CHAPTER 1

Grace sat at his desk, spinning lazily, head tilted back to stare at the ceiling. Fading light spilled into the room, a gentle reminder of how late it had gotten. But Grace paid it no mind, favoring to continue his monotonous activity, letting out a pensive sigh. He continued for a while before glancing out the window of his classroom at the golden sun sinking gently like it had all the time in the world.

Well, he guessed it kinda did, and Grace found himself becoming jealous of a ball of fire and gas. Everyday was a dull blur for the teacher, only brightened temporarily when he taught his excitable group of students. His students who were now gone.

They had graduated, he didn't mean to make it sound like they had all died. Whoops. It had been the last day of school before summer let out, and Grace found himself in his usual slump at this time of year.

He glanced around the room that had been decorated by his students over the course of the year. Drawings hung everywhere, most of them 'memes,' most of which Grace did not understand in the slightest. Little models of sea life hung from the ceiling, each one having been hand made by each of his children, a homage to his past life as a marine biologist before he had fudged it up with his smart mouth.

He had gotten into a heated debate with a fellow biologist, whom he had already disliked, shall we say, and after another dig at his thesis he may have said:

“*A jellyfish could have used the oxygen you constantly waste better*!”

It hadn't been his proudest moment, especially when he was escorted out, kicking and screaming. But he had deserved it, the jerk.

Grace groaned at the memory, rubbing his face harshly, as if to scrub away his shame. He concluded he had sulked for long enough, finally lifting his head, his neck protesting angrily. Wincing, he rubbed his neck to soothe the aching pain, his eye catching on movement. He turned to look at his classroom door.

It now leaned open, a middle aged woman standing in the doorway. She was shorter than Grace but still tall, and she held herself with a level of confidence he could only dream to have. She had mostly straight coppery blond hair that gently grew a bit wavy at the bottom, reaching a little past her shoulders.

She looked at him with a stern gaze, as if studying him. Grace shifted uncomfortably at the look and cleared his throat.

“Can I help you, miss?” He *really* hoped it wasn’t an angry mother looking for a better grade for their kid.

“Dr. Ryland Grace?” Her voice was gentle with a mild accent. Dutch or German he had to guess. He sucked in a breath at the title. It had been years since anyone had addressed him as “dr.”

“Maybe.”

She raised an unamused eyebrow.

“You are a marine biologist, yes?”

“Was.” He corrected. “I was fired a long time ago. I’m just a middle school teacher now.”

She gave him another studying glance before she reached into a large bag that hung off her right shoulder, and pulled out a folder. She opened it and threw it on the desk in front of him.

Grace hesitated before looking at the offering. As he focused on it, he realized it was a file on *him*. It told his whole life story; where he went to school, his degrees, his academic achievements, even some of the awards he had won over the years. There was even a section on the conference and his outburst. Okay, what the heck? This totally wasn’t the least bit creepy. Nope. Perfectly normal.

“I am Eva Stratt. I need a marine biologist.” She stated. “A good one. That isn’t afraid to upset people and take risks.”

“...why?” Grace was caught off guard by how direct she had been.

“We’ve made a… discovery. One that needs the best minds to handle it. People who we can trust.”

Grace finally looked up from the file, dumbfounded. He pointed to himself in confusion.

“Me?? Sorry, I'm just a school teacher. I’m nothing special.”

Her gaze hardened for a second before she grabbed the folder back and pushed it in her bag.

“That’s a shame. This discovery could change everything we know.” She paused, as if to let her words sink in. “But I understand it is too much for you.”

Grace stared, stunned, as she turned to leave. His head was swirled with so many thoughts and emotions he felt dizzy. Why him? What could they possibly have found? His chest ached, desperate to work in his field, his passion, even if only once more.

“Wait!”

Eva stopped just short of the door.

“What… What did you find?” He leaned forward over his desk, trying hard to bury his curiosity and excitement.

Eva turned, a sly smirk danced at the corners of her mouth. “That information is only for trusted personnel.”

He hesitated. He wanted to know more, he hated not knowing things, especially when it came to his specialty. But he was also wary. He had very little information to go off of, and he didn’t like the uncertainty. But her words kept dancing in his head, waking up the dormant marine biologist he had so desperately tried to keep down.

His empty classroom seemed to shrink around him, suffocating him. His students were gone, again not dead, just moving forward in their lives. And where was he? Wallowing in regret and pity? Going about his life like a zombie, barely able to differentiate each day from the next? What life was he moving forward in, if at all?

“You’re sure you want me?” Despite his desire to have a bit of excitement in his life, he still needed some reassurance. Just a little push into the murky depths of uncertainty and thrill.

“We need you.”

Grace shut his eyes as he took a shaky breath, before he stood up.

“Then I’m your guy.”

She hummed, smiling. “Come with me, Dr. Ryland Grace.”

His chest bloomed with pride at the title. Despite having thrown it all away in the blink of an eye, he had worked hard for it, and he was eager to dive back in once more.

His body moved on its own, following Eva out of the classroom and into the barren, cold, and empty halls. His confidence and curiosity grew with each step, eventually matching the older woman's pace, walking beside her and rambling nervously about what he was to do.

She led them to a black van. A tall built man, dressed in a suit, looking like security of some kind, stood at attention by the back door. Wordlessly he opened the door, Eva stepped in, and settled in a nice leather seat.

The man kept the door open as he now looked at Grace, expectantly. He tried to swallow his rising anxiety as he pulled himself into the seat next to Stratt, hands shaking as he buckled himself in. The door shut with a loud *thud*, silence settled for a few moments before security man got into the driver’s seat and started the car.

He fidgeted with his seatbelt as they pulled away from the school. He watched as the building shrank, wondering if he would return before the next school year started.

He brought his attention back to the woman beside him.

“Do I get to know now?”

She tapped her knees, as if debating if she would tell him or not. Grace chewed on the inside of his cheek, silently begging for her to spill everything.

“Do you watch or read the news?” She asked finally.

He blinked in confusion.

“Um. Occasionally. Why?”

“Have you heard about the numerous destroyed boats?”

Grace paused. He had heard of it. A few weeks ago, boats that were in deeper waters , started being sunk for unknown reasons. Many theorized it was a group of kids just messing with them or damage over time finally reaching its limit.

“The ones people think were sunk by a couple of troubled kids?”

She shook her head, eyes narrowing.

“It wasn’t a bunch of kids.” She said simply. “It was attacked by something in the water.”

Grace froze, waiting for her to continue, but she never did.

“What, like a giant sea monster?” He joked, nervous laugh dying in his throat at Eva’s expression. “You’re kidding.”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

Grace found himself regretting all of his life choices that led him here. Maybe he could pull the door handle and jump out. People did it in movies, he could figure it out. Maybe.

He didn’t attempt anything, instead choosing to sink into the crazy comfortable seat, going over his knowledge in his head to calm his nerves.

It didn’t work. He cursed inwardly at his useless brain and body.

“So uh- where are we going?” He tried.

“A navy base, 3 hours from here.”

“Oh.”

He had to sit with his thoughts for 3 hours?! He should have grabbed a crossword puzzle or something. Dang it, why didn’t he think this through at all? He could have been home by now, eating leftover chinese food as he rewatched golden girls for the seventh time.

Sad? Yes. But it was also familiar and safe, something he was currently lacking at the moment.

He settled on watching the road and fellow cars pass by them out the window as the sun dipped below the skyline, sky darkening

from orange, to pink, to indigo. The pit in his stomach only grew with the darkness.

What's the worst that can happen?

CHAPTER 2

He shouldn't have agreed to this. Is his first thought as he stood there on a beach, observing the wreck that apparently used to be a ship. Specifically a charter fishing boat.

It hadn't been the biggest by all means, but it was still decent, having been able to hold about 20 people. And something had *destroyed* it. Deep claw marks decorated the sides, like the boat was made of paper instead of metal. It was almost completely split in half, pieces of the craft littered the beach.

"What could have possibly done this?" He whispered to himself.

Stratt ushered him towards a cliff wall, and to a cave opening, not much bigger than a home door. She led them inside, the packed sand slowly transitioning to metal that clanged with every footstep.

Would it be too late to turn tail and run? This was something you would see in a horror movie. And Grace was the idiot that just

follows a random woman into a cave that's actually a secret base. Oh yeah, he would be the first to die. He might die. Crap. He would have liked to finish his show at least.

Stratt leads them deeper into the metal halls, unaware of Grace's inner turmoil. They passed people occasionally, getting weird or curious glances here and there. Finally they reached a large door, Eva opening it by putting in a long code to a keypad just next to it.

It opened with an ear piercing screech that made Grace flinch.

Stratt turned to him, gesturing to him to enter. "This will be where you work."

Inside was an enormous room. It was reminiscent of an aquarium, the room right above a large enclosure. There was a huge body of water in the center, big enough to easily house several large sharks or maybe even a small whale. The water so deep, he couldn't see the bottom. The room itself was dome shaped, a heavy duty railing lined the pool, except for one section where there was a metal dock that stuck out into the water. A staircase spiraled down around the tank to likely observe whatever specimen was held here from within the water.

It reminded Grace of where dolphin trainers would practice their drills.

To the right of the room was an alcove, housing medical equipment that seemed to belong to a veterinarian's office. He could even see a light box on the wall to look at x-rays.

To the left was another similar alcove, but it held more scientific equipment like microscopes and test tubes. His fingers twitched at his

sides. He wanted so bad to run over and explore everything and get to work.

But that would have to wait.

“What’s in there?” He asked, pointing to the water.

“Nothing. At least for now.”

He thought back to the conversation in the car. She had been kidding, surely. There was no way his stupid little joke he quipped from nervousness had any weight to it. But as he stared at the tank, he felt his skepticism fade slightly. Whatever was supposed to go in there was gonna be *quite large*.

“Okay. Well, what *will* be in there?” Grace asked, hoping for an answer with at least a little more information.

“We don’t actually know,” she sighed. “We have our theories but we won’t know until we have it here.”

Grace blinked at her in disbelief. “You dragged me here to show me a theory? You said you had discovered something!” He flew his hands in the air in astonishment.

Stratt glared at him. “We did. We just need to get it in the tank. Once we do, then that’s where you come in.”

“So let me guess. You only know it's a living creature, that's large enough to destroy boats?”

“More or less.”

Grace bit down on the insult that threatened to spill from his throat.

“I need you to determine what it is and if it’s a threat. You can do it however you see fit. Just do it.”

“Fine. So where is it now?”

“Somewhere out there.” She pointed in the direction of the beach. “We are still figuring out how to lure it in here.”

“Have you tried food?”

Stratt stared at him. “Of course we have. We’re not idiots.” She spat at him.

Could have fooled me. He managed to keep the thought internal somehow.

“Just checking. So, what’s the plan then?”

She looked away from him.

“You don’t have one.” It wasn’t a question.

Stratt just shrugged. “We are figuring it out.”

Grace couldn’t speak. If he did, he was sure he would be kicked out for the choice words that screamed in his head.

“Look, we have very limited resources here. I’m trying to keep this under wraps until I know for sure what we are dealing with. Are you gonna help me or not?” Stratt looked exhausted, Grace realized.

Was she on her own on this? Of course she was. If she wasn't, she wouldn't have asked a disgraced marine biologist turned middle school science teacher. He pursed his lips, regretting his initial reaction of anger and frustration.

"Yeah. Yes I'll help you. Just a lot to take in." He rubbed his face, glasses falling to hang off his chin. His body felt heavy and his mind raced.

"Thank you. For now let me show you to your room." Grace perked up at that, desperate to sleep off the chaos from the day.

"Please."

She led them again through metal corridors, before reaching a hallway lined with doors, similar to a hotel. She brought him to the end of the hall, turning to the door on the left. A name plate sat on the center of the door.

'Dr. Ryland Grace'

He quirked an eyebrow at Eva.

"I knew you would agree." She said as she handed him a key. "These are your quarters. All of your basic needs can be met here. However, if you need anything, you can come to me."

"Sure."

She nodded before disappearing down the hall, leaving Grace standing and staring at the key in his hands. He sighed in defeat before he unlocked the door and stepped cautiously inside.

The room was surprisingly nice. There was a small entrance way, a door that led to a bathroom on the right side. Further in was a full sized bed sat in the center of the room, a desk sat opposite of the bed, a closet beside it. There weren't any windows but soft white lights that framed the top of the walls kept it illuminated.

There was even a mini fridge and small kitchen on the back wall. Grace thanked Stratt in the back of his mind. He was glad he didn't have to worry about a cafeteria, a place he always felt uncomfortable in. Besides, he liked eating while watching something.

Grace walked in and collapsed on the bed with a huff. It wasn't super comfy but it was soft and warm and Grace let himself sink into the mattress.

What had he gotten himself into? He just wanted to help with a new discovery, and now here he was, in some weird secret base hidden in a cliffside.

He flipped over, staring at the white ceiling, mind wondering to all the possibilities that he may find in the coming weeks.

Was it really some kind of sea monster? Eva seemed to think so enough to set all this up. He wasn't sure how much help he would actually be, but he couldn't deny the thrill he got from all of this.

Maybe he would get to tell his kids all about the cool new sea creature he discovered when he returned next year.

His eyes grew heavy as his mind sang with thoughts of his kids and his classroom, his last thought being he wanted to get some of

those marine life models to decorate the plain, dull room he laid in, before letting sleep drag him down.

CHAPTER 3

Grace was awoken by flashing red lights and a loud alarm ringing in his ears. He scrambled out of bed, landing directly on his face. He ignored the pain blooming across his cheeks as he managed to push himself up and bolt out of the room, adrenaline in full force. He ran out so fast his feet lost traction and he slammed into the wall making him pause with a wince and take in the scene.

Soldiers and personnel ran around frantically, bathed in red from the alarms. All he could hear was his heartbeat in his ears.

What the hell was happening? Should he stay where he was or try to find Stratt? His eyes flickered between the halls, wondering where he would even start.

And then the screaming started. Not the panicked and confused screams he had been hearing. But screams of genuine fear and pain.

Grace sucked in a breath, then took off.

He followed the screams, tears pricking at the corner of his eyes. He was so scared. He didn't know what was happening but his feet still carried him towards the danger despite his brain screaming at him to stop.

He found himself back at the containment room, muffled crashing and screaming emanating from behind the door.

Before he could panic about not knowing the code, the door slammed open, a man dragged an injured man out, quickly disappearing down a corridor. His legs moved on their own again as he managed to get in before the door could close.

There was blood everywhere.

People were strewn about, groaning and twitching in pain. Some… eerily still. Eva Stratt stood in the middle, hands clenched and jaw tight as she watched the scene unfold.

Grace stared at the sight before him. A few soldiers gripped tightly onto chains that wrapped around the limbs of a man. At least the limbs that were available, seeing as its left arm was gone, only a scarred stub in its place.

He was huge. Easily more than twice their size. But it wasn't just a man. He had gills, fangs, and a very large fishtail that swiped at another soldier, sending them flying.

He roared, his quadrifurcated mouth opening wide to reveal rows and rows of sharp teeth. Large muscles flexed as he thrashed, trying to get loose from his restraints. Long black hair whipped around him as he whipped his head to bite the chains and ropes.

Sharp webbed claws strained to attack but failed as the chains were pulled taut.

But as Grace looked into its eyes, he couldn't help but feel that the creature was *scared*.

Eva was shouting orders, trying to regain control over the situation, but no one seemed to be listening.

Grace watched as the creature continued to thrash and scream, anger boiling under his skin.

"***STOP***!!" He screamed. Several people turned to look at him in surprise, including Stratt. "What in the mariana trench are you *doing*?!" Even the creature seemed to notice him now, his flailing weakening the smallest bit.

"Trying to contain it." Stratt said it like it was obvious.

"You're scaring him!"

"It's a giant sea monster."

"Did you even try to communicate with him?!" His arms waved around animatedly.

"I don't need to communicate with it right now. I needed it in the tank." She turned back to the frightened sea man.

"Well he's in the freaking tank so let him go already!"

Eva paused and looked around the room. She sighed defeatedly and lifted her hand, everyone dropped the restraints and fled to the farthest point from the man.

It ripped off the chains and stared at Grace with a hard glare before diving under the water, flooding the room with a wave.

No one spoke, everyone stared between him and Stratt, waiting for some kind of instruction.

Grace was breathing heavily, his brain trying to understand what had happened.

THUD

The whole room shook, everyone stumbled to keep upright.

“Wha-”

THUD

Everyone watched in horror as the shadow in the water slammed into the tank's wall.

THUD

Grace crumpled to the ground, unable to withstand the force. He shut his eyes and braced for another impact.

But it never came.

After a while he slowly unfurled himself from the floor and glanced up. Everyone was staring at the pool, waiting for something to happen, but it grew quiet and stayed quiet.

“That went well.” He muttered, finally standing up on wobbly legs. He wasn’t sure if it was from being thrown to the floor or from adrenaline. “What happened to figuring out a plan?”

People began helping others, helping them to their feet or fully carrying them, as Stratt turned to him.

“That was the plan.”

“Scaring him?!”

“Pulling it in if it got close enough. And it got close enough.”

“Well great flipping job! What a wonderful plan! Let’s injure your staff and possibly ruin any connection we might have been able to have with it!” He paced, running his fingers through his hair, trying in vain to calm his nerves.

“I couldn’t wait. I finally had an opportunity and I had to take it.” She defended.

“Unbeleivable.” He whispered. “So what’s the new plan? And I mean a real one, with proper thought and planning.”

“You decide that. From now on the ball is in your court.”

“You’re insane.”

“If I wasn’t at least a little, you wouldn’t be here.”

Grace huffed in annoyance but kept his mouth shut. He stilled and glanced back at the tank. The shadow under the water circled the enclosure, as if to find a way out. He felt guilty. Sure it had destroyed some boats, but it hadn't deserved the cruel treatment. And yes it had hurt people, but he was scared. If Grace had been held down, he would have screamed and thrashed too.

He sighed, rubbing at his temples as he thought.

"No one is allowed in here." He started. "Not until I say so. Until then, I am the only one allowed in here." He couldn't help the teacher voice that leaked out of him.

"Not even bodyguards?" She seemed genuinely surprised by his order.

"No. They have proven to be a threat to him. I need him to understand we don't want to harm him." He glared at Stratt. "And so far, only I have shown that I won't."

She looked between him and the tank, clearly going over the pros and cons of it.

"So it will be left unattended when you are not here?"

"No. Because I am not leaving this room until he knows he's safe."

She stared at him for a long moment but Grace held her gaze. Eva had told him he was in charge of the creature, and he was gonna make sure it was safe.

“Very well. Just don’t die. That would be very inconvenient for me.”

“I don’t plan to.”

Stratt nodded before she turned and walked out. She paused just before she was out of sight.

“No one knows it is here. Not even your government. I would like to keep it that way, but it’s up to you to prove it isn’t a danger to us. Only then can I guarantee its safety.” With that, she walked out, metal doors screeching closed behind her.

Grace let out a strained breath. No pressure. None at all.

He turned back to find heterochromic eyes burning into him. He sucked in a breath at the sight. One was a deep brown so dark it almost looked black. The other was a beautifully deep but bright red.

The creature had surfaced just enough that only its eyes were above water and Grace could see the scarring that covered his left side. There was another scar that branched from his right browline across his nose. It had clearly been through a lot.

A webbed fin like appendage, where a humans ear would have been, was a reddish black with the webbing being a similar red to its left eye. The left side was much smaller and looked like it had been shredded, as if something had tried to take a bite.

Black hair pooled around him like loose seaweed as his glare never wavered.

Grace stayed rooted in his spot, unable to move as he stared back.

His mouth went dry as he tried to think of something to say.

“... Hi.” Wow, good one Dr. Ryland Grace.

The creature narrowed its eyes at him but didn’t move.

He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“I’m sorry. About them. And the chains.” He took a breath. He somehow got stupider the more he talked. “It won’t happen again.”

Grace took a step forward, hands raised in a show of goodwill, the gesture falling flat as a deep growl rumbled from the fish man, muscles tensed as if he was preparing to strike.

He stilled immediately, and waited a few moments before he took two steps back. It seemed to accept the retreat, slowly quieting down.

He opted to sink to the floor, very slowly despite his joints protesting, sitting cross-legged.

They stared at each other for a few moments before it sank beneath the surface again.

Grace let out a breath he hadn’t known he had been holding.

His brain was finally catching up to the present, and despite the chaos and anxiety, he found himself excited.

CHAPTER 4

The next few days were slow. Very slow. In terms of progress? Grace had made next to none.

He stayed in the room like he said he would. Over the days he had had Stratt bring him food, blankets, and a pillow, as well as a computer to jot down notes and observations. And maybe to catch up on his shows.

Could you blame him? He was stuck in a colorless room, with a giant merman that seemed keen to keep his distance. He got bored from time to time, shoot him.

He had made sure they left the items just outside the door for him to grab them without any view of another human.

Despite having minimal contact with him, Grace had still managed to get quite a few observations.

The humanoid half was about as tall as Grace was, a few inches above 6', and the fish half was about 3 times that, making the being around 25-30 feet in length.

His whole left side was covered in large scarring, his right seemingly having been mostly spared from whatever happened to him.

Two gills sat on each side of his neck, reddish frills flaring from under them as he swam.

The fish half was stunning. It was eel-like except for the small red spines that ran from his neck to about 3 quarters down, transitioning to a frilly ribboned caudal fin, edges lined with that same red that ran the rest of length of the tail. Red dotted patterns lined the entire tail like a stone path, less markings the further down you went. He had what were likely pectoral fins that sat just below the transition line, lined in red similar to his caudal fin.

His mouth was especially interesting. The sharp teeth that sprouted from each cheek were tightly packed when closed. There was a mouth line that connected the teeth to his more human-like mouth that housed even more sharp teeth. Another line ran from the middle of his lip down to his chin so it could open up in four parts like it had his first day.

Grace saw the teeth often, as the man would bare them anytime he deemed him too close. Although, over the days he had been allowed to get a little closer.

He had gathered as much information as he could from the limited contact and lack of communication.

Communication was rough. Grace couldn't tell if the creature could understand him. Likely not. He couldn't understand him either. He rarely spoke, but when he did, he seemed to speak in clicks and songs similar to whales or dolphins.

He hadn't even been able to get a name, if he even had one, so Grace had elected to call him 'Fishy' for now.

He knew it was an insanely stupid name but he couldn't be bothered to think of a better one. He was tired and sore from sleeping on the cold metal ground and frustrated from the lack of progress.

But he couldn't blame him. Their first introduction hadn't been the best.

Grace sat on the metal dock, farther back to respect the boundary Fishy had put around space. He typed away at his computer, trying to figure out a way to communicate with him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement as the merman surfaced. Grace braced to hear another one of his guttural growls but was surprised to be met with silence. He glanced up to find him on the edge of the dock, so they were less than 10 feet apart, staring at him silently.

Grace tried to keep himself calm. This was the closest he had ever gotten and it had been him who had made the move to do so.

The biologist waited, not sure what for, but he didn't want to scare him off. This was a huge step in progress that he couldn't ruin.

A few short and sharp clicks echoed through the room. A rare moment of speech from the larger being.

Grace shook his head sadly.

"Sorry bud. I don't know what you are saying." He just blinked at him as he continued to stare.

He clicked a few more times, slower as if that would somehow get his point across. It didn't. Grace frowned, setting his laptop aside behind him, far away from the water.

"Nope, still nothing."

Fishy's brow furrowed in frustration before he lifted his hand out of the water and tapped on the edge of the dock.

Grace cocked his head in confusion at the gesture.

His tail flicked, spraying water, clearly annoyed.

He gestured again, this time pointing at Grace before tapping the dock again.

Grace's eyes widened in realization.

"You want me to come to you?" He squeaked in surprise. Fishy didn't move, just looked at him expectantly.

Grace stood up slowly, pausing once he was on his feet. He took a step. When he wasn't met with a growl he slowly continued until he was an arms length away. Well, a human's arm length.

His brain was short circuiting at the distance. His fingers twisted into the hem of his t-shirt.

"Sooo… " He trailed off, unsure of what to do next.

Fishy rose from the water so he was now eye level with Grace, hand resting on the metal platform, keeping him upright out of the tank.

His gills flared and four tendrils snaked out. They were small, only a little thicker than the average fishing rod, and were black but transitioned into that familiar red that decorated the rest of his body.

Fascination with a hint of fear curled around his intestines as he watched them reach for him. He fought his instinct to step back, choosing to trust him. Despite his stand offish nature, he hadn't once tried to hurt Grace. He held onto the hope that it wouldn't start now.

Two tendrils rested on his shoulders, sending small shocks at the points of contact. Another loosely wrapped around his neck, the final one around his head. The grip was surprisingly gentle except for the little pin pricks of electricity emanating from them.

Suddenly a bigger sharper shock jolted through his body. He yelped in surprise. It hadn't hurt exactly but it was definitely startling.

They retreated back under his gills quickly and Grace stood there awestruck.

"N-neat. Cool. so uh- what was that?" His hands lifted to ghost his fingers where the tendril on his neck had been.

Fishy looked at him for a while before he lowered back into the water, head just above it.

'***Hungry.***'

The word shot through Grace's head. It wasn't his own voice but a deep rough one.

No way.

“Huh?” His jaw dropped, blinking slowly.

‘***I’m hungry***.’

It repeated in his head.

“You’re… Hungry?” Grace was hallucinating. He had to be. The pressure had finally gotten to him and he had cracked.

‘***Yes***.’

Grace blinked some more. Finally his brain kicked on as he realized.

“Oh! Right, yes, food!” He fumbled to get his phone out of his pocket, almost dropping it into the water with shaky hands. His fingers paused on the keyboard. “What um… what exactly do you eat?”

‘***Anything. Fish mostly.***’

Grace smiled brightly, ecstatic at the new development. “I can definitely do that!”

He sent the message and within a few hours there was a knock at the door. The metal bangs echoing. Grace waited a few minutes to make sure they were gone before opening the door to collect his package.

It was a large fishing cooler, big enough to hold some pretty large fish, that sat on a trolley for Grace to be able to pull it in. He did so with some effort and brought it over to the waiting creature.

Grace stood behind it, opening it dramatically with a wave of his hand to show off the feast. It was filled with live fish, ranging from salmon to mackerel.

“We can get you bigger fish if you want. This was just what was available on such short notice.” He apologized.

‘***It’s fine.***’ He reached forward to bring it closer, a tendril slipping out from his gills again to dip into the cooler. Suddenly all the fish went still. Alive, just stunned. The appendage wrapped around one and brought it to his jaw.

Grace watched as he easily swallowed it whole, not even needing to open the wider parts of his mouth. He wondered what the largest fish he could eat would be if he opened his jaw completely. He figured it was like a venus fly trap, more to capture and hold prey rather than chew it.

He seemed satisfied with the offering, continuing to eat until the cooler held nothing but water.

Fishy hummed before he slipped back fully beneath the surface, disappearing deep into the water.

‘***Thank you***.’

It was faint but Grace heard it in the back of his mind. He smiled as he sat on the cold metal. This was gonna be fun.

CHAPTER 5

Grace was buzzing with excitement and scientific wonder. Yesterday had been a glorious day of discoveries. And now they were able to communicate! Finally!

His mind raced with all the probing questions he wanted to ask. He reluctantly pushed them to the side for now, focusing on one question in particular.

The biologist sat on his knees and leaned over the edge of the dock, splashing at the water gently, hoping to get his attention.

“Hey, bud? You there?” Grace waited a while before he lit up at the sight of Fishy. He swam close to the surface but stayed under as he raised an eyebrow at him.

“Good morning! Sorry to bother you but I just had a question. Would it be alright to ask?”

He considered it for a moment before slowly nodding.

“Great!” He chirped and clapped his hands together. “Since we can talk to each other now, I wanted to know your name. If you have one, I mean. I’ve just been calling you ‘Fishy’ this whole time but that feels wrong now.”

The merman scrunched his face.

“***Fishy?? Fucking fishy?***”

Grace sighed and shrunk back like a child being scolded.

“Look, I wasn’t sure what to call you! I don’t even know what you *are*. I planned to come up with a better name later, I swear.” He pushed himself so he leaned over the edge again, most of his upper body hovered over the water. “But you can talk! And I can understand you! So now I can just ask you!”

The man rolled his eyes.

‘***Fine. But only because I do* not *want to be called* Fishy**.’

A string of clicks and musical chords rang out. It took Grace a second to realize that it was actually him saying his name.

“Ah. Don’t think I can pronounce that.” He said sadly. “Can I try giving you a human name?”

He shrugged. ‘***Sure***.’

Grace thought for a moment, going over a list of names in his head like he was thinking of baby names.

He tried a few out in his head before settling on one he thought fit him.

“What about ‘Simon’?”

He swayed his tail in consideration before nodding.

‘***Works for me***.’

Grace smiled and threw his hands up in celebration, forgetting that they had been holding him up. He gasped as he fell forward and plunged into the cool water.

He flailed for a few seconds, trying to reorient himself, not knowing which way was up. His eyes instinctually pressed shut as panic began to bloom in his chest.

Suddenly he felt something wrap around his waist as he was then pulled up. He took a frantic breath as he surfaced, breathing heavily as he collected himself. It took him another few minutes to take in his surroundings. He looked down, through a curtain of wet hair, to see a large arm hooked around him, keeping him afloat. It was surprisingly warm.

He turned around, craning his neck to look up at Fishy. Simon now. He looked down with an expression of concern. Grace's face grew hot as he realized he was pressed flush against his chest.

"Th-thanks." He sputtered. "You can let go now. I'm okay."

Simon looked at him skeptically but slowly released him. Grace treaded the water to keep above the water.

"See? All good! Just was caught off guard." He let out an awkward laugh. "I'll get out now." He swam to the edge of the platform and braced his arms on the metal.

He pushed up, only making it up a few inches before he slipped back into the water. He huffed in embarrassment before trying again.

He slipped again.

After the third failed attempt, Grace reserved himself to living in the tank with Simon. He heard a quiet snort behind him and he whirled around, as fast as you could in water, to find him watching in amusement, hand over his mouth to hide his smile.

Grace was glad he found this *so funny*. At least someone was happy, and it was not him.

'***Do you need help***?' He did not appreciate the condescending tone.

He grumbled but hung his head in defeat.

"Maybe."

That got him a louder chuckle as he moved to grab him again. This time he hooked his arm under Grace's legs, pulling him so he was practically sitting on his arm like a chair, and brought him to the dock.

"Thanks." He mumbled as he finally managed to climb up, Simon keeping him steady, just in case.

Grace flopped down on his back with a wet plop and groaned. His clothes were soaked and he hated the feeling of wet clothes on skin. He wanted to grab his phone to ask for some new ones but didn't want to explain why.

'***What's your name***?'

Right. They had been talking about names before his stupid blunder. Grace pushed himself up, ignoring the way his clothes sagged off of him.

“My full title is Dr. Ryland Grace. But I mostly just go by Grace.”

‘***You’re an idiot Grace***.’

The words had no bite to them and Grace huffed at the statement.

“Only sometimes.” He quipped with a soft chuckle.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while. Grace eventually got up to request some clothes, growing increasingly uncomfortable in his soaked garments.

Simon drifted around as he waited for his delivery.

‘***Why haven’t you done anything***?’

Grace gave him a confused look.

“I’ve done things.”

‘***No, I mean to me. The others grabbed and held me down. You just sit and watch me. Why***?’

Grace winced at that. “Yeah, sorry about that. I had no idea they were going to do that.” A knock made him pause. He continued as he waited for them to leave. “I’m a marine biologist. I study marine life. Like you. I like to learn about things like you, not hurt them. I like to build things on trust, and trust goes both ways.” Grace fetched his fresh pair of clothes and walked over to the lab to get changed. Simon’s gaze followed him as he listened intently. “Eventually I will have to have others in here to help learn about you, but I won’t do that until you are ready.”

He sighed happily at the feeling of fresh dry clothes, dumping his damp ones off to the side to be dealt with later.

“You are a living creature just like me. You deserve to be treated with respect.” He concluded.

Simon sang a few gentle notes as he continued to drift.

‘***Thank you***.’ It was uttered so softly in his head, it made him shiver.

“You don’t need to thank me for something like that.”

‘***I do. It’s… Not something that I have been shown often***.’

Grace frowned.

“I’m sorry. But I promise you that, while you are here, you will be treated with respect.” Simon stayed silent but swam to the edge of the tank closest to Grace.

‘***So you just want to learn about me***?’

Grace walked closer, sitting down in front of him.

“Yep. Nothing invasive of course. But you’re truly fascinating! We’ve never seen anything like you before!”

‘***I’m really not that special***.’ Simon fidgeted with his hair as he looked away.

“You are to me.” The words left his tongue before he could think about it.

Simon’s eyes darted to his, faint pink dusting his cheeks as his eyes widened slightly. He flicked the water, splashing Grace a little before diving.

“Oh come on! I just got changed, Simon!” He protested loudly.

CHAPTER 6

Grace stood at the edge of the tank, hands on his hips as he looked down into the water.

“Come on, it won’t be for long.” He pleaded.

Simon stayed under but shot him an angry glare. Grace sighed like a disappointed mother.

“I just have to go meet some people and I will be right back, I promise.”

Sharp clicks struck his ears. Irritation. A sound Grace was very familiar with. He had been holed up in the room for a little over two weeks now, gradually making progress with Simon. He was now able to get close when he wanted and the merman had even let him examine him a few times. Each time was short but Grace was grateful every time he was allowed to work on him.

He had given over his findings to Stratt, who had taken it upon herself to set up a meeting with the other crew members that would be helping Grace. It was only two people from what he had gathered; a vet and an engineer. The second one surprised him but after finding out they had made the tank Simon now resided in, it made sense.

He was nervous though. Simon was still against interacting with anyone other than him, but he needed help with fully understanding the merman. He wanted to give his species a proper name and classification, but needed to know more first.

Simon had apparently grown very attached to the biologist, clicking anxiously any time Grace had left the room briefly to simply go to the bathroom or shower. A stark contrast to their first meeting.

“I need to make sure they will work well with you.” He tried to explain.

‘***Don’t need to work with anyone else. Only you***.’

Grace buried the bloom of warmth that spread through his chest at the words.

“You do though. I can only do so much. You need someone to be able to take care of your health and someone to take care of your tank.” He had explained who he would be meeting to him but he didn’t seem to care who they were or what they did. He was still extremely wary of humans. “I’ll only be gone a few hours, three at most. No one will come in here to bother you.”

‘... ***Don’t like it***.’ Simon grumbled.

“I know, but I still need to do it.”

That earned him a splash he just narrowly avoided.

Grace sat at a long oval table next to Stratt. Sat across from them were two people.

The first person, the engineer, was short, around Eva’s height, and lean. He had short, light brown hair, with a section of greenish blue in the part of his hair that framed his forehead. It looked crazy fluffy and the volume was impressive. He was tan and had circular glasses that framed dark brown eyes. He had a small amount of scruff just on his chin and a single dangly earring that matched his strip of dyed hair.

The other person, the vet, was tall. Taller than Grace and stocky, built muscle exposed from the black tank top they wore. Their hair was styled like a jellyfish, the same greenish blue as the stripe in the others hair, except they had a similar section of color that matched the other's brown hair, complementing their warm espresso skin. They had a matching earring, of course, the same brown accent, and kind warm brown eyes. A darker thicker scruff decorated their chin along with a well kept short mustache.

They were a married couple and seemed very kind and authentic, excitedly taking turns in talking about their fields. The engineer, Rocky, talked more enthusiastically, his partner, Adrian, calmer and more reserved but still just as excited.

Grace had never been very good with people, but he found himself able to converse with them with ease, like they had known each other for years.

“When will we meet Simon?” Adrian asked once they had finished getting to know each other. “I understand he is distrustful of humans.” Their voice was deep but gentle.

Grace hummed in acknowledgment. “Yeah, but I’m working on it. He trusts me, at least I'd like to think so.” He drummed on the desk as he thought. “As for timing, I’m really not sure. He’s warmed up to me but that’s about it. I’ll try talking to him after this meeting and hopefully I can convince him to at least meet you guys.” In their short talk, Grace had felt they were on the same page as him regarding Simon, and he was thrilled. He had been worried they would only see him as a specimen, nothing more than an animal to dissect and study. He had been pleasantly surprised to find that they saw Simon as a living being with thoughts and opinions.

“I get it.” Adrian nodded.

“Hopefully it’s soon. I would really like to check my work. Especially after hearing he body slammed it more than once.” Rocky had not been pleased to learn that Simon had tried to break through the tank in an attempt to escape.

“I will try my best.” He offered. “It seems mostly intact though. I have yet to see anything wrong.”

“Of course! I’m one of the best engineers around.” He sat up proudly in his seat. “Still want to do a routine check though.”

They continued to discuss plans and goals, losing track of time easily. It had easily passed the three hour mark that he had originally planned for, but it was okay. He liked talking to the couple.

‘***Grace***.’

Crap. He was *pissed*. Despite it being quiet, Grace could feel the anger wrap around his mind. He made a mental note to test the range of this form of communication.

He cleared his throat as he stretched, trying to come across as nonchalant.

“I’ts been lovely meeting you, really. I think you will be perfect for this. However, as much as I would love to keep talking, I should head back. I’ve never left Simon this long and I want to make sure he’s okay.” He offered an apologetic smile but was only met with kind smiles in return.

“Of course. Can’t wait to finally meet Simon” Adrian offered their hand as they stood up. Grace took it gratefully and finished saying his goodbyes as quickly as he could without seeming rude.

He practically ran back to the observation room. By the time he got in, he was sweaty and out of breath.

“I’m here! I’m here, I’m here! I’m so sorry!” He looked up and froze.

Simon was on the dock, almost completely out of the water, standing upright, tail curled under him to keep himself up.

Grace stumbled forward to Simon, eyes wide.

“What are you doing?! Is it okay for you to be out of the water like this?? Are you hurt?” Grace scanned his body, looking for injuries or signs of discomfort.

‘***You’re late***.’ Simon rumbled, not quite a growl but clearly displeased. ‘***Five hours***.’

Grace had to tilt his head up to be able to look him in the eyes.

“I’m sorry, I just lost track of time.”

Simon’s glare drove a knife of guilt through his heart.

‘***I thought- I didn’t know if you were okay***.’

Grace wanted to drown himself right there. He felt horrible. He didn’t mean to worry him, hell he hadn’t even thought of it as a possibility. He looked at Simon, ready to apologize over and over again before he stilled in realization.

“You were gonna come find me.” It came out just above a whisper, Grace stunned.

Simon looked away, warbling softly.

“Oh my god, Simon I am so sorry. It won’t happen again, I’m sor-” His apology died oh his lips, a surprised yelp replacing it, as Grace found himself being pushed forward.

Simon had snaked the end of his tail up and behind and around him, pulling him close. Simon lowered himself so he could curl around Grace, tail holding him in place, and clicked a few times.

‘***Stop apologizing already***.’ He pulled his tail so Grace fell back to sit down against his side, further curling around him, like a cat curled around her kitten.

Grace couldn’t think. He was so warm and the constant pressure from the tail was weirdly soothing. His clothes were becoming damp again but he couldn’t find it in him to care, too busy trying to breathe properly and slow his rapidly increasing heartbeat.

‘***How did it go***?’

Grace blinked.

“Um… Good. Yeah, good, it went good.” He was glad to have something, other than the body against his, to focus on. “They seemed nice. I think you would like them.”

Simon hummed a hesitant song.

“They want to meet you actually. You should give them a chance.” He sucked in a breath as the tails grip tightened slightly.

‘***Maybe. I’ll think about it***.’ Simon huffed as he fully laid down, resting his head on his arm. A tendril slipped out of his gills, wrapping around Grace’s wrist loosely, the buzzing he had felt last time absent. ‘***Don’t do that again***.’ It was stern but gentle.

“I won’t. Promise.” Grace said as he turned his wrist to catch the appendage between his fingers, fascinated by it.

He glanced over to Simon, noticing his eyelids drooping the slightest bit.

“Is it okay for you to be out of the water this long?” Truthfully he didn’t want it to end, but he wasn’t gonna let him get hurt.

‘***It’s fine. I can be out for about half a day***.’ Simon’s eyes drifted close as he nudged closer. ‘***Stay***.’

Grace swallowed thickly.

“Okay.”

CHAPTER 7

Simon watched as Grace typed quickly, completely entranced in his work, glasses hanging under his chin.

“Alright. The working scientific name for your species will be ‘Anthropisces!’ ‘Anthro’ meaning ‘man’ and ‘pisces’ meaning ‘fish.’ As for your general common name, I was thinking of taking from mythology, seeing as you already resemble the mythical mermaid. I found something called the Marmennill, who are known to have a lot of hidden knowledge, but mostly for them laughing at fools.” Grace looked up with a small smile. “Sounds just like you, don’t you think?” He had wanted to wait until they knew more about his species before naming them but Grace was too excited to wait.

‘***Does that make you the fool***?’

Grace huffed, rolling his eyes. “Very funny.”

‘***I like it though. We never really called ourselves anything***.’ Simon tilted back to float face-up, tail swaying to steer him around.

Grace tilted his head as his eyes followed him. “About that. There are more of you right?”

Simon stilled and let out a sigh.

‘***Yes***.’

“How come we haven’t crossed paths until now? Where are the rest of you guys?”

‘***We reside where there is no light. In the trenches far below***.’ It sounded like he was reciting something.

Grace stiffened. “What? What are you doing *here*?”

Simon slipped under the surface and swam deep, something he did to avoid something.

‘***Doesn’t matter***.’

“Of course it matters! You are so far out of your usual environment! I’m sure you want to go back home, right?” Grace discarded his laptop and leaned over the edge to look at Simon.

‘***Ain’t home for me anymore***.’

Grace wanted to pry, ask question after question, but he could hear the pain dripping with each word.

He chewed the inside of his cheek. “I see… If you lived in zero light, how is your eyesight?” He quickly changed the topic, hoping this route of questions were better.

It seemed to work as Simon swam closer.

‘***Couldn’t see shit when I first got here. Pretty much just saw light and shadows. Over time I could see more and more though***.’

Grace straightened and pulled back his laptop and started typing furiously again.

“So you adapted? And that quickly too. That’s amazing.” He thought back to the news he had read about. “Is that why you destroyed those boats?”

Simon finally resurfaced and cocked an eyebrow.

‘***Is that what they were? Sorry***.’

Grace smiled. “It’s okay. No one was hurt and you didn’t mean it. You were just scared.”

Simon paused, eyes looking away.

‘***What about the others? The ones that dragged me here. I wasn’t exactly… gentle***.’ He sunk into the water as he frowned.

The biologists grew serious, looking directly at the Marmennill.

“No one was killed, thankfully.” He started slowly, fixing his glasses to sit right on his nose. “But many were injured. Again, I

understand you were scared, and believe me, I am *not* happy with their methods. But I promise you are safe here. No one will hurt you again, as long as I am here, and I don't plan on leaving anytime soon." He paused again when Simon nodded. "You should try meeting some more humans. I want to show you we aren't all bad."

Simon hummed. '***Not right now. But… later. Maybe.***'

Grace nodded, his smile returning. "Of course!"

Grace clapped as he resumed his work.

"Alright! Next question! Do you all have the same patterning and tail structure?"

The sea man shook his head. '***No, we are all different. Only members of the same family are similar***.'

"So you are more of a social species? Like us?"

'***I guess so***.'

"Fascinating!" Grace was practically vibrating as he jotted note after note. "I assume that means you also vary in size? Is there an average? How small are the kids when they are born? Hatched? Do you call them kids?"

Simon gave a warning splash close to the laptop.

'***One at a time, Dr. Ryland Grace***.'

Grace startled at the title, choking on nothing.

“S-sorry. Let’s uh just start with average size.”

Simon had to think about it for a while before he could answer.

‘***I guess I would say I am average for an adult. Tail lengths vary too much for me to say much other than that. As for ‘kids,’ or as we call them, 'plips,' they hatch from eggs and they start out very small and weak***.’ He pointed to Grace’s hands. ‘***Not much bigger than one of your hands. They grow quickly though, getting full grown after around half a cycle***.’

“What are your lifespans? How old are you?” He couldn’t believe he hadn’t asked his age until now. “What’s a cycle?”

‘***I’m in the beginning of my third cycle, or I guess you would say I am in my thirties. If we don’t starve or aren’t hunted, we can live up to 15 cycles. Most don’t live past 10 cycles though. How old are*** **you**?’

Grace whistled, still recording his findings.

“So a cycle is about 10 years for us, meaning you average around 100 years but can live as long as 150? That’s longer than us! We average at about 70 or 80 years but we can live up to 100. Fun fact: The oldest person in history lived to be 122 years old! Oh and I am 37 years old, so not much older than you.” He paused. “Wait. If you guys live where there isn’t light, how do you tell time?”

Simon grimaced as if the answer brought with it upsetting memories.

‘***There’s this coral. It’s white and red and kinda looks like, what are they called? Trees I think? Anyway, the time it takes for***

them to mature is considered a 'cycle,' or for you 10 years. My colony worshipped the damn things, believing they gave us life.' Simon sank under the water again, shaking his head as if to dislodge a bad memory or thought.

Grace waited for Simon to continue, but he didn't seem to want to. He settled on trying to look up what kind of coral he had been describing.

He pulled up a few possibilities and turned his laptop around, screen facing the water, and tapped his foot into the cool liquid, telling Simon to surface. Simon obeyed and looked at the screen.

He pointed at one of the pictures with a tendril, careful not to get water on the device. Grace turned it around and looked at the image he had identified.

"Oh! Pink Hemicorallium! We mostly just use them to make things like jewelry. It doesn't grow this close to the surface so you shouldn't see them." He reassured.

Simon nodded, letting out a few nervous clicks. The biologist saved his work, several times just to make sure, and closed the computer.

"Why don't we take a break?" He stood and stretched, wincing at his stiff muscles. He really needs to stop sitting for so long. "Let's get you something to eat, yeah?"

The Marmennill visibly relaxed, letting off happier trills as he swam towards the dock to await his meal.

Grace sent the message and went to go fetch the fish.

They had been trying different fish, trying to see what he could and couldn't eat. They had yet to find something Simon couldn't eat. Size didn't matter much either. If it was too small he could just swallow it, and if it was too big, he could bite and tear it to pieces. Simon preferred not to do that, however, hating the mess it made, so they stuck to fish around 1-3 feet in length.

Today's menu was red snapper. Grace wheeled in the large cooler and over to the man and dumped the fish into the tank.

They had recently started having Simon catch his food, mostly to keep him active but also so he wouldn't lose his ability to fend for himself.

He watched Simon as he chased the fish, alternating between latching on with his open mouth and using his tendrils to stun his prey to eat easier.

"Simon, I have one more question."

He looked up, live fish thrashing with its head in his mouth. He slurped it up and swallowed it whole, like he usually did, and gestured for him to continue as he ate.

"Those black tendrils that come out of your gills. What are they for? I mean, I know you use them to stun prey but there was also that thing you did a few days after we met." He motioned to his neck to get his point across.

Simon snagged the last fish, warbling in satisfaction. He surfaced and swam back over to Grace on the dock.

‘***Yeah, we mostly use them to hunt. But we also use them to connect to others in order to communicate without giving our position away. We keep it reserved for people like family and…***’ He trailed off looking away. ‘***Honestly, I wasn’t sure if it would work with you***.’

“Wait, so does that mean no one else can hear you except me?”

‘***Yeah***.’

“Oh.” Grace didn’t know why, but he felt a sense of pride at being the only one who could properly converse with the Marmennill. Something else bubbled up along with the pride but he couldn’t put a name to the feeling, and chose to ignore it. “Can you understand other humans or just me?”

‘***I can hear and understand other humans now. Although, it’s mostly the muffled talking I hear through the walls***.’

“You can hear through walls?! How good is your hearing?”

Simon shrugged. ‘***Can’t hear farther than these walls. But our connection can go way beyond that***.’

“Yeah, I could hear you all the way in the meeting room. How far *can* it go?”

‘***I think about 1000 feet? Give or take***.’

“Holy moly.” He ran to fetch his laptop again, fumbling to write quick notes. “Wait. Can you hear what I am thinking?” He looked up,

horrified. If he had been able to read his mind this whole time, he was gonna jump into traffic.

'***No. I don't like it. I can't hear you when we are apart***.' He pouted and splashed around irritated.

Oh thank god. Grace got to live another day.

"Hmmm. Maybe I can think of something so you can still talk to me during times I need to leave. Like an underwater phone or something." Okay not the smartest way to phrase that but it got his point across. He hoped.

'***I would like that. Not you leaving, but if you have to, I'd rather be able to check on you***.'

Grace perked up. "I'll talk to Rocky about it! Maybe he could hook something up for us!"

He opened a second document that held a list of things he had wanted to add to Simon's enclosure, and added it to the top.

He was proud of the progress they had made and was overjoyed with how much he had learned about him and his species. There were still hundreds of questions he wanted to ask but he could be patient and go at Simon's pace.

CHAPTER 8

Grace waited by the door as Simon swam around anxiously. It had been about a month since they met and he had finally convinced the mer to meet with Rocky and Adrian.

“You’re gonna love them!” He was buzzing with anticipation.

‘***Right… Do I really have to do this***?’ Simon huffed.

“I mean, no, but I really want you to try.”

‘***Fine. Just- you’ll stay, right***?’

He gave a reassuring smile. “Of course. I’ll be here the whole time.”

A knock rang out and Grace excitedly opened the door. Stratt stood in front with Rocky and Adrian behind her. Adrian held a large duffle bag, likely filled with supplies for the exam they may or may not be able to perform today.

“Is he ready?” Eva spoke first as she took a step inside. Grace was nervous to have her here. He hoped Simon wouldn’t recognize her, or if he did, had forgiven her.

“Yes! Come in!” He gestured them inside before closing the door behind them.

His hopes shriveled up and died when a loud growl rumbled through the room. Grace turned to find Simon with his head above

water, eyes locked onto Stratt, teeth bared. He sucked in an anxious breath.

“I’m sorry he-”

“It’s fine. It’s good he is suspicious of me. Means he has good memory and judgment.” She cut him off. “I’ll stay back. I am only here to observe.” Eva said the last part more to the mer as she stepped to the side and leaned against the wall.

‘***Does* she *have to be here***?’ Simon growled.

“Sorry bud.” He offered apologetically before turning to the couple.

“Rocky, Adrian, this is Simon. Simon, this is Rocky and Adrian.”

Adrian stepped forward, stopping when Simon let out a warning warble. “It’s nice to finally meet you Simon. I’ve heard a lot about you.” They spoke softly, crouching to be at eye level. The mer looked over to Grace with an unamused glare.

He lifted his hands up in surrender. “Only good things, I promise!” Simon clicked a few times before returning his attention back to the vet.

“Would it be okay for me to do a basic physical exam on you? I just want to make sure you are healthy. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“Adrian is the best vet in the world. All their patients love them.” Rocky interjected as he headed over to the back wall to check on his work and fix anything that needed repairs. Adrian huffed with a small smile.

“I wouldn’t say the *world*, but yes, I am very good at my job.”

Simon looked over at Grace again, this time for reassurance. He nodded encouragingly and walked closer to him.

“It’s alright. I’m here.”

The fins on the sides of his head twitched anxiously.

‘***You owe me so many fish***.’

Grace laughed. “Deal.”

The others looked at him curiously at the exchange. He didn’t explain as he reached the start of the metal dock, reaching out a hand in support. Simon huffed but pulled himself up and out of the water, laying on top of the surface, the end of his tail hanging off into the water. Muscles flexed as he slithered further up to Grace.

“You ready?”

Simon just nodded and Adrian stood up to make their way over to them. He stiffened but let them approach, eyeing every movement they made.

“I’ll ask you some questions first. Just try to answer truthfully and to the best of your ability.” Adrian pulled out a tablet from the bag and clicked a few things before looking at the mer. They pointed to his missing arm.

“Can you tell me how that happened? Does it hurt?”

Simon hesitated, chirping in thought.

‘***Doesn’t hurt. There was an accident and it got crushed***.’

After a few moments of silence and Grace staring at him in shock, the biologist finally repeated what he had said to the vet. They wrote it down and looked him up and down.

“Is that what the other scars are from?”

Simon nodded, not wanting to elaborate. They typed some more.

“From what I can see, your wounds seemed to have healed nicely. But I would still like to examine them directly if I may.”

Simon’s tail curled around him defensively as he narrowed his eyes.

“Nothing invasive! Just gonna touch them a little.” Adrian touched their arm to demonstrate.

Simon shifted uncomfortably, looking again to Grace for reassurance.

“You’re doing great, Simon.” He encouraged gently. “It’s okay.”

He rumbled a few low notes but shifted closer for Adrian to have access to his scars. They beamed as they crossed the distance, snapping blue latex gloves on.

He flinched when their hand made contact with his skin but kept still as they felt a few spots, gently applying pressure here and there.

“No pain when I do this?”

Simon shook his head and they let go and stepped back.

“That’s good. Your injuries had been my main concern. I would like to x-ray your residual limb, just to be safe, but if you aren’t in pain we can wait on that.” Adrian pulled out their tablet again and looked at Grace. “I would also like to do an ultrasound as well as do a full blood workup. We can wait on those as well and just focus on a general physical exam for now.”

“That’s about what I expected.” He turned to the mer. “You good to keep going?”

‘***Yeah. Just make it quick***.’

The vet worked smoothly and quickly as requested. They measured him to find he was about 28 feet long and weighed about 5 tons. Grace knew he was big, but to have concrete numbers made it surreal. They moved on to record basic vitals like his heart and lungs, noting his resting heart rate fluctuated around 40 bpm.

Grace and Adrian worked together, the biologist mostly trying to soothe the mer as they examined him. After about an hour of poking and prodding Simon let out his signature sharp clicks of displeasure. Rocky had returned to them a bit ago, finding everything to be in peak condition, and sat a few feet away. Eva still stood at her post by the wall, observing.

‘***Are we done***?’ He groaned as Adrian finished their examination of his tail. Grace looked up from his computer, having pulled it out to write his own notes, unable to keep his biologist at bay.

His gaze shifted over the vet, glasses sitting on the tip of his nose. “I think we should call it here. I think Simon’s reached his limit.” Grace yelped as water splashed around him. He covered his laptop and gave the mer a stern glare that Simon only returned. “Watch the computer! We’ve talked about this; water and tech do not mix!”

Adrian laughed at the exchange and took off their gloves.

“Of course. I have more than enough for now. Thank you Simon, for being so patient with me. You are free to go.”

A wave surged over the edge of the tank with how fast Simon lunged into the water.

“Oops. Guess we pushed him a little too far.” Adrian laughed.

“I should make some water guards if he’s going to do that.” Rocky quipped.

Grace sprung up, eyes wide and sparking.

“Rocky! Speaking of, there are some things I want you to make, if it’s possible!” He pulled up his document from the other day and pushed it into the engineer's hands. He looked it over and smiled a toothy grin.

“Oh, these are easy. I can do that no problem.”

Grace clapped his hands in glee. “Fantastic! Thank you so much!”

They talked for a bit before saying their goodbyes, Eva scheduling another meeting to go over everything they had found.

He let out a relieved sigh once the doors had shut.

‘***They weren’t so bad. I guess***.’

Grace smiled as he turned back to him. “I *told* you. But I’m very proud of you. You did great!”

CHAPTER 9

The water was refreshing as it pooled around his ribs. Simon swam around, hunting his prey as Grace watched from his shallow pool.

It had been one of the things he had asked Rocky for; a shallow pool that both he and Simon could access in order to work with him easier and make it more comfortable for the Mermannill.

The water shifted with Simon’s movements, making Grace’s swim trunks sway in the current. He sighed in content as he shifted a little deeper into the cool liquid. He felt a little bad using something that was supposed to help them as his personal pool but it felt so nice and he deserved some r&r.

Simon glided up onto the shallow platform, the water pushing out with the movement, and slithered around Grace, tail wrapping around him as he moved to be face to face.

‘***Thought this was for me***.’ He teased as he lowered himself to lay on his arm, looking up at Grace through his eyelashes.

“It is! I’m just… making sure it’s good enough.” He playfully splashed at him only to be drenched by Simon’s retaliation. He straightened his back and shook his head to shed some of the water that now dripped through his hair.

‘***You have scars***.’ The mer spoke suddenly.

“Hm?” He followed his gaze to his chest, at the twin scars that sat just below his pectorals. “Oh! Yeah, these are from a surgery I had done. I had what is called a mastectomy when I was in my twenties. It’s where they remove breast tissue to give you a flatter chest.” He explained. He wasn’t afraid to talk about it. In fact, he loved to educate people and talk about his journey. He felt it was important to have these conversations to normalize it.

Simon tilted his head. ‘***Why***?’

Grace lit up. “Okay, so, I was born female, but my brain didn’t align with that. My brain felt I was male and so to remedy that there are multiple things you can do to transition to the gender you identify as, such as; hormone therapy or surgery. I did both. I had the mastectomy as well as a hysterectomy, where they removed my uterus, and I did, or still do rather, testosterone shots once a month to further transition.” He paused. “Oh, crap. I’m actually overdue for my next dose. I’m usually pretty good at remembering but I guess I forgot with all that’s been happening.”

‘***Is that bad***?’ Simon jolted up panicked.

“It’s not life threatening,” He reassured him quickly. “My hormone levels just drop and I get pretty bad brain fog and a little irritable. It’s alright. I’ll ask Eva to go get my supplies from my apartment.”

Simon hummed as he settled down. One of his black tendrils snaked out and stretched to gently caress the scar. Grace shuddered at the sudden warm contact. Simon stilled immediately.

‘***Does it hurt***?’

Grace shook his head. “No no, it's fully healed! You just surprised me.” He let out a flustered breath as the appendage retreated. Simon pushed himself so he was close to Grace’s side, using his tail to keep him upright as he lifted his hand to grip his side.

Grace bit his lip as webbed clawed fingers wrapped around him, almost fully around, his thumb resting on the scar. The mer began to rub it as he leaned forward, forehead resting on the biologist's chest.

‘***Scars show that one is strong, where I am from. They are a point of pride***.’ He released him as he shifted back to his original spot, settling in the shallow pool.

“R-Right.” Grace managed to squeak out. He cleared his throat, face burning as he looked away. “Thank you.” He leaned back until his backside came into contact with Simon’s tail that curled behind him, trying to keep his heart from exploding out of his chest. Over the month Simon had become very physically affectionate, and Grace found himself flustered at every new form of contact. He didn’t know what was wrong with him. Maybe it was from being holed up in a metal box with a Marmennill as a roommate. That would make anyone weird, right?

He needed some fresh air.

“You know,” he managed to get out after his heart had settled down. “I’ve been talking to Stratt about letting you have a day out. To swim in the actual ocean again, if you want.” He felt the tail behind him shift and push him forward. He turned back to Simon to find him inches away from his face.

‘**YES**.’

“You would have to promise to come back though.”

The mer dipped and nuzzled under Grace’s chin, like a cat, he thought.

‘***I will! I promise.*** **Please**.’

Grace chuckled as he patted his head, surprised by how soft his hair felt. “Alright alright, I’ll ask her again.”

Grace stood on the beach with Eva, Rocky and Adrian. They all watched the cliffside as a loud grinding noise screeched and echoed around them. Rocky observed intently, listening and watching for anything out of place.

A section of the cliff lifted until a dark shadow darted out of the opening and into the open water.

The biologist smiled as he watched the mer swim large laps under the water, happy trills and chips echoing across the ocean. Simon popped his head out of the water and looked around, eyes finally settling on Grace. He dived back down, surfacing much closer to the group.

“You look happy.” Adrian mused as the mer waded in the shallows.

‘***Very***.’ He said as he nodded for them to understand.

Eva glanced at her watch. “You have until sundown, about 6 hours from now. If you aren’t back by then, we will have to drag you back.”

Simon glared at her, letting rumbling growls out.

Grace shot him a warning look as colorful language filled his head.

“He says thank you and that he will be back in time.” He lied as Simon rolled his eyes and slipped back into deeper water.

“I’m serious.” She warned. “I understand you trust each other but he is still a risk as far as I am concerned. You’re lucky I agreed to this at all.”

“I know. Thank you. I promise everything will be fine.” Eva looked at him before nodding and turning away.

“I will be back in a few hours, I have a lot of work to do.”

He turned to the couple. “Care for a swim?”

The sun was beginning to dip, reminding them they had about 2 hours left. The couple was sunbathing on the beach, taking a break from swimming. Grace, however, was still swimming. He loved it. To just float and take the weight of his bones and joints, as well as his stress. He always found swimming helped quiet his mind and soothed his body. It also eased his anxiety that Simon would swim off and never return, if he could see him.

The mer darted around, enjoying the open space, disappearing every once in a while when he went into deeper waters. One of the times he came back into view he had a large fish hanging out of his mouth, making him laugh at the sight.

He lazily swam around, doing just enough to keep above water. He wasn’t too deep but he wasn’t in the shallows either, his feet unable to reach the bottom. He turned around to look at the beach to check on Rocky and Adrian. Adrian was reading a book as Rocky built a giant sandcastle. There were sand towers around Adrian like he was trying to protect his finest treasure.

It was such a domestic scene, he couldn’t help the smile that his lips stretched into. He continued to swim, slowly moving further out. He hummed as he settled into the current, feeling the push and pull like it was trying to take all of his worries away with it.

Movement underneath him caught his attention. A large shadow circled below him and Grace froze.

It wasn't Simon.

It was a great white shark. He knew that it was unlikely to attack him but he still needed to be careful. He slowed his movements to make as little noise as possible as he slowly pushed himself back towards the sand.

He kept his eyes on it, pausing his motions when it swam closer. He actually loved sharks. They got a bad rep and were not nearly as dangerous and as scary as people thought. Still he couldn't help the pick up of his heart beat as he paddled backward. The shark kept getting closer though and he tried to swim faster without splashing.

He glanced back to the shore, hoping they hadn't realized what was going on. He didn't want to freak them out. He knew the shark was just curious and would likely move on soon. He steadied his breath as the shark moved closer. He could almost touch it if he reached out his hand. He kind of wanted to, if he was honest. He hadn't had a lot of interactions with sharks and he found himself studying how it swam.

A loud rumbling growl rattled his bones as he watched the shark get body slammed.

Grace pushed himself back hard as panic settled in again. He sucked in a breath when he realized what did it. Or who.

Simon sank his teeth into its side as his tail wrapped around the shark. Blood spilled into the water as it thrashed, trying to break free. The mer held fast, letting out more deep rumbles, pushing it further away from the biologist. He tightened his grip before finally releasing it, putting himself between it and Grace.

The shark swiftly disappeared, a trail of blood behind it.

“Simon-”

‘***Are you hurt***?!’ He swam up to him frantically, tail swaying around him protectively. He reached out and ran his hand over Grace’s body, looking for injuries.

“I’m fine, it’s okay. I had it under control.” He placed a hand on a webbed finger as heterochromic eyes scanned him again. “It was just curious. They rarely attack humans.”

‘***It’s a* predator**.’ He pushed. ‘***It could have***.’

He sighed. “It’s okay. Look, I’m okay.” He slowly spun in the water to show the lack of injuries.

Simon warbled worriedly but accepted he was unharmed. He began nudging the human towards the shore and Grace let himself be led, body becoming exhausted with how tense it had been.

Adrian and Rocky were now standing in the shallows, having sensed something was wrong.

As soon as he was clear of the water he flopped down on his back, arm draped over his eyes, as he let himself relax.

“What happened?” Adrian asked, hovering over him.

“Nothing, just… tired.”

Simon clicked and splashed angrily.

“Nope. *Something* clearly happened.” Rocky said, crouching down and poked Grace in the side.

Grace swatted him away and groaned. “It’s not a big deal. It was just a shark. I was in the ocean and sharks live in the ocean. It’s gone now.”

“So, Simon saved your ass.” Rocky snorted.

“Language. And it was just checking me out. Nothing but harmless curiosity.”

“Whatever.” He poked him again. “Sounds like you should be thanking him. You got one hell of a guard dog. Guard fish?”

Grace laughed as he pulled himself upright, imagining a small goldfish with a spiked collar and leash.

“Thank you, Simon. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

‘***You better. That fucker tasted horrible***.’

“Can we please stop cursing?” He huffed flopping back down on the sand.

“What the hell is going on?” Eva asked as she leaned over him.

Grace sighed in defeat.

CHAPTER 10

Grace typed away on his computer, glasses sitting on the top of his head, as Simon slept wrapped around him. It had been 2 weeks since their day out and the mer rarely left his side now. Even when he was feeding, he would stay close to where the biologist was.

Weirdly enough, he didn't mind it. Over the course of the two months, he had gotten more used to the Marmennill's presence. It actually felt nice. Simon was warm and was always so gentle with him, it made him feel safe.

He hummed quietly to himself as he worked on the program. He was working on a translator for Simon so the others could talk with him, without his help. Rocky was working on implementing something in the room, but it was still in the works, Grace having to rely on using his laptop for now.

He had quite a few sounds in the database now, able to hold full conversations with it, even if was choppy most of the time.

Grace had asked the mer if he would be willing to do the thing with his tendrils but Simon had adamantly refused. He wasn't sure why but he didn't press it, compromising with this. He was making sure it was working and would have enough for today. Today being Simon's second check up.

They planned to get the x-ray, ultrasound, and bloodwork all in one go and he wanted Simon to be able to have full control with everything.

A knock rang out, startling him from his focus, glasses falling to his nose.

“Adrian is here! Let me up so I can let them in.” He patted the tail that wrapped around his legs.

Simon warbled sleepily before tightening his hold on the biologist. Grace huffed.

“Come on, Simon. I’ll be right back.”

He rumbled in displeasure but released him, stretching as he yawned with his full mouth, teeth catching the light.

Grace hopped up and greeted Adrian at the door. It was just them this time, as they held the large duffle bag again.

“Good morning Grace, Simon.” They greeted once inside. They headed over to their work station on the right, Simon chirping in acknowledgment. Grace followed with his laptop, settling it on a metal table closest to the tank.

The vet dug into their bag pulling out a portable x-ray and ultrasound, as well as blood drawing supplies. Simon eyed the needles and vials warily. Grace had explained to him how everything worked so he would be prepared, but he hadn’t liked the idea of a needle in his skin.

Despite that he still agreed to it.

They got everything set up and the mer swam over and pulled himself up into the shallow pool for them to work.

“What do you want to do first?” He asked, turning to Simon.

‘***I guess blood work. Want it over and done with***.’

“Alright. But can you actually say that so the translator can pick it up?” He pointed to his laptop and Simon did as he was told.

[**Blood work first**.] The words typed out on the screen and Adrian leaned over to read it.

“You got it.” They snapped on some gloves and made their way over with the supplies. “Can I see your arm?”

Simon pulled back, eyes trained on the sharp point.

“It’s alright. Just a quick pinch and it’ll be over quickly.” He reached over and grasped his claws, rubbing his thumbs to soothe his anxiety. He tugged softly to encourage him to present his arm. After a moment, Simon conceded, pushing his arm out. Grace kept his grasp on the mer as Adrian lined up the needle.

“Ready? 3, 2, 1..” They drove it in and a few sharp clicks rang out.

[**Hurt**.] The translation popped up.

“I’m sorry. It won’t take long.” They apologized as they filled several vials with deep red liquid. Grace squeezed his hand in reassurance as Adrian finally pulled out the needle, placing a piece of gauze over the wound. Grace moved to hold it in place for him as they placed the vials into a box. “All done! You okay?”

[**Fine. Keep going**.]

They moved onto the x-ray, Grace and Adrian stepping back and adorning themselves with lead aprons. They were quick, taking only a few minutes for several pictures of his residual limb, before putting it away. As they waited for the images they started the ultrasound.

Grace stepped back to let them work, going to his work space to work on some reports he had been neglecting, with Simon's permission, leaving the mer and the vet alone.

[**You and Rocky mates**?] He asked, not liking the silence after a while.

"Hm? Oh, yes we're married." Adrian smiled. "Have been for 20 years now." They lifted their left hand to show off the brown band on their ring finger.

[**What does that mean?**]

"Married? It's something human partners do to symbolize their connection and devotion to each other." They moved from his abdomen to his tail. "Do you have a mate?"

[**No.**] Simon flicked his tail. [**How did you court him?**]

Adrian laughed at that. "It's a funny story actually. We met at a college party and he was so drunk he could barely stand. He ended up throwing up everywhere and I helped him through it." The vet smiled to themself. "The next day he was at my door on his knees apologizing and begging to let him buy me dinner as a thank you. It was history from there." Adrian was now at the end of his tail.

[**Is that how humans usually court?**]

They snorted and shook their head. “No, our story was a bit of a special case. Usually we just ask the other out, usually to dinner or to go watch a movie. After a few dates, if you find you like the other and work well with them, you make it official. Then from there is all the physical affection like cuddling and kissing. Stuff like that. Marriage comes a lot later.”

Simon thought back to all the times he ate with Grace and the few movies he had shown him. [**Lip touching**?]

“Yep.” Adrian removed the wand and stepped back. “Alright, all done. Everything looks good. Just let me look at the x-rays real quick.”

The mer flipped back on his stomach as they fumbled with the technology. He looked over to the biologist, who sat with legs brought up to his chest, as he leaned forward, typing away. His glasses dangling from his mouth as he chewed the end of one of the temple tips absentmindedly.

[**Should I do it, then?**] He said it to himself, forgetting it would be translated.

Adrian paused. “What do you mean?”

Simon whipped around, eyes wide and face red.

[**Nothing!**]

“Wait.” They glanced over to where he had been looking. “Are you trying to *court Grace*?”

Simon let out a shrill chirp, the translator only writing ‘embarrassment,’ as he launched himself into the tank, spraying water everywhere.

Grace yelped at the sudden sound, snapping his eyes to the tank then to Adrian, who was staring with the goofiest grin.

“Is everything okay?!” He called as he stood up frantically.

The vet nodded as they shook their hand. “Yeah, yeah. Just surprised him is all. Ultrasound and x-ray look great by the way.” They turned to pull up the images on their own laptop and motioned him over.

Grace made his way back over, glancing nervously at the water. Simon was deep in the tank but he seemed unharmed. He trusted Adrian and decided to let it go. He brought his glasses up properly as he studied the imaging.

“Interesting.” He mumbled as Simon resurfaced, glaring at Adrian, as if to say; ‘Don’t say a word.’

They only chuckled as they looked between them.

“Very.”

CHAPTER 11

The room was quiet as Grace worked. The only thing that could be heard was the faint sound of water lapping at the sides of the tank as Simon swam around the enclosure.

He was hunched over his desk as he studied the water samples he had taken from Simon's tank. He was curious at how it was affected with how long the mer had been there.

He jotted down some notes, glasses hanging off his chin, before removing the sample and placing it in a box a few feet away. He distanced himself a bit farther just in case and waited. A quick flash of light burst from the container. The xenon flash lamp.

It had been a while since he had used one so he was sure to take extra precautions. He waited for a few minutes before retrieving the sample and looking at it under a microscope. He took more notes as he observed.

His back ached with his posture but it was muddled in the back of his mind as he focused on his task. After a few more slides and even more notes, he finally became aware of the burning stretch in his spine.

He finally decided to get up and stretch as he waited for the lamp to cool down enough for him to use it again.

He stretched his arms up, back cracking like a glowstick. His long sleeves sliding down at the motion. He didn't usually wear long sleeved shirts but it had been especially cold in the room that night and he wanted to be able to focus on his work without risking contaminating his samples due to his shivering.

'***Done***?' Simon peaked above the surface.

Grace shook his head. “No, just taking a quick break. Still have some tests I want to run.”

The mer clicked. ‘***You’ve been working non stop for 6 hours. Isn’t that enough***?’

He winced. Had it really been that long? No wonder his body was so angry.

“Just a little longer. I’ll finish up soon.”

Simon clicked a few more times in disbelief before sinking back down.

Grace turned back around to continue his work, only to bump into the table and knock down an open bottle of isopropanol alcohol he had forgotten to put away. It spilled over the table and his left sleeve.

“Crap!” He fumbled to save his samples and notes, probably doing more harm than good as he let panic take over. He tripped on his own feet and stumbled back, his back slamming into the table behind him.

He barely had time to register what was happening as a bright light went off behind him and an ear shattering crash rang in his ears.

White searing pain shot up his left arm as he screamed.

Simon swam in the deepest part of his tank. The temperature was cooler than he was used to but it was nice. He looked up towards where the biologist was still working. He didn't know how he could sit in the same position for so long, barely moving.

He admired the doctor's tenacity and ability to focus on his work. He just didn't understand how he did it.

"Crap!" He heard the closest thing to a curse for the man, ripple through the water. He swam closer to the surface, curious what silly blunder the older had done this time.

And then he heard a loud crash.

And then the screaming.

It was raw fear and pain and Simon shot himself up as fast as he could. He practically launched himself out of the water as he saw the scene.

Ryland was on the ground, writhing as flames licked up his left side, screaming at the top of his lungs. Red alarms rang out, bathing the room in crimson.

Simon didn't think. He lunged forward, grabbing his right arm and pulled as hard as he could, barely noticing the blood trickle down his claws at the force.

He used all of his strength to push himself back, flinging them both into the water. He clutched desperately to the biologist as the water swallowed them. A hiss rang out as the flames died.

Simon breached the water, making sure to hold Grace's head above the surface so he could breathe. He laid limply in his arm, passed out from the pain. His whole left arm was burned and blood dripped from the claw marks on his right.

'***GRACE***!' He cried over and over again. Tears poured down when he didn't get a response. He was still breathing and Simon could hear his heartbeat but he didn't know what to do.

He snapped his head up at the sound of metal doors screeching open. Eva barrelled in with several people behind her, including Rocky and Adrian. They all looked frantic, quickly turning to a look of horror as their eyes settled on them.

He let out sharp panicked clicks as he looked at them pleadingly.

'***Help him! Please***!'

***

Simon barely ate. He spent nearly all of his time staring at the door or trying to sleep. Adrian and Rocky tried their best to help as the days turned into weeks. Weeks into months.

The mer found himself thinking about the classes the biologist had talked about, also having been a teacher. The school year had started a while ago. He wondered if Grace would be upset about it. He loved his job as a teacher, and he had talked about his kids and all the projects that hung in his room.

He didn't think he would be able to return to that life.

Simon couldn't find it in him to surface, unable to look at the lab. It had been cleaned and fixed but there were still some scorch marks that decorated the floor and walls. Apparently Grace had fallen into a piece of technology and it had exploded, leading to the accident. A lot of the scientist's work had been destroyed due to the fire. Luckily most of his notes had been written on his laptop, so he shouldn't have too much trouble catching up to where he had been.

He thought about how the biologist would groan in frustration, rubbing his face and knocking his glasses to hang weirdly off his ears, as he tried to remember what he had written down.

Simon sank even deeper, letting out sad warbles. He settled into the sand bed at the bottom of the tank and glanced over through the glass. Adrian was there that day, working on who knows what. They sat at the bottom level so they could keep an eye on the mer.

The vet looked up at the sad sound, eyes worried.

"Oh, Simon. It'll be okay. He just needs time to heal." Adrian placed a hand on the glass as he curled around himself. They had told him he would survive and that Simon's quick thinking had prevented the worst, but the burns were still severe, having been put into a coma for him to recover.

Soft ringing echoed through the room and Adrian pulled out their phone. "Hold on. I gotta take this call. I'll be right back." They left the room, leaving the mer by himself.

He stayed curled at the bottom for a while, trying not to think of Grace's screaming. It still echoed in his head often and it made his skin

crawl. He touched his scars, he hoped the scars the biologist got weren't too bad. While it was true, they were a point of pride for him and his species, the thought of there being a constant reminder of his pain haunted him.

Finally, Adrian returned, a bright smile plastered on their face.

"Hey, I got a surprise for you." They pointed up. "Head on up." They climbed the staircase up with a pep in their step. Simon grumbled, wanting to just sit there and rot, but he reluctantly followed.

He surfaced, finding Adrian standing by the door, hand over the keypad as they smiled wide.

"Surprise!" They clicked a few buttons and the doors opened.

Just beyond the door, Grace stood, left arm tightly wrapped in bandages, a small anxious smile dancing on his lips.

"Hey, bud."

Simon launched himself to the shallow pool as Grace quickly made his way over. He had barely stepped into the water before the mer wrapped himself around the blonde, careful around his injured arm. He nuzzled as close as he could, trilling happily.

"Woah! Alright, it's alright. Just watch the arm, I'm still healing." He laughed gently. "Thanks for saving me. I owe you a truck load of fish."

'***Don't need it***.' He lifted his head to lick the side of Grace's face with a long tongue in affection. '***Just glad you're okay***.'

Grace jumped slightly at the sudden action, face reddening quickly.

“O-Oh! If you- If you say so.”

Simon let out a few gentle chirps as he returned to nuzzling the flustered man.

‘***You’re okay***.’ He said mostly to himself. His eyes fell to Grace’s right arm. 3 long thin scars wrapped around his forearm, from where he had grabbed him. He gently caressed the marks, looking at the blonde sadly. ‘***I’m sorry***.’

Grace just shook his head. “Don’t be. I wouldn’t be alive if you hadn’t grabbed me. This is proof I lived and that you were the one who saved me. I’m quite fond of it actually.”

Simon brought his arm to his lips as he licked it apologetically. ‘***Still. I didn’t mean to hurt you***.’

“Simon. It’s okay, really.” He sat back on the edge, only his feet in the water. Simon managed to get a little closer as he finally settled, Grace clutching onto him like a lifeline.

He didn’t plan on going anywhere for a while.

CHAPTER 12

It had been a few days since he had been reunited with the Mermennill. He had been put on a form of house arrest. He wasn't allowed to work until he was fully healed, and Simon made it his mission to hold him to that.

Grace sat on the edge of the shallow pool, feet playing in the water with a small frown. He wanted to swim. But alas, he was also banned from that for the time being. He could swim if he wore a protective plastic wrap on his arm but he hated how it felt. He cursed his past self for his clumsiness.

Simon popped up just beyond the pool and chirped at the biologist. He was also forced to keep his distance, not wanting to cause an infection of his wounds. Grace understood, of course, but he was still upset. He had grown accustomed to the mer's warmth and affection, and he found himself starved for it.

He lifted his uninjured arm and beckoned for Simon to come over. He fidgeted nervously.

'***But… your arm***.' He protested.

Grace scoffed in annoyance. "It's fine as long as you don't touch it. Just- Please?" Simon stared at him for a long moment before slithering up to him. He stayed on his right side, careful to avoid the burns. Grace sighed in relief as warmth finally enveloped him.

He closed his eyes and hummed in satisfaction.

'***How does it feel today***?' He asked softly.

"It doesn't hurt so much as it is itchy." It took all of his concentration not to scratch his arm raw.

He warbled in understanding.

‘***Yeah, I know what you mean. My wounds were uncomfortable for a while at first***.’

“How *did* you get them? You haven’t said much about it.” He felt Simon tense around him. “You don’t have to tell me! I was just curious.”

‘***It’s fine, just… scared***.’

Grace nodded but said nothing, letting Simon decide what he wanted to do.

‘***I… I was part of the colony called “Eden***.”’ He started slowly. “***They worshipped that coral I told you about. I never really believed it if I’m honest. Anyway, resources were scarce and we often butted heads with the other colony.***’ He fidgeted with his hair as he looked away. ‘***One day our leader, “Father,” they called him, decided to raid a much smaller colony called “Gyre Cove.” This wasn’t a new practice by any means. It was survival. But this time was different. They…***’

Simon let out displeased clicks as he closed his eyes, remembering. Grace reached out and placed a hand on his tail.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to continue.” Simon shook his head.

“***I want to. I need to.***” He took a deep breath. ‘***They planned to destroy the colony, killing everyone. I didn’t know until it was too late. We worshipped something that brought life, and yet here we were trying to take that very gift away. It didn’t make sense to me. I tried to save them but there was a trench collapse and I got***

caught in it. Lost my arm in the process. I was found and taken by the C.O.I., or the Colony Of Ignis. They imprisoned me for a cycle and a half, until they made a decision. I was to be put to death.'

Grace sucked in a breath.

'***Managed to escape though and headed for the light so they couldn't find me. We never leave the deep. I just wanted to live***.' He finished sadly. He finally looked over to the scientist only to find him covered in tears.

"I'm so sorry." He choked out. "You didn't deserve any of that." He sobbed harder as Simon reached out and wiped away the tears.

'***It's okay-***'

"It's not!" Simon flinched at the volume. Grace couldn't get anymore words out, he just clung to the arm cradling his face as he buried further into it.

Simon warbled gently trying to calm him down.

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't be comforting me. *You're* the one who went through hell." The mer smiled at the baby curse the blonde let slip out.

'***I'm okay.***' He rephrased. '***I got to see a whole other world. I got to meet you and learn about all kinds of stuff. Yeah I was dealt the shittiest hand, but it led me here. And I'm happy here.***'

Grace sniffed as a few more tears ran down. "You are? Even being stuck in this tank?" Simon chuckled softly.

‘***Oddly enough, I think I've had the most freedom being in here. Before, everything I did was just to survive. Now? I’m finally living***.’

“Still,” He said as the tears finally stopped. “You shouldn’t be cooped up here the rest of your life. I promise I’ll get you back out there, but away from all of that. I’ll get a beach house or something to see you everyday. I’m sure I can convince Eva to do at least something.”

Simon’s eyes widened at the offer. ‘***You would really do that***?’

“Of course! You saved my life! I mean I would have done it even if you hadn’t. You deserve to be happy and free.”

The mer let out a beautiful long chord as he snuggled up to him, still wary of his left side. ‘***Thank you***.’

Grace beamed as he stroked his hair, settling in silence.

He continued his ministrations, even after the mer’s breath evened out into a gentle rhythm. He eventually let his arm drop as he traced some of his scars. Tears threatened to fall again as he thought about their origins. He had been through so much and made it to the other side. He let his mind go, thinking of every way he could let the Marmennill out of this tank. He had said he was happy here but he was still trapped in a room and he didn’t feel right about it. He loved Simon but he didn’t belong in here.

Grace stiffened.

What.

The thought came so easily to him, he almost missed it. He glanced over and looked at Simon. *Really* looked at him. He traced his features and found that, yes, he was beautiful and that Grace felt a pull towards him. He was smart and gentle. He cared about Grace in a way no one ever had before. He was fascinating, not just in a scientific way, in a way that Grace wanted to know more about him. Not his species, but *him*.

Welp it was official; he was a freak. There was no way around it. He had never been more happy that Simon couldn't hear his thoughts. All he could think of was every point of contact between the mer as he sat there, skin ablaze.

This was fine. Everything was fine. He could just bury it deep down in the '*probably important things to handle but I'm too much of a scaredy cat to face them*,' vault. Yeah that seemed like the safe sane option to do. He's done it plenty of times before, so this should be no different. It would eventually fade into nothing and he could continue with his semi-normal life normally.

Yep. Totally normal.

CHAPTER 13

Grace bounced his leg nervously as he sat in the meeting room. Rocky and Adrian sat on either side of him, Rocky holding his hand as an anchor. He had waited until he was healed enough to get the all clear to work and swim again. He wanted to make sure everything was

in his favor but he still felt that pit of anxiety in his gut. Adrian turned to him with kind eyes.

"It'll be fine. After everything, there is no way she still sees him as a threat."

Grace sighed as he hung his head and shut his eyes tight.

"I know, but I'm still worried. I just- I need this to go right."

Rocky hummed as he squeezed his hand.

"We got your back. We'll *make* her listen if we have to."

Grace focused on the grounding presence of the couple, relaxing slightly. His eyes snapped open at the sound of the door creaking open.

Eva stepped in. That familiar air of confidence around her as she settled in the seat across from them. She raked her eyes over them, studying.

"So. What is this about?" She asked calmly as she interlocked her fingers and rested them on the table.

Adrian bumped his knee with theirs in encouragement. He took a deep breath as he straightened and looked her in the eye.

"I want to talk to you about Simon." Stratt raised an eyebrow but said nothing as she waited. Grace cleared his throat nervously. "Um… Okay. He has been here 6 months and he has made tremendous progress. He is able to work with all of us," He said, gesturing to the people at his sides. "And has even warmed up to you and a few others

a tad bit. He's not a threat and he doesn't belong here. He should be out there, happy and free. I want to release him. I'll move out here and keep an eye on him and keep you in the loop. I'll make sure he steers clear of human dense areas. Just… He can't stay here forever." He took a shaky breath as he finished his rambling and looked at Eva. She hadn't moved and her expression was the same.

He gripped Rocky's hand tightly as he waited. She turned her attention to Adrian and Rocky.

"And what do you two think?"

Adrian spoke up first.

"I have worked with him a few times but he has been very easy to work with. He keeps a distance but it's clear he doesn't want to hurt anyone. With the help of Rocky's and Grace's translator I've been able to converse with him and I can confidently say he is not much different then us. I think it would be in his best interest to be released, even if it's just around here. He needs open water and to hunt on his own."

Eva listened intently, never once taking her eyes off of them as they spoke. She nodded as they finished.

"I see."

Rocky spoke next.

"I haven't interacted with him as much but he's never once tried to hurt me. In fact he's been more curious if anything. He asks questions when I work on his enclosure and is incredibly smart. He's even helped me a few times to test the improvements. I've done what I

can but I can only do so much. He was the happiest I've ever seen him that day he was allowed out."

Stratt drummed the table as she took in their testimonies. Grace felt like he was on trial and was waiting on the verdict. She looked between the three of them like a lion stalking its prey. Grace squirmed in his chair.

"I can acknowledge he is not an immediate threat. But, he is still at risk of being discovered." She tilted her head in thought taking in the three. She leaned forward, a serious look settling over her face. "I would like some reassurance that he can stay in a designated area and keep away from humans. For the next three days he will have free access to come and go. He is to stay within 3 miles of the shore. I will have guards posted to make sure he stays within the area. If he can keep to these rules, I will work something out."

Grace launched out of his chair and slammed his hands on the table.

"You're serious?!" He cried.

Eva nodded as she leaned back in her chair.

"Thank you! I promise you won't be disappointed!"

"We will see."

Simon clicked happily once they had finished relaying the verdict.

[**Thank you.**] The automated voice rang out. It was as close to Simon's voice as they could get it. A screen in front of them at the front of the enclosure typed it out as it spoke for the mer. Rocky had set it up when Grace was hospitalized and Adrian had worked with Simon to make it fluent.

"Of course! I told you I would do it!" Grace beamed with pride as he looked down at Simon. "This is it bud. After this it's open waters for you." He couldn't help the sadness that leaked through his words. He knew he wasn't leaving him behind, but after so long together, the thought of the distance made his heart ache. He buried the stubborn feeling again.

"Since you will be allowed so far out," Rocky dug into his hip bag and pulled out what looked to be a large metal ring with two devices on either side that curved upward as well as a pair of earbuds. "We can finally put these to the test!" He clicked a few buttons on the translator screen before kneeling down and motioning Simon over.

He pressed a button on the front of the ring, snapping it open. He leaned to wrap it around the mer's neck, careful of his gills, and hooked the two devices around Simon's ear fins so the larger part sat just in front of the fins. Rocky turned and handed the earbuds to Grace who put them in.

"Alright! Give it a go just to make sure they work!"

Simon glanced at Grace and let out a few short clicks.

The words didn't come out of the screen. Instead the voice spoke directly into the biologist's ears.

[**Grace?**]

Grace lit up.

"That's amazing!" Simon's eyes widened as his fins flattened against his head. He brought up his hand to touch the piece on the side of his face.

[**I heard you.**]

Rocky pumped his fists in the air in excitement.

"Yes! It works! Try it under water!"

Simon sank under repeating the scientist's name. Grace heard it and clapped his hands together.

"Can you still hear me?" Simon nodded in awe under the water. "Rocky! This is incredible!"

The engineer puffed out his chest. "I know. I tried to use bone conduction figuring it would be better for underwater. Which of course means it is completely water proof and should be able to handle some decent depth."

Simon resurfaced and Rocky changed the settings back on the screen.

"Pretty cool right?"

[**It's amazing. Thank you, Rocky.**]

He bowed exaggeratedly as Adrian chuckled. Grace crushed him in a hug when he righted himself, a soft 'oof' escaping from the force.

"Thank you guys so much. Really, I cannot thank you enough. You have done so much for us." A few tears escaped him as he clutched his best friend. Rocky patted his back softly.

"What did I say? We've got you back, dude. But I think I've heard enough 'thank yous' for one day." He chuckled as he pulled back.

Grace wiped his eyes and nodded. He turned back to Simon and smiled wide.

"You ready?"

[**Always**.]

CHAPTER 14

It was the second day of the trial and Simon already had a routine. He would be out most of the day, talking to Grace often, and come back occasionally to be close to him. He would come back at night to sleep, which Grace was surprised by. Despite having more freedom the mer seemed to prefer to be where he was.

It didn't help that stubborn feeling in his chest that seemed determined to hold on tight.

He tried his best to focus on his work, finally able to work after almost 5 months of house arrest. He was extra careful with every piece of equipment and kept his space clear of any open containers. But when he sat down to write some reports, he found himself staring blankly at them.

His eyes would dart to the empty pool and he would wonder what Simon was up to. He could talk to him but he felt guilty every time he did while he was out. The Marmennill should be enjoying his freedom instead of being bothered by a freaky biologist with separation anxiety.

He slammed his head on the desk as he groaned. This was torture. He turned his head, eyes settling on the new decorations on his desk. Lined up on the back of his desk were a few large seashells, all different types. Every time Simon came back he would return with a new one.

He loved each one and always put them on his work station so he could look at them throughout the day. He figured each shell was the mer's way to keep saying 'thank you.'

Grace picked one up, his favorite of the bunch. It was a large Abalone shell, bigger than his hand. He loved the shape, like a shallow bowl. He traced his fingers inside it, marveling at the array of colors that shifted in the light. It was one of the most colorful ones he had seen, full of vibrant greens, blues, and purples. It looked more like a crystal than a shell. It had been the first one Simon had given him and

he smiled softly as he remembered how happy it made him when he had accepted it.

He had been especially happy when he noticed Grace had put it on display. From there began the constant shell gifts.

He sat back up as he brought the shell to his lap, cradling it in his hands. He wondered if he should give something back. What would he want that he hadn't already given him? He had access to the sea and he felt like anything from there wouldn't work. He wanted to give him something only he could get but he came up short.

He leaned back in his chair, head hanging off the top as he sighed in frustration. His eyes settled on the plant behind him. It had been a fairly recent addition. Simon was fascinated by terrestrial plants and he had asked to have some in the room. Grace had happily obliged, quickly requesting several plants. He stared at it for a long moment before an idea popped into his head. He sprung up, careful not to drop his prized shell, as he grabbed his phone and began typing. He sent the text and smiled to himself.

He hoped Simon would like it.

Rocky slid a small box across the table, towards Grace. He was in the couple's room and they all sat at the table of their small kitchen.

Their room was almost identical to his own but twice the size to accommodate both of them.

Adrian sat next to Rocky, practically vibrating. He had never seen the vet so excited before and it made him a tad self conscious. Grace reached over and grasped the box and slowly opened it. Inside held a glass pendant, a small maple tree seed sat suspended in the glass. On the top, in between the clasp and pendant, sat a dark red almost purple crystal also encased in glass.

“Adrian chose the stone. They thought it fit him.” Rocky offered as Grace held it gently between his fingers.

“It’s garnet.” They said simply, a sly smile on their lips.

“It’s beautiful.” He whispered as he placed it back in the box. “I just hope he likes it.” He felt a small heat creep up his cheeks. He had spent the entire third day of Simon’s trial working on the design with Rocky and the genius had finished it before the night was over.

“I’m sure he will.” Adrian reassured confidently.

Grace nodded nervously as he pocketed the gift. Simon had successfully completed his test and tomorrow they would talk to Eva about the next steps. He wanted something to give back to the mer, but he also wanted to celebrate his success.

“Wish me luck.”

Simon curled around Grace in the shallow pool as he hummed happily.

They had just finished their long meeting with Stratt and it had gone very well.

She had told them that she was very pleased with the outcome and deemed it okay to release him as long as Grace kept giving him reports on the mer. She had even found a very secluded spot where humans couldn't get to easily and was close enough for them to travel to in under an hour. There they would build Grace a home that connected to the water so Simon could see Grace whenever he wanted. She had given him a limit of 5 miles from the shore and had told him to completely avoid humans.

If he was to break any rule only once, he would have to return to the base. Obviously it would take time to build and design everything but they were excited. Simon was even allowed to keep his tank open to the ocean to continue to be able to leave freely. He still had the 3 mile limit while he was there.

Grace was exhausted from all the discussions but was the happiest he had been in a while. Maybe his whole life, if he was honest.

He looked over at Simon and worried the inside of his cheek, the box burning a hole in his pocket. He took a shaky breath as he sat up, getting the mer's attention.

'***Everything okay?***' He asked.

He nodded as he reached into his pocket and fumbled to bring out the box. He mentally thanked Rocky for making the container waterproof. He shifted so he was facing Simon and kept his eyes glued to the box.

“Okay, so. Oh boy, how do I do this?” He fidgeted with the gift as he looked anywhere but at Simon as anxiety welled up. “I just wanted to say: I am so proud of you. I know we didn’t get off on the right foot but despite that you warmed up incredibly fast. And through all of your hard work, you have earned your freedom. Not that you should have needed to but you get my point. I hope. Anyway, I wanted to make you a little something to celebrate you getting out.” He stopped his usual nervous rambling and opened the box with shaking hands.

Grace pulled out the pendant and presented it to the mer who stared at it for a long moment. He leaned closer and gently held it with his tendrils to see it up close.

“It’s a maple tree seed and a crystal that Adrian said was Garnet. I wanted to give you something that you wouldn’t get to see everyday but I also wanted it to look nice since you had given me all those amazing shells, thank you by the way. And the glass is so that they don’t get worn down by the ocean so it should last for a while. So yeah. Oh! And I had Rocky add a clasp so you could hang it on your communicator so you could have it with you, if you wanted of course.”

Grace squirmed as Simon remained quiet, staring in awe at the gift. He finally peeled his eyes away from it and finally at Grace.

‘***Put it on***?’ He asked as he handed it back over to the biologist. He let out a relieved breath as he stood up.

“Of course! You like it then?” He took back the pendant and moved closer to Simon, who lifted his head for him to clasp it on the ring that now sat on his neck below his gills.

‘***I love it***.’ He said softly as Grace stepped back to see his work. It now looked like Simon had a necklace and it suited the mer way more then he thought it would.

“It looks good on you.” He choked out, turning his head to try and hide his reddening face.

Simon regarded him. ‘***Do you know what the shells meant***?’

Grace paused, glancing back at him. “What? Oh, um, I assumed it was a form of thanks.” He stuttered out.

Simon tilted his head and let out a gentle rumble. ‘***Partially. But that wasn’t the full meaning***.’ He pushed Grace closer with his tail so they were less than a foot apart. Grace’s eyes widened. ‘***It’s how we court mates***.’

Grace choked on nothing as he squirmed, face almost as red as some of Simon’s scales.

“*C-court*?! That’s- *Me*?!” He buried his face in his hands, glasses riding up, unable to escape from Simon’s grasp.

‘***I want you to understand the meaning of returning my gifts with your own. Especially something as beautiful and thoughtful as* this*. One would assume this as you accepting my offer.***’

Grace curled into himself in embarrassment. Just kill him now. But wait. Simon had been *courting him*?? No way. He was dreaming.

This was just some freaky dream from repressing his emotions. It had to be. The solid tail pressed into his back told him otherwise.

'***We can chalk it up to a simple misunderstanding and forget this happened***.'

Grace found himself shaking his head before he could think about it. Oh God, what was he doing? This was insane. He had gone insane.

'***Oh***?' His voice dipped lower and it made him shiver as he kept his hands on his face. He was going to die. He felt clawed fingers wrap around his wrist and give a gentle tug, a silent request. Grace couldn't do it. His face was on fire and he was so overwhelmed from all the emotions swirling in his chest. Burying it had done nothing but make it stronger it seemed, and now it was consuming him.

'**Ryland**.'

Grace stiffened, hands finally slipping down in shock.

Oh.

Oh.

He liked it when he said his name. He *really* liked it.

With his eyes now free from their protective shield, he could see Simon with the softest gaze and smile, just a few inches away. He swallowed thickly as his eyes betrayed him and flicked to the mer's lips.

‘***There you are***.’ He chuckled softly. ‘***Is that a yes***?’ He leaned the tiniest bit closer, eyes fluttering as they flicked down to his own lips.

He sucked in a breath and slowly nodded, letting his eyes fall back to Simon’s lips and stay there.

‘***Can I***?’

“Please.”

Simon’s lips met his and he melted. They were soft and so warm. Yep, totally going to die. He expected it to be awkward with his size but he found it was actually fluid and felt like they were meant to slot together. It wasn’t heavy or starved, but soft and chaste. He tasted like salt and he couldn’t help the content exhale that slipped out of him as he let his weight fall against his tail.

He felt tendrils wrap around his head and neck, sending small jolts through him that made his head fuzzy. It was a delicious feeling and he found himself leaning into it.

He didn’t whine when Simon broke away. Absolutely not. He panted heavily as he fluttered his eyes open. When had he closed them?

‘***Yeah, definitely like kissing.***’ The mer chuckled and Grace looked at him incredulously.

“You’ve never kissed before?!” Simon shook his head. “How the hell were you so good at it?!”

Simon barked out a laugh at that and leaned back in to kiss his cheek.

‘***I don’t know. Just did what felt good***.’

Grace huffed as Simon showered him in affection, every bit of restraint he had having been thrown out the window.

He giggled as Simon laid on top of his chest and let out a soft rumble as he settled. He wrapped his arms around his neck, playing with the soft dark curls.

“This is crazy.” He laughed out. “But I’ve never wanted anything more.” He looked down at Simon and moved a hand to caress his cheek, fingers grazing the teeth that rested there. “You sure you want me?”

Simon huffed and looked back at him. ‘***I need you. Can’t see a future without you in it***.’

He shuddered at the confession. “I know what you mean. I think I need you too.” He had let himself be completely consumed in that feeling he had tried so hard to ignore and he couldn’t understand why he had in the first place. He felt so light and warm, like being wrapped in a blanket on a chilly night. Or being held by a handsome mer in a cold metal room.

Simon chirped as he snuggled closer to him.

‘***Good***.’

CHAPTER 15

Grace squirmed, trying to get out of Simon's hold. He had him pinned as he kissed every piece of exposed skin on the blonde's body. He squeaked as lips gently pressed into his neck. The pendant that hung from the mer's neck grazed his rapidly warming skin.

"Simon!" He cried as he laughed, lightly smacking his shoulder. He had long since lost his glasses in Simon's kiss attack but he couldn't be damned to try and find them. He was exactly where he wanted to be despite his flailing and squawking.

'***Been wanting to do this since the first time I saw you in swimwear***.' He mumbled as he continued his path of fire. Grace thought it was unfair he could talk and kiss at the same time.

"Oh my *goddd*." He groaned as his face flushed. "You can't just say stuff like that!" He whimpered as Simon kissed his scars gently.

'***I can and I will***.' He quipped, letting his long tapered tongue loll out and trace his chest scars. Grace gasped as Simon laughed, finally relenting his assault.

"You're the worst." He huffed, words biteless as he played with his hair.

'***Oh? Should I leave then***?' He smiled slyly.

"Don't you dare." He warned as he grasped his face and pulled him up for a quick kiss. Simon melted into it and Grace smiled into the kiss before letting his head fall back. Simon rested his head on his chest, letting out a low rumble.

‘***Your heart is going crazy.***’ He nuzzled his chest as the biologist scoffed.

"Well, who’s fault is that?”

Simon chuckled as he stilled, sighing as Grace continued to play with his hair.

‘***It always spiked when you were around me.***’ He said after a beat. Grace flushed as he covered his face as he realized what he meant. ‘***Thought you were actually scared of me for a while.***’

Simon laughed but Grace didn’t. He dropped his hands and moved to sit up, grasping the now surprised mer by the face. He let out a few concerned chirps as Grace looked him in the eye, dead serious.

“I was never once scared of you.” He stated urgently. “You were and are the most fascinating creature I have ever seen and I am so glad I took Stratt’s offer. You are amazing and beautiful and kind. Don’t ever forget that.” He smiled as Simon looked away, it being his turn to flush a pretty pink.

Simon turned back and closed the distance once again. Grace let his eyes flutter closed as their lips connected and let himself be pushed back to press against the mer’s tail. Simon loomed over him, arm keeping him up as he curled himself closer to the biologist, chittering happily into the kiss.

“I told you!”

The mer chirped in surprise and Grace snapped his head back, neck bent uncomfortably to look back at the door.

Adrian was shaking Rocky by the shoulders as they beamed with pure joy. Poor Rocky swayed violently with the force.

Grace settled his head back down and covered his face in embarrassment. He groaned as he heard rapid footsteps behind him. Simon didn't move but he could practically hear the smirk on his face.

He dropped his hands, flopping them down and out and glanced up at Adrian who was leaning over him, eyes sparkling.

"I feel like you are enjoying this a bit too much."

"Hush. I've been waiting for this since Simon let it slip he was trying to court you after his ultrasound." He felt Simon stiffen above him.

"You *what*? That *long*?!"

Adrian practically cackled as Simon buried his face in his chest, hair draping over the sides to further hide his flushed face.

'***Shut up. They promised they wouldn't say anything…***' He pouted against the pale skin. Rocky rolled up next to his partner as they were still doubled over in laughter.

"Good for you, man." He smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

"Thanks." He sighed as he gave a lazy thumbs up in return. Simon finally lifted himself off of the biologist and Grace immediately missed his warmth. Thankfully the mer kept himself wrapped around him as he sat up and turned to his friends.

Simon wrapped his arm around him and pulled him flush to his chest, chin resting on his shoulder as he practically purred into his ear. *That* was new. It made his cheeks heat up again.

Rocky pulled out a bunch of rolled up pieces of paper and laid them out on the ground, a bit away from the edge to keep them from getting wet.

“I brought some basic drafts of your home for you to look over. These are nowhere near the finished product but I figured it’s only fair I let you two have a say in it.” He looked up at Grace being held captive by a purring merman and smirked. “Should I figure out a way to have a bed in water so you two can easily *mate*?”

“ROCKY!”

[**Yes please**.]

Rocky and Adrian laughed loudly as Grace snapped his head to Simon, practically glowing red at this point. Simon just looked back at him and licked the side of his face.

Rocky bent down and wrote a note.

“*Mating Bed - must have*.”

“You did *not* just make that a note! Guys come on!” He squirmed in embarrassment . It’s not like he *hadn’t* thought about it but he didn’t want to discuss his sex life with his best friends. Not to mention he didn’t even think Simon would *want* something like that. Apparently he did. Cool. Great. He tried not to think about it and instead tried to focus on building the best home for him and Simon.

The mer, surprisingly, had quite a few requests. Most of which were actually for Grace. Things like making it wide and open to prevent as many trips and falls as possible and so most things were in sight to help him from forgetting things simply because they were out of sight. Or a button he could press to turn off his computer when he got too focused on his work. That last one earned him a playful slap.

They went back and forth, everyone, except Grace, adamant they keep the bed note. He relented, it being three against one but it still made him embarrassed every time he looked at it.

They went at it for hours, mostly because the couple kept teasing and bombarding the new couple with questions. He answered very few. Eventually they had to retire for the night, Rocky needing to make some final notes and adjustments before submitting them to Eva.

They said their goodbyes and Simon was quick to pull him back into the water with him. This time he laid on his back with Grace sprawled out on his torso. He was surprised to find that he could comfortably lay on him without worry of falling off. He shifted so he could press his face into the mer's neck and wrapped his arm around him as best he could.

Simon planted a soft kiss on his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around his waist, holding him firmly.

Grace smiled as an idea hit him. He turned his head and planted a kiss right on his gills. His gills flared as he heard the mer suck in a breath.

"Payback." He whispered and planted a few more kisses on his neck, moving down. It was Simon's turn to squirm and giggle as Grace

peppered him in sweet affection. He sat up on his stomach as he looked down at the flustered mer as he draped his arm over his eyes.

He smiled triumphantly as he bent back down to press his lips onto his scars. He followed them up until he was sitting on his chest.

His eyes widened as tendrils wrapped around his mouth. He looked at Simon who looked at him with a smirk.

Grace narrowed his eyes as he tried to tug them off. They held fast, Simon chuckling at his vain attempts. Finally Grace grew annoyed enough to open his mouth a bite down on one. Not hard, just with enough pressure to get his point across.

Simon flinched as his mouth dropped open slightly.

For a second he thought he hurt him but as the tendrils loosened and he looked him in the eyes, he realized he did anything but.

'***Careful. Don't want to start something you can't back out of***.' Something dangerous flickered behind his eyes.

Grace swallowed as he released the appendage and put his arms up in surrender.

"N-Noted. That was payback for earlier though."

Simon snorted. He reached out his arm for Grace who smiled softly and snuggled back to where he had been before his retaliation.

He sighed as he sank into the warmth and breathed in salt. If this was a dream, he never wanted to wake up.

CHAPTER 16

The sand was warm under his palms as he sat back and watched the mer swim. They had decided to check out the stretch of beach that had been chosen for their future home, the startings of a home already littering the back wall of the beach. It was practically fully enclosed with jagged rocky cliffs, making it nearly impossible to get to, making it the perfect spot to house a secret sea creature. They had finally finished the building plans a month ago and they had gotten restless sitting in the base waiting for it to be completed.

It was still going to be a long while before it was finished but seeing where it would be temporarily scratched that itch. The sun was starting to dip, sky glowing beautiful pinks and oranges, the vibrant array reflected onto the ocean like a mirror.

Simon surfaced, being bathed in that same light, and Grace sucked in a breath at the sight. He still hadn't fully processed that they were together, mates, as Simon would put it. Every once in a while he would catch the mer staring at him, eyes so filled with adoration that it would cause him to sputter and flail as he tried to compose himself. And when Simon would catch *him* staring? Oh boy, he would tease him for hours until he was a puddle of flustered goop on the ground.

One thing that particularly would turn him to mush was Simon's possessiveness. He had always been protective of him, but after the gift exchange he had quickly turned to possessive. It wasn't

over-bearing or aggressive but it definitely sparked a heat to bloom across his face every time. Anytime he would have to go to a meeting or talk with Rocky and Adrian, he would nuzzle into his neck to make sure the biologist smelled like him.

Grace had gotten him to mostly stop once he had told him the scars on his right arm were like a permanent mate mark that told everyone he was Simon's. That had sparked an… intense cultural exchange. One that left him covered in more "mate marks."

He was pulled from his mature memories at the sound of cheering and hollering. He looked up to see Simon dive under quickly as a small fishing boat sped into view.

From the sounds and looks of it, it was a bunch of drunk college students messing around, not realizing they had gone into private waters. Grace clutched a handful of sand as he tensed, silently begging for them not to see Simon. He grabbed his phone and quickly shot a text.

The good news was that his prayers were answered as they moved right by where he had been. The bad news was that they didn't see him because they had noticed Grace and a clean beach that was hidden away from the rest of the world. They beelined to where he was, barely slowing down enough to beach their boat on the shore, narrowly avoiding their own boat they had used to get here.

Grace scrambled up as a group of three guys, all in their early twenties, hopped out and drunkenly stumbled their way over to him.

"Nice fancy beach you got here!" One of them slurred as they got closer.

“This is private property. You cannot be here.” He was surprised at how calm and even his voice was given how shaken up he felt.

“Come ooonn. Don’t be such a Kevinn.” Another one said as he nearly face planted into the sand. What the hell did that even mean? And just how much did these idiots drink? They all moved to surround him, backing him against the waters edge. His eyes flicked behind him, hoping the mer was still hidden. To be fair, the three were so messed up he doubted they could even see *him* properly.

He stood his ground.

“Look, I understand you boys are just trying to have fun, but you have crossed a line. You need to leave.”

The third one frowned as he stepped closer.

“Relax, old man.” His frown twisted into a weird smile as he dug into his pocket. “Here, I’ll even let you have a ‘chill pill.’ You get to take that stick out of your ass and we get to have a nice beach to let loose.” He pulled out a little baggy with little white pills. Grace stared wide eyed.

So they weren’t just drunk. Fantastic.

He wasn’t new to this, he had been in college before, but the circumstances this time were much different now.

He took another step back as he raised his hands, feeling the water begin to lap at his heels.

“Nope. All good here.” He laughed nervously.

‘***Grace?? What’s going on? Are you okay?***’ Panic shot through his mind. Shoot. He couldn’t respond, not without giving him away, and he really didn’t want all their work to be for nothing.

He needed them gone, and fast.

“If you don’t leave, I’m calling the cops.” He tried.

The third one laughed as he looped an arm around his shoulder. “I’d like to see them try and get in here.”

Grace shivered at the unwelcome contact and in a moment of pure frustration, he pushed the man off him and he stumbled back. He snapped his head up at the blonde, eyes flaring.

Uh oh.

The other two just seemed to watch, dumbfounded as their friend lunged forward. Grace stumbled back more into the water, arms raising in defense.

He felt his back hit the water, his head slamming into the sand bed painfully. He couldn’t tell which way was up and his head was underwater as his head pounded. He could feel a weight on top of him as he was pinned down. His lungs ached as he tried to hold on, but he hadn’t had time to take a breath before he had been shoved.

He flailed, trying to push the guy off of him, chest burning. Why did this crap keep happening to him? It was like some cruel being loved making him suffer for their enjoyment. He felt the edges of his consciousness blur and his strength started to leave him. All he could think about was Simon and if he was okay.

Suddenly the weight was lifted off of him in an instant, and a large hand pushed him upright, out of the water. He clutched his burning chest as he frantically filled his lungs, coughing and gasping.

He opened his eyes to find the one who had attacked him, much farther on the beach, sitting with his legs splayed, blood dripping from his nose, eyes wide as he looked just behind him. The other 2 quickly stumbled backwards, just as terrified.

A loud growl rumbled behind him as a large arm snaked around his chest and pulled him back. A black and red tail curled around him protectively as a shadow loomed over him.

His eyes landed on a pissed Simon, eyes wide with fury and shaking with restraint.

“Simon! No! They can’t see you!” He cried through gasps, but he knew he was too late. Simon only held him tighter, growling louder as his tail thumped angrily around him.

‘***They don’t just get away with*** **hurting my mate**.’ He growled, flaring his teeth, making the trio flinch hard, all rooted to their spots in terror.

He swallowed, his throat sore, trying to ignore the bloom in his chest at the statement. He let his eyes fall back to the trio of idiots as they stared between him and Simon. He didn’t know how to get out of this mess. He shook from the adrenaline and Simon shifted to put more weight on his back, trying to ground him.

“*What the fuck is that?!*” The first one seemed to snap out of his daze, falling back onto the sand with the third guy.

The second one bolted back towards the boat. He only made it halfway before he was tackled.

Grace watched as more men descended on them, pinning each man to the ground as they squirmed and screamed at the sudden assault. He heard Simon laugh.

'***Serves them right***.'

He looked up to find Eva Stratt, glaring at the kids with her arms crossed.

"It seems I can't let you two go anywhere without trouble following suit." She reprimanded with a cocked eyebrow.

"The fuck?! Why are we the ones being grabbed, when there's is a *fucking sea monster right there*?!" The third shouted.

Simon growled again, head lowering to hang over Grace's shoulder, glaring at the man face down in the sand. The man holding him down tightened his grip.

The biologist could only watch, the mer keeping his hold firm, as if he would disappear if he let go. As Eva gave orders about what to do with the kids, panic surged through him.

"I'm sorry! Please, it won't happen again! He was just protecting me, he had stayed hidden before I got hurt. Don't put him back there!" He pleaded as they began to haul off the offenders.

Eva gave them a long stern look before letting her hands fall to her sides and let out a heavy sigh.

“Relax. Those three have been a constant problem for us and now we have a reason to handle them. Besides, they are too high for anyone to take them seriously. And I can’t say we weren’t a little at fault as they somehow managed to slip past the cracks. But this is the only freebie you get. This *cannot* happen again.”

He gripped Simon’s arm, that was still wrapped around him protectively, as he nodded furiously.

“Of course! Never again! Thank you, Stratt.”

She hummed as she nodded.

“For now, let’s get you back until we handle this situation.”

Simon tightened his hold once more, eyeing the men as they were boarded onto the boat Stratt had apparently arrived on. Grace patted his arm as he nuzzled into his neck.

“I’m okay. Thanks to you, again. Let’s just get back and binge watch a show all night. How does that sound?”

The last bit of sunlight was fading when Simon finally released him, warbling worriedly. He scanned his body, webbed claws gently checking for more injuries.

‘***You’re sure you’re okay***?’

“Yep, all goo-” He stood up only for the world to spin violently. He tumbled back into Simon who chirped in alarm as Grace groaned. “Okay, maybe not ‘all good.’ I think I hit my head harder than I thought.” He winced.

Another growl escaped the mer, and Grace knew it wasn't directed at him. He heard another heavy sigh from Eva.

"Let's get you to medical. Again."

'***If you keep getting hurt like this, I'm never gonna leave your side.***' He huffed.

"Promise?"

'**Ryland!**'

CHAPTER 17

Grace typed away, leaning way too close to the screen, glasses barely holding on to his ear. He scrunched his brow in concentration as he typed, barely noticing the chime that played throughout their home.

It had taken a little more than a year to finish its construction but it had been worth it. It was huge and spacious to allow Simon to move freely, big enough to be considered a mansion. Grace was still getting used to the space and accepting it was his and Simon's. The shape they had settled on was rectangular with one side being rounded, like a pill cut in half. The rounded end stuck out on the beach while the other

half of the building was tucked inside the cliff wall, hiding the true size of it until you walked in.

There was a door for human visitors on the right side and when you entered you were greeted by an enormous open room. The door to the back wall measured about 80 feet and from the rounded wall all the way to the end of the building measured a whopping 120 feet. The open room took up half the building, a large round pool taking up most of the left side of the room, a shallow pool extended off it in the shape of a pear, large windows on either side.. It alone stretched to 55 feet. It was where Simon could come and go, an entrance and exit under the water that led to open waters.

The back wall in the right corner housed a large living area with 2 couches and a large tv where they would hold movie nights with Rocky and Adrian. Behind the couches was a large rounded window that had a large sill for a little reading nook. That of course was also big enough for the Marmennill to use as well.

Directly right of the front door laid the kitchen. It was L shaped and an island with stools sat connected to the hallway on the left side. From there was a long hallway that led to 4 rooms, 2 on each side. Each door was large enough for Simon to fit through comfortably. On the right was the bathroom. Even that was huge, almost big enough to fully fit the mer. Next door at the end of the hall was the guest bedroom and pretty much only housed Rocky and Adrian. His brother, Colt, had also stayed a few times, somehow convincing Stratt to let them meet, of course having his twin sign a type of NDA.

Simon and Colt got along surprisingly well. A little too well for Grace's liking as when they first met his twin had sat on him as he showed his partner his most embarrassing pictures and moments. The

mer had jumped at the chance to know more about him, and while it was sweet, it was also just as mortifying.

On the left of the hallway, was his and Simon's bedroom that was big enough to house both of them. They each had their own beds, Grace being unable to sleep well in water, but they were still as close as they could be. Simon had a shallow pool that sat at the right wall and took up half the room. It was coated in a bed of underwater moss, thick enough for it to be surprisingly soft and comfortable and they often cuddled in it. Next to that was his office/lab which he currently resided in.

His lab station was pressed against the left wall while his regular desk, that he currently sat at, was on the right.

Grace ran his fingers through his hair as he somehow leaned even closer. His online classes had long since ended but he needed to finish his lesson plan for his in person presentations. He was going to be going to a variety of different schools to introduce the students to marine biology and he had to make sure it was perfect. He couldn't wait to work with his kids again and was overjoyed that he could share with them his passion.

'***Grace***?'

The deep voice that shot through his head snapped him back to reality. He looked up over his computer to find his mate in the doorway looking at him with a raised eyebrow, glass pendant catching the artificial light.

'***You said you would stop before I got back***.'

He smiled sheepishly as he leaned back, wincing as his body protested loudly.

“I meant to, honest. But I had an idea about showing off bioluminescence and I had to write it out before I forgot.” He paused as he looked at his screen. “And I maayy have gone a bit overboard.”

‘***Have you eaten***?’ Simon asked as he slithered into the room and kissed Grace’s cheek.

Grace stilled and looked away.

‘***Love***.’

“I forgot!” He protested.

‘***Kitchen. Now.***’

“But-”

‘**Ryland**.’

He sighed in defeat as he saved his work and dragged himself out of his chair, Simon close behind. As they made their way to the kitchen, Grace realized just how hungry he actually was. He was colder than usual and his hands were shaking. He was embarrassed that he could just forget to eat in lue of working but the mer never judged him for it, only helping to remind him when it happened.

He trudged to the fridge and pulled out some leftovers to heat up quickly. Simon hummed, pleased as he finally sat down to eat, beginning to scarf it down as his body urged him to fuel itself. Once the

mer deemed he had eaten enough, he slipped away for a second and came back, holding something in his hand.

Grace turned, mouth full of food as he extended his hand, curious what the Marmennill had found this time. Simon released what he was holding and Grace smiled as a large wentletrap shell landed softly in his palm. He swallowed his mouthful as his fingers curled around the shell and brought it to his lips, kissing it gently.

Simon had never stopped gifting him shells and Grace cherished each and every one. The house was littered in them, decorating every corner with Simon's display of love and affection. Grace's prized Abalone shell hung just above the front door, Simon adamant it should go there once he had learned it was his favorite.

It was the only one in the entire house and Grace liked it that way. It made it feel that much more precious. He had had to explain to the mer about Abalone shells and how they were endangered, so as much as he *loved* the one he got him, to leave the rest in the sea. Simon had understood and made it his mission to find another shell that Grace loved almost as much as the Abalone. Once he had realized that shell was a Wentletrap, he made sure to find one every time he went out.

Which, of course, meant that he had a *lot* of them. He didn't mind and had even taken to making jewelry out of the smaller ones so he could show off Simon's love anywhere he went. He was even wearing a pair of earrings of the smaller shells at that very moment.

He loved how Simon would stare at each piece of jewelry, eyes so full of warmth it would make the biologist melt.

“Thank you, Si.” He spoke softly as he pulled him in for a sweet kiss. “Love you so much.” He whispered when they separated. Simon chirped and nuzzled into his neck.

‘***Love you too. But please, take care of yourself when I am not here***.’

Grace rolled his eyes and scoffed as he lifted his hand to play with the soft black locks, earning him the gorgeous sound of the mer purring at the touch.

“Bossy.” He teased.

A click wrang in his ears as he barked out a laugh, Simon snuggling closer. The warmth and gentle grip had him fully relaxing, a yawn slipping out past his lips.

The mer slipped back and cradled his face in his webbed hand, thumb rubbing his cheek. He sighed, eyes fluttering closed as he leaned into the warmth.

‘***Tired***?’ He whispered as he kissed his forehead.

“M’only a little. You’re warm.” He slurred as exhaustion crept up.

‘***Wanna go to bed***?’ He pulled him into a hug, hand playing with his blond curls as he felt Grace melt into him.

“M’not yet. Wanna cuddle.” A giggle escaped him as Simon kissed his neck.

‘***Anything for my Sunshine***.’

Grace squeaked as his face grew hot and buried his face into his shoulder. He was beginning to regret teaching the mer about pet names and the effect they had on him.

He playfully bit down as Simon laughed. He bent down and scooped Grace up from the legs, the blond wrapping his arms around his neck as he let himself go limp. He would never get over how strong the mer was. Grace was tall and every partner he had had been shorter than him, so he had never gotten to experience being picked up, but when Simon began doing it, he had quickly learned how much he liked it. Granted, he mostly did it to tear him away from his work when he was being too stubborn to listen.

Simon had once lifted him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him out of his office like a kitten and they had laughed about it for weeks afterward. He had never experienced this level of trust with anyone before Simon. To just let him have full control and lead him anywhere, knowing he would never do anything he didn't like. The way he could just drop everything and let Simon take him away from his worries and stress. And the mer seemed to like it just as much, so why fight his desire to be held?

Simon brought them to their bedroom and slowly lowered him to the ground. He whined in protest as he nudged him towards his dresser.

'***If you want to cuddle, you have to get changed***.'

He would have said 'screw it' and let his clothes get wet, but he *really* hated the feeling of wet clothes on his skin.

"Fine." He pouted as he made his way over. Simon settled into his moss bed as Grace changed into a pair of blue swim trunks with a

white wave pattern. He practically threw himself into the shallow pool, Simon maneuvering them so Grace laid on his chest.

He let himself melt again as Simon played with his hair.

'***How's school going***?' He broke the comfortable silence after a while.

Grace lifted his head to rest his chin on his arms to look at Simon and hummed.

"Fantastic actually! All my students have been lovely and so invested in their studies, it makes teaching them so fun. Never thought I would end up an online high school teacher but here I am." He chuckled. "Can't say I don't miss teaching middle school. It was never a dull day with those kids. Oh and the *drama*! Don't get me started!" He smiled as Simon laughed under him. "Glad I can do some little demonstrations at some of the schools though. Maybe I'll run into some old students! Shame I can't talk about you though. I could talk about you for *hours*."

He didn't miss the rare flush that spread across Simon's cheeks as he smiled slyly.

'***Shut up***.' He covered his face as he tilted his head to the side, but the smile on his lips betrayed his words.

"Make me." He quipped snarkily as he stuck his tongue out playfully.

He barely had time to gasp when Simon flipped them, his tail moving to bracket his back to keep his upper body above the surface.

The mer fixed him with a mischievous glare before descending on his lips, tendrils slipping out and sending sweet little shocks through his body. He squirmed and giggled through the kiss at the sensations, Simon using his weight to pin him. He covered the blonde in kiss after kiss, recapturing his lips any time he tried to say something.

Finally he was able to push the mer back for long enough to get a few words out.

“Alright alright, you win!” He croaked, sides hurting from laughing and his skin burning from the onslaught of affection.

‘***Always do***.’ Simon smirked as he settled on his chest, positions now swapped.

Grace rolled his eyes, fingers beginning to trace mindless patterns into tanned skin.

“Hey, Simon?”

‘***Hmm***?’

“Do you think you could get me some Moon Jellyfish the next time you go out? Wanna show the kids how they glow.”

Simon chuckled as he nodded.

‘***Of course, Love***.’

Grace hummed a thank you as he pulled the mer up for another slow and sweet kiss, taking the chance to pepper his own barrage of kisses on his face.

“So sweet.” Kiss. “So pretty.” Kiss. “So smart.” Kiss. “Love.” Kiss. “You.” Kiss. “So.” Kiss. “Much.” Kiss. Simon clicked in embarrassment at the sudden praise as he buried his head into his neck. “I think I won that one.” He couldn’t hide the smirk in his tone.

‘***I let you win that one***.’ He huffed.

“Sure you did.”

Simon shut him up with a quick peck on the lips as they smiled at each other. They finally relaxed as they took in each other’s warmth.

They were right where they were meant to be.