onto his scales until she was back in his arms. "You are well?"

"Perfect," she whispered. "Absolutely perfect."

"Your females can enjoy this far more than mine can." He licked his lips, then leaned down to tongue her shoulder. "I like it when you scream."

Shivering, overstimulated, she thought perhaps she should make him feel the same way. "We've focused entirely on what I like. What about you?"

"I am easy to please."

"Are you?" Perhaps all males were the same, then. She twisted in his arms, trying to see where he would even have a cock. But he stilled her, wrapping an arm around her waist and turning her away from him.

Her back pressed against his chest, she could feel the hardness behind her thighs, trapped by the remnants of her skirt.

He thrust against her, and though it was a strange sensation, it was somehow still familiar. "I have concerns we are too different."

"I know you aren't a human," she replied with a little chuckle. "Can I touch you?"

His hands glided down to her waist, slowly bunching her skirts up. Her legs glided down in the water, brushing against his tail that slowly coiled around her. Just the bottom hooked around her feet, holding them together and stuck in place.

He didn't reply. Instead, she felt another thrust at her back and suddenly there was something similar to a cock in between her thighs. He'd glided the head through, smoother than a human and more pointed than she'd expected. Thick, though. God, he was thick.

But then... Oh, then she felt another prod at her lower back.

She gasped, her rebreather suddenly not giving her anywhere near enough oxygen. "You have two?"

"Most creatures in the sea do," he grunted, but she felt him still against her back. "Your kind do not?"

No. They absolutely did not. But the mere thought of two had her... hot. She surprised herself with that, certain that two cocks would have sent her running at any moment other than this one. But the feeling of him gently gliding between her thighs, pressing against her clit and somehow smoother than anything she'd ever touched, made her want him even more.

She braced herself on his forearms and turned. Perhaps this was how he and his kind had sex, but she wanted to see him. She wanted to look at him.

His tail loosened enough for her to spin around, and she pulled one of her legs free, leaving the other to be trapped in the coil of his tail. Reaching up, she wove her fingers through his gills and watched his eyes roll back in his head again as she stroked the soft membranes there.

"Tell me if I do anything you don't like," she whispered.

He stared at her like she'd lost her mind. "There's nothing you could do that I won't like."

She somehow doubted that, but still. She reached between them and discovered what she was working with. Two cocks, one on top of the other, extruding from his scales that had slid to the side to reveal them. She'd explore that later, but right now just the feel of him in her hand was enough to make her pant.

He was so different, but eerily similar to the toys she'd used before. Smooth, almost textureless, but thick and conveniently tapered, so it should be rather easy to feed him inside of her. And right now, that's all she wanted to do.

Holding one with a firm grip, she experimentally pumped her hand up and down him. He bucked into her fist, hissing out a long breath with an almost angry look in his eyes.

"I don't want this to end so soon," he scolded.

"Why not?" she asked, lifting a brow. "You have two."

He spun them in the water, and her back hit the sand surprisingly hard. Suddenly he was everywhere, that long tail wrapping underneath her hips and coiling around her leg. The other leg he clutched in a webbed hand as he drew her even closer to him. Rising over her like some god of the sea, all she could stare at was that muscle and endless mottled gray skin.

And through it all, she still notched him at her entrance. They both stilled the moment he brushed against her, freezing as they realized this was the point of no return. If they did this, they were tied together even more than they already were.

He flexed his hips, sliding inside her only an inch, but it was like he had poured molten fire into her veins. She was stretched, speared by a cock that was almost too large, but somehow so right. So smooth and gliding into her body without any barrier or resistance.

Tilting her head back, she groaned as he sank in another inch. Then another. His tail shifted underneath her, arching her back even more, so he slipped in as far as her body would let him.

A long sound erupted from his chest, and she opened her eyes to see all his gills fluttering at the same time. He was so otherworldly, so ugly and beautiful at the same time as he took her offering. His second cock slipped against her as well, laying across her clit, but not moving enough for it to help.

“You feel so good,” he groaned. “So tight.”

“Move,” she whispered.

She realized maybe his kind didn't move. Maybe they locked together like some species of fish and that was it. But she refused to not get her dues on this. So she arched her back, rocking her hips against him. Pulling back so he slid almost entirely out of her. He hadn't stopped her, other than the clenching of his fingers on her hips and a slight moan that made her wonder if he thought she was already leaving him.

But then she slammed her hips back into his, clutching at his scales for leverage as she forced him back inside her. The other cock slid with her, gliding the entire time on her clit, the delicious friction absolutely perfect. It was a constant, heavy weight against the sensitive bundle of nerves. His eyes snapped open, and she knew the moment it clicked.

He grabbed onto her hips and slammed in again. Again. Hammering into her body, just as she so desperately wanted. Though the texture of his cock didn't give her much friction, the stretching certainly did. She was pushed nearly to her limit. Forcing her body to take him, turning an aching burn into a pleasure that consumed and burst through her until she clamped down on him again, nearly screaming into her rebreather as he arched over her as well.

She felt him come. Felt the warm pulse of his seed flooding her insides. So much more than a human. So much that it leaked out of her, rising from where they were joined in thin tendrils that shimmered with a hundred colors, like a pale oil slick.

Breathing hard, she stared up at him with some form of awe in her eyes, she was certain. “Wow,” she whispered.

He was breathing hard as well, his gills still flared wide. “That was acceptable?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Good.” He grabbed her by the hips and turned her around. She laid on his tail, her stomach pressed against the undulating scales when she felt a second, hard touch against her opening. “Because I have two.”

She arched her back and screamed as he slid in again. This time felt different. This time, he didn’t let her adjust or to sit with him inside. He pulled back and slammed in again, his clawed hands digging into the sand on either side of her head as he used his tail to hold her in place. The water grew cloudy around them as he rutted into her, his big body pressing against her from every angle.

But in this way, she could feel his scales rubbing against her sensitive skin. He seemed to forcefully slide her along them, marking himself with her body and the scent of her passion.

“So good,” he muttered, his teeth flashing beside her head before he pressed his lips to her shoulder. “So tight.”

She couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe. Was the rebreather even working anymore? She had no idea. She arched back against him, tilting her hips so he had an easier access. So he could slip in and out even faster as she felt herself clenching around him again.

He hissed out a long breath, bubbles erupting in the water around them, and suddenly his movements were even more frantic, more desperate. One hand clenched down on her waist and he jerked her against him, grinding into her with the smallest of thrusts that somehow still moved him, but she could constantly feel him against her. Around her. In her.

Rearing up, he used his tail to bring her with him. She was limp in his grip, could do nothing other than take what he gave her. Wild now, he thrust harder, faster, moving into her with the undulations of the sea.

Frantically, she grabbed one of his hands and pressed his fingers against her clit, moving them with her own fingers to show him what she wanted.

Then she splintered, shattered, screaming into the mask yet again as she came so hard she thought she might have died.

He came harder this time, shuddering against her back even as she felt a sharp prick at the side of her neck. The pain didn't even register as she felt another flood of come between her legs, almost too hot even as it seeped out of her.

Breathing hard, he pressed his lips to her shoulder, her neck, her cheek, every part of her he could reach with her facing away from him.

"You are perfect," he whispered against her skin. "So perfect."

If she could feel her limbs, she'd have said the same to him. But the feeling of him still inside her, the sensation of pleasure that had almost popped her heart, she found she had nothing else to say. There was only wonder, and the realization that she couldn't ever leave him. Not after this.

Fuck, she was in love with an undine.

THIRTY-FOUR

ARGES

His whole life unraveled the moment she touched him. Fuck, that was a lie. The moment he laid eyes on her was the moment he should have known that he would never be the same again.

This woman, this achromo who fought with an undine even knowing what terrible things he could do to her, had captured his heart. He had admired her bravery back then, but he had no way of knowing that bravery would turn into an admiration that eased into love. True, blissful love. He

felt better when he was with her. Like his mind stilled and his soul eased. Like he had been searching his entire life for someone who could see him. Just him.

Not the warrior. Not the man who could save his people and who was good at attacking the achromos. Not the tactician with the brain who could see through what the achromos built.

All she saw was Arges. The monster who had kidnapped her and the creature she had forgiven. They'd fought. They'd argued and drawn blood both ways. And still she found it in her heart to forgive him.

How did he deserve a woman like this? How had he found someone who was so fierce and yet so soft at the same time?

He was a fool for her.

Gathering her limp body in his arms, he swam up toward the moon pool. The longer they were in the water, the more chances there were for his people to hunt her down.

His brother knew where they were. Daios had all but given him an ultimatum. Bring her back to her people, send her home where they would fight against each other for the rest of their lives, or the People of Water would kill her. Because if Daios didn't, someone else would.

Arges couldn't do that to her. He couldn't watch her die because he had been incapable of keeping her safe. He just didn't know if there was anywhere else for him to take her. This dome had clearly been created with one intent in mind. To keep an achromo safe. To keep someone like her alive underneath the waves with a way for them still to be close.

He wished he had thought of it himself. He wished he had provided her with a safe place to rest her head, built with his own two hands.

Drawing her up to the surface, he reached to put her back on the edge of the metal dome. But something tugged at the back of his head when he did it.

Wincing, he reached for the aching spot, only to see her do the same thing at the side of her neck. What was plaguing them? He hadn't hurt her; he was certain of that. He'd been so careful with his spines or any of the dangerous parts of his body. And she would have let him know if she was harmed. There hadn't been the scent of blood in the water, so what...

He watched with horror as she pushed her hair away from her neck and he saw one of the tendrils from the mess of his hair impaled in the side of her neck.

“Don’t move,” he said, reaching out to her with a shaking hand. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“It’s all right.” She seemed strangely fine with the thought that something was sticking inside her. “I felt it when it happened, but I didn’t think it was actually in me. Just let me pull it out.”

“I don’t know if you should.” Arges moved a little closer, brushing her hand away so he could see what was happening.

It appeared that one of his tendrils had speared into her neck, right through the soft flesh. There was a strange goo around it, one he had never seen come out of a tendril. He didn’t know what his body was doing. This wasn’t natural in the slightest. He had mated before. His body had never reacted like this, and certainly never without his permission to do so.

Byte’s box opened in his peripheral, but Arges was far too nervous to look away from the wound and the strange sight of a tendril of his hair moving underneath her skin.

“Would you like me to scan you, Miss Mira?” the robot asked.

“Sure, Byte. Go ahead.”

“Perhaps you should get the medkit while I do so.”

He swore the robot said all this with judgment. There was a tone to its tinny voice that said it thought he had tried to kill her, and now they were all going to have to fix the issue.

Glaring at the box, Arges reached for the medkit and handed it to her. His arms were longer, and he didn’t want her yanking out the strange appendage with no way to heal her. What if this ripped her throat open? What if she bled out in front of him?

“Scanning now.”

He froze as that green ray of light moved over him as well. It was inevitable that it would need to do so. He’d seen the creature scan Mira before and had thought it looked painful. So he waited for the bite of the light to burn through his skin, to sear through his flesh as it tried to seek out what was wrong with him. But the light did... nothing. It was just a light. He couldn’t even feel where it was touching his body if he stopped looking at it, but still every gill flattened hard to his sides as if he could hide from the robot.

“Scan complete,” Byte finally said. “This is interesting.”

“Interesting?” Mira said with a laugh, but he could see the faint way her eyes crinkled when she said it. She was nervous, too. “What is in my neck,

Byte?”

“It appears the undines have an unusual way of mating with your kind. I do believe that is what you were doing outside.”

He watched Mira’s cheeks turn a pretty shade of dark red. “It was.”

“It appears your undine’s body has made changes of its own to connect with you more. In a way, to keep you safe. That tube in your throat, I believe, would allow him to breathe for you. If you were to take your rebreather off, as long as you were connected, portions of the oxygen he is receiving through filtering the water in his gills would go to you. He would, of course, have to breathe a little faster to make up for the oxygen you breathe, but as long as you weren’t doing anything too strenuous, you could actually breathe underwater with him.”

Arges wasn’t quite following all that. What did the creature mean they could breathe underwater together? That he was breathing for her?

“No wonder I was a little lightheaded,” she muttered, tapping her fingers on her knees. “So what you’re saying is I shouldn’t need the rebreather as long as we’re connected?”

“I imagine it will be an uncomfortable experience to get used to. It’s very similar to having a machine breathing for you. You would not need to breathe at all, because air is being directly sent to your lungs through your neck. It is... fascinating. It shouldn’t work, but it very well might.”

Arges held up his hand for the two of them to stop talking, and also so he could just breathe for a second. His hearts were racing a little too fast, and he suddenly felt a bit like he needed to float for a little while and get his thoughts under control. “Wait. Both of you stop talking for a second. I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

Mira grabbed his hand in the air and held it close to her chest. “We’re both saying that this tube in my throat might be a way for me to be in the water without the rebreather. The undine body apparently makes concessions for the person it’s mating with. If we can figure out how to do this whenever you want to do it, then I could breathe underwater with you indefinitely. No more grabbing the rebreather. Nothing on my face.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Apparently it is.”

He couldn’t... do that. No undine could take an achromo and put them in the water for good. Her people didn’t live underneath the waves like his did.

They couldn't breathe. They drowned. This was the way of things and he hadn't just created a way for her to... to...

Ghosting his fingers over the place where the tendril connected to her neck, he touched his fingers to the goo that clearly was keeping the air inside of her. "What does this connect to?"

"We sometimes call it a windpipe," she said with a slight laugh. "But I think it's a similar tube that goes right to my lungs."

"This is wrong," he whispered. "I shouldn't be able to do this to you. No one should be able to do this to achromos."

"But what if this is a way for our people to live together?" She cupped his hand in hers, holding it against her neck. "What if this means that you can return to your people with a better option? I know you've been saying your mission has always been to kill me, Arges. But what if you were sent to me for a bigger reason? What if we were thrown together to prove that our kinds can actually be together? For good?"

That couldn't be the reasoning. The ancients would have shown him that future, but it was just him and her. It was just their life, their future, their child growing in her belly. There hadn't been anyone else in that vision.

And in this moment, he knew what he had to do.

The future the ancients had shown him was a future with him and Mira alone. There was no room for either of their people in it, so he had to do the right thing here. If he wanted to keep her, and the future that had given him new breath in his lungs, he had to tell his people that he would leave them. He had to give it all up. For her.

He had never made an easier decision in his life.

Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to hers, lingering for a few moments before he wrenched the tendril free from her neck. Mira hissed out a long breath, wheezing through the pain even as the strange substance his tendrils had emitted closed the wound for her. There was no blood, no mess. She didn't even have a hole in her neck where her own air leaked out.

But there was a strange new dot there. Almost as though his body had permanently changed hers.

"I have to go," he said against her lips. "I have to tell my people that I am leaving. With you. We are going to make a life together, away from all of this."

"Arges, wait—"

He couldn't stay to listen to her attempt to change his mind. Instead, he plunged into the water and speared through it. Leaving her back in the dome where he knew she could not follow him, even as he sank into the depths that would have stolen all the light from her eyes. His entire body lit up, brighter than it had ever been, as he made his way toward his future. His people would be fine without him. They had Daios, who hopefully would get his head on straight after his arm fully healed and his brother had lost him. Maybe all the People of Water would turn their attentions toward themselves.

He mourned that he couldn't be there with them to celebrate those successes. He wished he hadn't been put in this place where he had made a choice between his future and his past. But right now, there was no choice to be made.

He wanted to be with her. The future he had seen was the one thing he'd always wanted, and he would not give it up for anything.

But in the hours that it took for him to swim to his home, his mind second guessed itself. He saw the people lingering outside their homes, waiting for him. He saw the mistrust in their eyes, and perhaps the fear that he would judge them. And he knew.

He knew.

Something had happened.

Swimming slower, he reached up for one of the coral arches and pulled himself through what had once been his home. The glowing coral illuminated the grip of his hands as he swam past homes filled with far more people than he had expected to see here. There were usually so few of them, and yet, right now, there appeared to be everyone in the town.

Waiting for him.

Frowning, he swam through the crowds to the center where the council already gathered. He had never seen them all look so worried. All of their eyes were on Mitéra, who only had eyes for him.

Every light in his body flared even brighter with anger. They thought they could stop him. Mitéra had already guessed what he planned on doing, and she would argue.

He refused to believe for even a second that they truly thought they could stop him. He would be with Mira for the rest of his life. The ancients had given him that vision for a reason, and if he had seen it, then so had Mitéra. She wanted to steal all of this from him.

She wanted to take his future and mold it into the one she desired. But she didn't get to do that.

Swimming toward her, he paused in the center where the swirling colors stilled. Arges met her gaze and waited for her to speak. Even the sand seemed to settle faster from his movement to hear her words.

"Arges," she said, her voice booming through the clearing. "Your brother has told me of the poison the achromo has injected into your veins. She has pierced through the shield of your soul and sickened your heart."

"No one has harmed me in any way." His tail flicked the sand, drawing up a dust that swirled around him before settling. "I went to the ancients, as you told me to do. They showed me two futures, and I chose her. I will choose her in every instance. I know this means I must leave this place, my home, my family. I do not make this decision lightly."

"Your people need you to lead the pod that keeps them safe."

"There are others." He turned his attention to the crowd. Each one of them watched him, and he knew them all. Beloved faces, people he had protected for years now. But no longer. There was only one person he wanted to protect. "It saddens my heart greatly to leave you. I have never once wanted to lose you all. But this is a choice I must make for myself."

He didn't tell them that his body had changed for her. That he had found a way to live with his *kairos* and combine their worlds.

Sure, it would be difficult. It would be hard to sleep separately from her, or to have to wait days until her fragile skin could get wet again. But maybe his body would change even more. Maybe hers would as well. The more time they spent together and the more his body adapted to hers. The People of Water were a hardy bunch.

He couldn't wait to see what their future would bring. Even if that meant he had to lose his own people as well.

"We cannot lose you, Arges." Mitéra almost seemed... sad as she said it. "I have spoken with the ancients. We all agree the future you have chosen for yourself affects the rest of us too much. You have left us no choice."

He heard it before he realized they were going to attack him. Spinning, he flicked his tail and shot forward, but the net still caught his fluke. Struggling, he had to slice through the cords before another reached around him. Then another. Then there were hands, ripping and tearing and pulling until there were ropes around his neck, around his arms, up and over his

tail. All of them binding him to the ground. To anchors he had not seen before.

Straining against his chains, he could feel the muscles of his neck bulging as his gills flared to suck in more air. Mitéra floated above him, giving directions to what had once been his pod.

His brother was with them. His red brother, full of so much rage since the day he was born. But this time, Daios looked down at him with sadness and pity. As if to say it didn't have to be this way. We could have stopped this together.

“Not him,” he snarled. “Mitéra, if there was ever a time you respected me, you will not send him.”

His hearts raced, thundering in his chest with anxiety because he knew if Daios was sent to her, that Mira would be dead the moment she laid eyes on him. His brother would destroy everything that he held so dear.

“Not him?” Mitéra's bell hair undulated, pulling her a little closer to his bound body. “Then you may choose, son of my soul. Choose who ends the achromo.”

So they were going to kill her. No matter what, Mitéra wanted her dead, and this wasn't... It wasn't right. She didn't deserve to die because he had chosen life with his *kairos*.

Frantically, he searched the gazes of everyone in his pod. Someone who would know there was a mercy to pity.

Gaze locking with Maketes, he knew his brother would do the right thing. He trusted this light-hearted brother of his to know what he was saying.

“Maketes,” he said. “He has always known that there is beauty in forgiveness.”

His yellow finned brother seemed to hesitate before nodding. “I will show her swift mercy, Arges.”

It wasn't enough for him to feel any sense of reassurance, but he could only pray to the ancients that they sent Maketes to her with kindness. Otherwise, he had already lost the best gift the sea had ever given him.

He had failed his people. He had failed his mate.

This rotting future reeked of despair, and he had no idea how to fix it.

THIRTY-FIVE

MIRA

Mira poked at the small incision on her neck. Whatever the tendril of his had emitted was impossible to get out of the hole. Byte had told her to stop touching it, that he had permanently changed her body as well as his own. If she pulled that goo out, there was no way of healing it back up. She could breathe strange for the rest of her life or she might fill her lungs with blood and drown in her own fluids.

Realistically, she wanted to avoid both of those options. But that didn't mean she wasn't going to poke at it and at least look.

It wasn't a gill, that much was certain. She didn't think that was even possible to change her so much that she grew gills. Not without surgical intervention. But still, it was a strange looking dark dot on her neck that maybe looked a little like a gill.

"What do you think I should do?" she finally asked, turning around to look at Byte.

"About what?" The little robot hadn't had much to say for a while now. It was silent, scanning her often and then disappearing back into the box like it had a tiny lab in there with which to look over the documents of her changes.

"I... I don't know." Mira finally left the mirror to sit down in front of Byte. "About everything."

"I don't think you have a lot of choice in any matter as of yet."

"I could go back to Beta."

Byte snorted. "You couldn't get back to Beta. You don't even know where it is."

"No, but you do." The droid froze, and she knew she'd gotten it backed into a corner. "Of course you know where it is, Byte. You have the entire ocean mapped out in those memory banks of yours. You could get me to Beta, to Alpha, Gamma, even a few of the forgotten cities that have long been flooded. There are probably a thousand places you keep in that head of yours that you could tell me to hide in. So why aren't you?"

It grumbled a few times before muttering something so quietly she couldn't quite make it out.

"I'm not sure why you aren't helping me more, but I think there is a good reason for it." She tapped the side of the box gently. "So why don't you just tell me?"

Byte sighed, and a few clunks echoed from inside the box before its projector appeared. On the glass of the dome, and emitting out into the water, it showed the blonde woman it had before. "You remember her?"

"Alys Fairweather, the woman you served before she disappeared."

"This was her home."

Mira felt her jaw drop open as the droid said that with such ease. "Excuse me?"

"This was her home. It was built for her by her father, after she supposedly disappeared. My programming initiative was to tell everyone that she'd died, but we were not programmed to lie well. So I was sent into the ocean because I couldn't keep the secret about... him." Another click and a new image appeared, floating like he was just outside the window.

A green finned undine, just like the legends always said. He wasn't nearly as different as Arges, but perhaps he was from a different clan. He certainly looked like he wasn't a deep sea creature. With tiger stripes of green scales that glimmered on his skin, and gills behind his long pointed ears, some along his ribs as well, he was just as massive as Arges but so much softer looking.

This new undine pressed his fingers against the glass, and the love in his eyes hurt to look at. He loved her so much. She could see it in his eyes, in the way that he lingered at the window, draping his tail over it as the image of Alys danced through the room. She reached up for him, wiggling her fingers and laughing at the way he shook his head.

They were so in love. So very in love.

The images faded, and she found her throat had closed up with emotion. Licking her lips, she asked, "So you wanted me to come here? Why?"

"I didn't know you would end up here. In her home. But I saw the way you two looked at each other and I couldn't let you go back home without realizing the truth."

"What truth?" she croaked.

Byte's projector crunched back into the box. "That it was possible for your two to be together. Because I have seen it happen, and I know that it can work. Alys and her undine were together until she was very old. They lived here, and no one bothered them. He was an outcast to his people but he... he loved her. Very much. And she loved him in return."

It was possible.

They weren't the first.

She sank down onto her knees next to the open moon pool, suddenly questioning everything that she'd been taught. All her life she was told that the undines were monsters, that she couldn't trust them and that they were dangerous creatures who clearly wanted to harm her. They were going to destroy everything her people had ever done, and that was only because humans had forced them to share the ocean.

Humans and undines hated each other. It was only natural that they warred because they were so different they would never see eye to eye and yet...

Oh, and yet. Someone had done this before. Someone had fallen in love with an undine just as she had fallen in love with Arges and it wasn't fair that she hadn't known. She hadn't seen. No one had told her that it was possible!

Tears dripped from her eyes into the water below. Salty tears joining the salty water that had kept her away from him for such a long time.

"So you think I should stay," she whispered.

"I think he loves you very much, and I can see that you love him. Leaving would only send you back to the city, where you already said you weren't very happy. Why not take a risk on an adventure while you're here?"

"I suppose you're right," she muttered before turning to look at Byte. "But why do I have to give up my people to be with him?"

A small drive opened up from the middle of Byte's body, the same drive that housed the language chips. "What makes you think he isn't giving up everything to stay with you? Now take this, you're going to need it."

"Why?"

"Because it seems like the undines have already made their choice in the matter, and I don't think the undine beside you is all that friendly. At least, not yet."

She didn't think, she reacted. Mira grabbed the language chip and turned in the same motion. There was indeed an undine in the water right beside her, one of the yellow ones that she recognized. With a lunging movement, she threw herself at it.

Clearly the undine wasn't expecting her to do so. It hardly even had time to flinch before she had slapped the translation chip behind his ear. The instant pain startled him, and he hit her so hard in the chest she went skidding back across the floor. She hit the stairs with a harsh wheeze, and struggled to pull air back into her lungs while the creature writhed in the water.

She saw the flash of rage in his eyes. The glint of his claws as he launched himself out of the moon pool toward her but she sucked in a lungful of air at the same time and shouted, "Stop! Stop wait!"

And that did it.

He froze, his claws still outstretched but this time he stared at her like she'd turned bright blue and told him she was actually just a fruit.

"What?" he breathed. "Did you just talk?"

"All of us can talk, I just made it so you could understand me." She held out her own hands, trying to show she wasn't a threat. "The device is a little painful, I'm sorry for that. But now you can understand my language. We can talk."

His yellow edged gills fluttered, and his dark hands slowly lowered. "I have never wanted to talk to an achromo."

"Really?" She licked her lips, trying to get this under control was going to be harder if that was true. "I've always wanted to talk to an undine. Your people have fascinated me since I was little. So when I got the chance to talk with Arges, it was like I had been given the best gift. I could ask all the questions I wanted. See the world through his eyes. You live in a beautiful place."

"One that your people have destroyed."

"I can't argue that." Nor did she want to. "But I was not actively trying to destroy your home. So many of us were born in the cities, I didn't even know there was another option."

Mira slowly scooted upright, leaning her back against the stairs as he slid back into the water. They stared at each other, neither trusting the other, but she knew she had to make this leap. She had to do something or this undine would kill her.

"Where is Arges?" she asked.

"Not coming back."

Her stomach flipped and sudden nausea pressed against the back of her throat. "Is he..."

"He's alive." The undine shook his head. "He chose me to come after you. Our council wants you dead. I was supposed to get it over with already. I shouldn't have stopped even when I heard you speak. I should have cut your throat and left you for the sharks. That's what... That's what I'm supposed to do."

There it was.

A spark of guilt that flashed in his eyes before he squeezed them shut. She was so much better at reading undine expressions now that she'd been around Arges. She could see from the flat gills on the sides of his head that he didn't want to do this. He didn't want to hurt her.

"But you're not going to kill me, are you?" she breathed. "You don't agree with killing me. With killing someone you can clearly see is a person, not just your enemy."

"You don't have to rub it in," he grumbled. Something dark flashed in his gaze before he jerked his head toward the back of the room. "Gather what you need. You're not staying here."

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

"Home?" She launched to her feet, racing for her wetsuit and rebreather. It had been a little clunky lately, but it would have to work. The wetsuit had seen better days as well. It wasn't going to keep her warm for much longer. The rip in the back had only gotten bigger, and she didn't have her gloves or fins anymore. The head piece was nearly coming off, but it would work. "Are we going to where your home is?"

"Not my home." He said nothing else until she got close to the edge of the moon pool, tugging her wet suit so it fit better and fixing the rebreather to her mouth. "I'm bringing you home, achromo."

Bringing her home? To Beta?

"Byte," she said, turning for the box.

But she didn't get a chance to grab the droid, who had said absolutely nothing thus far, before the undine grabbed her around the waist. She let out a little shriek of fear before she hit the water hard. Apparently him understanding that she didn't deserve to die didn't mean he was going to be gentle with her.

He grabbed her by the arm, yanking a little too hard as he dragged her through the water. Her shoulder screamed in protest, and she shouted a few times for him to slow down.

He either couldn't hear her, or didn't care to. The undine plunged into the darkness of the sea and the only thing she could do was hope he didn't rip her arm off on the way.

She didn't know how long they traveled, only that eventually she reached with her free hand to grab onto his wrist. Instead of giving her any reprieve, he wrapped his hand around both of her wrists.

The journey was long and painful. Everything in her ached, from her head to her toes. She didn't think all of it was entirely physical, though. Part of the pain came from knowing that in saving her own life, she was giving up so much more.

Arges had to know where they were taking her. Maybe he would come for her, and maybe he wouldn't. She had no idea what his own people would do to him for the abomination of their romance. Byte would remain alone in that tomb for the rest of time, now. No human was going to find him in that dome, because no one ever ventured out of the safety of their own homes. She had doomed him. Completely and utterly doomed the little creature who didn't deserve to be alone again.

Tears burned in her eyes, but she couldn't open them. So the tears just streamed out of her squeezed lids, until she found herself in some kind of strange trance. She stayed drifting in the water, her body limp and her muscles finally easing.

She let the current carry her and the undine who dragged her. She let the ocean know that she forgave it. She was angry, so angry, but there was no more fight left in her. She had fought for a very long time.

And now, she wanted to just rest. With the soul of her father and mother, the people who had raised her to never give up. Maybe they would be disappointed in her right now. But she liked to think they would understand.

The undine dragged her closer to him, and she felt a strong arm band around her waist. Then she finally opened her eyes and saw Beta in front of her. The glowing lights. The neverending expanse of the city that stretched so far and looked so out of place in the sea now that she had seen so much more of it.

"Your home," the undine said. "Get inside."

"I don't know how to get inside," she said. "There is no easy way to get into Beta from the outside."

He shoved her toward it. "That's your problem, achromo. I got you here. Now get yourself inside."

Was this a trick? Did he want to see how she got back into the city? Because she'd already used the service elevator once, and the damn thing had barely gotten her into the city the first time. Maybe if she found another one, she'd get lucky. But she really didn't think there were any exciting new ways to get into her old home.

Her rebreather kicked against her face.

Every fiber of her being froze in horror. It had never done that before. Not once. And then the air she was breathing got real thin, a little like it had in the tunnels when Arges had cut off their air supply.

She pointed to the rebreather on her face. "My air. I think it's broken."

He swam a little farther away from her, lifting his hands and looking like he was incapable of helping. "I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. I said I would get you home. This is as close as I can get to the city without your people attacking me."

"But I can't—" She pressed a hand to her chest, trying to still the anxiety. "I can't breathe."

"The sea is no place for your kind, achromo. This is proof of that."

And then he was gone. He spun around, flicked that tail, and left her all alone where she was clearly going to drown.

Fuck.

"Fucking hell," she repeated out loud before swimming as fast as she could toward the nearest window.

There was nothing she could do now except stay alive. Maybe, if she was lucky, her own people could get her inside. So she swam, harder than she ever had before, with numb fingers and toes that she was afraid she would lose. And then she attached herself to the glass, holding on for dear life as she pounded on it. Again and again. Hitting the glass with all her rage, fear, and sadness that life would never be the same again.

Not without him.

THIRTY-SIX

ARGES

He stayed there, lying in the sand, for weeks. Staring up at the darkness of the sea and swearing that he would get revenge for what they had done to him. For what they had done to *them*.

He had no idea where she was. He'd heard the moment Maketes returned. His brother had come home to much fanfare, but Maketes had remained quiet. Even when people asked him what he had done. So many of his people wanted the dirty details of how badly she had screamed. Had

she writhed in the water while she died, trying her best to get a hint of air that her kind could not breathe?

It hurt to listen to them be so cruel. He knew that their limited knowledge claimed that her people were monsters. They were taught from the day they were born that the achromos were the enemy.

But none of them had spoken with her. They didn't know what it was like to see her expression soften every time she saw something beautiful, nor did they know the tears that always welled in her eyes when he brought her a fish to eat. They didn't see the bravery or the heart that burned so hot in her core sometimes he swore he could see it glowing in her chest.

He remained where he was. Tied up and fed only when Mitéra deigned to remember him. Every time she remembered he existed, she brought him a small fish and then asked him if he was willing to give up this fight.

He'd almost taken off a couple of her fingers every time she asked him such a thing, and she hated that he hadn't given up yet. But he wouldn't. Couldn't. The rope burns along his scales should have told her enough about how he felt.

Arges would never stop fighting to get Mira back.

A soft sound near his head caught his attention. He had taken to lying on his back while his tail floated up in the water. It made him look almost dead, or perhaps that he had finally succumbed to the exhaustion. But he only wanted to see who was the first person brave enough to come up to him.

Nerves firing like lightning throughout his body, he forced himself to remain still and limp. He couldn't let whoever was approaching him know just how aware he actually was.

"Arges," a voice hissed. "I know you're awake."

"Maketes," he snarled without looking. "How badly did she writhe when you killed her?"

"Pound sand. You know I didn't hurt the girl. You didn't want me to."

"So, what did you do?"

"I brought her back to her home." Maketes shifted, and he could see the frond of a fluke float over his head before it was ripped back. "She said there was some issue with the thing that let her breathe, but that was as far as I let her get. I swam off before someone could see me. The last thing we need is two warriors missing an arm."

“You let her drown?” Arges felt all the lights in his body going out. One by one. They flickered, guttering as if his last hope had disappeared. He couldn’t imagine the fear she must have felt, the way she would have fought for air because Mira always fought. Always.

“I didn’t let her die,” Maketes whispered. “I waited to make sure they got her back into the city. I thought maybe she would reveal a secret way in. But she fought for a bit, pounding on the glass, and then they pulled her back into the building with one of those metal arms. They woke her up once she was inside and then I left.”

So she was still alive. His lights flickered back on, the slightest bloom of hope still in his chest.

If she was there, then he could go get her. He could find her, because that was what he did best. He had stalked her people for years. All it would take was a few moments in front of the glass and he would know exactly what room she was in. And maybe it would take a while for him to figure out how to get her out of there. But now they both knew they didn’t need her to wear that rebreather.

Her device would be good for others, if there were any other of his people who were kind enough to see that her kind were actually people like them. But she would never be so far from his side again. He wouldn’t let her get farther out of his reach, so he would breathe for her.

As if that future had already come to pass, he took a deep breath and felt the air sacs in his belly expand. Soon, he would breathe for both of them.

“Arges?” Maketes broke through his thoughts. “You can’t go get her.”

That made him turn his head. Finally, he glared at his brother. “What do you mean, I cannot get her? The moment I get out of these bindings, I will find her. I will save her.”

“Why are you so fixated on this creature? It has been weeks since you saw her. Weeks since you have been free of the effects of her poison.” Maketes laid on the sand, his webbed fingers gripping the fine white granules. His tail was flat to the ground as well, almost as though he didn’t want anyone to see him here. “It should have worn off by now.”

His eyes found and caught on the translation chip in Maketes’s ear. “You talked with her.”

His brother remained silent for a few moments, but he knew the truth when he saw it. So he waited, listening for the change in breathing before his brother blew out a long breath.

“I talked with her,” Maketes relented. “She is as fearsome as I always thought your mate would be. She attacked me first, to put the translation device behind my ear. The pain was immense, and I was certain that she had done something to permanently damage me. But then when she spoke, I realized she merely wanted to share her knowledge.”

“It is not that much knowledge,” Arges snorted.

“It is another world. Another language. She spoke to me like I wasn’t just some animal to her. She clearly sees us for who and what we are and it is... confusing.” Maketes shook his head as though trying to clear a fog from his mind. “I have not been able to stop thinking about it.”

“Did you return to the city to listen to them?”

“I did not return to the city they call Beta.”

It was not a denial of returning. Just not to the same city that he had been in before.

A sense of horror filled his chest. “Where did you go?”

“To all of them,” Maketes replied. “Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, they call themselves. Cities under the sea that are filled with so many achromos, it’s almost impossible to count them all. They are so different, though. Very different cities with very different people.”

Arges tugged against his bindings, trying to turn so he could see his brother better. “What do you mean?”

“Beta is the one that seems to do most of the work. The people like Mira do a very good job at working hard. They fix things. Create things. And then send them to the other cities. Alpha is a work of art. All the people there wear gemstones, jewelry, and the city isn’t like Beta. The entire area where they live is encased in a dome, like the small one you put your achromo in. Gamma is... dangerous. I do not know what kind of people they put in there, but the achromos seem to always be killing each other.” His expression appeared troubled. “Even the women. There are many women attacked there.”

Three very different cities. Three different problems that he would have to fix.

Blowing out a breath that sent bubbles out of his gills, he laid flat on his back again and stared up into the darkness. “It is strange to think of them as people and not just a school of fish that we haven’t been able to access.”

“I resent her for giving me this gift,” his brother murmured. “But I thank her for it as well. There is so much I have learned, and I feel as

though I've only tapped the briefest hint of the surface of what we can learn about them."

"You've been hidden?"

"Very hidden. It is easier than you'd think when there is only one of us. The achromos do not hush their voices inside of their cities. They think we cannot understand them, so they are safe in their glass cities."

This was a terrible move. Mira should never have given more of his people the ability to understand her kind. This would only lead to more bloodshed, more violence, and nothing would get fixed. He didn't know how to stop this, though. Not now that it had happened.

"Have you told Mitéra?" he asked.

His hearts thundered in his chest, drowning out even the sound of the current. He waited to hear the terrible news. That Maketes had taken his place and that Mitéra would unleash yet another warrior full of anger on Mira's people.

But then his brother sighed. "Do you think I would be speaking so quietly if she knew, Arges?"

Jerking his head so quickly his neck cracked, he looked at his brother in shock. Maketes shrugged in response.

Arges couldn't contain the glee. A feral grin spread across his lips and he said, "I always knew you were my favorite."

"Shut up, Arges."

"The one brother who can see the future better than all the others."

Maketes lit up for a second before he forced his lights to disappear. "Shut up, Arges. You know there is little else I can do. All I can even attempt is to keep you in on the loop. Your brother will kill me otherwise."

"Daios has one arm."

"And he can do enough with the other. I swear, he's gotten more aggressive to make up for the loss. He's planning another attack against the achromos."

Arges squeezed his eyes shut. "Another death swim, you mean? If he has his way, the achromos will shoot us with their weapons until there is nothing left of our kind."

"Mitéra isn't listening to him yet. She wants to see when the poison will leave your body before they do anything else." Maketes dragged himself a little closer, pitching his voice even lower. "If you want to get out of these

bindings, you're going to have to convince her that you will lead the pod in another attack."

"I have no wish to attack their kind any longer."

"I understand that. And I know you are honor bound to not lie, because that is who you are. But a little lie to get out of these bonds, to go and find her... Wouldn't it be worth the mark on your honor?"

He hesitated.

Could Arges lie convincingly? Could he pretend he wanted to kill Mira's kind and that the fog had lifted from his mind?

Maketes lingered for a few more moments before he added, "I don't think the achromos were happy to see her back. I returned to Beta only once, and it took a long time to find her. They were questioning her in a room that had no windows, but I saw them bring her in. She was tied up, and there were bruises on her face. I don't think they are happy that she survived any more than Mitéra is happy she survived."

They were hurting her? Her own people?

A low snarl erupted from his mouth, pressing against the back of his throat. "I will do it."

"I figured you would."

Maketes darted up into the water above him, making sure he was visible to all who looked. "Arges has returned to us! Our warrior is back!"

A few shouts echoed from the water, and it didn't take long for Mitéra to appear. Her glowing bell hair undulated around her body as she stared down at him, suspicion in every line of her body. "Has he?"

He bared his teeth in a feral snarl. "The fog has lifted from my mind, Mitéra. the achromo has released her hold on me, and I am ready to attack their home again."

"I don't believe you, son of my soul."

He slammed his tail hard into the sand, allowing a plume of it to rise around him before he did it again. "Give me leave to destroy them, Mitéra. I was able to converse with the achromo. She told me many of their secrets. I will bring the fight to them. Dismantle their city piece by piece until we can sneak into their underwater cities. We will ruin them from the inside out."

"How?"

He didn't have to think that hard. Arges had stored all the information away from when they had met. From the first moment he had laid eyes on her. "There are a few moon pools throughout the base, the same kind that

were in the dome where I was keeping her. Those pools are going to be the best way to get into their city. She showed me the tools to seek out. There are many of them on the ocean floor where the achromos have discarded their garbage. We will melt our way into their city and come in through the bottom. They won't even know we are there."

Daïos appeared out of the darkness and was the first to reply. His dark, demonic voice echoed through the crowd. "He wishes us to fight on land? You want us to go into the very city where the achromos live and fight them in the air?"

"Expel the water from your lungs, brother. Perhaps you will remember what it is like to breathe air rather than water. We will fight their people. Destroy them from the inside out. The city is a clam, sealed shut from the rest of the world and impossible to break open. We must become the rot that forces it to open."

These were the words he never wanted to say. The words that meant he had truly betrayed the one person who meant so much to him.

But Mira would understand. She would fight him at first, maybe even strike him with those tiny fists. But she would know that he had done it to save her, and that was all he could do in this situation.

Her own people had hunted her. They were beating her, harming her, destroying her even now. And he would not wait until she was dead. He couldn't.

So he would bring the fight to her. Even if that meant tearing down her entire city to get her back.

Mitéra narrowed her eyes at him, then turned her attention to Maketes. "Is this the truth?"

His yellow finned brother was staring at him with a mixture of horror and respect. "It is, Mitéra. I have seen what he says. I was there with him when he first scouted it out with this human, but none of us knew there were many of them. If he knows the locations of all of them, then this would allow us to attack them from many angles. We would destroy the humans easily."

"We are larger," Arges interjected. "We are stronger. The humans would not know how to stop us."

Mitéra's bell swelled, growing immensely large as her eyes flashed a hundred colors. "Then we will destroy the achromos tonight. Release him."

And as the bindings fell away from his wrists and tail, Arges permitted himself one moment to wonder...

What had he done?

THIRTY-SEVEN

MIRA

“B astards,” Mira snarled, spitting a wad of snot and blood toward the man in front of her. She didn’t even know this one’s name, only that he had been sent this morning to make her life a living hell.

But then again, every morning since she’d gotten back was a living hell.

At first, they’d bundled her up and brought her to the fixed engineering wing. She’d gotten to sleep in her old bed, eat familiar food, gorge herself on stale air again and being able to walk more than just a few steps from

one side of the dome to the other. Sure, she'd gotten her exercise swimming, but that wasn't the same as walking.

She'd missed walking. Just taking steps from one place to the other, knowing that she could just step a few feet in one direction and there was another hallway for her to keep going. And then she had realized how much she'd missed the safety of these walls too.

This was the same bed she'd slept in as a child. The same spot where her father had leaned over to kiss her forehead goodnight and tell her stories about monsters of the deep. She still had her pictures of her mother and father here, and a few other trinkets that made her think of home. All of it was good. Even if it was lacking a certain undine who had been the hero of a lot of stories as well.

Then they had come for her. Men in uniforms that she'd never seen in Beta before. Perfectly pressed, starched uniforms that could only mean they came from one place and one place alone. Alpha. Someone had squealed on her.

She'd been getting punched in the face ever since.

The man shook his hand, the one that he'd just used to strike a shoulder since they didn't actually want to kill her. "You could be spared from all of this. You don't have to endure all the pain and torture, you realize that? All you have to do is tell us the truth."

The truth. That's all she had been telling them.

"I told you already. I was sucked out to sea by a current and I happened to find one of our old research facilities. It was still fairly operational, but it took me a very long time to fix my rebreather. Which works, by the way. Tell my boss to shove that up his ass cause the old bastard said I couldn't invent anything that worked." Was her back tooth wiggling? It was absolutely wiggling.

The man sighed. She got a real good look at this one, while the others didn't like to stand in front of her. This man was tall, lean, far too good looking to be someone who tortured other people for a living. And yet that floppy brown hair that kept falling in front of chocolate colored eyes wasn't hiding the joy that he got from hitting her. Oh yeah, this guy knew what he was doing.

And he liked it.

He shook his head. "We know you're lying to us, Mira, and that's what we don't understand. We could work together here to figure out what really

happened to you and how to help you. How to help our whole city.”

They wanted her to say she was stolen by an undine. They wanted a smear campaign to plaster all over the walls of the city. She knew this game. They wanted everyone in Beta to be living in fear, terrified that they were going to be the next people stolen out of their beds. It gave Alpha even more reason to take ownership over their city.

It would not happen. Not because she cared that much about Beta. The building had been falling apart for ages. But because she would not give them another reason to hate Arges’s kind.

“Go ahead and keep hitting me, man. The story won’t change because I’m telling you the truth!” she screamed the last words of the sentence.

Maybe she yelled to get back at him for that last hit that made her tooth wiggly. Or maybe it was because the louder she said it, the more she believed it herself.

He slammed his hand against the chair they’d tied her to, spinning her around to look at the glass. They had moved her into this room today. Surprising, considering they’d kept her away from the windows so far. She wasn’t all that sure why.

Now, she had a guess. The man leaned behind her, his hot breath brushing against her ear. “We know what happened to you, Mira. There are cameras all around this place. In case you were unaware, we already have the tapes from when you were trying to fix what you broke. And now here we are, listening to you lie over and over again, to keep an undine safe. Why is that? That’s the question I keep asking myself. Why are you trying to protect him?”

He was probably muttering some impressive villainous plan, but she was just looking out to sea.

They were closer to the top of the base, so she could see for miles. There was a pod of whales in the distance, just three humpbacks with a tiny baby in between them. Their tails were so graceful as they lifted and dropped them. Slowly moving through the water together. She wondered if they were seeking warmer waters. Maybe the winter was what made them leave.

A hand slammed down on the chair and tossed her toward the window. She hit it hard, her cheek catching on the glass as she precariously tried to balance herself so she didn’t hit the floor.

He didn't let her save herself. The man kicked the legs out from under her chair and down she fell. Hitting the ground hard first with her shoulder and then with her face. Groaning, she rolled only to be picked up by the back of her head and a fistful of hair.

"Well, well, well," he growled in her ear. "I had a feeling if I started hitting you in front of a window, someone would show up. That sure looks like the same undine who saved you."

She opened her eyes, trying her best to focus on the outside of the windows and... fuck. There he was.

Arges floated in front of the window, all of his lights on full display. His fins were so bright they were almost blinding, and she could see the rage on his features. All his gills were flared out, his black eyes narrowed, and his sharp teeth showing like a shark on the other side of the glass.

The man behind her gave her a shake, ripping out hair in the process. "It sure seems like he wants me to give you back, Mira. Is that what you want? Did you lose yourself to a monster like that?"

"Lose?" she repeated. "I lost absolutely nothing to him."

"You clearly spent some time with him. I've never seen an undine look quite so angry at one of us. Certainly not because we were hurting one of our own." He dangled her closer to the window, watching as Arges moved closer as well. "You see, we don't need you to tell us anything, Mira. I can guess what happened. Would you like to know what I think happened?"

"Not particularly," she ground out through her teeth.

"He took you because he was interested. You were interested, too. Maybe there's a bit of a slut in that engineering mind of yours. Maybe you fancied yourself to be a pioneer in a new genre of mating. I don't care what you say about it. Justify it to yourself all you want." He leaned down, that hot breath in her ear again. "You fucked him. And now he wants you back."

She bucked in the chair, trying to get away from the monster behind her, and closer to the glass. She wanted Arges to swim away. There was only one direction this was going, and it wasn't one that either of them were going to like.

The man gave her another shake. "Here's the thing, Mira. I don't need you. All I wanted was to see if I could get him here. We've been dropping your blood into the ocean for days and that didn't summon him, but all of a sudden here he is the moment you're in front of a window. The closer he

and his people are, the better. We're going to light them all on fire and get rid of the problem once and for all. How's that sound?"

Terrible. It sounded terrible.

But there was nothing she could do, all tied up like this with a man holding her by the hair. She'd always known the hatred between their people ran deep. She had seen it for herself. The years of abuse and greed that had torn this entire ocean apart.

This went beyond that, though. This was an old hatred that made her wonder whether or not this man knew Arges. It certainly seemed like he recognized the blue glowing undine in front of them. And Arges definitely recognized him.

She saw the shaking rage, the undulated gills that were plastered so close to his side now she wondered if he could even breathe. He came closer to the window, pointing at the man behind her ominously.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of you," the man said to Arges. He had no way of knowing the undine before them could understand him. "I'm going to cut her up into little pieces and feed her to the sharks. Just you wait, undine. I'm not done punishing you yet."

He was going to what?

She gasped as he shoved her away from the window. She landed hard on her shoulder again, nearly popping it out of its socket as the man followed her. He was *laughing*. A gleeful, joyful sound that turned her stomach.

Leaning down, he grabbed onto her shirt and dragged her with the chair into the back room. The room with no windows. The room where they had done their worst to her and apparently he was going to do even more.

"I've seen that undine around here for ages," the man said. "Beta sends all their recordings to us, you see. All the cities do. You'll be happy to know you somehow caught yourself one of the biggest fish in the sea. Or at least, one of the most dangerous. He's been scoping out our cities for years and doing considerable damage for quite a while."

She didn't know that. But Arges was intelligent. It didn't surprise her in the slightest that he had been successful in every attack he'd made. But what did surprise her was that this man knew him.

Even as the stranger in front of her sat her upright, steadying her chair once again on its wobbly legs, she eyed him. He wasn't familiar to her. The

uniform was clearly Alpha based, too clean and too pressed, but she had never heard of such brutality from Alpha.

Swallowing hard, she croaked out, “You aren’t from Alpha, are you?”

Again, he chuckled, that gritty sound already grating on her nerves. “No, Mira. Alpha employs all of us, but that doesn’t mean we’re from there.”

“There’s only three cities left,” she muttered. “Delta is long gone. Gamma only recently built back up. I suppose you could be from Gamma, but...”

He tsked, the sound sharp and cruel in the otherwise soundless room. “No one knows where I’m from, Mira. No one could ever guess that there is another city. Deeper in the very depths of the ocean. One buried in rock and rubble so the undines would never find us. Are you done asking your questions yet?”

“No.” She glared. “I have a hundred questions for you, but I have a feeling you won’t let me ask any of them.”

“Smart girl.” He brushed her hair back from her ear, and then leaned down to whisper, “Tau is the city you’re looking for. If you somehow survive this, I want them to know who is the real power under the sea.”

And then he plunged a knife into her belly.

It took a few moments for her to realize what had happened. Her stomach muscles cramped, clenching around the cold metal. It was hard to imagine he’d even done it. She knew he had threatened Arges with that, but she hadn’t thought...

Then the fire came. The burning ache that spread throughout her entire form as her body realized that there was a horrible wound on her belly. He ripped the knife out, not even trying to be considerate as he drew it down her arms. Slice by slice. Marking her with cuts that dug into her muscle and made her scream.

She was ashamed at the sounds that came out of her mouth. She had always considered herself to be strong, enduring what others couldn’t. Engineers lived in pain. Her muscles always ached. She was constantly burning herself, hitting her fingers with a hammer, searing her skin with warm bolts. But never had she endured pain like this. Never had she felt her skin splitting and blood pouring down her arms, down her belly, into her lap.

She was going to pass out, she realized. The cold sensation rushed from the top of her head down to her toes, and her vision started to get a little hazy.

The man in front of her slapped her hard. The sudden strike woke her only for a few seconds, enough for her to hear him mutter, “Can’t have you dying just yet. Need to send a message, Mira. You’re the message.”

The message? What message did he want to send? That anyone who spoke or was around the undines would be killed by their own people? Delirious, she faded in and out of consciousness. She knew he was walking around and doing something, but she had no idea what he was doing. But then she got really lightheaded and had no idea what was happening.

No, she wasn’t light headed. She was being carried.

Lifted through the air and dumped into icy water that froze all the air in her lungs. Her initial reaction was to take in a deep breath, but she stopped herself right before she inhaled mouthfuls of water. This wasn’t right. She wasn’t supposed to drown. She had created a device to prevent this, and if they would just give her the rebreather, she could survive this.

But then the pain hit her all over again. The salt made all her wounds turn into searing pain, and it wasn’t possible for her to survive. She couldn’t. The pain was so great that her heart was going to explode.

Warm arms slid around her, pulling her away from that nightmare of a building and against a familiar chest with two hearts beating to calm her. “Hush now,” he said, and she could hear the regret in his voice as another ache joined the others in her neck. “Let me be your breath.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

ARGES

Rage made his hands shake as he brushed her hair away from her face and swam as fast as he could away from her home. He'd known they were hurting her. Despite what that man had said, he could smell her blood for miles. He knew exactly what they were doing to her and how long she had suffered. But he hadn't been able to help her.

There wasn't any way for him to get into the city. He knew better than to rush any attack, even a rescue mission.

The moon pools were the best way for them to get into the city. He'd looked over the one in the dome he'd brought Mira to, and he was quite certain he knew how they worked. The humans hadn't upgraded many of their cities in a very long time. The functionality should be the same.

He and Maketes had gone back to the dome before they had headed to the city. Between the two of them, they had almost completely ripped it apart and then rebuilt it. They needed the welders. Those were the most important part of getting these open and being able to attack the achromos.

Thankfully, they had more welders. They were the older versions, like he had brought Mira, but there were enough of them for them to swarm the moon pools and start taking them apart.

He just hoped she would forgive his people for attacking her home. He'd already made it very clear to his warriors. They were not wiping out the achromos. The city would not be ruined or sunk like the other. They already knew what happened when that occurred. the achromos just multiplied.

What they were doing was sending a message. They could destroy the city whenever they wished. They could tear it apart and murder everyone inside of it. Instead, they were going to take technology. They were going to steal more welders, some weapons, terrify the people inside. They would flood one or two wings, just to give the achromos something to do, steal a few droids, and then they would someday return with the ability to understand what the achromos were saying.

Mira was necessary for this, though. She had to be the one to translate for them. He needed her to make more chips, so her people could understand what his were saying.

It was a start. Mitéra had only agreed to the violence. She knew nothing else of what he had said and what he had ordered. Arges had a feeling he would pay for that, but right now, he didn't care what happened to him.

He had Mira in his arms. Though her blood coated his scales and floated around her like a plume of bright color, she was still alive. He was certain they would save her. Even with the wound in her belly.

Brushing his claws over her face, he drew her closer to him and held her tightly against his hearts. "You're going to live," he breathed. "You're going to live, Mira. I will not let you go."

He was pleased that Byte had been correct. He breathed for both of them, and this was the first time in the water he'd seen her without a mask.

Her face was so beautiful, so peaceful, as she looked up at him. She lifted a hand, gently running her fingers down his neck. "I love you," she said, her voice so quiet he almost didn't hear it. "I love you so much, Arges. I don't want to die without you knowing that."

The words were a punch in his gut. "You're not going to die."

"I might." She lifted her hands from her belly, and the weak stream of blood frightened him. There should have been more. So much more.

Cursing, he changed where he was going. He couldn't bring her to the dome himself, not yet. His people would lose their focus. Daios might even lead them into another attack where they would die. He couldn't afford the risk when he had finally gotten them to a point where his people would listen.

But his mate was dying, and he did not know what to do.

The two sides of him screamed two very different things. His heart wanted him to go with her. To be there while the life faded from her eyes. He knew she would want him there with her if anything happened. So he could hold her hand through the pain.

But his mind had always been stronger than his heart. He knew he wasn't the fastest swimmer here. And if they could get her back to the dome, then they could save her life. The medkit was something he'd already explained to many of his people. They would press it to her belly and it would heal her.

She had to heal.

No one would take her from him. Especially not some weak, scrawny achromo who thought he was strong because there was a wall of glass between him and one of the People of Water.

"You're not going to die," he snarled. "I forbid it."

"You may have stolen me for the last time." Water flowed over her mouth as she spoke, bubbles of air filtering off her tongue and jittering as they rose toward the surface. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I should have fought harder."

"Mira!" he shouted, his voice echoing as loud as a whale call. "You're not going to die. Stop apologizing for something you did not do. I was the one who failed you."

"You didn't fail me."

He did.

He had.

He probably would again.

But not this time. This time, he would save her. He would keep her alive and he wouldn't make the choice that his heart wanted him to make. He had a mind, a quick-witted mind, and this was the best time for him to use it.

Whipping his fluke, he shot toward one of the larger females in his group. She had scars decorating her arms and dark splotches of deep purple that spread all along her tail and arms. She'd cut her hair very short, cropped close to her skull. The female was obviously surprised when he swam up to her and reached for a long tendril at the back of her skull.

"What are you doing, Arges?" she asked.

"You're taking her to the dome."

"I am here to fight."

"You're taking her to the dome and using the medkit like I taught you." He looked down at Mira, at the pale flesh that had turned almost as gray as his own. "Mira, hold your breath."

He couldn't feel her breathing. He exhaled long and hard, feeling it go through the tube that came out of him and watching her own chest expand. Then he ripped the tendril out of her neck and quickly replaced it with the one that came out of the female of his own kind.

She hissed, the sound echoing through the water as the strange feeling overtook her. "What have you done to me, Arges?"

"Something that we are all capable of doing and none of us were aware of it until now." He made sure the goo around her tendril was thick before handing Mira over to her. "You breathe for her now, Melete. I need you to bring her to the dome, heal her. Save her life."

"The life of an achromo?" Melete winced, her lips drawing up over her teeth in disgust.

He swam closer, their faces almost touching as he loomed over the much larger female. "The life of my mate, Melete."

That did it. She nodded, turning to leave and only stopping when he grabbed her arm so he could take one last look at the tiny achromo in her arms.

Mira looked even smaller when she was held by a female of his kind. She looked like a child, with her legs drawn up to her chest and tremors shaking her body as she endured the pain.

He leaned down and pressed their foreheads together. “You stay alive for me. Do you hear me, Mira? Fight. You have to fight like you’ve never fought before.”

She brushed her lips against his in a weak kiss. “I love you.”

Arges reached out his hand and laid it between her breasts. “You hold my soul, *kairos*. Keep it safe for me.”

With a quick nod to Melete, he let another one of his people take his heart through the sea. He couldn’t think of her just yet. He couldn’t let the worry and the fear swell over his head like a wave and break everything he had worked so hard to get.

Right now, he had to focus on leading his people and making the achromos pay for what they had done to the woman he loved. Right now, there was only one achromo he wanted to kill.

Cracking his neck, he turned his attention back to the city. Already his people were working on dismantling the moon pools. They would tear the metal apart once the bolts were melted, just like Mira had done to help him all those months ago. They would rip into the city and they would bring the achromos true nightmares to life.

Joining his pod, he turned his attention to them. “Find what we need. There should be plenty of weapons in the tubes I showed you before. I have seen them while I watched the achromos. It is the most important thing that we will find. Weapons will help us be able to stand a chance against these people.”

“People,” Daios repeated with a snort. “That’s what you are calling them now, brother?”

Turning with a snarl, he grabbed Daios by the neck and dragged his brother so close he could see the filaments of the gills on his neck flaring for breath. “Listen to me very closely. You will kill whoever you want. You will get your blood. But I am the one getting you into the city and I am the one who can understand them. Do not test me now, Daios.”

Another hand settled on his back, trying to stop the anger that surged in his veins. “We are with you, Arges. Despite what your brother says.”

“Watch him closely, Maketes.” Arges released his blood brother and turned his attention to the first open moon pool. “Whatever mess he causes is your responsibility as well.”

As for him, it was time to hunt. Arges would find that achromo who had laid his hands on Mira and he would destroy him.

As one, his pod turned toward the first open moon pool. He was the first to launch himself out of the water and drag himself into the home of the achromos. Even having been here before, it was difficult for him once inside. The colors were so bleak. White walls, lights that were far too bright, and two technicians who stared at him with wide, horrified eyes. Before they could reach for the weapons at their hips, he batted them aside.

One of the men hit their head against the edge of a console and blood splattered on the floor. The other tripped and fell into the water where Arges did not watch to see what happened. He did not say his people couldn't kill, and they needed this. They deserved to have blood underneath their claws after all they had endured.

Dragging himself out of the door, pushing it open with his shoulders and barely fitting through it, he expelled all the water from his gills and started forward. The halls were still tight. He couldn't quite touch either side with outstretched arms, but it was close.

Achromos scattered. Screams filled the hall, and he knew soon enough there would be soldiers with powerful weapons. His pod would never see the soldiers, because he was the bait.

His warriors turned a corner behind him, and then another. They all slithered down the halls, dragging themselves on their bellies and ignoring everything but what they sought. Soon they would have weapons. They would be able to fight back.

Arges was focused only on one achromo. And that man had been deeper in the city.

He crawled quickly, his tail lashing out behind him and catching any achromos stupid enough to get close. They fired their weapons at him, the sound of them pinging against his scales and digging into his flesh. He didn't stop. Not even when his black blood left streaks behind him.

Because he had seen the man. He watched as the achromo ran from him, but there was no terror in the man's eyes. Only a realization that he was being hunted. And perhaps a thrill in that.

He tracked him through the city. Past massive rooms with glass ceilings, beyond rooms that were filled with so much shit, he couldn't guess what it all was. Deeper and deeper into the heart of the city. Perhaps this was a trap, but he highly doubted it.

Then he saw the plan. He realized the man had gone to another room with a moon pool they hadn't seen before. He was already opening the door,

standing above a ship with a glass top that he sank into. The man didn't even look at him as he fired all the sides of the ship and dropped it into the water.

"No you don't," he snarled, launching himself into the sea with the ship.

He had seen this in his future, he realized. The achromos fleeing their cities in these small glass bubbles that would take them deeper into the sea. They were fast, but he was faster.

He surged after the ship, following as the man dodged around rock pillars and deeper into the depths. He thought he could get away from Arges. This man thought he was a better swimmer than someone who had been born in the sea.

It took him a while, but eventually he caught up with the man. He grabbed onto the back of the ship and swung. It careened off course, spinning wildly in the dark with its lights flickering on and off as the entire ship struggled to maintain its direction. Arges attached himself to the front of it, ripping pieces off and flinging them into the depths. He didn't care what pieces he tore off. One of them had to be important.

And then, finally, there was nothing but silence.

He stared into the light at the center of the ship, glaring down at the man inside who must think he was staring at a monster. Perhaps he was. Arges bared his teeth, snapping them in the man's direction.

But he could see the achromo had a weapon in his hand, and it was pointed right at Arges. "Do it," the achromo snarled. "I'll kill you, just like I killed your little whore. A soldier of Tau never stops, no matter how long it takes for us to win."

"That's the difference between my kind and yours," Arges replied, even though he knew the man couldn't understand. The achromo's eyes widened, though, and he wondered if it was the first time this soldier had realized the People of Water could speak. "You never know when to stop, and we always have to be the ones to end things."

He dug his claws into the edges of glass and ripped the shield off of his ship.

Water rushed in long before the man could fire his weapon. Arges was faster than him, anyway. He batted the hand that held the weapon and watched as it joined the sinking ship. But the man he held onto. The achromo dangled in his grip, so small that it was hard to imagine they were so deadly. The man was already drowning, sucking water in like air with his

mouth gaping open. He was trying to live, but he hadn't realized he was already dead.

Arges squeezed his throat a little harder. "You touched her, and that will never happen again. I wish I could rip you apart, limb by limb, and that you would be awake for all that pain. But you will not, because you are weak." He grabbed one of the man's arms, then the other. And he knew the moment the achromo realized what he was going to do. "So I will end this quickly, not because you deserve it, but because she needs me more than I need my vengeance."

Arges ripped.

Both of the arms came off far too easily, and he let the man and his parts return to the sea. Some crab or other creature would snap up the rest of him. Blood filled the water, and he dragged it into his gills so he could taste the metal on his tongue.

Then he turned in the direction of the dome and returned to his mate. The woman who needed him.

The woman he could only hope was still alive.

THIRTY-NINE

MIRA

Mira didn't remember much of her healing, only a lot of pain. She woke a few times; she was certain of that. There were times when she remembered soft hands on her cheeks and a melodic voice who told her that she would live. He ordered her to live, because if she didn't, then he would follow her into the abyss.

By the time she was well enough to sit back up and be aware of everything around her, she was mostly alone. Byte was still there, and the

little droid was so excited to see her again. It hadn't left her side, and instead decided the best spot in the entire dome was right next to her bed.

She'd arrived here essentially dead. But because she had been hooked up to the undine, it had been like chest compressions. The undine had breathed for her, and so her body had been forced to stay alive. Melete had stayed with her for days with that cord connected to her, breathing for an achromo she should have hated.

The moon pool no longer closed. She wasn't all that certain why, but had a feeling it had to do with the attack on Beta.

She didn't know much about that. The yellow finned undine, Maketes she had since learned, told her about the attack and that most of the people in her city were still alive and well. She didn't have any reason to worry too much about them, although he seemed to hesitate while telling her.

Those black eyes looked at her and saw too much. He knew there was something angry bubbling inside of her. That she wanted to see Arges and still hadn't seen him.

Thus far, she had stopped herself from asking. Maketes had told her that his people had kept him trapped. At least, that was how she thought he meant it. He said that Arges wasn't coming for her, and she'd thought that was because someone wasn't letting him return to her side.

The longer it took for him to get here, the longer she wondered if he just didn't want to see her.

She feared he considered her unworthy. Or maybe he'd gotten what he wanted out of her. Information, sex, and then he thought better of it. Maybe she'd been so bad at having sex with him that he had decided it wasn't worth it to keep her around. She didn't know.

All she could do was stay in her dome. Clearly, her own people didn't want her back. So she healed, waiting until she was well enough to walk, then workout, and then swim. After that, she swam every day.

No one attacked her. None of the undines seemed to care that she existed. Even the ones who visited with fish for her to eat watched her swim with amusement. She was getting stronger, though, and that's all that mattered. Stronger. Healthier.

The medkit had stitched up her body, and that was the only thing she could focus on right now. Because her heart was shattered.

Maybe she just wasn't good enough for him. At least not any more than as a pet.

Swimming now, she adjusted her rebreather, so it didn't pinch her face so badly. Mira had to test the damn thing to make sure it still actually worked. After the last fiasco where it had stopped working, she didn't really trust it. Not as much, at least.

A clawed hand reached out of her peripheral and grabbed the rebreather. She only had a second to shout, "Hey!", before the rebreather was pulled from her face. Planting her feet hard against the chest of the undine next to her, she shoved with her feet and pushed off of them. All she had to do was make it back to the dome. She'd been practicing. She was better at holding her breath for long periods of time, and getting better the more she practiced.

A sharp jab at the side of her neck, and suddenly there was air in her lungs. Pushing, inflating, giving her a sense of life.

"Where are you off to?" She'd know that deep voice anywhere. Part of her wanted to melt into him, to weep in relief that he was finally here.

The other part of her wanted to hit him, and that was the part that came out on top. Whirling, she punched her fist to his chest and then ripped the tube out of her neck. "Where have you been?"

He grabbed the end of the tendril, sighing, before attaching it to her neck again. "Feral creature. I've been here, but there has been much for me to fix."

"Fix?" She felt him inflate her lungs again, and the feeling was so strange it was hard for her to even focus. "I don't know what you're trying to do here, Arges, but you haven't come to see me since I've been injured."

"I've been here, just not while you were awake." He lifted a hand again, brushing her hair behind her ear before making that sighing sound again that suggested he was pleased. "I have missed you."

He didn't... He didn't get to say that. She had missed him too, but she'd been sitting here alone. Sad. Dreaming of him coming and telling her that she meant something to him and instead, here he was, being an absolute dick!

"No," she muttered, turning toward the dome and swimming away from him. Air be damned. "I'm not having this conversation with you."

He floated above her, barely flicking his tail to keep up with her. "Did you not miss me?"

"While dying? Yeah, a little." She hated admitting it, but she'd told Arges that she was in love with him. So, of course, she had missed him.

She'd be lying if she said she didn't.

"Then why are you swimming away from me?"

"Because I'm mad at you."

He swam around her, and their connection made her have to spin with him. The gliding rotation was graceful and calming, but she refused to be calm with him right now. "Why?"

"Because I almost died, Arges!" She sucked in water and choked. Just because she had air didn't mean being underwater was easy for her. She felt him exhale hard and all the water expelled out of her mouth, as her lungs couldn't contain all the air. It was uncomfortable and strange and it wasn't human. None of this was.

She couldn't even breathe hard in her anger. She could only take what he was giving her. So all she could do was glare at him, tears pricking her eyes alongside the saltwater.

"You weren't here," she said, her voice choking a bit. "You handed me away when I was clearly dying and you didn't even care. You stayed there, and then you didn't come here. I thought..."

She didn't know what she thought. She thought he would come back as her knight in shining armor to tell her that he loved her too, and that they would figure out a way to be with each other, but all of this had happened so fast. And then nothing happened. Nothing at all. She didn't even get to see him.

"Mira," he murmured.

She let him grab her around the waist and drag her through the water toward him. Maybe she was weak for it. But she wanted to feel him, even if it was a lie. His clawed hands curved around her skin, pulling her against hard muscles and a tail that coiled through her legs with a familiarity she wasn't sure he deserved anymore.

"Don't Mira me," she said. Planting her hands against his stupidly firm chest, she gave a little shove. "Where have you been?"

"I told you, there were things I had to do. I had to make sure that the two of us were safe, and now I know for certain that we are."

"Really? That's all you have to say? You had to make sure we were safe."

"I had to know for certain that everything was where it was supposed to be. My people and yours do not play nicely, and I had to tell some rather elaborate lies to make sure that I could even get out of those bindings to

save you.” He dragged his face along hers, and she felt the fluttering gills at his neck toy with her skin. “My people were not happy that I saved you. Some of them wanted to kill you after I had worked so hard to save you. So I had to stay. I had to argue for your life. Our life.”

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” He cupped her cheek, turning her face to his and pressing a kiss to her lips, lingering there for long moments. Almost as though he meant it. As though he really meant he’d missed her. “I did not want to return to you until I knew you were safe. Until I know we could love each other without anyone else interfering.”

Love.

He’d indirectly said he loved her, but that wasn’t the same. That wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

She wanted to hear that he was consumed by her. That every second he was away from her, it was like he’d torn out a piece of his heart and let it dangle in the currents. She wanted him to bleed because he wasn’t with her.

They were insane thoughts, but it was how she’d felt. Like a part of herself was missing. Like she wasn’t entirely a person until he came back to her.

He tugged her against him a little harder, scooping his hand around the back of her neck and forcing her to look at him. Really look into those black eyes that saw too much. “Did you question my affection while I was gone?”

“Every day.”

“Really?”

“Every second,” she said, her voice a little choked. “I could have died. I would have if Melete hadn’t breathed for me. Or if we didn’t have the medkit. That man tried to kill me and all you did was hand me off and then disappear for weeks.”

His claws dug into the back of her head. “I went back to kill him, Mira. I followed him through the entire city and then I chased him in his escape pod. He tried to flee so he wouldn’t have to pay the price of touching you. But then I ripped his ship apart, and I tore him in half. I left him for the sharks, so that they would all know what happens to anyone who lays a hand on you.”

Her heart skipped a beat. She didn’t think it was normal for her to be so turned on by that answer, but fuck, she wanted him.

He inhaled deeply, those gills fluttering against her stomach, where he was suddenly very obviously excited. “Fuck, woman. You shouldn’t react like that when I tell you I murdered someone for you.”

“How else am I supposed to react? I thought for weeks that you didn’t care about me anymore. You disappeared, and I thought I was some pet you put back in the carrier and was having people take care of you while you lived your life.”

“Never,” he hissed, his fingers flexing against her hip and the back of her head. “I couldn’t leave you if I tried, *kairos*. You are and always will be the soul of my soul, the heart that beats in my chest. I would do anything for you, Mira. Even lie to my own people, convince them that fighting against the achromos is foolish, and making someone else the leader of their warriors. I have given everything up for you.”

“You didn’t.”

“I will,” he said with a shrug. “If that is what you want. That is what I have set in motion, at the very least. At any point, I will make Maketes the person who leads the pod. You and I can disappear forever.”

It sounded nice. Just the two of them. But then she would never see more undines, or more people in the ocean that still made her feel like this world was worth saving.

They had been so helpful in his absence. Melete, Maketes, a few others whose names she hadn’t caught, but they were kind. Really, truly kind. They had brought her food and asked her questions. Some of them had even taken their own chips so they could actually converse with her. They were sweet, and she didn’t want to lose all that.

But most of all, she didn’t want him to give up everything for her. That wasn’t fair. Not when there was a chance they could make this work.

She shook her head. “I want to figure out a way for all of us to stay together. I want you to have your people and me, Arges.”

“There are some who say that is an impossible future.” He kissed her collarbone, his lips skating over her skin. “I have spoken with the ancients in the sea. They showed me our futures, and there were only two paths. One where we fight, and one where we are a family.”

“Maybe you didn’t see everything,” she replied, petting her hands down his hair and digging her nails into his scalp. “Maybe you only saw a piece of the future. A moment where we were alone. But maybe your future is with me and with them.”

“We have a lot of work to make that future happen. Your people. My people. None of them want to get along and I don’t think it’s entirely possibly just yet. You’ll have to translate for us before they will even speak with our kind.”

“I can do that.” She didn’t know how or what would happen if she did, but she would try.

Arges scraped his nails down her sides, and those fine points of contact made her gasp. A sudden rush of heat flooded through her veins and, oh, she had forgotten it felt like this when he touched her.

Like nothing else mattered. Like a shark could swim by her and she wouldn’t even notice. Even if it took a bite out of her, she would just smile and beg Arges to touch her again.

Arching against his touch, she tried to remember what they had been talking about. “So your plan is to work with the achromos, then? You want to make a deal with them?”

“My plan is to bring you to a grotto and fuck you where the water is warm and you can be comfortable.” He nipped at her neck, his sharp teeth likely leaving marks. “I want to hear the sounds you make again, this time with nothing standing in our way. I want to know that you are mine, and I am yours.”

She was nodding. Why was she nodding like an idiot?

Wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, she held him tightly against her. “Let’s do that, Arges. And perhaps this time I can come up with a way for both of your... needs to be met at the same time.”

He growled low under his breath and those black eyes flashed. “That is not possible, achromo.”

“Maybe not with an undine.” She reached between them and palmed where she thought he came out. A kick of his hips against hers was her reward, and she swore the scales shifted underneath her palm. “But that’s entirely possible with a human.”

“Fuck me,” he groaned, already swimming away from the dome so no one would find them.

“I intend to,” she replied with a bubble of laughter.

FORTY

ARGES

She let her body go limp as he swam with her through the currents. All the while, as they journeyed, he ran his hands down her sides. Down her skin. He touched her like he didn't think he would ever touch her again. Perhaps he had feared he wouldn't.

Even though he hadn't said it in so many words, she could feel through his touch that he had been worried about her. He had wanted to see her, and

he hadn't lied when he said he needed to fix things. His people didn't want them to be together. Hell, her people didn't want them to be together.

But they were. And now they were connected as he breathed life into her lungs and dragged her through the water until they were floating in the middle of the deep blue. All around her was the same color. Just endless blue in every direction with spears of sunlight from above. They were the only people on the planet here. No sound other than what he made, and even that was slightly muffled.

His arms around her waist tightened, pulling her a little closer to him. His gills fluttered as he breathed her in and his hearts beat hard against her palms. So otherworldly. So other than human, and she couldn't get enough of him.

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his gills. Those delicate fins, fluttering in the current, immediately stilled. Finally, she got to touch him the way she wanted to touch him. She could kiss along the thin membranes, flicking her tongue along them as she'd so desired to do for such a long time.

He stiffened in her arms, tilting his head to give her more access and groaning. "How does that feel so good?"

She had no idea. But she'd known he would like it from the first moment she had touched her fingers to them.

He made such a pretty picture, arching away from her as though the pleasure was a little too much, but still holding her tightly as though he couldn't let her go. All those muscles flexing, bunching underneath her touch as she tried to touch him everywhere. She wanted to feel him, every inch, all the warm skin that she hadn't been able to touch last time because she was so overwhelmed by the need that consumed them both.

Mira wriggled in his grasp, moving so he had to release his tight grip on her hips. His hands grasped at the water, as though his claws needed something to dig into.

"Mira," he growled, but then fell silent as she trailed her lips down his neck, over his chest, and down to the gills at his ribs. Running her tongue along those, she looked up to see his black eyes were wide. He breathed hard. She could feel that breath puffing through her own lungs, forcing them to expand as his excitement slid into her body.

"I want to know where you hide yourself," she murmured against his ribs. "I want to see you, Arges."

With a groan, he rotated his hips so she could see the scales slide out of the way as his twin cocks erupted into the sea. She hadn't gotten too much of a look at him last time, only felt his soft skin and the smooth texture before it was spearing into her. But now? Now she could look her fill.

He was impossibly smooth and so damn large. Tapered at the end, and for a second she was shocked that she had actually fit him inside her. But then again, she'd done it. So she didn't know why she was questioning it now.

Gripping the top one in her fist, she gave him an experimental stroke. And oh, all those muscles seized again. His abs flexed, and he tilted his head back, those handsome cords of muscle standing out in stark relief compared to the blank background behind him. His hair floated around his head, and all she could focus on were the miles of muscle and strength rendered immobile by her tiny hand.

"So sexy," she murmured, leaning down to press a kiss to the head of his cock. "All mine."

His hips jerked and his claws raked through her hair. He forced her to look up at him, his eyes wide with a question and a hint of fear. "What are you doing, Mira? Is this some strange human test?"

She chuckled, realizing it probably looked like she was going to take a bite out of him. "Hush, and just feel."

There were benefits to not having to breathe on her own. Mira slid his cock into her mouth, sucking hard to draw him as deep as she could. The instant suction had the effect she was hoping for. His hips bucked, but she controlled the depth with her hand still wrapped around the thick cock that almost too easily slid down her throat.

Drawing back, she swirled her tongue around the head and watched his reaction. He stared down at her like she'd found a new god for him to worship. Maybe she had.

Mira took her time with him, learning the salty brine of his taste and the things that made him squirm. He didn't have a normal cock head like a human man did, so she had to discover the parts of him that were sensitive. The parts of him that made him shout and then bite the back of his knuckles when she sucked, or licked, or dragged her teeth down the shaft because apparently he loved that.

She didn't stop until all his gills were standing straight out from his body, fluttering so quickly she almost couldn't track the movement. Then

he let out a loud groan, an angry sound, before he grabbed her underneath the arms and shot her up in the water. He caught her around the waist, wrapping her legs around his neck as he tore through her underwear.

His gills fluttered again, and she knew this time he was inhaling her scent. Dragging it through his gills as he always did.

And then he was there. That long, bumpy tongue dragging through her folds until he speared her with it. She arched against him, her spine curving as she tried to grind herself a little harder into his mouth. She wanted him to touch her everywhere, all at once. She wanted to be consumed by him after all that they had almost lost.

His grip on her thighs was almost bruising as he held her in place, those deadly claws digging into her skin as his fangs nipped at her folds. He didn't just lick her, he ate her. Arges was messy and loud, with little grunts and groans that made her feel like she had the most divine pussy in the world. Every inch of her was precious to him, and she never once felt like she was lacking.

Arching more, a thought filtered through her mind. A thought that was wild and crazy but was one that she could actually do in water. There was no gravity here. Nothing holding her down.

So on his next groan, when he automatically loosened his hand as he kneaded her thighs, she moved. Not away from him, but bending back until she was upside down in his arms. And his cocks were right where she wanted them.

Before he could grab her and move her back—and with that growl, she knew that was his plan—she took one of them into her mouth. Sucking hard, she wrapped the other in her fist and worked them both at the same time.

He shuddered again, his tail coiled below her as though he desperately needed to wrap it around something. And then all his attention zeroed in between her legs. Suddenly, he was everywhere again. His tongue plunging deep inside her, those bumps sliding against her clit every time he moved. He rubbed, he sucked, he teased until she was a trembling mess in his arms.

All the while, she tortured him. Mira could feel the slickness of his pre-cum coating her hands, so much of it that she should have been startled. But she didn't care. She just wanted more of him. More of his taste, more of his desire.

But he was far more talented, or perhaps more dedicated to her pleasure. With a sharp cry, she came around his tongue. She clenched so hard he was locked inside her for a few seconds before she felt him slowly pull his tongue out, lapping between her legs with a soft sigh that fluttered his gills against her thighs.

“Mira,” he said, nearly gasping the word. “I cannot...”

She already knew what he was going to say. He couldn’t wait any longer, and neither could she. She didn’t want to wait any longer, even for what she had planned.

“Bring your tail up closer to me,” she said, allowing him to turn her, so she was facing him.

Mira had experienced sex before him. There wasn’t a lot to do under the sea other than that. Engineers weren’t shy about their bodies. She’d thought she had fucked every way possible, but this she had never done. Never even offered to do it for another person, but... She wanted to feel that overwhelming fullness with him. She wanted to experience this with him.

With the only person who could give her this satisfaction.

He coiled his tail up around them, and she had the strange sense that they were drifting. Floating in the water but slowly sinking. But then his scales scraped her legs, and she didn’t care what the sea did to them.

Another shuddering breath filled her lungs as his cocks brushed between her thighs. Apparently her undine remembered what it felt like to be inside her.

“Are you sure sex without violence is all right with you?” she asked, breathless herself from the shuddering air in his lungs.

“Yes,” he groaned. “Nothing has ever felt like you, Mira. Nothing.”

“Oh, just wait, it’s about to get a hell of a lot better.” She reached between them, palming both of his cocks and guiding them to her entrances. One for each.

She’d imagined doing this before. Double penetration was a fantasy that a few of her female coworkers had mentioned before. But that required two men at once, and they all agreed that it was so much work to have just the one man. But right now? Now she could finally fulfill this fantasy.

“What are you—” His eyes widened, and then a choked sound echoed in his throat as his natural lubrication helped him slip partway inside her.

He appeared incapable of speech. His hands clamped down on her, slowly drawing her lower and lower. Too much. Not fast enough. And god,

she was so full. The sensation of two cocks inside of her at the same time was overwhelming.

She could barely think, barely breathe as he eased them together inch by agonizing inch. The air from him filled her lungs, slowly and methodically, as though he was having a hard time staying still. Slowly sinking on to him, she felt the same struggle. And finally, he was seated all the way inside her.

She could feel him everywhere.

“Fuck,” she whispered, hissing out a long breath. “I don’t know if I can... Can...”

“You can, love.” Arges bent her slightly away from him, shuddering at the movement and drawing the tip of her breast into his mouth.

The subtle pull of his mouth, the bumps of his tongue moving over her nipple, it was so much on top of the fullness. And then he moved.

Oh, he moved.

A slow glide, so wet and easy that the friction was almost missed until he glided back inside her. Slowly, ever so slowly. The movement was so gentle and she felt her body opening up to him. Allowing him to move, glide, shift until there wasn’t a hint of pain or discomfort.

There was only slick, incredible pressure. From every angle and every part of her body.

She didn’t know when her mouth had dropped open, and he took advantage of it. Arges plunged his tongue into her mouth, licking and biting until she was whimpering in his grip.

“Breathe, *kairos*,” he hissed against her lips. “You feel incredible. You take me so fucking well.”

She moaned. “Move, Arges. Faster, harder, do something.”

She was begging him to make her come. Right now this was so good, but she was on the edge of something incredible and she didn’t know how to make it better. He flexed his hips and suddenly...

Fuck, he plunged into her hard. So hard it felt like her mind fractured. She groaned out a sound that she’d never made in her life as he held onto her hips and bucked. Hard. Harder. Achingly perfect as he bottomed out inside her.

She pressed a hand to her belly, feeling him moving inside her, and hissed out a long sound as he tugged her forward.

Nipping at her neck, he growled, “You’re going to make me come so hard, Mira. Fuck, you’re perfect.”

She arched her back and shattered. The guttural sound of his voice, the groaning need that rumbled out of his chest... It sent her right over the edge. Vaguely, she could feel him join her. The flooding heat that consumed both of her holes, filling her to the very brim with his need and desire.

They were both breathing hard. Or he was breathing hard, filling her lungs over and over again until she felt a little lightheaded. Or maybe that was the orgasm that had shattered her very soul. She could still feel little aftershocks that squeezed his cocks inside her, making him kick a few times before he let out a little chuckle and pulled himself free from her.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked.

“Not at all.” She’d be sore in the morning, but he didn’t need to worry about that. Mira had been so certain she could take him, and she’d proven she could. It was her own damn fault if she was sore, and it would be a lovely reminder about the adventure they’d had.

Burying her face in his neck, she nuzzled into his gills as they both settled onto the sea floor. Dust plumed around them, and she realized they had actually been sinking.

He tilted back, lying down in the sand with her on his chest and his arms around her. His cocks were still half hard, wedged between her legs and strangely comforting.

“Well?” she asked, drawing circles on his chest. “What did you think?”

He huffed out a breath that made her cough with the force of it. “You stole my mind, Mira. How could I ever go back to the way things were before? I didn’t even know it was possible for me to come with both of my cocks at the same time. That was... Shocking.”

She giggled. But the sound bubbled out of her, sending tiny air bubbles wiggling through the water and up toward the surface. “Well, I did want to blow your mind.”

“Indeed, you did.” He gathered her a little closer, arranging her legs on either side of him so she was comfortable. “You are a gift from the sea, Mira. A rare pearl I am so lucky to have found. I do love you, you know. More than anything else in this world. You hold my soul in your chest. Wherever you go, I will never be far from you.”

Her hair billowed around them, red tangling around the electric blue of his body. “I love you,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to his gills. “No matter how different we are or where we came from. You are mine, Arges. And I am yours.”

EPILOGUE

MIRA

Mira was cautiously optimistic about the future. More and more undines showed up at the dome, politely asking if they could also be fitted with a translator. Though she had yet to meet any members of the council or the woman that Arges called “Mitéra”, she hoped someday she would. They still didn’t trust her, and she supposed that was their right.

Arges, on the other hand, was quick to ask her opinion about everything. He let her know that their attack on Beta had been successful.

The undines now had weapons they could use against her own people. And even though it felt a bit like she was going against her own kind, she showed them how to use the weapons. She even showed them how to store the guns and welders and all other manner of nonsense that they'd stolen, so that the sea wouldn't destroy them before they could ever attempt to use them.

Maybe it was the wrong thing to do. She should have fought against them, told them that the humans were worth fighting for. Maybe there was another person out there as well who would change their mind.

But for now, she only remembered that she had been one of many. Forgotten in a city where they only wanted her to work. It was hard to forget the fist that had hit her so many times, or the knife that had left so many scars.

The city was just that.

A city. A blank space where many people gathered, but no one had helped. She was an orphan after her parents died, one of many who had tiny fingers that eventually became strong hands. But no one cared how she was or what she was doing.

The undines cared. They asked questions about her life before, and what she enjoyed eating. They brought her gifts whenever they came to ask for a translation chip, and then they returned later to ask how she was. They made the effort to bring her into their society and she was ever so grateful for it.

Besides, Arges never left her alone for very long. He lingered underneath her home most days. Some nights he spent inside the dome, some she had taken to sleeping with him in the shallows. The few nights she was alone, Mira spent in a comfortable bed with cushions and blankets and Byte to keep her company.

It wasn't a perfect life. There was still a lot for them to figure out, and she still had to spend days staying dry so her skin wouldn't get so soggy that it split open.

But for the most part... it was quiet. It was peaceful, and it was everything that she'd wanted.

Arges poked his head through the moon pool, surveying her project of vegetables and fruits before turning in her direction. "Are you ready?"

Not really. He had wanted her to speak with his pod, to give them a direction on what to do next. Beta was obviously under their control for a

few more months, at least. Soon, they would need to speak with the generals there. Her people would not let that attack stand for long, but they needed time to lick their wounds.

She didn't want them to have that time. But she also realized that Beta was just one head of a hydra. There were so many more heads for them to deal with.

Arges gathered her in his arms and swam with her through the shallows to a sunken human town. It was an easy landmark to find, and therefore, that was where they usually found each other.

She recognized Maketes, and the yellow-finned undine grinned at her. He waved, a little ridiculous considering who he was floating next to.

Narrowing her eyes at the glowing red undine, she bared her teeth in a snarl. "What is he doing here?"

"He is an important part of this pod," Arges begrudgingly said. But then added, "If I had a choice, he would not be here. But Mitéra insisted he lead this next attempt toward one of the other cities. She is trying to give him another chance to come back into our lives."

"Without an arm?"

"Even without an arm." Arges swam them closer, then released her. It was clearly a move to show his brother that Mira was strong enough to stand on her own.

Or perhaps a way to tell his brother that there wasn't a chance for him to lay a finger on her. Not without Arges killing him first.

He held out his hand, and Mira peered between the webbed fingers to see Arges held a translation chip.

She arched a brow. "You want me to give that to him?"

"You're the only one with fingers small enough to implant it." He shrugged, though. "It's up to you. Whatever mission you send him on will probably be easier if he can understand your people."

Sighing, she took the translation chip and pointed at Daios. "If you bite me, I will make Arges kill you."

Her threat wasn't likely scary to the massive red undine, but Maketes repeated it and Daios flashed even darker. She thought he would argue, but instead, he merely inclined his head and tilted his body so that his good arm was farther away from her.

She looked at the stump where he once had a strong arm, and she felt a small thread of pity worm its way into her heart. He had been injured by her

people. And his own hatred as well, of course. But that didn't mean she didn't see the injuries for what they were.

Pain from inside his soul had moved outside of him, and that loss would stay with him for the rest of his life.

She untethered herself from Arges and held her breath. It was so easy to stick the translation chip onto the side of his head, and she tried not to wince as he flinched in pain. Unlike the other undines, however, he did not writhe in the water or churn up the sea. Instead, he stoically took the pain, staring into her eyes with no small amount of distrust.

"There," she said, swimming back to Arges's side, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She reattached him to her throat before adding, "You should be able to understand me now."

Of all things, that was what made him wince. He looked like he was actually in pain listening to her speak, but then squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. "I can, achromo."

Arges turned his attention to the others, clearing his throat for attention. "Mira has a plan for us. We've been talking about the other cities. Beta is currently licking its wounds, and soon we will have to deal with them again. But there are other cities."

"Why should we focus on them?" Maketes asked. "They're far from our home."

"All the cities are intertwined," she replied. "Every city helps the other. Beta creates weapons and fixes any of the ships that need fixing. Alpha runs the entire thing, though. If we strike Alpha, that will be the one that has the most effect."

"We?" Daios repeated, his dark eyes flashing with hate. "I do not believe you wish to help us, achromo."

Glaring at him, she grumbled, "I don't want you to kill more people."

"Then what do you wish us to do?"

"There are ways to get around a city without murdering everyone who stands in your way." She grabbed the tendril connecting her to Arges and dragged them all down toward the sand. She drew the cities into it, circles for each one with a symbol by each.

Mira spent the next hour explaining how the cities worked. Who was in them. They needed to focus on Alpha because that was where all the political leaders were. Beta was a good one, yes, because the ships wouldn't get fixed. Anything broken in all the cities would remain broken, and that

was a good start. But there were others that would make a much larger impact.

Alpha would have to be the one they set their eyes on first. It was the only one that would create a ripple effect throughout all the other cities that none of her people could disregard.

When she finished, even Daios looked a little impressed.

“Their leaders will not speak with us,” Daios said, his voice a grinding, guttural noise. “If you think we can make a deal with them, you will be sorely disappointed.”

“I don’t think they want to make a deal with us. So we have to change the want, and turn it into a need.” Mira picked up two seashells. “Alpha is run by the General. No one gets close to him. No one except...” She gestured with the other seashell. “His daughter.”

A few of the pod members swam a little farther away, almost as though they were expecting this to end in an explosion.

Even Arges looked at her with a furrowed brow. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m saying that I can survive underneath the water just fine. My eyes were opened the moment you brought me down into the depths and I realized there was so much more to your people. To our history. If we can get the most important person in his life on our side, then we have a fighting chance at convincing him that he doesn’t actually have a choice.”

Daios flicked his tail through the sand. “You are suggesting we kill her?”

“I’m suggesting we kidnap her. Just like you did to me.”

The silence in the ocean was heavier than usual after that statement.

“Right, you don’t want to do that,” she muttered.

“It’s not that easy,” Arges said, smoothing a hand down her back. “Alpha is a city that is completely under guard. We couldn’t get into it if we tried. It’s also not built like Beta. The whole city is under a massive dome. It’s more like the bubble you live in than the singular structure that Beta was.”

“I know what Alpha looks like. I have seen the drawings.” She gestured with the smaller seashell that was supposed to be the General’s daughter. “But I also know the rumors about her. She’s always close to the glass. People say she’s obsessed with sea creatures, and that includes the undines. Just a couple years ago I heard gossip that her father was keeping her under

lock and key because she got way too close to the glass when there was an undine on the other side. I don't think it would be hard to convince her to get a little closer. Or to take a risk."

The entire pod looked at each other, then back at her.

Finally it was Melete, the lovely and massive female undine, who replied, "I think it is a good plan."

A few others grumbled as well that it wasn't a half bad plan, and if they could convince this other achromo to help them, then maybe this would all start to work in their favor.

Mira beamed up at Arges. "See? I told you it was a good idea."

But his eyes were all for his brother. "Do you think you can do this, Daios? Mitéra will not be angry if you decide the next mission is the one you wish to take."

Daios had yet to take his eyes off the tiny seashell in her hand. As she watched, he extended his blackened fingertips and waited for her to place the tiny shell in his grasp. He closed his webbed fingers around it gently.

"I will find this daughter," he growled. "And she will be mine."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, this book wouldn't be the same without my incredible beta readers. Nic, you're a legend and I swear none of my books would be anywhere near as good as they are without you. You're the best person I've met on the internet!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emma Hamm is a small town girl on a blueberry field in Maine. She writes stories that remind her of home, of fairytales, and of myths and legends that make her mind wander.

She can be found by the fireplace with a cup of tea and her three Maine Coon cats dipping their paws into the water without her knowing.

Subscribe to my Newsletter for updates on new stories!

www.emmahamm.com



zlibrary

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>